



PROFILE 67
Subash Ghisingh

SRI LANKA

The end of peace

Woman crying near the coffin of a 16-year-old Tamil boy allegedly killed by government soldiers, at Kanniya village in Trincomalee, eastern Sri Lanka, 23 April 2006.

Anuruddha Lokuhapuarachchi

Farmer suicides in Vidharba 57
Dilip D'Souza

Missing Daughters of Punjab 45
Astri Ghosh

Indo-Pakistani economic ties 53
Haris Gazdar

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The redesigned monthly

With this issue, Himal reverts to being a monthly publication. We hope to bring out articles that are crisper, even while retaining the worldview and commitment of old. Himal remains a publication where the editorial emphasis is on reported articles and analyses of a length not generally entertained in the newsmagazines. This is why we are a 'review magazine', where our critical readers are presented with argumentation and reportage they will not find elsewhere. We hope to further develop this niche on the newsstands of Southasia, which is still empty other than for Himal.

We asked Bangalore-based designer **Rustam Vania** to tweak our presentation, to provide some visual relief for our loyal but long-suffering readers. What you hold in your hands is the result of his labours. We also include here the covers that Rustam had designed before he opted for the one that actually graces this issue.



Editors
Kathmandu

Commentary		Essay	29
A People's Movement for Pakistan	6	Disaster capitalism, neo-liberal peace and a return to war	
Task for Rajapakse, Prabhakaran	7	Darini Rajasingham Senanayake	
Salwa Judum's <i>zulum</i>	8	Profile	67
War, peace, war peace	9	Mountain autocrat, still	
Wanted: A Southasian candidate	9	Niraj Lama	
'Kali Luxuriates'	10	Southasiasphere: C K Lal	35
Southasian briefs	11	The shroud of meritocracy	
Cover story		Reflections	
The end of peace	20	Wagah and Jallianwala Bagh	51
Jayadeva Uyangoda		Deepa A	
The fourth Eelam war	23	In Lahore, waxing eloquent	65
A S Panneerselvan		Rinku Dutta	
Needed: A people's power movement	26	Photo feature	39
Sanjana Hattotuwa		Between the devil and the deep blue	
Analysis		Naeem Mohaiemen	
Inflation and the garments worker	16	Robert Bailey	
Zahin Hasan		Time and a place	57
The economics of accomodation	53	Just another suicide	
Haris Gazdar		Dilip D'Souza	
The fuzzy logic of Maoist transformation	59	Mediafile	63
Kanak Mani Dixit		Book review	
Bollywood and the middle-class nation	70	Of scholarship and politics	74
Mahmood Farooqui		Ted Riccardi	
Report	18	Intensity and concentration	76
Assam's rise of the margins		Jai Arjun Singh	
Sanjeeb Kakoty		On the way up	78
Special report	45	Pushing the boundaries	
Missing daughters of Punjab			
Astri Ghosh			



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Vacancy: Expert on Social Policy

Regional Office for UNICEF for South Asia, in Kathmandu, Nepal invites applications for a 12 months temporary fixed term contract in international professional category at L3 Level from candidates meeting the following requirements:

Background:

INCLUSIVE SOCIAL POLICY: Improving MDG performance in South Asia with a special focus on socially excluded children. Despite high economic growth rates and strong professed government and public commitment to child rights and child wellbeing in South Asia, MDG-related performance lags far behind its goals in most countries of the region. This is especially marked in the areas of young child survival and development, basic education, gender equality, and child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse. Research and policy discussions suggest that the situation is largely due to various forms of social exclusion. The UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) is therefore seeking a qualified expert to undertake work in the area of social policy and its impact for MDGs, child rights and child wellbeing in South Asia, with a special focus on socially excluded children.

Major work Assignments:

Under the guidance of the Regional Advisor on Social Policy:

1. Contribute to analysis of disparities with a regional focus, by examining the factors which contribute to social exclusion and identify specific efforts needed to redress processes of social exclusion to meet the MDGs by 2015.
2. Contribute to social policy analysis by compiling and assessing approaches to inclusive social policy applied in countries of the region.
3. Develop advocacy tools on the need for inclusive efforts to address social exclusion and to create a consensus for action, addressing policy makers and advocates.
4. Participate in the development of a knowledge management system at UNICEF South Asia Country Offices, and possibly with regional partners; preparing substantive/conceptual frameworks for organising, codifying and assessing knowledge; and supporting the development and implementation of a knowledge management system and knowledge exchange processes conducive to making substantive knowledge relevant to the region easily accessible.
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Qualification and Experience Required:

Master's Degree in international relations, international development, sociology, anthropology political science, development management, or a related field. / Experience in sociological analysis and knowledge of key development issues in South Asia essential. / Strong academic background and experience in evidence-based policy analysis and familiarity with comparative analysis and social science survey techniques useful. / Experience in project management, and in knowledge management approaches and processes, highly desirable. / Excellent communications and networking skills and good drafting skills in English essential. / Proven ability to work and communicate effectively in a multicultural team / environment. / Familiarity with the work of UNICEF would be an asset. / Firm commitment to the goals and principles of the UN.

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A People's Movement, now, for Pakistan

With Pervez Musharraf's legitimacy and support base crumbling, Pakistan's parties in the opposition plan a concerted attempt to restore democracy. A People's Movement is what's needed, nothing less.

In Pakistan's tryst with long periods of military rule, elected civilian governments have appeared as mere aberrations. None of the dictators were ousted due to popular pressure – General Yahya Khan replaced Field Marshal Ayub Khan; it was the humiliating defeat in Bangladesh that ended Yahya's tenure; and Zia Ul-Haq's death in a mysterious air crash paved the way for a democratic interlude. The supremacy of the Pakistan Army as an institution has largely gone unchallenged, and the politicians remain meek when dealing with the generals. The broad pattern of Pakistani politics will not change in the absence of a mass upsurge.

On 14 May, Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif agreed to launch a joint campaign to restore democracy in Pakistan. They signed the Charter of Democracy, labeled as a historic document that would change the complexion of the state. The document promises to subordinate the military to civilian control, vest executive authority in the prime minister, and ensure independence of the judiciary. The two leaders also demanded that the 1973 Constitution be restored, and free and fair elections conducted under a national government.

Sharif had once expressed his fascination for the democratic culture in India, where political differences do not usually translate into personal animosity, and contrasted it to the situation in Pakistan. Indeed, Bhutto and Sharif were not on talking terms through the 1990s, and each spared no effort to use the state machinery to target the other while in power. Both have been accused of significant corruption: Bhutto looked the other way for her husband, who spent eight years in jail; Sharif, meanwhile, was sent into exile in lieu of serving extensive prison time for tax evasion and 'terrorism and hijacking'. It is this bitter past that makes the agreement between the two leaders, out of sheer necessity if not ideological commitment, a significant event. It is this unity that promises to give a fresh lease of life to the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD), which has been struggling to mobilise people against the Musharraf regime for more than five years. The ARD, which is comprised of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), along with other smaller outfits, is expected to ratify the Charter in early July.

The Charter is comprehensive in scope and ambition, and provides a framework to remedy the structural flaw in

Pakistani politics that has left duly elected democratic governments at the mercy of the corps commanders headquartered in Rawalpindi. The parties have not presented an agenda replete with rhetoric, but a document that delineates how they plan to transform the political system. At the same time, the Charter is flexible enough to leave enough room for future negotiations. The promise to introduce provincial autonomy is an attempt to include leaders like Sardar Bugti of Balochistan in the agitation; but given the differences between the PPP and PML(N), as well as between the mainstream and regional leaders, it is not surprising that the document leaves the matter open-ended. There are other complex issues – the demand for the restoration of the 1973 Constitution, as it existed before the coup, ignores the grave distortions that had already crept in because of amendments introduced by Zia and, later, by Sharif himself.

These ambiguities, however, pale in light of Pervez Musharraf's troubles. The general's worry about his popularity is most clearly reflected in his ploy to get re-elected for a second term by the same assemblies that elected him five years back, in gross violation of both the letter and spirit of the Constitution. While Musharraf's political legitimacy was always questionable, his performance has also taken a battering in recent months. The macro-economic indicators may appear deceptively stable, but living standards are dismal. The military is bogged down in Waziristan, even while the Balochistan crisis, the Kalabagh Dam controversy and demand for provincial autonomy remain contentious issues.

There are reports of fissures developing among the general's loyalists. The recent US attack on innocent civilians in Bajaur Agency fueled suspicion and anger against the regime's foreign policy stance. President Musharraf is also finding it increasingly difficult to continue his balancing act of being feted as a champion of the 'war against terror', while clandestinely keeping channels of communication open with several jihadi groups.

Long road

In the wake of this newfound energy among the political actors, and the president's relatively weak position, it is tempting to conclude that democracy is around the corner in Pakistan. However, that would be putting the cart before the horse. Remember that the Charter was signed in London, where Bhutto is based. Sharif lives closer to home, but in Saudi Arabia. Their last meeting, in early June, took place in Dubai. While proclamations can be made from international capitals, a movement cannot be triggered from afar. Until the two top political leaders return to Pakistan and mobilise people at the ground level, the military will

have no reason to be overly perturbed.

There is a slight practical problem though: President Musharraf has already announced that Bhutto would be arrested on corruption charges as soon as she arrives, while Sharif will not be allowed to return, as per an earlier political understanding he had with the army. We believe such threats needs a two-pronged response from the democratic forces in Pakistan. First, build up a mass campaign against the regime in the absence of the two leaders; at the same time, Bhutto and Sharif, taking into account local realities, must prepare to return. Mass sentiment is better triggered from a Lahore prison rather than from plush palatial bungalows overseas.

An important reason why these leaders need to plan a decisive movement soon is because elections for the National and Provincial Assemblies are scheduled for next year. Claiming that free and fair elections are not possible under the present dispensation, the parties have demanded the formation of a caretaker national government. Legitimate as the contention may be, it must be understood that the only way to see it through is by generating enough pressure so that the government is forced to buckle. If the ARD is unable to do that before the polls, it will either have to opt out of the elections or reconcile itself to contesting under the military's supervision.

The task of organising such a mass struggle is

indeed a major challenge in a fractured polity like Pakistan. One of the reasons why there has not been an effective campaign against the military over the past few years is the mutual suspicion between the PPP and PML(N) workers. Will the adoption of the Charter by the two leaders be enough to change attitudes? The heterogeneous nature and aspirations of various groups in Pakistan means that unless the two main parties create an all-inclusive agitation that accommodates conflicting interests, the agitation will not pick up momentum. The stand of the right-wing Islamist parties, especially Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which has an impressive strength on the streets, will be important in this regard.

For far too long, Pakistani politicians have either blamed the army or the 'international community' (read: the US) for the democracy deficit. However clichéd as it may seem, it is undeniable that once the people are on the streets asserting their rights, very little can stop this powerful force. While there have been a few civil-society groups and political activists who have consistently fought for democracy, the country has never witnessed a true People's Movement that seeks to transform the structure of politics – placing the politicians in the seat of power in Pakistan, the army in the barracks, and declaring the people as supreme. The words of the Faiz Ahmed Faiz ballad for freedom "*Hum Dekhenge*", as sung once by Iqbal Bano against the dictatorship of Gen Zia, need to finally be given their due in Pakistan.

Sri Lanka

Task for Rajapakse, Prabhakaran

As Sri Lanka spirals violently downwards, both the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) prefer to project themselves as victims of a war forced upon them. In all the incidents of the past weeks, including the claymore mine attack on a civilian bus in Kebbitigollawa, the gruesome murder of a Tamil family in Mannar District on 8 June, the shocking killing of civilians in Jaffna District, and the bombing of a church compound in the north, the government and LTTE accused each other of outrages while denying their own culpability.

The horrific bus bombing, where an unprecedented number of civilians died or were wounded, could have been the LTTE's way of retaliating for the difficulties in which it finds itself. The organisation is bitter at the ban slapped on it by the European Union, which has made it an outcast in the world's most influential countries. Some of the Tamil Tigers' leading cadres have been killed in recent weeks by subversive forces of which the government denies having any knowledge, and a large number of pro-LTTE civilians have also been killed in brutal fashion.

The new phase of warfare in Sri Lanka is likely to be

very costly to civilians. Killings are already taking place on a regular basis in the northeast, for which any responsibility is denied. As a result, all political activity in the region has come to a halt, as people live in mortal fear of getting on the wrong side of the gun carried by any one of several forces. Amidst all of this, the targeting of international NGO workers is a new phenomenon that has affected their relief activities. And the northeast is where these agencies are most needed. Civilians living outside the northeast are also in danger from the LTTE's violent agenda. Meanwhile, the government is not above threatening peace activists who argue for a negotiated political solution. A parliamentary committee is presently investigating NGOs deemed to be threats to national security. In the days ahead,



organisations critical of the government and the LTTE are likely to be more cautious in the work they do.

The path out of this vicious quagmire is more or less clear, but there is no one to take it. There is no dispute on what needs to be done by the government and the LTTE, as per clear guidelines set out by the peace process 'co-chairs', the EU, Japan, Norway and the United States. They ask the belligerents to renounce violence as a tool of conflict resolution, and also call for far-reaching political reforms for which the state would have to make concessions. This is what peace activists of Sri Lanka have been demanding all along, but it does not look as if the warring parties are in

a mood to listen to the imperatives of peace. The situation looks grim in Sri Lanka.

To repeat: the government of Mahinda Rajapakse must acknowledge the need for changes in the country's constitutional structures so as to address minority Tamil grievances. At the same time, it must provide full explanation to the majority Sinhala population so that there is receptivity to change. On the other hand, the LTTE must transform from a military-led formation to a political organisation. For the sake of a population suddenly shoved back into the jaws of war, this is what is required of Mahinda Rajapakse and Velupillai Prabhakaran.

India

Salwa Judum's *zulum**

Consider this. 172 out of the 600 districts in India are affected by the presence of Naxalites. More than 1400 people have been killed in Naxalite-related violence over the past year-and-a-half. The entire tribal belt from Bihar to Andhra Pradesh – which includes Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, as well as parts of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka – faces an active ultra-left rebellion. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has termed this the largest threat to national security in the country.

There is no easy answer to Naxalism. When an armed group decides to fight the state, it is opting out of the social contract and the political arrangement at which democratic society has arrived. Does a state then deal with them as a force outside the terms of the contract and, in the process, sacrifice basic liberties and values? Or do you engage and seek to bring them into the mainstream without compromising basic rights?

Over the past year, the state government of Chhattisgarh in central India, with ample support from the opposition parties, has encouraged an anti-Naxalite force called the *Salwa Judum* (Campaign for Peace). The authorities would have everyone believe that this group is an example of 'spontaneous' and 'voluntary' activism by victims of Maoist violence.

A study published in early June by the Independent Citizen's Initiative, comprised of prominent academics, activists and journalists, points to a different reality. Reports the group: "The Chhattisgarh administration appears to have 'outsourced' law and order to an unaccountable, undisciplined and amorphous group." The state has appointed more than 3000 so-called 'special police officers', among them minors, who have been handed 303 rifles. This support of vigilante action has violated every canon of the law, and in pitting tribal against tribal it has exacerbated the conflict.

Besides polarising the locals, this privatisation of the task of tackling an insurgency has further militarised local society, and an all-pervading fear now dogs the region.

Leadership of Salwa Judum has passed on to criminal elements beyond the government's control. Nearly 50,000 people have been displaced from their homes. There is revenge and retribution in the air – Salwa Judum activists kill anyone remotely suspected of ties to the Maoists; in reprisal, the rebels attack Salwa Judum members. Innocents are crushed in the crossfire.

The abdication of responsibility by the state has been morally flawed and strategically imprudent. Far from engineering a societal reaction against the Maoists, the state's responsibility should extend to controlling even genuinely spontaneous vigilante action. There is no alternative for the state than to promote legal recourse against Naxalite violence. What the Chhattisgarh authorities have done, instead, is astounding in its foolhardiness, for it is bound to result in a swelling of the rebel ranks.

Take a look at the development indices of Dantewara in southern Chhattisgarh, which has emerged as the hub of Naxalite activity and the Salwa Judum response. There are no schools in 700 out of the 1220 villages; only 59 villages have health centres; and 84 percent of the tribals are marginal farmers barely eking out an existence. Combine this with the agrarian crisis overtaking all of India and the loss of tribal control over natural resources, and the causes behind the Naxalite expansion is clear.

It is certainly a difficult task, but there is no getting around the logic of the argument that until the state takes up its responsibility of ensuring livelihoods, the Maoist rebellion will continue in one form or another. Meanwhile, how to respond to rebellions already ongoing? Both the Centre and state governments must engage with the Naxalites, because talking to them at different levels is the only way to moderate them.

The last thing the state should do in tackling ultra-left violence is to arm vigilantes. If you love the villagers, do not do that.

* *zulum*: Urdu for grievous injustice

War, peace, war, peace, war, peace, war, peace



Tamil lady with gun

While Kathmandu is abuzz with terms such as 'peace process', 'arms management', 'summit meetings' and 'international supervision', the rhetoric over in Colombo has suddenly darkened significantly – 'ceasefire violations', 'bomb blast' and 'war'.

It was less than a year back when, to an outside observer, Sri Lanka seemed well on its way to mending its tattered polity. Also at that time, on average seven Nepalis were dying every day due to political violence, the highest rate of political deaths anywhere in the world. In the island, it was hoped that the 'peace dividend', in terms of an absence of violence and a rising economy, would create enough incentives for the belligerents to stay the course of peace.

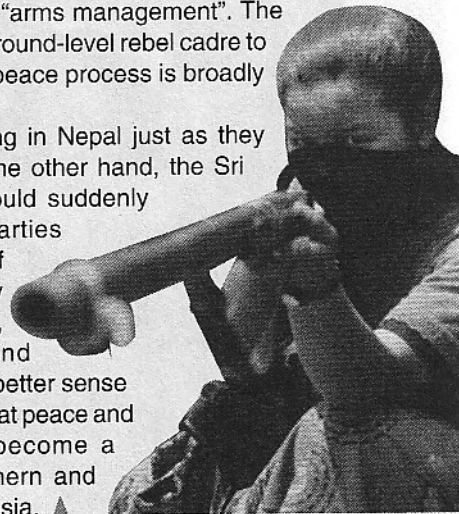
But the momentum of 20 years of war was apparently too much to undo the joint action of a state establishment that could not reconcile itself to the idea of a federal state, and a Tiger leadership that in retrospect must have been itching to revert back to the call of the gun that it knew so well. In such calculations, there was little consideration for the lives of the citizens, such as those lost in the

landmine blast of 15 June that woke up the rest of us to the fact that Sri Lanka had reverted to war.

For their part, the Nepali Maoists realised sometime last year the strategic necessity of considering the Indian government's nervousness, and the impossibility of winning state power militarily. The fact that, unlike the LTTE, the Nepali rebels did not have a geographical base made them more amenable to an understanding. Additionally, a class-based war is relatively easier to accommodate than an identity-based conflict.

What gave impetus to their transformation was the feeling among the Maoists that their chances of having a share in the power structure were higher if they engaged with the democratic mainstream. Credit for this transformative reconciliation goes to Nepal's much-reviled political parties, which have shown admirable wisdom in creating space for the rebels in recent months, even though the latter still hold the carbines in their hand. It is now for the Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal to reciprocate by sincerely beginning the process of what is euphemistically called "arms management". The challenge of getting the ground-level rebel cadre to disarm remains, but the peace process is broadly on track.

Things could go wrong in Nepal just as they have in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan ship of state could suddenly right itself if the two parties realise that the tsunami of a restarted war may sweep everything away, including Jaffna and Colombo. We hope that better sense prevails all around, and that peace and inclusive democracy become a reality in both the northern and southern parts of Southasia. ▲



Nepali lady with gun

Region

Wanted: A Southasian candidate

Just how far we have to go before evolving even a rudimentary level of regionalism is reflected in the clamour among Southasian states regarding the new post for UN Secretary General. Sri Lanka, India and now even Pakistan plan to slug it out for a high office that symbolises, ironically, the finest attributes of inter-state cooperation. The refusal to engage with each other on an issue where countries usually cooperate on a regional

basis is disheartening.

In accordance with the principle of regional rotation, it is Asia's turn to be take the top post when Kofi Annan's term ends at the end of this year. U Thant of Burma was the last Asian to have occupied the office, more than three decades back. The Thai deputy prime minister and the South Korean foreign minister have already thrown their hats in the ring. Some Eastern European candidates who

have objected to the 'regional principle' are trying their luck as well.

But it was Sri Lankan career diplomat Jayantha Dhanapala, former UN Under-Secretary General for Disarmament Affairs, who was rated as the front-runner for the post. Until now, that is. The race has suddenly become crowded, and all bets are off.

India has suddenly decided to nominate writer and UN official Shashi Tharoor, Anan's confidante until recently and presently the Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information. The foreign policy establishment in Islamabad has decided to field one of its own, and is considering two possible candidates – the former head of the UN Population Fund, Nafis Sadiq, and its current ambassador to the UN, Munir Akram.

To begin with, the sudden proliferation of candidates probably mires the chances of any Southasian making it to Secretary General, and so it might have been best if the Sri Lankan candidate Dhanapala had been allowed to remain. The point is not the relative merit of the

candidates, but the lack of any political will across the capitals of the region to collaborate on such an issue, despite the existence of that forum called SAARC. Contrast this competition with that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is collectively backing the Thai candidate.

Dhanapala has been in the fray for months now, but because he was in charge of disarmament when the Non Proliferation Treaty – an agreement New Delhi abhors – was given an extension, South Block's attitude is said to have been chilly. And India, which is so self-concerned about its germinating Great Power status, seems to have conveniently forgotten that the post of Secretary General tends to go to a candidate from a smaller country. Thankfully, Bangladesh and Nepal seem to have maintained some decorum and kept out of the fray, otherwise it would have been an even more complete Southasian embarrassment.

The next Secretary General of the United Nations may well be from Southasia, but he will not be a Southasian candidate. ▲



Inkjet print

'Kali Luxuriates'

The destroyer of ignorance

This piece by Venantius J Pinto is of Kali, the Hindu deity of dissolution, a form of the goddess Parvati. Kali is famous for having saved the gods from the demon Raktabija by spreading her tongue on the ground so that when his blood dropped, it could not transform into another demon. Kali is known for destroying ignorance, and aids those who seek sublime knowledge. Kali's name is commonly known for meaning 'black', or 'black female'. However, the Sanskrit word *kaala* also means time – in this case, meaning a synonym for death, or 'devourer of time'.

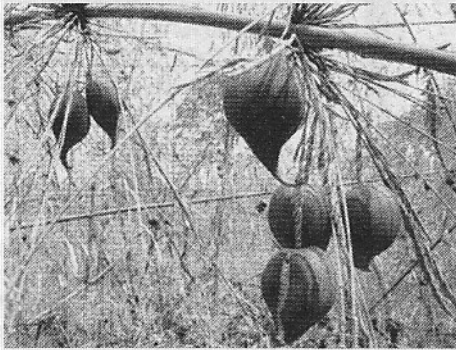
Kali, for all her fearsome self, stands for destruction of ignorance, which is always the start of the end of war. And she is the devourer of time, wanting all to know how little of it we have to pull our societies together.

This is part of a regular series of Himal's editorial commentary on artwork by Venantius Pinto.

INDIA / MANIPUR

Mautam: the sequel?

The dreaded bamboo flowering has begun



It has started. For the first time in a half-century, the dreaded bamboo flowering has begun in parts of Manipur. So great is the fear of the imminent blossoms that, in areas of Churachandpur District only recently cleared of militant activity, the Indian Army has been redeployed – to go on an emergency education spree about rats.

The enormous bamboo forests of the Northeast spread across Manipur, as well as Mizoram, Tripura and parts of Assam. Although the plants only blossom once every 48 years, the occurrence has long been known to lead to widespread famine. The last time that the bamboo in the region blossomed was in the late 1950s.

The *Mautam*, as the mysterious occurrence is known in the Mizo language, is disastrous for two reasons. First, after flowering, bamboo dies almost immediately, rendering it almost completely useless. Whole swaths of bamboo forests disappear. Second, the sudden prevalence of bamboo seeds leads to an explosion in the regional rat population. The rodents decimate more than just the bamboo blossoms, however, and inevitably turn their attentions to the locals' foodgrain stores.

After the government failed to act quickly enough the last time the *Mautam* took place, the resulting frustration in Mizoram led to the transformation of the relief-based

Mizo National Famine Front into the militant Mizo National Front. That group subsequently fought a separatist war against the Indian government until 1987.

With unrest already bubbling at the surface in the region, it is perhaps telling that it has fallen to the shoulders of the security forces to try to head-off what is being referred to as "the menace". Since May, when the first

blossoms were sighted, soldiers have been moving to the farthest reaches of the affected area, educating villagers about rodent eradication techniques, purchasing soon-to-be worthless bamboo, and hurriedly setting up community farms growing only ginger and turmeric – crops that the rats supposedly will not eat.

When was the last time that the Indian military focused – so promptly and proactively – on addressing the root causes of poverty and frustration?

■ ■

BHUTAN

Power report = National happiness

Bhutan's second major hydroelectric project is expected to begin producing energy any day now. With the opening of the gargantuan Tala Hydro Plant, Bhutan's current export of 500 megawatts is set to triple by October. Energy officials in Thimphu are hoping to position the country to be ready to export around 5000 MW by 2016 – all to India. The commissioning will be none too soon for North India, whose demand has risen to more than 26,000 MW, and led to shortages of up to 5000 MW during peak hours. As the temperature spiked this summer, New Delhi experienced loadshedding of up to nine hours per day.

Hydro cooperation between New Delhi and Thimphu goes all the way

back to 1961. When the first major plant, the Chukha project, became operational in 1988, its entire INR 2.5 billion cost was covered by India. Since then, Chukha alone has contributed 40 percent of the country's annual revenue, with 70 percent of that energy being exported to India.

The new run-of-the-river Tala project, downstream from Chukha on the Wangchu River, is one of the largest of Southasia: 92 metres in height, with a 23 km-long headrace tunnel. At INR 43 billion, it is the largest-ever Indo-Bhutan joint project – and, like Chukha, is again completely covered by New Delhi. In May, Indian conglomerate Tata Power also finished the first phase of its 1200 km-long transmission line – India's first public-private transmission venture – which will pipe the Tala power straight to Delhi. There are critics who claim, as they did with Chukha, that India pays very low rates for Bhutan's power, but King Jigme Singye Wangchuck does not seem to be complaining.

Once Tala begins functioning, according to one estimate, Bhutan's per capita income could jump by more than 50 percent – from USD 700 per year to USD 1200. Bhutan's hydroelectricity and North India's thirst for the same is said to be one reason why New Delhi has never been too keen to push Thimphu on taking back the Lhotshampa refugees.



Happy, happy

Indeed, it is only Indian diplomats who have always been hard-pressed to explain the humanitarian insensitivity of South Block when it comes to the Lhotshampa. The advent of the Tala project probably cements the Indian silence even further, because it is a choice between loadshedding in New Delhi in midsummer, and the fate of a hundred thousand feckless Lhotshampa.

■ ■

BURMA

Finally, some attention

It has been years since any kind of good news – or any news – has emerged from Burma, and so a brief spike of international interest recently prompted speculation that the country was about to turn a corner. The spring of 2006 saw some of the worst state violence in Burma in a decade, with the junta openly admitting to cracking down on the northern Karen National Union, the nearly six-decade-old resistance group. Monitoring agencies report more than 18,000 people have been displaced.

Against such a backdrop, it was surprising that the UN Undersecretary-General for Political Affairs, Ibrahim Gambari, on a three-day trip to Burma in late May, succeeded in meeting with detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. It was the first time since 2004 that a foreign visitor had met with Suu Kyi, who turned 61 in mid-June.

In what was only the second time that the UN Security Council has been formally briefed on Burma, Gambari reported signs that Rangoon may be readying itself for greater ties with the international community. These included a report on Suu Kyi prepared by the junta police that suggested that “her release would not necessarily lead to political instability”. Nonetheless, Gambari



Gambari

concluded that Rangoon appeared unwilling to be a part of a “credible and inclusive political process”.

In the midst of this speculation, at the end of the week following the UN envoy’s visit, Suu Kyi’s current house arrest term was set to expire. Secretary General Kofi Annan made a direct appeal to junta leader General Than Shwe to release the Nobel laureate, but the order to extend her detention came just hours later.

As the Security Council is tries to decide on its next move, the US is unilaterally involved in preparing a provisional resolution on the issue. Russia, Japan and China are firmly against any such action on Burma, and it appears that the Americans are the good guys. Gambari also suggested the appointment of a special envoy on Burma, and speculation is that it could be former Philippine President Fidel Ramos.

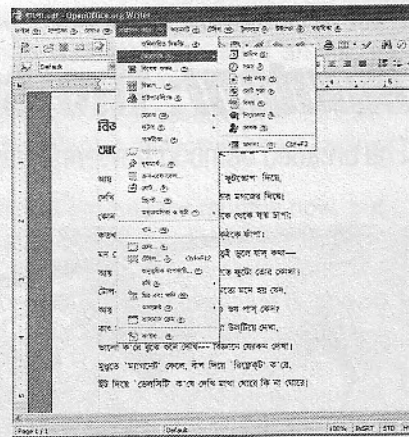
■ ■

REGION

Localising the *sanghanak*

Despite being perhaps the most profitable, dynamic and influential industry on the planet, the high-tech world of computer hardware and software has been notoriously slow – some would say repressive – when it comes to facilitating computing in local languages and scripts. Although the omnipresence of the English language in computer programs, operating systems and the Internet is both a danger and detriment to all of the world’s languages, it is particularly problematic for those languages that do not use the 26-letter Roman alphabet for which nearly all standardised keyboards are equipped. While such factors are also stacked against languages like Spanish or German, which utilise some characters not available on a standard keyboard, these types of problems have become shorthand for a general discontent with Western neo-colonialism.

With access to technology being touted as the civil rights issue of the 21st century, such references are perhaps not misplaced. In Southasia,



Bangla open source word processor

after all, English is largely a language of the affluent. As such, those sections of society that are not ‘affluent’ are coming at this new ‘civil right’ with two major strikes already against them: one of economics, one of knowing the ‘wrong’ language. The former can be dealt with through raising incomes and reducing the cost of hardware and software, but what of the latter?

In the beginning of June, students from throughout Southasia gathered in Lahore for a first-ever workshop in Asian Language Processing, organised by the Bangladesh-based PAN Localisation project. Recent years have seen a host of effective and rabble-rousing crossborder initiatives in Southasia, working to develop both free and region-friendly computing tools. Perhaps the most well known is Ankur, a thoroughly unofficial Indo-Bangladeshi collaboration that recently won a major award for developing a Bengali-language operating system and application tools. Hoping to build on that success, Indian and Pakistani programmers are looking to start work on a similar project for Urdu.

An Indian initiative, IndLinux, is working on “localising free software” in ten major Indian languages. “Should ‘File’ simply be called ‘File’ but written in Indian scripts because it is now a part of popular usage?” the IndLinux website muses. “How many people even know that the Hindi word for computer is *sanghanak*?”

In Kathmandu, the half-century-old Nepali-language archive Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya recently solved

a monumental problem it faced with digitally sorting its texts. By standardising the electronic Nepali script, the Pustakalaya has now cleared the way for any number of future Nepali-language computing applications.

Why are such crucial projects being spearheaded by such small organisations? "Both big and small companies are in the business of making money," notes Taneem Ahmed, Ankur's founder. "But in general, people love their language. Many now believe a language will become obsolete and lost in the near future unless it is supported in the digital media."

REGION

The future is by rail

Along with the feel-good openings of several new (or restarted) India-Pakistan crossborder train and bus links in recent months, rumours have been swirling of New Delhi's desire to put down several more permanent, physical connections elsewhere in the neighbourhood, to the north and east.

Although India's rail network was once the world's most extensive, politics have played a negative role over the past half-century, and most international links have been left to rust. New train plans would be in addition to the Sindh-Rajasthan Thar Express, which restarted regular service this past February between Munabao and Khokrapar.

Just as Indo-Bhutan relations look to be incrementally strengthened with the imminent commissioning of the massive Tala hydro-electric project, New Delhi recently agreed to help Bhutan create its first crossborder railway linkage. Five potential crossing points have been identified, two in West Bengal and three in Assam, and construction is expected to begin in 2007.

Lalu Prasad Yadav's Railway Ministry has drawn up plans to vastly expand the country's

current 63,140 km of tracks into a larger network that would eventually connect directly with Southeast Asia, by way of both Bangladesh and Burma. Although six railway connections historically existed between India and Bangladesh, only two are currently used – on an intermittent basis for cargo only.

Yadav's expansionist dreams are also receiving a boost from the private sector. At an inaugural meeting in early June, the Indian and Bangladeshi chambers of commerce agreed to push New Delhi and Dhaka for increased container trade between the two countries, as well as for a resumption of the Calcutta-Dhaka passenger train service as quickly as possible.

According to the current railway budget, funding has also been requested for several new lines in the Northeast, including one in Manipur between Jiribam and Imphal, which is one of two feasible Indo-Burmese rail connection possibilities. Reports this spring had stated that the Railway Ministry had recommended extending that line to the border at Moreh, as well as onward to Kalay-Segyi in Burma. In addition, the ministry has floated the possibility of rebuilding an old Burmese line that runs between Segyi and Chaungu Myohaung.

Insofar as Nepal is concerned, a World Bank project has already commissioned a large (some say oversized) inland cargo depot at the Raxaul-Birganj border point. India is presently engaged in a roads-and-railway project to upgrade highways on both sides of the Nepal-India Tarai border. At the same time, Indian Railways is converting its *choti line* metre-gauge lines along the Nepal border to broad-gauge, and extending them when they do not exist right up to the border, including two points in the west and one in the east.

At a time when the mainstream press is all excited about the spread of air travel, it seems a more silent but more people- and trade-friendly transportation is happening by rail.



Bholu, the Indian Railways mascot

REGION

Public intellectuals, begging to differ

Dear Pratap bhai, began one letter, signing off with, *I remain, your friend and admirer, Yogendra Yadav.*

Dear Yogendra bhai, responded the other, ending the note with, *with great admiration, Pratap Bhanu Mehta.*

Two Delhi-based social scientists have stood out in the din of facetious argumentation over the government's decision to extend reservations to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in central educational institutions. Narrowed down to a matter of 'merit' vs 'social justice', those agitating against reservations refused to recognise that merit is up to a point a socially constructed category. Those rooting for reservations were quick to label anyone else as 'casteist', bent on perpetuating discrimination.

Political theorist Pratap Bhanu Mehta, who resigned as a member of the National Knowledge Commission over the issue, stood up to point out what he said were flaws in the government's proposal. Political scientist Yogendra Yadav, who has been seeking alternative mechanisms for affirmative action, begged to differ. When the two engaged in an exchange in the public realm, they lifted the level of debate with their rigour, depth and grace.

In his widely published resignation letter, Mehta criticised the government for: not respecting the principle of freedom of academic institutions; making caste the sole determinant of a person's identity; not taking into account the qualitative difference between the discrimination faced by the Dalits and by the OBCs; and closing the possibility of a more intelligent and targeted affirmative-action programme.

Yadav's riposte was equally convincing. While admiring Mehta for standing up to political power, and agreeing with him about the need to creatively devise mechanisms for social justice, he argued that, when left free, elite institutions have rarely devised any serious measure of

affirmative action. "More often than not, radical measures of social justice result from state intervention, that too from the top," he pointed out. Yadav remarked on how the campaign against reservations had morphed into one against the idea of social justice.

Mehta took this public exercise still further. He said his argument left enough room for the state to enact radical policies, but more intelligently. Attempting to find common ground, he wrote to Yadav: "Perhaps I trust society too much, but perhaps you trust the state too much, and good historical sense requires being wary of both in appropriate measure."

With affirmative action having influenced key strands of politics throughout Southasia, this exchange between two respectful scholars indicates the importance of that rare breed known as the 'public intellectual'. Here were two such, using the pulpit to engage in the public sphere to comment on an issue of contemporary concern, and argue nuanced positions in order to influence the public discourse.

REGION

Drunk man talking

Film stars have a way of putting shoe squarely in mouth, such as when Madhuri Dixit told a Kathmandu press meet that Nepal and India were, like, the same country. This time it was Feroze Khan, the star from the early 1980s, who decided to pontificate on state issues and nation-building. In Pakistan for the premiere of *Taj Mahal*, only the second Hindi film to have been released in the country in 40 years, an inebriated Khan launched into a tirade against Pakistan and its creation.

Sample this of Khan's talk: "I am a proud Indian. India is a secular country. Muslims there are making lots of progress. Our president is a Muslim, prime minister a Sikh. Pakistan was made in the name of Islam, but look how the Muslims are killing each other."

His remarks were considered so inappropriate for the occasion that Bollywood colleagues led by Mahesh Bhatt were quick to distance themselves. You may have dismissed it as the ramblings of a drunken, spent star, but trust the Bharatiya Janata Party back in India to issue a statement praising Khan as a "nationalist Muslim" and congratulating him for "showing courage to praise India in Pakistan". Ironic, considering Khan (even in his inebriated state, so he does deserve some consideration) was lauding India's secular credentials, which the BJP has worked hard to destroy.

Pervez Musharraf, too, might have decided to leave well enough alone. But then he decided to order a ban on Khan's future entry into Pakistan. The *Daily Times* of Lahore, stunned by the president's personal directive, wrote,



It's time to go home, Feroze

"What good would it do us to make him a bigger celebrity when we shouldn't even have the time to think twice about him?"

Oh well, we hear that the audience in Lahore enjoyed the romance of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal.

Yet again, Nathula!

It has been on-and-off for a long time now, but the ancient Indo-Tibetan trade route through Nathula – the pass that the Dalai Lama took during his escape into India – finally looks set to reopen after more than three decades. The unveiling was initially slated for last October, but was delayed due to hesitancy in Beijing, ostensibly to build up more trade- and tourism-related infrastructure on the Tibetan side.

Having heard the talk of opening many times now, the locals of Sikkim are sceptical. "Even if there is trade, it will be limited to crossborder communities like in Uttaranchal," says a pessimistic trader from Siliguri, the commercial hub that would reap the maximum advantage if trade were to flourish between Lhasa and Calcutta.

For the moment, the trader is probably right. Despite beginning construction on some new infrastructure at nearby Sherathang on the Sikkim side – including new customs, postal and banking offices – the setup on the Tibetan side is quite rudimentary. Still more importantly, the road itself is hardly fit for any greater usage.

Less than a month before the intended opening, the Indian Army's Border Roads Organisation announced that it had been commissioned to lay a full-scale, INR 2,000 crore trade road. With that work not expected to be completed until 2011 at the earliest, however, Sikkim state officials seem content to let the action at the border remain as "border trade only". Meanwhile, the army has proposed that crossborder trade "should be conducted only thrice a week, so it does not hamper tourist movement." Despite all of these glitches, there is no doubt that, slowly but surely, the Nathula route will become an important trade route of Southasia. An earlier study commissioned by Gangtok had suggested that, by 2015, trade through Nathula could reach USD 2.8 billion per year. For now it has to be conceded, however, as the Siliguri trader suggested, that "the trade will only raise highway dust in Sikkim, and do little else."

Free to leave

During his power-play in Kathmandu, King Gyanendra certainly did try to tarnish Nepal's reputation as an open, friendly place. Even as the press was muzzled and civil liberties were tossed out the window, the royal government saw fit to order crackdowns specifically on those who came to the country as refugees.

For the estimated 23,000 Tibetan and 106,000 Bhutani refugees currently hosted by Nepal, last October Gyanendra decided to cut off what little freedom they may have had. The royal regime suddenly ceased issuing travel documents and exit permits to refugees. This was just the nature of an autocratic regime, but the action against the Tibetans also had to do with the king trying to use the 'China card' to shore up his regime. Beijing, incidentally, was not impressed.

With the resumption of democracy, Nepal is suddenly more open both socially and politically. On 20 June,

which happened to be World Refugee Day, the government restarted issuing exit permits to Tibetans. Without the funding necessary for long-term stays, the Tibetan Refugee Transit Centre in Kathmandu had been growing significantly more cramped in recent months, as new refugees arrived from the north but none was able to leave to the south for India and Dharamsala. Now it can go back to being a 'transit' centre rather than a boarding house.

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NEPAL

Unnatural quiet

On 12 June, militants shot and killed at point-blank range eight Nepali labourers working in Yaripura, Kashmir. The incident reminded many of a similar tragedy two years ago, when 12 Nepali workers in Iraq were executed by extremist militants, allowing for the instigation of violent anti-Muslim protests in Kathmandu. The lack of reaction among the Kathmandu intelligentsia to the latest Kashmir killings begs a number of questions.

The attack happened as follows: on the afternoon of 12 June, heavily armed militants came to a brick kiln in Yaripura. They ordered everyone out, demanding the separation of Kashmiris from non-Kashmiris. The 'outsiders' were then lined up and shot. Eight labourers were killed, while four additional victims were taken to the hospital in critical condition.

All eight killed and three of the wounded were Nepalis from Govindapur village in the eastern Nepal Tarai, working for INR 100 a day. Their families are poor and illiterate, members of the Mushahar community.

While political parties in Kashmir have been quick to denounce the killings,

repeating that "no religion allows the killing of the innocent", where is the condemnation from Nepal – from the press, officials or civil society?

The Kathmandu government itself has said surprisingly little, other than to order its Delhi embassy to "conduct the necessary investigations". Perhaps, in the return to democracy, Nepal is focused on other matters. Or perhaps, in these heady times, nobody wants the burden of responding to a tragedy befalling a 'backward' community from the Tarai plains. Could this be the way towards a 'new Nepal' that everyone seems to want to create?

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REGION

World without borders

First we had Doctors without Borders (*Medecins Sans Frontieres*), which spawned a whole lot of other '...without borders', including Reporters without Borders, as well as this magazine's one-time slogan, 'Writing without borders'. Now, there is the Psychosocial Assistance without Borders (PAWB), which seeks to serve the unmet psychological needs of workers who respond to crises, disasters and complex emergencies. Says Siddharth Shah, the man who started PAWB: "Many crisis responders, especially those without formalised clinical training, are under-prepared for the physical destruction and emotional anguish they witness. There is a need for effective crisis counselling to prevent burnout and vicarious traumatisation."

In December, at the invitation of the *Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi* public trust, three psychotherapists from PAWB provided training to nearly 200 workers in the earthquake-affected areas of Pakistan. The following month, the group worked with Sri Lanka's Foundation of Goodness in responding to Tsunami destruction. In February 2006, they trained 'peace volunteers' in India who tend to be at risk of both physical attack and psychological fatigue during times of social and ethnic strife.



Nepali Foreign Ministry official: "Every year poor King Jigme sends us an anniversary cake, and then I remember, it is World Refugee Day again!"

Rajesh KC in *The Kathmandu Post*

Inflation and the garments worker

Bangladesh's garment industry is constrained by competition from Chinese manufacturers, and the changes in global demand for trousers, jackets, shirts and sweaters.

BY ZAHIN HASAN

The garments industry is by far Bangladesh's largest exporter, employing roughly two million people, and accounting for 80 percent of the economy's foreign-exchange earnings. For years, these workers have accepted a precarious existence, working long hours for less than USD 1 a day. Over the last year, however, rapid inflation in food prices has made their wages unlivable.

Beginning on 23 May, rioting workers in and around Dhaka torched several garment factories and vandalised many more. The press responded to the rioting by flaying factory owners, both local and foreign, for exploiting their workers. The owners in turn pleaded with the government to restore law and order. After deploying security personnel to protect factories from vandalism, on 31 May the government established an official commission to review minimum wages in the garment industry. The move was subsequently endorsed by representatives of both workers and factory owners in a memorandum of understanding signed 12 June.

Violent protests may have waned, but the fact is that the garment industry is in crisis. In an industry that is healthy, most companies make a margin high enough to pay their workers a wage that is mutually

acceptable to both the workers and employers. The recent riots show that the Bangladeshi garment industry is far from healthy.

The root of the problem is inflation, which has ultimately been fuelled by high international oil prices. During fiscal year 2005 (July 2004 to June 2005), Bangladesh imported crude petroleum and POL (petroleum, oil and lubricants) worth USD 1.6 billion, a price increase of 57 percent over FY2004. Final data is not yet available for FY2006, which ended in June, but a further increase in the oil import bill is almost certain.

In 2005, the higher cost of oil imports put pressure on foreign-exchange reserves and forced Dhaka to allow the Taka to depreciate dramatically. This immediately made imported foods more expensive. Large volumes of subsidised diesel were smuggled to India, creating a fuel shortage in border districts, and forcing the government to increase retail fuel prices. That hike subsequently increased the costs of irrigation (the pumps run mostly on diesel) and transportation (from field to market). As a result, food prices have risen significantly over the last year. Garment factory workers typically spend their entire income on food and rent, and inflation has made their situation desperate.

Worryingly, more inflation is expected. The new budget proposed by the finance minister in early June combines an unrealistically high revenue target with a high level of expenditure, and is a formula for large fiscal deficits. In the short-term, deficits fuel economic growth; with a general election just around the corner, such growth-oriented fiscal policy is hardly surprising. In the long term, however, fiscal deficits will cause even more inflation and more misery for workers.

Exports of garments in major categories in USD millions

Period	Shirts	Trousers	Jackets	T-shirts	Sweaters
FY2001	1074	656	574	597	477
FY2002	871	637	412	546	518
FY2003	1020	644	465	642	578
FY2004	1117	1335	365	1062	616
FY2005 (est)	1053	1667	430	1349	893
Change over					
five years:	-2 %	154 %	-25 %	126 %	87 %

BCGMEA
Table 1

Losing to China

The big question is whether the garment industry can afford to pay higher wages. Before jumping to any conclusions about this, we should examine the industry's performance statistics (*see table 1*). These figures show a clear trend: the value of exported shirts and jackets has fallen over the last five years, even though the other categories have been growing. A business whose sales are stagnant or falling is seldom profitable. From this table, we can infer that most of the factories that have been unable to raise workers' wages are probably those producing shirts and jackets. They are proving unable to compete globally – meaning, they are unable to compete with Chinese manufacturers.

The trends in the average unit values of exported garments (*see table 2*) are very disturbing. Unit value of garment exports (ie, the average export price of each garment shipped) has gone down almost across the board. This applies to woven garments (shirts, trousers and jackets) as well as knitwear (T-shirts and sweaters).

Combining the information in the two tables gives us a clear picture of what has been happening in the industry. Over the last five years, knitwear factories have had to cut their export prices to compete globally. They have accomplished this by integrating backwards: most of them now knit fabric as well as sewing it into garments. By doing this, they are successfully competing globally, and their export volumes – in value as well as quantity – are increasing.

Woven-garments factories have also had to cut their export prices, but in the case of shirts and jackets, they are still largely dependent on imports of fabric from China. This gives them two huge disadvantages over Chinese factories. First, fabrics take a month to reach Bangladeshi factories from China (by sea), whereas Chinese factories get the same materials within a few days. This means the Chinese factories can ship finished garments earlier and can command a higher price. Buyers accept that earlier delivery merits a higher price. Second, when defective fabric is received, Bangladeshi factories must simply write it off as a loss; it has already been imported and paid for by letter of credit. Chinese factories, on the other hand, would simply send defective fabric back to the textile mill and get it replaced for free.

Labour in China is more expensive than in Bangladesh, but the advantages of quicker fabric delivery and lower losses on defective fabric more than offset the disadvantage of higher labour costs. That is why buyers of shirts and jackets are getting better deals in China – and why exports of woven garments from Bangladesh are falling.

The implications are ominous for certain segments.

Average unit values of garments exports

Period	Woven Garments			Knitwear		
	Value (USD millions)	Quantity (millions of dozens)	Unit value (USD per dozen)	Value (USD of millions)	Quantity (millions of dozens)	Unit value (USD per dozen)
FY2001	3364	71.48	47.06	1496	52.54	28.47
FY2002	3125	77.05	40.56	1459	63.39	23.02
FY2003	3258	82.83	39.33	1654	69.18	23.91
FY2004	3538	90.48	39.10	2148	91.60	23.45
FY2005	3598	92.26	39.00	2819	120.13	23.47
Fall in unit value over 5 years				-17 %		-18 %

Table 2

BGMEA

Three months from now, when, as expected, the government wage commission recommends higher minimum wages, most knitwear and trouser exporters will probably be able to raise wages; their business appears to be fundamentally sound – or at least that is what is implied by their growing export volumes. On the other hand, shirt and jacket exporters have seen their business shrink for the last five years, and are probably in no position to increase wages. There is a high probability that raising minimum wages will force many woven-garments factories out of business.

Order of the day

Though Bangladeshi shirt and jacket exporters are unable to compete with China at present, they do have two possible survival strategies. The first would be to re-equip (and re-train) themselves as trouser factories. This is technically feasible, though it could not be accomplished overnight. However, it would mean starting from scratch, selling a new product to new customers. It would also mean abandoning the shirt and jacket customers overseas with whom they have built up trust over the years.

The second (and probably more realistic) strategy is for the garment manufacturers to open sales offices in Europe and the United States. Buyers have a feeling of comfort in dealing with suppliers whom they can contact anytime, without having to worry about varying public holidays, weekends and time zones. Garment exporters who maintain sales offices abroad command a higher price based on buyer comfort.

Maintaining even a two-person foreign sales office would require an annual budget of about USD 200,000. This is only affordable for a garment company that exports over USD 20 million every year. As such, the order of the day must be consolidation: small shirt and jacket companies must merge to combine the volumes of their factories and work together to have representation overseas. If they do not, they will probably be forced to close their businesses. At that point, no amount of protesting will save the thousands of jobs that will be lost.

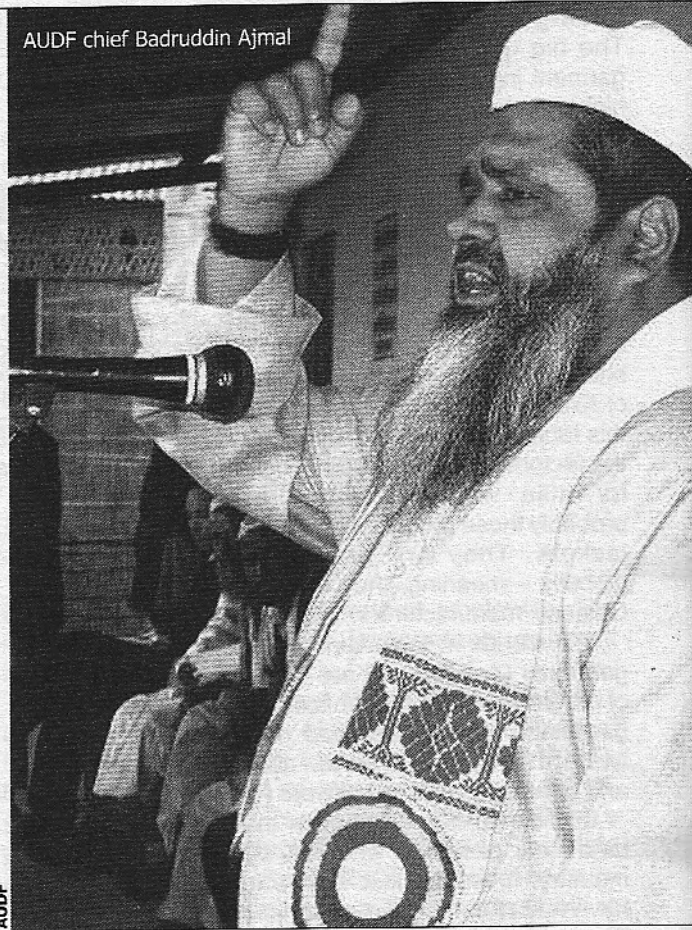
Assam's rise of the margins

The Congress party squeaked by in Assam's recent elections, but it's racing to keep up with the state's new dynamics.

BY SANJEEB KAKOTY

AUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal

AUDF



The recent assembly elections in Assam, with results out in mid-May, represent a turning point in the state's political evolution. New outfits are jostling for political space with the older ones, and in many cases replacing them. The discourse that has dominated state politics for decades seems to be gradually taking new contours. An erstwhile militant group has successfully joined mainstream democratic politics. And 'minority politics' has made its presence felt. Moreover, beating the anti-incumbency trend, the Congress (I) has returned to power in the state, albeit with a diminished mandate. To understand these trends, it is important to locate them in their specific state contexts and to trace the micro-processes that influenced the poll outcome.

Since 1979, the issue of illegal large-scale immigration from Bangladesh has dominated the political discourse in Assam. In 1983, when the Congress (I) was in power at the Centre, the Indian Parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, or IMDT, a controversial legislation on immigration applicable only to the state of Assam. Under the Act, the onus of proving the citizenship credentials of a person lies with the complainant and the police, not the accused. Since then, elections have been fought

with parties aligned on either side of the IMDT divide. The Congress and the Left parties have supported the act, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other regional outfits like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) had opposed it.

The IMDT Act dominated the 2006 elections as well. The emphasis was not the Act itself, but the fact that the Supreme Court had struck it down as unconstitutional, following a petition by Sarbananda Sonowal, a former president of the All-Assam Student's Union and a sitting member of Parliament of the AGP. The court found that the IMDT and its rules had been so made that insurmountable difficulties were created in identification and deportation of illegal migrants. This once again polarised the political arena; but ironically, this time the Congress was put on the other side of the IMDT fence.

In an effort to retain its vote base among the immigrant Muslims, the Congress rushed through an ordinance that was almost a carbon copy of the IMDT. Despite this, many minority organisations blamed Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and the Congress for not doing enough to retain the Act. As a consequence, a conglomerate of 13 mainly Muslim organisations came together and formed a party called the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF),

led by perfume dealer and business tycoon Badruddin Ajmal. This party did not make a secret of its support to the IMDT or its resolve to fight for the cause of the minorities.

Logically, this should have made the AUDF natural allies of the Congress, which all along had been championing the minority cause. Instead, the AUDF was seen cozying up to the regional parties such as the AGP, whose *raison d'être* was to oppose illegal immigration. Such a dual strategy, AUDF hoped, would prevent the Congress from winning in minority pockets, as well as negate the logic of the emergence of anti-immigrant outfits like the AGP. Interestingly, though the Congress has traditionally played the politics of minority vote-banks, this time around it made no major effort to woo the AUDF. Instead, it signed a pre-poll pact with the indigenous political formation, the Bodoland People's Progressive Front (Hagrama faction), or BPPF(H), a party made up mainly of former militants of the dreaded Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT).

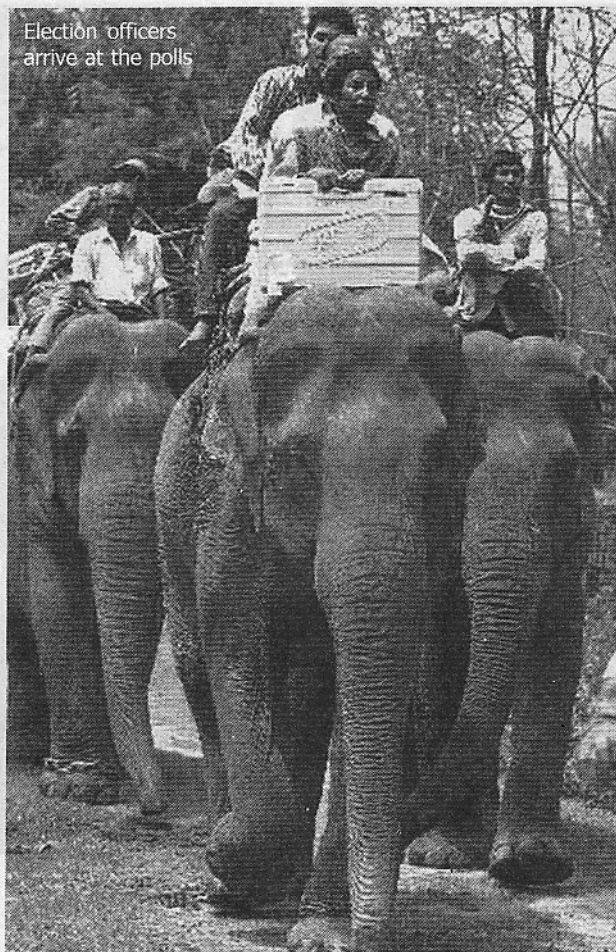
New equations

The irony of the political realignment was not lost on anyone, least of all the electorate, which the election results clearly demonstrated. The BPPF(H) succeeded in winning 12 seats, and its support was crucial in ensuring a second consecutive term for the Congress. The 24 seats won by the AGP was less than half the seats that Congress did. At the same time, though the Congress retained power, its vote share declined to just over 31 percent, from nearly 40 percent in 2001. This reduction may be partly explained by the formation of the AUDF. The new formation won 10 seats, eight of which it wrested from the Congress.

The fact that the Congress refused to align itself with the AUDF greatly endeared itself to the indigenous voters. Moreover, the party also seemed significantly committed to bringing the militant groups to the negotiating table. That the former BLT militants could give up arms and ally with the Congress made the latter's commitment to peace all the more credible. In addition, there was hope that with the Congress return to power, the talks between the government of India and the ULFA-nominated People's Consultative Committee would continue unhindered.

For its part, the performance of the AUDF in the Assam elections also had a national impact. Syed Ahmed Bukari, the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, even suggested a national front of minority political groups along the lines of the AUDF in Assam. Even as the other groups were banking on the AUDF to be the lynchpin of such a formation, the outfit decided to play it safe and maintain a distance. Neither the AUDF nor its leader, Ajmal, seem prepared to act as the catalyst for the nationwide Muslim Front.

This reluctance on the part of the AUDF stems



from the party's conscious effort to shed its image of being a party of the minorities. Instead, AUDF is keen to call itself a "party for deprived ethnic groups in Assam". 'Minority' in Assam, after all, has always meant the immigrant Muslims, and not all of the state's Muslims. A small yet influential section of the state's citizens profess the Muslim faith and speak the Assamiya language, and they are averse to being dubbed minorities whose mother tongue is Bengali. Political formations carrying the minority tag have never succeeded in occupying anything but the peripheral space in Assam's politics.

The AUDF seems to have realised this fact, though belatedly. It was probably hoping to play a pivotal role in the government formation, as it was anticipated that no political party would command a majority in the house. In the new political realignment, however, parties of the indigenous people, as those of the Bodos, came to grab the political limelight. The BPPF(H) not only gave the Congress the numbers to form the government, but also reinforced the matter of indigenous legitimacy in government formation. The fact that an erstwhile militant force emerged as the key to the power battle so soon after joining democratic politics may just hold lessons for other armed groups across the region.



ANURUDDHA LOKUHAPUJARACHCHI

The end of peace

Neither the Colombo government nor the rebel leadership wants to take the blame for destroying the peace process, but both appear eager to exploit the situation. All the international community can do now is to ensure that both sides are held accountable for the hurt they inflict on the civilian population.

BY JAYADEVA UYANGODA

The peace process that began in 2002 in Sri Lanka is now in serious crisis. An undeclared war between the armed forces of the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is intensifying every day. In the escalating violence, civilians have become victims of claymore mine attacks, while there are reports of civilian killings by unidentified death squads operating in the northern and eastern provinces. The conflict has now become a dirty war, in which civilian populations are deliberately targeted.

The 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) and the presence of the International Monitoring Mission are no longer effective instruments to arrest the spiral of violence or the sliding back to war. Indeed, it can now be said that the war has begun. Now more than ever, Sri Lanka needs new initiatives from the international community and the government to prevent the war from developing into a catastrophe.

All this is taking place against a backdrop of the recent failure of Colombo and the LTTE to re-start the stalled peace process. The first such attempt under

The incident forced the international community to realise that they have little or no role to play in re-convening Sri Lanka's peace process, and as this is written they will be looking for an honourable exit.

the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse was made in February in Geneva. Facilitated by the Norwegian peace brokers, the two sides met there after a three-year gap in direct talks. The immediate context for the Geneva meeting was the increasing violations of the CFA and the fears of a resumption of full-scale war. In Geneva, the two sides agreed to renew their commitment to honour the CFA fully and to take immediate steps to prevent future violations. That pledge was not kept, and within two weeks Sri Lanka had returned to violence, with each side blaming the other.

The European Union's listing of the LTTE as a terrorist entity on 29 May happened amidst an increasing risk of full-scale hostilities. The decision should come as no surprise, said the EU, given that the LTTE had systematically ignored prior warnings. The LTTE had disregarded the EU's repeated insistence that the parties in Sri Lanka "show commitment and responsibility towards the peace process, and refrain from actions that could endanger a peaceful resolution and political settlement of the conflict".

The Oslo shift

The meeting of the peace process co-chairs – the EU, US, Norway and Japan – which took place a few days later, blamed both Colombo and the LTTE for the crisis, and insisted that both parties take immediate steps to "reverse the deteriorating situation and put the country back on the road to peace". The four demanded that the LTTE re-enter the negotiating process, renounce terrorism and violence, and "be willing to make the political compromises necessary for a political solution within a united Sri Lanka". The government, meanwhile, was asked to address the legitimate grievances of the Tamils, take steps to prevent acts of terrorism by armed groups, and protect Tamil civilians throughout the country.

Most importantly, the co-chairs insisted that Colombo "show that it is ready to make the dramatic political changes to bring about a new system of governance which will enhance the rights of all Sri Lankans" – with 'dramatic political changes' meaning federalist state reforms. This refers back to the international consensus that federalism is the only alternative to Tamil separatism and Sinhalese unitarism.

If the co-chairs thought that by being 'tough' they

could pressure the two sides back to the table, it was a short-lived hope. Responding to intense international pressure, the LTTE agreed to meet with the government delegation in Oslo on 8 June, and the two delegations traveled there. Astoundingly, however, on the morning that the talks were set to begin, the LTTE delegation, led by its political head S P Thamilselvam, refused to meet the government representatives – the explanation being that the Rajapakse government had sent too junior a delegation.

The government immediately recalled its team. The nonplussed Norwegian facilitators sent a stern letter to both the government and LTTE leaders, demanding that they re-commit to the CFA and ensure the security of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). The incident forced the international community to realise that they have little or no role to play in re-convening Sri Lanka's peace process, and as this is written they will be looking for an honourable exit.

Why did the LTTE go back on their word? Subsequent excuses aside, it appears that in Oslo the rebels in fact implemented a major political decision to terminate the peace process. In truth, this peace process has been in crisis for the past three years, and only intensified during the last six months in the context of government change in Colombo.

Both the government and LTTE have repeatedly expressed deep dissatisfaction, each for their own reasons. The Rajapakse government came to power in November on a Sinhalese nationalist platform promising the electorate that it would amend the CFA and start a new process. The thinking of Colombo politicians has been that the peace process, initiated four years ago by the previous United National Front government, accorded unnecessary legitimacy to the LTTE, and gave the rebels concessions that placed national security and sovereignty at risk. The LTTE's negative assessment of the peace process, meanwhile, is clearly based on the view that it has not produced a favourable political outcome for them.

The EU ban appears to have provided the excuse for the LTTE to bring the peace process to a political end, without the need for an official announcement. The 10 June Oslo announcement by S P Thamilselvam was actually a step towards a unilateral path that the LTTE leadership seems intent in exploring. This unilateralism seems to entail either separating the EU from Sri Lanka's peace process, or creating conditions for the United Nations to engage in Sri Lanka under new conditions of dramatically increasing violence.

The United Nations might be the next in line to get involved, though it is clear that it would do so only reluctantly.

New paradigm

As the 2002 peace process approaches what in all likelihood is its final phase, Colombo, the LTTE and

the international community face three particular dilemmas. For the government, the problem now is to prevent a major war from breaking out, while trying to weaken the LTTE militarily and politically. The government does not want to be seen by the international community as taking any direct initiative to bring the peace process to a formal end. Meanwhile, there are groups within the establishment that continue to argue that the time has come to defeat the LTTE militarily. The radical Sinhalese Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a key member of the ruling coalition with 39 parliamentary seats, has launched a campaign saying that 'enough is enough', and telling President Rajapakse to move in the direction of defeating "LTTE terrorism" once and for all. Along with sections of the military, they emphasise that war with the LTTE is both necessary and winnable.

President Rajapakse, however, appears to be cautious about a large-scale war, and many politicians understand that such a conflict would give an opportunity for the rebels to launch heavily destructive attacks on the country's economic edifices and general infrastructure. The government's preferred option seems to be maintaining the low-intensity war of the past few months, eventually weakening the LTTE's offensive capacity. Even without the 15 June attack in Kebettigollawa, however, would that really work?

For its part, the LTTE has bid farewell to the 2002 peace process, even though it may not have made an official announcement. The rebels' dilemma is essentially what to do next, for they too do not want to be blamed for unilaterally initiating the next phase of the conflict. At the same time, the government's low-intensity offensive has hurt them militarily. With the 2004 defection of Karuna, the LTTE's military commander of the eastern province, the LTTE's military strength and control of the east has suffered a considerable setback. With the assistance of the Karuna group and other paramilitaries, a number of the local LTTE military commanders and key civilian supporters have been assassinated in recent months.

The LTTE leadership's claim that it has the ability to protect civilian Tamils is also coming under serious doubt, particularly in the context of the continuing abductions and killings of pro-LTTE civilians by anti-LTTE armed groups, as well as the government's new policy of retaliatory air and artillery strikes. Thus, from the rebels' perspective as well, a major war seems to be a necessity. Who takes the initiative to declare hostilities, however, remains the question. It seems that the LTTE would prefer provoking the government to take the first step towards all-out war, with the hope that a massive retaliatory attack would be justified in the eyes of the world.

As far as the international community is concerned, the LTTE is clearly engaging in a process of trying to redefine its role in the conflict. The rebel leadership has realised Norway's limitations as a peace facilitator. From their perspective, Norway has not been able to ensure that the Colombo government implemented

ANURUDDHA LOKUHAPARACHCHI



Funeral house of 16-year-old victim, Trincomalee District

commitments made during the negotiations. The LTTE might now look for a stronger body, with the capacity for power mediation. Yet there are probably no volunteers to take up this responsibility, particularly in view of the international community's frustration and disappointment with both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.

New international role

Against this backdrop, the international custodians of Sri Lanka's peace process do not seem to have many options. In both the EU ban and the Tokyo statement, released at a major donor meeting in the end of May, the international community re-asserted its role in Sri Lanka. There are limits to what external bodies can do, however, particularly when the domestic actors in Sri Lanka are not in a mood to work together for peace. The United Nations might be the next in line to get involved, though it is clear that it would do so only reluctantly.

The escalating dirty war in Sri Lanka has, however, opened up space for a new kind of role for the internationals. They must consider setting up an international verification commission to investigate incidents of violence against civilians. Although there have been many incidents of gruesome violence against both Sinhalese and Tamil civilians in recent months, including the 15 June massacre, the SLMM does not have the power or capacity to conduct thorough investigations and positively identify the perpetrators. While the government and LTTE exchange charges and counter-charges over responsibility for such war crimes, the presence of other armed groups in the northern and eastern provinces has made such violence against civilians a crime with impunity.

With the end to peace, it is now time to think about an international verification commission for Sri Lanka, with powers of both investigation and ensuring compliance. The move would be a small but necessary step towards humanising a conflict that looks truly and tragically intractable.

ANURUDDHA LOKUHAPUARACHCHI



The fourth Eelam war

With the West's efforts at peace-making having suddenly been stymied by the return to war, the focus shifts to New Delhi. How will it respond, even as Tamil Nadu turns restive?

BY A S PANNEERSELVAN

After spending more than a quarter-century in the profession, 15 June 2006 taught this writer one of the cardinal principles of journalism: a reporter should never postpone a story hoping to give good news. After having repeatedly extending the deadline for this article in the hope that the international facilitators would somehow persuade the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to abandon their intransigence and seriously take up the path of negotiation, there is now no ceasefire, no peace process, and the worst fear of many has become a reality.

The fourth Eelam war began early on the morning of 15 June. A powerful land mine ripped through a bus packed

with commuters and schoolchildren in the northern Sri Lankan village of Kebettigollawa, killing 68 people and wounding as many more. The explosion was the worst single act of violence since the government and LTTE rebels signed a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) in 2002. For days afterwards, Sri Lanka's military responded by bombing rebel-held areas in the northeast, including a Catholic church in which 200 people were taking refuge.

Other than the extraordinary loss of innocent life, the tragedies that 15 June signified are many. One, the peace constituency in Sri Lanka clearly had failed to explain the gains of four years of ceasefire, or the peace dividends it had brought to the country in general and to the south in

particular. Two, while much was written to explain the difference between *no war* and *enduring peace*, there was a systematic effort by both the Tamil Tigers and the government to scuttle the peace process by strengthening antagonistic views of each other. Three, both futilely tried to play the India card. Four, the limitations of any third-party mediation in an entrenched conflict situation have become clear. Despite the vigorous efforts by the facilitator Norway – as well as the other co-chairs of the peace process, Japan, the US and the EU – the process was unable to move forward due to a simple lack of consensus between the two major political groupings in the south. Five, though both the LTTE and the Colombo government are well aware of the futility of war and the military stalemate it would produce, there was a suicidal desire to shore-up military might and be seen as tough players – both at the cost of the people.

Return to isolation

Recent fighting had already emptied many villages in the northeast. In April, a series of bombs exploded in a market in the port town of Trincomalee (*See Himal May/June 2006, "Again, in Trincomalee"*). That same month, a bomb ripped through the military headquarters in Colombo, in what was believed to be an attempt to assassinate the chief of the Sri Lankan Army, an act that was followed by airstrikes on rebel posts. Since April, more than 500 people have been killed in the conflict, mostly civilians.

Although official peace talks had been essentially shelved since the second round was postponed indefinitely in late March, a meeting in Oslo between the warring parties also collapsed in the first week of June. Though the agenda for those negotiations had simply been the future role of European-led truce monitors, Tamil Tiger representatives pulled out before the talks even began, ostensibly objecting to the composition of the government delegation.

In truth, peace monitors themselves have come under increased fire from the rebels in recent weeks. After the European Union put the Tigers on its list of banned terrorist groups in May – following the lead of the US, Britain and India – the LTTE responded by ordering all monitors from EU countries off the island. While the Tamil diaspora in Europe is a major fundraising source for the Tigers, the EU's move was obviously very painful as a stinging diplomatic rebuke representing a further loss of international support. The wheel has now turned full-circle for the LTTE. After obtaining a degree of global legitimacy in the aftermath of the CFA, the rebels are once again facing international isolation.

Amidst signs that the EU may wash its hands of the peace process if the situation deteriorates further, even Norwegian facilitators are showing signs of frustration. Unhappy with both Colombo and the rebels, Oslo has asked the two sides to give in writing whether or not they intend to continue to stand by the 2002 ceasefire pact. If Norway gives up, it is likely that no other international player will want to touch the problem.

International observers have been predicting this turn

for the worse since the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse last November, facilitated by the support of two extreme Sinhala nationalist parties, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Jathika Hela Urumaya. Unlike his predecessor, Chandrika Kumaratunga, who was open to a settlement on broader devolution of powers under a federal structure, President Rajapakse appears determined not to alter the unitary character of the Sri Lankan state – an option that is rejected by all Tamil groups. The old slogan 'Peace with dignity' has now been replaced by the hawkish 'War for peace?'

Lankan legacy

These developments are a cause of major concern for India, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been engaged in strategy exercises. A full-scale war between the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE is bound to cause immediate political, economic, diplomatic and strategic problems for India – and incrementally more so if the conflict is allowed to drag on indefinitely. Although it has not been openly made an issue, there is anger in New Delhi over Colombo's persistent failure to come out with a genuine devolution package, one that would counter the LTTE's goal of separation. Thus far, the most that has been achieved was a 2 June agreement between all of Sri Lanka's main political parties to work towards a framework within which a new power-sharing offer could be made to the Tigers.

Noted one Indian security official, "If war breaks out, Norway's image will take a beating. For us, it will be much more than that." At this point, the only certainty about New Delhi's position is that it will not intervene militarily. The last time that Indian troops were deployed on Sri Lankan soil was the disastrous experience of 1987-90, when 1200 Indian soldiers died fighting the LTTE, and the remaining troops were callously ordered off the island by Colombo. With Sonia Gandhi remaining the Centre's fulcrum in New



The Kebattigollawa bus, 15 June

First Eelam War: 1983 – July 1985.
Began with the start of the civil war,
ended with an attempt at peace talks.

Second Eelam War: August 1985 – 1994.
Began with the failure of attempted peace
talks, ended when President Chandrika
Kumaratunga initiated peace talks.

Third Eelam War: 1995 – February 2006.
Began with the collapse of peace talks,
ended with the government and LTTE
declaring "respect" for the 2002 Ceasefire
Agreement.

Fourth Eelam War: 15 June 2006 – ?
Began when 68 people were killed when a
bus hit a mine in Kebettigollawa.

Delhi, it will also be impossible for the Indian establishment to forget Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 assassination – allegedly by Tamil militants from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu, determined to keep Gandhi from being re-elected and potentially re-deploying Indian troops against the LTTE.

At the same time, it is not expected that there will be contacts between New Delhi and the LTTE, as the group is outlawed in India, although subdued suggestions have been made for "indirect contacts". The dominant view in Indian strategic circles is that nothing will come of such an approach, because while New Delhi cannot influence the LTTE's mindset, the rebels could end up benefiting from the connection.

DMK nightmare

Already, the cycle of killings and counter-killings in Sri Lanka's northeast has sparked an exodus of refugees to Tamil Nadu. Official estimates suggest that around 3500 refugees are in India already, with another 5000 set to make the journey if the situation does not improve in upcoming weeks. This is a potentially explosive issue in Tamil Nadu. With some of the most vocal pro-Tamil parties, such as Vaiko's MDMK (Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and R Thirumavalavan's Dalit Panthers of India aligned with the principle opposition party AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), a passion-laden propaganda war is sure to be in the offing.

**A passion-laden propaganda war is
sure to be in the offing.**

Such a turn of events is exactly what the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) of Chief Minister M Karunanidhi does not want to see. Having just returned to power in May after five years, the DMK has paid a significant price in the past over the Sri Lankan Tamil issue, and is now extremely worried about the current crises' potential spillover. In January 1991, the DMK's government was dismissed on the basis of the presence of LTTE rebels in Tamil Nadu, and the party was wiped out in the general elections after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination the following May. In 1997, it was the Sri Lanka issue that brought down the government of Prime Minister I K Gujral, due to the DMK's presence in his cabinet. Today the DMK is again a part of the Union government in New Delhi, with seven ministers in Manmohan Singh's cabinet.

More than most other issues, the DMK fears the eventuality of India becoming directly involved in Sri Lanka's internal affairs. On this matter, officials in Madras see a convergence of opinion between the LTTE and Colombo. When President Rajapakse asked India to become a co-chair for the peace process in December, it was largely the DMK's gentle prodding to the Union government that kept New Delhi away. The fresh influx of refugees into Tamil Nadu is now being seen by worried DMK leaders as an LTTE ploy to re-involve the state. Within two days of the Kebettigollawa attack, Tamil Nadu security officials had issued a red alert along the state's southeastern coast, based on reports of intense fighting between rebels and the Sri Lanka Navy near the international maritime borderline.

India's dilemma is that it can neither openly assist Colombo, nor can it afford to see Sri Lanka break up. Although military experts are nearly unanimous that the LTTE would not have the capability to bring the whole of the island's northeast under its control, in the post-15 June context the Tigers may indeed try to seize Jaffna. Such a return to the situation of 1990-95, when they controlled the northern peninsula, would again place LTTE territory less than 50 km from the Indian coast. It is unlikely that India – or any country – would ever recognise the resulting Tamil Tiger government, but such a development could lead to entrenchment in the long run, bringing about a near-permanent divide in Sri Lanka.

A crucial shift in New Delhi's policy towards Sri Lanka has been to encourage an internationally backed peace process, rather than asserting its role as the regional superpower. Its backing of Norway reflects this policy shift. With the seeming inability of international mediators to reach a lasting solution, however, the focus is bound to inevitably return to the region's powerbroker. The plans to put the maddening past behind and to move towards a peaceful future have been drastically muddled by the events leading up to and following the 15 June blast, and India may be just as confused as the rest of the world. Noted one senior policy adviser in New Delhi: "We know that we have to say 'enough, stop it'. But given the complicated past, we do not know how and when to say it."



Needed: A People's Power movement

Perhaps the return to war in Sri Lanka will energise the flagging peace movement, as people wake up to what was achieved during the time of ceasefire and all that would be lost. We have been here before.

BY SANJANA HATTOTUWA

Sri Lanka is back on the brink. For all practical purposes, the 'peace process' has crumbled. Even as both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) time and again re-affirm their commitment to peace talks and the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), the violence on the ground presents a different reality. The increasing violations of human rights, extra-judicial killings and disappearances, and the

audacious suicide bombing in Colombo aimed at the Chief of the Army earlier this year had already raised doubts about the commitment of both sides to peace.

For many, the situation resulting from the 15 June attack in Kebettigollawa may have eliminated such doubts altogether. Certainly it is the most serious challenge to date of the CFA, now worn and tired. The high publicity given to the mass funeral of the victims of Kebettigollawa

brought to light emotions that whipped up zealous calls for an outright war effort against the LTTE. Any official rhetoric about peaceful negotiations seems aimed more at the international community than at the Sri Lankan people, in whose name this war is being fought.

Over the past few months, there has been a severe deterioration of the democratic fabric throughout the country. Journalists are under threat as never before. Also under fire are NGOs, which have cumulatively served as a central mechanism for supporting democracy and governance in a state incapable of safeguarding or strengthening them on its own. Several leading human rights advocates have been left fearing for their lives.

Humanitarian aid to the north and east has been severely hampered on account of the rising violence, adding to the suffering of communities ravaged by conflict and the 2004 tsunami. The rising cost of living seems unassailable, with a drastic increase in fuel prices. A culture of impunity that promotes the rule of the gun is also on the rise – with the state unable or unwilling to curtail the increasing lawlessness with measures consistent with the international covenants on human rights and democracy that it has signed.

The commitment test

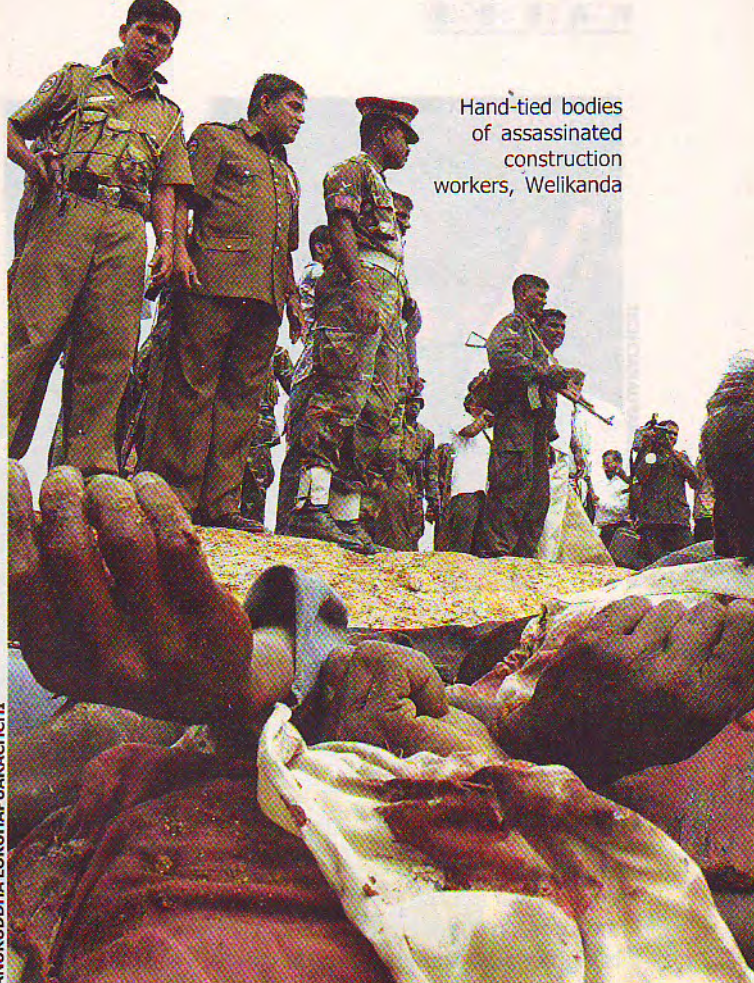
While it may be tempting to lay the blame for the present crisis on one side or the other, an objective assessment reveals the failure of both the government and the LTTE in taking the peace process forward.

Given recent developments, it would be only fair to have suspicions as to whether the LTTE was ever truly committed to transforming into a genuinely democratic force. Finished is the euphoria that greeted the engagement between the previous United National Front (UNF) government and the LTTE, and which continued until the talks with the incumbent government in Geneva in February 2006. The LTTE's renouncement of the call for Eelam, and its willingness to consider a federal solution, now seem like mere facade, carefully crafted to engineer international and local support for a struggle it always intended to continue militarily.

International and local civil society-driven capacity-building exercises that have engaged the LTTE – ranging from workshops on federalism to study trips that examined models of governance in federal countries – have failed. As regards a final solution to the ethnic conflict, there is no appreciable difference in the approaches of the LTTE today. The hardcore rebel elements, who were never part of the peace process either earlier or now, seem to wield ultimate authority in the designs of the organisation. The hope that was generated in engaging with the LTTE, the rebel Peace Secretariat and its concert of local and international supporters was based on an essential fallacy: that the Secretariat was staffed by those able to influence the thinking of rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and his closest cohorts.

Also contributing to the collapse of negotiations was the lack of inclusiveness in a peace process that had been

Hand-tied bodies of assassinated construction workers, Welikanda



ANURUPDHHA LOKUHAPUARACHCHI

War brings with it a perverse certainty of a defined 'enemy', and with it, the space to contest the actions of that enemy.

pegged to neo-liberal theories of economic prosperity during the United National Front's tenure. The 'peace dividend', promoted as a windfall in economic prosperity and a lower cost of living, failed to materialise. Politically, the almost pathological inability of then-President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to form a united front to address the challenges of peace-building resulted in a splintered polity and society in the south. This, in turn, debilitated a national consensus on the necessary foundations for a political settlement of the conflict.

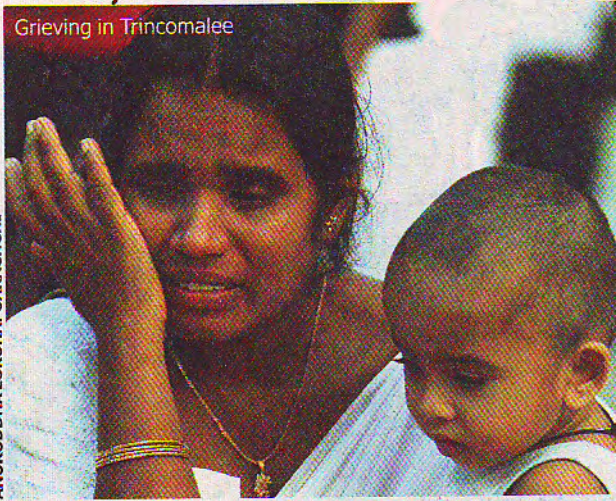
War for peace

Even as the problems facing Sri Lanka today are self-evident, solutions remain elusive. On the one hand, there are tired voices in civil society that call for levels of political leadership and acumen that mirror Nelson Mandela or Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Sri Lanka's favourite beacons of political perfection. Needless to say, such calls fall on deaf ears. What needs to be envisioned instead is a two-fold process through which we may be able to rekindle a sincere interest in a negotiated settlement.

Ironically, the first step is the need to recognise that

Grieving in Trincomalee

ANURUDDHA LOKUHAPUJARACHCHI



It is this voice that will be the bedrock of the process necessary to transform the Sri Lankan state into one accommodative of the idea of federalism – the lynchpin of a final solution to the conflict.

another war may be precisely what is needed to galvanise the forces in support of peace. The peace lobby at present is frightened, fragmented and largely ineffective in the face of preparations for a war effort by both the government and the LTTE. The concert of forces opposed to any negotiated settlement, ranging from political parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to sections of the mainstream media, wield greater influence in shaping the hearts and minds of people than does the project-oriented activism of civil society, which has displayed a marked inability to scale up operations to mitigate the strident war-mongering. In such a milieu, voices in support of rights and democracy – key pillars of a just and lasting peace – are silenced.

War brings with it a perverse certainty of a defined 'enemy', and with it, the space to contest the actions of that enemy if they are in contravention of laws by which the state has to abide. Another war in Sri Lanka is of course unwinnable by either side – short-term strategic gains will inevitably lead to medium-term military contestation and long-term instability. The unceasing waves of military victories tempered by defeat will inevitably debilitate those supporting the argument of Colombo leaders who claim that military victory against the LTTE is possible. The inevitable exhaustion of forces in support of war, coupled with almost total economic collapse of the state (resulting from loss of tourism, investment and the possible targeting of key economic infrastructure by the LTTE), makes this a war effort that cannot continue for another 25 years. This is by no means a certainty, which is precisely why a second, parallel process needs to be strengthened: the need to increase the people's voice in support of peace.

Hopeful power

That the majority of Sri Lankans are in favour of war is a fallacy – believed by the very naïve – promoted for parochial gain by various political forces opposed to a negotiated settlement to the conflict. In fact, they are not – Sri Lankans know that a quarter-century of conflict has robbed them of their future, their children, their hope. It is absolutely necessary to capture communal hope for a future free of violence, and to promote this voice to the highest levels of policymaking. It is this voice that will temper the rabid calls for war by those who know full well that there is no life left in military struggle. It is this voice that will be the bedrock of the process necessary to transform the Sri Lankan state into one accommodative of the idea of federalism – the lynchpin of a final solution to the conflict. It is this voice, above all else, that will be the harbinger of a groundswell of opinion to force the political parties to heed the call for an end to conflict.

As things stand, it seems that Sri Lanka's tryst with peace will only result when more lives have been lost. A peace process that 'requires' more lives to be extinguished is difficult to digest, but it is time to plan strategically. And it is in strategy that the incumbent Colombo government of Mahinda Rajapakse is the weakest. Bereft of those who can envision a process that locks in the LTTE, while at the same time allowing for dialogue at various levels, the government is bedevilled by both the paucity of advice to strengthen the peace process, as well as a glut of advisors keen to promote a military effort. This urgently needs to change.

Many claim the Kebettigollawa incident to be the last straw in the peace process. In this light, those in support of peace now need to consider the limited uses of violence to secure what Sri Lankans hold most dear – an end to conflict. This violence, however, is not necessarily in the nature of military offensives. It is the violence of the anger and despair in the voices of the people – the millions of Sri Lankans that are as fed up with the LTTE's continued use of terrorism as they are with the state's inability or unwillingness to put in place the necessary foundation to strengthen the peace process.

If war is seen as inevitable, and a political solution to the conflict remains distant, it is valid to question whether the wellspring of hope for a just and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka has all but dried up. It would be instructive to recall the experience of Nepal in this regard. For over a decade, the democratic process in that country, through its many ebbs and flows, slowly built constituencies able to articulate a clarion call for democratic and constitutional governance, an unequivocal rejection of the king's authoritarianism, and a return to peace.

What we witnessed in April 2006 in Nepal was not the result of an overnight epiphany, but the slow moulding of public opinion in support of democratic options and rights, and its relationship to peace. The same can be applied in Sri Lanka. Build a People's Movement for peace and democracy. The future of the island depends on it. ▲



Waiting for post-Tsunami aid, January 2005

Disaster capitalism, neo-liberal peace and a return to war

With the end of peace in Sri Lanka, the time has come for a massive re-appraisal of the international community's successes, failures and outright incompetencies in the name of rehabilitation, reconstruction and peace-building.

BY **DARINI RAJASINGHAM SENANAYAKE**

Pace in Sri Lanka is increasingly an international legal fiction – an assumption contrary to ground realities. The ebb of peace in the palm-fringed, tourist-friendly island is indexed in the return of 'dirty war', a rising body count, trickle of refugees to South India, as well as suicide bombings and barricades in Colombo. For the first time, there have been coordinated attacks on

international aid agencies. As the head of the Scandinavian peace Monitoring Mission noted recently, there is an ongoing low-scale, low-intensity war.

Even though neither the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), nor the government has formally withdrawn from the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), the new war continues the spiral of the (para-) militarisation of civil

society, with a 'war economy' sustained by terror, taxation and international post-conflict and post-Tsunami reconstruction assistance. These trends point to the possibility that the current conflict may also achieve a self-sustaining momentum beyond ethnic minority grievances as it has done in the past.

In this context, it is important to analyse the role of the international community, which, though a set of apparently external observers, has become intrinsically embedded and intertwined in Sri Lanka's conflict and peace process over the past decade. Given the massive international aid industry and bureaucracy in the country, the return of war despite the best efforts of Norway raises fundamental questions about their relevance and impact on conflict transformation.

A recent study of peace processes has noted that, of 38 internationally mediated peace efforts in the decade between 1989-1999, 31 had returned to conflict within the first few years. International assistance in low-intensity armed conflicts and peace processes may either ameliorate or become part of a renewed conflict cycle. As such, the attempt here is to develop a structural analysis of the three principal actors in Sri Lanka – the government of Sri Lanka, the LTTE and the international community – and their relationship, based on study of the political economy of the international aid industry and bureaucracy.

The war, peace and reconstruction industry

Not too far back, in 2003, Sri Lanka was projected in international reconstruction and development conference circles and media as a test case of 'liberal peace building and reconstruction'. After the Norwegian-brokered Ceasefire Agreement in 2002, three separate international pledging conferences for Sri Lanka were held in Oslo, Washington and Tokyo. The conferences ended with the promise of USD 4.5 billion for post-conflict reconstruction. Four co-chairs were appointed to Sri Lanka's peace process – Norway, Japan, the EU and US. The World Bank, having positioned itself to lead the expanding international reconstruction industry and bureaucracy in the island, was appointed custodian of the North East Reconstruction Fund (NERF).

Given donor emphasis on the privatisation of development assistance, international consultants, private companies and I/NGOs competed for lucrative reconstruction contracts in Sri Lanka in the peace interregnum – from de-mining, to road building, to peace education and advertising. More recently, the December 2004 Asia Tsunami disaster drew a large number of volunteers and technical experts, unfamiliar with local languages, institutional structure and culture. Despite this,

reconstruction has been painfully slow, primarily due to the fact that the international aid industry has snatched away local and regional ownership of the recovery operation. This is in stark contrast to India and Thailand, which refused most forms of international assistance after the Tsunami, but are far ahead in the task of reconstruction.

Over the past half-century of war and natural disaster, Sri Lanka's politicians and policymakers have developed a culture of 'aid dependency', even though ground-level facts point to the necessity of a different approach – the country is no longer a least-developed county, has an almost 90 percent literacy rate, a number of under and unemployed graduates, and it exports technical skills overseas. There are several questions that need to be asked about the reconstruction effort: why is national expertise marginalised in reconstruction? Do aid pledges materialise? And how much of the assistance actually reaches the country or the communities affected by war, natural disaster and poverty?

There have been few systematic reviews of donor assistance and its impact. There is the Strategic Conflict Assessment for Sri Lanka – commissioned and launched by the World Bank, the Department for International Development of the UK (DFID), the Asia Foundation and other donors – that was recently released. That report did not meet the need for a transparent analysis of the assistance coming into Sri Lanka. Arguably much of the aid pledged and disbursed for peace and reconstruction in the country is 'phantom aid', defined by the relief organisation ActionAid as "aid that never materialises to poor countries, but is instead diverted for other purposes within the aid system" (*see box*).

In May 2006, the donor co-chairs estimated that of the USD 4.5 billion pledged to Sri Lanka, USD 3.4 billion "had been provided based on Tokyo pledges and Tsunami funds, and more than 20 percent of that allocated to the north and east, including LTTE-controlled areas". No disclosure is made of how much of this aid was in the form of loans. Phantom aid in disaster situations, where the usual development project safeguards are waived due to an emergency situation, may be as high as 80-85 percent of donor assistance. In this context, the fact that Sri Lanka's aid absorption rate remains at around 17-20 percent while donors continue to pledge ever-larger sums for development assistance is not mysterious.

The international peace and development bureaucracy in the past decade in Sri Lanka has clearly gained its own self-sustaining momentum. This has happened at a time when aid may become increasingly irrelevant in a world where 'trade not aid' is seen as the way forward, particularly for countries that are no longer in the least-developed category. The development bureaucracy

Given the massive international aid industry and bureaucracy in the country, the return of war despite the best efforts of Norway raises fundamental questions about their relevance and impact on conflict transformation.

Phantom aid

The international peace and development industry that is by now entrenched in most parts of the global South is believed to be the fifth-largest industry in the world. Conflict situations present significant 'opportunities for growth' to international aid experts and bureaucracy, exported from the Euro-American world to these regions. However, the utility of this ever-growing donor assistance to conflict-affected countries and communities is an open question. At odds with local development priorities, the international aid bureaucracy is seen to have its own self-sustaining logic that is increasingly irrelevant to either the poverty or the conflict on the ground.

A June 2005 report on aid effectiveness by the relief organisation ActionAid, titled "Real Aid: Making Aid More Effective", estimated that 61 percent of all international donor assistance is 'Phantom aid'. As

opposed to 'real aid', phantom aid includes funds that are: a) tied to goods and services from the donor country; b) overpriced and ineffective technical assistance – by far the largest category of phantom aid, accounting for USD 13.8 billion; c) spent on excess administration; d) poorly coordinated and high transaction costs; e) aid double-counted as debt relief; f) assistance not targeted for poverty reduction; g) amounts spent on immigration-related costs in donor countries, etc.

The report further notes that, "eighty cents of every dollar of American aid is phantom aid, largely because it is so heavily tied to the purchase of US goods and services, and because it is so badly targeted at poor countries ... Just 11 percent of French aid is real aid. France spends USD 2 billion of its aid budget each year on Technical Assistance ... In real terms, the Norwegians are nearly 40 times more generous per person than the Americans, and 4 times more generous than the average Briton."

requires and absorbs most of the aid targeted for development, conflict resolution and poverty reduction.

Moreover, international humanitarian aid has become, as one academic termed it, "a means without end". It tends to lack an exit strategy until the money runs out, is often mistargeted, distorts the local economy, and aggravates inequality, poverty and the underlying structures of a conflict. In the long run, it develops aid dependency and aggravates conflict. The conflicting parties often blame each other for aid that never materialised. International aid may increasingly morph into the war dynamic in the conflict zones of the global South, even as it expands through processes of bureaucratisation.

At the same time, it is important to note that that the Norwegian mediators, who have often been held responsible for peace and reconstruction policy failures that originate in the World Bank- and UN-centric international development bureaucracy, are but a miniscule part of the international peace and reconstruction aid industry. Moreover, the Norwegian government that came to power in 2005 decided not to partner with the Bank in cases where structural adjustment was required as part of a peace and reconstruction package.

A bureaucratic peace

Sri Lanka's peace process has been termed a 'no war, no peace' process. Arguably, the formalistic and 'legal-bureaucratic' approach of international peace building and reconstruction largely accounts for this phenomenon. Consider, for instance, the resources, energy and experts spent on legal drafts and re-drafts of an Interim Governing Authority for the North and East (ISGA), the World Bank's North East Reconstruction Fund (NERF), Post Tsunami Operational Mechanism (P-TOMS), three international

donor pledging conferences, Multilateral Needs Assessments, and the hundreds of MoUs for large infrastructure reconstruction projects in the past four years for Sri Lanka. The internationalisation and bureaucratisation of the peace process resulted in too much time spent on international development agendas, conferences and timeframes that were often at odds with the needs and priorities of those affected by the conflict.

This approach effectively eschews seeing track-one peace building as a social process. It has stemmed from, among other things, the large number of international players and the peace and reconstruction bureaucracy in the island, and the attendant coordination burden. Of course, all three actors in the conflict and peace dynamics in Sri Lanka – the LTTE (seduced by the legal fiction of 'equality or parity of the parties'), the Colombo government and the international community bent on implementing a 'neo-liberal' peace – have contributed to the legal bureaucratic approach of peace building.

Arguably, the time spent on legalese would have been better spent in the creative implementation of actually existing possibilities for power and resource sharing, enshrined in the Constitution under the 13th Amendment, and proper targeting of aid to improving the livelihoods of communities from whom fighters are recruited. There has also been a tendency to overburden an already over-determined peace process by linking everything, including natural disasters like the Tsunami (aid), to power sharing. There appears to be a need to de-link these issues and have a more balanced approach to peace and development.

The peace building approach of dialogue in various international capitals, rather than analysis of substantive issues and implementation at the ground level, seems to

derive from Euro-American analytical frameworks that privilege state-centric theories of conflict resolution, developed out of Cold War inter-state conflict mediation experience. However, intrastate conflicts where resource and ethno-religious identity conflicts tend to be intertwined and are often the outcome of post-colonial state building, and require different approaches from peace builders. They require engagement with social realities within the country, and attention to internal complexities at the local and sub-national levels. Where the challenge of reconciliation is within countries, and between asymmetric parties (eg, state actors and non-state actors), peace building necessitates a less legal-bureaucratic approach.

The emphasis on legal mechanisms and processes has also obscured another picture closer to the ground – the reality of the emergence and existence of a dirty war in northeast Sri Lanka. The morphing of the peace process into war is evident when we move away from formalistic frames and focus on non-verbal speech acts – in other words, when we 'read between the said, the meant and the done'.

In this context, adding another layer of international bureaucracy in the form of Bill Clinton or some other UN Envoy to Sri Lanka will only deflect from the focus on substantive issues. Rather, a new peace process led perhaps by the Norwegians would need to thin the international aid bureaucracy and agencies, and focus on substantive issues, including improving poverty reduction among conflict and Tsunami-affected communities. In short, an exit strategy, rather than extended time frames, for aid is necessary for much of the international aid industry in Sri Lanka. This would enable a more locally owned and hence sustainable peace process.

The economics of peace

Though fisheries are arguably Sri Lanka's greatest natural resource, given the unpolluted ocean and rich breeding grounds that surround the country, international development assistance over the decades has not focused on the need to target and up-scale the fisheries sector for poverty alleviation and conflict de-escalation in the north or south. Throughout the peace process, the north and east coastal fisheries communities continued a subsistence economy. Sri Lanka's two main donors, Japan and Norway, both have highly industrialised fisheries sectors.

The most influential number of combatants in the LTTE hail from impoverished coastal fisheries and rural agricultural communities in the northeast. In fact, the LTTE sank a Chinese fishing trawler perceived to be poaching on local fishing grounds in 2003. To transform the conflict, it is crucial to develop the fisheries sector and industry to enable viable livelihoods for poor communities from which

fighters are recruited. The impoverished fishing communities of the north and east and the socially marginalised caste groups on the coast have been the most radicalised in the years of conflict, and provide the foot soldiers. The Tamil elites and *Vellala* or high castes have tended to eschew the LTTE's brand of nationalism, and the LTTE in turn has fought to overthrow the caste hierarchy in Tamil society.

However, the post-conflict and post-Tsunami aid industry experts have systematically overlooked the importance of enabling sustainable livelihoods for such impoverished communities. The Multilateral Needs Assessment for Tokyo and the Tsunami Needs Assessment study, conducted by the World Bank in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank and Japan's official aid agency, pegged the loss borne by the tourism industry at USD 300 million, versus only USD 90 million for the fishing industry, even though fisheries communities were far more affected. The researcher and human rights scholar Vasuki Nesiiah points out that the ideological assumptions embedded in an assessment methodology that rates a hotel bed bringing in USD 200 a night as a greater loss than a fisherman bringing in USD 50 a month have far-reaching consequences.

With reconstruction measures predicated on this kind of accounting, we are on a trajectory that empowers the tourism industry to be an even more dominant player than it was in the past, and, concomitantly, one that disempowers and further marginalises the coastal poor. Many have noted the bias towards big business and tourism in the needs assessments of the multilateral agencies and the government, where the up-scaling of fisheries infrastructure is ignored.

The donor-people disconnect

For the first time since the conflict erupted 25 years ago, coordinated grenade attacks were carried out on three international aid agencies in Sri Lanka recently. These attacks were in the wake of widespread rumours of sexual exploitation and harassment of local women by foreign staff of INGOs in the Tsunami- and conflict-affected areas. Local women were instructed not to work with international agencies, which, it was claimed, were violating Tamil and Muslim 'culture'. There is a sense among common people that the aid industry has not delivered, but rather consumed and lived off the funds.

At the root of the critique of the aid industry is the fact and perception of gross inequality between those who came to help and the receivers of assistance, as well as the erosion of basic humanitarian ethics and values evident in the operational style of INGOs. What people see are extravagant lifestyles, lack of transparency and increased

Should a relief agency such as the Red Cross have taken up long-term housing construction given the absence of expertise and experience, simply because it had managed to raise the funds?

aid dependency, with a concomitant failure of donors to deliver on projects. The fact remains that the majority of large international aid agencies have not performed, and even at times blocked, local philanthropists and the business community, which did much of the work in the immediate aftermath of the Tsunami and have a far better 'delivery rate'. Exit strategies and deadlines for the large agencies also seem to have become anachronistic.

The attacks on aid agencies must be contextualised in the broader setting. Militants who lack access to information, technical critique and evaluations respond to real and perceived corruption in the aid industry with violence. Such attacks are a matter of great concern to those who believe that competent international assistance is necessary for conflict de-escalation and reconstruction. Critics however fail to acknowledge and address the general disenchantment with international aid and INGOs that has become widespread in the country since the Tsunami.

The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) in Sri Lanka represents a case study of the manner in which these agencies generate high expectations but fail to deliver due to a host of reasons. Having raised almost USD 2 billion for post-Tsunami reconstruction, 183 expatriate 'volunteers' came to Sri Lanka, each worth over USD 120,000 but with little technical expertise, knowledge of society, politics or culture, local languages or institutional structures. Having pledged to reconstruct 15,000 houses, it had built a mere 64 one year after the Tsunami. The IFRC and the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society together make up the largest pledged housing donor, and have set the bar very low. The blame for this is placed on the government's buffer zone policy or alternatively on the condition of the land.

The latest government estimates are that 21 percent of the required housing after the Tsunami is complete. That means that several hundred thousand Sri Lankans are still without permanent homes, by government estimates. Some 33,000 families, or at least 150,000 people, remain in transitional shelters. Others are living temporarily with relatives or friends.

The Red Cross was given 67 plots of land, out of which about a third had problems. But several questions arise: why did it not build homes on the remaining land? Should a relief agency such as the Red Cross have taken up long-term housing construction given the absence of expertise and experience, simply because it had managed to raise the funds? The Reconstruction and Development Agency in Sri Lanka, unlike the government of Tamil Nadu in India, has failed to evaluate the INGOs and ask under-performing INGOs to leave the country, so that others may help.

It is increasingly apparent that privatisation of post-disaster reconstruction, given information asymmetries and endemic market imperfections in the sector, is a mistake. As long as such a large, incompetent and costly international bureaucracy remains in the island, substantive and sustainable peace building and development will be elusive. There is by now extensive literature on how international peace building, humanitarian and reconstruction assistance may contribute to sustain low-intensity wars in Africa, Asia and other parts of the global South, because such aid constitutes a large and complex industry and bureaucracy *in itself and for itself*. There is a clear need for reform of the international aid architecture and practices in the context of what writer Naomi Klein has termed 'disaster capitalism', to enable accountability to beneficiaries and affected communities.

Neo-liberal aid

Even as the government and the LTTE are the principal actors in the conflict, it would be naïve to downplay the role of the international community in the peace process in Sri Lanka. The extent of international investment in Sri Lanka's 'peace and reconstruction' has made official acknowledgement of the return to war difficult. But the peace process, in the best of times, enabled merely a repressive tolerance. This was by no means only due to the inability of the two main armed actors to engage on difficult issues – principally the need to democratise the LTTE and Colombo government, and to professionalise and humanise the military. The international peace builders colluded with the main actors in deferring the core social, political and economic issues that structure the dynamics of the conflict, in order to promote a neo-liberal economic reconstruction agenda that is integral to the (phantom) aid industry.

With the wisdom of hindsight, this approach undermined the Norwegian-brokered CFA. The promise of USD 4.5 billion for reconstruction came with a policy requirement of structural adjustments (SAPs), and liberalisation favoured by the World Bank. Very little of this reached the communities affected by the disasters, and from which the majority of combatants are recruited. A recent Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission Report notes on the subject of child recruitment: "some underage children freely volunteer to leave their families due to economic reasons to join the LTTE." Mis-targeted aid translated into an economic bubble, a dramatic rise in the cost of living, increased inequality and poverty in the communities from which soldiers are recruited, and further erosion of the welfare state. In a very short time, the government that signed the peace agreement with the LTTE was voted out

The post-conflict and post-Tsunami aid industry experts have systematically overlooked the importance of enabling sustainable livelihoods for impoverished communities.

of power – and the rest is history. The tide in the affairs of men that may have led to fortune, even to peace in Sri Lanka, had turned.

Since Sri Lanka is not considered a least-developed country, the country's donor dependence is directly related to the armed conflict and the need for external mediation. International development agencies have recently recognised the profitability of working with rather than around social conflict in the post-9/11 world, increasingly focusing on projects "for democratisation, governance and conflict resolution", as the Strategic Conflict Assessment notes. Sri Lanka's strategic location and the over-capitalisation of its post-Tsunami reconstruction means that the country remains creditworthy and an attractive place for the international lending institutions and the aid industry, despite stories of donor fatigue.

Given the aid bureaucracy's embeddedness in the political economy of peace and conflict in Sri Lanka, it cannot be seen as a neutral actor or set of actors. This fact has particular relevance for much of the technical assistance and development 'knowledge' produced and sub-contracted by development agencies. There is ample evidence that the macro-polices of the Washington Consensus exacerbates intra-group and inter-group inequality and poverty that fuels (identity) conflicts in fragile states in the global South.

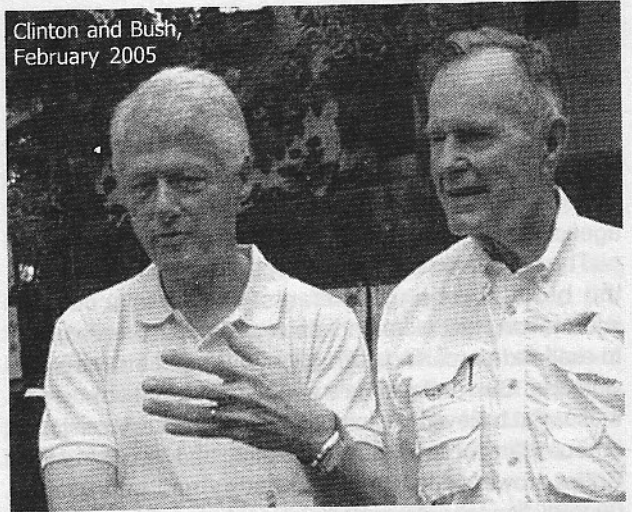
There is a fundamental problem with a peace and reconstruction policy approach that claims to link 'conflict-sensitivity to development' without assessing the dominant neo-liberal development paradigm, and policy that tends to generate inequality and conflict within and between countries. The Strategic Conflict Assessment does precisely this, though it hints at the need for such a critique. Ironically, the international aid industry and bureaucracy and technical experts may be a key impediment to the production of knowledge frames that could lead to more sustainable peace building in Sri Lanka and other conflict-affected parts of the global South.

Looking ahead

For the sake of peace and development in Sri Lanka, it is important that policy-makers and others draw lessons from the past experience of international involvement. What is needed immediately is an evaluation of the performance of the various aid agencies in the country. This could then form the basis for retaining only the efficient ones, which have contributed to the task of post-conflict and -Tsunami reconstruction at the ground level. This would in turn reduce the coordination burden, and help streamline and effectively target development assistance. The Indian authorities' approach to international aid and experts, especially in the wake of the Tsunami, is a good example in this regard.

It is also important to reduce phantom aid and debt burden; and to demand greater transparency, disclosure and accountability from the international financial institutions, the UN agencies and the various donor countries regarding aid programs (loans or grants), the

Clinton and Bush,
February 2005



Such aid constitutes a large and complex industry and bureaucracy in itself and for itself.

extent to which the aid is aid, and technical assistance. INGOs should be required to disclose budgets, qualifications of staff, and in-country spending on projects, operation and transaction cost.

The connection between resource and identity conflicts is often not adequately acknowledged in peace processes. A new peace process will need to grasp the connection between resource and identity conflicts, as well as the intra-group dynamics of the inter-ethnic conflict. This requires deepened social analysis that is not to be confused with the notion of 'social capital' that post-conflict advisors and specialists promote at the knowledge bank. Peace mediators and international development actors will need to be attentive to the discourse on inequality and poverty, and link track-one discussions to deeper social conflicts and intra-group inequalities.

The need for deeper analysis, however, should not to be confused with or used as a legitimacy clause for extending project delivery timeframes. Extended aid timeframes make for even less accountability among aid agencies, who tend to delay on project delivery and extend costly contracts, while generating a culture of aid dependency. This was clearly evident with the Tsunami recovery operation. It is important to devise exit strategies for aid agencies and to stick to the schedule.

Finally, it is to be hoped that the lessons from the peace process in Sri Lanka may serve as a turning point for a 'structural adjustment' of the international peace and development industry, and ensure accountability to communities and countries affected by conflicts. This requires getting beyond the toolkit approach to post-conflict reconstruction, with its predictably damaging macro-economic policies of structural adjustments that undo the work of peace mediators. These steps, coupled with local ownership of the peace process, may provide the way out of Sri Lanka's present quagmire. ▲

The shroud of meritocracy

*Whenever clouds melt
A few droplets get entangled in its leaves
And as the sun brightens
Tiny globules turn into glorious rainbows.*

— Amita Prajapati in *Ek Dal Hai Ped Ki*

One sixth of the human population has no place in the greatest show on earth. As in earlier FIFA World Cups, Southasians are once again mere spectators as the show proceeds in Germany. Selection for national football teams is not hamstrung with reservations, positive discrimination or affirmative action. And yet, none of the 'meritorious' youths of the privileged classes of Southasia excel in a game that requires complete coordination between agility of the body and alertness of the mind. Maybe once the quota for Other Backward Castes (OBCs) creates redundancy among the 'talented' progenies of upper castes, some of them will finally find their way to the sport stadiums.

It has been argued that Southasians prefer cricket to football for three reasons. Unlike in the competitive sport of the plebeians, there is very little chance of bodily contact in the gentlemen's game, hence almost no risk of caste pollution. Cricket is a relaxed game, more suited to the temperament of the leisure class. Compared to the dullest match on the football field, even a one-day contest on the cricket pitch is a long-drawn affair. The third distinction is the most pronounced. Cricket is played in starched-white, a mark of nobility in hot and humid Southasia, where a premium is placed on the persona of those who wear clothes dipped in *Tinopal*, the whitener predecessor of heavily-advertised *Ujala*.

The anti-reservation lobbyists like to tell the story of Indian cricket teams that they think they have done their country proud. Their argument is that if positive discrimination is so good, why not also have reserved quotas for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs) and OBCs in the national sports teams. This criticism should be considered as a valid suggestion by the Cricket Control Board of India, for it proves the point that reservation, or the lack of it, has very little impact on the quality of the game.

There are other factors – social prestige, pecuniary returns and cultural proclivities, for example – that determine the performance of players, be it in football or cricket.

Ruckus over reservations

The animosity towards reservations is as old as its provision in the Indian Constitution. Initially, quotas were fixed in administration to give a sense of worth to the outcastes of the Hindu Varnashram. The elite interpreted it as a gesture of magnanimity towards the oppressed. Reformers explained the move as a compensation for the wrongs of the past. Both these versions sought to assert the generosity of the upper castes. In reality, reservations saved the twice-born from the rage of the oppressed as the aspiring members of SC/ST discovered that they finally had a stake in maintaining the status quo. If discrimination of the past has to be truly compensated for, Southasia will have to be ruled solely by untouchables and tribals for at least the next thousand years. All that the reservations have done is to pacify the vanguard of the subjugated, a section of SC/STs derided by the privileged castes as a 'creamy layer'. They should be thanking this section of emerging elite for the stability they have given to the strife-prone and congenitally wobbly Indian polity.

Howsoever reluctantly, reservations for SC/STs were tolerated by the middle class. Bereft of human and material resources, these groups struggled to benefit from affirmative-action programmes, and those of the higher rank never considered them as challengers. Quotas for OBCs was an altogether different matter. When the 'Mandal Messiah' V P Singh expanded the list of beneficiaries of positive discrimination a decade ago, all hell broke loose. Privileged classes denigrated him as the person who will stand guilty of destroying the calibre of Indian education and



By fielding a Jagjivan Ram here or a Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed there, Indira Gandhi remained unassailable until the Emergency.

Developments since 'Mandal' have demonstrated that ensuring social justice is good even for those who stand to lose in the short run.

administration. Developments since then have demonstrated that ensuring social justice is good even for those who stand to lose in the short run. Were it not for OBC quotas, cyber-coolies of Whitefields and NOIDA would be toiling at the call-centres for a pittance. Reservations released them from the false safety of lowly job guarantees, and forced them to compete and innovate in demanding disciplines. Freed from the bondage of clerkship, the twice-born youths were forced to concentrate on education, and have since flourished in the New Economy.

But the Raja of Manda was persuaded, perhaps by his compatriots of the upper castes, to exempt so-called 'institutions of excellence' from the purview of additional reservations. Now that Arjun Singh, another Thakur, has decided to right the wrong, the entire sacred-thread-wearing BRB (Brahman, Rajput and Baishya) brigade is up in arms with a deceptive battle cry: *Merit is in danger*. That their contention is patently false needs no elaboration: the *Upanayan* ceremony does not confer 'brilliance'; it is a set of socio-economic privileges enjoyed by the upper castes that allow their progeny a head-start in the career race. This point has been minutely examined from every angle by eminent Indian thinkers. However, the mainstream media is still besotted with the merit-versus-mediocrity debate, defending the idea that half of all opportunities are too little for one fifth of the Indian population. An anecdotal bit of data reveals the reason behind the obsession: 85 percent of senior journalists at leading media

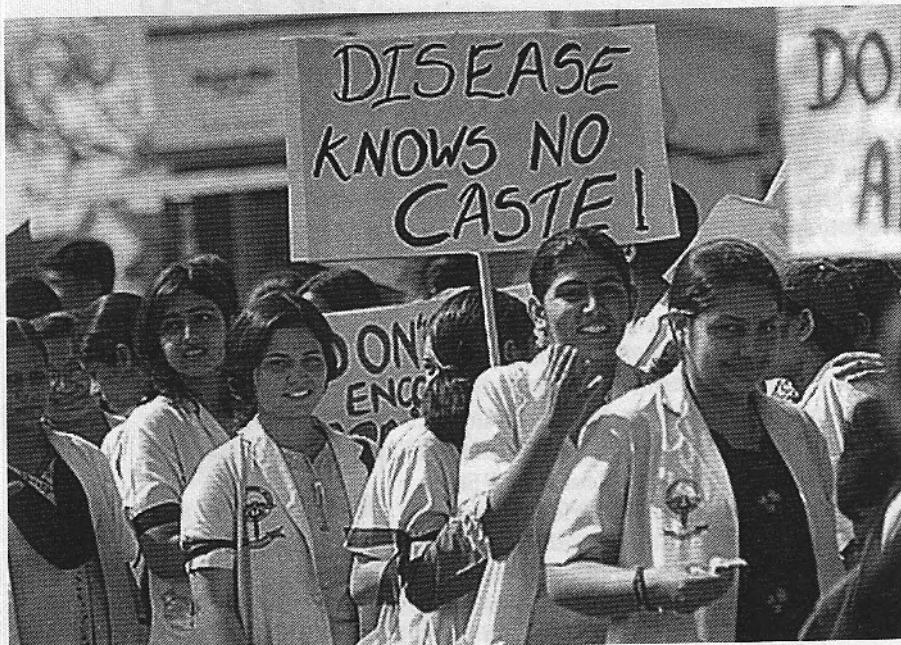
houses are BRBs. Caste is thus not an issue for them; the 'merit' that ensures their monopoly over IITs, IIMs and other premier institutions of higher learning is much more important for these free-market fundamentalists than even job quotas in government service.

During the formative decades of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, high-caste politicians defended their communal interests by co-opting dummy spokespersons from minority communities, marginalised sections of society and ostracised groups. By fielding a Jagjivan Ram here or a Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed there, Indira Gandhi remained unassailable until the Emergency. The Janata Party tried the same trick but not with similar successes, because the political movement of Jaiprakash Narayan had awakened the consciousness of the oppressed. His campaign exposed the disadvantaged to the possibilities inherent in their numbers.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of assertive representatives of the downtrodden who made a virtue of their deficiencies. Laloo Prasad, Rabri Devi, Mulayam Singh and Mayawati did not care what the world thought of them, so long as they won elections by being what they were – coarse, crude and impolite. The mandarins of Indian administration kept them in check by their monopoly over modern voodoo – technocratic jargon, administrative procedures, and the maze of rules and precedence more complex than the riddles of Bikram-Betaal stories. With the media also protecting their turf, the stranglehold of BRBs on Indian society is likely to continue unless the majority rises up against the monopoly of the minority on the dubious basis of 'merit'. Eminent sociologist M N Srinivas had once warned that the curse of caste will not go away from Indian society without a violent and vengeful civil war. Opponents of affirmative action programmes are bent upon proving him right by vilifying steps meant to mainstream the traditionally disadvantaged.

Caste-in-stone

Lenin is supposed to have said that the class of birth determined the worldview of a person for life. Ram Manohar Lohia's correction to that controversial statement was uniquely Southasian; he opined that caste was the key determinant of Hindu society. These two observations are complementary rather than dichotomous. Caste and class often coalesce in the region. True, there are poor Brahman rickshaw-pullers in Calcutta, but they are not as common as lower-caste Bihari farm labours



in Haryana and Punjab. Similarly, Yadav or Kurmi merchants are few and far between. Perhaps there will be more of them in 20 years time, if the media forsakes its fixation against reservation and honestly considers the reverse reservation traditionally enjoyed by BRBs at top-rated educational institutions.

The record of media bias in other countries of Southasia is no better than that of India, and the reason behind the partiality is also somewhat similar. Voices of Hindu Bangladeshis remain muted because none of them man the gates of Dhaka media. The Oxbridge connection of influential journalists in Pakistan was once legendary. That seems to have changed - Ivy Leaguers have established a parallel hierarchy of their own. But the character of the close-knit inner circle remains the same. When was the last you heard, saw or read in Pakistani media that Hindus, Sikhs and Christians of their country deserved better representation in politics, administration, diplomacy and the military?

The chauvinism of Sinhalese media can perhaps be partially attributed to the state of civil war, but that does not explain why almost no journalist of repute ever speaks up against the violent rhetoric of Buddhist monks. The BCN (Bahun, Chhetri and Newar) caste-

coalition of Kathmandu media ensures that terms referring to 'Madhesi' and Musalman plains people are always pronounced with a pejorative inflection. In the name of merit, the media in Southasia has fallen hook, line and sinker for the elite consensus designed to protect inherited privileges, come what may.

For the media, perception is often the reality. Despite their inherent caste biases, journalists will not be able to ignore the star performers from SC/STs and OBCs once they see them shine. Reservations at higher institutions are thus as important as promotional measures to popularise primary and secondary education. The Khans of Bollywood give a sense of fulfilment to the most humble Musalman in Assam. Admission into the Pune Film Institute is no guarantee of stardom, but a doctorate from the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore is a sure-fire passport to success. It cannot be denied to those who hold mountains in their minds and oceans in their hearts. Without being based in social justice, the superstructure of meritocracy hangs uselessly in the air, flying wildly between one and another section of privileged population. The time to challenge and change the status quo has arrived. The rainbow is a harbinger of hope.

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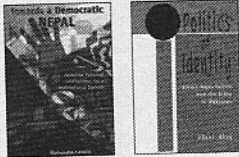
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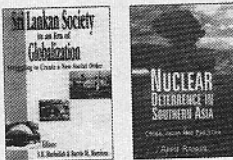
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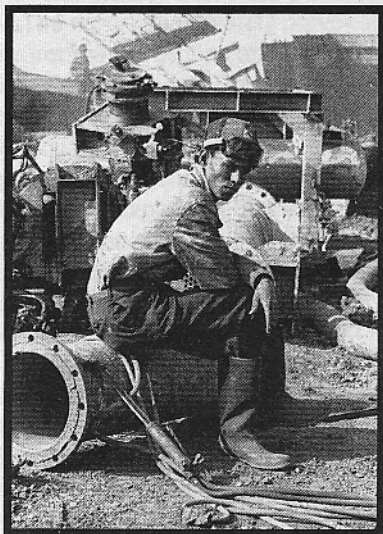
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Text by **Naeem Mohaiemen**

Photographs by **Robert Bailey**

SHIPBREAKING transfers a dirty industry from North to South. In Bangladesh, however, it also employs 300,000 and supplies 80 percent of the country's steel.

There is a development paradox here.

Between the devil and the deep blue



In 1992, *The Economist* leaked a memo by World Bank chief economist Lawrence Summers, which discussed the economic rationale for "encouraging more migration of dirty industries" to Less Developed Countries (LDC):

The measurements of the costs of health-impairing pollution depend on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view, a given amount of health-impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages.

"The question is if you should want to die first of starvation or pollution."



The report immediately provoked outrage from environmental groups and the developing countries. Brazil's Secretary of Environment, Jose Lutzenburger, called it an example of "unbelievable alienation, reductionist thinking, social ruthlessness and arrogant ignorance" of economists. Summers quickly disavowed the memo, explaining that the remarks were meant to be an "ironic aside" to illustrate that free trade would not necessarily lead to environmental improvements for LDCs.

Whatever the memo's provenance and intention, Summers' prescriptions have now been implemented – not directly by the Bank, but through the logic of global markets. A prime example is the shipbreaking industry, which has essentially migrated from the Northern countries to Southasia – 90 percent of the world's ships are now dismantled in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

The statistics are staggering in their long-term implications. There are approximately 45,000 ships in the world's seaways. About 700 of these become obsolete every year and need disposal. Over the next few decades, the number that will need to be

decommissioned will increase dramatically, due to new regulations. A majority of ships are built in South Korea and China, filling orders placed by Japan, the UK, the US, Norway, Singapore and Denmark. Until the 1970s, shipbreaking was done in the countries of origin, using heavy machinery on salvage decks. But increasing environmental regulations and labour costs resulted in

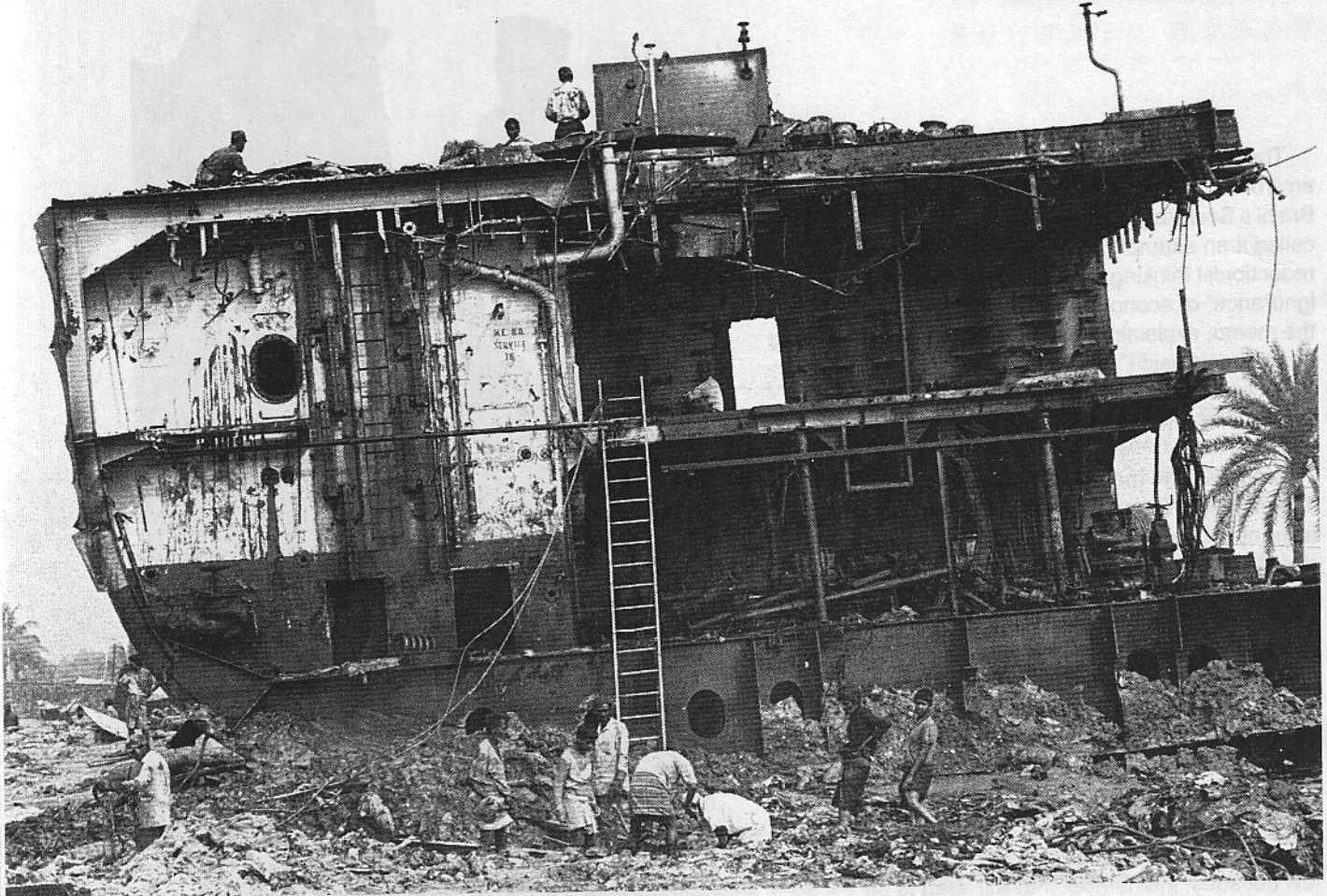
the transfer of this work – first to Korea and Taiwan, and then to Southasia. Two decades ago, 79 countries engaged in some form of ship-recycling activity. Today, most of that work is completed here. Shipbreaking yards in Bangladesh alone dismantle about 90 giant ships every year, mostly oil tankers.

There is little doubt that this is risky work, and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in

particular has extensively documented the industry's dangers. The most obvious risk is from industrial accidents, especially explosions from leftover gas and fumes. Even if a ship is gas-free, the regular use of torches, saws and grinders is very risky, especially because many workers do not have safety equipment. More hotly debated is the level of toxins inside the

Material typically
released during
ship-scraping includes
asbestos, lead, arsenic,
chromates and mercury.





Shipbreaking remains a highly unregulated business in Bangladesh

ships. According to the ILO, material typically released during ship-scraping includes asbestos, lead, arsenic, chromates and mercury. The shipping lines refuse to acknowledge this, however, for fear of being held in violation of the 1992 Basel convention, which banned the export of toxins.

An accidental industry

Shipbreaking came to Bangladesh via a strange set of circumstances – first a cyclone, and then a civil war. The Bay of Bengal is a particularly deep approach, and the differential between the high and low tides along the Bangladesh coast is over six metres. This geological advantage – which makes it possible to bring giant ships as close as possible to the shoreline – came to the attention of locals after a 1965 cyclone beached a giant cargo ship on the Chittagong shore. In a country starved for raw materials, the local demand for steel was too high for the stranded ship to remain a mere curiosity. A few days after the accident, local businessmen started to tear the vessel apart. Within a short period, hundreds of people had stripped bare the entire structure. The accident had caused the loss of a good ship but offered up a bounty of free steel and other recyclable materials.

This would-be industry stayed dormant until the 1971 War of Independence. Among the numerous crises for

newly independent Bangladesh were the ships, crippled by wartime attacks, blocking Chittagong Port. Hastily arranging a makeshift auction, the government sold two of these ships to the only bidder, businessman Shirazul Chowdhury. Although the new socialist government was in the process of nationalising all businesses, shipbreaking was not considered an industry and was free from intervention.

The methods used by Chowdhury to break apart these two ships were labour-intensive and low-tech, and they set the template for the future industry. Hundreds of workers climbed aboard the hull and took apart steel plates by hammering out rivets one-by-one – a process that would take weeks to pry out just one plate. In order to bring sections of the ship further inland, the workers jerry-rigged crude mechanical pulleys powered by hundreds of men. Today, blowtorches and other cutting equipment are more common, but every ship that comes to the Chittagong yards is still taken apart in a process that has changed little in over three decades.

India's troubles begin

Today, in order to generate jobs and attract industry, developing countries compete against each other to offer the lowest wages and least regulations. When

labour and environment activists target individual offenders, other countries rush in to lure away that business. Bangladesh lost many of its clients in the garment industry after a series of media exposés on its sweatshops. Ironically, the country gained traction in shipbreaking precisely because activists were targeting the competition in India.

In 1997, a series of investigative reports made India's massive Alang yards in Gujarat a symbol of the 'dirty ships' industry. This began with an investigation by a US newspaper into the large number of military vessels that were abandoned on the Baltimore docks. These ships were government-owned vessels that could not be sent overseas for scrapping because of a US ban on exporting PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), an organic pollutant found in hydraulic and electrical systems. Because the cost of dismantling the ships was prohibitive, the US firms that had been given the job had either gone bankrupt or abandoned the work. The reporters realised that commercial vessels carried similar toxins, but were not subject to the export ban. Eventually, the reporters landed at Alang, which at the time was scrapping more than half of the world's ships.

After the reporting team won a Pulitzer Prize, the story gained additional momentum due to European interest. In 1998, Greenpeace published its own report on Alang, making the explosive claim that there were approximately 365 deaths a year from shipbreaking accidents, resulting in the slogan: "Every day one ship, every day one dead." Greenpeace's campaign eventually led to intervention at the highest policy levels.

Shipbreaking received fiery denunciations by officials in the US and Netherlands, and was inserted into the agenda of the European Union and the International Maritime Organisation. The Alang yards were now under intense pressure to reform their operations. One key step was the requirement that all ships provide a 'gas-free certificate'. In response, ship owners looked for countries with fewer requirements, resulting in more work for Bangladesh. Instead of an increase in global standards, Southasia saw a regional version of the race to the bottom.

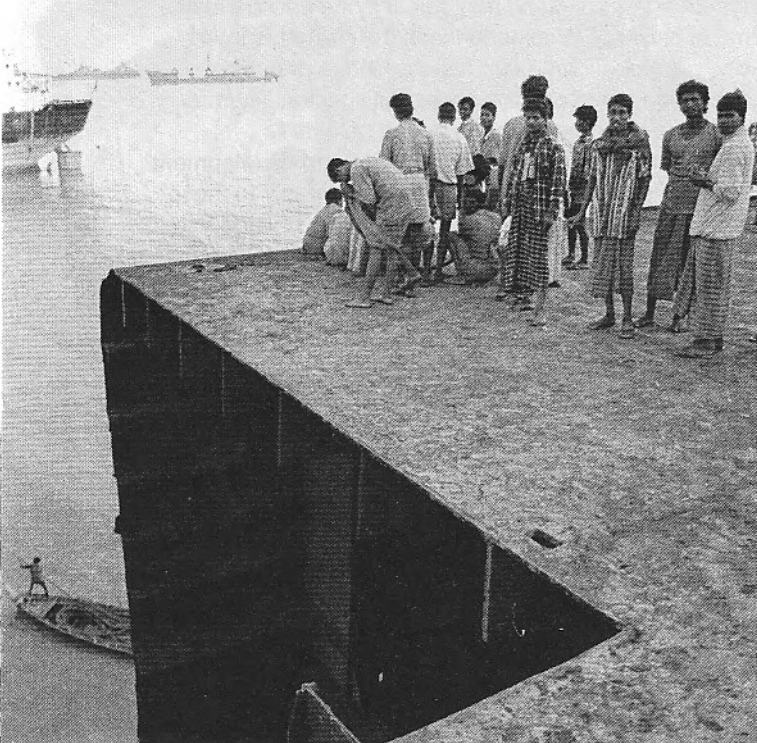
Chasing ships

In its rush to enter world markets, Bangladesh has had a complicated history, both as a source of cheap labour and as a dumping ground for unregulated products. Past skirmishes between Bangladesh and external players involved testing of 'RU-486' abortion drugs, the herbal remedy Gripe Water, toxic milk imports from Russia, contaminated fertiliser from the US, and the arsenic-poisoning crisis linked to deep-water tubewells built by donor agencies. Activism around these issues tends to have a strident tone, but when it comes to cases with a linkage to industrialisation and trade, a more

delicate dance is at play. Then the fear is that too much human rights critiquing may result in the country losing that business. The experience of the garments trade, where a global campaign resulted in the departure of many foreign buyers, is a perpetual spectre. There is also a common belief that a period of 'dirty industrialisation' is essential for long-term development. Because shipbreaking is dangerous primarily to those employed by the yards, there is also little spillage into the consumer space that could create mass awareness of the issue.



Shipbreaking remains a highly unregulated business in Bangladesh. Because it directly and indirectly employs almost 300,000 people, and provides 80 percent of the country's steel needs, agencies are loath to 'tamper with success'. Recently, the Chittagong yards were forced out of the shadows because of a series of legal actions. Armed with Greenpeace's list of 50 ships that were bound for scrapping, environmental activists started filing lawsuits against the Bangladesh government. Faced with a court order and intense media coverage, the government banned three ships from entering the country, including the controversial asbestos-laden SS *Norway*, which had been docked in Malaysian waters looking for a destination. In an illustration of the techniques the industry uses to avoid scrutiny, the ship even changed its name to *Blue Lady* in the middle of court proceedings. The Dhaka government's action marked a defeat for the Bangladeshi shipbreaker who had purchased the vessel for USD 13 million. The ship was then sent to India after



Bangladesh's rejection, where the Supreme Court issued a ruling allowing the ship to enter, although NGO groups have vowed to block its dismantling. During the same period, French President Jacques Chirac ordered another asbestos-lined ship, SS *Clemenceau*, to return from India after widespread protests.

Although NGO groups gained these significant victories this year, there are tactical limits to interventions through individual ship-chasing. Ship ownership and registration operates through a complex system of FOC (Flags Of Convenience, often of tax havens like the Bahamas) through which half of the world's ships are registered. This makes it difficult to hold any government accountable for a particular 'dirty' ship. As a result, the pressure for reform has always been on the destination countries.

Iconic images and brutal realities

Many in Bangladesh are watching the debate over toxic ships with trepidation, fearing that activists will deprive them of a growing industry and critical revenue. Industrialists point to strong local demand for steel and claim that, without shipbreaking, industrial development will shrink. The business sector exerts pressure to maintain the status quo, including keeping out trade unions. To counter the harsh reputation of the yards, others portray the inventiveness, resilience and

pride displayed by many of the shipbreakers. Because every part of the ship, down to toilet fixtures, is recycled and sold on the local market, supporters even call it a '100 percent green industry', and urge activists not to target the trade.

In recent media work around this issue, an implicit position has emerged that counter-balances the activist platform. Journalist Roland Buerk's book *Breaking Ships*, the first in-depth look at the Chittagong yards, spends most of its pages documenting the work process in minute detail – much less attention is paid to the environmental issues. But one of Buerk's own photographs, showing a young worker covered in a mysterious fluorescent substance, indicates what may be missing in his text. Considering photography's complicated history as a tool of icon building, images around this issue do need interrogation (consider the mythical photos by Alexander Rodchenko of the Soviet-era Baltic Canal, and by the US Farm Security of the American Dustbowl). Brazilian Sebastiao Salgado, whose haunting photographs first brought attention to the Chittagong yards, became, in philosopher Susan Sontag's words, "the principal target of a new campaign against the inauthenticity of the beautiful". Although Robert Bailey's photographs that accompany this essay do not carry any mythologising intent, there can always be audiences that use these and other images to rebuke activists who want to curb dangerous labour.

When the Indian yards were being investigated, one resident said to journalist William Langewiesche: "The question I want to ask the environmentalists is if you should want to die first of starvation or pollution." It is a transparently inadequate binary, but one that is used to stymie reform conversations. New theoretical frameworks and practical solutions must be developed through debates on development, free markets and globalisation. The Southasian economies desperately need new industries, but the model of development-at-any-price will render them vulnerable to health pandemics and labour disasters.

Developed countries need to take the primary steps: by guaranteeing that ships are not sent with toxic content, by forcing FOC tax havens to abide by international regulatory frameworks, and by enforcing the Basel ban on export of toxic waste. In the shipbreaking countries, calls for unionisation and safety standards have been resisted with that over-used excuse of 'staying competitive'. Activists need to continue pushing for reforms that will create sustainable development. The challenge is to keep competitive industries like shipbreaking in Bangladesh, while making them truly '100 percent green'.



MISSING

DAUGHTERS OF PUNJAB

The declining ratio of girls to boys born in the two Punjabs points to a heart-rending problem which few want to discuss. It is not a matter of education, it is not a matter of poverty, it is not a matter of religion. What is going on here?

TEXT AND PICTURES BY **ASTRI GHOSH**

The jacaranda trees are in full bloom on the drive into Chandigarh, this early spring morning. The streets are wide and lined with tall, shady trees: mango, laburnum, gulmohur and eucalyptus. Bougainvillea plants grow in the concrete strips that divide the roads. There is nothing haphazard about the design of this city. Bus shelters and lamp posts complement the buildings nearby. The roundabouts have manicured gardens, each more spectacular than the last.

In the Sector Ten part of town, the market has shops with the latest fashions, bakeries that sell croissants, cafes where you can take away a cappuccino and a pastry. Two girls dressed in jeans and skimpy tops come out of a café

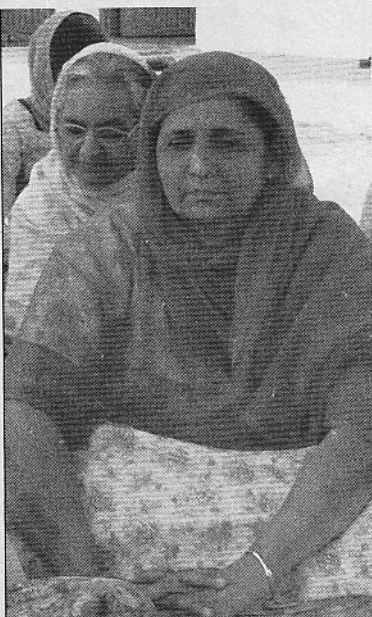
called Coffee, Conversations & Beyond... and ride off on a scooter.

The smartly dressed women of the city, driving drive cars and scooters to work or college, might give an observer the impression that women in Chandigarh have gained full freedom of decision over their lives. That observer would be wrong. In Chandigarh, an Indian girl has one of her poorest chances of surviving – in the womb. Modern technology and ancient customs ensure that one-fourth of all the girls that are meant to be born in this thriving city do not live to see daylight. Here, today, there are 128 men for every 100 women. It is a matter of female foeticide.

After the division of Punjab in 1947, the historic capital,

"There were
no girls
born here
last year,
only boys,
*munde hi
munde*"

Paramjeet Kaur,
Khudda Jassu
village outside
Chandigarh



Lahore, was left in the newly created Pakistan. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, wanted Punjab's new capital to be a symbol of the country's faith in the future. The iconic modernist architect Le Corbusier was invited to come from Switzerland and give shape to the new city, a capital that would match the splendour of Lahore. In 1966 the Indian state of Punjab was divided once again, but Chandigarh remained the capital of both resulting states, Haryana and Punjab. It was already a city full of research institutions, technology parks, hospitals and schools.

Chandigarh was the first stop on my journey to discover whether the city's preference for sons was something that could be seen across the entire former state of Punjab, today divided into the Pakistani province of Punjab and the Indian states of Punjab and Haryana. The 'land of five rivers' has always had the dubious distinction of having fewer girls than other states in India. In 1901, there were 972 women for every 1000 men in India. Even at that time, that ratio worked out to just 832 women in Punjab. In 2001 that number had dropped to 927 nationally, but in Haryana the state average was 820, and in Punjab, 793. The district of Fatehgarh Sahib had the lowest child sex ratio – just 754 girls per thousand boys.

Abortion is legal in India, but the act regulating termination of pregnancy specifies the necessary existing medical and foetal conditions, as well as the establishments that can perform abortions. Determining the gender of the foetus and eliminating it based on that information is illegal. Nonetheless, easy access to ultrasound equipment since the early 1980s has led to an increase in sex selection and, consequently, a rapid decline in the Indian child sex ratio. Of the four million induced abortions that take place every year in the country, it is estimated that only around 500,000 are legal – the rest are illegal and unsafe operations, performed by untrained staff in improperly equipped institutions.

Mourning girl births

Above the market at Sector Ten is the office of the Voluntary Health Association of Punjab (VHAP), an organisation that has worked extensively on preventing female foeticide. As I walk in, volunteers are in the middle of organising a tribunal on farmer suicides in the state. On the walls are posters about girls that vanish from the womb. On the tables sit UNFPA bags with pictures of girls on them that say, starkly, *Missing*.

VHAP is holding a camp for women in the village of Khudda Jassu, on the outskirts of Chandigarh. There, about 20 women sit under a large, shady tree in the courtyard of a gurudwara. Two VHAP representatives are talking to the group about the importance of looking after girls. I ask them how many girls were born in the village in the last year.

"There were no girls born here last year," Paramjeet Kaur informs us. "Only boys, *munde hi munde*".

Did the women in the village go in for ultrasounds to find out whether they were going to have girls or boys?

"No, no one here that we know of had an ultrasound," she answers.

"Well, what do we know", says another woman, Harpreet Kaur. "They could easily have gone and done it without telling the village."

"When boys are born we celebrate; when girls are born we mourn," a third, Manjeet Kaur, says, then continues: "But it is actually much better to have daughters than sons. Sons go and live by themselves, or go abroad and forget all about you. The daughters stand by you."

Statistics show that a strikingly large proportion of people in the Subcontinent do not share Manjeet's point of view. There is a strong preference for sons throughout the region, and giving birth to a boy enhances the mother's status within the family. On the other hand, an inability to produce a male heir may result in humiliation, contempt, abuse and abandonment. In-laws threaten their daughters-in-law with dire consequences if they cannot produce a son. In abusive situations, a woman will be forced to undergo tests to identify the sex of her unborn child, and then forced into an abortion if the foetus is female. The Punjab government now offers an incentive of 100,000 rupees per case to villages that report a case of foeticide.

In a study published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* in January, an Indo-Canadian team of doctors estimated that at least 10 million female foetuses had been aborted in India over the past two decades by middle-class families to ensure that they had male heirs. In the course of a survey of more than a million homes, the researchers found that sex determination in pregnancy and selective abortion accounted for 500,000 missing girls each year. Researchers from the University of Toronto in Canada and the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in Chandigarh also found the sex of the previous child born affected the sex ratio of the subsequent birth. Fewer girls were born to families who had not yet had a boy. More than twice as

many educated mothers were found to have had selective abortions, compared with those who were illiterate, a finding that did not vary by religion.

"Some demographers say we underestimate the amount of sex-selective abortions in our figures," says Dr Rajesh Kumar, head of the Community Medicine department at PGIMER, and co-author of the Lancet study. "But we don't want to enter the numbers game here. That will just divert the attention of people from the issue that is at stake. What we are saying is: take action."

Devaluing women

The child sex ratio for all the districts of Haryana dropped to below 900 girls in 1991. In 2001, almost all districts recorded a ratio of less than 850 girls to 1000 boys, with several well below 800. This drastic trend not only reflects the elimination of girl foetuses for being female. It also is a harbinger for severe social dislocation, already being faced, for example, in the 'marriage market'. "The situation is the same in Haryana as it is in Punjab," says Dr Kumar of PGIMER. "Both states face the same lack of girls. There is an obvious shortage of women – men don't find brides and can't get married. So, they bring in girls from other states, and not much is done to stop it."

Indeed, Haryana's men now pay touts to bring in women for marriage – when sold against their will, these women are known locally as paros. Social activists fear that most of these women end up being used as sex slaves, before being resold to other men in what looks to be a new, flourishing female-trafficking market. According to one media estimate presented this April, there are almost 45,000 paros in Haryana from Jharkhand alone. In addition to the increase in trafficking, the scarcity of women has also led to a revival of old customs like watta-satta, or bride exchange (literally, 'give-take'), where a brother-sister pair from two households marry simultaneously.

Access to education and higher literacy rates have largely failed to change attitudes. On the contrary,



"In Pakistan we have not focused on the issue of female foeticide at all"

Khawar Mumtaz,
Lahore

"When I started working, women used to work the fields. Now they sit at home while tractors and machines do their work. This has affected the attitudes of men towards women."

Jasbir Kaur,
Nandpur, Fatehgarh Sahib



VHAP's Manmohan Singh says that the educational system tends to reinforce traditional thinking. "Our educational system is just a churning machine for certificates. Teachers don't make students aware of gender questions, and most textbooks have stereotype figures of males and females. If you look at the illustrations in schoolbooks, you'll see small girls looking after babies, boys playing, women in the kitchen."

Singh believes that the agricultural revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to a rise in the living standard and an increase in wealth in Punjab, succeeded also in disempowering women. "Before the Green Revolution, women's participation in agriculture was very high," he explains. "They would select and purchase seeds, sow them, and reap the harvest. When the process was mechanised, people stopped preserving the seeds. You just buy them now. Using chemical fertilisers and combine harvesting is a male thing."

About fifty kilometres away is the district of Fatehgarh Sahib, where the sex-ratio figures are among the lowest in the country. We drive past golden fields of wheat and sugarcane. The smell of boiling gur lingers in the air. Large banyan and pipal trees, as well as stacks of cow dung line the road. Palatial houses sit in the middle of fields. As we near the village of Kalour, a young Sikh farmer stands next to his tractor, looking out at fields that are yellow with mustard.

At the Primary Health Centre in Kalour, Jasbir Kaur has worked as an auxiliary nurse and midwife for the last 20 years, overseeing five of the 169 villages that the Health Centre covers. Jasbir agrees with Manmohan Singh's suggestion: she too blames the Green Revolution for the low status of women in Punjab and Haryana. "When I started working, women used to work the fields. Now they sit at home while tractors and machines do their work. They don't earn money, even though there is a lot more money. This has affected the attitudes of men towards women." In essence, as the economic value of women has gone down in recent decades, the prevalence of female foeticide and infanticide has risen.

Skewed statistics, Lahore

As I catch a flight to Lahore to explore the situation in Punjab Province, I page through a newspaper from that city and find a letter to the editor entitled 'Gender selection in Pakistan'. A reader had written: "Coming across an advertisement on a cable channel, I was quite shocked to say the least. The ad was regarding gender-selection, now made possible in Pakistan."

The advertised hospital in question is the Akbar Hospital, in the area of Lahore known as Defence. How do they offer gender-selection services? After all, it has been a decade since both the Pakistan Medical Association, and the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council declared it unethical to tell parents the gender of an unborn child.

Dr Shabana, a medical officer and gynaecologist at Akbar, says that abortions do not take place in the hospital, as they are against the law. But she can let me in on an astounding open secret. "Dr Nosheen, who has put advertisements on cable TV, is a private practitioner who rents a clinic from us," she explains. "She does not do ultrasounds with abortions, but she uses a technique where you wash the chromosomes, and implant the male embryos in the woman's uterus."

In other words, sex-selection takes place before conception. This process, called 'Pre-implantational Genetic Diagnosis', or PGD, is a complicated gender pre-selection technique that first appeared in the 1990s. After a woman's eggs are fertilised in the laboratory, genetic testing is performed on the resulting embryos to determine their gender. Only embryos of the 'desired' sex are then implanted in the woman. The process of identifying and discarding the female embryo is banned in India. At PKR 150,000, this technique is too expensive for most people who want to ensure a male birth. Nonetheless, it is a prime example of technology flouting the letter of the law.

In Pakistan, there are no restrictions on telling expectant mothers the gender of their unborn baby. Abortions are not legal, however, except in exceptional circumstances. But legal restrictions do not mean that abortions do not happen; they are simply driven underground, and become more dangerous.

"In Pakistan we have not focused on the issue of female foeticide at all," says Khawar Mumtaz, a social scientist who leads the advocacy organisation Shirkat Gah. "Abortion is illegal, so we don't know what is happening – how people are getting rid of a female baby if they know it is female and don't want it." Although Shirkat Gah runs a women's-resource centre in Lahore that focuses on reproductive rights and reproductive health, they have only recently begun to look at the incidence of foeticide in Pakistan.

"We do have quite a high incidence of unsafe abortion deaths," Mumtaz continues. According to WHO estimates, 2 to 12 percent of all maternal deaths in the country are due to induced abortions. "Our concerns have been with the mortality rates because they have been some of the highest in the region, even in the world."

Even if there is little research on the subject, however,

sex selection in Pakistan is taking place. "Most patients who come for an ultrasound want to know the sex of the baby," says Dr Umera, an ultrasound operator in a small clinic she runs with her mother. "There is no ban on giving them this information here yet. If a woman already has girls and is depressed and under pressure from her family, of course I tell her what the sex of her child is."

Child sex ratios are alarmingly similar on the two sides of the border, with Pakistan also showing the same trends as India: in urban areas, more boys than girls are born. According to the latest census, in urban Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan respectively, 110, 114 and 118 boys were born per 100 girls. In Islamabad, that number jumps to 122. Female foeticide is a drastic highlight of the discrimination that females – infant, girls and women – face in Pakistan. In all countries, sex ratio at birth is naturally tilted slightly in favour of boys, and generally around 105 boys are born for every 100 girls. However, since males usually have higher lifelong mortality rates than do females, in most countries women end up outnumbering men. But in Pakistan, 1-in-10 live-born infants dies before its first birthday, and over half of these deaths occur in the first four weeks of life. The sex difference in child mortality is one of the highest in the world: death rates for girls aged one to four years are an astounding 66 percent higher than for boys in the same age group.

"In the rest of the world, the girl child is supposedly stronger than the boy child," says Khawar Mumtaz. She says that Pakistan's alarmingly skewed statistics "reflects a certain kind of bias or lack of interest in the way females are looked upon in the country. Now that the whole issue of foeticide has been brought up by Indians, it has made us also start to look at this issue."

Temple Road

A recent study by the international Population Council, conducted from 2001 to 2003, found that the abortion rate in Pakistan is 29 per 1000 women. Nearly a quarter of the women are later hospitalised for complications. "Although women are bothered about the morality of having abortions, if they weigh the cost of having an unwanted girl, or the fact that their husbands might marry again in order to have sons, against morality, to bachchi girva dete hai – they abort their daughters," says Shaheeda Asgar, with the women's-resource NGO Simorgh.

Outside Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, a respected institution in Lahore, a staff nurse and a Lady Health Visitor (LHV, a rural basic-health-care practitioner) are walking to a private hospital around the corner on Temple Road. Do people come to these private facilities to have sex-selective abortions?

"No, abortions are illegal, so people go to dais (traditional birth attendants) in all the 'Safiya clinics' on Temple Road," says Attiya, the LHV. "But they come to us when the dai has made a mess of things, and we have to clean up and save their lives." These clinics are named after a woman, Safiya, who had been a dai with a clinic on Temple Road 50 years ago. Today, the street is lined with

clinics bearing her name, each offering the same services.

The first Safiya clinic I try to enter has a long line of women, both young and middle-aged, waiting for their turn. The next clinic is tiny, with dark glass doors. A lady in her late thirties sits behind a desk, while an elderly lady gets up from a charpai and moves to the backroom, to make room for me to sit. For PKR 12,000, Shabana, the lady who runs this clinic, will perform an abortion on a young unmarried girl the same day. She hands me a visiting card with three mobile numbers. "A lot of married women come to me if they have too many girls or feel they can't have the child they are bearing," she says simply.

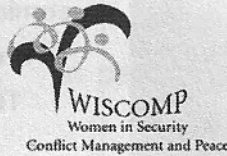
And so it goes. Despite being vehemently separated for six decades, many of the same practices and attitudes towards women continue to flourish throughout the old, undivided Punjab, on both sides of its international border. Standing outside Shabana's clinic, here on the Safiya-lined Temple Road, I am reminded of what Manjeet Kaur told me earlier, in the shady courtyard of the Chandigarh gurudwara. "When boys are born we celebrate," she had said, "when girls are born we mourn." Despite hearing this refrain time and again in Lahore, Chandigarh and the surrounding countryside, Manjeet had been the only one to continue: "It is actually much better to have daughters than sons ... It is your daughters that care for you, and make sure that you are all right."

At the moment, however, few seem to be taking care of



Temple Road Safiya clinic

the daughters themselves. If more women had access to contraception, and were given the freedom to restrict the number of children they bore, would lives be saved? How many women can we afford to lose to backstreet abortions? And how many more daughters of Punjab will die before they are born? ▲



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Wagah *and* Jallianwala Bagh

BY DEEPA A

I grew up with indistinct ideas of what constituted a frontier, vague notions that, in retrospect, were entirely appropriate given the amorphous nature of the subject. In my hometown of Palakkad, a sleepy Keralite border town that carried favour with sandalwood smugglers due to its strategic location near Tamil Nadu, I learned to identify territorial limits with forms that seemed specifically located to mark a boundary: the dull khaki uniforms of the sometimes-dozing policemen at the checkposts, the signboards frostily greeting travellers with *welcome to* or *goodbye from*, the long queues of trucks that were as much a fixture of the landscape as the grey road and the trees trying to shake off dust from their leaves.

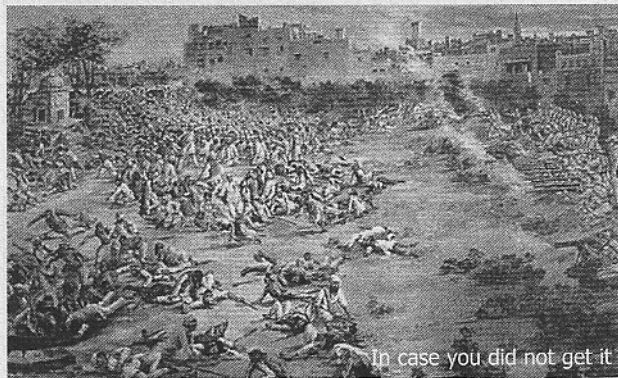
These recollections are perhaps why I find the clamour at the Wagah border so astonishing. The atmosphere leading up to the nightly closure of the border gates is festival-like, with young men flagging down vehicles full of visitors to tell them to park here, not there, or there, not here. Schoolchildren sit chattering, sipping colas, outside the many stalls lining this last stretch of the Grand Trunk Road in India. The colas taste suspiciously unlike the brands they claim to be, but no

one appears to notice anything amiss.

In front of each of the stalls are television sets, facing not the stalls but an imaginary audience on the road. These screens continuously show Indian soldiers marching, presumably taking part in the sunset ceremony, when both the Indian and Pakistani sides bring down their respective flags – an event that all of us are here to witness. On the road are boys selling CDs of what they describe as the 'border show'. They run away at the first sign of an authority figure, unsuccessfully trying to hide in the fields by the makeshift parking lots. Two men in khaki, however, assure me that the CDs are genuine. "It's us," says one.

Nearing the border, I see a stadium-like arrangement where Border Security Force (BSF) men are sorting out the seating woes of still more schoolchildren. Patriotic songs blare from a loudspeaker and, behind a BSF building, young military personnel practise their steps – perfecting the ritualistic stomping of feet, synchronising their salutes. *Desh mangta hai qurbaniyan* (the nation demands sacrifices), says one of the songs, as if in approval.

The view beyond the gate that marks the end of



In case you did not get it

Indian territory is similar – more schoolchildren, girls in burqas running from one corner of an amphitheatre-like structure to another, trying to decide which seats will give them a better view. I wish I could see them more clearly, but though smiles and frowns are indecipherable from the distance, their spirited sprinting indicates their excitement. I notice that the men and women are seated in separate sections. Soon, they start clapping and singing loudly.

Without warning, a Master of Ceremonies materialises on the Indian side of the road – a tall, thin man with a booming voice. He exhorts the audience to shout *Bharatmata ki jai!* loudly, more loudly, till the voices reach a crescendo. He is not happy with these decibel levels, however, and screams across many heads, scowling menacingly: “*So rahe ho kya?*” (Are you sleeping?). Mortified, we cower in our seats.

A chorus of *Pakistan Zindabad!* is heard on the other side of the gate, to the accompaniment of breezy tunes that I do not recognise. The cheers from the Pakistani side seem to make not only the MC but also an overly gung-ho young man in the audience unhappy. “Look at them, you can at least clap your hands,” urges the youngster, and proceeds to organise several rounds of *Bharatmata ki jai!* at full throttle. The MC is displeased with this unexpected competition from the stands, and attempts to re-win the audience by encouraging schoolchildren to dance on the road, even allowing several people to run up to the gate with the Indian flag. There are many more who are eager to display their patriotism by swaying the tricolour before a Pakistani crowd, but as the sky turns crimson and the evening breeze becomes cooler, the MC is forced by time constraints to turn them down.

30 km away

There is something unreal about all of this, this entire setting, this frantic show of patriotism at the border. The meaninglessness of this jingoistic posturing, wherein vocal chords are tested to prove one's loyalty to the nation, is amplified by what I had seen just the previous day at Jallianwala Bagh. This memorial lies next to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, its entrance so nondescript that it is easily missed in an alley full of small shops and pilgrims. A narrow passage leads to the open ground where, on 13 April 1919, a crowd had gathered to peacefully protest the colonial Rowlatt Act, which had provided for imprisonment without trial and other measures intended to decimate dissent. This was where Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer had famously ordered his soldiers to fire on the crowd, spilling, as a signboard morbidly informs tourists, the blood of “innocent Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs”.

Today, the ground is a garden with green lawns, fragrant roses and trees, with a teardrop-shaped sculpture in the centre. Surrounding the garden are walls pockmarked with bullets – the walls that had reined people in on that fateful day. The bullet holes are encircled with white paint, helpfully pointed out for visitors. On one side of the garden is the ‘Martyr's Well’, into which people jumped to escape the firing. 120 bodies were recovered from it, notes another signboard.

The afternoon I visited, a family of five was posing for pictures in front of the well. “You think there is water in the well?” one asked. “Will it splash if I throw a stone? Hey, now take my picture, let me stand here, now come, it's your turn, stand here...” I heard these sentences delivered one after the other, with much preening and grinning, as the family posed in front of the well, taking turns to photograph each other as if they were standing next to a film star's life-sized wax model.

There was no reverence, not even a perceived need not to be boorish at a place where people had died for the freedoms that we exploit today – to think of dropping stones and buckets into a well stained with the blood of martyrs and innocent victims, or to write graffiti around the bullet marks; “Rinku love Reetu my life” went one, while another affirmed, “Kamal Madhu I love you”. There were several more, not to be deterred by either the written warnings against desecration or the memory of those who had lost their lives here less than a century ago.

Inexplicably, just 30 km away at the Wagah border, we who can so effortlessly show disrespect to the sanctity of a memorial find our patriotic feelings suddenly roused in front of a crowd from across the border. We are suddenly proud of our country, of the freedom fighters who won us our Independence, of the tricolour that we shake before an iron gate whose very existence defines us as *Us* and them as *Them*. Here, as long as I can shout louder than a Pakistani, dare you question my patriotism? *Bharatmata ki jai!*



BILASH RAI

The economics of accomodation

The fate of India-Pakistan economic ties seems pegged to the fluctuating peace process between the two. But the normalisation of bilateral economic relations is inevitable, and will have far-reaching and unforeseen implications.

BY HARIS GAZDAR

There is plenty to be sceptical about the current 'peace' process between Pakistan and India. The immediate impulses behind this peace process are none too encouraging. In particular, the military-led government in Islamabad is under tremendous pressure from its US backers to adopt a cooperative posture vis-à-vis the giant eastern neighbour. The Pakistani military, unsurprisingly, is a corporate player with a history and culture of animosity towards India. Some peace-process optimists argue that it is for this very reason that the military is the most reliable deliverer of amity – weak civil leaders cannot make credible promises and survive.

The logic that hawks can be reliable peace-makers is widely used in international relations, but what of the fundamental political and economic interests of Pakistan's military, which might actually lie in the perpetuation of the state of cold war in the

Subcontinent? Any normalisation process would undermine the political legitimacy of the military as an entity, consequently giving rise to challenges to its claims on the country's economic resources. These claims would not be limited to the public purse, though that is important. They would extend to the military's vast and expanding corporate empire, spanning sectors such as manufacturing, finance, property development, freight, air travel and agriculture. Why should a corporate entity that is known to jealously guard its interests bring about its own studied demise?

The fact that the current peace process is largely choreographed by the United States also, paradoxically, does not bode too well. Far from providing assurance, the deep and detailed involvement of the superpower highlights the possibility that domestic political constituencies for peace are not as well prepared as they might appear. The tectonic shift in Southasia, of course,

is the investment being made by the US and India for a close, long-term relationship, with security at its core. Pakistan's relationship with India must ultimately adjust to the requirements of the developing Indo-US relationship on the one hand, and Pakistan's own close security relationship with the US on the other.

Herein, interestingly, is where the American link is a source of weakness. The primacy of the security agenda in all of these mutual relationships – in the place of, say, an economic development agenda, or even a 'security-through-development' agenda – means that the parties are free to play drawn-out games in other spheres, as long as the core concern of the key protagonist is respected. The two neighbours have a proven historical ability of playing such drawn-out games. Pakistan, the smaller party, probably outclasses India, having played the game as a state-survival strategy for much of its history.

Pakistan's military establishment, the country's most powerful political interest group, continues to regard India as an existential threat. It has mastered the art of walking the tightrope between America's long-term (security engagement with India), and its short- to medium-term interest in the 'war against terrorism'. The peace dance can be performed to a slow beat while keeping the powder dry. Things can and do change – so the reasoning goes. The US might leave Pakistan to its own devices, its objectives might be reined in, there might be a regime collapse in Afghanistan, or a regime change in Washington DC. American willingness to underwrite the Pakistani military cushions the latter from economic imperatives and political constituencies for peace-making.

It's the economics

Scepticism about the current peace process does not mean that economic normalisation is not inevitable. There are far stronger gravitational forces towards normalisation than even the might of the United States. These forces have to do with the historical moment we inhabit, in which the economic insulation of the India-Pakistan boundary becomes more anomalous by the day. There are few frontiers left in the world today that are as off-limits as this boundary line. The examples that do spring to mind – North and South Korea, Israel and some of its neighbours (Syria and Lebanon) – simply confirm the mid-20th century vintage.

The Pakistan-India frontier is bound to be breached, for the economic imperatives are just too overwhelming. The rising volume of legal and documented trade between the two countries, as well as estimates of illegal and undocumented trade, attest to this inevitability. The two economies are not only geographical neighbours, they operate at comparable levels of technology, and share similar levels of purchasing power, tastes and preferences. They are natural candidates for market integration – something

that is understood by economic players in both countries, and by foreign multinationals.

Both India and Pakistan are developing their economies in order to compete in global markets. They operate in highly competitive sectors where market share depends on small differences in margin. The insulation of the two economies puts strains, at times unbearable ones, on domestic consumers and manufacturers alike. Ad hoc crossborder trades – such as those in food commodity in order to avert price crises – have become common. Pakistani manufacturers have become strong proponents of the import of cheaper Indian capital goods and raw materials. Major future investments in the energy sector, and hence in all other sectors, hinge on political cooperation between the two countries. Even if the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline is blocked by the US, an alternative such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gasline is also viable only if the Pakistan-India component remains intact.

A continued posture of insulation will also become increasingly difficult to sustain in terms of regulation. There is political consensus in both countries towards greater trade liberalisation. Economic players already bypass regulation using a variety of means such as third-country routing and crossborder smuggling. The question is not if, but when economic relations will be normalised. The fact that the current peace process is driven largely by American security imperatives might delay economic integration, but it will not stop it.

Opening up

'Normal' economic relations would obviously mean relatively open trade regimes between countries. The governments have signalled their commitment to this outcome by entering the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement, which came into force at the beginning of this year. But in today's world of economic globalisation, normal relations mean much more than the lifting of trade barriers.

Normalisation ultimately implies the development of intra-industry trade across national boundaries, harmonisation of economic activities, economic governance, and joint and crossborder investment. The contemporary trajectory of normalisation seeks a seamless transition from trade liberalisation to all-around market integration and institutional coordination. The SAFTA agreement acknowledges this reality when it makes reference, under its Article 8, to "macro-economic consultations", "removal of barriers to intra-SAARC investment", and "rules for fair competition".

At the time of Partition, India and Pakistan had initiated the processes of mutual economic dislocation and inward-looking national economic development. Increasing barriers to economic interaction between the two countries led to a virtual state of insulation in the

1960s, at a time when the world was divided into self-contained economic blocs. The institutional architecture of the world economy at that time was not inconsistent with the closed borders of Southasia.

Inter-country economic opening in that era could be controlled and limited to selected sectors and actors. Across the ideological divide, it was the norm for the state to mediate, monitor, regulate and control economic interactions between their respective citizens and corporations. Countries that allowed even such limited interactions were considered to be relatively open economies. In today's world, such a controlled opening will be neither credible nor feasible.

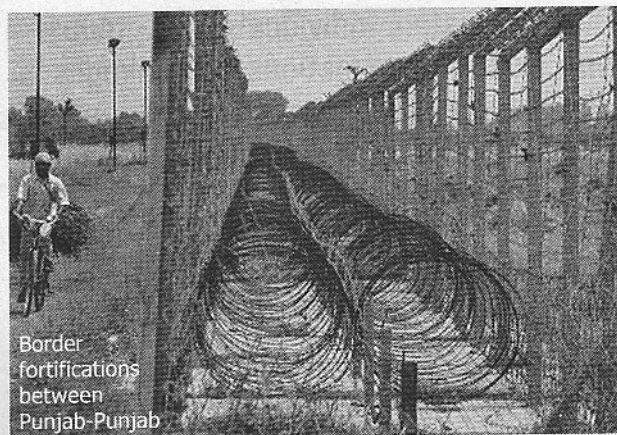
Normalisation of economic relations, once started, cannot be monitored, let alone regulated to any effective degree by the states. Multi-dimensional market relations will proliferate, and a wide range of citizens and corporate entities from across borders will make joint economic decisions on a regular basis. One-off transactions will give way to durable and profitable economic relationships between numerous and diverse economic agents across borders. How will the economies and societies respond, and what will be the issues that are likely to emerge?

Institutional evolution

At least in Pakistan, there are competent studies of the impact of trade opening with India on various sectors. These date back to at least ten years ago when the Ministry of Commerce became interested in the issue. More recently, the same ministry, as well as other government and private organisations, have been engaged with the issue. The main findings, which have been widely disseminated and discussed in business circles, are that the Pakistani economy will be a net beneficiary, the position of certain sectors notwithstanding.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, those in strategic studies are concerned by the relative pace of economic development in India and Pakistan, and what this implies for the trajectory of conflict management. Here the dominant conclusion is that the balance of power will continue to shift towards India (partly due to its higher rates of economic growth), and that India, being the 'status quo' party in all of the key disputes, will gain from drawing things out, whereas a quick settlement will allow Pakistan to achieve relatively less unfavourable terms.

But neither technical economic impact analyses nor strategic studies can anticipate the dynamic behaviour of individuals or groups, or predict institutional



outcomes in economies and societies. In lieu of systematic inter-disciplinary analysis, the crystal ball must rely on a reading of post-Partition institutional development. This admittedly speculative exercise might yield some useful lines of future enquiry, at the very least. We do not know when exactly the process of economic normalisation will accelerate – the ambitions of SAFTA notwithstanding – but we can begin to give due weight to what we do know about how things have fared in the two countries during the period of insulation.

Despite the apparent similarities in economic management – fiscal conservatism, use of planning, inward-looking policies followed by liberalisation, mixed-economy regimes – India and Pakistan have ended up with very divergent outcomes. India used its period of inward-orientation to integrate her national economy. The institutions of the modern state that were more developed in India to begin with, became stronger. The process of the formalisation proceeded apace, and traditional economic networks, such as those based on caste and kinship, were built upon to create world-leading corporate entities. Regional interests ultimately found expression in Centre-state politics, and the creation of a national market was mediated (conservative economists might say slowed down) through political stakes created at the state level.

In Pakistan, the institutions of the modern state lost over time in their ability to transform traditional social relations. There was a steady informalisation of the economy that corresponded with the incapacity of modern systems for contract enforcement, let alone regulation. The writ of the state actually weakened, which enabled individuals and groups to engage in relatively unfettered economic activity within the country and abroad. The relatively large incidence of

Pakistan's relationship with India must ultimately adjust to the requirements of the developing Indo-US relationship on the one hand, and Pakistan's own close security relationship with the US on the other.

Those Pakistani individuals and groups with existing connections and linkages across borders will benefit greatly, often at the expense of those who do not have these connections.

international migration – facilitated by informal social networks rather than formal systems – further eroded the ‘control’ the state might have exercised over the process of economic development. Informal networks not only persisted but also became more powerful, as formal political channels of interest-representation were frequently disrupted.

***Bhai-bhai* economy**

What will closer economic interaction – or even market integration – imply for these two economies with divergent paths of institutional development? It is fashionable in some quarters to hold forth that India’s strength will ensure that Pakistan becomes an economic appendage. This is merely an acknowledgement of the difference in the size of the two economies. Going beyond the issue of size, some salient patterns are likely to emerge.

Successful Indian players will end up having to rely on the informal networks of their Pakistani counterparts in order to make a success of their ventures in the country – be they related to trade, investment or joint production. The relative weakness of the institutions of the modern state in Pakistan will ensure that only those who are linked with existing social networks will make progress in the first instance. The Indian economy, on the other hand, is likely to be more open, in an anonymous market sense, to Pakistani players. Individuals and smaller corporate entities from Pakistan are likely to be more successful in their access to Indian markets than are their Indian counterparts. On the Indian side, major companies will lead the way, at the expense of individuals and small businesses.

Those Pakistani individuals and groups with existing connections and linkages across borders will benefit greatly, often at the expense of those who do not have these connections. And those that have connections of different types will prosper in different ways and develop divergent interests vis-à-vis their Indian counterparts. Economic players in the central Punjab hub around Lahore, for example, have had the opportunity over the last 20 years or so of developing links with their counterparts in the Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. These connections have received official patronage at various times. In Karachi, on the other hand, there are trading and entrepreneurial groups embedded in entire kinship communities with close crossborder ties. These groups, including Muslim Gujaratis, Kachhis and Memons, as well as segments of the Urdu and Sindhi-speaking communities, have

continuing kinship and business links in India.

Closer integration with India may open up inter-regional linkages within and across the provinces of Pakistan. Market integration or even market opening will not happen in abstract anonymous terms, after all. It will occur through real interactions between real economic players large and small, who in the Pakistani context have social, ethnic, kinship and regional identities. There may be conflicts between those who are direct and those who are second-round beneficiaries of Indian connections. Importantly, there might also be a divergence of interests among those with Indian connections – for example, between Lahore and Karachi – and the possibility of internal market dislocation alongside external market integration.

These patterns will give rise to new opportunities as well as new sources of tension and conflict. Political entities on all sides will need to deal with issues with tact and sensitivity. The success of Indian companies in Pakistan and Pakistani individuals in India might give rise to mutual resentment. Tensions within Pakistan between regions and ethnic communities might also lead to destabilisation, particularly considering the relatively weak forums, when compared to India, for representing regional interests.

These potential potholes do not imply that economic integration is harmful, or indeed, that it can be stopped. In general terms, the normalisation of economic relations between India and Pakistan will be good for both the economies, and for Southasia as well. Moreover, attempts at delaying or stopping this normalisation will become costlier with time, and will divert attention away from the more urgent task of political and institutional preparation necessary for orderly economic integration.

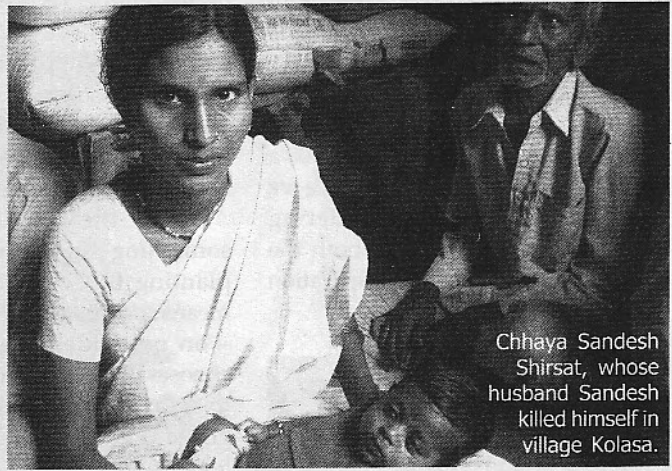
Much of the running in terms of institutional development will have to be done by Pakistan. It will have to empower existing institutions of political representation (Parliament, assemblies, political parties, election commissions) at the national and provincial levels, so that potential disputes can be handled within the political process. Pakistan will also need to strengthen formal state structures and use these for the modernisation of social and economic relations. Systems of property rights, trust, arbitration and dispute resolution will need to move away from traditional social structures and towards modern citizenship.

These ‘nation-building’ transitions and others that were consonant with the post-colonial moment have few active supporters in the era of globalisation. India, however, will need to provide Pakistan with the space and time it needs to make these necessary transitions. It will require a robust, effective and unified modern state as its partner in Pakistan if the process of economic integration is to be managed successfully. Resisting the temptation to do anything else will test India’s political foresight and fortitude to the limit.

Just another suicide

After being hit locally, nationally and internationally, the farmers of Vidarbha are down – and some are out.

BY **DILIP D' SOUZA**



Chhaya Sandesh Shirsat, whose husband Sandesh killed himself in village Kolasa.

The thing about traveling in Vidarbha – the districts of eastern Maharashtra – to learn about farmer suicides is this: very soon, the issue comes to dominate your thinking. Everything is shaded by those suicides. Take for example what happened to us when we entered the village of Barshi-Takli.

As we drive in, I see off to my left a long, straggly procession of men. My first thought is 'funeral', my second is 'farmer suicide'. So I leap out to inquire. Turns out it is a funeral, but not a farmer, not a suicide. It's just – and what do I mean, *just?* – an old man of the village.

There are ways to rationalise what's happening in Vidarbha. According to the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti (VJAS) in Pandharkawda, who have been tracking the suicides, about 550 farmers have killed themselves since June 2005. But that's 'just' 550, in a region that's home to tens of millions. After all, farmers are not killing themselves in the thousands. So why the alarm? Besides, how can you sympathise with a man who chooses this cowardly way to escape his problems? What's more, these guys got used to the old socialist ways, when the government bought cotton at a fixed price. That can't continue!

When market forces begin dictating the economy, as they must, they will have to adapt or suffer, period.

In any debate about farmer suicides, you will hear arguments like these. There may be truth in them, too. Yet we do know that at least 550 families across Vidarbha have gone into mourning over the last year. What's to be done about that?

Monocrop worries

Here's a broad-brush portrait of what's going on, as I understand it. Many Vidarbha farmers grow cotton. (Cotton is, many people there say, the best-suited crop for Vidarbha's soil and water situation.) For a generation, the government offered a fixed price every growing season, a price at which they would buy cotton. Now there are arguments about whether this was wise, but the reality is that it was done. Yes: a generation of cotton farmers grew up used to the fixed price.

Add debt to this. Though again, debt is no unusual thing in these parts. (Or any farming parts.) Farmers regularly take loans, whether from banks or moneylenders, to buy supplies. They rarely worried much about this, because they were confident that their crops would give them enough to repay the loans.

But some things have changed. For

one, the government stopped buying cotton at a fixed price a couple of seasons ago. Farmers must now sell cotton at market rates.

For another, there is a general glut of cotton. People explain this in various ways, but we heard two things repeatedly in Vidarbha. First, cotton is left over from last year. Second, import duties on foreign cotton are lower than they should be, making foreign cotton actually cheaper than Indian varieties.

For a third, many Vidarbha cotton farmers had a poor crop this season. Again, earlier this would not have overly troubled them: the fixed price was insulation of sorts. Besides, even market-dependency means that a poor crop will at least fetch a good price. Supply and demand, after all.

Not so simple. Other cotton areas had good crops, so prices actually fell. So when Vidarbha farmers went to market with their (generally) poor crops, they faced a double-whammy. Their cotton was (generally) worse than cotton from other parts of the country, yet the price had declined about 25 percent – about Rs 2200-2500 per quintal (a 100 kg bundle) last year, Rs 1500-1900 this year.

So the typical Vidarbha cotton farmer is a man who has paid higher prices than before for seed and

fertiliser (those being subject to usual inflation), who carries loans, whose crop is worse than last year, who is faced with prices lower than last year. So some of these farmers cannot repay their loans.

And Raju Mahadev Pinjarkar of Barshi-Takli exemplified this conundrum. He had borrowed Rs 7000. But this year, his three acres yielded only three quintals of cotton. And his crop brought only Rs 1500 a quintal. This was the lowest price we heard in over a week wandering Vidarbha, an indication of both the quality of his crop and his desperation to sell.



Advertising for the famous Bt Cotton

You don't need a calculator to understand Pinjarkar's plight. So yes, he was one of those weak farmers whom we must look down our noses at, someone who chose the easy way out. One April morning, just days before we reached Barshi-Takli, he became #455 on the VJAS list.

It's worth understanding that Pinjarkar's was hardly the smallest debt we heard about. A young farmer in nearby Dadham village killed himself over a Rs 2000 loan. Seven thousand rupees, two thousand rupees. These are numbers that worry people in rural Vidarbha. This is what is happening in rural Vidarbha.

Bollguard blight

Vidarbha farmers have been exposed to a lot of advertising for the famous Bt (or Bollguard) Cotton, the genetically modified variety sold by the US corporate giant Monsanto. This is worth noting because of the price difference between ordinary and Bt Cotton. A 450 gm bag of ordinary

cotton seed costs about Rs 600. The same sized bag of Bt costs about Rs 1700. (An acre of farmland needs two of these bags.)

What you get for that higher price is Bt's resistance to bollworm, a destructive cotton pest. Most farmers I spoke to believe it is also supposed to resist other pests and disease. Whether this is true, or whether the advertising gives this impression inadvertently or otherwise, I do not know. But farmers seem to believe it.

Well, they actually believe something slightly different: that planting Bt Cotton in their fields means spending less – in fact, nothing – on pesticides. The farmer who chooses Bt expects that he won't have to spray his crop. That justifies the greater seed expense. Yet the Marathi leaflet that comes with Bt seed packets has these two statements:

"Athavdhyatun donda sakali bollguard kapaasachya shetat vodalyaanchi mojni kelyanantar phavarni karnyachya nirnay dhyava." (Twice in a week, after counting pests [worms] in the bollguard-planted field, you must spray [pesticide]).

"Sarva jhaadavarchi milun jivanta vodalyaanchi ekun sankhya 20 kintva 20 pakshi jaasta bharli tare phavarnichi garje aahe ase samjha." (If you find 20 or more than 20 live pests on the plants, then you need to spray [pesticide]).

You expect your seed will resist pests. What must you make of these injunctions to spray? What of your hope that you won't have to spend on pesticides?

This season, there was an additional complication. Cotton in Vidarbha was blighted by what the farmers call *lalya*, a disease that dries up the plants and turns them red. (Thus the name.) Again, farmers who invested in Bt expected their crops, rightly or wrongly, to resist *lalya*. No luck. That is, the blight hit all the cotton, Bt or not. That is one reason they went to market with greatly reduced yields.

The days pass

Finally, some notes from hot and dusty Pandharkawda, three hours south of Nagpur. At one end of

Pandharkawda, there's a massive gathering of bullock carts, tractors, tempos and other small trucks. What is this? Each vehicle, cart or truck or tractor, is heavy with a bulging load.

Cotton, of course. Cotton fresh from the picking, stuffed into canvas sacks and carted here from as far away as 50 km by bullock cart and truck. Cotton, brought to market here by small- and medium-scale farmers.

A few things about these loads of cotton. First, they weigh a lot, but they lose weight. As it sits in the sun for days, the cotton dries and becomes lighter. So with each passing day, the value of the load decreases.

Second, the men who bring the loads have to pay rent for their transport. Bullock carts come for a rental of Rs 100 per quintal of cotton, plus Rs 50 per night. Fodder for the bullocks is separate. Trucks and tractors have a hire charge of Rs 1500 (one-time) and Rs 500 every night. Fuel is separate. So is food.

With each passing day, these expenses eat into what these men will earn from their loads.

Third, why do the days pass? Because of the glut, there are few buyers for the cotton. So a seller must wait his turn, sometimes for days. When we meet him, 38-year-old Mohammed Rahimuddin and his cart have waited eight days. Others, at least four.

Fourth, the occasional long weekend. For three days when I visited, the office here was closed. The state holiday for Mahashivratri explained the first two. On the third day, no 'labour' turned up to unload the carts and weigh the loads. Just like that, these farmers had to wait three days in the searing Vidarbha heat, totting up three days of hire charges.

When we visit, there are hundreds of farmers like this in Pandharkawda, waiting to sell their loads. Some of those farmers – forgive me, I cannot help the thought – will kill themselves.

Yes, Vidarbha puts these ideas in your mind.



KANTIPUR

The fuzzy logic of Maoist transformation

Nepal's Maoist rebels are headed towards becoming a part of the political mainstream, but they're not there yet. It might just happen if they show some respect for the power of peaceful change.

BY KANAK MANI DIXIT

Following the success of the People's Movement and collapse of the Gyanendra autocracy in late April, a delicate experiment is underway in Nepal. An attempt is being made to draw a violent insurgency into open politics. Far-reaching changes have been initiated over the past two months to put the country on the track of full democracy and peace, and the process of integrating the Maoists into the mainstream has begun with their emergence on the stage of open politics. To what extent will they change the terrain of Nepal's polity, and how much will they themselves be transformed in the engagement with open society?

A jittery international community, India among them, feels that a fast-talking rebel leadership of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) is extracting excessive concessions from the political parties without submitting to an immediate process of 'management of arms', a route towards the demobilisation of Maoist fighters. While a

section of civil society could not be more pleased with the inroads made by the Maoists into the national sphere, the political party rank-and-file wants disarmament to proceed immediately so that they can return and revive politics in the districts. They also fear a chasm between what the Maoists leaders say from the national pulpit and their ability to deliver a transformed cadre at the ground level.

The assumption is that the Maoist leadership is indeed committed to multiparty politics, which ipso facto carries with it the need for them to begin the process of laying down arms. To what extent can the rebel supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal push the agenda, given that the political leaders have acted with sagacity in meeting him halfway?

As things stand, all over the country, the rebel combatants retain control of their weapons even as their people's war has been abandoned. And therein lies the most critical challenge facing the Maoist leadership – of keeping the flock together so that when the time comes,

the guns are laid out for inspection by United Nations decommissioning experts in a process leading to ultimate demobilisation. This is a hiatus, dangerous but also full of possibilities.

The valley summit

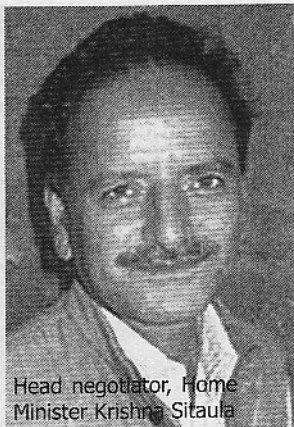
The pace of events since the April uprising has been quite astounding, with the reinstated House of Representatives stripping the monarchy of all power by a proclamation on 18 May and undoing much of Gyanendra's autocratic transgressions since October 2002. For their part, the Maoists staged a massive rally in Kathmandu on 2 June, and intensified their demand for the disbanding of a Parliament that was undercutting their plank with its many progressive pronouncements.

An ailing Girija Prasad Koirala went to New Delhi, was graciously treated by his hosts, and returned to Kathmandu with a NPR 15 billion (USD 218 million) package for shoring up the interim government's budget and kick-starting development. In a significant departure, New Delhi also indicated its willingness to allow UN experts to oversee the demobilisation process. The possibility of credible oversight generated momentum for the peace dialogue.

While the bilateral ceasefire continued to hold, official talks began between three senior Maoist leaders and three ministers representing different political parties. This culminated in a 'summit' organised at Prime Minister Koirala's residence on 17 June. Dahal's meeting with the prime minister soon expanded to include other members of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) that had fought to bring down the royal autocracy with the assistance of the Maoists. After a quarter-century underground, Dahal suddenly became 'public' on the national stage for the first time, in a crowded and impromptu night-time press conference (*see picture*).

During the meeting, even as the ailing Koirala kept retiring to his room to rest his weakened lungs, what emerged was a far-reaching eight-point understanding, under which the two sides agreed to draft an interim Constitution, create an interim government including the Maoist, announce the date for elections to a constituent assembly, and dissolve the House of Representatives "after making an alternative arrangement". For their part, the Maoists promised to dissolve their 'people's governments' in various parts.

These rapid developments were propelled by the Maoist need to arrive at a 'safe landing' as quickly as possible, before there was a dissipation of their forces and energy. Even as the rebels appeared satisfied at what they had



Head negotiator, Home Minister Krishna Sitaula

been able to extract at the talks, the political party rank-and-file were agitated at the equation of the Parliament with the Maoist people's governments, and the silence regarding the decommissioning of rebel arms. "That was supposed to be the quid quo pro, not this," said one minister, fuming. The leaders of all parties were left hoping that Dahal had given secret assurances on downing his guns to Koirala in their one-on-one session, for he certainly could not have said so in the larger group. Koirala, meanwhile, was not telling, and soon flew to Bangkok for treatment.

There were misgivings within the larger SPA that a coterie group within the Nepali Congress had essentially presented them with a *fait accompli*, and that the populist pressures based on the overwhelming desire for peace meant everyone kept his own counsel on the crucial day. The grumblings began the day after, with party workers castigating their leaders for giving in, stating that the Maoists had held on to their main card, which was the gun in their hands. At the same time, the rebels had the terrorist tag removed, received an agreement to enter the interim government, had their jailed cadre released, and, most importantly, got the announcement on the disbanding of Parliament. The naysayers maintain that Maoist sincerity has not been tested on the ground, even while the rebel bluster tries to push their position as the 'mainstream' position.

But it is also a fact that it is impossible to negotiate by committee, and the delicate situation of the Maoist leadership vis-à-vis their cadre required a level of secrecy and a need to maintain momentum. And while so many bemoan the lack of quid pro quo from the Maoist side, the very fact that the insurgents have abandoned their agenda of violent war can be considered their major concession, which was provided last autumn and which contributed to the momentum of the People's Movement. But while it is important not to lose momentum, the negotiators on the two sides must realise that a situation must not be created where a dangerous rejectionism overtakes the parties.

What is left hanging in the air in the third week of June is how the Maoists are to join the interim government without the arms issue being settled. At the time of this writing, no letter has been sent to the United Nations on arms management. Meanwhile, amidst all this, Secretary General Kofi Annan has inexplicably assigned Ian Martin, the high-profile UN human rights official assigned to Nepal and expected to play a key role in demobilisation, to a six-week fire-fighting mission in East Timor. Nepal needed more consideration than that.

The political party rank-and-file were agitated at the equation of the Parliament with the Maoist people's governments, and the silence regarding the decommissioning of rebel arms.

Managing the arms

Without doubt, the CPN (Maoist) high command has taken an extreme risk in the bid to reorient its political strategy, both in terms of personal safety and protecting the gains of the 'revolution'. This has stemmed from its willingness to submit to geopolitical reality, as well as the dawning realisation that state power cannot be attained militarily. For this reason, and their evident willingness to finally abandon arms, the political parties have created space for them in the national mainstream.

Yet, there is no need to be placatory beyond a point, for the rebels did unleash a violent agenda on the people of Nepal. Moreover, their claim to speak for the Nepali people will only be tested once they go in for elections and the people get to vote freely, without the looming threat of the gun. The Maoist cadres need to undergo a rapid process of 'politicisation' so that they learn to function in open society, without resorting to the threat of the pointed muzzle. The parties must be allowed to penetrate the districts beyond the headquarters, which they still are unable to do due to the recalcitrance of the ground-level rebel activists.

In this context, the big question today is how credible is the Maoist willingness to submit to 'arms management', and what is the exact procedure? And if commitment is shown to be lacking, can the political parties hold off on the disbanding of Parliament? The Maoists need to understand that other than their own fighters, militia and cadre – their numbers yet to be ascertained – each and every other Nepali citizen wants those rifles and pistols to be handed in.

The entire disarmament exercise was labelled 'management of arms' in the 12-point agreement signed between the Maoists and the SPA last November, the roundabout language used to allow the rebel leadership to 'sell' the idea gradually to its fighters. In private conversation, some Maoist commanders have conceded to the political leaders that they could not survive within the organisation just yet if they went around talking of demobilisation and decommissioning.

Over the course of a decade, young fighters have been socialised into the culture of violence, and for them a decommissioning process would entail loss of prestige, power – and even income. Midlevel Maoist commanders have assured some interlocutors that while they would be willing to be confined in barracks, with guns available for inspection to the UN, they cannot give up arms completely because they do not trust the top brass of the Nepal Army. The reluctance of fighters and militia members to hand over their rifles may also be for fear of spontaneous reprisals by villagers who have remained sullen and subdued for much too long. If this is the case, then the Kathmandu government must create the conditions where such impromptu vigilantism is nipped in the bud.

It is a fact that the stability of the state following the People's Movement was possible only because the House was reinstated.

There is no doubt that disarmament of Maoist fighters is key to Nepal's future, even as every effort is made to keep the Nepal Army under a tight leash and made incapable of further crushing democracy or fighting a 'dirty war'. The question is whether the leaders who today head an armed group should show due humility towards political activists who do not hold guns – given also the success of the peaceful People's Movement, which had non-violent Maoist participation. Should a party that wants to submit to multiparty politics push its agenda in the districts through the sheer potential of armed intimidation? Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that truly free and fair elections to the constituent assembly will not be possible until the voting public knows that the rebels will return to the villages after the elections only as non-combatant sons and daughters.

Representative House

While to some the eight-point agreement of 17 June has the flavour of excessive concessions, the ambiguities may have been left there deliberately to provide 'space' for the rebels. It could also be that Dahal and his lieutenant, Baburam Bhattarai, have been talking in confidence not only to Koirala, but also to Indian interlocutors and senior UN officials, and that they may have provided believable assurances about their transformation for peace. While many believe that the return for disbanding the House should have been a definitive announcement regarding the renunciation of violence, it might just be impossible for the rebels to do so at this stage even if the intention is there.

As far as the Parliament is concerned, it is a fact that the stability of the state following the People's Movement was possible only because the House was reinstated. Similarly, international recognition of the landmark legislative events that followed only took place because it was done by the House. Against such a background, what is the 'alternative arrangement' that could stand in for the revived Parliament of elected representatives, and would such an entity ever get the same legitimacy in the eyes of the people and the world? If there is to be a compromise body, would it not receive full credibility only when it is anointed by the House before it disbands?

Without the legitimacy granted by such a process, how can the donor community and foreign governments be expected to come forward to the assistance of an incongruous coalition government of political parties and

The very fact that the insurgents have abandoned their agenda of violent war can be considered their major concession.

The Maoists' claim to speak for the Nepali people will only be tested once they go in for elections and the people get to vote freely, without the looming threat of the gun.

Maoists who have not yet renounced violence? Will there, then, be an entity within the government of Nepal that actually commands two armed forces; the Nepal Army and the 'People's Army'? But there is also the argument that accepting the Maoists into the government is exactly the way to 'co-opt' them and force them to take the guns from their combatants. The argument is that such contradictions and ambiguities are the very elements that will allow the Maoist leadership the manoeuvrability needed to extricate itself from a difficult spot vis-à-vis their radicalised cadre and fighters.

Functional haziness

Two matters will thus be at the centre of the energetic debate in Kathmandu in the weeks ahead – what do the Maoists understand by *hatihaar byabasthapan* (management of arms), and what will be the shape of the "alternative arrangement" that is to follow a disbanding of the House of Representatives? The creativity and forbearance with which the Maoists and the political leaders seek these answers will ensure whether Nepal will succeed in what so many have failed to do elsewhere in the world – bringing an insurgency to a decisive end so as to make up for lost time on the path to social and economic transformation.

The hazy ambiguity can be seen as necessary to bring the Maoists in from the cold, as long as there is careful monitoring of the process. But it must be said that the true

transformation of Nepali society will not come from the CPN (Maoist), which would become part of the social revolution that is still required only *after* it joins the mainstream, multiparty politics. Such a social revolution must emerge from the clearly expressed desires of the Nepali public by way of the People's Movement, for a non-violent society where historical ills are tackled through discourse and political evolution rather than through atavistic violence.

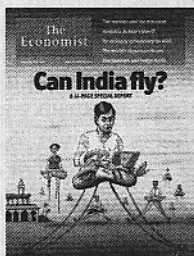
The Nepali people are convinced – if the insurgent and political leaders are not – that social and economic advancement will be achieved only through a return to peace, disarmament, reconstruction of the economy, and rehabilitation of the national psyche. The 'inclusive' Nepal of the future will come from a pluralistic state with social-democratic political leadership. The Maoists will also be part of this campaign, as a political party, once their fighters have been truly demobilised, in the process that begins with the 'management of arms'.

The Maoists began their insurgency against a democratic dispensation back in 1996, with the Gyanendra interlude making it a convenient conversion for them to fight a dictatorial monarchy. Now that the kingship has been defanged, its future to be decided by the citizenry through a constituent assembly, will the rebels revert to their old violent agenda or will they adjust to the new reality? Over the past two years, after all, much has changed, even in their own strategy and thinking. With the CPN (Maoist) having taken a strategic decision to come to multiparty politics, the political parties open-heartedly decided to make space for them in the political spectrum. Will the rebel leadership now show their own magnanimity – and courage – by lowering their pitch and restraining their demands? Amidst the haze, and even taking into account the contradictions in pronouncements by the Maoists of Nepal, the outlook looks bright.

The recent debate on reservations for 'OBCs' has spurred interest in the 'social profile' of the Indian media, particularly because of the partisan line taken by the big-time (aka 'mainstream') media. The researcher Yogendra Yadav (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi) and two colleagues have just published the result of a spontaneous survey conducted between 30 May and 3 June, of 315 key decision-makers (kdm's) of 37 national media organisations based in Delhi. The survey included all the major newspapers, news magazines, radio channels, television channels and news agencies based in Delhi with national spread. Here, in one long breath, is a summary of the report:

India's 'national' media lacks social diversity, it does not reflect the country's social profile. Gender bias rules – only 17 percent of the kdms are women. 'Twice born' Hindus make up 16 percent of India's population, but man 86 percent of key positions. There is not even one Dalit or adivasi among the 315 positions, and only four percent are OBCs, even though they make up 40 percent of the population. Meanwhile, for comprising nearly 14 percent of the population, only three percent of the kdms are Muslim.

The man who started the South Asia Journalists Association (www.saja.org), Columbia Journalism School's Sreenath Sreenivasan, points out in one of his regular mailings, how "June seems to be India cover month for some of major magazines". The 1 June cover of *The Economist* featured a 14-page special on India, "Can India Fly?" with the over-used rope trick association. Ufff! And then *Time* ran another India cover: "INDIA INC. - Why the World's Biggest Democracy is the Next Great Economic Superpower- and What it Means for America." The July/Aug 2006 issue of the influential *Foreign Affairs* featured "The Rise of India". Wrote the editors: "Economic growth and newfound political confidence have together remade India. The once socialist and nonaligned country is now reforming its economy and building strategic partnerships with the world's great powers." If you believe that the interest of heavyweight American press in India



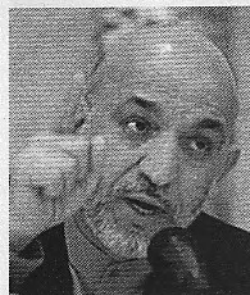
indicates that India is now being wooed and courted by the West generally, why, you would be right. This editorial attention is bigger than Bill

Clinton visiting India and being sprinkled with marigold petals. Come to think of it, all this lionising (tigerising) of India began with Bill Clinton visiting India and being sprinkled with marigold petals, back in March 2000.

From another part of the Himalaya, a new weekly newspaper. *The Magpie* is the only newspaper of Ladakh, a weekly started by editor Tashi Morup, responding to the fact that "somebody should come out with a newspaper which lives up to some of the people's expectations". In a disarming note that *Chettria Patrakar* picked up from Sevanti Ninan's *The Hoot* website, the editor opens up to the readers on the challenges he faces:

I started The Magpie involving a friend of mine in tourism business to take care of marketing section. I have been able to bring out this weekly newspaper regularly without a break, 18 issues have already been published and the response has been positive as the circulation has increased to around 800 from the initial number of 500 we started with. It has gone to six pages from four. The army, which has its large and significant presence here, takes some 150 copies ... Though I am taking care of the newspaper including layout, advertisement design and news coverage on my own, there are some people who contribute occasionally. My partner, a travel agent, looks after the marketing and distribution. The Magpie has now become sustainable. There are many difficulties in bringing out a newspaper here in Ladakh, mainly, limited readership, poor facilities such as printer, electricity, telephone and internet services. But the other major challenge is how to write openly about sensitive issues. The reason being Ladakh is a small society where almost everyone knows each other.

To check how he is doing, write the editor at morupp@sancharnet.in.



The BBC reports that Afghanistan's intelligence services have been distributing a list of restrictions to Kabul journalists on what to report and what not to. Afghan armed forces are not to be depicted as weak, nor are the US-led coalition or the Nato mission to be criticised. Interviews of

'terrorist commanders', or even filming or photographing them, is banned. Interviews against the Karzai government's foreign policy should not be printed. Suicide or roadside bombings are not to be used as lead stories in radio or television bulletins. The draconian directive, which does not apply to foreign reporters, was distributed to Afghan journalists after they were summoned to a meeting. Hamid Karzai's spokesman said that the intention was merely "to refrain from glorifying terrorism or giving terrorists a platform", and that the request was "entirely consistent with the principles of the freedoms of speech and press enshrined in the Constitution". All *Chettria Patrakar* can say in response, is, "Let us take a look at that Constitution." And thanks to the BBC for exposing the matter.



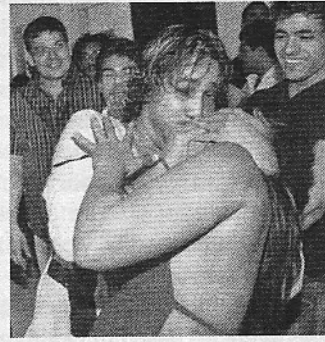
Given the geopolitical importance of the Indian media vis-à-vis Nepal matters, it was very important for the managers of the People's Movement of April that the editors and producers remained clued in. But then BJP leader Pramod Mahajan was shot by his brother, and coverage of

the movement evaporated. When Mahajan briefly stabilised, however, the Indian print and television press once again flooded Nepal and provided continuous coverage until victory was achieved on 24 April. Conceded one of the politicians who was underground organising the movement, "It was tragic that Pramod Mahajan ultimately died, but the movement did benefit from the fact that he died later than earlier. Indian media coverage was vital for us." Later, when Girija Prasad Koirala went to India in early June, his visit (important because of a NPR 1000 crore aid package and issues related to Maoists) was completely eclipsed by the case of the cocaine-sniffing Rahul Mahajan, the BJP leader's son. Said the same politician: "Just as well, because the quantum of aid might have come down if the Delhi media had covered all the negative talk in the Nepali Parliament about a sellout to India." Sometimes, less can be more.



Alumni of St Stephen's College in New Delhi have always believed that they were born to rule the world, and now there is just an off-chance that their expectation will be fulfilled. So the boyish-looking 50-year-old Stephenian, Shashi Tharoor, is India's official candidate for the top job at the United Nations. The

novelist, who is also a cricket aficionado, is well known to the 'desis' of the United States – an articulate man on television defending United Nations positions. In fact, that may be his handicap, having had to defend boss Kofi Anan when the US was throwing copious amounts of mud at him (Kofi). Some of that will have splattered on Tharoor. The Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information, who would like to cut the 'under' from his title, is also a competent publicist, and has his own website. Go to the glitzy Official Website of Shashi Tharoor, which has, expectedly, more pictures of the USG than can be handled in one sitting, at www.shashitharoor.com. If you want to contact Mr Tharoor's publisher, write to jmseaver@arcadepub.com, or his literary agent, try merrylit@aol.com.



Rakhi Sawant is a young 'item girl' – new on the block, uninhibited, or rather 'bold' in Bombay parlance. With a reputation for baring it all. She went for this Punjabi singer Mika's birthday party, gave him a peck on

the cheek, wished him happy birthday. Mika responded by forcing himself upon her and giving her a full-mouthed kiss. Television cameras dutifully captured all. Sawant was clearly grabbed, and she looked upset after the incident. She left, came back a few hours later, asked him to apologise. He did not. She also lodged an FIR; Mika is out on bail.

All this was frontpaged by several newspapers the next day, and the matter hogged airtime on ALL Indian channels. Instead of seeing this as a clear case of molestation, the TV discussions highlighted her reputation, how Rakhi had brought this upon herself. The papers and channels showing pictures of her initial peck seemed to imply that she had indeed asked for it.

Is this India's liberal media that we are watching here? Just because the lady dresses salaciously, does that make her suspect, even when the man has been caught on tape as overstepping? And all this coverage comes just a week after the Indian media – print and electronic – went to town on the Rahul Mahajan cocaine case. Wake up!

Bhutan Times

Balanced. Independent. And Realtime!

In the beginning of May, Bhutan saw its first privately owned newspaper open up. The *Bhutan Times* aims to take on what it perceives to be the "existence of endless, unanswered anti-Bhutan propaganda on the Internet". Say the editors, "Is Bhutan a xenophobic, autocratic nation that subscribes to ethnic cleansing of its citizens of Nepalese descent, or is Bhutan a small peaceful country of 0.7 million people who, while accepting of and happy to live with all its citizens including those of Nepalese descent, struggle to survive in a nook of the Indian Subcontinent that hosts over 35 million people of Nepalese origin with a long history of economic migration?" Well, we hope to see how the website develops given the editors' understanding that "there always are two sides to every story and that the truth often lies in between." Go to www.bhutantimes.com, whose slogan is "Balanced. Independent. And Realtime".

– Chettria Patrakar

In Lahore, waxing eloquent

BY RINKU DUTTA

I have been in numerous awkward, potentially perilous positions before. But this one beat them all.

There I was: flat on my back, the marbled floor cold against my skin, my legs held immovable under the ample thighs of a hefty Pakistani woman squatting in the V of my parted legs. No, we were not tangled in a sumo wrestling *dohyo*, pitting our strengths and skills in some championship. The Pakistani woman was inspecting me as would my gynaecologist, except that she was not my gynaecologist. She was a 'waxing woman', and was about to apply hot, molten wax to my most sensitive of parts.

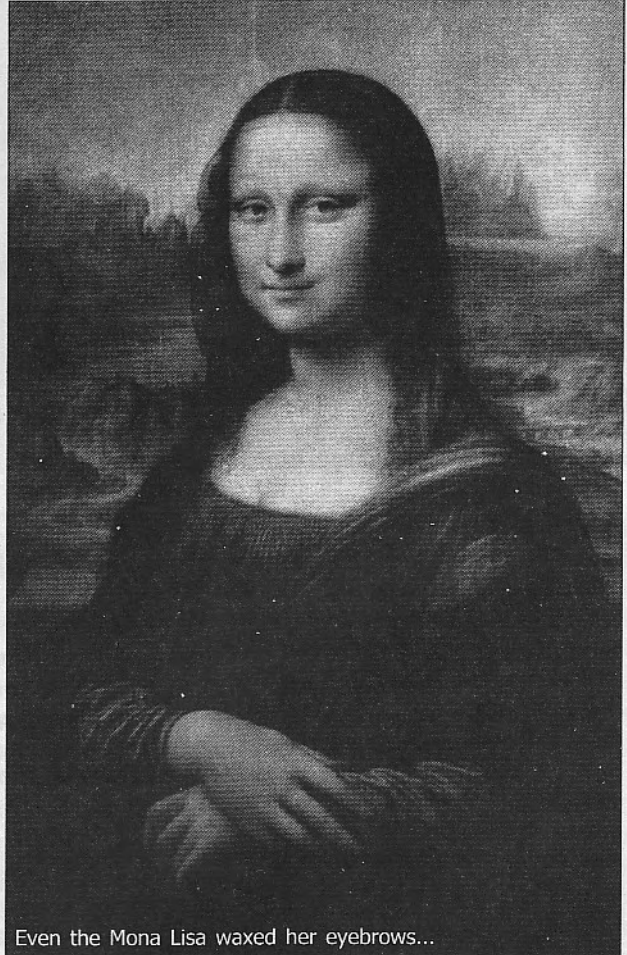
Suddenly, she paused. Butter-knife dipped in caramelised sugar, suspended like an executioner's chopper over my lower belly, she queried: "Wayse mein, aap kahaN ke haiN?" (By the way, where are you from?)

As an Indian in Pakistan, I debated the wisdom of stating the truth. Terrifying visions of 'accidents' involving my vulnerable 'under-legs' raced through my mind, along with a vivid flashback: My friend Ramesh, sitting in a chair while a bearded barber leans over him, swiping Ramesh's jaws and neck with an *ustra*, a traditional knife-razor. An overhead TV is tuned to the Kashmir Channel, while the zealous barber is spewing vitriol against the Indians, the *kafir* Hindus. And Ramesh Tharwani, a Hindu from Sindh getting a much-needed shave in the mountains of northern Pakistan after trekking, is fretting: "This shave is getting way too close to my carotid for comfort."

Ramesh had survived the encounter to later relate the anecdote to his Indian and Pakistani friends. The humour that had accompanied his yarn was missing in my recollection, however, laying apprehensively on the floor of my bedroom in Lahore.

As it happened, I had nothing to fear. The waxing woman, Khurshed (affectionately called Khushi, and obviously, joy), was born on 15 August, the day that India commemorates her Independence. Khushi's mother's family had migrated from India, and was happy that Khushi's propitious birthday would sustain the link with her origins. "I love Indians. I love their dance," Khushi admitted. "Hum to ek jaise haiN" (We are so alike), she continued, cheerfully spreading the warm wax below my navel, like orange marmalade on brown bread.

Agreed. But we do differ in details – significant details. Precisely the kind that Khushi herself was



Even the Mona Lisa waxed her eyebrows...

working on at the moment – *na-pak baal*, not-pure hair. I wailed as she yanked off the strip of starched white cloth she had patted over the wax. In one efficient tug, the hair matted into the hardened wax had been uprooted en masse.

The 40 day cycle

In Islam, removing unwanted hair from the body is an act of *fitrah* (natural disposition). In the holy Sunnah, the Prophet is reported to have laid down the following guidelines: "The *fitrah* consists of five things: circumcision, trimming the moustache, cutting the nails, plucking the armpit hairs and shaving the pubic

hairs." The *fitrah fatwa* (ruling) applies to both men and women, and is a hygienic ritual that has to be done at most every 40 days, as a religious binding.

While hygienic practices are also encouraged in Hinduism, such as the use of the left hand strictly for cleaning oneself and the right hand to eat, there are no ritualised guidelines offered on maintaining 'personal' hygiene. It is only in response to a recent fashion trend that some ladies parlours in the Indian mega-cities have begun catering to the rare client who requests 'under-legs' waxing.

Among practicing Muslims, however, maintaining one's pubic hair – even indulging in creative topiary on special occasions like Valentine's Day – is not an option. Khushi chides me for having lapsed on the decreed time of trimming within 40 days. According to her, *na-pak* hair should not be allowed to grow taller than the length of a grain of *jowar*, or sorghum. Her 'ladies wax' business is a direct result of this strict religious requirement, as waxing has become the chosen depilatory method among urban women in Pakistan. Muslim jurists allowed the use of lime and other depilatory agents. Today, any method, provided it is safe, is considered permissible. While men choose to shave or trim their hair with scissors, women prefer to wax.

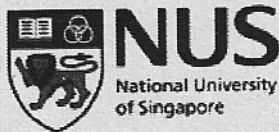
Having been at it for 18 years, Khushi is very

***Na-pak* hair should not be allowed to grow taller than the length of a grain of *jowar*, or sorghum.**

proficient, and was finished within 15 minutes. I paid her PKR 450, which she charges for a full-body waxing. She visits at least two or three customers every day, and makes a decent living earning 20,000-30,000 rupees per month. Khushi does not suppress her satisfaction at her success, either, noting to me that, "Only very well-educated people make this kind of money." Khushi's clientele includes not just those in Lahore, but also old customers who have relocated to Rawalpindi and Faisalabad. "People like my work," she said. "They say that they'll only use my services for this job."

Her pride is warranted. As a poor, uneducated girl with no family support, the common route would have been to become a low-paid house-help. Above all, Khushi likes her job because it offers her a more respectable place in society. She is offering a service, a skill, and she is her own boss. With the money she earns she maintains a home, schools her five children, and enjoys a few luxuries. "*Shukr Allah ki, maiN aaj apni zindagi se uthti hooN, aapni zindagi se sotI hooN,*" she explained. "By the grace of Allah, today I rise to my own life, I sleep to my own life."

Closing the door behind her, I paid Khushi the waxing woman a grudging respect: with any honesty, I certainly could not claim the same about myself. ▲



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES PROGRAMME

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Applicants must submit (1) a full vita; (2) a statement detailing their research agendas and professional experience; and (3) contributions he/ she can make towards this appointment. (4) In addition, applicants must arrange for three academic referees to write recommendations on their behalf. The deadline for all these submissions is **31 July 2006**, and all materials should be sent to

Chair, South Asian Studies Programme Search Committee
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
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Suitable candidates will be invited to make campus visits in **September/October 2006**, with a view to the appointment starting, if possible, in **January 2007**.

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Mountain autocrat, still



MRINAL RAMA

BY NIRAJ LAMA

Subash Ghisingh has been the satrap of the Darjeeling hills for two decades. Responsibility for the region's endemic problems sits squarely on his shoulders – and on Delhi and Calcutta powerbrokers that have helped him consolidate.

Political leaders in the Darjeeling hills talk with conspiratorial relish about the Qinghai-Lhasa railway that China has recently finished constructing in Tibet, slated to open in July. The hushed tones do not necessarily reveal any immediate fear, as much as they underline a prevalent perception in this place tucked away in India's eastern Himalaya: that far-away forces are at work here, forces that the people understand little, over which they have even less control. Why this fear over the faraway railway? Much of the prevalent paranoia in Darjeeling about issues and events near and far has to do with the waywardness of the ruling satrap, Subash Ghisingh. And also the fact that the authorities – of a country that prides itself on being the world's largest democracy – have declined to conduct major local elections here for over two years.

The plot thickens as hill politics remain outside of most locals'

comprehension – a confusion that is only compounded when local politics mesh with matters of culture and religion. During this year's Buddha Jayanti celebrations, for instance, the hill people witnessed the introduction of a 'Living Buddha' from Malaysia. The event was organised by the cultural department of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) after the political leadership declared that the Buddhists of the region – a significant chunk of the population – had thus far been worshipping a "dead Buddha".

Indeed, over the last two decades, political platforms have allowed for the promulgation of many unique theories pertaining to issues of religion, as well as those of science, art and culture. From discussions on the exact date of man's 'advent' on earth, to replacing idols of Durga with rocks, significant ground has been covered in lofty, sometimes bizarre public discourse. Much of this has been recorded on cassette and distributed about the countryside, conveying the words of

one voice in particular. Nearly two decades ago, it was that very same recorded voice that had brought people together, to listen with racing pulses about fighting for the freedom and dignity of Indian Nepalis. That voice belonged to an orator *par excellence*, who grasped the disaffection of his people and fired their imaginations with a desire for a separate state. They took up arms. It was 1986. The man was Subash Ghisingh, president of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF).



In a strange way, this frontier province has subsequently taken up the character of a 'no-man's land'. In fact, that term was popularised by the GNLF, the area's ruling party, when it spearheaded the movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland from 1986-88 to be carried out of West Bengal. Besides the suspension of elections, in November 2004 a blustering Ghisingh demanded that the hills be merged with Bangladesh. Six years earlier, he raised the question of the region's "territorial integrity" vis-à-vis the Indian Constitution. Due to its sensitive border location, nearby and faraway events in these hills are habitually seen through a lens of larger geo-politics, adding to a peculiar cloak-and-dagger atmosphere.

This peculiarity also explains the reaction to the new Tibet train line. Darjeeling is located so close to the borders of China, Nepal and Bhutan, that policymakers in New Delhi have long wanted to quash any potential trouble – particularly a separatist movement. The view has subsequently become entrenched that this local strongman, Subash Ghisingh, is and needs to remain as a 'safe bet' for New Delhi and Calcutta. The building of the new railway across the border is seen in some Indian intelligence circles as a new threat, given that China would have a (marginally) stronger presence in the border regions. Without an amenable Ghisingh in Darjeeling, officials fear that separatist demands would resurface – and with the potential

Starting in 1988, when Ghisingh agreed to drop the demand for Gorkhaland, he has been given free rein to run the council.

Chinese 'build up' at the borders, they cannot afford such a thing to happen. Emphasising the new train's rumblings in Darjeeling can thus be seen as a shrewd political move on Ghisingh's part.

The writer-rebel

Ghisingh was born into a tea workers' family in 1936. He joined the Indian Army when he was 17, although, for a soldier, he was unusually fond of painting and literature. Not surprisingly, he was discharged after five years. During a prolific writing career that he gave up in 1976, he wrote nearly 21 books, including mediocre novels and poetry. On turning from writing, he is said to have explained that "the *kukhri* is mightier than the pen."

Ghisingh was not the first to demand self-rule for Darjeeling's hill people. The issue was formally raised with the British government in 1907. Since then, local organisations and political parties would from time to time send deputations to various governments, demanding separation from Bengal. Ghisingh, however, was the first to break the tradition of peacefully submitting memoranda, all of which had been stockpiling in New Delhi's cupboards. The violent movement that he led for 28 months in the mid-1980s at long last forced Darjeeling into the post-Independence national consciousness of India. Nearly 1500 people were killed and thousands more displaced during those two years. While such numbers may not seem dramatic by the standards of modern insurgencies, for this small and formerly peaceful region it was cataclysmic.

As homemade guns cracked and bombs echoed across the valleys, the GNLF president was soon being flown about in helicopters to various

governmental negotiating tables. Many feel that that was when he lost the plot – in a narrative that he himself may have set in motion, but which impacted the whole of the Darjeeling hills. When the rebellion was quelled and the accords signed, these restive areas again faded from the national scene. This would have been fine, if representation and good governance had at long last arrived in the Darjeeling hills. But that did not happen. At the end of the agitation, Ghisingh accepted on behalf of Darjeeling an autonomous politico-administrative body, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, with himself at its head. As often happens, the liberators became the oppressors, taking advantage of their raised stature among the locals, as well as the government's blind spot towards 'small areas'.

The people greeted the formation of the Council with great jubilation, until very quickly they discovered that the autonomy had been given only in spirit, not in practice. Calcutta, from whose clutches Darjeeling yearned to be free, retained tight control. The opposition alleged that Ghisingh had accepted several crore rupees to agree to a hill council that had no real power. That may or may not be the case, but the question that has been asked again and again is, 'Was Ghisingh, at the time of signing, aware that DGHC was essentially a dud?' Neither he nor his party, the GNLF, suffering from a militancy hangover, allow such questions to be raised. With the hill people's inherent dislike for confrontations, it was easy for the party to create a vice-like grip over the region, as they have maintained ever since.

Better than Gorkhaland

While the extreme general violence that marked the Gorkhaland movement is now a memory, political violence continues to dog and destabilise these hills. In February 2001, after 11 years of rule, an assassination attempt was made on Ghisingh. Heavily armed men ambushed his convoy on a deserted stretch of highway about 50 km from

Darjeeling. Although two of his bodyguards were killed, Ghisingh himself survived with minor injuries. In the aftermath, around 13 people were arrested, including some opposition leaders. Five years later, it is not clear who were the masterminds behind the attack. Eight of them, including the head of the GNLF's militant wing during the Gorkhaland agitation, Chattré Subba, still await their fate in prison.

In the last seven years, three DGHC councillors have been murdered, including C K Pradhan, Ghisingh's closest lieutenant. Each of these has been attributed to intra-party rivalry. At the time of his murder, Pradhan had been on the verge of launching a new party, to revive the demand for Gorkhaland, whose goals he believed GNLF high command had abandoned. To this day, no one dare tell who killed Pradhan.

Although Ghisingh maintains that he has not forgotten Gorkhaland, he also does not hesitate to announce the difficulty of achieving such a goal. On 6 December 2005, another tripartite agreement between Ghisingh, New Delhi and West Bengal was signed to include DGHC in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. This section originally provided for self-rule in tribal areas of India's northeastern states – although in the Darjeeling hills, tribals are a minority. As tensions rise anew in Darjeeling amidst the simmering demands for statehood, Ghisingh has stressed that the impending dispensation is *better* than Gorkhaland – suggesting that there would be no difference between the ruler and the ruled, a situation that would not hold in a separate state.

The latest tripartite agreement – described as the “full and final settlement” for the Darjeeling hill area – is seen as a major achievement for New Delhi and West Bengal, at a time when the opposition in the hills

is once again trying to whip up passion for separate statehood. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that an amenable Ghisingh is indulged by state and national officials. Starting in 1988, when Ghisingh agreed to drop the demand for Gorkhaland, he has been given free rein to run the council.

One-man disaster

Besides now-routine irregularities in the functioning of the DGHC, extreme arbitrariness has marked the way that Ghisingh has spent a large volume of government funds – for instance, in building temples throughout the hills. After the first couple of years in power, DGHC's budget – if indeed one was prepared – has never been made public. Development, meanwhile, has been limited to the building of community halls and roads. No new employment avenues have been created. Joblessness in the Darjeeling hills is sky high. The area's three hill towns are a mess, and basic amenities like water are in constant short supply.

Ghisingh has always been averse to good counsel, and after the 2001 assassination attempt, he has retreated further into his autocratic cocoon. He runs the Council single-handedly, illegally refusing to convene a session to bring the members together. This serious violation of the DGHC Act continued for more than four years, until the state government appointed him as the council's ‘sole administrator’ last year, legitimising his illegal tenure.

The most grievous action, however, has been the suspension of elections to the council for the past two years, which Ghisingh has refused to allow until the Sixth Schedule proposal is implemented. There is still no talk of elections. The state government was finally forced to come up with the lame excuse of Maoist troubles across the border in Nepal to explain their capitulation with the GNLF leader's wishes. Even

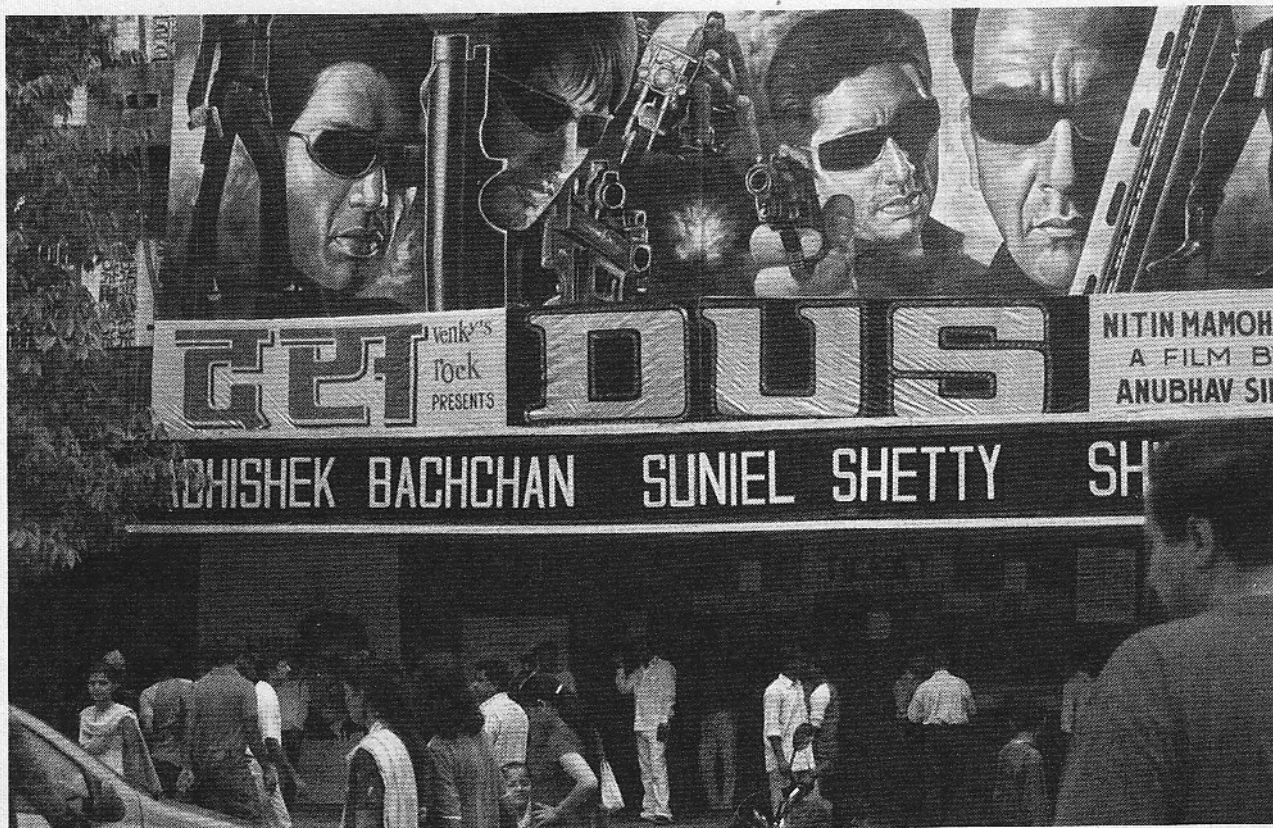
the election to hill panchayats has now been kept on hold for over a year.

Matters have only been made worse by the opposition's failure to show a united and cogent plan of action. Most opposition politicians become active only with the approach of elections. The rest of the time they are not to be seen, leading the electorate to doubt their commitment. The opposition's excuses for being so insufficient, meanwhile, remain a lack of resources and biased state and central governments that ‘sponsor’ Ghisingh. It is difficult, they say, to dislodge a man who enjoys the blessings of both Delhi and Calcutta for so long.

Under these surreal circumstances, feelings of helplessness have crept in, giving rise to these perceptions of unknown forces at work, mysteriously influencing almost every aspect of life in these majestic hills. It has always taken a long time for political change to occur here. In the tradition of hill politics, a ruling party reigns for about two decades, uninterrupted. Ghisingh has now enjoyed his spoils for 18 years. Some would hope that a culmination is near, particularly with the building frustration among the citizens. With the continued interference by Delhi and Calcutta in this border region, however, including that of suspending elections to preserve their man, the ‘natural’ course may not be followed. In Ghisingh, you have a populist who has become a wayward autocrat, but the people's frustration with him is no challenge for someone who is protected by the state and the Centre. For Calcutta and New Delhi, as long as Subash Ghisingh keeps the hills subdued, they are satisfied.

But what is the price that the people pay for this indulgence? Prophets and demigods have to be created, and ghost trains must be set on their tracks. There is no telling what will happen when the illusion breaks. ▲

The liberators became the oppressors, taking advantage of their raised stature among the locals, as well as the government's blind spot towards ‘small areas’.



Bollywood and the middle-class nation

Bollywood's focus has shifted from the all-encompassing underdog to celluloid presentations of sanitised pseudo-reality meant to comfort an already comfortable English-speaking middle class.

BY MAHMOOD FAROOQUI

Over the last few years the Hindi cinema produced by Bombay, Bollywood for short, seems to have come of age. With a far greater slickness in production values, with a visible presence in metros of the West, with talk of crossover films and crossover stars being the rage, and with the injection of unprecedented numbers of young directors and producers, Bollywood would seem set to conquer the world.

There is also celebration of a new kind of cinema, a neo-real cinema that feels confident of breaking away from the old formula, from old song-and-dance routines to newer films like *Black*, *Rang de Basanti* and *Bunty Aur Babli*, new both in their themes and treatment. But in this turning away from formula, Bollywood is also rejecting something that had once made it so universally popular, from Bombay to Padrauna, from Kathmandu to Indonesia,

from Egypt to China. By eschewing the underdog and celebrating the 'real Indian', it is also creating – as well as pandering to – a new kind of India, one that celebrates itself, its money and its greatness.

Over the last half-decade, Bombay cinema has discovered a new sense of professionalism. Producers are turning into conglomerates with multiple productions – witness the way that director Subhash Ghai has transformed Mukta Arts from being the provider of occasional mega movies into a company that turns out a number of smaller productions. The most successful examples of this trend are producer Ram Gopal Verma's 'The Factory' and Yash Chopra's 'Yash Raj Films'. In the case of the latter, film production has now been subsumed under a whole variety of ancillary activities, such as distribution, music production and publicity. The industry greats have consolidated their holdings, and the older stars are now a part of a conglomeration where their families play a greater role than ever. Indeed, with ten or so families commanding 80 percent of the Bollywood industry, the family matters to Bollywood as never before (*see box*).

Along with the greater family-based control, there is also a new corporatisation, as an incipient studio system emerges. Producers are now venturing into film distribution and music production; exhibitors such as IMax and Adlabs are moving into production; and music companies and television-software makers such as UTV are making films (they produced *Rang de Basanti*). Producers are hiring whole teams of writers, directors and technicians, and in-house studios and production facilities are creating a one-stop shop for the entire filmmaking process. Market surveys, research and payments by cheques are becoming the norm in the industry.

Even as this consolidation bars outsiders, however, the success of the new 'small film' opens doors for new entrants. In particular, the multiplex phenomenon has created the space for 'niche' films – those made for a targeted audience in the metros – which allows many more first-timers to essay their luck. To an inordinate extent, the industry is now dominated by Delhi-wallahs – products of a convent education, trained at mass-communication or film institutes, managers, technicians and writers who understand and speak the language of business, who talk about *dividends* and *returns* and *product placement*.

Hindi cinema also pervades Indian lives as never before. Some elements of this booming industry include: five Hindi channels devoted to cinema in India alone, and many more in other parts of the world; an ancillary DVD and music industry; a marketing and advertising machine that hogs a major share of news space; a host of music channels that broadcast Hindi songs, remixes and promos; an advertising industry that feeds on cinema, both for ideas as well as for brand ambassadors; and growth of event-managed stage shows, by stars, on and around films. Bollywood stares at us from the front pages; it is a part of our leadership – every single political party contains film stars as members of one of the houses of Parliament; it fundamentally influences the national

**There are a million stories to be told,
but all we get is adultery or
narcissistic individualism.**

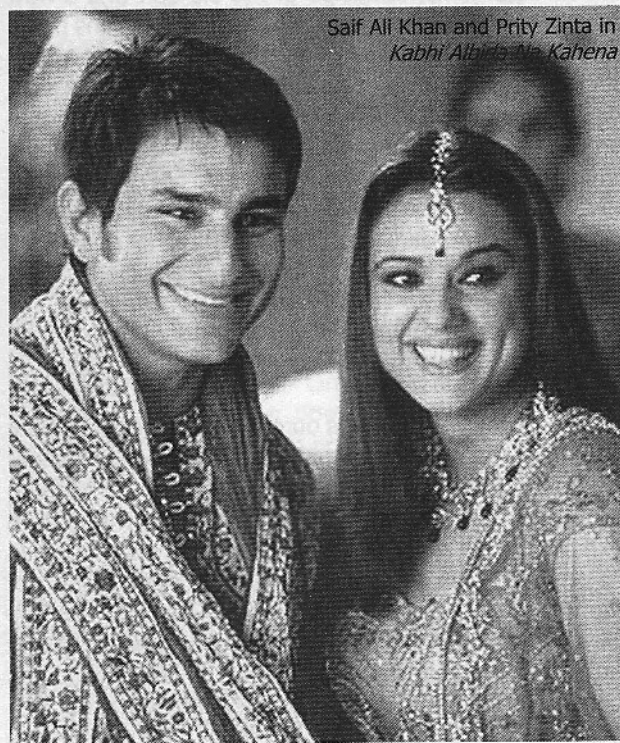
society's self-image.

But all of this transformation – the arrival of the corporate-types, the smaller films, the multiplexes, et al – has not affected one simple equation: the power of the stars. The fact is that the entire film business still rests overwhelmingly on the stars you have in your film. And the quality of stars is always dependent on their paucity. So, as ever, there are still less than a dozen saleable, A-grade stars. Make a film with them, if you can, for otherwise you are condemned to struggle, no matter how good your story or clever your treatment. The mode of business may have changed, but the most important asset remains the same – so how much change can there really have been?

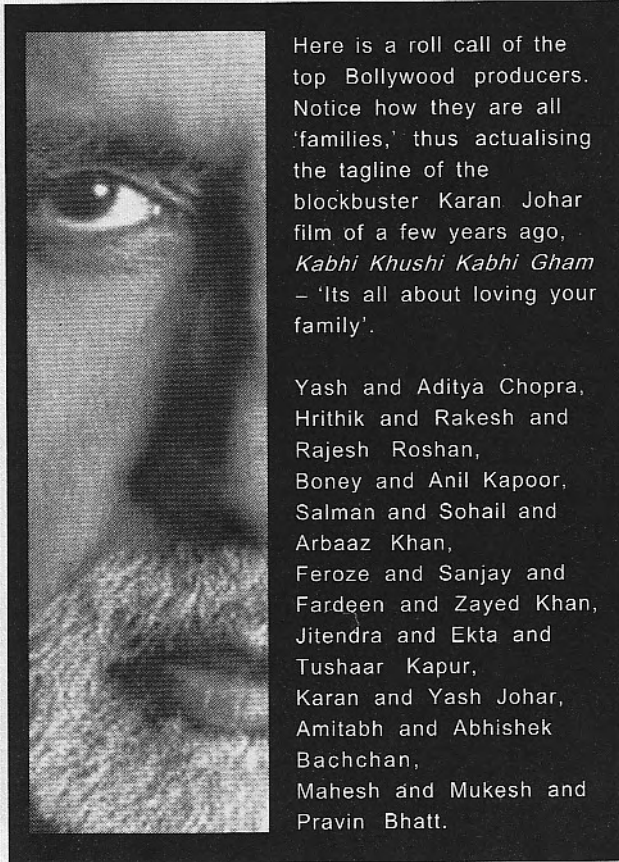
Not a mass medium

Time was when one had to learn Urdu to survive in the Hindi film industry. Now, if one does not know English, one would find it difficult to find work of any sort. Most of today's stars can speak only English fluently. Hindi film posters and promos rely increasingly on English. Scenarios, screenplays and scripts are written originally in English, and even the dialogues tend to be translations from English, but the actors' and the makers' lack of command over written or spoken Hindi seems of no consequence.

This neo-real cinema, then, is also a neo-liberal one. It is made by English-speaking middle classes, for the



Saif Ali Khan and Preeti Zinta in
Kabhi Albulis Na Kahena



Here is a roll call of the top Bollywood producers. Notice how they are all 'families,' thus actualising the tagline of the blockbuster Karan Johar film of a few years ago, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* – 'Its all about loving your family'.

Yash and Aditya Chopra, Hrithik and Rakesh and Rajesh Roshan, Boney and Anil Kapoor, Salman and Sohail and Arbaaz Khan, Feroze and Sanjay and Fardeen and Zayed Khan, Jitendra and Ekta and Tushaar Kapur, Karan and Yash Johar, Amitabh and Abhishek Bachchan, Mahesh and Mukesh and Pravin Bhatt.

English-speaking middle classes, for people who also watch Hollywood and regard it as 'world cinema', for people who live in flats and aspire to a universal, Americanised lifestyle. As such, Bollywood today produces two kinds of films, fantasies of the old sort and a new socially relevant film. Whereas earlier masala films pitted their relevance on certain universal truths about Indian society – love between social unequals, poor vs rich, *badmash vs sharif* – this cinema tries instead to recreate an expanding and self-referential middle-class habitus, where the poor and the marginalised do not even find the token representation they did earlier. Films that have been big hits in recent years treat relationships either as a matrix between two adults who do not occupy a social space – *Chalte Chalte*, *Hum Tum*, *Fanaa*, *Salaam Namaste* – or as a story of families where emotions (the Karan Johar films) and not their social location provides the main conflict.

The social, which is thus outcast, returns in a different shade: as the story of the nation, a middle-class nation, where the state and its activities are seen to be harming the ordinary and self-contented middle class. This realism exhibits a great impatience with 'the system', and bandies its progressivism as a call to action for a generality, not merely as an avenging hero. So in this year's *Rang de Basanti*, two politicians are murdered at the end, but that ending is presented not as justice for the individuals concerned (as it was in *Inquilab* or *Aakhri Rasta*) but as a possible solution for all social ills. In this case, the speech

of the dying hero – a very old trope – is converted into 'an address to the nation' from a captured radio station, by teenagers who have just committed these murders. Like the teenagers themselves, director Rakesh Omprakash Mehra seems to believe that he has done something radically new, whereas all that he has really accomplished is to situate the oldest storyline of Hindi cinema – the revenge murder – differently.

The other kind of the neo-real is represented by inordinately expensive films about individual destinies (*Devdas*, *Black*, *Veer Zaara*, *Parineeta*), which rehash old films and the question of fate in the most self-indulgent ways possible. These offer the pure individual, whose social locale, where specified, is again a comfortable middle or upper class that is done in by the distant state. As such, you can have films about India-Pakistan relations, or Kashmir, or a dumb, deaf and mute girl, without any visual reference to the actual contemporary sites. In this neo-liberal cinema, solutions to social problems do not exist because the conflicts faced by the protagonists are either not social, or the 'social' simply does not exist.

Then, there are the 'niche' films. What the vamp used to do in the 1970s cinema – a provocative and titillating dance number – has now been taken over by the heroines. The 'item' number has found a new lease on life by re-inventing itself, abandoning the classy cabaret of old, and introducing a risqué element where lewd sexual gestures are wholly acceptable. Even while we decry Fashion TV and pornography, it has invaded us by the backdoor, as the filmic item number or its equivalent in music videos. It is as if the old style C-grade films – of the *Pyaasi Jawaani*, *Bhookhi Aurat* variety – restricted until now to the morning shows, have returned as genre films, made by respectable people, released in A-grade halls.

Marginalising the marginalised

So the whole familiarly variegated social space of Bollywood, where stars, junior artists, extras and runaways from small towns interacted together in what became a small microcosm of the country, has been replaced by a flattened, middle-class world where English acts as the lingua franca. Since cinema dominates the entertainment industry of India, and since the entertainment industry now commands a much larger quotient of society, the people who produce this content can no longer be the truly deprived or the poor. There is no room for the poor even when they have to play the poor. And extras – poorly educated, living in slums – can no longer appear dark or ill-fed; dancing boys and girls must be natty and fair. In this brand of 'feel-good' cinema, the mofussil (the country or the suburbs) is dreamt of as a place that must be left behind in order to arrive – as in *Bunty Aur Babli*. In truth, it is so in the real world too, but at least in the real world it is not possible to amass huge amounts of money doing con tricks that would shame a child of five. Better the Amitabh Bachchan of *Don* or *Adalat* or *Deewar*, whose rags-to-riches stories were equally fantastical but whose realism derived from a metaphoric reality, not imitation. So the

real must be fantastical and vice-versa, for it to appeal to the new middle class.

For the majority of cinema being produced in Bombay, a lack of money no longer matters to the storyline. Watch last year's three big Bollywood blockbusters: *Fanaa*, *Rang de Basanti* and *Salaam Namaste*. Money is not a problem here; unlike in some of Aamir Khan's past hits, like *Rangela* or *Raja Hindustani*, where its lack or differentiation provided the main conflict in the story. Imagine Amitabh Bachchan without poverty. Imagine Amitabh Bachchan without the frontbenchers, without the rickshawallahs, coolies and urban proletariat.

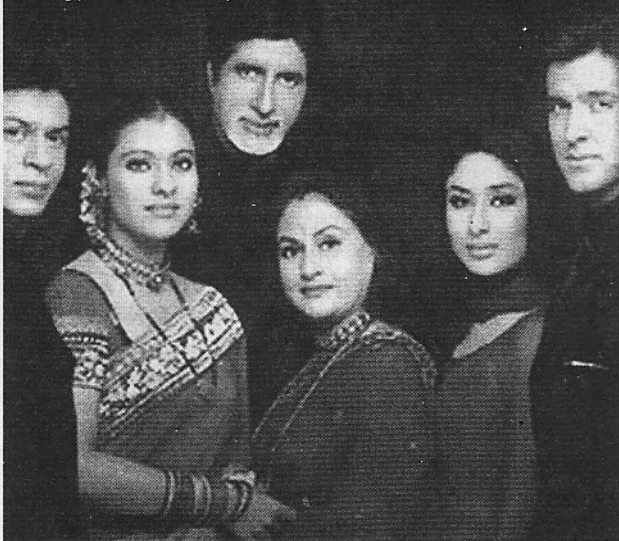
The action cinema loved by the frontbenchers has been shunted either to small cities or to rundown cinemas in the larger ones. On the other hand, technology is facilitating a localisation of cinema. A small town in western Uttar Pradesh like Meerut has its own CD-based local film industry, where it refashions Bollywood hits or recreates a more authentic local idiom in its own right. Same in Malegaon, in Maharashtra, and often these films are better written and funnier than the originals.

In a stunning change, then, the frontbenchers are out of the reckoning for the A-grade Hindi films, perhaps because the all-India hit film is out. The changes in the revenue structure mean that, in addition to the box office, there is now the overseas market, the music rights, the DVD and satellite rights to compensate in its lieu. Hindi cinema is no longer a mass medium.

Bollywood bankruptcy

All the achievements of Bollywood – its success among the diaspora, its popularity in America and England, its standing up to Hollywood and its increasing self-confidence in the last decade – cannot conceal the fact that in the internationally respected festival circuit its achievements have been nil. In the 1970s and 1980s,

Haan ji, all in the family he!



In this neo-liberal cinema, solutions to social problems do not exist because the conflicts faced by the protagonists are either not social, or the 'social' simply does not exist.

when the Art Cinema movement was at its peak, it would have been a rare year when an Indian film did not win an international award. Since the decline of that movement, however, it has been a rare year when an Indian film has won any awards, let alone a film produced by Bombay.

The bankruptcy of ideas in Bollywood, particularly in the choice of plots, is evident in the recent trend of 'remakes'. It is an idea that is not entirely unwelcome, for at least the scripts will be better than are the present. So *Devdas* and *Parineeta*, two classics from the 1950s, both based on Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterji's works, have been recently remade in lavish productions, replacing the simplicity of the originals with the opulence of new money. It is almost as if this country of billions, this country 'on the move' to its destiny, where millions are moving into cities and on the highways to international prosperity, does not inspire our filmmakers enough. It is astounding how they are simply not capable of finding stories from the here and now. Forget the falling, the rising also have interesting stories, indeed a million stories to be told, but all we get is adultery or narcissistic individualism.

The reason Hindi cinema used to be a mass medium, and was once as popular as it was across South, West and Southeast Asia and Africa, was because it told stories that resonated with the lives of the have-nots and the deprived everywhere. They were fantasies alright, but fantasies that rested on ancient and transnational sagas, myths, symbols and metaphors. These narrated the triumph of good over evil, the success of love over all other impediments, which depicted a city that could always make space for the newly arrived poor, or a village that could always be imagined to be a repository of a community, throbbing with a sense of belonging. As the village is edged out, as the poor are cast out, as the social is eradicated, this cinema still entertains – it still has song and dance, but it now speaks the specific language of the English-speaking middle-class of India. Bollywood no longer turns to old myths; it does not rework old formulas; it does not speak a universal language. It is, therefore, no longer a mass medium. It is popular entertainment and popular culture alright, but one that finds the masses a huge bore.

Bollywood is the only cinema industry in the world that has stood up to the invasion of Hollywood, but in the process it is simply becoming Hollywood in another language. That it bores this writer and excites the film critics and the neo-intelligentsia is a reflection of a deeper misalliance between me and my country, and a new bonhomie between a specific class and the entertainers it craves – more of the same, more of the same... ▲

Of scholarship and politics: the relentless pursuit

BY TED RICCARDI

Those of us who have devoted much of our careers to the study of the societies and cultures of Nepal have contributed unconsciously, perhaps inevitably, to the notion that there is a group of works, written mostly in English, that form an indispensable canon dealing with that country. One thinks immediately of names such as Colonel William Kirkpatrick, Francis Buchanan Hamilton, Brian Hodgson, H A Oldfield, Daniel Wright, Perceval Landon and, of course, Sylvain Levi, the greatest of French Indologists. There are certainly others, and each can form his own.

Canonicity struggles against analysis and criticism. It is there to conceal, as much as it can, the politics of scholarship. The *unread* quickly becomes the *unquestioned*. To maintain its authority, the canon is occasionally plundered for individual facts, like the price of salt or musk in 1829. Rarely, however, is it subjected to critical scrutiny. Like the gods, it floats in midair, above us all, its divine status taken for granted. But one has only to take a desultory look at, say, the complexities of English surgeon Daniel Wright's *History of Nepal* to get a sense of the human politics that surround this famous work, and to realise that its very structure derives from the politics of the British Residence, its divine status highly dubious.

The two works under review here relate directly to these problems of politics and scholarship. *The Origin of Himalayan Studies* is a volume of essays about Brian Hodgson, the first British Resident in the Kathmandu Valley and a significant supplier of some of the first Nepali manuscripts to reach Europe. The second, *Nepal:*

Hindu Adhirajyako Itihas, is a Nepali translation of the first volume of Levi's celebrated *Le Nepal: Etude Historique D'Un Royaume Hindou* (Nepal: A Historical Study of a Hindu Kingdom).

Vice President of the Royal Asiatic Society, David Waterhouse's volume consists of 12 articles describing Hodgson's work from Kathmandu and, later, Darjeeling. Significant new material is brought to light here, and the breadth of Hodgson's interests is shown more clearly than ever before. US professor Thomas Trautmann introduces the volume with an interesting foreword that, among other things, highlights the misfortunes of Hodgson's long life. This is followed by sketches of Hodgson himself; his political role and domestic problems; his relationship with Joseph Hooker, the English botanist; and essays on Hodgson's many studies – Buddhism, Buddhist architecture, zoology, mammals, ornithology, ethnography and linguistics. The book is beautifully and profusely illustrated with drawings by artists that Hodgson had employed in both Nepal and Darjeeling.

Still, despite the detailed nature of the book, one would have liked more about Hodgson's education, as well as his relationship to Thomas Malthus, Charles Darwin and other major figures of the 19th century, including the chief Indologists of his time. Also, what were his working relationships with his "native informants" and assistants? How well did Hodgson know any of the languages of Nepal? More about such things may not be possible, however, as the record may simply not be available.



The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling, 1820-1858
David M Waterhouse
London and New York:
Routledge Curzon
2005

My main criticism is that *The Origin of Himalayan Studies* is a bit too celebratory of Hodgson. There is little reference to those crucial figures – like Newar scholars Amritananda and Ram Singh – who made possible his fame in the 19th century. There is little on Hodgson's attitudes towards imperialism and colonialism. Surely, in such a volume as this, there was room for a discussion of Hodgson's essay on the suitability of the Himalaya for colonisation – the mountains being, according to him, a natural habitat for development by 200,000 stalwart Anglo-Saxon hearts.

One of the book's contributors, US professor Donald Lopez, is quite correct when he notes that Hodgson was more of a collector than a scholar. Except for inscriptions and other archaeological remains, he collected everything. Indeed, Hodgson was a cladistical maniac, a relentless classifier, a genius of taxonomy and even taxidermy – but not an intellect that analysed and interpreted. Little of his writing is very extensive. Many of his papers are very short, only two or three pages, and few topics are developed beyond their initial presentation. His broader ideas remain unexpressed. He wrote no books, translated or edited nothing. By these comments I do not wish to diminish his achievements, but at this juncture it is best to be clear. As

Nepal: Hindu Adhirajyako Itihas (Pahilo Khand)
Sylvain Levi
Translation:
Dilli Raj Upreti
Patan: Himal Books
2005



ongoing surveys of Hodgson's papers in the British Library reach completion, we may soon know more about his methodologies. At this point, however, we must see him mostly as an enabler of others.

In Nepali again

Of the writers mentioned above as canonical, all except Sylvain Levi were Englishmen in the service of the East India Company or the British government. In contrast, Levi (1863-1935) spent his entire career as a professor at the Sorbonne in Paris. It was not an ordinary career, and Levi was no ordinary mind. By general consensus he was the leading India scholar of his time, and one of the masters of both Indian history and the texts on which that history is based. Almost everything he wrote still deserves the attention of the scholarly world.

At the suggestion of the French philosopher Ernest Renan, Levi began the study of Sanskrit as a young man under Abel Bergaigne, a teacher to whom Levi was completely devoted. Bergaigne held the chairs of both Indo-European philology and Sanskrit at the Sorbonne, and most of his work was dedicated to Vedic literature. When he died in 1890, Levi succeeded him to both chairs. Well aware of the controversies surrounding the Veda, Levi chose to devote much of his career to the study of the later periods of Indian history, in particular the history of Buddhism. He was far more interested in how Indian civilisation shaped the cultures of Asia – Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma and Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Japan and Mongolia. He chose not to follow the other route, the one that led to the attempt by much of European Indology to view early

ancient Indian history as also the earliest part of European history – a problem with which Indian studies are still contending today.

Undaunted by the size of his task, Levi mastered Chinese, Japanese and other languages necessary to his work. He began extensive travels. In 1898, he made the first of three trips to the

Subcontinent, and it was during this time that he also visited Nepal, which, as he said on numerous occasions, was his second *patrie*, or fatherland. He became enamoured of the Kathmandu Valley, and after three months of intense work that year, he returned to Paris with enough material to produce his longest and most famous work, *Le Nepal*, three volumes published from 1905 to 1908.

By now, *Le Nepal* is in many respects out of date. Much has been done in archaeology, anthropology, epigraphy (the study of inscriptions) and history of which Levi could never have guessed. He knew of only 17 Sanskrit inscriptions of the Licchavi period, for instance, while today there are over 200 now known. Still, *Le Nepal* bristles with ideas and insights, dazzling suggestive sparks that make one pause at the country's fortune in having such a brilliant chronicler.

Despite its importance, because it was written in French, the book has remained unread in Nepal. While an

English version is available, for the first time Nepalis now have the opportunity to read this important text in their own language. Longtime resident in France, translator Dilli Raj Upreti has rendered Levi's French into clear and relatively simple Nepali. While the translation is excellent, the text, particularly the notes, is marred by many orthographic errors and typographical mistakes. These should be removed from future editions and from the two volumes yet to appear. One awaits the *dosro* and *tesro* volumes with enthusiasm.

We do not know whether Hodgson and Levi ever met, although they could easily have done so in the early 1890s. They would have had much to discuss. Both were deeply humanistic but relentless in the pursuit of their quarries, even forcing their wills on a resistant government in Kathmandu. Like Hodgson, Levi was no slouch when it came to collecting. The story of how he demanded the excavation of the Manadeva pillar at the famed Changu Narayan temple – to the great anger of the priests – is told by him in his *carpet de sejour*, his journal. In Waterhouse's volume, brief reference is also made to an instance in which a potential language informant that Hodgson wished to interview was finally delivered to him in a cage by the Nepali authorities.

Neither Levi nor Hodgson could have been well understood by their Nepali hosts. The ultimate disposition of their collections would have been found amusing, if not ridiculous, or even horrifying.

Several years ago, this reviewer accompanied a young Nepali woman who was visiting the US for the first time to the American Museum of Natural History. As we roamed the halls, we were subjected to an endless, undifferentiated mass of displays and glass cases. We moved from stuffed birds to stuffed mammals to dioramas of peoples of the world. As she gazed at these last exhibits, she cried out, "Did they have to kill the people too?"

I still do not think I have an answer to her question. ▲



Portrait of Sylvain Levi at Kaiser Mahal, Kathmandu

Intensity and concentration

✪ JAI ARJUN SINGH

Even many dedicated readers know little or nothing about Vilas Sarang, a talented writer who is equally at home in Marathi or English. This neglect may be in part because Sarang's writing style is largely influenced by Western writers like Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, even Lewis Carroll, rather than rooted in any obvious Indian tradition. Perhaps the surrealism and absurdism that runs through much of Sarang's work, together with his interest in European modernist themes, tends to alienate some Southasian readers. For the unprepared, after all, the content of the stories can be very unsettling, even offensive – particularly for those for whom religion is taboo as a subject.

Many years ago, this reviewer was struck by a short story titled "An Interview with M Chakko", which told of a strange island somewhere in the Indian Ocean where the titular protagonist had once been shipwrecked. On the island, all of the women only had half-bodies: those with only lower bodies were the *Ka* women, while those with only upper bodies belonged to the *Lin* class. Through Chakko's experience living with a member of each class, the nature of the sexual arrangements on the island are discussed. "It seems to me," he notes, "that the half, the partial, gives something that the whole, or what appears whole, doesn't." The reader never learns whether the author meant to project the island as real, or simply to accept it as an elaborate fantasy. Although the name of the author of that tale had never registered, finding *The Women in Cages* allowed for the unexpected rediscovery of M Chakko's strange tale – along with a host of Vilas Sarang's other delights.

Sarang's short stories are simply but compellingly written, and the variety of themes covered are often

infused with fantastical elements. In "The Odour of Immortality", a prostitute – with the help of a tantrik and the blessings of Lord Indra – grows dozens of vaginas all over her body, to allow her to service her customers more quickly and make more money. A second story echoes this precarious connection between sex and worship, when a man wakes up to find himself transformed into a giant phallus, and is eventually mistaken by religious villagers to be the severed lingam of Shiva. At one point, Sarang tells the reader about a particular Ganesh festival, where clay statues of various deities come alive and escape from their worshippers; at another, a vulture is refused treatment at a bird-hospital because of his carnivorous ways.

Writing reality

Perhaps most enthralling in *The Women in Cages* is the way that the author plays with the divide between the conscious and the subconscious, moving indiscernibly from one to the other. In "An Evening at the Beach", for instance, a character named Bajrang joins a group of mourners at a woman's funeral pyre. Looking at the assembled group, he speculates that they might have killed the woman in order to have a bonfire with which to warm themselves on the cold night. It is the sort of morbid mind-fantasy that many readers have created at one solemn gathering or another – especially when they are emotionally distanced from, and perhaps a bit bored by, the proceedings. In Sarang's hands, however, Bajrang gets so involved with his mental drama that he proceeds to act it out: stretching his hands out in front of the pyre fire, even turning around so he can warm his back. The other mourners, of course, are incensed.

This aspect of Sarang's storytelling is interesting particularly in how it lets the reader in on the writing process.

Here are explorations of the dual worlds that many writers simultaneously inhabit: the real world with its relatively mundane daily routines, and also the embellished one, where the writer is constantly analysing that which is happening around him, creating and fleshing out alternative scenarios. Some of Sarang's own characters emulate this dynamic – as though they are writers with ideas for the next novel perpetually floating around in their minds.

Sarang has also written explicitly about writing, some examples of which are included in the epilogue to this collection. The author laments the undervaluing of "the guerrillas of prose fiction" – meaning the great short-story writers – as well as the lack of a sustained tradition of short-story



The Women in Cages: Collected Stories

by Vilas Sarang
Penguin Books India
283 pages
INR 275

writing in Indian fiction in English. "We do not have unitive collections which may serve as primers for budding writers," he asserts. "Does Indian English literature hope to produce a *War and Peace* before it has attempted something like [Leo Tolstoy's short stories] 'How Much Land Does a Man Need?' or 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich'?" He observes that, at its best, the short-story form is capable of achieving the purity and perfection of the finest poetry – which is something the novel, however great, cannot accomplish. "The strength of the novel is length ... But this precludes the kind of intensity and concentration – the 'critical pressure' – that most art forms strive for."

This pure intensity is on show in many of Sarang's own short stories. *The Women in Cages* offers a fascinating entry point into the work of this provocative writer.

TRAVELLING FILM SOUTH ASIA 2006

Fifteen Outstanding Documentaries
from the Subcontinent

Film South Asia announces Travelling Film South Asia 2006 (TFSA '06) – 15 outstanding documentaries from the subcontinent. These films were chosen as representative of the 44 films screened at Film South Asia '05, the fifth edition of the festival of South Asian documentaries. Institutions in Southasia and worldwide are invited to host TFSA '06.

- 1. A Certain Liberation (38')**
Bangladesh, 2003, dir – Yasmine Kabir
Ghost of the Bangladesh war
- 2. City of Photos (60')**
India, 2005, dir – Nishtha Jain
Neighbourhood photo studios that we knew
- 3. The City Beautiful (Sundar Nagri) (78')**
Delhi/India, 2003 dir – Rahul Roy
Being laid off in global India
- 4. Continuous Journey (87')**
Canada/India, 2004, dir – Ali Kazimi
Entering Canada in 1914
- 5. Dirty Laundry (42')**
South Africa, 2005, dir – Sanjeev Chatterjee
Identity: South Africans of Southasian origin
- 6. Final Solution (149')**
Gujarat/India, 2004, dir – Rakesh Sharma
The extremism that was in Gujarat
- 7. Girl Song (29')**
Bengal/India, 2003, dir – Vasudha Joshi
Jazz nights in Calcutta
- 8. Good News (Bhal Khabar) (17')**
Assam/India, 2005, dir – Altaf Mazid
Looking for good news in 1980s Assam
- 9. The Great India School Show (53')**
Maharastra/India, 2005, dir – Avinash Deshpande
The young ones under cctv gaze
- 10. Lanka: The Other Side of War and Peace (75')**
Sri Lanka, 2005, dir – Iffat Fatima
From LTTE to JVP
- 11. The Legend of Fat Mama (23')**
Bengal/India, 2005, dir – Rafeeq Ellias
Among the Chinese in Calcutta
- 12. The Life and Times of a Lady from Awadh: Hima (135')**
Awadh, 2005, dir – Shireen Pasha
Remembering the Awadh that was home
- 13. Sunset Bollywood (54')**
Bombay/India, 2005, dir – Komal Tolani
Life off the stardom lane
- 14. Team Nepal (37')**
Nepal/India, 2005, dir – Girish Giri
To India on a football journey
- 15. Teardrops of Karnaphuli (60')**
Bangladesh, 2005, dir – Tanvir Mokammel
Bangladesh's hill people

HOW TO HOST TFSA

The 15 films of the TFSA package comes with professional-quality mini-DV or DVD format, TFSA posters, festival catalogues and display material. We recommended screening TFSA only with high-quality video projection systems. The package cumulatively constitute 15 hours of viewing time, to be ideally screened over three consecutive afternoons-evenings.

The TFSA festival will only travel to cities where host organisations are willing to take full responsibility for publicity, screenings and all associated logistics. As per the festival's agreement with the individual filmmakers and production houses, the screenings may only be non-commercial, which means that entry fees at TFSA venues may at best be used to offset screening costs.

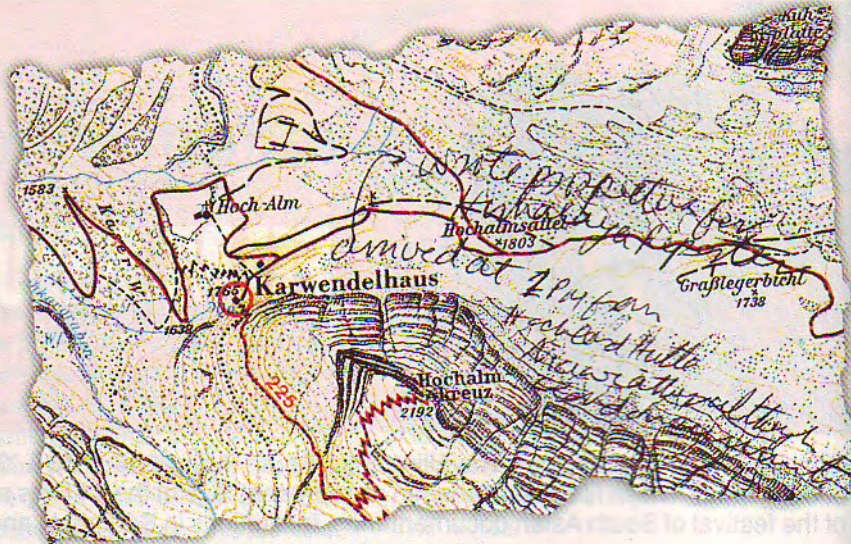
There is no charge levied on hosts and venues within South Asia. Beyond the region, an all-inclusive charge of USD 700 per venue is levied by the Film South Asia Secretariat in order to defray all TFSA-related costs (left over funds will go to the organisation of FSA '07, scheduled for September 2007). The local host (whether in South Asia or overseas) takes the responsibility of dispatching the set of films to the next venue as directed by the Secretariat.

For further details about Travelling Film South Asia, including travel schedule, contact TFSA Coordinator, Mallika Aryal at tel: + 977-1-5542544 or fsa@himalassociation.org. Further FSA '05 report, jury citation, etc, go to www.himalassociation.org.



On the way up

Pushing the boundaries



Karwendelhaus is a lodge in the mountains north of Innsbruck in Austria, and as the sun settled down in the alpine valley to the west, I scribbled the concept of Himal on a notepad. That is essentially where Himal was born, back in June 1986, as a Himalayan magazine.

It has always been a struggle, and it is a struggle still, to bring out a magazine that seeks to define new boundaries for journalism by going 'regional', where there is no loyalty base to provide foundational support. This is why readers over the years have found Himal experimenting with content layout and frequency. It might have been disconcerting, but we have always been forgiven by readers who know what we have been up against in putting out a magazine that seeks to define a regional journalism that is idealistic yet hard-headedly non-romantic.

Returning to New York where I was working at the United Nations, I found my spouse Shanta more than willing to move back to Nepal with the magazine, just as soon as her PhD was defended. I took leave and prepared the first issue, which came out in May 1987. To publish the magazine, I sought the help of my brother Kunda, then editor of InterPress Service, based in Colombo. The prototype issue of Himal was published at the Sarvodaya Press in that city.

The subsequent issues of Himal were laid out with the help of a first-generation pagemaking software called Byline. Layout was done by Shanta and a friend from the UN who lived in Brooklyn, Robert Cohen. Many a dawn was brightening the sky east of the Brooklyn Bridge as we headed back to Manhattan after all-night layout sessions.

Now headed back to being a monthly magazine of Southasia after a hiatus as a bimonthly, the credit for having brought Himal this far goes in large measure to the hundreds of writers who have graced these pages for nearly two decades. But even more so, it is the associates and editors who invested themselves in Himal who have 'made' the magazine.

Himal was based in Kathmandu after 1989, and the editorial associates who made the magazine work with

its special blend of long, reported articles and deep analysis included Kesang Tseten, Manjushree Thapa, Manisha Aryal and Deepak Thapa. We might then have evolved into a glossy coffee-table periodical of the Himalaya, but in 1996 we opted instead to take another pioneering challenge – tackling Southasia.

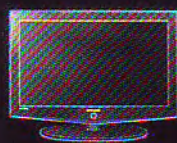
It was never easy, but by then we had a core group of Southasian friends who understood both the near-foolhardiness of the attempt and the importance of doing it and 'literally pushing the boundaries'. Afsan Chowdhury of Dhaka came on board during an intense discussion in Bhoorban, near Murree in Pakistan. The raconteur Manik de Silva of Colombo warned at the Pearl Intercontinental in Lahore how difficult it would be, but began contributing his irresistible writings. Beena Sarwar and Mitu Varma, from Punjab and Punjab originally, have stood by Himal through thick and thin now for a decade. Jehan Perera from Colombo and Rajashri Dasgupta came later, also to become 'Himalers'. Thomas Mathew provided editorial backbone during a time when the crisis of empty coffers threatened to undo years of toil, and when the editor also had actually broken his back.

The fight is not over, but Himal has the formula, it has the energy, and we are at long last beginning to understand the market as well. As we go monthly and seek more sales and subscription, we hope not to jettison our irreverent streak, which you may have occasionally noticed. As we make Himal more readable, we will not lose sight of our mission – fine writing and good journalism for the critical thinkers of Southasia.

These years have passed by, as they say, 'just like that'. I had salt-and-pepper hair when Himal started, and now am all silver. Hopefully, the magazine will institutionalise before baldness sets in. But like the Edelweiss of the Austrian Alps, Himal will bloom and grow forever. There is no doubt about that. The time of blood and sweat is over. Now all that is left is creativity.

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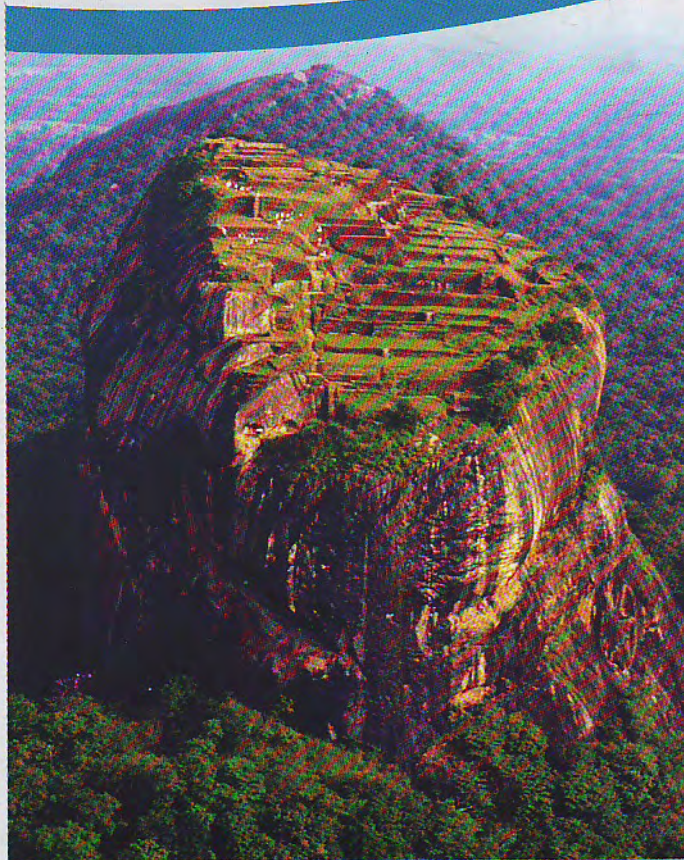
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