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HIMAL SOUTHASIAN

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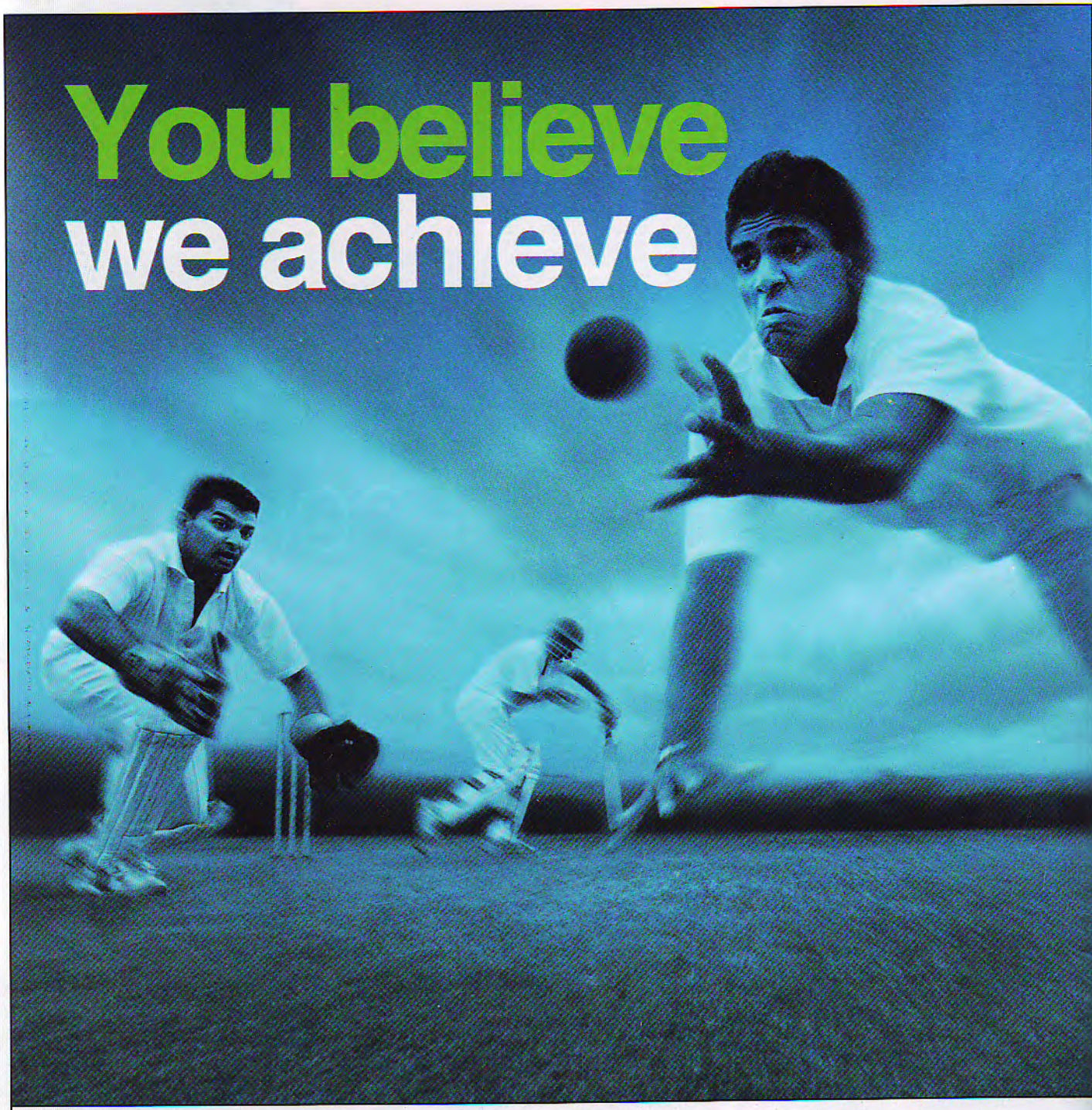

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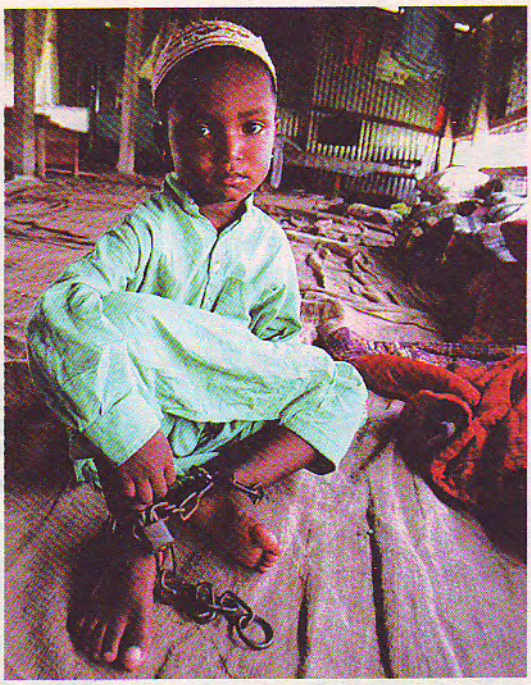
Unshacking of Bangladesh

The cover image of this issue shows Arafat, 7, confined for having run away from a madrasa in Narayangonj, 20 km from Dhaka. This issue of *Himal* looks at the great promise of Bangladesh, which has been shackled by low-grade political competition, Dhaka-centrism, top-to-bottom corruption and a cynicism that seems to emerge from the deltaic mud. But we know that Bangladeshis are made of the stuff of great nations, and that the country is doing far better than anyone had expected in 1971. And that whether or not the upcoming January general elections provide the release, Bangladeshis are ready to break free of their shackles to make their country work for them.



I-M-B-Akash

Vol 19 No 5

HIMAL SOUTHASIAN

August 2006 | www.himalmag.com

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Kanak Mani Dixit

Assistant Editor
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Design
Kiran Maharjan

Web
Bhusan Shilpakar
Roshan Tamang

Administration
Sunita Silwal

Subscription
Kabita R Gautam
subscription@himalmag.com

Sales
Santosh Aryal
Shahadev Koirala
info@himalmag.com

Himal Southasian is published by
The Southasia Trust, Lalitpur, Nepal

Office address
Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal
Mailing address
GPO Box: 24393, Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel: +977 1 5547279
Fax: +977 1 5552141
editorial@himalmag.com
subscription@himalmag.com
info@himalmag.com
www.himalmag.com
ISSN 10129804
Library of Congress Control number
88 912882

Image setting: ScanPro
Printed at: Jagadamba Press, Lalitpur, Nepal
+977-1-5547017/5547018

Contributors to this issue

Ali Riaz is an associate professor in the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University in the US.

Amardeep Singh teaches postcolonial literature at Lehigh University in the US. His book on 'literary secularism' will be out next year.

Anant Sudarshan is a graduate student in the School of Engineering at Stanford University. He is currently with The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) in New Delhi.

C K Lal is a columnist for this magazine and the *Nepali Times*.

Faisal Bari is an associate professor of Economics at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS).

Gautam Bhan is a queer-rights activist and writer based in New Delhi, a member of the Nigah Media Collective, and co-editor of *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*.

Greg Constantine is a photographer based in Southeast Asia currently at work on a long-term project documenting the struggles of stateless ethnic minorities. *www.gregconstantine.com*.

Hari Vasudevan is a professor in the Department of Modern History at Calcutta University.

Liz Philipson is at the London School of Economics and is a student of the conflicts in Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Mohamed Latheef is the founder of the Maldivian Democratic Party. He is currently living in self-exile in Sri Lanka.

Naresh Fernandes is editor of *Time Out Mumbai*.

Rajashri is a Delhi-based reporter.

Renana Jhabvala is national coordinator of SEWA and chairperson of SEWA Bank.

Rinku Dutta is a Scholar of Peace Fellow with Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP). She portions her time between Delhi and Lahore.

Rubana is studying for her Masters in Literature at the East West University.

Sonia Faleiro is a journalist and writer based in Bombay. Her first novel, *The Girl*, was published in 2006. More of her work can be viewed at *www.soniafaleiro.com*.

Sukumar Muralidharan is a visiting professor at the Nehru Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi.

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta is in the Indian Administrative Service, based in Bombay. Her writings can be found at *www.indianwriting.blogspot.com*.

Venantius J Pinto is an artist who moves between Bombay and New York.

Vijay Prashad is a professor and director of International Studies at Trinity College in the US. His most recent books are *Dispatches from Latin America: Experiments Against Neoliberalism* and *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (Leftwood Books).

Cover Image: G M B Akash

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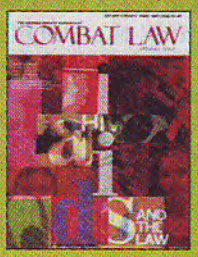

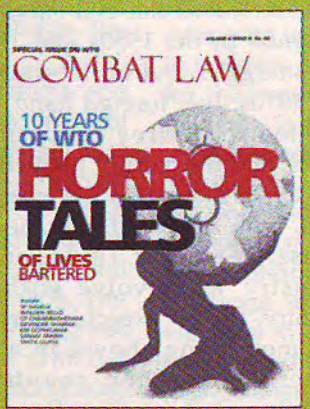

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Appan Menon was a journalist who began as an agency reporter and worked in the print and finally television in its early years. Anchoring the popular weekly programme called The World This Week for NDTV he followed International news and reports through an Indian prespective. Before joining NDTV, Appan had worked for The Hindu, Frontline, The Press Trust of India and United News of India. He had also spent some time covering the United Nations HQ for Inter Press Service. The AMMT was established in 1996 soon after his untimely death on 28 June 1996.

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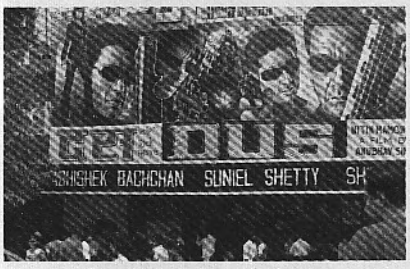
Tracking Bollywood

Mahmood Farooqui's article (*Bollywood and the middle-class nation, July 2006*) tracks important changes taking place in Bombay cinema. The author has been able to isolate some trends, but he seems to have missed the underlying dynamics that are guiding these changes.



The first part of the piece, about Bollywood becoming more professional, is true. Families are consolidating, diversifying and transforming Bollywood. But why is this happening? Here Farooqui forgets to mention the industry status accorded to Bollywood in 1998. The whole rise of structured production houses started just a year or two later. The fact that 'Bollywood' is now the 'Hindi Film Industry' has given professionals the confidence to enter, finance and develop this industry. As a result, the erstwhile murky world of film financing is fast receding.

The writer's second point, about films resting entirely on the power of stars, is a bit of an extreme view. The best of star casts cannot make a bad film work. A classic example is Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit in *Hum Tumhare Hai Sanam*. And sometimes the most modest of casts make a great film – *Iqbal*, for instance. The question is whether any movie has failed at the box office for the lack of a star, despite being well-written and well-directed. The answer is, probably not. Even films like *Maqbool* or *Hazaron Khwaishein Aisi* did well through word-of-mouth.

Farooqui has also made a point about the 'neo-real' being neo-liberal. But brushing aside the jargon, what has prompted the change? It is a cycle of demand and supply. Bollywood's success in the Indian diaspora is because the expats want to celebrate their culture, not mope about the poverty and exploitation. And that's why you need the movies that a Karan Johar makes. The same is true for the well-off Indian of India.

Indian films are a reflection of the mood of the country. Look at the nature of the villain in popular movies. It was the evil *munshi* or *zamindar* in the 1950s and 1960s, the smuggler and businessman in the 1970s, the 'foreign hand' that wanted to destroy India in the 1980s, and the corrupt politician in the 1990s. Now, it is the everyday man, with shades of grey, and, of course, the terrorist. The Indian film industry will evolve with the country. Do not expect hungry, ill-fed men being shown in abject poverty when the country is growing at 8 percent. Sure, the growth is not touching everyone, and there are additional problems. That's the reason a movie like *Apharan* or *Seher* or *Lajja* is still talked about. And watched and appreciated.

The reason you see people in Bhojpur and Moradabad make their own films is not because they feel marginalised. They make them today because they can! Money and technology is more easily accessible. What Farooqui fails to link this back to is the death of the *naach* or the *nautankis* in these places, which were the mediums through which the same stories used to be told, complete with raunchy songs and the bust-thrusts. Now local cinema is doing that job, and the *nautanki* troupes have moved operations from 50,000 villages to the 5000 villages in the interior.

Farooqui has written an interesting piece. What it lacks is a deeper analysis of the reasons for the changes he tracks.

Soumava Sengupta
Gurgaon, India

Salutes

My July issue of *Himal* just came through the post this morning. You deserve great credit for bringing out a magazine that is strikingly well-produced, and full of interesting and very informative articles. I learned a lot from them.

The 'Missing Daughters of Punjab' opened my eyes. I was aware generally of what was going on, but had no idea about the scale. The Sri Lankan articles made absorbing reading, and confirmed one of the rules of insurgencies: the longer they go on, the bloodier, nastier and dirtier they become, and the more difficult to stop. The article on 'Disaster Capitalism' should be required-reading for a host of people in the various capitals of Southasia. And if they cannot afford the time, they should read the fifty lines under 'Phantom Aid'.

Having been to Darjeeling a few times, I was totally engrossed by Niraj Lama's article on the truly awful Subash Ghisingh. Strangely enough, this was the article which resonated most strongly with me about Nepal. If the powerbrokers and thrusters in Delhi can callously entrust their own people to a despot like Ghisingh, they are quite unlikely to put the rural poor at the top of their priorities when working out their Nepal policy.

Moving back to a monthly issue must be a big challenge, but already the editorial team is up to it.

Samuel Conan
England

Bangladesh

Bangladesh the powerful

Without anyone really noticing, some time during the 1980s Bangladesh stopped being regarded as an international basket-case. This was an appellation that had also coloured the vision of its Southasian neighbours, and the image was that of a country devastated by cyclones, tortured by famine, impacted by floods and droughts, and inhabited by a mass public that was expected to be a philanthropic burden to the world, much like the African Sahel.

As Bangladeshis look to themselves with some woe in the run-up to January's elections, there might of course be some justification in the pessimism that seems to exude from the very earth. Yes, the low-grade rivalry between Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Sheikh Hasina Wajed's Awami League has all of us frustrated, and the rise of the Islamic right in politics is worrying. The all-pervading corruption in Bangladesh, from the highest of political circles to the depths of the criminal underworld, is nothing to be proud of. The continuing levels of poverty leading to labour migration, the incredible centralisation of power and wealth in Dhaka city, the statelessness of the Bihari community, the former Hindu presence now to be recalled only in place-names, the arsenic invasion affecting millions, the impact of the Ganga (Padma) diversion at the Farraka Barrage, the bureaucratic confusion over existing natural gas reserves, and the politicisation that drags down the relationship with India – all of these point to the massive challenges that face the Bangladeshi people.

But this is also a Bangladesh of successes, as achieved nowhere else in Southasia. The mega-NGOs, such as BRAC and Proshika, have succeeded in providing services to the mass population in a way that has taken place in no other neighbouring country. The innovation that is the election-period caretaker government is thought of as something to be copied. Whether it is the introduction of rural micro-credit or organic pesticides or traveling libraries, Bangladeshi NGOs take things to scale – whereas elsewhere in Southasia, at best we can achieve localised token successes.

The devastation from cyclones seems to have been largely curbed by the building of elevated shelters and evacuation procedures, something that the coastal regions of India could emulate. As for floods, due to the impossibility of building embankments in this deltaic country, unlike the upper-riparians the Bangladeshis are learning to live with the inundation, which has always been the course to take. In industry, though presently in sudden crisis, the Bangladeshi garments sector has shown its resilience, its ability to innovate and to deliver the highest quality products for the world market. The successes achieved by migrants in the West and elsewhere have begun to percolate back to the home provinces.

All in all, Bangladesh has shown Southasia and the world that it has the ability to rise to the challenge, to deliver a better quality of life to its population of 144 million. Now, it has to actually rise to that challenge, with the political class utilising the upcoming elections in January to achieve a level of maturity in keeping with the expectations of the population. A less-polarised political landscape will deliver bonuses in practically every area of the economy, in governance and in international relations. As far as India is concerned, with political stability will also come the ability to engage with New Delhi constructively, to be able to sell natural gas to the western market at a premium, and to open up Chittagong as the entrepot of the Indian Northeast. At that point, Bangladesh must be able to allow a rail corridor from the mainland to the Indian Northeast, and extract munificent concessions in the bargain.

Countries become truly powerful when their population size is matched by economic growth. In that calculation, Bangladesh is set to become a powerful member of the world community, once it deals with its difficult issues of malgovernance and confrontational politics. As such, we feel that this is the time and reason to wish Bangladeshis well, as they head for elections in a few months away. ▲

India

Your Move

'Terrorism' is not a term to be used lightly. The horrific blasts in Bombay on 11 July, which left almost 200 train commuters dead and several hundred more injured, constituted clear acts of terrorism. Bombay 2006, however, was not an isolated incident. In the past year itself, innocents in India have suffered due to the politics of violence in the bazaars of Delhi, the temples of Benaras and the fields of Doda.

In the wake of such dastardly attacks, there is a constant danger that the state and society might draw the wrong lessons. The US-led 'war on terror' is an example of the flawed approach that has polarised societies and created new recruitment grounds for terror outfits. Southasian states have fared no better. The political class exerts immense pressure on security


REUTERS

agencies to bust terror modules and instantly nab those involved in such attacks. They are egged on by a media that publishes endless commentaries on the 'soft' nature of the state that cannot prevent the killing of innocents. A defensive police establishment then arrests people on a mass scale, in violation of every tenet of law, breeding further discontent.

Six million passengers travel on the Bombay commuter trains every day, and checking every one is impossible. However, the intelligence network should have had its ear to the ground when the terrorist outfits were planning the operation and amassing explosives, a process that must have taken several months involving multiple actors. The Indian government is suggesting that the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba was involved in the attacks, assisted by the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). While the Lashkar claims to fight for the cause of *azadi* in Kashmir, SIMI is a banned radical outfit that aims to establish an Islamic state.

Re-examining motives

The espousal of a certain cause by these groups often prompts sections of the intelligentsia – especially those belonging to the left-liberal spectrum – to relate every act of militancy to the 'root causes' theory. This explanation is based on the premise that attacks would continue till grievances of discontented groups in, for instance, the Kashmir Valley, are addressed. This is a valid proposition, and more complete than other explanations, but is not totally adequate. Such a theory neither takes into account the political economy of the terror network and its close linkages with crime-lords, nor the realpolitik calculations of the leadership of these outfits. To believe that granting autonomy to the local government in Kashmir or creating softer borders between the two sides is the all-encompassing panacea to this problem would be over-simplification.

Indeed, militant groups know that accomplishing their stated goals – be they the independence of Kashmir or "freeing Muslims from the Hindu yoke" – is not possible by butchering civilians. If anything, terrorism only serves to harden the position of the Indian state, restricting the space for both engagement and negotiation for a possible solution to the dispute.

If they are under no such illusions, what is the real motive of these groups who have again and again targeted civilians? One part of the answer lies in the peace process between India and Pakistan. Although there is a certain stalemate that has marked the negotiations between the two sides over the past few months, the fact that the ceasefire is in place and channels of communication remain open is remarkable. Jihadi outfits realise that this process, if sustained, has the capacity to marginalise them politically. One of their primary aims is to ensure that the peace process collapses, which would enhance their importance and, in some quarters, legitimacy vis-à-vis the conflict that has engulfed the two states.

The decision by the Indian government to postpone the foreign-secretary-level talks with Pakistan, while perhaps understandable as a political necessity, strikes at the heart of the peace process. South Block must recognise that the Pakistan government could not have been involved in planning the attack, and continue the process of engagement. The fact that the attacks may have been planned on Pakistani soil is not enough reason to scuttle the process. For his part, Pervez Musharraf must act even more firmly on his commitment not to allow Pakistani soil to be used for anti-Indian activities. The onus is clearly on him to clamp down on the militant outfits, which have free run in Pakistan and are supported by sections of the military and intelligence agencies. Any failure to do so will only weaken the détente in Southasia, and help the terror outfits to attain their objective.

The second part of the answer lies north of Bombay, in the persona and politics of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. A person complicit in the massacre of Muslims, Modi is set to lead an anti-terror march in Bombay. His philosophy, like that of his ideological *parivar*, is simple: a Hindu is naturally patriotic, while a Muslim in India has to prove his nationalism. Extremists on both sides wish to build on precisely such sentiments of distrust. Indeed, the state-sponsored killing of Muslims in Gujarat is used by SIMI as a motivational tool to get new recruits.

And therein lies the other, three-fold purpose of these blasts. First, to polarise the communal situation. Second, to create a situation wherein Hindu groups put the loyalties of the Indian Muslim under the scanner. Third, once discontent sets in, to seek to recruit them into radical Islamist organisations. When security forces engulf Muslim ghettos and slums to arrest possible 'suspects', the government plays directly into the hands of the militants and their strategy.

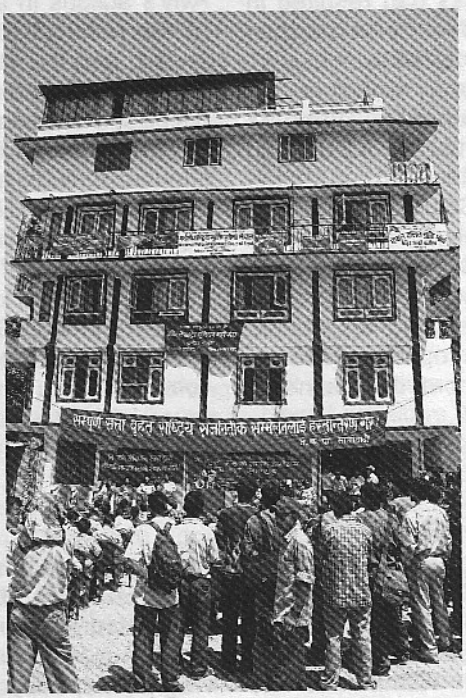
Unfortunately, this is not the last India has seen of terror attacks in this particular 'series'. What the state must do is strengthen its intelligence network and beef up security measures. At the same time, it must continue to engage in the peace process with Pakistan, for that is the most effective way to sideline those dedicated to terror. Most importantly, India's political and intellectual community must not allow fundamentalism to dominate the discourse during these troubled times.

Nurturing the Nepali makeover

It was never going to be easy to bring a violent insurgency into open politics. The immediate challenge in Nepal, which is engaged in such an experiment, is finding a mutually acceptable mechanism to deal with the military component of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). For now, the entire exercise is euphemistically termed *hatiyaar byabasthapan*, or 'management of arms'.

Mature politicians today find themselves maintaining a carefully calibrated stance vis-à-vis rebel leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda') and his colleagues, which could ultimately enable the rebels to lay down their arms. In doing so, the political parties are recognising the full extent of Maoist vulnerabilities. This assumes added significance at a time when the bravado of the rebels, amidst a honeymoon period with the Kathmandu civil society and media, gives the impression that they are in control of much of the polity.

Indeed, the Maoist leaders, who unabashedly claim to represent the *janata*, the people, have publicly demanded equal participation with the political parties in any future dispensation. This seems unrealistic, for whether they are indeed speaking for the people of Nepal will be tested on the day they contest elections. Till then, it is only the political parties who have democratically proven their right to represent. Let it be understood that the Maoist place at the table has mainly been assured by their ability to take the country back to war, and added their stated willingness to join competitive politics. While the editors of *Himal* are confident about the Maoist intentions, everyone else need not be.



Maoist HQ in Kathmandu Valley

The Maoists continue to have the run of much of the countryside. However, logic dictates that the subdued nature of the populace vis-à-vis the rebels can largely be attributed to the gun that remains in the hand of their cadre. This leaves open the possibility of a reaction, sometimes violent, by sections of the citizenry against the Maoists once they are seen to be losing hold of their gun. It is this fear of reprisal that probably explains to some extent the unwillingness of the cadre to disarm, and also the inability of their leaders to utter the word 'decommissioning'. It is high time to start a public information campaign in Nepal to nip in the bud any trend towards vigilante justice against rebel activists.

As we go to the printers, there is a sense of dilly-dallying among the Seven Party Alliance, and perhaps a hope that the Maoist organisation will collapse under its own weight in the meantime. That would be a dangerous gamble, as among other things it would lead to a fracturing in Maoist ranks and jeopardise the entire peace process. It is critical that the unified Maoist command structure remains in place, so that a confident leadership can lead the entire rebellion towards peaceful politics. This is a process that is rarely tried, and seldom succeeds, but in the Nepali context it might stand a chance.

The way ahead

Like any other nation-building exercise, the political transition in Nepal will be cumbersome and confusing. Even if the Maoists are currently unwilling or unable to lay down their guns, in late July a senior government minister threw down the gauntlet, precluding any possibility of forming an interim government until rebel arms are managed.

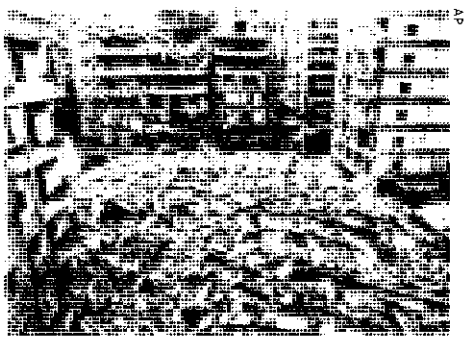
Even if it is not possible to agree with Mr Dahal's demands that the Maoist army and the Nepal Army be merged *in toto*, innovative means are required in the name of 'managing' the Maoist fighters. This would include inducting some fighters into an appropriate unit within the Nepal Army, sending the youngest cadres back to school, arranging for skills-training for those remaining, and ensuring that the householder Maoists are protected as they give up their arms. Simultaneously, the politicians and society leaders must ensure that the Nepal Army – plagued with weak and opportunistic leadership – is significantly downsized in the days to come, and its structures altered so that it will never again have political ambitions. The politicians who have been placed in the driver's seat by the People's Movement of April 2006 must beware the dangers of the ultra-right, even as they try to bring the ultra-left into the political fold.

Region

Israel and Southasia

Israel has done it again. And the governments of Southasia cannot even bring themselves to remonstrate with some volume.

In a display of brute force, Tel Aviv launched simultaneous offensives against innocent civilians in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. Under the pretext of rescuing three of its soldiers – one allegedly kidnapped by Hamas militants and two by the Hezbollah – the Israeli defence forces attacked the airport and nearby residential areas in Beirut, besides bombing bridges, power plants and government infrastructure in Gaza. At the time of writing, the attacks had resulted in the death of more than 250 civilians.



Hezbollah headquarters in Beruit

West Asia is an immensely complex region, with the conflict involving multiple actors, and analysts differ about the possible reasons for the present phase of confrontation. Some attribute it to the assertiveness of the Israeli defence forces, while others point to the role of Iran and Syria in encouraging Hezbolla's provocations. Irrespective of the precise roots of the crisis, certain facts remain indisputable. Israel's response is vulgar and disproportionate to the kidnapping of its soldiers. Furthermore, the manner in which it attacked homes, meted out collective punishment and tried to cripple life in Gaza and Lebanon is in violation of even the generally accepted tenets of war.

As West Asia ignites, all the governments of Southasia can do is look away in embarrassment. Despite the immense moral authority the present government in Kathmandu commands, it has seen fit to ignore the Israeli excesses in their entirety. Meanwhile, what of New Delhi? The state that prides itself on being the next Great Power is too concerned about defence cooperation with Israel to worry about the fate of civilian Palestinians and Lebanese. In the past few years, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has slowly awoken to the immense strategic utility of a partnership with Israel. Official contacts have been established, and Pervez Musharraf has mooted the idea of entering into a partnership with Tel Aviv.

As with New Delhi and Islamabad, Dhaka too has contented itself with one-off press releases criticising Israel. There has been no sustained criticism of Tel Aviv's actions in any of these capitals; the response of the political class in these countries has been muted; and the idea of Southasia taking the lead in mobilising international opinion against Israel is dismissed as loony idealism.

The countries of Southasia might think that they shouted enough for Palestinian self-determination in the 1970s and 1980s, and that they have done their share. But Palestinians remain a people deprived by a coming together of global geopolitics in favour of Israel. With so many millions of disenfranchised people within its own borders, Southasia neglects the Palestinians and supports Israel at its own peril. What goes around comes around.

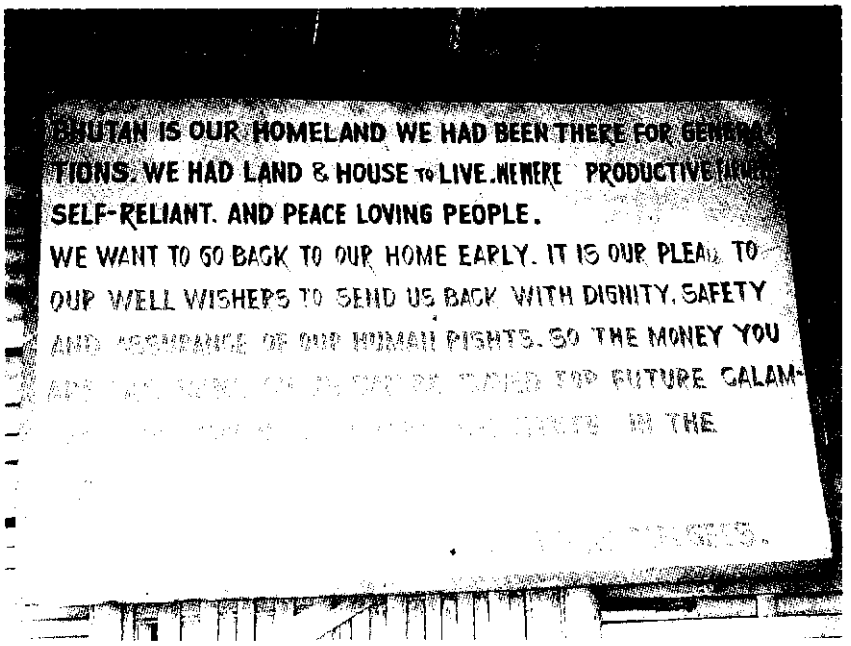
BHUTAN | NEPAL

Lhotshampa go home

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Kathmandu has officially broached the subject of third-country resettlement for the more than one lakh Lhotshampa refugees from Bhutan, who languish in seven camps in southeastern Nepal. For the first time ever, an officiating foreign secretary of the Nepali government has concurred that the idea can be considered for certain 'vulnerable' refugees, and will be allowing UNHCR to conduct a critical census of the camp's residents.

Ever since the Lhotshampa were discovered on the banks of the Mai River by a UNHCR official back in 1991, these refugees have been afforded international protection. Whereas other previous Nepali-speaking evictees from Burma and Meghalaya had to fend for themselves, the unpoliticised peasantry driven out by the government of King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Druk Yul have been provided food and shelter through the support of the UNHCR and the World Food Programme, supported by various governments and INGOs such as the Lutheran World Federation. But the support has begun to dip in recent years, with education of refugee children suffering, and their rations becoming more meagre.

Thimphu has continuously conducted a farcical yet eminently successful diplomatic exercise to keep the Lhotshampa refugees from returning. While succeeding in depopulating a significant portion of its southern hills of the Lhotshampa inhabitants, a massive roadblock arose with the quick recognition of the evictees as refugees by the UNHCR. But after that initial setback, Thimphu has, over a series of 13 talks, stalled any repatriation – sometimes proposing a meaningless refugee-categorisation exercise, another time



conducting a sample verification from which it withdrew on the excuse of disorderly conduct by the refugees. All the while, Bhutan has been aided by the continuous political turmoil in a Nepal saddled by commoner politicians new at diplomacy, a Maoist insurgency and, in the latest instance, a royal regime that for its own reasons had incipient sympathies for the Royal Government of Bhutan's actions against the Lhotshampa.

Fair game?

On the face of it, the call by the UNHCR representative in Kathmandu, as well as by the recently visiting UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner, for third-country resettlement seems a humanitarian response to a crisis that has gone on for too long. If Nepal and the international community are unable to do anything over 16 long years to provide a return to Bhutan with dignity (so the argument seems to go), should not the agency at least try to seek refuge elsewhere for the refugees? There are several questions that need to be asked on this score. Most critically, what do the refugees themselves want? While it would seem logical that many refugees would want to opt – like so many citizens of Nepal would, if asked – for resettlement to a European country, there are some interesting results in conversations with the refugees themselves. A recent series of interviews by the *Nepali Times* weekly also revealed that the refugees, whenever asked, all preferred to return to their homesteads in Bhutan.

There is also the question of how many of the displaced would really be welcomed by those Western states that have shown concern for the plight of the Lhotshampa. It must be kept in mind that the Lhotshampa have been eminently un-fashionable as refugees – just some more Nepali speakers in a sea of Nepali-speaking humanity of Southasia. Even UNHCR's own public information bulletins and pictorials have over the years tended to neglect the Lhotshampa of Jhapa and Morang districts, so it is not possible to take at face value the assurance of any significant number to be repatriated. The rest, supposedly, are to be settled in India and Nepal, with not even a tiny fraction being allowed back home to the hill terraces of Chirang, Sarbang or Samdrup Zonkhar (where many of the fields are said to have converted to jungle).

Against the on-the-face-of-it humanitarian argument of third-country resettlement is the fact that such a policy would provide success – a decade-and-a-half late – for King Jigme's policy of uprooting and making stateless a full seventh of his kingdom's population. He and his Oxford-accented bureaucracy would thus be rewarded for malice, cruelty and – there is no other word for it – racism. Even more importantly, this capitulation by Nepal and the international community would suddenly make vulnerable Nepali-speaking communities all over the Indian landmass, and in particular in the Indian Northeast, which has already seen more than one instance of evacuation. Indeed, Indian citizens of Nepali origin are today nervously eyeing the international – and Indian government's – response to the call for third-country resettlement. The message that would go to sons-of-soil movements in India (and Bhutan itself) is that the Nepali-speakers are fair game for cleansing.

Tri-lateralise

The initiative for the resolution of the Lhotshampa crisis must come from Nepal, the host country. Fortunately, today there is a democratic government in Kathmandu. Although a bit unstable because of the unfinished business of making peace and writing a new Constitution, that government must use all the energy and self-confidence it derives from the People's Movement to push the refugee issue to the front-burner. In the coming months, as some stability is achieved in the polity, the Kathmandu government must – for both humanitarian reasons and Nepal's internal security – engage Thimphu in a way that its attempts of subterfuge and prevarication will not succeed.

It is also time for Kathmandu to bring New Delhi formally into the picture. For a long time, the Kathmandu politicians have tried to shake Bhutan out of its obduracy by threatening to internationalise the issue, by raising it in the United Nations. It would be much more effective to 'Indianise' the Lhotshampa refugee matter. The fact is that India is an interested party in the Lhotshampa issue, because the refugees

used Indian territory – freely available to them – to enter Nepal. To return to Bhutan, the refugees would again have to cross Indian territory. Thus far, New Delhi has pushed back whosoever has wanted to march to Bhutan from Nepal, across the Mechi bridge at Pani Tanki. India is also an interested party, for the simple reason that it holds the key to the Bhutani gate.

It has been continuously unclear why India chooses not to use its considerable leverage on Thimphu to take back the refugees. We now believe that it is because of an extreme lack of consideration for the largest number of refugees presently existing anywhere in Southasia, outside the Afghans in Pakistan. The refugees would even be forgiven for believing that this neglect reflects a prejudice against Nepali-speakers. There are also those who believe that Bhutan's willingness to share its hydropower resource with an energy-starved Indian electricity grid has New Delhi holding off on an arm-twisting vis-à-vis the refugees, as also is the use of Thimphu as a steadfast supporter in international fora.

However, the most likely reason for this standoffishness on the Lhotshampa is the long-held Indian tradition of not acting against a regime in the 'sensitive' Himalayan rimland, unless the force of circumstances dictate some action. 'Don't fix what ain't broke,' has been New Delhi's attitude. Geopolitically that may be so, but there are more than a lakh broken lives whose deprivation will at some point stick on the diplomats and politicians of Delhi as well. Let them ask one question -- what would an M K Gandhi or Nelson Mandela have said about the Lhotshampa refugees?

Kathmandu must move to make the status quo untenable. It must ratchet up its public diplomacy and engage New Delhi in order to resolve the Lhotshampa refugee issue – not through any kind of resettlement, but through repatriation to the home country, with appropriate guarantees given for the continued stability of the Drukpa state. Nepal must therefore promptly trilateralise the issue, and seek Indian presence in a three-way meeting between Thimphu, Kathmandu and New Delhi. It is time to send the Lhotshampa home. Nobody should suffer this much for speaking the 'wrong' language, or wearing the 'incorrect' dress.

'Unforsaken: II Corinthians 4: 8-10'

This image by artist Venantius J Pinto shows a woman, a Sita perhaps, trapped under a net cast by a difficult force, Ravana perhaps. The possible mindset of this lady from Mithila as she is abducted and transported southward is encapsulated in the Bible in 2 Corinthians 4: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed." Amidst the deprivations and maltreatment faced by millions every day across Southasia – at times when even recognition of a tragedy is not forthcoming, much less an attempt to heal the wounds – there is still resilience among the people. That spirit remains due to a belief in the ultimate triumph of justice and sense of accountability. This is what we believe keeps Southasians walking on the road, even when pumelled by desolation and melancholy. There is every reason to look forward to another day, or the rising sun.

This is part of a regular series of *Himal*'s editorial commentary on artwork by Venantius Pinto. The original image of "Unforsaken" is with Amnesty International. Japanese woodblock print on Fukui Kozo fiber. Printmaker: Takuji Hamanaka.

NEPAL

Managing the armoury

KIRAN PANDEY

The conflict contractors that are parachuting down on Kathmandu to partake of the expected peace dividend tend to be derisive of the terminology used by the locals to define the path ahead: 'management of arms', *hatiyaar byabasthapan* in Nepali. But this is just the right term to use at the moment, when an insurgency is being cajoled into open politics. There are many highly motivated and agitated armed fighters out there, and in all fairness neither the Maoist leadership nor the political parties in government can utter 'demobilisation' or 'disarmament' without jeopardising the peace process. The blurred reference is best.

The need for 'management of arms' under UN supervision was agreed to at the time of a 12-point agreement achieved between the political parties and the rebels back in November 2005. But all political players felt this could not proceed unless the Indian government was agreeable to international disarmament experts coming through. New Delhi provided that signal when Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala came visiting in mid-June, after which it should have been all systems go.

But while a UN observation mission cooled its heels in New York, the government in Nepal suddenly went into low gear when it came to sending a letter asking for 'management of arms' expertise. Some say this was due to India, which wanted to see the terms of the letter. Others say it was the matter of whether to consult with the Maoists or to send the letter as fait accompli.

It transpired in early July that the letter had been sent by Prime Minister Koirala from his hospital bed (he had been taken in for a lung infection). When asked about the contents of the letter by the parliamentary committee formed to monitor peace talks, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister K P Oli said that the letter was in a suitcase in the hospital with the prime minister, and that he had not seen it. The committee sent Oli back, asking him to come with the letter, which he did. The committee, including Speaker of Parliament Subhas Nembang, then went all hush-hush, and said that leaking the contents would be embarrassing to the government. The letter was finally made public on 19 July. The problem seems to have been that the letter actually refers to decommissioning.

Independent of the letter, for all their insistence on UN involvement in the past, the Maoist leadership in early July suddenly started giving hints that such involvement was not required – that Nepalis could manage their arms themselves.

It seems that the initial welcome given to the rebels by Kathmandu's intelligentsia has convinced the Maoist leadership that they can turn the political situation to their advantage without 'arms management', strictly understood. It could also be the realisation that a UN accounting of arms and personnel would expose real strengths and weaknesses that the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) would rather keep under wraps. ■

BANGLADESH

Goodbye Tata ... for now

Citing his "extreme" frustration and disappointment, Tata Sons executive director Alan Rosling announced on 10 July that his company is suspending its plans for a USD 3 billion investment in Bangladesh. The Indian conglomerate's massive project – which included steel, coal, power and fertiliser plants – would have equalled the amount of foreign direct investment that Bangladesh has received in its 35-year history *(see Himal Nov-Dec 2005)*.

With July as the deadline for a final deal, the plan had faced increasingly stiff resistance from Bangladesh's local steel industry, as well as the larger business community. Rather than tackle the contentious issue, the increasingly frazzled government of Begum Khaleda Zia decided to push off a decision until after the January 2007 general elections. That seemed to have been the final straw for Rosling, who accused Dhaka of being unable to "go beyond politics".

Rosling vents

For now, the Dhaka Government would have everyone believe that the Tata deal is only sidelined, not abandoned. Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman, who has guided the negotiation with Tata Sons, said that the matter had merely been "postponed". He added, rather lamely, "Tata said they would come when the government invites." He may be right. A week after Rosling's outburst, Tata's resident director confirmed that his company would wait and see what took place in Bangladesh over "the next six to eight months". ■

SRI LANKA

Some-parties conference

Everybody knows by now that devolution and power-sharing is ultimately the answer to Sri Lanka's crisis, and yet it is so hard to 'get' to the position to talk about it. The latest attempt, in mid-July, was when President Mahinda Rajapakse formed a 13-member all-party committee, dubbed the Representative Committee on Constitutional Reforms, to explore options for constitutional changes. The move came after Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran urged Colombo to devise a credible plan for an end to the suddenly escalated ethnic violence.

But do you really have a committee when the key players of the political opposition are not there, and neither are the Tamil Tiger rebels? While the committee was originally to be made up of lawyers and intellectuals from all backgrounds, the first meeting went forward without those who may be said to be speaking for the rebels, nor the main opposition party, the United National Party, or even the main Tamil party, the Tamil National Alliance.

And do you have an effective committee when, at the very inauguration, you note that the unity and sovereignty of the country are not open to bargain? That might very well be true, but does it need stating at a critical period, when President Rajapakse needs to begin some sort of engagement with the rebels? Under such an atmosphere, how can the committee come up with "creative options" to resolving the current conflict, as the president directed?

Policy Planning Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said that the committee would be looking at the details of other countries' constitutions, including that of India. Well, if the idea is to look at Indian federalism, have things not gone a bit too far for that? And, in any case, is federalism in India really that good to write home about?

INDIA - PAKISTAN

More travel, more peace

Around 170,000 people traveled both ways between India and Pakistan in the first five months of this year, according to statistics released last month – "a significant increase" from the previous year, said the Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman.

So what's the breakdown? From January through May, nearly 84,000 people traveled between the two countries by air, 47,700 by train and 8000 by bus. In addition, nearly 28,500 people crossed the Wagah border by foot. Those who crossed the newly opened Line of Control by foot or by bus numbered around 800. The new Thar Express train, which began running in February between Khokrapar and Munabao, was by June carrying up to 800 people per week.

At the end of June, Pakistani authorities announced new visa arrangements for Indian citizens. Indian businessmen will now be able to get six-month multiple-entry visas, while pilgrim and tourist visas for Indians have been extended to 15 and 30 days respectively. Pakistani media hailed the decision to facilitate "people-to-people" contact, and called on India to reciprocate the new measures – and to start giving tourist visas to Pakistani citizens, which are not currently offered.

There are many, many fingers crossed on the two sides of the border that the Bombay serial blasts will not reverse this trend of heartening, increased India-Pakistan travel.

KASHMIR

Poonch to Rawalkot

In mid-June, Sonia Gandhi and Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee flagged off a long-awaited bus service between Poonch and Rawalkot, 55 km apart. This is the second cross-frontier bus link in Kashmir, after Srinagar and Muzaffarabad were connected last April. That first service, Gandhi noted, "helped us break the first wall between India and Pakistan. Poonch-Rawalakot helped break the second one." How many walls are there between these neighbours, anyway? The *Karvaan-e-Aman* bus will ply this traditional route just once every two weeks.

DAILY TIMES

INDIA - NEPAL

Aha, open border!

Good or bad, developments on one side of the open border between India and Nepal are quick to affect those on the other side. An eye hospital in the Nepal tarai is flooded with patients from Bihar, and there is always massive shopping in Bihar when the price of any commodity shoots up in Nepal.

The border town of Birgunj, south of Kathmandu, has seen it all. And now that the Patna government of Nitish Kumar has managed to visibly improve the law-and-order situation in Bihar, Birgunj residents are seeing the rampant criminality migrate northwards. Criminal gangs feeling the heat in districts like

East Champaran are now causing havoc in the neighbouring Nepali townships of Gaur, Malangwa and Rajbiraj, besides Birgunj.

Already suffering from the 'donations' demanded by the Maobaadi rebels, the Nepali businessmen say they are extremely distressed, and well they might be. Chhote Lal Sahni, described as the 'kidnapping godfather' of East Champaran, was just one of quite a few busy weaving extortion rackets across the Nepal tarai.

There have been four kidnapping cases in Birgunj alone in recent months, with two of the victims released after paying a ransom of INR 10 million each. Two industrialists were seriously injured in a bomb blast engineered by Sahni's gang. Such was his daring, the godfather even used Nepal's radio network to his advantage, making calls to the local FM station to own up after each kidnapping case.

As a last straw, the Nepali industrialists placed their grievance with the Indian ambassador to Nepal, Shiv Shanker Mukherjee. Soon after, Sahni was nabbed – south of the border by the Bihar police.

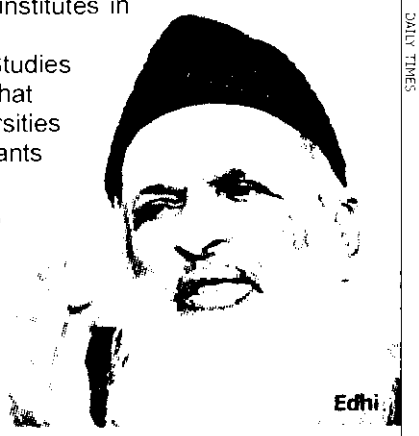
The lesson from the episode: in the case of an open border, in the absence of equivalent levels of law and order, criminals will flow to the side that has poorer governance. It used to be Bihar. For now, it is Nepal. ✻

INDIA / PAKISTAN

Pakistan studies, India studies

"There should be no visa and passport restrictions" between India and Pakistan, renowned social worker Abdus Sattar Edhi thundered in Karachi in mid-June, addressing a newly established Bombay-Karachi education forum. The programme, to be headed by professor Tauseef Ahmed Khan, will facilitate crossborder exchanges of students, teachers and faculty between educational and research institutes in India and Pakistan.

When the talk turned to 'Indian Studies departments', it became apparent that there were none in the many universities of Pakistan. The Pakistani participants agreed to work towards the establishment of some. Meanwhile, the Indian side patted themselves on the back for already having five departments of Pakistani Studies – evidently feeling that five was enough.



DAILY TIMES

Edhi

The new education forum was part of an ongoing exchange programme between the two financial capitals organised by the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA), an organisation that confounds sceptics by relentlessly using media as a wedge to introduce all manner of issues between India and Pakistan. Other initiatives on the anvil are said to include the swapping of technology, medical students, media-related information and expertise on issues of urbanisation and commerce.

That Bombay and Karachi are talking rather than New Delhi and Islamabad gives rise to some hope that something lasting might actually come of this exchange promoted by SAFMA. ✻

NEPAL / TIBET

Tibet secret

After months of rumour, it finally surfaced in the reinstated Nepali Parliament – a secretive plan to transfer to the United States thousands of "vulnerable" Tibetan refugees currently living in Nepal. The cat emerged from the bag when, during a meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Human Rights Committee, an MP asked whether rumours were true that the government was preparing documents "to send 5000 refugees to the US".

Foreign Minister K P Oli responded that Nepal has recently restarted issuing travel documents to Bhutani refugees, and "they are also being given to Tibetan refugees on humanitarian grounds and in special cases." He hastened to note that, "It is not that we are granting travel documents to illegal Tibetan migrants."

The cautious qualifications were required because of Beijing's sensitivities towards the Tibetan refugee issue, which the earlier Gyanendra regime had sought to pander to by, among other things, closing down the Kathmandu office of the Dalai Lama, set up to look after refugee affairs.

Despite Oli's guarded comments, the matter has enraged Chinese officials, who will not object to Tibetan refugees in India but who take particular pleasure in rubbing Kathmandu's nose in the mud on the self-same matter. China has consistently maintained that there are no Tibetan refugees in Nepal, only illegal migrants. As *Himal* went to press, Beijing was said to be despatching Vice-Foreign Minister Wu Dawei to Kathmandu to indicate its displeasure. Kathmandu is supposed to tremble at the thought.

Meanwhile, little is known of the issue that touched off the controversy. The Tibetan government-in-exile in

Dharamsala confirms that a plan to evacuate the refugees to the US exists, but they will not say more. Refugee representatives in Kathmandu claim to know even less. The US embassy is keeping mum. The Tibetans wait. ■

BURMA

Changing of the guard?

Reports out of Burma point to a resolute move on the part of the ruling junta to reinvigorate the country's flagging power structure and economy. Eight deputy ministers and a Supreme Court judge have been relieved of their positions, and observers have noted that additional cabinet changes appear to be in the works – including the possible resignation of General Than Shwe, the junta head.

Shwe: putting his feet up?

Programmes of economic liberalisation appear to be in the pipeline, coming in the wake of a crackdown on corruption in Rangoon.
A new Constitution is also said to be in the works.

The changes and rumours of change are thought to be an attempt simultaneously to strengthen and soften the Rangoon regime ahead of some constitutional adjustments. Even if this does not really mean a loosening up of the regime, the military leaders do appear ready to hand over power to a younger generation. Such a move, however, would seem merely to have the function of extending the military's hold on Burmese society and its prospects.

Aung Sang Suu Kyi, in the meantime, spent her 61st birthday under house arrest in mid-June. ■

PAKISTAN / AFGHANISTAN

Refugee, Taliban and Pakistani

Islamabad has appealed for international funding to allow the remaining 2.6 million Afghan refugees currently in Pakistan to return home. It will not be cheap, with the cost of the exercise hovering at about USD 5 billion.

Adding a twist to sweeten the pill for the Western donors, Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri added that, together with the departure of the refugees, an important staging ground for Taliban militants would be eliminated.

UNHCR

Going home

According to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 100,000 Afghans have voluntarily left Pakistan thus far this year. Although these numbers are down from previous years, those going back are being described as more highly skilled than previous returnees.

Which is why it is a shame that the rate of return has suddenly dipped as the Taliban has stepped up its violent activities inside Afghanistan. Relations between Kabul and Islamabad have become frayed as a result, with the latter surely wanting the refugees to be repatriated.

Since UNHCR began its repatriation operation (its largest ever) after the fall of the Taliban, more than 2.8 million Afghan refugees have returned home. It is said that those most desperate to return have already done so, leaving behind a group that will cost more to repatriate and reintegrate into Afghani society. Which explains the high price tag. ■

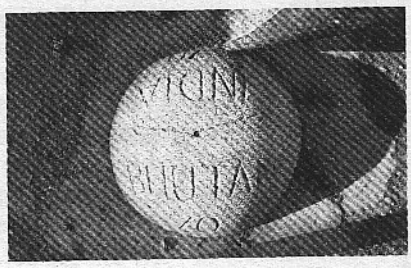
BHUTAN / INDIA

Bhutan: frontier matters

The demarcation of Bhutan's border with India is said to be nearly complete. Although the borders were originally defined back in 1963 and ratified in 1971, several boundary pillars were found missing in 2001 and the process was restarted. By last December, only eight strips of territory remained pending, on the Arunachal Pradesh and Assam borders. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has announced that these remaining segments would be finalised by the end of 2006.

In the meantime, looking to the north, Thimphu's National Assembly legislators have been airing worries about the Tibetan borderlands. In recent years, the Chinese have constructed a number of roads up to the Bhutani frontier, and some are thought to actually traverse the defined border. "For a small country, losing even a small piece of land would be a big loss," said one official.

All border matters are supposed to be cleared up in advance of the unveiling of Druk Yul's new Constitution in 2008. While Thimphu does not have diplomatic relations with China – out of deference, it is said, for India – the Bhutanis are on tenterhooks about



the goings-on across over the Himalayan rampart.

The 2003 announcement by Delhi to open up the Nathula border point (*see related story later in this issue*) for India-China commerce saw fruition on 6 July, and Thimphu is extremely alert to the potential impact on its own economy and prized sense of security. The Chumbi Valley, through which the route between Siliguri, Gangtok and Lhasa passes, lies across Bhutan's western border.

Thimphu believes that Nathula's opening will greatly increase pressure within Bhutan to reopen the traditional trade routes with Tibet. Bhutan would want to have more to do and say with China, and before long India may have to accede to this Druk desire. ■

PAKISTAN

Waziristan ceasefire

Unbeknownst to much of the rest of Southasia, fierce clashes have continued for several months in both North and South Waziristan. However, even as anti-Taliban fighting continued to escalate across the border in Afghanistan, with 80,000 Pakistani troops stationed along the frontier, a one-month truce was called by militants in North Waziristan in late June. This was meant to allow tribal elders to negotiate a settlement with the Islamabad government.

The fighting was scaled down abruptly with the mid-June announcement of a tribal *jirga* called by the government. The jirga, which is made up of 47 members, demanded that the government dismantle new military checkposts, reinstate fired local officials, pay out withheld salaries, release innocent persons suspected of militant ties, and order soldiers back to their bases to make way for tribal security personnel. Days later, the government released 50 tribal men from detention.

Three weeks after it was announced, despite two instances of militant violence, the new governor of the Northwest Frontier Provinces called the ceasefire the first major step towards restoration of peace in Waziristan. Despite the seeming success, however, the ceasefire period had yet to be extended. ■

THE MALDIVES

Over to the people

Could control just possibly be slipping away from Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, president for nearly 28 years? It may well be, if recent actions of the Maldives' Special Majlis (Constitutional Assembly) are any indication.

Amidst discussion of constitutional reforms, during a mid-June debate on the country's future ruling structure, an impasse in the Special Majlis on the choice between a presidential or parliamentary system led to the body voting to go in for a referendum. The people of the Maldives are now set for the first such exercise in nearly four decades. The vote was carried by an overwhelming majority opting in favour of the referendum – including half of the ruling Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) members in the assembly.

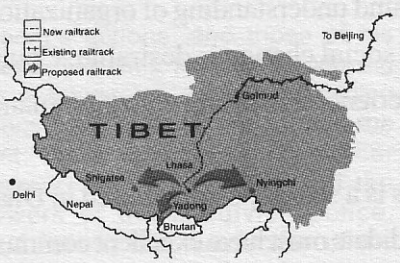
The opposition favours a parliamentary system with a ceremonial head of state, while DRP members had reportedly been instructed by President Gayoom to block any such possibility.

In preparation for the referendum, three weeks later the DRP again broke with the president, releasing a leaflet urging voters to support a "full" presidential system. This is in direct opposition to the 'hybrid' system that Gayoom has proposed, which would include an elected president as well as a prime minister appointed by the president. The opposition says that whatever the referendum's result, it will be a setback for the longtime president-autocrat. Although an exact date has not been set, opposition leaders suggest a vote could take place as early as the end of the summer. ■

TIBET

Yet another Tibetan frontier

There was still a week to go before the spanking new Qinghai-Lhasa railway was set to open, and Beijing was already announcing three extensions to take the railway in the high plateau to the next frontier. The new projects, which will cost several billion dollars and take close to a decade to complete, will connect Lhasa to three other Tibetan cities – Yadong in the south, Nyingchi in the east and Shigatse in the southwest.



What this indicates is that Beijing is going full steam ahead with its plans to convert Tibet into a new frontier of economic and natural resource exploitation. Tibetan political activists have feared that the Golmud-Lhasa line would permit the Han infiltration of the Tibetan towns to extend to the countryside.

On another plane, the building up of a railway network in Tibet would seem to enhance possibilities of commerce between it and South and Central Asia. Those in the know say that this has indeed been Beijing's plan since 2001. ■

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The Country Director will have a proven track record in leading and managing institutional development programs and have experience of either being part of social movements or being an active member of the civil society. S/He will adopt empowering management practice to expand and deepen our partnerships, programmes and accountability in Bangladesh. Actively committed to gender equity, our Country Director will be value driven and a team player possessing high level of people related skills. S/He will have the perspectives and competencies for rights-based and policy advocacy work: fundraising and donor relations: regional and international linkages and a sound understanding of organizational development. Familiarity with local strategies for poverty eradication and social change is desirable. Courage of conviction in taking public stands against issues of injustice and experience of dealing with governance boards would be an asset.

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Whilst all applicants will be assessed strictly on their individual merits, qualified women are especially encouraged to apply.

Roadmap to nowhere

President Gayoom's new reform plan is not very reform-minded.

BY
MOHAMED LATHEEF
IN EXILE IN COLOMBO

In the sandy atolls of the Maldives, civil and political rights have traditionally been viewed as a privilege bestowed by a benevolent ruler, rather than as inalienable rights of the citizenry. Nonetheless, under intense internal and international pressure that was heightened last year in particular, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was forced to make some concessions. This culminated in the announcement of the much-touted Roadmap for the Reform Agenda on 27 March 2006. Since that time, however, the 'reforms' have remained on paper, while systematic, targeted violations of constitutionally guaranteed rights have increased sharply.

In the past few months, the constitutional right to freedom of assembly was severely curtailed by violent actions against peaceful protestors by both the police and pro-government thugs believed to be in the control of Police Commissioner Adam Zahir. Protestors have been brutally beaten, arbitrarily arrested and charged with "disobeying police orders" or "obstructing police work". Detainees facing trial are typically brought in through the backdoor of the courts and summarily sentenced, without recourse to defence procedures. The police and the pro-government thugs have made a habit of roaming the streets, storming houses and indiscriminately arresting family members and supporters of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). Such actions have included the detention of a girl and her four-year-old sister.

Both the United Nations and the European Union have strongly condemned the Male government for the mounting severity of its actions. While President Gayoom, under international pressure, did allow the registration of independent newspapers and magazines earlier this year, media work has been severely hampered through intimidation, arbitrary arrests and spurious charges. Almost half the staff of the opposition-run *Minivan*, the widest circulating daily, are either in jail or have court cases pending against them. Independent journalists in general face similar persecution, including death threats and intimidation.

'Christianity and communism'

Judging from the nature of laws that were passed even just during the two months following the introduction of the Roadmap, it appears clear that Gayoom's intent is to maintain his autocratic rule as long as possible. One piece of legislation, purportedly designed to 'strengthen' press freedoms, in fact gives legal backing to attempts to stifle the media. A second law, giving higher level of immunity to parliamentarians, was refused ratification by Gayoom on the grounds that it would strengthen opposition MPs. The president strongly rebuked his own party members for voting in favour of the bill.

One of the reforms previously touted by the president stipulated that both the Parliament and the Constituent Assembly (the Majlis and Special Majlis, respectively) would include only elected members. But when the MDP agitated in support of this proposal, by calling on Gayoom to remove the 29 members appointed by him to the Special Majlis, he balked. His argument was that such a step would pave the way for the MDP to introduce "Christianity and communism" to the Maldives.

Other 'innovations' are just as misguided. The newly introduced system of bail empowers the police more than it does the judiciary. The police now have the power to determine the amount of bail to be imposed, and have discretionary powers to determine whether the bail has been violated.

The most draconian of all of the newly introduced legislation, however, is the Presidential Decree regulating freedom of assembly, passed in mid-May. This empowers Police Commissioner Zahir to decide whether citizens can partake in any protest or gathering. These new powers were almost immediately put to use, when over 200 demonstrators were arrested during a week of protests in the capital.

President Gayoom's actions, and those of his police, belie two particular claims: those of introducing greater separation of powers, and of strengthening competing institutions such as the judiciary and the legislature. In fact, these new laws only further strengthen the power of the executive and the discretionary powers of the Maldivian police. Gayoom's actions following the introduction of the Roadmap make it clear that, despite the widespread demand for reforms, he has no intention of diluting his powers, or of ushering in a more democratic system of governance. The people of the Maldives continue to be deprived of their constitutionally guaranteed civil and political rights. Under President Gayoom, the Maldives will remain a police state, irrespective of rhetoric about 'roadmaps', 'reform' or 'democracy'.

A break in the ridgeline

Despite plenty of false starts, it finally happened: the trading pass of Nathula was reopened after four decades. Congratulations are in order. Let us now have some trade.

By **PRASHANT JHA**

ASHIT RAI

In the bustling main bazaar of Gangtok, ensconced in a small shop, lies a slice of history. Sanjeevani Medicine is the kind of store one would instinctively walk past, one among the row of outlets that punctuate MG Road. But its proprietor is quite different from the other retailers in this line.

Frail and bespectacled, 78-year-old Ridh Karan is not your normal pharmaceutical shopkeeper. From a Marwari family that settled in Sikkim more than a century ago, Karan is among a few still alive who were a part of the erstwhile kingdom's thriving economy during the 1950s. Those were the days when trade with Tibet, through Nathula, was still in operation, forming the backbone of the eastern Himalayan economy. Indeed, archives suggest that 80 percent of Sino-Indian trade was conducted on this route, linking Calcutta and Siliguri to Shigatse and Lhasa via the Chumbi Valley.

Karan was an active trader, and traveled annually to Tibet from 1953 to 1959. Looking out at the busy street, he says wistfully, "It used to take us two days on muleback to get to Yadong in Tibet, with a stopover in Chhangu ... We didn't just engage in commerce at the border. I had a shop in Yadong, where we took commodities which were in demand on that side." These included rice, lentils, clothes, petrol, kerosene, even motor vehicles and Rolex watches. In return, the main items of import ranged from raw wool to Chinese silk.

The presence of Chinese troops in Tibet, the Dalai Lama's escape, and the increasing tension between India and China gave Karan a sense of the troubled times ahead. In 1959, the very year of the Dalai Lama's flight south, he closed his shop and decided to focus on retail within Sikkim. This political astuteness saved him from economic ruin. In the wake of the Sino-Indian War of 1962, Nathula was shut down, leading to the collapse of several large trading houses. The mule trains stopped plying. And Sikkim was left with little more than tales of trade and the wealth of Tibet, as narrated by misty-eyed traders.

At 14,400 feet

It has taken New Delhi and Beijing 44 long years to let the border communities interact once again. On 6 July

this year, Nathula was re-opened for trade amidst great fanfare. At 14,400 feet above sea level, Sikkim Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling and the Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), C Phuntsok, cut a ribbon, putting into effect an agreement signed between the two countries in 2003. The opening had been postponed once already, and there had been doubts about whether the ceremony would ever happen. It was only a fortnight before the inauguration that a high-level Indian delegation finalised the modalities with their counterparts in Lhasa.

Nathula was windswept, rainy and freezing on the morning of the opening. With a curious medley of Elton John, Punjabi Bhangra and soft instrumental music in the background, people from both sides mingled happily. The absence of a common language made conversation difficult, which was possibly why everyone, including government officials and army officers, focused instead on posing for photographs. This was a media jamboree, with television crews in impressive turnout. As a local newspaper had put it the day before, there were more journalists in Nathula than traders.

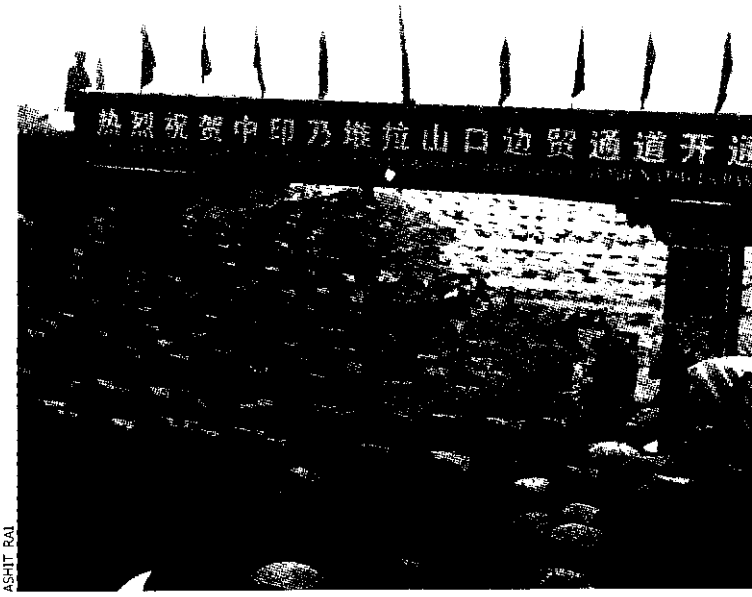
Not that the traders were any less enthusiastic. 100 elated Sikkimi men and women proudly showed their trade licenses, which would enable them to journey across the border and up to the Renqinggang trade mart 15 km away. 89 Tibetan traders had been granted similar passes, which made them eligible to come over to the Sherathang border mart on the Sikkimi side, which, apart from trading facilities, houses the world's highest cyber café and bank ATM. Surendra Kumar Sarda, president of the Sikkim Chamber of Commerce and Industry, was gleeful: "We have been looking forward to this day for years. This will open the door for prosperity in Sikkim."

The enthusiasm went beyond business leaders and government officials. An emphatic B Parida, a hotel owner in Gangtok, asked, "What were they thinking till now - that terrorists would cross the pass if it was opened? This should have happened a long time back."

Chamling, who had long pressured New Delhi to agree to the re-opening, appeared satisfied that it was Sikkim citizens who would stand to benefit more than others. But, he added, "The people in Sikkim must work hard and engage in active manufacturing and trade, harnessing our natural advantages. We have entered the global market now, and must be competitive." The Nathula commerce on the Indian side is initially restricted to Sikkim residents, and vehicles that make the 56 km journey from Gangtok to Nathula need to be Sikkim-registered.

Realpolitik in Beijing

To find the cause of Nathula's opening, one must look not to the provincial capitals, Gangtok and Lhasa, but to New Delhi and Beijing. Following almost three decades of open hostility, India and China succeeded



ASHIT RAI

in carving out relatively cordial ties after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Beijing in 1988. Through the 1990s, these ties were strengthened through several high-level visits, treaties and the opening of border trade between Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh. Simultaneously, India-China bilateral trade boomed, and there was some progress on the boundary disputes between the two countries.

It was in 2003, during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China, that New Delhi and Beijing agreed to resume trade across Nathula. The significance of the step lay in China's implicit recognition of Sikkim's merger with India - a fact that Beijing had consistently refused to accept before then. For its part, India reiterated its recognition of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet.

In terms of policy calculations regarding Nathula, analysts point to a multi-pronged, long-term Chinese strategy. Even as eastern China's 14,000 km-long coastline has participated in an economic boom, the western region, with its 3500 km of land frontiers, has not reaped the benefits of the boom. Mahendra Lama, of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi and author of an authoritative study on trade across Nathula, notes, "The major driving force for China to open its border for more trade and investment is the need to bring its own periphery provinces, mainly the western region, into the national mainstream."

Beijing's calculation also revolves around its broader strategy vis-à-vis Tibet. China last month inaugurated the Golmud-Lhasa rail link, which connects Beijing directly to the Tibet Autonomous Region. The strategy of opening up Beijing in the northeast and Nathula in the southeast seems aimed at promoting economic growth that will once and for all close the chapter on any meaningful Tibetan autonomy that the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile in Dharamsala demands. More prosperity is seen as a

"Delhi has posed unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and has been reluctant to release funds for infrastructure. But economic logic will ensure that Nathula trade here will take off."

surefire way of subduing Tibetan nationalism, which is where Nathula's opening finds its uses for Beijing.

Even as the opening of the Lhasa railway has some Indian traders excited about the possibility of greater market access in the future, the line to Golmud has caused consternation among Tibetans in exile. The fact that Nathula opened on 6 July, which also happened to be both the Dalai Lama's birthday and 'World Tibet Day', may have been a coincidence. But it has only served to reinforce the impression regarding Beijing's hard-line stance on the issue of Tibetan autonomy, and India's acceptance of China's position.

Interestingly, Tibetan activists are not critical of the possible impact of the re-opening of the pass itself, given that it marks restoration of a trade link that preceded the Chinese takeover of the 1950s. In fact, they argue for even greater movement between the two sides. "This will only revive historic links, though it is important to be careful about the impact of trade on our environment. What we are more worried about is the rail link, which might facilitate further Han influx into Tibet," says Kasur Tenpa Tsering, the Delhi-based representative of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Activating the Nathula trade route is thus seen as a part of Beijing's broader strategy to stabilize Chinese frontiers. The opening of the pass could also add 'strategic depth' by giving China easier access to the Bay of Bengal. This would complement its control over the Gwadar port off Pakistan, and create, according to one analyst, a "new maritime security paradigm" for the country. Besides these strategic calculations, the sheer economic potential of Nathula would explain Beijing's interest, for the route could provide everything that the Chinese authorities have had to provide from the distant mainland to date. Production is today concentrated beyond the eastern frontiers of Tibet, and the cost of distribution is high; border trade could fulfil local demand at reasonable rates. More importantly, China also senses a future opportunity to access the billion-strong Indian market, even if the present infrastructural limitations make this a distant proposition.

Dilemma in Delhi

It is not clear if China's strategic thinking is matched by a similar long-term plan in New Delhi. For South Block, the single most important consequence of the Nathula re-opening seems to be China's explicit and seemingly irreversible acceptance of Sikkim as an Indian province. However, Lama believes that from initial scepticism, New Delhi bureaucrats have slowly awoken to the other purposes that Nathula's re-opening can accomplish. "Besides the strategic and economic gains, the Indian state can hold up the re-opening of the pass as an example to its other northeastern states about the benefits of maintaining peace," he notes. "Nathula can also provide a lesson on how border areas can develop."

At the same time, India has not yet been able to figure out what it really wants from the Nathula route. Would it be happy with a symbolic step, one with strategic meaning but little economic impact? Or is the central government looking at more definite gains? One policymaker admits, "It is true we have been hesitant about the way ahead, due to both security and economic considerations."

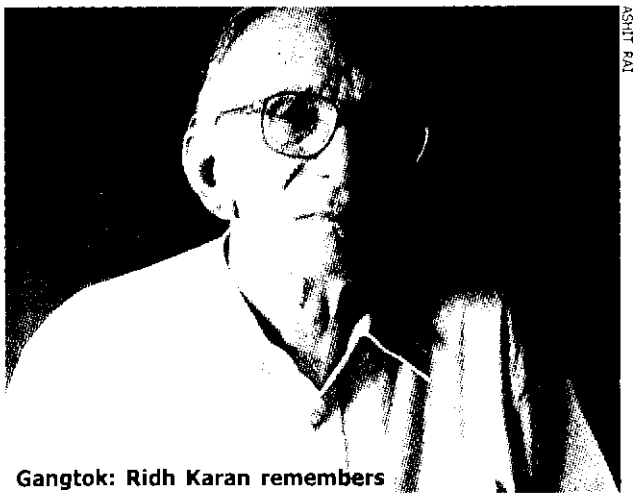
The security concern essentially stems from the cautious approach advocated by some senior officers in the Indian Army who have harrowing memories of the 1962 war. They express apprehension about expansion of the road up to the pass, because it would create a wide access for an invading force into India's interior. Younger officers, however, tend to disagree. A captain serving at Nathula says, "A healthy relationship based on trade and interaction between people is the best way to increase one's security."

The economic insecurity, meanwhile, is born out of the fear of Chinese goods flooding the market if trade is flung open beyond its present limitations. Nonetheless, there is a realisation in India about the inevitable economic engagement that lies ahead, and how Nathula could be used in this regard. Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran has said, "There is certainly the potential to develop this into a border trade crossing through which even normal trade can take place in the future."

The ambivalence of New Delhi's stand on Nathula, and how far it is willing to go, is a matter of acute concern in Gangtok. For this reason, Chief Minister Chamling spares no effort to thank every concerned ministry in Delhi for its support. Locals, meanwhile, voice apprehension about the intentions of the central government. "China has been far more flexible than India in terms of actual trade rules and procedures," says Pema Wangchuck, a prominent Gangtok journalist. "Delhi has posed unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and has been reluctant to release funds for infrastructure. But economic logic will ensure that Nathula trade here will take off."

For now, optimism

Things have not proven quite that straightforward, however. A fortnight after the opening of the pass, trading activity had yet to begin between the two



ASHIT PAL

Gangtok: Ridh Karan remembers

sides. The problem: the fact that Indian rules require traders to have an import-export code number. To get that code, however, it is essential to have a Permanent Account Number (PAN), issued by the national Income Tax Department. But Sikkimi residents are not issued this number, because the state does not come under the central taxation regime. It seems that in the innumerable meetings, workshops and awareness programmes in the run-up to the Nathula opening, the bureaucrats had forgotten to mention this requirement.

Gangtok traders are resentful that this formality has been waived at the two other India-China border trading points, at Lipulekh in Uttaranchal and Shipki La in Himachal Pradesh. Some believe that India has developed cold feet after seeing the Nathula route's potential, which far surpasses the limited trade possibilities at the other two points. But perhaps it is too early to hatch such theories. "This is a procedural matter – merely a reflection of the inefficient system we have in place. It will be sorted out," assures Lama.

The historic background of the trade link, geographical proximity to Calcutta and Lhasa, the efforts being made by the state government – all these give Nathula a distinctive edge vis-à-vis the other routes. But does it truly have the widely discussed economic potential? Modern trade is about multi-lane highways, high volumes and container traffic – none of which is currently in place in Sikkim. The only way to Nathula is through a narrow 143 km road from Siliguri, via Gangtok. Despite repeated promises, the central government has not yet released funds to improve the road across the difficult terrain. Some reports did suggest that INR 900 crore had been released for the purpose, but no official notification has been received in Gangtok.

Sikkim is currently allowed to export 29 products and import 15 others, including various livestock. While this is not exactly a recipe for high-volume trade, and while the state's weak industrial base does not help matters, the local business community is nonetheless convinced there is immense potential. Returning from Tibet after receiving orders for commodities, traders claimed that they had found an overwhelming response. Indeed, the challenge is to understand the needs in Tibet and capitalise on local strengths. On the import side, Sikkimis are allowed to purchase wool from their Tibetan counterparts, which in itself could reap rich dividends.

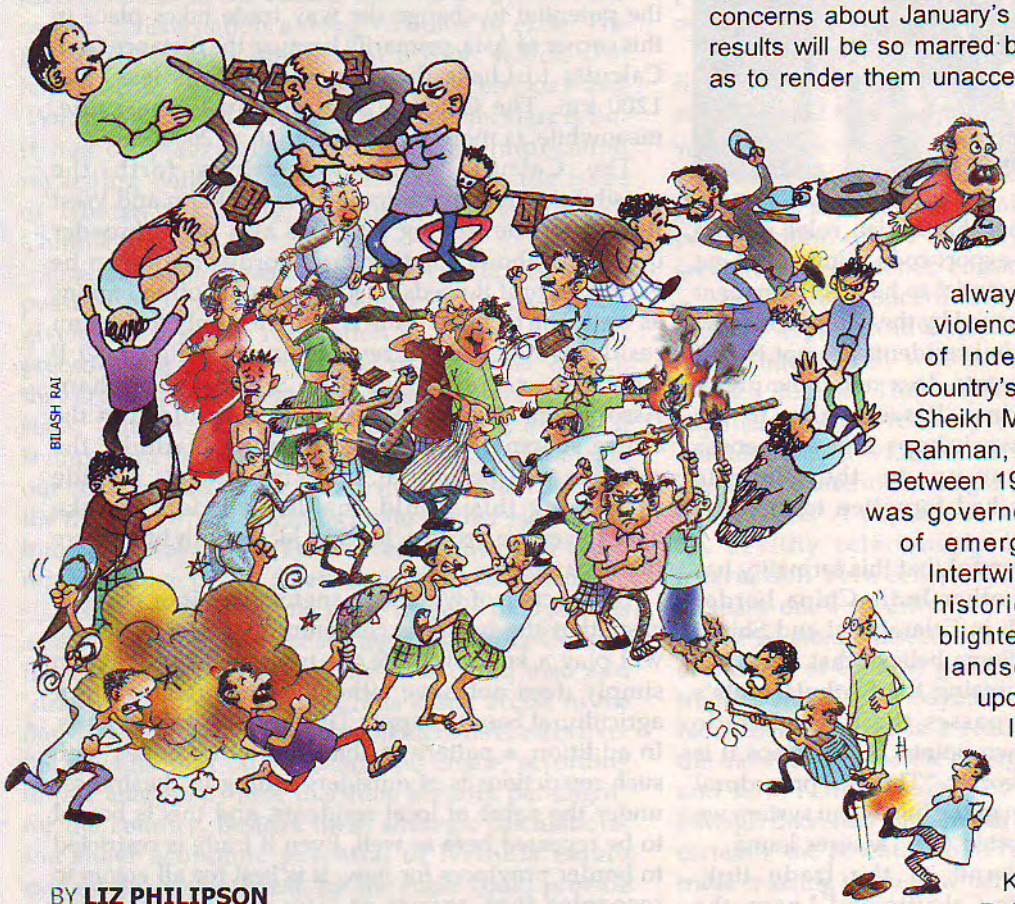
The optimism is also borne out by a glance at the map. A fully operational route across Nathula has the potential to change the way trade takes place in this corner of Asia, primarily because the distance from Calcutta to Lhasa through this route is less than 1200 km. The Calcutta-Kathmandu-Lhasa route, meanwhile, is more than twice that, at 2600 km.

The Calcutta dimension brings forth the possibilities of competition between Sikkim and West Bengal for the trading pie. This also raises broader questions about whether crossborder trade can be exclusive, or if it needs to accommodate other regions as well. The fact that trade is restricted only to Sikkimi residents has caused resentment in Siliguri. O P Agarwal, secretary of the Siliguri Merchant Association, says, "Unless Siliguri is included in the entire scheme of things concerning Nathula, the exercise will be partial." Sikkim officials confide that doing this would enable outsiders to take over the entire process, leaving locals with little more than crumbs.

Irrespective of whether Gangtok likes it or not, it is clear that the business community of North Bengal will play a key role once the trade picks up. Sikkim simply does not have either the manufacturing or agricultural base to supply Tibet on a sustained basis. In addition, a pattern visible from other zones with such restrictions is of outsiders setting up businesses under the name of local residents, and this is bound to be repeated here as well. Even if trade is restricted to border provinces for now, it is best for all actors to recognise that, sooner or later, a more inclusive framework is inevitable. The logic of Nathula trade is bound to go beyond Gangtok, and rope in Siliguri and Calcutta – not to mention Mongla in Bangladesh in the slightly extended future.

For the moment, the important point is that Nathula has re-opened. What is critical now is getting the route activated, and learning from the experience over the next few years – even as trade through the pass, both in terms of quantity and reach, expands to another level. More than anything else, it is the true power and enthusiasm of individual entrepreneurship that will drive Nathula trade. More than four decades after he last engaged in border commerce, the septuagenarian Gangtok businessman, Ridh Karan, understands this point well. With a glint in his eye, he says, "Do you think exporting dry fruits to Tibet is a good idea? I have just submitted my application for a trade license."

Corrupted democracy


BILASH RAI

BY **LIZ PHILIPSON**

Bangladesh's worsening problems are the result of systemic political failure. Even as anger mounts in the midst of pre-election jockeying, however, the truth of the matter is that little will change after Bangladeshis head to the polls in January. Regardless of who wins, it won't be the people.

This coming January, Bangladesh will go to the polls to elect a government for the fifth time since military rule ended in 1990. During each past election, apart from the discredited February 1996 poll, strong anti-incumbency sentiment has resulted in a change of government, thereby allowing the two main parties, the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), to alternate in power. Despite a strong record of formal democracy, both Bangladeshi and international analysts are expressing strong concerns about January's polls. Many fear that the results will be so marred by violence and corruption as to render them unacceptable. Some even worry that the existing situation may disallow the possibility of an election at all.

Politics, like much else in Bangladesh, has always been characterised by violence. After the bloody War of Independence in 1971, the country's first two prime ministers, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman, were both assassinated. Between 1974 and 1990, the country was governed largely under states of emergency or martial law. Intertwined political and familial histories have subsequently blighted the country's political landscape. Even as the upcoming election looms, the leaders of the two main political parties – the AL's Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Mujibur Rahman) and the BNP's Begum Khaleda Zia (wife of Ziaur Rahman) – are not able to so much as have a talk together about the national state of affairs.

The past three decades of deep personal animosity between the two leaders has stifled political discourse in Bangladesh generally. The Parliament is routinely boycotted by the opposition, so issues are fought out street-side through anti-government general strikes. Though these have become increasingly frequent, and perhaps more violent, in recent years, the pattern of the opposition eschewing dialogue in Parliament in favour of confrontation on the streets has held true no matter who sits in power.

Despite the uncertain political climate, Bangladesh has enjoyed an enviable growth rate averaging five percent over the past several years. However, rising economic performance has also resulted in an increasing polarisation between the country's rich and poor – an inequality that potentially adds to instability.

Penniless beggars stand outside Bashundhara City, the mega-mall in central Dhaka that is claimed to be the largest shopping complex in Southasia. In rural areas, meanwhile, the situation has changed little.

Bangladesh is doing better than other countries in the region at achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the UN in 2000. The World Bank in Bangladesh states that the country "has made remarkable progress on several MDGs and is already on the verge of achieving the targets in gender parity. It also has a good chance of reaching other targets in areas such as under-five mortality and consumption poverty." Many Bangladeshis are openly astonished when they hear of such 'successes', however, being aware of the high levels of insecurity experienced by people of all classes in the country. At the end of the day, economic growth has not resulted in any increase in physical security for Bangladeshis; indeed, it may have promoted increasing insecurity through a rise in criminality and impunity.

In recent times, Bangladesh has come to international attention through the lens of Islamic extremist violence and terrorism. However, the threat posed by systemic corruption of the political, business and justice structures poses a greater and more immediate threat to the security of Bangladeshis, and to the integrity of democracy in the country. Bangladesh is a very politically aware country, but one where survival requires political patronage at all levels. The politics that is practiced is complex, multi-layered and opaque, and political relationships frequently include 'protection' that reaches into both the criminal sector and the justice system itself.

Mastaans and godfathers

Corruption is not so much endemic as systemic in Bangladesh, and the country has now topped the Transparency International corruption index for several years running. Corruption is also directly linked to criminality, violence and impunity. The social system in Bangladesh remains somewhat feudal, and both social and business relations are based on patronage – relationships that have assisted organised crime to capture many aspects of the state and governance, law enforcement and the judicial system. It also pervades business practice. *Mastaans*, organised criminals, run wide-ranging 'protection rackets' through a complex system of payment and collection. Even street beggars pay for protection.

Mastaans have developed relationships and linkages with politicians, who in turn benefit financially. Some of these politicians, known as 'godfathers', hold high-ranking positions, and extend political and judicial protection to the mastaans. Some mastaans have become legitimate businessmen, while others have themselves entered politics – each maintaining his own coterie of goondas. As such, the lines between politics, business and organised crime have become increasingly blurred in Bangladesh. Honest businessmen and politicians are often isolated and powerless, as the prevailing atmosphere makes it difficult to remain unsullied by corruption and patronage.

The success of the political-criminal nexus in Bangladesh is underpinned by impunity. The godfather-mastaan system enforces endemic corruption, and protects those engaged in its organisation. Furthermore, protected mastaans enjoy impunity from both police and the justice system – though in recent years this safety has been threatened by other extrajudicial means.

In October 2002, police claimed that 10 people were being killed every day by crime syndicates with links to politicians. The government subsequently launched Operation Clean Heart, an army programme that arrested over 11,000 people, of which only 2400 were listed as alleged criminals. There were 44 deaths reported during the operation, which ended in January 2003. The government immediately passed an ordinance granting indemnity to all the security personnel who had been involved in the excesses. Although there was a strong outcry from human rights organisations and Western governments at this use of the army and lack of due process, Operation Clean Heart was an immediate popular success. Dhaka thereafter instituted the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary force almost entirely composed of military personnel but reporting to the Home Affairs Minister. The RAP operations were 'legalised' by investing it with the powers of civilian police.

Numerous criminals have been killed in 'crossfire' by the RAB, to the extent that 'being taken to the crossfire' is entering the language in much the same way as 'being disappeared' did in Latin America in an earlier era. The RAB still enjoys high popularity, as many Bangladeshis view it as their only hope against preying criminals. Many RAB officers have been on UN peacekeeping missions, and therefore fully understand human rights norms; in the war against the mastaans, however, they do not see these as applicable. Currently, the RAB seems to be efficient, disciplined and relatively incorrupt, but their actions offend every precept of due process and rule of law. Even within some parts of the army itself, questions are being asked as to who will ultimately be able to control this proud, elite, popular force.

Impunity and enforcement of the rule of law are key issues to many of the country's governance, security and business ills. Unfortunately, many of those benefiting from the system are also those to whom one would look in the fight against impunity, criminality and corruption. A more successful process needs to be systematic, long-term, and one that harnesses the will of Bangladeshis.

The RAB seems to be efficient, disciplined and relatively incorrupt, but their actions offend every precept of due process and rule of law.


RAB

RAB rambos and prisoner

Turn to conservatism

Unlike other parts of Southasia, Bangladesh was converted to Islam by the Sufis prior to its incorporation into the Mogul empire during the 17th century. The more spiritual, rather than clerical, approach of the Sufis resulted in a blended, syncretic Bengali culture. Though Islamic by religion, these cultural forms celebrate singing and dancing from the Sufi tradition, and also incorporate many aspects of Hinduism.

This traditional Sufi-based faith has been increasingly challenged, however, by both Deobandism from Pakistan and India, and some Wahabism from West Asia – both of which are stricter and more clerically based. The West Asian influence has been strengthened by investment of oil money in Bangladesh since the 1970s, as well as by Bangladeshis returning from work in the Gulf. Increasing worldwide Islamic consciousness and geopolitical events have also played a part in introducing more clerically based trends. Thousands of Bangladeshis are believed to have fought against the USSR in Afghanistan, subsequently returning home after the Soviets left.

The increasing conservatism of Islam in Bangladesh is noticeable in the transformation in dress of women and men, as well as in the conspicuous pious acts in which political leaders of all parties increasingly engage. The AL is traditionally seen as the party of secularism, while the BNP, which removed secularism from the Constitution, is perceived as more favourable to Islam. This is particularly so in the current context, as the present BNP-led government is an alliance that includes two Islamic parties, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Islamic Oike Jote.

JI's percentage of the popular vote has remained below 10 percent in successive elections. After allying with the BNP in 2001, JI secured 18 out of 300 seats in Parliament, and now holds two cabinet ministries. This is the first time that the party has been in government, and the advantage it has been able to garner from this exposure will only be clear after the 2007 election results are known. The acrimony between the two major parties has left the population disillusioned with almost all their political leaders. As such, there were fears that JI's image as a party with a clear agenda and relatively free of financial irregularity would attract disillusioned voters. However, it seems that the activities of violent Islamist groups may have boomeranged against the party, and a JI election upset now appears unlikely.

International headlines, meanwhile, have focused on the threat of violent extremism, particularly in the wake of the bombings between August and December 2005 associated with the militant Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Despite widespread media reports, however, the government continued to deny JMB's existence for months, until strong international pressure forced Dhaka to ban the group in February 2005, one day before a high-level international donor meeting was slated to take place. After the JMB was suspected in the 459 near-simultaneous countrywide explosions in August that year, it was again international pressure that resulted in the incident being taken seriously.

During subsequent attacks that targeted members of the judiciary, investigations and arrests did indeed proceed. This resulted in several long jail sentences being handed down in February, and two leaders being sentenced to death in May. However, recent reports state that other trials have been frustrated by the authorities failing to produce the accused in court. Furthermore, during the judicial process links have been discovered between the accused and Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, as well as with JI itself. In addition, there have been reports of strong links with leading politicians in both the major parties. Some Bangladeshis believe that the JMB leadership has had 'godfather' protection, particularly in its earlier activities in northern Bangladesh.

In 2004, the leader of the terror outfit JMJB (Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh) known as 'Bangla Bhai', whose real name is Siddiqul Islam, held a press conference in a local government office in Rajshahi. Locals also observed cooperation between the police and the JMB, who were hunting down supposed communists and leftists. However, the actions by the security forces against the JMB have convinced most Bangladeshis that the Mujahideen has, for the moment, been broken – although few believe that they are finished.

Prior to August 2005, there was much confusion


G M B AKASH

about the extent of support that groups such as the JMB might have. The public reaction to the exhibitions of violence that month, however, indicated a clear rejection. Indeed, JI's profile has suffered badly as a result of the JMB's activities. This bodes well for countering further threats of Islamic violence in Bangladesh. However, the underlying spectre of Islamic conservatism 'laying the foundation' for an Islamic state appears to be one that Bangladeshi political parties are unwilling to publicly take on board, lest they offend Islamic sensibilities among the electorate. At the same time, the international community is simply unable to do so, constrained as they are by a mixture of excessive liberalism on the one hand, and judicious caution that they may inflame sensitive anti-imperialist and/or Muslim sentiments among Bangladeshis on the other.

New popular will

It can now be seen that Bangladesh's formal democracy has been gradually undermined by the impunity and failure of the rule of law inherent to both the godfather-mastaan system and the politics of patronage. Yet over three previous elections, the first two were thought to be free and fair, while a third reflected the will of the people despite overt violence in some areas; a fifth poll was dubious, but was rejected by the people, and a new government was installed within five months. Critical to this has been the non-party caretaker government system, which has been held up as a model for other countries in democratic transition. Recent irregularities surrounding this system, however, have led to a wide coalition of opposition parties drawing up an Electoral Reform Agenda (*See accompanying story, "A crippled caretaker").*

At the end of the day, economic growth has not resulted in any increase in physical security for Bangladeshis; indeed, it may have promoted increasing insecurity through a rise in criminality and impunity.

The AL has threatened to boycott the election if the reforms are not adopted. The government agreed in principle to a discussion, and for a while it looked as if the absence of dialogue in Bangladeshi politics might suddenly be broken. But that hope was short-lived. The AL wanted direct talks with the BNP, and stated they would not hold discussions with the government's alliance partners, the JI and Oike Jote. The BNP subsequently put forward a dialogue team that included members from all alliance parties. As such, there has still been no dialogue, leading commentators and activists to believe that the government and opposition are on a collision course that can only end in violence.

Meanwhile, most of the country's voters appear to be disillusioned with both of the major parties, and harbour an active distrust of all politicians. The parties themselves have ignored the people's needs between elections, other than to use the public against each other. In the villages, there is an increasing polarisation between those who seek solace and social welfare from the new mosques, and those who cling to the traditional Sufism and embrace NGO programmes.

But as the political parties swing into election mode over the spring and summer of 2006, the people have begun to take things into their own hands. Popular local demonstrations, neither orchestrated by nor linked to any political party, have occurred spontaneously around a variety of non-political issues. In the volatile political atmosphere of present-day Bangladesh, these could continue to grow.

Though there had previously been some popular protest around energy and environmental issues – particularly in those areas that were devastated by gas blowouts and fires in the country's northeast – these had always been utilised by opposition parties for their own purposes against the government. For many, no electricity means no water; the high level of electricity outages has subsequently caused huge frustration, resulting in these large and public protests in Kansat and Demra villages during the first four months of this year. The national press estimated that over 1000 people were injured at Kansat, forcing the government to issue a public apology. Regardless, there is little that Dhaka can do to improve the electricity situation in the short term.

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Responsibilities include:

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- Preparation of procurement plans for the office and projects and their implementation monitoring.
- Organization of procurement processes including preparation and conduct of RFQs, ITBs or RFPs, receipt of quotations, bids or proposals, their evaluation, negotiation of certain conditions of contracts in full compliance with UNDP rules and regulations.
- Implementation of the internal control system which ensures that Purchase orders are duly prepared and dispatched. Timely corrective actions on POs with budget check errors and other problems.
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- Excellent verbal and written communication skills in English and Nepali languages; and
- Demonstrated interpersonal skills in client relations and in achieving client satisfaction is an asset

Applications should be submitted **no later than 21 August 2006** by email, to: **hrmu1.np@undp.org** or in a sealed envelope to **UNDP Operations Department (Ref: PA/PBS), UN House, Pulchowk, P.O. Box 107, Kathmandu, Nepal**

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Applicants must submit the updated standard UN Personal History Form available from the UN House Reception or the UNDP webpage http://www.undp.org.np/vacancy

WOMEN, INDIGENOUS AND DISADVANTAGED PERSONS ARE STRONGLY ENCOURAGED TO APPLY.

In late May 2006, the protest focus turned from electricity to industry, when workers across the garment sector violently rioted in what began as a dispute over dismissals in a single factory and quickly spread to engulf whole industrial areas (*See Himal June 2006, "Inflation and the garments worker"*). This is another example of the extreme volatility of contemporary conditions in Bangladesh. With no political party having the credibility to give leadership or direction to such protests, street turbulence lacking in any national leadership is likely to increase.

Little will change

Getting through the next election is a necessary but not sufficient condition to stabilising Bangladesh. Despite the widespread disillusionment with the political parties, without doubt it is important that January's elections take place and, as far as possible, are conducted freely and fairly. The international agencies in Dhaka are already cooperating with Bangladeshi organisations to ensure that there is a good distribution of trained monitors, both local and international, throughout the country. If the elections cannot take place and there is no mandate for governance, the possibilities are all grim.

Bangladesh has a history of military government. Currently, the armed forces do not seem to have political ambition – they enjoy some political influence without any responsibility, and they earn well from UN missions and business deals. However, if the civilian political parties are unable to establish a credible government, their intervention may be welcomed as a stabilising factor both within and outside Bangladesh. Previous military governments originated under a similar guise of 'saving the country'.

As such, the 2007 elections are crucial for Bangladesh, despite the fact that their actual outcome will change little. The country's problems are systemic, and have come about through the lowering of people's expectations of government and of political parties. The latter, meanwhile, have managed to hollow out the state through corruption and nepotism. Both the AL and BNP are complicit in this negative process, and both have allowed the 'godfather system' to become so entrenched that it is questionable whether they can ever totally extricate themselves from it.

While these problems need to be articulated in the public domain, that has proven a dangerous task, as many Bangladeshi journalists have discovered for trying. But it is not until the corruption of Bangladeshi politics is addressed publicly that a corrective process will be able to begin. Only at that point will Bangladeshis be able to start developing systematic responses to the governance challenges the country faces. And only then might the people of Bangladesh be able to look to a more secure future.

G M B AKASH

The crippled caretaker

Bangladesh's system of caretaker government is seen as a successful exercise in allowing free and fair elections, but the country's current political crises can be traced back to this hasty, imperfect arrangement.

BY **ALI RIAZ**

A dark cloud of uncertainty hangs over the upcoming electoral exercise in Bangladesh. With less than five months to go before the parliamentary elections, the fifth since the new democratic era began in 1990, there are serious doubts as to whether the exercise will be held on time – and if so, whether it can be fair, and with participation by all political parties. Three of the four institutions crucial for the general elections are either in some sort of crisis, or have lost credibility in the eyes of the public. These four are: the presidency, the head of the caretaker government, the election commission (particularly the chief election commissioner) and the army. Recently, the first three have been in the news on an almost daily basis, and for the wrong reasons. The possible role of the army is yet to feature prominently in the public discourse. But reading what the politicians and pundits leave unsaid, it is not very difficult to see the shadow of the military looming large.

Ever since the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1996, the Bangladesh Constitution has stipulated that, upon dissolution of the Parliament at the end of each five-year term, an 11-member non-party caretaker government will function as an interim government for 90 days. The country's most recent Chief Justice is to serve as the head of this temporary government, which dissolves when a new prime minister assumes office. The Constitution also stipulates that, during the term of the interim government, the defence ministry is to remain under the control of the president, who otherwise is the titular head of state. Accordingly, the term of the current Parliament and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led coalition government will end this October. The election, therefore, is required to be held by the end of January 2007.

All elections are important for democratic processes. However, both at home and abroad, the upcoming polls are seen as 'crucial' for Bangladesh.

The 13th Amendment was hastily drawn-up and passed in a marathon session on 26 March 1996, the night before the dissolution of Parliament. At the time, it was regarded by almost all political parties as a panacea.

These are the first elections since the sudden rise of political violence in the country, as well as an organised Islamist militancy. There is ample evidence to suggest that militant groups have received moral and material support from members of the ruling coalition government over the last four years. A fair election would provide an opportunity to gauge whether Bangladeshi society at large acquiesces to this ongoing trend, which is building towards a crisis of governance, weakening of the rule of law and a rise in violence against the people, particularly the minorities.

Elections and political practices since 1991 demonstrate that, while there has been some progress in the formal aspects of the country's democratic system – such as the electoral process – little progress has been made on the substantive issues like political freedom and inclusiveness of processes.

During the last couple of years the international community has expressed concern about the law and order situation, particularly the rising tide of militancy, and the attacks on minorities, opposition activists and journalists. Yet Bangladesh is also viewed by many as a possible model for democracy in Muslim-majority countries – that despite the negative factors, democracy is better than chaos. Members of the international community have often expressed the view that, in the absence of the formal democratic process, Bangladesh will inevitably plunge into such a chaos, leading to either a 'failed state' or an Islamist state. Neither of these would be a welcome development in a volatile region such as Southasia.

There is also another crucial element linked to the upcoming polls – the election exercise will demonstrate whether having a stake in the system has moderated the positions of the mainstream Islamists. Of course, participation in elections does not necessarily produce democratic Islamists – Bangladeshi Islamists, too, tend to express disdain for democracy, declaring an intent to use elections merely as a means to power. If they make a credible showing in the polls, will the Islamists decide to work with the institutions of democracy and abide by the rule of law? Or, with adequate power in their hands, would they seek to institute legal and constitutional changes so sweeping as to practically unmake democracy?

Electoral free-for-all

The current political uncertainty in Bangladesh cannot be ascribed to the campaign by the opposition political parties, particularly the Awami League (AL), having demanded the resignation of the government for over four years. Instead, the uncertainty is largely the result of the supercilious behaviour of the ruling coalition, led by the BNP. Take, for example, the government's 2004 decision to extend the retirement age of Supreme Court judges. This was evidently intended to ensure that a certain individual would be able to head the caretaker government. That person is former Chief Justice K M Hassan, who has in the past held a position in the BNP hierarchy.

Extending the judges' retirement age was followed by the appointment of a new Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), M A Aziz, allegedly chosen for his loyalty towards the ruling government. While this appointment in early 2005 followed the letter of the law, it represented a missed opportunity for the government to respond to the opposition's demand for reforms. The opposition grudgingly accepted Aziz and concentrated on its other demands, particularly on the issue of the head and jurisdiction of the caretaker government.

Beginning in September 2005, the Election Commission (EC) began to take prejudicial action. Despite objections voiced by two election commissioners, CEC Aziz unilaterally decided to draw up a new voter list, beginning the process with hardly any preparation. After opposition parties filed writs, the High Court instructed the EC to base the new rolls on that drawn up in 2000. The government, for its part, responded by appointing two new commissioners, considered close to the party hierarchy. In addition, two opposition commissioners, appointed during the time of the AL government, finished their terms and left the EC in April.

The CEC first flouted the High Court's instructions, and then lost an appeal when the Supreme Court upheld the previous verdict. In the meantime, a list containing more than 91.3 million voters had been prepared at a cost of BDT 640 million (USD 9.2 million). The number baffled local demographers, as their projections had showed less than 76.7 million eligible voters, while at the same time tens of thousands were complaining of being left out.

Despite the public demand that the enlistment of new voters should be carried out through houses-to-house visits, CEC Aziz decided to allow corrections to the list only if individuals appeared in person at local EC offices during the month of July. Even though it took more than five months and more than 272,000 workers to compile the now-rejected list, the Commission insisted that a list that is now more

than five years old can be updated within a month with the support of less than 6400 officials. All this has prompted a call for Aziz's resignation even from a section of the ruling BNP, and the opposition has declared its refusal to participate in any elections under the present CEC.

As if these events were not enough to create doubts about the election's being on schedule, controversy surrounding President Iajuddin Ahmed that began in May also jeopardises the process. When he had a heart attack and was taken abroad for surgery, rumours spread that the BNP was planning to replace with him someone more loyal, who could be particularly proactive during the caretaker government. The president returned after surgery in Singapore, and while he was in recovery, the Speaker, Jamiruddin Sircar, began performing the presidential tasks, claiming for himself the title of 'functional president' – a term not provided in the Constitution. Rumours of President Ahmed's health fuelled rampant energy-sapping speculation until 6 July, when the president resumed office.

While the uncertainty in relation to the presidency has subsided, the controversy has not. The opposition is demanding that the defence ministry, and therefore the army, be placed under the head of the caretaker government so that, if necessary, they can be mobilised to ensure free and fair elections. This, however, will not be possible unless the BNP-controlled Parliament amends the Constitution.

NEW NATION

President Ahmed back at work, 9 July

Unlucky amendment

The immediate causes of the current crisis are the ruling coalition's uncompromising attitude, manipulation of existing institutions and rules, and deliberate efforts to sway tried and tested procedures in their favour. The roots of the current situation, however, can be traced back to the 13th Amendment of the Constitution. It is important to bear in mind that, of the four elections held between 1991 and 2006, three were remarkably fair, while the fourth was the exact opposite. The election of 15 February 1996 was not only boycotted by all political parties except the BNP, but was also blatantly manipulated. The seeds of the current problems were largely sown by the Parliament that grew out of that election.

The 13th Amendment was hastily drawn-up and passed in a marathon session on 26 March 1996, the night before the dissolution of Parliament. Interestingly, at the time it was regarded by almost all political parties as a panacea. In 1995, when the AL had demanded that the notion of a caretaker government be included in the Constitution, the then-ruling BNP had opposed the motion, terming the request unconstitutional. Many analysts have subsequently questioned the wisdom of both. Some have further warned that the system of caretaker government itself cannot guarantee fair elections, but that the Election Commission should instead be strengthened and made free from the influence of the executive branch. AL leaders were not amiable to the idea at that time, and the BNP has had no time to pay attention to any proposal for reform.

Over the last few years it has become evident that the 13th Amendment, meant to guarantee free and fair elections, has had the unintended effect of politicisation of the judiciary, hurt the presidency, and made the army dependent on partisan politicians. Since political expediency was the driving force behind introducing the system, the long-term consequences of the system of caretaker governments and how it would impact the aims of government were scarcely contemplated. Meanwhile, crucial details have remained unexplained, such as the modus operandi of selecting the members of the caretaker government (described as 'advisors'), and the relationships between the executive branch, and the EC and the army. It is some of these ignored 'details' that have now come back to haunt the country.

A way out?

Some analysts dismiss the concerns, saying that political crisis is nothing new in Bangladesh, and that in the end a solution is always found. Such a fatalist attitude is based on viewing the present situation as reminiscent of previous 'crises' – the last days of the military regime of General Hussain Mohammed Ershad in 1990, or the political crisis during the Khaleda Zia regime of November 1995 - March 1996, both of which were resolved peacefully. On the surface, the argument is simple and forceful: however difficult it may appear, or however self-centred the political leadership may be, the Bangladeshi elites have a stake in the current system and will find a way to keep it running.

Missing in this perspective is the presence of forces – international, regional and domestic – with agendas detrimental to the national interests of Bangladesh. It does not take an alarmist to underscore the possibility that, with the overall governance in disrepair and a badly organised general election, the country may be dragged into a situation that could demonstrate the weaknesses of multi-party representative democracy. The inability of leading political forces to resolve the crisis would

The 13th Amendment, meant to guarantee free and fair elections, has had the unintended effect of politicisation of the judiciary, hurt the presidency, and made the army dependent on partisan politicians.

then benefit a small but lethal force. Saving the healthy practice of representative government through a clean and effective poll exercise, one has to be proactive rather than waiting for some divine or happenstance intervention. It is imperative that solutions to the current crisis are explored in the weeks ahead, before it is too late.

At first glance, the current situation appears nearly impossible. The country has a chief election commissioner bent on ruining his commission; a reliable electoral roll is unlikely to be in place before the caretaker government takes over in late October – and therefore will not be available for the election in January; unless Chief Justice K M Hassan declines the appointment, the caretaker government will be headed by the person least acceptable to the opposition parties; and the army will remain under the jurisdiction of the president. To these elements should be added the highly politicised government officials who are in a place to jeopardise the conduct of free and fair polls. Added to this is the presence of a huge amount of illegal small arms in the market, and the presence of various militant networks. None of this seems to be conducive to a fair election exercise, and yet the options to improve the situation are apparently limited, chiefly because of provisions in the Constitution itself.


CEC Aziz

The relevant constitutional stipulations in play are as follows. The CEC holds a constitutional position [118(5)], and therefore cannot be removed by executive orders, despite violating the court orders. In appointing the head of the caretaker government, the president will have to exhaust a number of options [58C (3) and 58C (4)] before turning to "a citizen" in consultation with the political parties [58C (5)], or assume the functions of the Chief Advisor [58C (6)]. Finally, the term of the caretaker government is not clearly articulated in the Constitution [58C(2) and 58C(12)], but it has been made contingent on the election of the Parliament, which is to be held within 90 days of the dissolution or expiration of its term [123(3)].

While following the letter of the Constitution might ironically result in a level of despair, there do exist options to accommodate extraordinary circumstances. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the spirit of the Constitution should be taken into cognisance. Concerning the removal of the CEC, the president can seek the opinion of the Supreme Judicial Council, which consists of the country's three seniormost judges and which can investigate the CEC's conduct. The proceedings of the Council can be initiated by the president upon receipt of complaints that the CEC or any of the commissioners have acted improperly. In late June, a government minister clarified that any citizen can lodge such a complaint.

To invoke the option regarding the appointment of a citizen as the chief of the caretaker government, the retired judges would need to decline the job. A complete electoral roll can be compiled if the term of the caretaker government is extended beyond 90 days, and other impediments towards a free election, such as the law and order situation and politicisation of the civil administration, can also be addressed effectively in the interim. In any case, the term is not set by the Constitution; it is intrinsically tied to the holding of the election.

Interestingly, the Constitution has no provision for a situation in which, for whatever reason, the election cannot be held within 90 days. It does, however, say that if, "for reasons of an act of God", the election for a vacant seat of the Parliament cannot be held within 90 days, it will have to be held within the following 90 days. If the spirit of this provision is taken in conjunction with the spirit of the entire Constitution – that the fundamental aim of the state is to secure the rule of law, equality and justice for all citizens – a fairly logical solution subsequently offers itself.

Not a divine document, the Constitution of Bangladesh is meant to be a guide for effective governance with the consent of the people, and to ensure that citizens are able to exercise their rights freely and devoid of fear. A Constitution that does not fulfil these responsibilities, quite simply, needs to be changed. Needless to say, the measures outlined above would only be able to bring temporary relief. For a long-term solution to a crisis of this nature, there is no escaping from the fact that the caretaker government system needs to be revisited, and the independence of the Election Commission ensured. The sooner this is done, the better for all. But first, there are elections to be held.

G M B AKASH

When we dead awaken*

BY **RUBANA**

Close to noon, while I grope for colours to paint my Bangladesh, I look at a daily that habitually sells well with Boschian human deformities and negative news, and I smile. On 21 July 2006 – 35 years, seven months from when we first happened – Bangladesh has covered the graph from all angles, and has ended up being a positive quotient in most of its challenging equations. It is not the line that identifies us today, it is the people here who sketch the character of the land. Perhaps a cartoon by 'Ranabi', from way back on 9 January 1971, best explains the psyche of the people's power in Bangladesh.

The cartoon's aptly captioned: *Protiggya Nobayon*, and it stands for renewing a pledge. The map boasts of a strong fist, shooing the profiteers, black marketers and smugglers away from the land, while the people, barefoot and lungi-clad, are positioned in their soon-to-be-won freedom land – Bangladesh. We had won or, to say the least, we had bought our right to independence at the cost of our blood, sweat and tears.

The UNCTAD LDC report 2006 reflects the land's improvement in 15 indicators, which include average national labour productivity, birth, death, infant and under-five mortality rates, life expectancy, population growth, school enrolment, per capita energy consumption and a few others. Areas which have been touched by the masses have experienced dramatic growth and recovery. If there are any specks of dirt and disillusionment on the page, let it be known that these blemishes are all products of the Political Midases. In this land, at their touch, gold turns to dust, and fables and myths lose their magic within an instant.

Yet Bangladesh is free today. Every face down the alley sweats today and labours towards a more successful tomorrow. A lower-middle-class household has at least a couple of children going to school. Some of them even have house help. With their kettles boiling, they hurriedly prepare their *cha* and leave for their workplaces. One actually hears a spoon clinking in a mug at such a home. One actually enjoys the luxurious sight of at least a 12-inch black-and-white television there. The people live in this land, perhaps

*Henrik Ibsen

not with cushioned lives, but at least with the bare minimum hope of getting a better job in the next lane, which has newer factory buildings coming up.

This place smells of opportunity. There may be floods, there maybe strikes; roadblocks may be a fortnightly affair. But for the masses, these are speed-breakers that temporarily slow their pace. These do not deter the common vision or even impair the dream of 1971.

Controversies are regular in this country. The Election Commission may have spent an unhealthy sum on the most wasted voter list of the century; the Finance Ministry may strategically ask for an explanation from the CEC; there may be rebels within the government voicing their frustrations, there may be popular slogans promising nothing short of a 'golden Bengal'; there may be waves of criticism in revenge rags which attempt to mesmerise the simple folk – but underestimating the power of History and the strength of democracy, even if imperfect.

The people of Bangladesh have *shadhinota* (independence) in their veins. They need no lessons on war and freedom. Survivors in this topography of corruption and dispensable beneficiaries, who benefit from the current administration in their everyday lives of commerce, the people have all learnt their lessons. To them, *desh* ranks way above the conniving 5000 ill-meaning hands, through whom the balance of power sways every five years. This sway does not bring in fresh air for the crowd – it rather ensures a selfish survival seeped in wealth and greed for those in position. And every five years, the amusement park thrives with politicians queuing up for their next ride.

Third-world disconnect

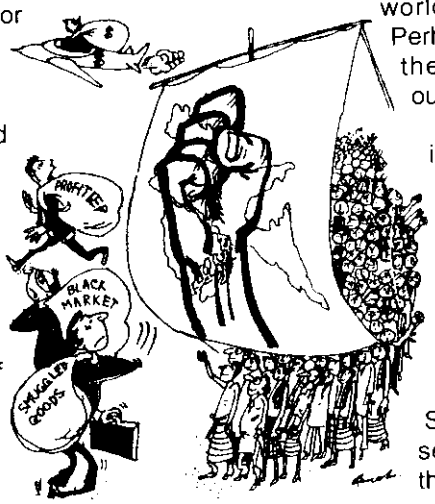
'Freedom' in Bangladesh has turned out to be a household concept. It's a space that ensures my bread, my breath and my peace. The space that lies between me and the well-mounted 24-inch plasma screen has mountains I cannot cross. The apparent shots at 'apparent' objective reporting of burning scenes in the busiest areas of Dhaka, or the rapes happening at the most distant corners of Kurigram, are all part of the simulation game.

As a woman, as a mother, as a conscious Bangladeshi, I feel that we are placing images way above their qualifying range. Media moguls controlling the scene have a silent say in all our discourses. Private channels try being progressive and often test our senses. Even the hyper-conscious 'I' gives in at times, thinking ... maybe, just maybe, it's time to turn a new page. Perhaps the mogul doesn't stink so much, perhaps the opposition will at least play the cards right for strategic reasons, maybe there will be a lesser evil springing up from the rungs of hell.

However, it takes me a nanosecond to pinch myself and lead my senses back to sanity. It isn't happening. The hyper-reality of seminars, symposiums, conferences and dialogues is quicksand and ... 35 long years of being Bangladeshi has smartened us up, and we all know better than to give in to the façade.

For us, Bangladesh still offers opportunities of minimum employment, transport, habitat, health, education and oxygen. For us, even the few factories that shut down following the recent labour unrest are opening, once again, at 7:00 every morning; the retailers are still hanging on to the supplier chain. The FDI inflow, though at a nominal level of USD 400-plus million, spells hope. The IT sector, though late, today is operating through a submarine cable; the pharmacies are selling comparable made-in-Bangladesh medicines; the supermarkets have packaged food. Banga Bazaar, the market that sells the export surplus of the readymade garment industry, stands for a respite to our closet; every second woman, a skilled homemaker for years, attempts micro-entrepreneurship in the form of a vegetable garden, a small boutique, poultry or a beauty salon representing an urban economic rescue.

And at the end of a fatigued day, every second family in town comfortably settles in the living room couch and watches the day go by in hypnotic electronic slides. My colleague who just got beaten up in the morning becomes a part of my news quota. I follow his story through the screen, through the letters in the press. Perhaps this *is* the disconnect that a third-world democracy should be dreading. Perhaps we should all wake up and make the unrest in the next street over our business.



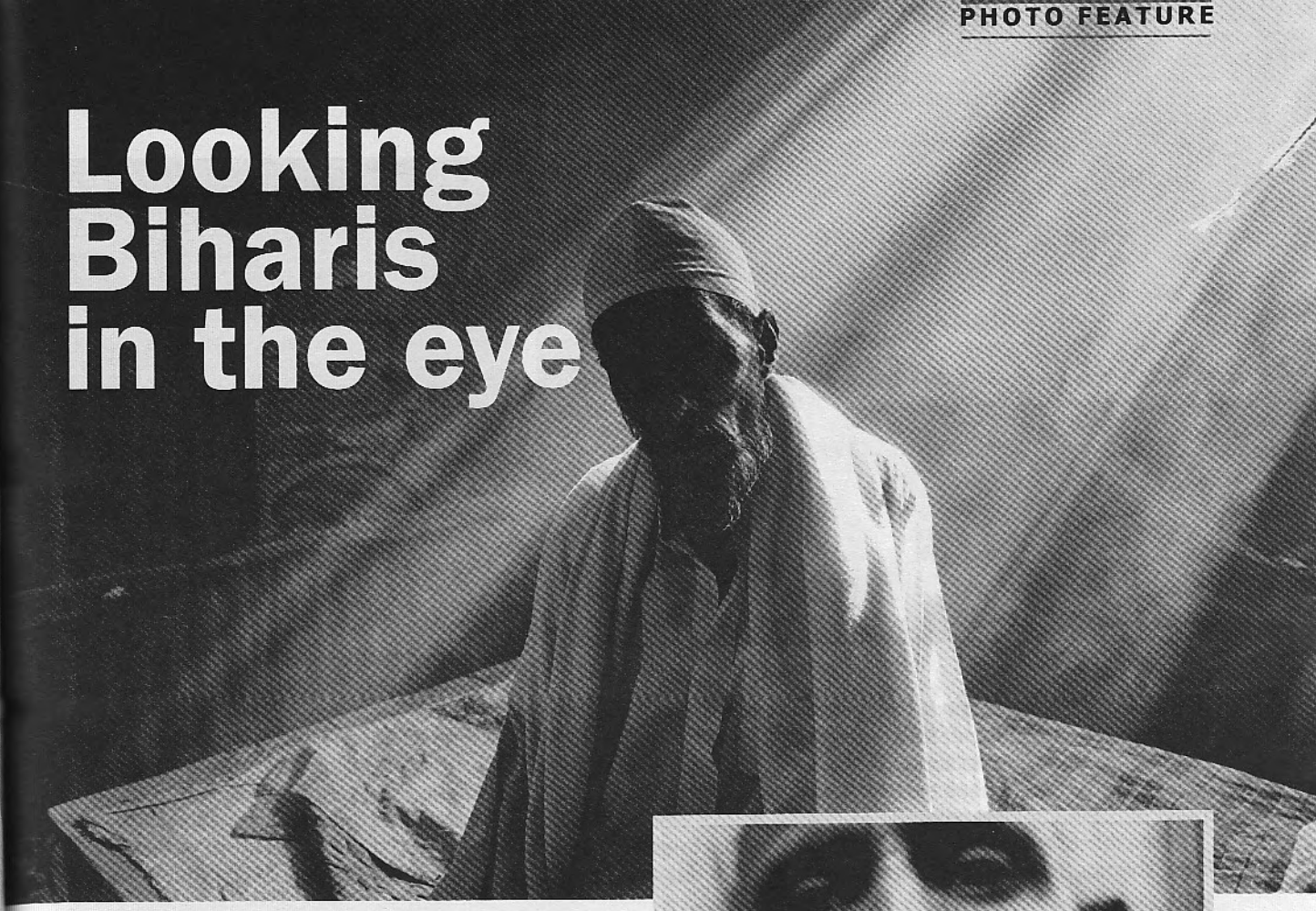
Renewing a pledge: Rafiqun Nabi. *Weekly Forum*, 9 January 1971

After all, paraphrasing Amartya Sen, identity does become a complicated business when we ourselves haven't been friends with our own entities in a long time. As a woman trained to believe that silence is the most desirable complicity of all, I propose that we shed our passivity, rebel along with Adrienne Rich against being "a table set with room for the Stranger", against "being a woman who sells for a boat ticket", and not stand there in a poem: "unsatisfied".

Just because two women leaders are playing with our political sensibilities and subjecting us to infinite derogatory female jokes, doesn't mean that we give up our road. Rather, our roadmap should have more female voices emerging from the ruins of our political scene, resorting, if need be, to a lifetime of Philomela's prayers:

The air of Heaven will hear, and any god,
If there is any god in Heaven, will hear me.

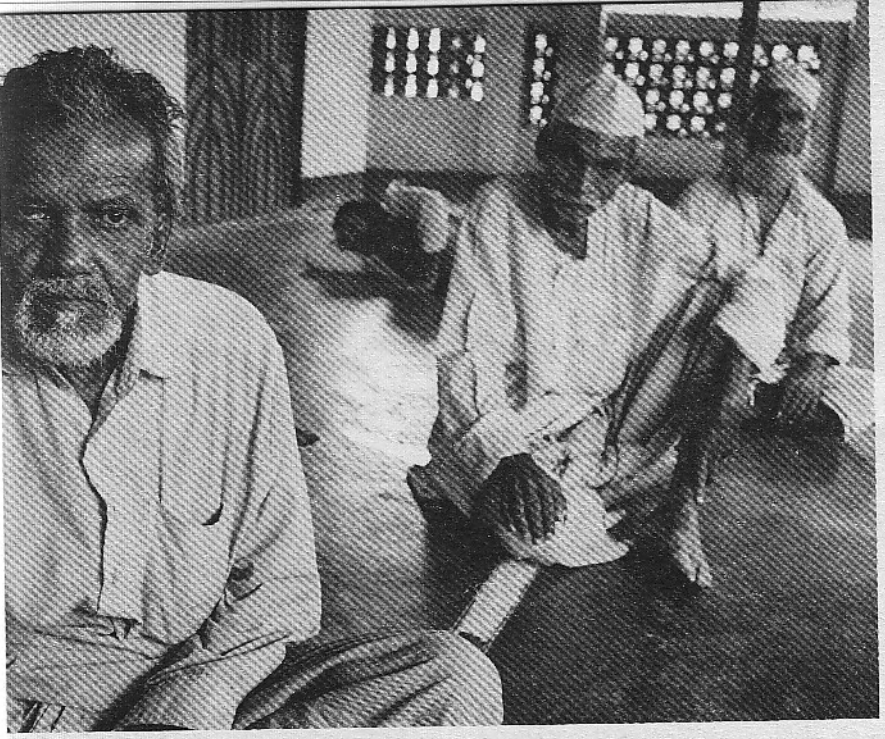
Looking Biharis in the eye

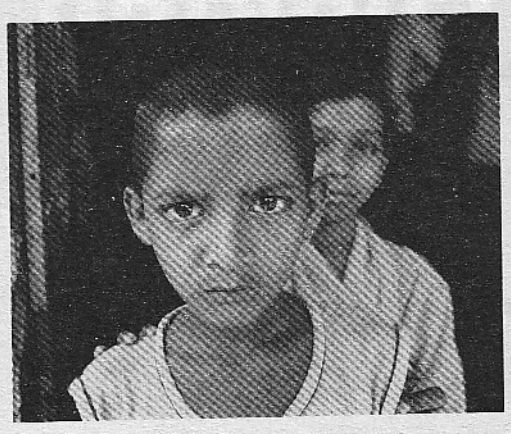


PHOTOGRAPHS BY **GREG CONSTANTINE**
TEXT BY **KABITA PARAJULI**

They are another souvenir of Partition, the Biharis – or stranded Pakistanis – of Bangladesh.

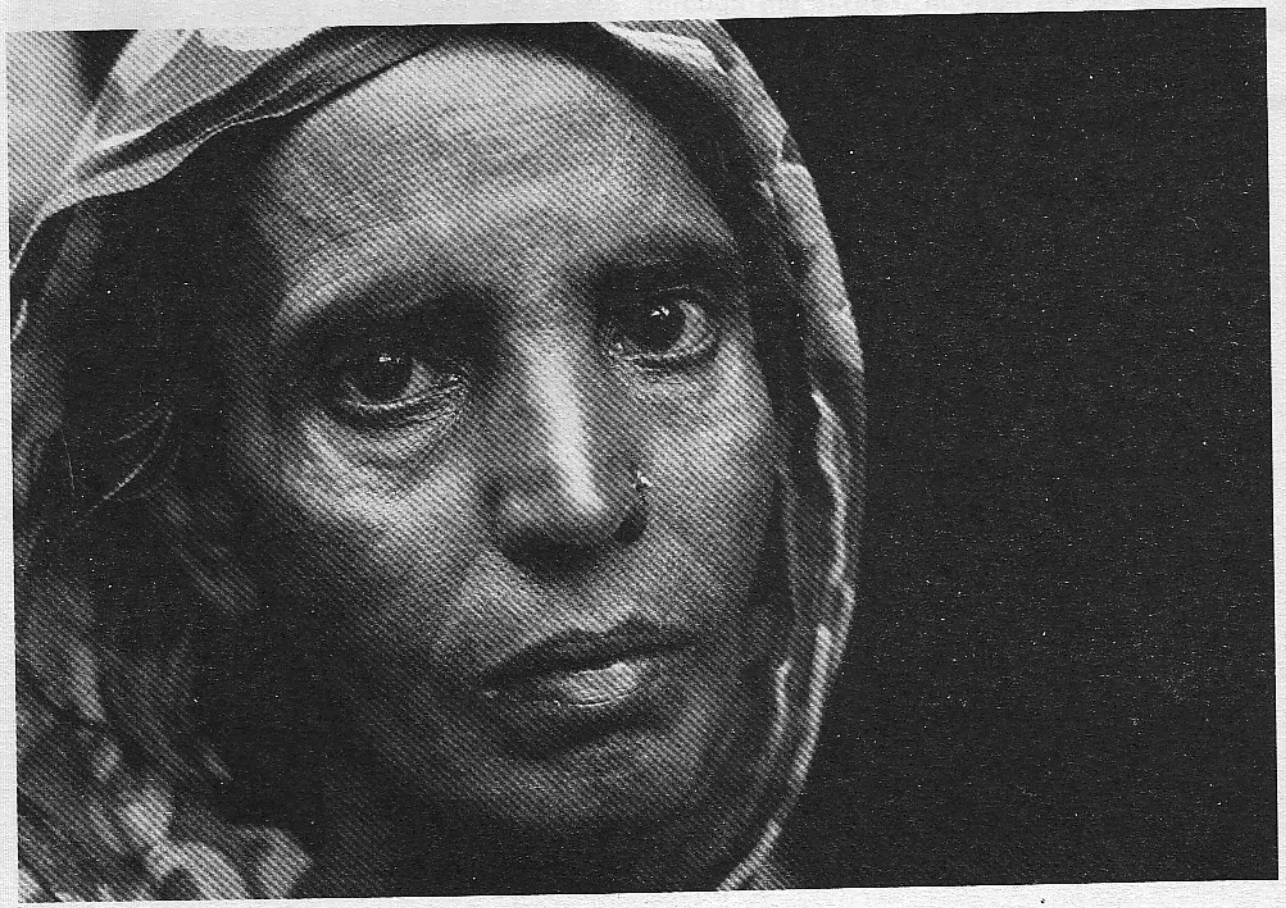
In 1947, one million Muslim Biharis migrated from India, like so many others, to Pakistan – East Pakistan. Educated and fluent in Urdu, the Biharis were treated as part of the elite, filling major bureaucratic and private-sector positions, all the while remaining separate from the 'local' population. As a result, the Bangla-speaking populace grew resentful, viewing these migrants as supporters and symbols of unjust West Pakistani domination. The Biharis drew even more Bangladeshi ire during the liberation war of 1970-71. Since the group regarded itself as Pakistani, the majority sided with West Pakistan, some joining the armed movements.





After India's intervention in December 1971, Pakistan evacuated Bangladesh. Left behind, in a country that had formed around them, were over one million Urdu-speaking Biharis. Persecuted, their property and houses seized, their jobs terminated, by 1972 1,008,680 Biharis were interned in camps across Bangladesh.

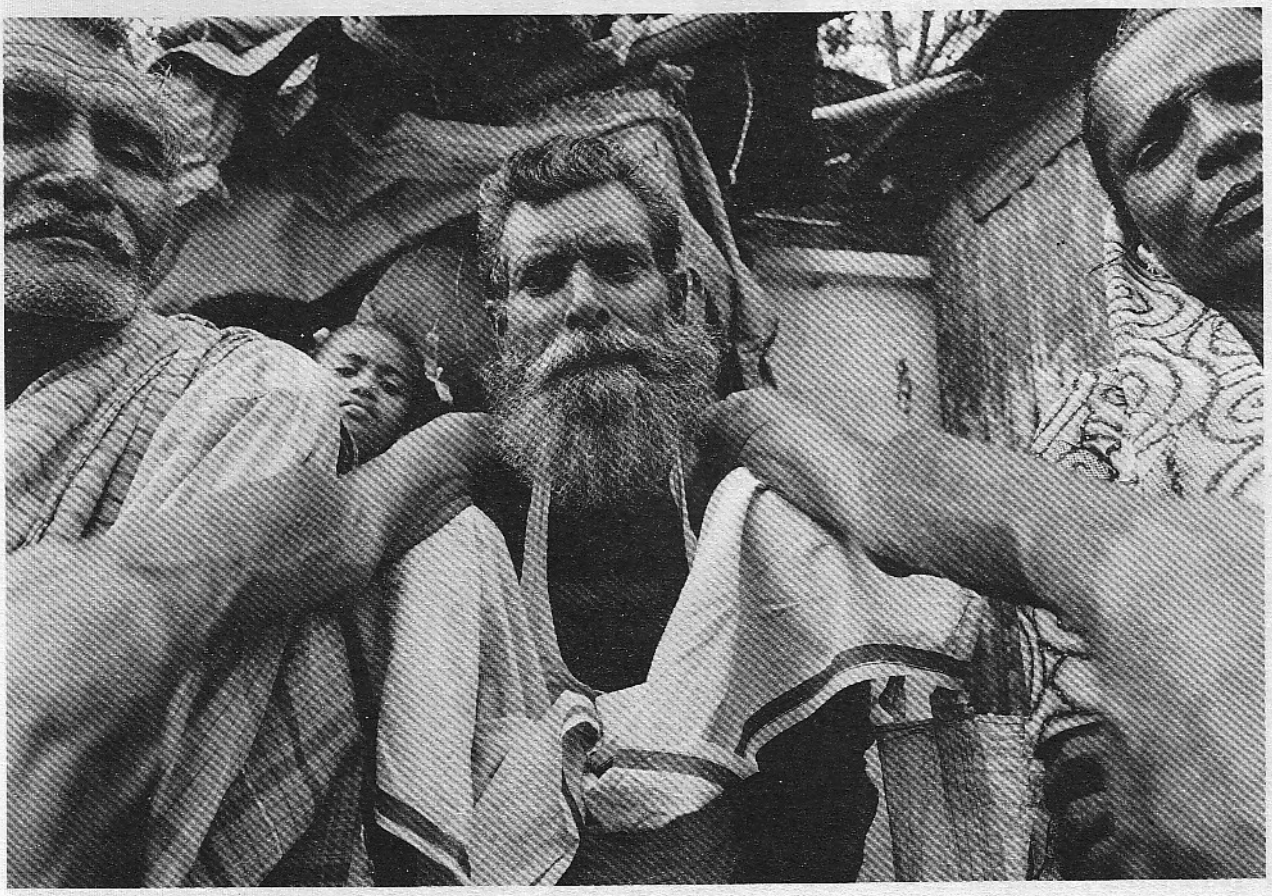
While these 'temporary' camps were being constructed, officials from Pakistan, Bangladesh and the international community committed themselves to finding a solution. Of these three, the first agreed to repatriate the Biharis, the second to tolerate them for the time being, and the third to support them. The agreement is now decades old, but Islamabad accepted only a few of those it had promised to repatriate, while Dhaka let them sink to the absolute margins of society. The international community turned

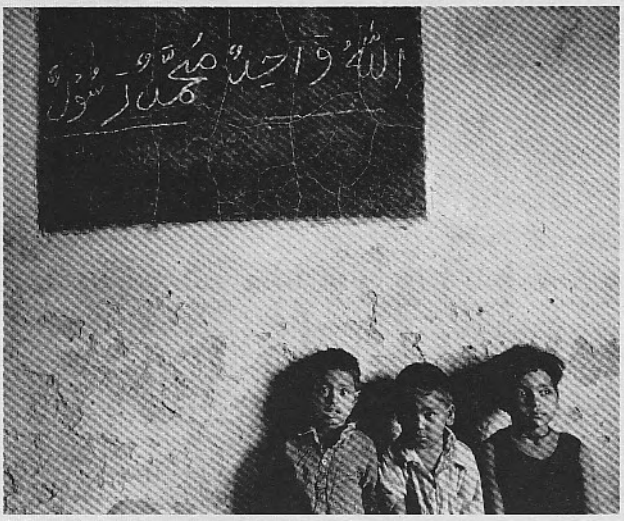


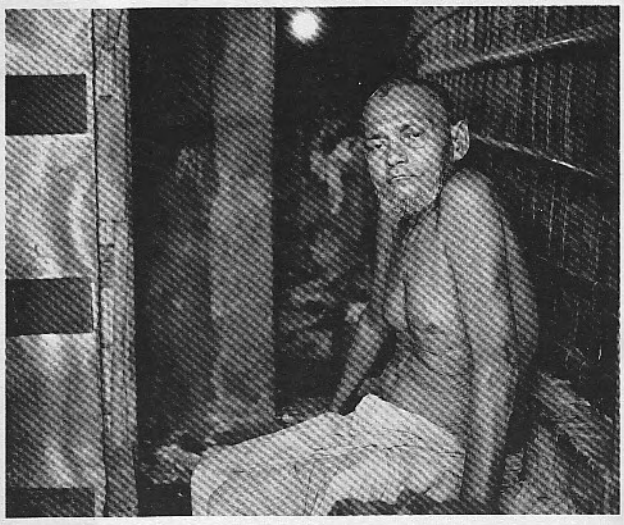
its attention to new challenges, and the Biharis became stateless.

And there, in the camps, the Biharis remain. Over half (600,000) accepted Bangladesh's offer of citizenship in 1974, while 539,000 registered with the International Community of the Red Cross as refugees, to "return to their country of nationality – Pakistan". Since 1972, Pakistan has accepted back around 175,000 Biharis. 300,000, meanwhile, have continued to live in the camps for more than three decades.

Camp conditions are deplorable, characterised by chronic shortages of clean or running water, undependable electricity, communal kitchens and hour-long queues for squalid bathrooms. The majority of Biharis held university degrees in 1947; today, while primary enrollment in Bangladesh nears 100 percent, less

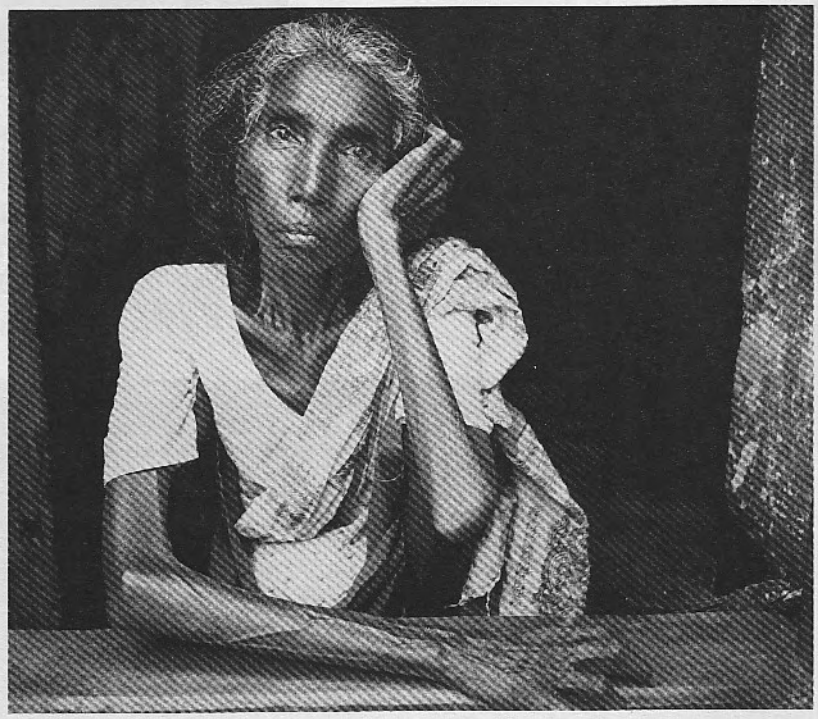


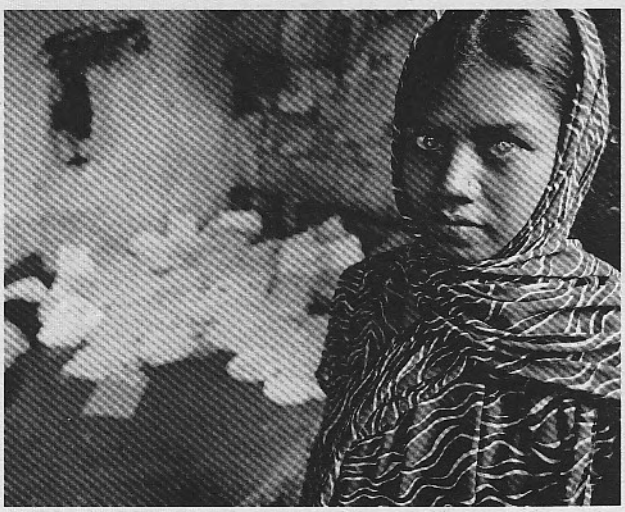


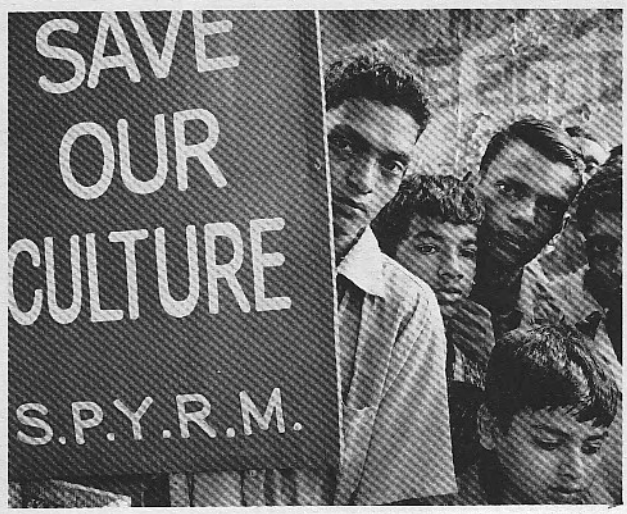


than 20 percent of Bihari children are in schools. The refugees are refused admittance into most government public schools and universities, and are prohibited from joining civil service, the police, the military or holding political office. Unemployment and extreme poverty are rampant, as two generations have been denied the resources, knowledge and skills needed to improve their lives.

In 2001, 10 Biharis born after 1971 successfully petitioned a court for the right to vote. Hundreds of thousands of others, however, have been stripped of even the most basic of human rights. Both Pakistan and Bangladesh refuse to recognise their suffering and grant them citizenship. All but forgotten by the international community, the Bihari wait, desperate for attention, afraid to dream of a better future for their children.

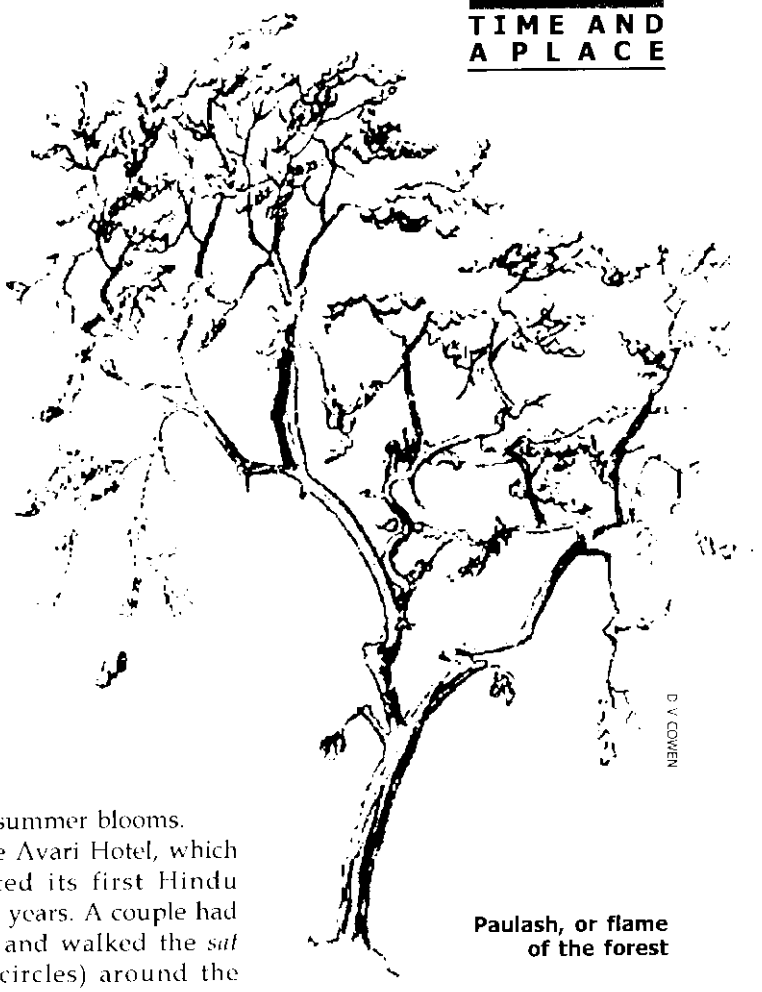






A taste of berries

BY **RINKU DUTTA**



D V COWEN

Paulash, or flame of the forest

Driving down Mall Road in Lahore this morning on the way to the Home Ministry Office to apply for a visa extension – sweaty palms, dry throat – I fail to appreciate the sunshine, bouncing gaily off the orange funnels of tiger lilies colouring the median divide. A puff of cotton, hovering over the cars ahead, catches my attention. Hoping to escape the anxious *whatifs* in my mind, I latch onto the white-haired seed, following its rise and fall through the air ... now just missing the raised white glove of a traffic policeman, now gliding behind the young motorcyclist whose t-shirt logo inspires me this morning: "Think DONE!"

The traffic light turns green. As the car speeds forward, I crane my neck to catch a last glimpse of the white puffball rising above the blue smoke of the spluttering autorickshaws. What a din of mufflers!

Soon, I discover the source of the cotton: the tall shimul trees (*Bombax ceiba*) bordering the road, with powder-puff seeds still attached to their split pods. A few months ago, these branches were a glorious crimson, sporting the fist-sized, fleshy flowers that also speckled the grounds below. Now the bloody tiger-claws of *Erythrina indica* cheerlead the summer blooms.

We pass the Avari Hotel, which recently hosted its first Hindu wedding in 18 years. A couple had tied the knot and walked the *sat phera* (seven circles) around the sacred fire. What were their names? Rama and what? Come to think of it, I haven't met or heard of a single renowned, extant Hindu in the two years that I've been frequenting Lahore. Considering the fact that this was once a major Hindu and Sikh city (I haven't met a Sikh yet either), that is a sad reminder of the legacy of Partition.

Further along, I spot another of my favourite plants, the rain tree, *Albizia lebbeck*. My heart wells with sad-sweet memories of evening strolls with my mother, the air perfumed by the cream pomponms of shirish, as they are called in Bengal.

I am delighted that I should find all of these old friends here: the tiger lilies that used to border the driveway of our house in Dishergarh, a small settlement on the banks of the Damodar River in West Bengal; the shimul, the grand monarch of our garden; the shirish, which lined the road outside. So far north and west from my childhood home, I never expected to find them here in Lahore. As we continue to cruise, I even spy a paulash tree rearing its spectacular head from behind a compound wall – the flame of the forest (*Butea monosperma*), the flower that symbolises the onset of spring in Bengal.

Putting down roots

One familiar shrub and tree after another, my ride along Mall Road is like a trip down memory lane. Before long, I forget my visa fears. I begin to enjoy the drive, amidst the companionship of the ancient trees – peepul, neem, arjun, seesham, amaltaas, alstonia – old trees with gnarled and knotted branches that mesh overhead in a green, leafy canopy. Many of these were growing more than 60 years ago. How ironic that the people they had grown with were uprooted, while they have held their ground!

We pass the High Court, a beautiful red brick building that harmoniously combines design elements of Mughal and Gothic architecture. Above the plaster-raised design of the Scales of Justice waves the green Pakistani flag. I

IMAGES BY D V COWEN

Paulash

Raintree

look at it with interest. Tomorrow, if I were to seek a permanent solution to my visa issues in order to live in Pakistan, I might need to change my citizenship. For while other foreigners (except Israelis) can opt for a seven-year residency permit as a relative of a Pakistani, I, as an Indian, can only stay here on temporary month-long visas, despite being married to a Pakistani. I can try to prolong my stay by pleading for extensions, but the length of stay appears to depend mainly on the discretion of members in the upper echelons of the Home Ministry.

The Indian spouse of another Indo-Pakistani couple managed to obtain a six-month residency permit from Islamabad. They were told that that was the maximum length of stay allowable for an Indian spouse; if she wishes to stay longer, she must apply for Pakistani citizenship.

The Indian laws, concomitantly, are no less stringent. Restricting long-term residency permits and requiring the sacrifice of birth citizenship make settling down in any one country – India or Pakistan – a huge impediment for crossborder couples. The duo mentioned earlier eventually became so frustrated with manoeuvring through the red tape that they opted for an unconventional marriage. They now maintain parallel homes in the two countries; they meet whenever the visa regime is merciful, or else plan one rendezvous or another in neighbouring lands like Nepal or Sri Lanka. This, however, is an option that few would be able to exercise. After the initial resistance, most couples eventually yield, and one partner sacrifices both passport and citizenship.

For Siddiqa Faruqi, a Karachi lady married to a Lucknow cousin now residing in Delhi, changing citizenship was a traumatic decision, put off until circumstances made it absolutely unavoidable. Predictable grief ensued: Siddiqa was not able to get a Pakistani visa in time to attend her brother's funeral in Karachi.

Chakh ke dekho

The car slows and we swing left at Kim's brass canon, Zamzama, made famous by Rudyard Kipling. The Lahore Museum, whose first curator was Rudyard's father Lockwood, is on the right. The other day I met Naheed Rizvi, the museum's present director, at a lawn party. She has undertaken significant renovation work in the museum, uncovering the original ceiling, which had once held glass that had naturally lit the halls.

We spoke of the Bengal School of Paintings, part of the museum's most treasured assets and a reminder of an important cross-Subcontinent connection. Abanindranath Tagore, the school's founder, had taught at Shantiniketan, which is about 150 km from my hometown of Dishergarh. As an amateur artist, I had been profoundly influenced by what he had instructed: "If you want to paint a tree, look at it, sit in its shade, observe it change through the seasons. Then, go home and paint it." The celebrated Lahori painter Abdul Rehman Chugtai had trained at the Mayo School of Arts, now renamed the National College of Art, and was taught by Samarendranath Gupta, a Bengali artist. His paintings use both the Bengal School techniques and Persian miniature styles.

We arrive at our destination, a typical matchbox office building. 'The Education Department', a signboard announces. I walk up to the Section Officer's desk, housed in a dark room off a long, cramped corridor. I know the man. I frequent this place. He smiles and says: "I thought you must have left!" I am assured a two-month extension this time, but warned that for any further extensions I'll have to go to Islamabad.

We are driving back. Released from yet another immediate visa crisis, we give in to a traffic-light vendor selling *falsas* (*Grewia asiatica* berries). S buys a packet of the magenta-coloured fruit for 10 rupees. Taking the small newspaper cone through the car window, he asks the youngster, "Are they sweet?" He replies: "*Munh ka zaiqa badal dega*" (They'll change the taste of your mouth). I pop a salt-sprinkled berry in my mouth and wince. It's tangy!

The next time someone asks me why I opt for all this trouble, what holds me here in Pakistan (S aside), I'll steal this falsa-seller's line and challenge: "*Chakh ke dekho. Munh ka zaiqa badal jaega!*" (Sample it. It'll change the taste of your mouth).

Baby-booming India

A 'youthful' India will inevitably age. There must be creation of wealth and productive employment today, to prepare for tomorrow's dependency.

BY ANANT SUDARSHAN, WITH SHRIPAD TULJAPURKAR AND DEBARUN BHATTACHARJYA

As with any region of similar size, scope and history, it is difficult to characterise 'Southasia'. Common threads do run through this part of the world: shared histories, common religions, entwined cultures, interlocking geography. Yet any one of these is inadequate in defining a binding, region-wide character.

Perhaps an answer lies not just in the past that Southasia's people share, but in the common challenges they face in the future. The creating of lasting and well-functioning democracies, eradicating illiteracy and poverty, finding development approaches that are sustainable in terms of both energy and environment, and battling terrorism and sectarian violence – all of these are problems for the region as a whole. One particularly crosscutting question is how best to tackle population growth, how to draft policies that are sensitive to the realities of population character, change and trend – referred to collectively as the study of demographics.

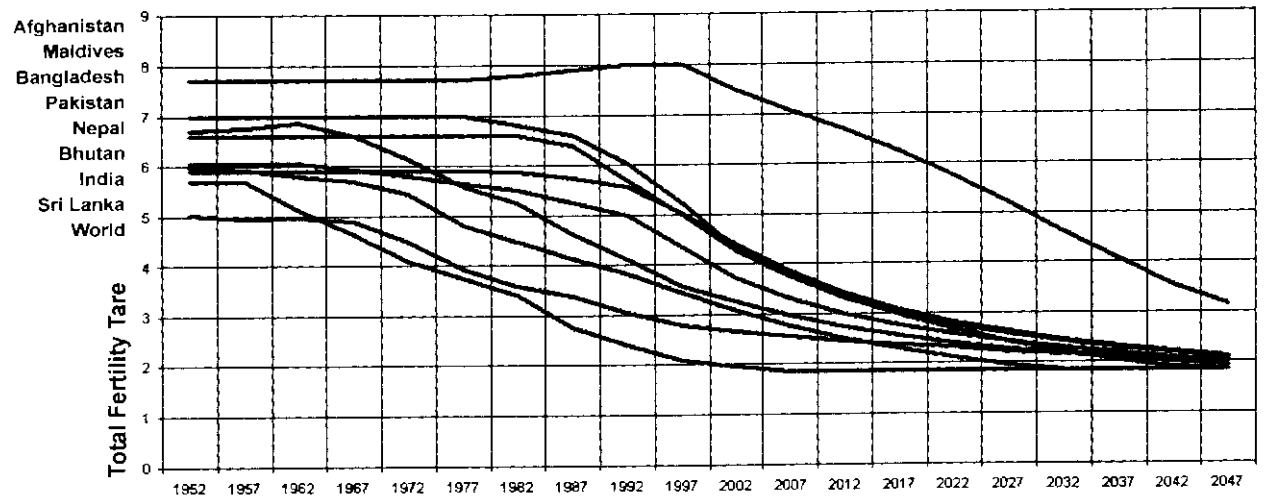
While the size and structure of a population – as well as how this is expected to change – affects virtually every aspect of a society, in general too little attention is focused on demographic factors when framing national policy. This is particularly true, and critical, in the case of India, where significant population growth is inevitable, making it particularly important to invest in the young people of today. While the focus here is India, it is important to realise that much of Southasia is undergoing and facing similar processes and questions.

Population bomb?

That India has a huge and growing population is hardly a secret – indeed, the argument that 'we just have too many people' has been part of popular debate throughout modern times. Unfortunately, the ability to constrain population growth is necessarily limited by two factors. The first is what demographers like to call 'Population Momentum'. This refers to the fact that

Table 1

The Southasian Fertility Transition



even after a country reduces its fertility to replacement levels – a rate at which successive generations remain about the same size – population continues to grow for a while before finally stabilising. In essence, the cause of Population Momentum is the birth of large numbers of children when fertility is still above replacement. These children then go on to reproduce, driving population increase. This means that even if India dropped to replacement levels overnight, it would still end up with a lot more than a billion people.

The second factor is the mixed, heterogeneous nature of India's society. In terms of demographics, there is a world of difference between, say, Kerala and Bihar. India's populous BIMARU states* lag far behind the national average when it comes to controlling population size, and these state-level disparities have a large impact on overall population growth. Taking these facts into account, projecting population size into the future reveals that India will in fact grow even *faster* than what most estimates (such as the United Nations projections) based on average national statistics suggest.

Back in the 18th century, English political economist Thomas Malthus published a famously pessimistic prediction: "The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race" – in essence, that the human population will eventually outstrip the food supply. While Malthusian theories on the effects of population growth and fears of a population bomb may well be unfounded, it would be foolish to deny the importance of understanding what India is going to look like in the years to come. It is, of course, not impossible to reduce the country's final stable population through development, with quicker drops in fertility and mortality, and an increase in the age of marriage. In order for this to happen, however, careful attention needs to be paid to the few, yet populous, states that have resisted substantive change.

The rising tide

India, and indeed all of Southasia, is undergoing a transition from a state of high fertility rates to one of stable population (see Table 1). This decline normally occurs only once in a country's history, and will have a number of significant implications over the next few decades. The decline from a high fertility rate to one low enough to stabilise the population is referred to as the *fertility transition*; in such a situation the replacement level is a little above 2.0, whereas the figure for India is currently about 2.7. Fertility transitions are associated with growth and opportunity, but also represent severe challenges for the future.

Countries that are undergoing a relatively sudden drop in fertility tend to experience what is referred to as a 'baby boom'. India, where over 60 percent of the population is under 30 years of age, is seeing precisely this phenomenon (see Table 2). Over the next few years, the country has the rare luxury of a large and youthful workforce, as well as decreased old-age dependency in the population. This 'bulge' in people who are young and productive is a wonderful opportunity to grow quickly, and has certainly played a part in India's recent increased growth.

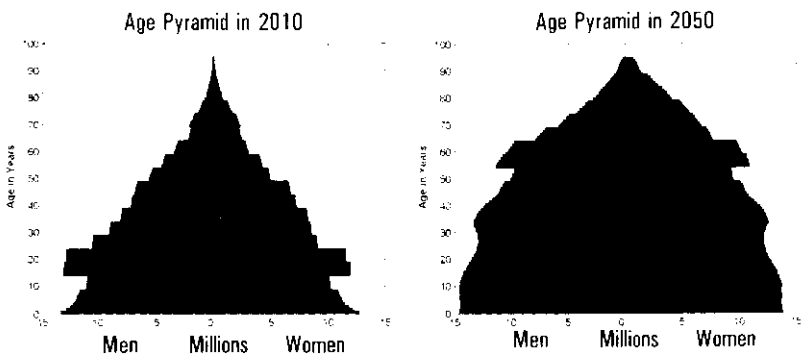
However, a country that is primarily young today will also be largely old tomorrow. A population in which a large number of people are either too young or too old to work places a heavy burden on the relatively fewer numbers who must support them. The graph in Figure 3 highlights the timeframe when the dependency levels in India's population are expected to be low: beyond about 2025, India can expect to see a rising number of dependents.

To understand the pressures that aging can place on a nation, we need only look around the world. The United States, for example, is currently struggling to ensure that its social security system will be ready to cope with the impending retirement of its baby-boomer generation. As a large fraction of American society prepares to leave the workforce, the implications on state finances, policy and public life are enormous. In Italy, for every ten workers there are a staggering seven pensioners, and over a third of pre-tax annual earnings by the working population is being used to pay pensions.

Fast growth, and the creation of wealth and productive employment today, is therefore more important than ever before in India's history. How well the country does in the next three decades is not merely about solving current problems, but also about insuring against the inevitable future challenges.

One such challenge that has not been confronted is education funding. Successive Indian governments have

Table 2



Age distribution of India's population in 2010 and 2050. Note the bulge at the bottom moving up, and the distortion of the pyramidal shape with aging.

*Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh

talked for years about the need to increase spending on education. Spending at least six percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education has been held up as the ideal. But India continues to spend under four percent of its GDP on education, and within that, a little under 1.8 percent of GDP on elementary education. This would be an unfortunate state of affairs at the best of times, but when looking at the age distribution of the country's population, it makes for particularly poor public policy.

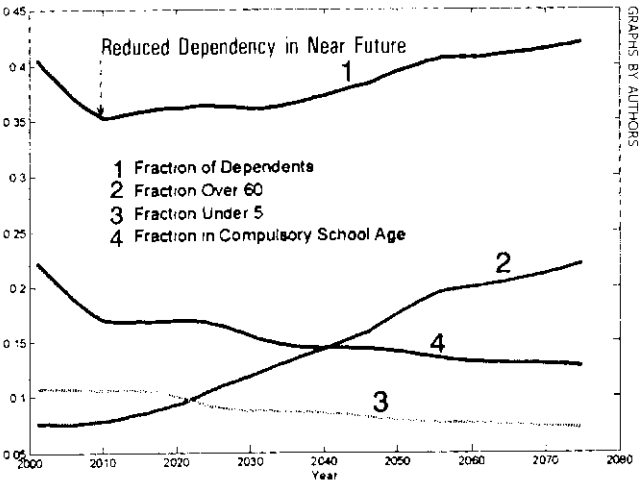
The 2001 Census of India reported that over 22 percent of the population was between 5 and 14 years of age. As can be seen in Figure 3, which starts at 2001, the percentage of children who must be educated in schools will remain high for the next few years, before declining gradually as the population ages. Correspondingly, there will be an increase in demand for college and university education, vocational schools and technical training centres. An insufficient investment in education today will translate into an under-skilled workforce in the next few decades. The last thing that India can afford is to let this young workforce be held back by a lack of sufficient educational funding and opportunities.

Retirement and marriage

As life expectancies have risen over the last half-century, societies have worked to define a reasonable retirement age that makes economic sense for their citizens. In India, 93 percent of the economy lies in the informal sector, and consequently the concepts of 'retirement' and 'pensions' are less significant here than in many other countries. Even so, the formal sector remains important, particularly as a middle-class employment option. Already, Indian retirement ages have been moved up from 58 to 60 in many sectors, and there is serious discussion on the possibility of raising it further. In higher education, for instance, allowing people to work longer might mitigate teacher shortages.

In the near future, it is certain that a significant fraction of people over 60 will also be under 65. An increasing retirement age is therefore likely to have significant short-term effects. Some of these might be regarded as generally positive, such as a reduction in pension payments and an increase in experienced workforce. Others, such as the holding back of a younger workforce and the resulting unemployment, are much more worrying. In the case of the education sector, the availability of experienced teachers and a larger quantity of available teachers might be a very good thing. In other areas, however, the consequences of unemployment among the next generation could outweigh any short-term good that might result. It is therefore crucial to consider the balance of such effects across age groups, sectors and regions.

Then there is the issue of marriage, for the problem



The changing face of India: Change in the fraction of dependents (under 14 and over 60 yrs) with time. Also note the demographic window of low dependency.

of finding a mate, too, is a 'policy' issue. 'Marriage policy', for example, is crucial if the state is to work towards reducing the increasing imbalances in India's sex ratio. The 2001 census in India reports a child sex ratio of 927 males for every 1000 females, with the figure being far worse in many regions (*See accompanying story, "The absent daughters of Punjab"*). Shameful as this statistic is in itself, it is even more worrying when we look a little further into the future.

A skewed sex ratio at birth today, combined with higher female mortality rates, inevitably results in an even more imbalanced situation 20 years in the future. This is also the time when people look to get married, and, in a monogamous society, a lack of women tends to have uniformly depressing consequences. Several recent studies have found that the presence of a large number of men who are unable to find a mate is a driving force for prostitution, increased crime (especially against women), the spread of HIV/AIDS and so on. In states like Punjab, for instance, women are already brought in from other parts of the country to make up the deficit that exists today. Yet as sex ratios continue to change in the wrong direction, this is a problem that is only going to get worse.

India is currently at a very significant stage in its demographic history, and the deep-rooted ramifications of its fertility transition are being realised too late and too slow. The fact is that, over the next decade, people will become both India's most valuable resource and its greatest challenge. As such, India's policymakers in New Delhi and the individual states must confront the issue and study the trends realistically in order to make intelligent decisions that will take the second most populous country in the world into the future

GEORG NAGGIES

Looking to the shadows

India's unorganised labour has always played a critical part in the economy, but the only time New Delhi has paid attention has been to pass largely employer-friendly legislation. Two important draft bills are currently being considered.

BY **RAJASHRI**

They work in almost every conceivable situation, along with their entire families. They do agricultural labour in season, and are artisans, head-loaders and construction workers. They sweat in brick-kilns and quarries, glass- or brassware operations. They toil for far more than eight hours at a stretch, yet they do not have the luxury of either weekend holidays or social-security benefits. They number around 300 million, yet they are not part of any organised system of work. They constitute the bulk of the workforce in independent India but are rarely written about. They are not on any list, register or muster roll. They are the anonymous contributors to the national income. They are, in short, the survivors of the other India at work – invisible to the glitzy, high-tech environs of the new India-on-the-move. Unorganised-sector workers contribute nearly 45 percent of the national income, and produce nearly 40 percent of industrial products. And their ranks are growing, in accordance with the omnipresent emphasis on short-term contractual employment.

According to the National Sample Survey Organisation report of 1999-2000, workers in the unorganised sector in India total 369 million; the corresponding figure in the organised sector is just 28 million. Within this category of unorganised work, those employed in agriculture take the lion's share at 237 million; construction numbers 17 million; manufacturing activities, 41 million; and 37 million each in trade and transport, and communication and services.

With the advancement of technology, the fragmentation of work has allowed for separate activities to be carried out in different places. The necessity of using skilled labour has also decreased, as each task can comprise of simple operations that can be performed by non-regular workers. For instance, over 50 percent of bangle production is done at homes by women and children – indicating the clear cost-advantage to the employer. Firozabad, in Uttar Pradesh, is famous for its bangle production – an unorganised-sector industry that is more than 200 years old. Here, workers used to learn on the job, working for free until they acquired the necessary skills. There was no formal process of recruitment or training. Even a significant amount of the furnace-related activity was done manually, although now motors ensure that workers produce more in eight hours than they used to in twelve.

Meanwhile, it has been a long-standing demand of trade unions that comprehensive legislation is required to cover unorganised-sector workers. Little, however, has emerged so far. The recommendations of the second National Labour Commission, constituted by the previous National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, did not come out with any concrete provision for guaranteed minimum wage, social security

or employment regulation. In fact, it was not until around the eve of the national elections in 2004 that the NDA government finally floated a social-security scheme whose coverage, while not grossly inadequate, was found wanting. Even this, however, was subsequently shelved.

Similarly, without any consultation with trade unions, the present United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government introduced a labour bill in 2005 that seeks to exempt employers from filing various returns, registers and statements, mostly pertaining to employees and employment conditions. Trade unions have opposed the draft bill. While two significant pieces of comprehensive legislation for unorganised-sector workers were introduced last year, both currently remain in the draft stage, requiring a significant amount of improvement.

The other India

The informal sector accounts for around 93 percent of the total working populace in India. A large section of these workers consist of women workers and child labour, and most belong to the socially 'backward' sections of society. Nonetheless, they have been dubbed the "ultimate entrepreneurs" by none other than the International Labour Organisation for their ability to sustain a livelihood with very little capital. This is an entrepreneurship that need not be envied, as the norms of 'decent work' do not apply to them.

A 2005 ILO report titled "The Other India at Work" visited 74 small- and micro-enterprises (a sophisticated term used to denote work in the unorganised sector) in ten clusters spread over several states of North India. The report's focus was on the informal manufacturing and artisan clusters that made up the "original manufacturing hubs", which have subsequently been diversified into a piecemeal variety of jobs. There is every reason to believe that their number is increasing. While many of the advantages of globalisation may have been taken up by the new manufacturing and service clusters – knitwear in Tiruppur, automotive components in Delhi and Madras, IT and back-office work in Bangalore and Gurgaon – the ILO report found that the bulk of the informal sector remains languishing in abysmal working conditions.

Although around half of the locations surveyed were found to be officially registered, employers preferred to remain unregistered to avoid government interference (read: labour inspection) and tax liabilities. In fact, 75 percent of the owners of unregistered ventures stated that they expected higher incomes by operating within the informal economy. In addition, the survey also found that much of the work subcontracted to the micro-enterprises was from larger, generally registered enterprises. This is a relatively recent development, having sprung up over the past decade-and-a-half. Whether this was done as cost-cutting or to escape labour legislation is not clear, but these small enterprises have clearly been discovered as a pool of cheap, casual labour for larger businesses.

This is an entrepreneurship that need not be envied, as the norms of 'decent work' do not apply here.

Of those labourers whom the ILO surveyed, nearly two-thirds were from micro-enterprises employing from one to five workers; over half of these also had a system of subcontracting work. The quality of employment was found to be poor in terms of wages, social protection, and conditions of employment and work environment, while the level of skills and technology was also low. Although no employer reported child labour, the researchers found many instances of child workers engaged in hazardous work. While most employers and employees appeared unaware of the adverse impact of the poor work environment and occupational safety, both employer and employee showed a keenness to improve working conditions.

For the moment, however, this is a working population almost completely devoid of any social-safety net. For most of these workers, there was no arrangement compensation in case of disability due to work-related accidents. Salaries were deducted during sick days, and medical expenses had to be covered by the workers (or their families) themselves. Only four percent were covered by the Employees State Insurance Scheme, which is stipulated for any employer with a certain number of employees. Not a single worker expected to receive unemployment benefits in the event of joblessness. Labourers said that they would work until the age of 51, after which they expected their family members to support them.

Slow attention

In September 2004, soon after the UPA government took over power, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector was set up, keeping in line with a commitment spelt out in the National Common Minimum Programme four months earlier. This body was supposed to examine the Unorganised Sector Workers Bill of 2004, which had been prepared by the previous government. The commission itself, which is not a statutory body but rather an initiative from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's office, was a response to a longstanding demand by trade unions for protective legislation for the unorganised-sector workers.

ILO

7-year-old Asif, packaging for Nestle in New Delhi

In the meantime, the National Advisory Council, the body set up in 2004 to oversee the Common Minimum Programme, had

also drafted a social-security bill aimed at the unorganised sector. That bill was found wanting on several grounds, particularly in terms of the very limited number of people it sought to cover. The commission subsequently decided that instead of a single bill, two separate bills were needed to deal with what it called the "heterogeneous and highly differentiated universe". Thus, in mid-2005, there emerged two pieces of draft legislation: the Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Bill, and the Unorganised Sector Workers (Conditions of Work and Livelihood Promotion) Bill. Together, an estimated 300 million workers could be covered within five years.

The first bill, dealing with social security, is more or less comprehensive in that it will cover all workers in the unorganised sector with a monthly income of INR 5000 or below. This will include wage-earners, self-employed (including small and marginal farmers) and home-based workers. In addition, coverage will be extended to casual unorganised-sector workers. The only problem with this legislation had been its approach to the identification of employers. Here the suggestions of some of the trade unions have been accepted, such that wherever the employer is not identifiable and the worker is compelled to change jobs frequently, the contribution of the employer should be borne by the appropriate government or board (state or central), or shared between the state and central governments.

More troubling has been the second bill. Since this draft was made public, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-aligned Centre of Indian Trade Unions has suggested several improvements. These include more specific and concrete provisions on "protection against retrenchment/dismissal", appropriate compensation, working hours, labour inspection, appropriate dispute/grievance settlement machinery and punishment for contravention. It has also demanded that workers in the unorganised sector be given the benefits that have already been mandated under other industrial legislation, such as the Trade Union, Minimum Wages, and Maternity Benefit acts.

The hope for these two draft bills is in creating what is called the 'social floor', for providing a measure of social security and ensuring a core of minimum acceptable standards of decent work. Though it may be that the unorganised sector in India is being taken up seriously for the first time, much depends on how keen the government machinery is to implement even the minimum currently envisaged. While the bills were postponed last December, it is now hoped that they will be taken up during the monsoon session. If anything, the hurdles are the financial burden the government would have to bear in terms of enforcement and monitoring. With the existing labour-law enforcement machinery, after all, simply passing this new legislation would be the easy part.

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Movement profile

SEWA, of self-employed women

The 'informal' sector in India actually comprises 93 percent of the country's workforce, 40 percent of whom are women. As the Self Employed Women's Association has discovered, such overwhelming numbers are sure to offer significant opportunities – and frighten the establishment.

BY **RENANA JHABVALA**

Laxmiben lives in a slum area in Ahmedabad with her four children. She supports her family by carrying cloth parcels on her head in the downtown cloth market. She inherited this work from her mother, and has done it all her life. Although Laxmiben's earnings are small and insecure, she is well respected among her fellow workers and the market's shopkeepers because she is the vice president of SEWA Bank – a women's cooperative set up by the nationwide Self Employed Women's Association. SEWA has been gaining strength in its work of helping to lift women out of poverty since 1972.

Laxmiben is part of India's vast informal economy, which includes door-to-door vegetable vendors, rickshaw pullers and rag-pickers, as well as garment and paperback makers, beedi rollers and food processors. In rural areas, the landless agricultural labourer, the woman crafts-worker, the silkworm farmer or the forest worker are all part of the crucial informal economy, which accounts for nearly 93 percent of the total workforce in India. And over half of them, 53 percent, are self-employed. Women constitute roughly 40 percent of this part of this economy, although official statistics often report significantly less. At the same time, informal-economy workers are extremely active economically, accounting for about 60 percent of India's GDP, over 50 percent of national savings, and about 47 percent of all exports.

In spite of these significant contributions, however, these workers remain at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid. Their earnings are low, just one-third that of formal-sector workers; their employment is insecure; and, especially in rural areas, they are often without work for several months every year. Unlike workers in the organised economy, they also have access to neither social security nor pension plans. Within the informal sector, women fare worse, earning the lowest amounts. Out of the entire female workforce in India, 94 percent toil in the informal sector.

It was as in an attempt to organise these workers that, in Ahmedabad in 1972, trade union leader Elaben Bhatt founded SEWA on Gandhian principles. Functioning as a trade union, SEWA operates through a joint strategy of struggle and development, with goals of full employment and self-reliance. Full employment includes four types of security: work, income, food and social. Today, SEWA has a membership of nearly 800,000 in nine states. By and large, SEWA members are poor women, traditional and deeply rooted in their communities. Throughout her life, a woman faces multiple needs and risks; Ela Bhatt believed that both the needs and the risks must be addressed if a woman is to emerge from poverty. Through SEWA, members struggle for their rights by building a mass movement of workers, grounded in the everyday issues of the women themselves. Local and national collective bargaining is subsequently able to take place with employers, contractors, municipal authorities, police, forest departments and the like.

Mandal services

SEWA has also promoted about 100 women-owned cooperatives. The largest of these is the SEWA Cooperative Bank, with whom Laxmiben works, but also include initiatives for artisans, agricultural and dairy farmers, and others. In addition, the organisation has initiated more than 5000 membership-based organisations, which include village-based savings and credit groups, as well as producer groups. Owned by the women workers who put up the capital, and managed by an elected board, these organisations are sustainable in terms of both finances and decision-making. In the rural areas, the self-help groups, or *mandals*, have formed their own district federations, with which the government has been working closely for the past 15 years, in order to channel developmental

projects aimed at poor women.

Over the years, a host of programmes have been set up to focus specifically on the many needs of SEWA's members. The Bank, set up in 1974, prioritises asset-creation for its members. It has established over 20 types of savings accounts and 15 types of loans, tailored to the worker's immediate or long-term needs. While the women themselves are the Bank's owners and board-members, day-to-day operations are conducted by a team of qualified professionals, along with a large number of '*Bank Sathis*' who are 'mini-banks' in themselves. In rural areas, banking operations are conducted through self-help groups and district federations run by the rural women. At present, there are 300,000 depositors in SEWA Bank, with a capital of INR 950 billion.

Of necessity, self-employed workers depend heavily on market systems and structures. The process for poor, rural, self-employed workers' organisations to enter national markets is a long and slow one, however, facing endless constraints, cutthroat competition, and constantly changing tastes and requirements. The SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre, started in 2000, helps local organisations develop their own infrastructure to meet market demands, linking the local district federations and cooperatives with national and even global markets. A related project, the SEWA Gram Mahila Haat, aims to eliminate middlemen and provide market-oriented services to its members, so that they can be in direct contact with their local-level customers and clientele. The Gram Mahila Haat sells such items as salt, gum, agricultural products and handicrafts.

Beginning in the 1970s, one of the earliest SEWA focuses was on health. Today, SEWA Health provides a wide range of primary healthcare services, emphasising disease prevention and promotion of well-being, including both mental and physical health. Additional curative initiatives include health centres, mobile clinics, and programmes for tuberculosis, AIDS and occupational health. All of these are particularly dependent on local women, especially traditional midwives (*dais*), who can subsequently become the barefoot doctors of their communities. Two critical related concerns were childcare and insurance, both of which are now widely available to SEWA members and their families.

Finally, for more than a decade a SEWA sister organisation has offered technical and financial housing services, having built over 5000 low-cost houses and undertaken large-scale slum upgradation programmes. With the understanding that training, research and communications are vital to building a movement, an academic institute, the SEWA Academy, also offers several specialised courses, as well as a basic training programme for members who are identified as potential leaders. At present, the Academy has undertaken a campaign to make every SEWA member literate.

Too successful?

In the last five years, SEWA's membership has increased four-fold, and has gone from working in just Gujarat to having operations in eight additional states. Perhaps because of its emerging size, the organisation has recently come under attack from the Gujarat state government. After the devastating earthquake of 2001, SEWA supported its members in the worst-affected districts, through both relief work and long-term rehabilitation focusing on livelihood restoration. Taking note of these efforts, the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development approached SEWA and Gujarati officials to undertake a holistic, seven-year rehabilitation programme.

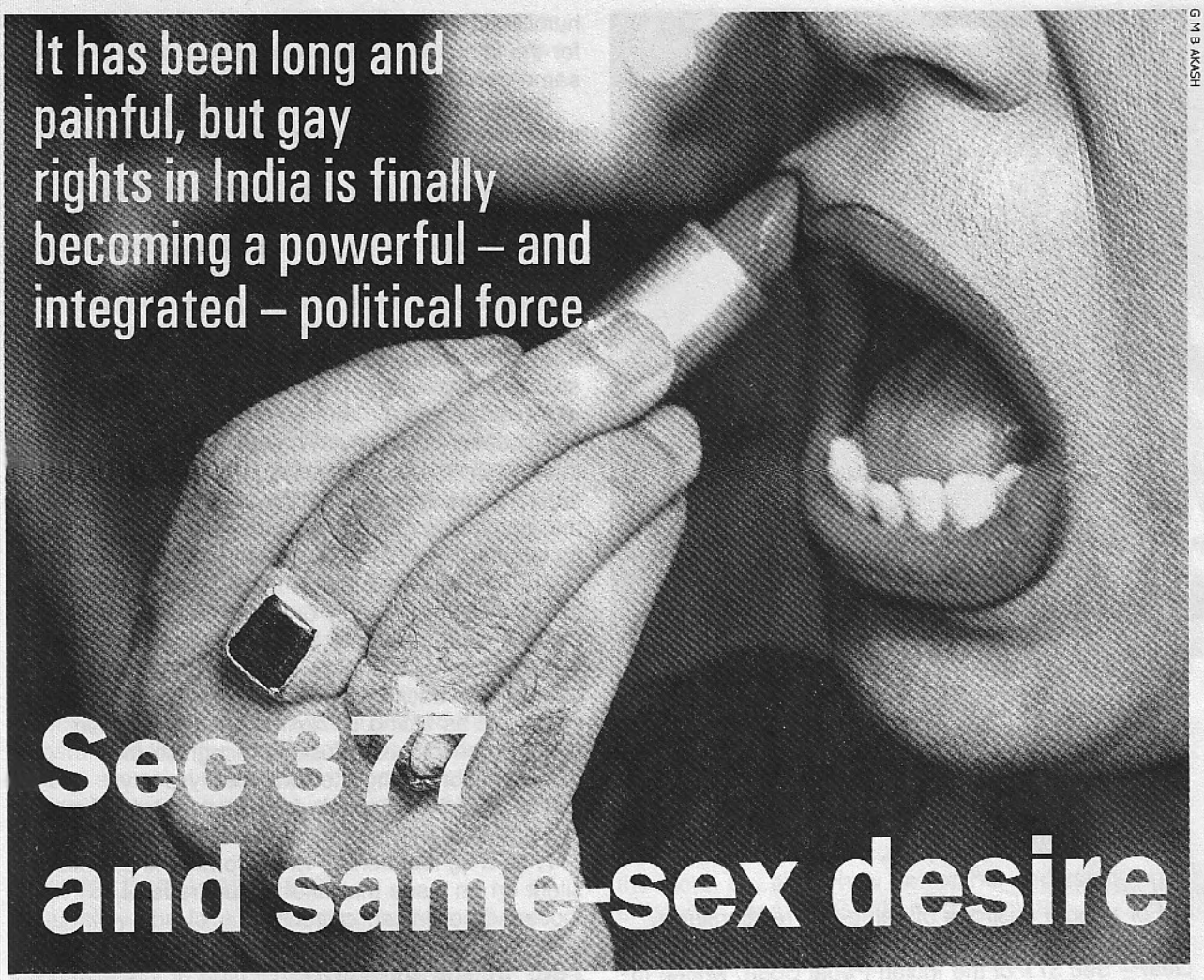
For three years, the project went well, with notable accomplishments. Slowly, however, official attitudes towards SEWA changed in Gandhinagar, Gujarat's capital. First, the government began to withhold payments to the women for work done. At one point, the total outstanding amount was a staggering INR 20 million, a sum that was impossible for SEWA to work around, resulting in a complete cessation of all project activities. This situation naturally caused immense hardship for the local people, and more than 12,000 poor women's livelihoods came to a grinding halt. In addition, it caused a loss of credibility for SEWA and its sister organisations, since local suppliers were owed thousands of rupees.

Instead of heeding SEWA's request for reimbursement, the government slapped a special audit on the organisation and began to leak disinformation to the newspapers. SEWA subsequently decided to withdraw from all projects with the Gujarat government. Nonetheless, the government has continued to attack SEWA, in both the media and the villages.

In October 2005, some of what the organisation took away from the experience was recorded in the SEWA newsletter:

What we have learned is that when a mass-based organisation – and that too of poor, working women of all communities and castes – grows and expands its base, it becomes a strong political force. This undoubtedly attracts both the attention and ire of politicians, bureaucrats and others. A feeling of competitiveness, of being threatened to some extent by this collective strength develops ... Also, the fact that SEWA organises women of all faiths and castes is not acceptable in all quarters. And it is these poor women who take the lead for social change in their villages.

SEWA's strength – indeed, its most crucial asset – has always been its membership. And in spite of all the setbacks, SEWA membership continues to grow, while new services continue to be added. As Gauriben, a member from rural Gujarat, says: "We are used to the cycle of drought and plenty. When there is a drought, we just tighten our belts and continue our work."



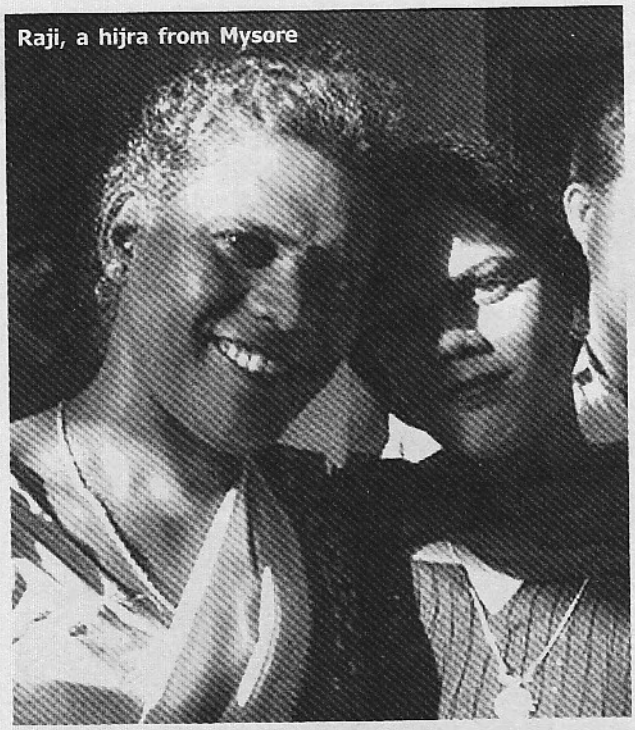
G M B AKASH

Sec 377 and same-sex desire

BY **GAUTAM BHAN**

For many years, the struggle in India of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual (LGBT), *hijra*, *kothi* and other non-heterosexualities – what this writer terms as 'queer' sexualities – has been fought along the silent margins of both mainstream society and 'progressive' politics. Things have begun to change in recent years, but there is still a long way to go. While certain sections of Indian society have opened up due to the activism of the queer-rights movement, the spaces that queer lives must negotiate in India today remain difficult – in their everyday lives, as well as in their struggle to articulate sexuality as not just as an aspect of identity, but as a deeply held political language in its own right.

Society repeatedly tells us that there is only one kind of acceptable desire – male, heterosexual, within marriage. Social structures further define and defend what can be referred to as the 'hetero-normative ideal': rigid notions of what it means to be a man or a woman, how the two should relate, and the family unit that should result from such a relationship. This dynamic creates a unique kind of universe. A certain type of family is privileged – heterosexual men and women of the same caste, class and religious backgrounds – while any other realities outside this ideal (think single women, widows, sex workers, inter-caste and inter-class couples, along with LGBT-identified people) are punished, subtly and not-so-subtly, through law, medicine, social norms and religion. There is a fundamental principle at work here: those in power create rules and structures that enforce their vision of what is acceptable, and penalise all those that fall outside of these structures. This play of power will sound familiar to those in other political movements, but unlike in the case of gender, caste, religion or statehood, for example, the acknowledgement of such marginalisation on the basis of sexuality is relatively recent.



Raji, a hijra from Mysore

Hijras are allowed neither passports, ration cards, nor the right to vote. On the margins of gender, they are literally bereft of citizenship.

For people desirous of same-sex relationships, the boundaries of this regulation are unashamedly clear – Sec 377 of the Indian Penal Code, written in 1863, criminalises "voluntary carnal intercourse against the order of nature", effectively criminalising homosexual activity even when it occurs between consenting adults in private. In an unfortunate shared-neighbourhood legacy, most Southasian countries carry similar laws.

Few cases tend to be brought to the court under Sec 377. Yet both documented evidence and the lived realities of thousands of queer people in India testify to the fact that the law creates an environment that justifies violence, stigma and discrimination against same-sex desire. In the name of the law, there is widespread police abuse, violence and sexual assault, especially against transgender hijras and non-middle-class LGBT people. Activist groups in Delhi have documented tales of leading hospitals and mental-health professionals ordering 'conversion' therapies that include years of electric shocks and psychotropic drug prescriptions to 'cure' people of their sexuality. In 2001, the offices of an NGO working on sexual health and HIV/AIDS prevention were raided, and the members were charged under Sec 377. More recently, in Lucknow, several gay men were set up in a fake encounter and then arrested, publicly humiliated and charged under Sec 377 – simply for the crime of trying to meet a partner of the same-sex.

Hijras – indigenous transgender communities that have some recognition, however fleeting and negative it may be, in Southasian history, mythology and culture – are allowed neither passports, ration cards, nor the right to vote. On the margins of gender, they are literally bereft of citizenship, for the nation demands that citizens be classified according to binary gender systems. Over the past few years, there have been more than a dozen cases of lesbian couples committing suicide together when either faced with or subjected to forced separation and marriage to others. Same-sex couples do not even have the dignity of having their relationships acknowledged for what they are, let alone receiving any of the legal entitlements and rights that married heterosexual couples take for granted.

The stories are endless. LGBT people are unable to live their lives openly or with dignity out of fear of discrimination, arbitrary loss of employment, or violence. Activists must work with hands tied behind their backs, since any action can be construed as aiding a criminal offence. Human rights organisations refuse to recognise the discrimination, citing the law. Nearly every institution, from hospitals to workplaces to places of worship to schools, cites the existence of Sec 377, as a fig leaf behind which to hide and remain silent on an issue that affects hundreds of thousands of Indian citizens.

Fear of the alleyway

How do we understand the true impact of Sec 377? Law does not simply live within the walls of the courts – it actively shapes the social, moral and ethical fabric of our society. It can challenge as well as enforce the boundaries of what is imaginable, and what is acceptable. The existence of Sec 377 shapes much of the public discourse around sexuality, in a context that is already marked by a deafening silence.

Given this, what has been the queer movement's response in recent years? The advent of HIV/AIDS made it easier for activists to talk, albeit indirectly, about (male) same-sex desire. For LGBT activists in the late 1990s, the only means to garner attention or support was to speak of queer persons as the victims of human rights violations and/or HIV/AIDS. Though the disease has undeniably opened up spaces to talk about sexuality, many activists question the longer-term effect of using HIV/AIDS as the entry point for what are some of the first conversations on same-sex desire in the Subcontinent. They argue that the 'bodies' of LGBT people and their desires have thus been pushed to the periphery of the discourse, and in their place has emerged an acceptable dialogue of rights,

violence and disease prevention. This new rhetoric, however, leaves unchallenged the hetero-normative structures that legitimised social conceptions of queer people as (at best) the concern of a small minority, or (at worst) that of the deviant, abnormal, perverted and/or mentally ill. Put simply, one did not fight for LGBT people to live lives of respect and dignity – one simply fought for their right not to be subject to public and extreme violence, and not to die of HIV/AIDS.

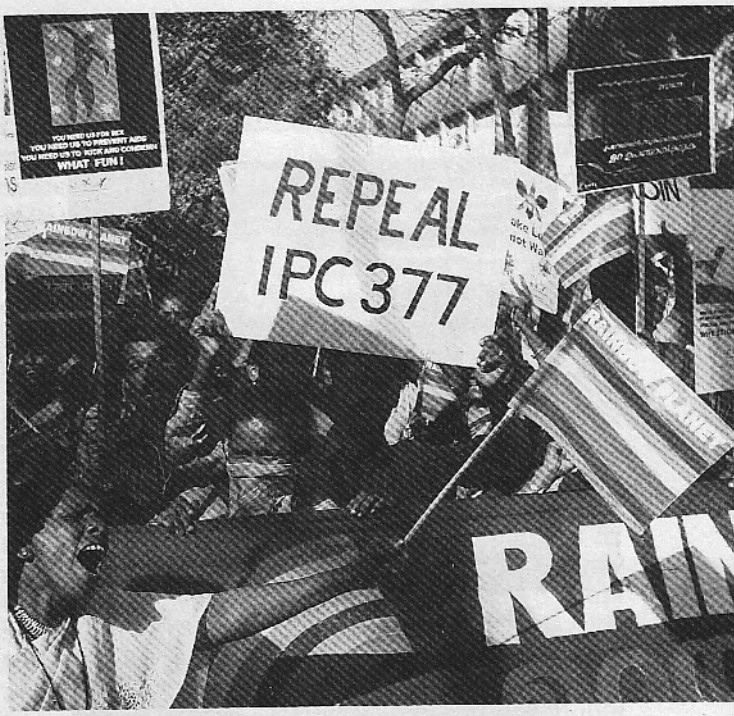
Just a few years ago, when sexuality was first articulated as a matter of politics – largely by using human rights language to speak of 'gay rights' – it was given little legitimacy. Sexuality, as gender used to be, has long been placed at the bottom of a hierarchy of oppressions – it is seen as a 'lesser politics', one less important than those of poverty, caste, religion and labour. In India, alliances with progressive movements were all the more precious for the few activists that could afford to lead open queer lives and organise around sexuality. This fact was made abundantly clear to this writer while attending a planning meeting for the World Social Forum in Bombay this past year. While trying to get gender and sexuality included as a thematic focus of the forum, one of India's most respected trade-union leaders said that the WSF was a space to "discuss serious issues of development and society, not to traverse through its dark alleyways and shadowy corners".

Intersectional interests

Fortunately, the face of the queer movement has changed in recent years, as has the perception of the movement in both larger society and within other political groups. A legal challenge against Sec 377 is currently traversing the corridors of the Delhi High Court. This is riding on supportive recommendations against the law by the Planning Commission of India, the National Commission for Women, and the Law Commission of India. Each of these shows cracks in the state's monolithic and homophobic response to the legal challenge to the law.

Outside the courts, several queer groups have begun to articulate a notion of 'intersectionality' – that discrimination based on race, class, caste, religion and gender all intersect with homophobia, and therefore could not be fully understood without taking sexuality into account. An example of this approach was the 2004 formation of Voices Against Sec 377, a broad coalition that consists of human rights groups, women's groups, child-rights and LGBT organisations. The coalition was created to show the courts that Indian citizens beyond the LGBT-identified community cared about gay rights and were against the law. The success of the coalition in bringing together a broad alliance to fight for sexual rights, however, was the result of a longer process.

Many queer activists are, after all, parts of other



World Social Forum, Bombay, 2004

political movements. Using the language of intersectionality, they demanded inclusion in these other groups, arguing that these interests were incomplete without an understanding of sexuality. It was not about homosexual or heterosexual, therefore, but about how patriarchal understandings of gender, race, class and religion impact *all* sexualities. With this new articulation, a broadening of the queer spaces occurred, to bring in non-LGBT-identified people who were still able to see and speak of queer rights as their issue, rather than as the issue of a small minority community.

Certainly, an increasing presence in media, films, books and other forms of popular culture have also increased the visibility of queer communities and helped such alliances, as has the rising numbers of vocal queer activists. These have inevitably led to the emergence of a more confident, self-conscious and positive articulation of queer lives by queer people themselves, as a new generation of activists increasingly finds more spaces in which to be themselves, as well as a more expansive set of voices that feel comfortable and confident in speaking about queer issues.

This new sense of freedom, however, is still hesitant, for few of us can afford to forget how fragile are the accepting spaces we inhabit, or how few of us truly have access to them. Yet this new freedom is a heady feeling, and it cradles within it a hope that seemed distant just a few years ago. As long as this hope persists, the movement will continue to fight for the rights of all Indians to live lives of dignity, and be free of the oppressed labels of despised sexuality.

Salaam Mumbai
As a salute to Bombay, we present a variegated run of three articles on the city of contradictions.

The spirit of Bombay

BY **NARESH FERNANDES**

At the end of June, as Bombay anxiously scanned the skies for evidence of the monsoons, the metropolis was drenched by a cloudburst of self-righteous indignation. Evidently irked by a survey by the US-based *Reader's Digest* on urban etiquette that placed Bombay at the very bottom of a 36-city stack, the city's bold and beautiful mounted an enthusiastic defence of the metropolis.

"You realise this is only on the surface and people here have a heart," a prominent advertising-filmmaker named Prahlad Kakkar pronounced. His exasperation was echoed by actor Makarand Deshpande, who told journalists, "Mumbai has heart and soul, and those who think otherwise lack it."

The battle was even taken global by my friend Suketu Mehta. In an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, he quoted a lyrical, locomotive allegory from his wonderful book, *Maximum City* :

> If you are late for work in Mumbai and reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, don't despair. You can run up to the packed compartments and find many hands unfolding like petals to pull you on board ... They know that your boss might yell at you or cut your pay if you miss this train ... Come on board, they say. We'll adjust.

Mehta's enthusiasm can perhaps be attributed to the fact that he hasn't lived in Bombay for at least six years, since he finished researching *Maximum City*. While there is much to be admired about the bovine way in which we allow ourselves to be packed into the local train each morning (about 4700 of us in each nine-coach train meant for just 1700), it is evident to anyone who actually travels by train that our capacity to adjust has been worn very thin.

Not so long ago, a man clinging to the footboard of a moving local train was pushed to his death by fellow passengers in a scuffle about space. It was an unusually violent conclusion to the sort of disputes that break out at rush hour every day, when passengers on trains bound for the furthest stops blockade the exit against those doing short trips. Those who live closer to the Churchgate and Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus starting points pay the price for taking up precious space in the trains traveling to the end of the line instead of taking shorter-haul trains, and are taught a lesson by being allowed to alight only several stops after their destinations.

As for those hands reaching out, many of my women friends think they are actually like octopus tentacles. They may unfold like petals as the train leaves the station, but as it pulls into a stop, they most often dart out to grope women on the platform.

The others who have taken it upon themselves to protect Bombay so passionately from the insults do not even have Mehta's state of expatriation for an excuse. Both Kakkar and Deshpande imply that even if Bombay does not do the little things, like hold doors open for the people behind us or say 'thank you' to strangers who have afforded us random acts of kindness, we have actually got the big things right. After the bomb blasts of 11 July, we were reassured by the sight of thousands helping out to offer aid to strangers. But that's human nature: adversity brings out the best of everyone. Bombay's problem is that we've failed to show such generosity and engagement with our neighbours in times of normalcy.

That's exemplified in the debate about Bombay's civility. Etiquette, after all, is a measure of our sensitivity to people around us, and Bombay barely has any. Many visitors are shocked by how little we care for the small courtesies: most working days, we do not make way for ambulances in traffic, we honk at old people crossing the street, and it sure as hell isn't in our DNA to say thanks.

Bending backwards

Still, it would be possible to ignore the relatively insignificant acts of rudeness if India's commercial capital was really doing the important things correctly. But it is impossible to believe that a city with real heart would allow 60 percent of its residents (that's

more than seven million people) to live in slums. If India's most affluent city really had a soul, it would not countenance the inequalities that allow children in the shanties to grow up malnourished. In mid-June, 31 of 41 children surveyed in a slum in Bhandup, in northeastern Bombay, were found to have inadequate levels of nutrition.

If we really were sensitive to the people around us, we would be demanding that the government restore subsidies to public hospitals rather than ensuring that we all have place to park our cars. In March, residents of the posh Walkeshwar area physically attacked policemen towing away cars from a no-parking zone. "Each household has three to four cars and parking is already an issue in this city," one resident plaintively told journalists. "Where do we go?"

Early in July, Bombay ground to a halt for three days after a relatively small amount of rainfall caused floods across the city – including in such elite neighbourhoods as Breach Candy. The newspapers were filled with the usual feel-good stories about how strangers had helped each other to safety through waist-deep floodwater. They also used the opportunity to bash the *Digest* survey, one of the criteria for which was whether citizens were likely to help strangers pick up scattered papers. Bombay "doesn't bend to pick up a pile of papers but bends backward to lend a helping hand", proclaimed one article.

If only that were cause for reassurance. The floods were a replay of similar events exactly a year ago. On 26 July 2005 an astonishing 37.2 inches of rain pounded down within 24 hours. The downpour left 447 people dead and damaged the homes of tens of thousands of citizens, rich and poor. That deluge brought into focus the years of wilful damage the city had suffered. Politicians and bureaucrats, in their eagerness to appease builders, have completely subverted the city's development plan. Skyscrapers have been sanctioned without considering the ability of the sewage and storm-water drainage to cope. Meanwhile, the 'reclamation' of mangrove swamps reduced the area available for the rainwater to drain.

Many suburban areas were flooded because the Mithi River spilled over its banks. A highly polluted channel in central Bombay, the Mithi soon emerged as a symbol of all the misguided development that has been visited upon the city over the last decade. Many members of the middle class piped up to claim that the river channel had been narrowed by the slums that have sprouted along its banks. In reality, it was the government-approved reclamation work that has reduced the Mithi's capacity to carry monsoon water to the sea. The extension of a runway at the airport diverted its course by almost 90 degrees; the hypermodern Bandra Kurla Complex office district squeezed it some more; and the Mithi's mouth has been blocked by the construction of a grandiose Sealink that will carry vehicles across the bay between Bandra and Worli.

Faced with a catastrophe of the magnitude of last year's flood, citizens of most other cities would have swarmed unto the streets to demand immediate remedy from the politicians and administrators. But the residents of Bombay were content with passing around SMS messages that thundered about the government's misdeeds. That was slacktivism at its best – and yet another sign of just how unconcerned Bombay's citizens are about our crisis, and how willing we are to point an accusing finger at those less fortunate.

Never-say-die

Though those floods should have been a wake-up call, over the last year the city silently acquiesced to two decisions that will only deepen our malaise. In May, the Supreme Court of India ruled that owners of 52 mills in central Bombay could sell their land as they wished, ending a decade-long debate. Activists had pointed out that if a portion of these lands (which form a geographically contiguous 600-acre chunk) were acquired by the state, Bombay would finally have the opportunity to create parks, build broader roads and other infrastructure so as to decongest itself.

With this court decision, developers have now received the green light to build skyscrapers throughout central Bombay, with no thought given to the city infrastructure's ability to respond to such pressure. Shortly after, in the middle of June, the government announced plans to allow construction on 5500 acres of salt-pan land – coastal tracts that allow monsoon waters to drain. Neither of these decisions caused as much outrage from the city's elites as did the results of the *Reader's Digest* survey.

Bombay's middle classes have attempted to blame our crisis on political forces beyond our control, but we're working overtime to add to the problems of our already burdened metropolis. We're now the fifth-most polluted city in the world, but the eagerness of the middle classes to buy vehicles (in a city at which traffic moves at 12 km an hour) continues unabated. Bombay adds just over 200 vehicles to its narrow streets every day.

During this year's floods, as they did last July, Bombay's beautiful people attributed the city's ability to cope with disasters to "the spirit of the city", which the newspapers have variously described as "indomitable", "never-say-die" and "undying". These are facile formulations that seek to absolve the elites of any real responsibility of fixing things. They seem to believe that the city's capacity to "adjust", as Suketu Mehta puts it, is so infinite, that they do not really have to bother reconsidering the path they have chosen for the rest of us.

Even if Bombay's defenders are right in asserting that the premises of the Digest survey are flawed and that we aren't as rude as they say, we'd still be in the running to be declared the most callous, thoughtless city in the world.

RESCUE FOUNDATION

The embrace of Mumbai

The siren call of Bombay attracts the rich and poor throughout Southasia, including large numbers of women from Nepal and Bangladesh. While some are dragged under by the vicious subculture of manipulation and forced labour, others discover fulfilment.

BY **SONIA FALEIRO**

In a petal-strewn Bombay alley, up a narrow rank of rusting metal stairs, is the one-room bedroom-bathroom-kitchen of social activist Indira Paudyal. Two bamboo mats are beds; a wall cupboard holds clothes, paperwork, photographs. A kerosene stove warms water for lemon tea. A single window overlooking suburban Thane's envied greenery eases the claustrophobia. Through this, 32-year-old Indira, who emigrated from Nepal two months ago leaving her two children and parents behind, watches a street slowly flood, hears the comforting clang of temple bells, and, like the persistent buzz of mosquitoes, listens to conversations in languages she does not understand.

Indira is among an estimated 300,000 Nepali women in Bombay. While the majority are housewives who accompany their husbands, following the push and pull of political and economic realities, many are employed, in sectors ranging from domestic and sex work, to non-profits and small businesses. However, like the city's estimated 200,000 Bangladeshi women, at least half have been trafficked, including into domestic and forced labour, and may spend years trying to regain control over their own lives. Even those living the 'immigrant dream' are faced with obstacles, of being both women and migrants.

Says social anthropologist Rahul Srivastava: "Migrant women are preferred to men, because they are cheaper and can be exploited more. In sweatshops, behind sewing machines and as cheap domestic labour, they are easily manipulated by the power and brutality of the economy." As their numbers increase, Bangladeshi and Nepali women are helping to change Bombay's migrant face. In the process, they are contributing to its successes, and concerns.

Dangerous fairy tale

Such concerns are particularly true of women in the sex trade. Activists agree that up to 50 percent of Bombay's 100,000 sex workers are Nepali. Triveni Acharya, president of the Rescue Foundation, which focuses on migrant girls in Indian brothels, says that 5000-6000 Nepali women are trafficked into Maharashtra every year. The majority are sold to brothels for INR 25,000 to 100,000 and upwards, depending on their physical attributes and age. Although most girls are between 14 and 17 years old, a few are as young as six or as old as 40.

For up to three years, sex workers receive no money except for tips from customers, and it is only after the brothel manager decides that the girl's debt has been paid off that she receives a cut of her earnings – approximately INR 150 for less than an hour, INR 300 for one hour and INR 600-800 for the night. Popular girls may service up to 15 customers a night. Every year, up to 10,000 female children are believed to go missing from Bangladesh, trafficked to India, Pakistan and the Gulf. "Bangladeshi sex workers were never taken into account, because they passed themselves off as Bengali," says Acharya. "But deception is harder now, and they outnumber their Nepali counterparts in Mumbai by a ratio of 60 percent to 40 percent."

An investigating officer who participates in brothel

raids, and requested anonymity, explains: "During the first two or three weeks of her arrival, the girl is broken mentally and physically. Beaten, raped, threatened and mocked that she can never escape." After a while, he says, most girls accept their circumstances and forget about returning home. Years later, there is only one job that she can do. "So she returns to her village, impresses the young girls with stories of Mumbai's prosperity, and beguiles them into running away. After they do, they find themselves trafficked into the brothel she has set up for herself."

Bangladesh's porous border with West Bengal, as well as its sea route, and Nepal's open border with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, enable this selling, buying and transportation of women. Poverty and illiteracy are the primary reasons that women become involved in sex work, says Acharya, while many also come from disturbed families. "For example, a Bangladeshi woman may find herself abandoned when her husband remarries. In both places, impoverished village girls and their families hear a fairy tale: *in Mumbai no one goes hungry*."

Last February, 21-year-old Fatima Ali, whose husband and family of four survived on 15 acres of petulant land in a village near Dhaka, was cajoled by a friend into journeying to Bombay. After a week's travel by boat, train and bus, Fatima was deposited at what she soon discovered was a brothel. The friend told her, "I'll be back shortly. Rest." She never returned. For 15 days, Fatima was mutilated with cigarettes, beaten and threatened with rape by the brothel's pimp. She believed that the beatings were meant to abort her month-old foetus.

On the 16th day, acting on a tip, police and members of the Rescue Foundation raided the brothel, freeing Fatima. She now works as a chef in a women's hostel. Her daughter Khushi is one year old. Back home, her husband has remarried, and wishes no contact with her. A dark-eyed beauty with hair falling to her waist, a baggy blue and white salwar kameez shrouding the dozens of burn scabs on her legs, Fatima shrugs: "I'll never return. I was hungry. There was no work."

Rafia and Hameeda

It is not only sex workers who are trafficked from Nepal and Bangladesh. Female trafficking for forced labour and domestic work has been traced to 20 districts in Nepal, including Lalitpur, Kathmandu, Chitwan, Jhapa and Lamjung. It is more difficult to track the source areas in Bangladesh because the majority of immigrants enter India illegally, and hence are unwilling to divulge details.

"It's never the girl's idea to enter illegally," says Kavita Saxena, deputy superintendent at the Rescue Foundation. "Greed is instilled in her. Whether it's greed of a job, greed of travel, greed for a marriage proposal – which a young, male trafficker, who is proficient at this, dangles in front of her ... not one of the girls knows what awaits them."

Neither did the family of 14-year-old Rafia Khan, a domestic worker who moved from a village near Chittagong to West Bengal, and then to Bombay three years ago. She and her mother and sister are all domestic workers here, collectively earning INR 2800 a month for working from 6 am to 8 pm. "There wasn't enough food in our village," she explains, simply. The Khans live in a construction of knitted palm leaves, with layers of plastic sheet and sacking for a roof, in a slum in Andheri West. Rafia's father, Shahnawaz, is unemployed and addicted to country liquor.

In a fortnight, Rafia says, she is to return home to marry. Shahnawaz, who rarely communicates with his wife and children but to beat them, has married twice, and Rafia hopes that her marriage will not tempt him into a third. "The fathers get frustrated from remaining unemployed," explains Shobha Kale, of the National Domestic Workers Movement. "They want alcohol to feel better, but don't have any money. So they beat their children, and extract money from them."

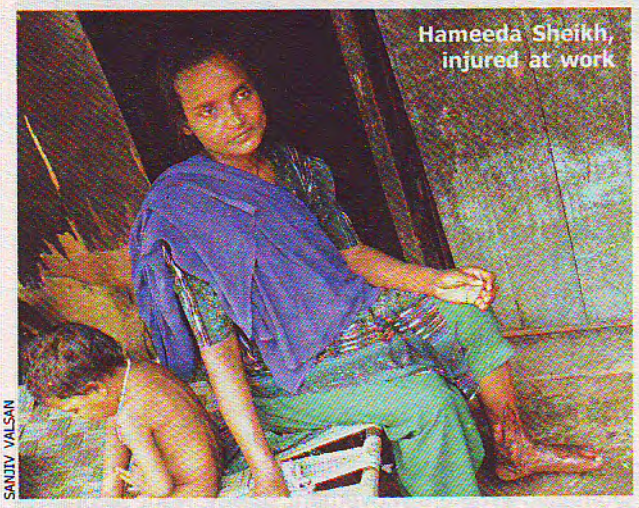
As the monsoon engulfs Bombay, its easiest targets remain slums like those in Andheri West. Perpetually wet and cold, with no access to water to drink or bathe in, their hunger never satiated, the Khans are contemplating resettling in their village after Rafia's marriage. "My mother doesn't want to return to Mumbai," she explains.

Across the city from Andheri West, South Bombay's Reay Road is a string of hutments inhabited by Bangladeshi families. Despite their poverty, with no identification, they are not entitled to ration cards. Until last year, Hameeda Sheikh, 38, worked as a steel polisher in a factory, earning INR 50 a month. After a hot steel container fell on her foot, corroding it to the bone, Hameeda was fired, and has since lived on the earnings of her eldest daughter, who pipes beads on blouses for INR 1.50 per blouse. Hameeda does not have the option of returning home. Her wounds have shackled her to a life of poverty in a city she had believed would lift that burden.

Both Hameeda and Rafia knew that survival in their hometown was impossible. They also believed the stories of the opportunities Bombay proffers. But in a city already teeming with the hungry, they quickly found themselves as disadvantaged as before.

Far left: Sita Dhuri, Nepali acrobat

SANJIV VALSAN



Hameeda Sheikh, injured at work

SANJIV VALSAN

Strength of community

Not everyone is as unlucky. Sita Dhuri, a Nepali acrobat with the Great Royal Circus, is content with her new life. Married to an Indian acrobat, Sita's hair is parted with vermillion, and she is a doting mother to one-year-old Pooja. Like many immigrants from central Nepal, Sita entered India via Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, initially leaving behind her parents and brother, who worked in the fields for a living. "My parents didn't want me to leave," she says. "But I put my foot down. I told them I'd return after two years, but I never did!" She traveled to Gujarat, and then Maharashtra, where she was joined by her family, who she left shortly thereafter.

Sita saw an opportunity to escape a life of drudgery by joining a circus as an acrobat artiste, a trying profession that inducts many impoverished Nepali girls like her. Sita performs five acts in three shows daily, earning approximately INR 8000 a month. Although she receives a fortnight of paid leave annually, she chooses not to visit her family, maintaining contact through phone calls. "This is better than home," she says. "Once my performances are over, I don't have to worry. At home, there's always something else to do. And here someone is always looking out for my child." Nevertheless, Sita says her daughter will not follow in her footsteps. "Children should be educated," she says, firmly.

Bindu Adhikari, heading back home

SONIA FALEIRO

Whatever their work, Bombay's immigrants maintain strong links with their ethnic communities. This is particularly true of those who work from home, are unable to speak Hindi or Marathi, and subsequently have difficulty assimilating. Gita Sharma, for instance, is 21 years old but only ventures out of her house with her husband, Raj, a chef in a Chinese restaurant.

For a city that has six Nepali newspapers and 21 cultural and political organisations, it is not hard for Nepalis like Gita to occupy themselves. The Nepal Sahitya Mahasangh, the largest Nepali cultural organisation in Bombay, celebrates Nepali festivals throughout the year. Says Shanta T Sharma, a Nepali teacher in a school in suburban Dahisar: "It's hard for new migrants, particularly housewives who aren't educated, to communicate with their Indian neighbours. So we wait for festivals like Teej, and sing songs about our lives in Nepali. And if there's something that's bothering us, whether it's our husband or mother-in-law, that's included in the lyrics as well!"

The lives of Bombay's Nepali and Bangladeshi women immigrants vary significantly – from those who live mild lives of domesticity, to those whose experience has been so dark that they cannot bear to talk about the past, nor harbour hopes for the future. But somewhere between the world of the weary, made-up women of the cages of Hanuman Tekri, and the bustling housewives of Thane's leafy green colonies, are women like Bindu Adhikari. She has struggled and succeeded in Bombay, but is now ready to settle down in Nepal.

Bindu moved to Thane from Nepal's Kaski District in 1991 as a 16-year-old bride. She had heard great things about Bombay, she says – about the shops, and how much money a man could earn by waiting tables at a restaurant, or guarding a building through the night. "I heard you didn't even have to be educated," she exclaims. Unable to speak Hindi, Bindu spent her first month in Bombay familiarising herself with the city through the chinks in her blinds. "I didn't like it first. I saw all the Nepali men working, and all the Nepali women sitting at home all day. I thought, 'I have hands and legs; I can work as well.'" She soon opened a vegetable shop in her house. Within months, business was flourishing, and Bindu also began selling music and videotapes to cater to her Nepali clientele. Soon she was selling albums of the *Lok Dohori* duets popular in Nepal, as far away as Rajkhot, Nasik and Pune.

15 years later, Bindu's business was flourishing. But she recently sold it, and bought a house in Chitwan, southwest of Kathmandu, where she will live with her husband and four daughters. "I've worked with Nepali women in Mumbai for years, encouraging them to do something with their lives. I've even traveled to Gujarat, meeting women in trouble," she explains. "Then I thought, 'why should I remain here when women at home need my help even more?' That's why I'm going. I don't think I'll ever come back. Bombay has shown me what I can do."

Bombay talkies: the documentary

For a city known for its flashy sensationalism, Bombay's everyday stories seem to get regularly swept away. Luckily, some of these are being caught by documentary filmmakers.

BY **UMA MAHADEVEN-DASGUPTA**

In the hours immediately following the Bombay train blasts of 11 July, we saw much of the city's generous and resilient spirit. Ordinary people briskly took the injured to hospitals, donated blood, handed out biscuits and water bottles. We also saw commuters getting into the trains again, coming to work, attending school and returning to normal life. We cheered: Salaam, Bombay.

And yes, the city deserves our salaams. It has always been a slightly unreal city – heroic, with a great heart. The city of dreams and dreamers, the city of Bollywood. And yes, India's commercial film industry has helped to create the myth of Bombay.

In one familiar kind of film, the young hero arrives in the city, struggles for a while and then achieves success. A variation on this has the young hero meeting a girl, romancing her, struggling for a bit and then winning her over. In the second kind, the gritty 'realistic' crime film, the young antihero arrives in the city, struggles for a bit and then slips into – well, not quite 'failure', but a life of crime. Indeed, in such films, this is just another kind of success.

In short, one kind of Bollywood film shows us the Bombay that is a firmament, studded with stars and starlets. The other kind, meanwhile, takes us into a version of the underworld. As for the city's 24/7 news channels, they are generally busy on another battlefield – warring for soundbites and ratings whenever the city is in a crisis, unwilling to give the time and space needed for a deeper analysis of Bombay's problems.

Million poems

At a time like this, in order to look for the 'real' Bombay, one turns instead to documentaries. Take, for example, Anand Patwardhan's two-decade-old documentary classic *Hamara Shahar*, the story of the city's four million slum-dwellers (that number has now increased to over six million). It is about their daily struggle for survival, not only for water, sanitation and livelihoods, but also for their space in a city that is constantly displacing them, pushing them further to the fringes.

This writer thinks of the wet and grey evening of this past 11 July, when young men from the same slums pulled bedsheets from their shanties to carry the wounded and the dead.

This writer also thinks of *Where's Sandra?*, Paromita Vohra's search for Sandra, the goodtime girl of Bombay films – not the bashful heroine, but the girl in the dress. On a local train in Bombay, Vohra finds a happy group of women, all secretaries, some knitting, some clapping their hands, singing: "Darling open the door / darling open the door / Why are you angry so?" Surrounded by the ads of the women's compartment – the earlobe-stitching, the work-from-home – and the sound of the train, they sing the chorus: "I will take you to Bandra and show you my Sandra..."

And the women get off the train, leaving the handgrips swinging from the ceiling of the emptying compartment. As the narrator reflects, there is a little bit of Sandra in all of us – the part that runs to catch the train to work, makes 'train friends', claps hands and sings.

Think of Arun Khopkar's film about Narayan Surve – his mill, his streets, his poetry and his city. And also of Paromita Vohra's *Cosmopolis*, which tells two tales about Bombay. The first, "The Forgotten City", is about the hush that fell over Girangaon, Bombay's mill district, when the mills fell silent. "The name of this poem is Mumbai," says the poet, for whom the city itself is a tragic poem: "Slapping a shawl on his shoulder / My father came down the hills / He stood at your doorstep / Gave you his labour..."

The camera rushes along the train tracks, but the mills fall

Documentaries set sail on this ocean of stories to look for these narrators, and they listen.

silent. We are left instead with images of frenzied partying at what is now called High Street Phoenix.

Discrepancies of food and toilet

The second story, "Defeat of a Minor Goddess", is about the defeat of Annapurna, the goddess of plenty, by her wealthy sister Lakshmi. Annapurna is charmed by her first meal of Bomdil curry and rice in this city by the sea.

But then the façade of easy camaraderie, the good-neighbourliness, the 'I love Bombay' myth begins to crack. Food habits become an issue. "The smells are very strong and the beliefs are very strong," says one woman, sharply defending the vegetarian discrimination that stretches from Nepean Sea Road to Chowpatty. "Wealth is clout." Standing on the balcony of her vegetarian ghetto, she smiles thinly, conclusively. Even for a vegetarian, there is something chilling in her fundamentalism, this determination to sanitise the area of "people like that".

And suddenly, we are in the midst of a political meeting. *Katenge bhai katenge, Machchi jaise katenge* is the slogan being chanted: "We'll cut them up like fish." The anger is directed against the immigrants from UP, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, who come to Bombay to work. One part of the city, turning upon the outsiders. Of course.

Paromita Vohra's *Q2P*, a film about toilets in the city, notes that, "The city of the future appears around us, in pieces, like a dream." But who is dreaming this dream, wonders the film, moving from the glass-and-steel facades of Bandra-Kurla, to the refuse lying on the beach, to the men queuing up at the public toilet, including the women's section. "So many men on the beach," explains the attendant.

In a slum, a young girl takes the film team to their public toilet. There is just one light bulb; the women carry candles and matches, just in case. Elsewhere, a Bombay municipal schoolteacher explains that, while girls in the second and third standards still use the toilets, from the fourth standard onwards they try to "control themselves", often going for seven hours with little or no water.

At a vocational training centre where they are taught to set hair and pluck eyebrows, the girls say that they avoid public toilets. We go by a system, says one trainee – the system of self-control. Would free toilets make women free, the film wistfully wonders.

Ocean of stories

And finally, Madhushree Datta's film *Seven Islands and a Metro*, her new documentary about Bombay, uses eminent authors Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chugtai as interlocutors to take us through the city. Although Manto decided to leave for Pakistan after the Partition-era riots, he loved Bombay; apart from his film work, some of his most powerful short fiction is set here. Although Ismat did not write about the city, she lived and died here. Harish Khanna and Vibha Chibber play Manto and Ismat, taking us through the different lives of the city. Nevertheless, despite the power of their narration, this framework has a kind of self-conscious staginess about it.

But the film works because of its several other narrators, the real-life inhabitants of this city. The bulldozer driver who must demolish the houses of slum-dwellers, including his own. The window-washer who would not mind staying in his perch above the city. The chaiwalla who cycles about the city streets at night, who came to the city after a failed love affair with a girl from another caste. Here, he is making a few rupees a day; back home in the village, the girl killed herself.

"It was an ocean of stories," Salman Rushdie wrote about Bombay in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. "We were all its narrators, and everybody talked at once."

What do documentaries like these do? They set sail on this ocean of stories to look for these narrators, and they listen. They are not perfect, but their commitment is remarkable. They set out with a camera, walk into the city's bylanes, sometimes just filming the empty street in the middle of the night. They let the dispossessed speak, and they stand back. They deconstruct the facile myths of the city – not to explode them altogether, but to discover the tiny, fleeting narratives of courage and resistance that are far more precious. As columnist Girish Shahane wrote recently: "They don't pay lip service to the worth of common people, but instead present complex, interesting personalities who make us feel that worth. In doing this, the documentary filmmakers take their place among the inheritors of Gandhiji's legacy to India."

One image from Datta's film comes to mind, that of small, stamp-sized photographs floating in water. Although perhaps a clunky image, it is all the more evocative after the recent train blasts in Bombay. Life seems so fragile in this city by the sea, where six million people travel in the suburban trains every day, clinging on by their fingers, occasionally falling, some dying while crossing the tracks. Inside the cars, they travel tightly packed – some become friends, singing bhajans, sharing intimate family stories, even cutting vegetables. When there is a crisis, they rush to help each other. Other days, the moment they separate, they atomise into the city, as people of different classes, genders, ethnicities, eating habits, smells and stories.

The *Times of India*'s final frontier

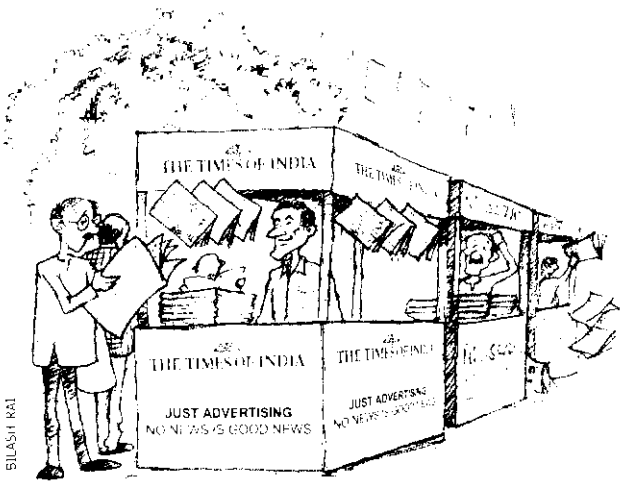
Emboldened by a history of cosy relationships with advertisers, over the past decade the *Times of India* has revolutionised the way that Indian newspapers must compete. With advertisers now making content decisions, print news no longer considers the reader.

SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

Even for a time when a newspaper is more spectacle than information source, the Delhi edition of the *Times of India* (TOI) on 30 January this year was remarkable, featuring stories on its front page so outlandish that a reader's first impression would have been of a day of dedication to tomfoolery, to compete with the hoary antiquity of All Fools' Day. Readers who managed to negotiate the length of the page and arrive at its anchor space were rewarded with an answer to the mystery. TOI, it transpired, had engineered a harmless hoax to jolt its readership into an awareness of the multitude of possibilities that the future held in store. Underlining its intention to think beyond the limitations of the present, the paper had datelined its issue for the year 2025.

TOI's stated purpose with the 30 January issue was to drive the agenda of transforming Delhi from a rather slovenly, unkempt city, into a true world metropolis. Together with this foray into the consciousness of the capital city, the TOI group (otherwise known by its formal corporate appellation of Bennett, Coleman and Company Ltd., or BCCL) also announced Times Now, a satellite television channel covering news and current affairs. Launched in association with the international news agency Reuters, Times Now came as the finale of a rapid process of diversification that had seen the group venture into FM radio, music publishing and retailing, internet commerce, and the lifestyle and entertainment segments of satellite TV broadcasting. By extending its reach into the final frontiers, the company was fully geared to consolidate its position as India's dominant media entity, leveraging its strengths in print, television and radio for the ultimate in commercial synergy.

TOI has solidly established credentials for being in step with future trends. When other newspapers were mired in old habits of thought, clinging to outdated beliefs that they served a public purpose, TOI boldly proclaimed its exclusive devotion to the commercial calculus. It tided over the storm of derision that followed, squeezing out the last rupee of advertising revenue available in the market. And it succeeded not merely in maximising advertising revenue yield, but even in sharply boosting circulation and profitability. It is a



measure of the company's success that it has managed this entire process of growth and diversification without diluting its ownership, still retaining the character of family control that has for long been an entrenched, seemingly eternal feature of the Indian media.

Right to free advertisement

Freedom of the press is, of course, an inviolable principle, of benefit especially to those who own one. In the more enlightened debates that have taken place around the issue, freedom is necessarily balanced by a notion of responsibility. And in maintaining the uneasy balance between information as commerce and information as a basic human entitlement, the emphasis has been not so much on curbing the business of the press as on ensuring the sustenance of sufficient diversity in the press. A liberal democracy, though, allows for few institutional restraints on the functioning of the media, leaving the marketplace of ideas as the final arbiter.

Yet the issue has cropped up periodically in public policy debates in India. In 2003, the Standing Committee on Information Technology in the Indian Parliament urged the government to prescribe a "ratio for coverage of news contents and advertisements in newspapers". This was considered necessary, since,

This was not a situation of a newspaper being forced to raise prices because it was deprived of space to carry advertisements, but of a newspaper able to slash prices and drive out competition because it had managed to establish a pre-eminent position in the bazaar for advertisements.

"a tendency is being noticed in the leading newspapers to provide more and more space for advertisements at the cost of news items."

For its part, the government responded with a plea of inability, given the judicial precedents on the issue. For those immersed in the culture of neo-liberalism, these seemingly outlandish policy options may seem the exclusive domain of politicians operating in a milieu of power without responsibility. That would be a misperception, since the idea of a 'price-page schedule' (see below) has been a part of the public debate on the Indian media for decades, and its proponents have included many with vital interests in the newspaper industry. The awareness is well-developed that, unlike in most other industries, price competition in the media could be antithetical to consumer interest. So too is the belief that newspapers as a public institution require the controlling hand of public policy, when self-discipline fails.

As a policy instrument, the 'price-page schedule' was put forward by the First Press Commission, appointed in 1952, which was India's first official exercise in evolving a theory of the media in society. Without undue fuss, this body went to the core issue in newspaper economics, recommending that certain norms on the allocation of space between editorial matter and ads be enforced as a means of preserving the press as a diverse institution. Guided by these findings, Parliament in 1956 passed into law the Newspapers (Price and Page) Act, which sought to regulate the price of a newspaper in accordance with the number of pages it offered, and to oversee its allocation of space between editorial and advertisement content.

In 1962, in the case of *Sakal Newspapers v the Union of India,* the Supreme Court found the price-page schedule to be in violation of Article 19 of the Indian Constitution, which enshrines the rights to both free expression and commerce. Handing down its ruling, the court found that the order took away the freedom of the newspaper to charge whatever price it chose, constricted its ability to disseminate news and opinions, and cut into its commercial fortunes by limiting advertising space.

With the benefit of hindsight, it could be pointed out that the relationship between circulation and advertisement revenue is not quite as neat as the Supreme Court believed it to be. Ad revenue is dependent not merely on gross circulation, but, more crucially, on the demographic composition of the audience itself. In 1996, the TOI proudly proclaimed that it had crossed the magical threshold of a million in circulation. But in the breathless ardour of this achievement, it did not quite inform readers how its printing presses were sustaining this output, when every additional copy was being sold at a price rapidly plunging below the cost of production. The simple answer was that the paper had, through its conquest of the ad market, assembled enough of a war chest to be able to ramp up its financially draining output, and to reach those segments of the populace that were of the most intense interest to advertisers.

The situation was the exact opposite of what the Supreme Court had considered in the *Sakal case:* not of a newspaper being forced to raise prices because it was deprived of advertisement space, but of a newspaper able to slash prices and drive out competition because of the pre-eminent position it had managed to establish in the bazaar for advertisements.

These particularities of the media market have long engaged the public, which is part of the reason why the price-page schedule as an instrument of regulation retained a significant degree of appeal for years after it was deemed unlawful. Judgments about its utility, however, have been influenced by contingent factors. In 1965, a Committee on Small Newspapers upheld the price-page schedule as a legitimate device of protection of the right to free speech. But in 1975, the Fact Finding Committee on Newspaper Economics thought it to be of little use. That was a time of acute newsprint shortage, when the commodity was selling at a massive premium. Under the circumstances, few newspapers had an incentive to raise page numbers to offer a wider menu to readers. Advertisement revenue was simply not adequate to support the expenditure involved in printing those additional pages. Yet the Fact Finding Committee did agree that a statutory ratio between advertisement and editorial space would serve the public interest.

The issue was revisited by the Second Press Commission, appointed in 1978, which argued that the price-page schedule did not amount to an abridgment of Article 19 freedoms. On the contrary, the Commission concluded, the objectives "being [the] promotion of competition and prevention of monopoly, the law will advance freedom of speech and expression".

Marketing 'all ideas'

This provides the context for grappling with another significant judicial intervention in interpreting the right of free speech, one that came in a case involving the TOI group. At hand was a government notification, issued in a situation of acute newsprint scarcity, limiting

the allotment of the commodity to newspaper publishers. In October 1972, the Supreme Court decided that the order was in violation of the Constitution, in that it imposed unreasonable restrictions on free speech. The judgment in the case of *Bennett, Coleman and Company Ltd v the Union of India* is of historic significance, since it lays out a whole range of norms on the exercise of the right of free expression. In addressing the issue, the court seemed to oscillate between a notion of free speech as a privilege that is enjoyed by the few, and a broader conception in which the unreserved exercise of the right by all would inevitably engender conflicts in the use of scarce resources.

Without unduly burdening themselves with facts, the majority of the bench that decided the Bennett, Coleman case concluded that "the press is not exposed to any mischief of monopolistic combination". Of special significance in this context, however, was the lone dissenting judgment by Justice K K Mathew. Rather than blandly ruling it out, Justice Mathew explicitly conceded the possibility of a conflict between the public interest and the profit motivations of the press as a commercial institution. Using a "theory of the freedom of speech" that essentially viewed it in terms of twin entitlements – to speak and to be informed – the judge observed that, as a constitutional principle, "freedom of the press" was "no higher than the freedom of speech of a citizen".

What was essential under the circumstances, Justice Mathew wrote, was to evolve "an affirmative theory underlying freedom of expression", and to attend to the "various conditions essential to maintaining a workable system". The problem was in bringing "all ideas into the market [to] make the freedom of speech a live one having its roots in reality". In pursuit of this ideal, it was first necessary to recognise "that the right of expression is somewhat thin if it can be exercised only on the sufferance of the managers of the leading newspapers."

In the years that followed, newsprint allocation was the single most important lever of control that the government exercised. But in 1995, in response to persistent pressures from the newspaper industry, newsprint import was deregulated. The immediate context was a rapid, 70 percent rise in the price of newsprint between October 1994 and April 1995.

Cover price dominoes

Whether by coincidence or design, TOI's aggressive foray into the national capital – which till then had been considered safe ground for the *Hindustan Times* (HT) – happened at a time when newsprint prices were on an upward trajectory, and already engendering some commercial distress for even the bigger newspapers. According to TOI's official story, it had stayed at a moderate level of circulation in Delhi for a longish period, and was merely experimenting with changing price variables. In March 1994, the newspaper sharply cut its selling price from INR 2.40 to 1.50, except for Friday's issue. To guard against a catastrophic drain of revenue, the Friday price was raised to INR 6, but soon cut back to 2.90.

By early-May, the results were distinctly promising. But an unexpected hitch arose from another quarter. Newspaper vendors, a powerful lobby in Delhi, were worried about a potential loss of income, since their fees were computed as a fixed percentage of the paper's cover price. To assuage these worries, TOI agreed on an ad hoc basis to increase the vendors' fees from 25 percent to almost 40 percent. It is unclear whether an assurance to revert to the old pricing scheme and eliminate these contingent measures was also conveyed. But three months into the new deal, vendor organisations, claiming a breach of commercial agreement, began a boycott of the TOI. For weeks on end, the street corners where newspapers were bundled for daily distribution resembled battle zones, and vendors managed to disrupt every effort to distribute the TOI. An injunction obtained from the Delhi High Court served little purpose against raw muscle power. Editorial columns in both the TOI and the HT became the medium through which this battle of ideas, such as it was, was fought.

The newspaper scenario was transformed beyond recognition by the time the peace was established. Apart from the HT, two other newspapers, the *Indian Express* and *Pioneer*, felt compelled to match the TOI's offering by way of cover price. With all newspapers published in Delhi facing a massive drain of circulation revenue, the race began in earnest for the conquest of those demographic segments among the city's English-reading audience that would be of maximum interest to the advertisers.

Needless to say, the TOI emerged the winner. It could not have been otherwise, since by 1994 the TOI had long since internalised the most significant rule of competition. Simply put, the advertiser was king, and the readership, no longer a burden to be borne, a distant abstraction with little immediacy to the newspaper except as a shopping entity.

A recent chronicle of the Indian media industry records that the history of the country's press can be written in terms of one particularly significant point of inflection. The print industry, long mired in romantic recollections of its contribution to the Indian freedom struggle, was only shaken out of its reverie by Samir Jain, current TOI boss, who entered his family's business as a decisive player around the mid-1980s. According to this account, Jain's achievement was to use "simple marketing principles and good business sense to transform a down-in-the-dumps publishing company into a profit machine".

It is a testament to its essential simplicity that the same strategy, when deployed in Hyderabad in 2000, encountered rather stiff opposition. Both *The Hindu* and the *Deccan Chronicle*, with longer established bonds in the city, pre-emptively slashed prices to retain and even increase their market shares. Price competition had evidently reached the limits of its potential in expanding market share. The focus then

The advertiser was king. The readership, but a distant abstraction with little immediacy to the newspaper – no longer a burden to be borne.

shifted to the demographic character of the audience.

Paradoxically, those segments of the newspaper-reading public that put much emphasis on price are relatively less important to advertisers. The TOI marketing strategy then devolved upon a simple principle: to bring that segment of the populace with high purchasing power into the gaze of the price-sensitive buyer. It was the decade of globalisation, when the cult of the celebrity acquired unparalleled proportions, and the celebration of the good life of the few became a source of vicarious delight for the many. Instrumental in the creation of this ethos was the TOI.

Majority adspace

The TOI had always been strongly entrenched in Bombay, home also to most of the country's principal advertisement agencies. Enjoying a near monopoly in this market for decades, the TOI by 1994 was estimated to have an advertisement ratio – measured as the proportion of total printed area devoted to ads – of 55 percent. In comparison, the HT in Delhi and *The Hindu* in Madras enjoyed much more modest ratios, in the lower 40s. This was the initial advantage that endowed the TOI with the confidence to launch a price war against HT in Delhi. The war chest assembled in Bombay was being deployed in the conquest of the next most lucrative market in India.

The gains of the price war would have proved ephemeral, if the TOI had not recognised that celebrity narcissism was the wave of the future. The newspaper's distinction was in being significantly ahead of the curve when it came to adapting editorial content to fit advertiser needs. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the TOI began a shift of content towards fashion, lifestyle and entertainment that had its loyal readership thoroughly flummoxed. But even as many among the older audience cancelled their subscriptions, the newspaper succeeded in attracting new readers from previously unexplored segments of the population. The results were dramatic.

On 22 December 2003, TOI readers began their day with a veritable display of triumphalism. Blazoned across the front page of the newspaper was a message of thanks to the Delhi readership, which had supposedly made TOI the city's premier newspaper. And just as important as the aggregate figures was the composition of the audience. "Over three-fourths" of its readers, proclaimed the paper, were in "the highest socio-economic category"; "almost a fourth" were "executives, businessmen, [and] self-employed professionals"; and the newspaper had established itself as the "clear choice" of the youth, with an estimated 40 percent of its readers below 24 years of age.

The financial performance of the Indian media is difficult to monitor, but figures uncovered by The Hoot, a website specialising in media matters, are little short of astounding. In 2001, for instance, BCCL was the "second most profitable unlisted company in India", recording a net profit of nearly INR 2.1 billion, well over twice the figure registered the previous year. In comparison, other media companies turned in distinctly anaemic performances – and the weakest, expectedly, came from the newspaper that had suffered the misfortune of encountering the TOI at its most aggressive. HT's net profits in 2001 were down by over 96 percent – at INR 5.8 million, the company seemed to be rapidly plunging into the red.

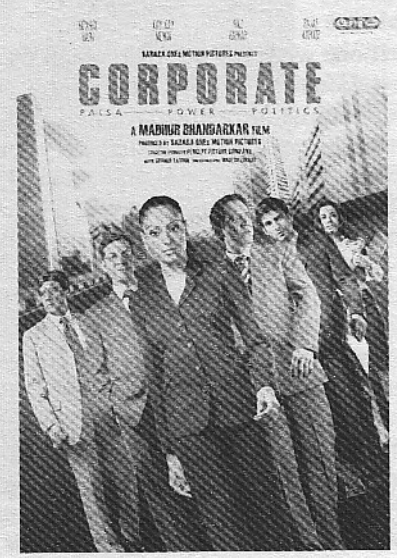
It took some years before HT found its way out of the woods. In August 2005, the paper, which had been among the most ardent naysayers when it came to foreign direct investment in the print media, came out with an initial public offering of shares. In an analysis of the offering, *The Hindu Business Line* reported that the HT bottom-line had improved for a variety of reasons. These included the fact that advertisement rates had been raised in both March and May 2005, and that the HT and TOI had agreed on a concerted rise in cover price of about 30 percent. The "price-cuts that hurt profitability", the analyst concluded, appeared "to be a story of the past".

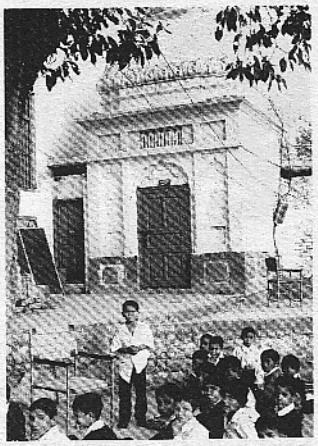
With the declaration of truce, the two media giants evidently accepted an uneasy coexistence. In terms of content and target audience, they now seemed cloned from the same cell. But the media landscape in which the peace was established was a very different place. Several of the newspapers that used to offer competing menus and priorities right up to the early 1990s were now hollowed out financially, compelled to reach ever deeper to appease politicians and advertisers merely to bring out a day's edition. BCCL itself ended its decade-and-a-half of rapid commercial growth with a much leaner portfolio of publications. Its daily newspapers in English were far and away the leaders of their respective market segments. But several other prestigious mastheads – including, in English, the *Illustrated Weekly of India* and *Science Today*, and in Hindi, *Dinmaan*, *Dharmyug* and the *Navbharat Times* edition in Lucknow – had passed into history.

The transformation of advertisement and circulation also meant initiating radical changes in the editorial function, which had to adapt itself to the new imperatives of providing a hospitable environment for advertisers to display their wares. Previous editorial priorities had to yield to demands for entertainment and celebrity lifestyles. In short, increasing profits were achieved through a palpable loss of media diversity and seriousness. That the ends of consumer sovereignty have not been served by the price war in the newspaper market, nor by the aggressive advertisement-oriented strategy of the TOI group, is a conclusion that, for many, seems unavoidable.

Kuensel, from Thimphu, reports a Dr Ross McDonald from the University of Auckland suggesting at a media conference in early July that "Bhutan should consider banning all advertising." Ummm, okay, nice idea. The argument that jobs would be lost if advertising was limited did not apply to Bhutan, a predominantly non-industrialised society, said the doctor. "With the national policy to maximise happiness among people, advertising is a destructive force ... And while Buddhist culture in Bhutan aims to undo the desire and control it, ads inflame the desires to maximum degree." The Kiwi doc has obviously gotten carried away with Bhutan-as-utopia, otherwise why would he propose something that is so palpably impossible?! Well, we can always hope, and *Chettria Patrakar* would not mind if Druk Yul were advertisement- and commercial-less. Ahem, does that include overseas advertising for Bhutani tourism?

One had expected better sense from the gentlemen of the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), who have protested the allegedly negative depiction of business-India in Madhur Bhandarkar's Bollywood film *Corporate*. The problem, says the body's Secretary General D S Rawat, is that the film portrays the "industrial houses as ruthless, heartless and hand-in-glove with corrupt politicians." India Inc, he says "has some of the most respectable leaders to boast", and, "The India growth story would not have been possible but for the contribution of a host of corporate leaders", trotting out the names of N R Narayana Murthy, Azim Premji and Lakshmi Mittal Steel. Come on Secretary General, you do protest too much. Going by your standards, no film would ever be made in the world. Next, you will have agrarian feudal lords, bureaucrats, politicians and - why not - underworld dons following the ASSOCHAM lead and putting out press releases against Bollywood productions.

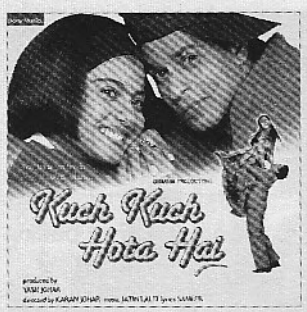




Rinku Dutta is a never-say-die Bengali transported by marriage to Lahore, who is a fine chronicler of fine moments and contradictions in her adopted land (she also writes for *Himal*, see her piece in this issue). She recently wrote an article in Karachi's *Newsline* magazine about a Kali temple in the village of Saidpur, near Islamabad, from where all the Hindus have evacuated since Partition. Dutta discovered that the Capital Development Authority had decided to spend extensively in developing Saidpur as a tourist village, and that the finely preserved temple, with its ochre sikhara roof, was to be converted into a restaurant. Wrote she: "In these promising days of Indo-Pak peace, has the CDA considered the cultural implications of its gustatory dreams for the Kali temple at Saidpur? ... With changing state ideologies, the tides of memory and forgetting leave their mark not just on shelved government documents but also on the *yaadgaar* monuments built by the state. Often the museum that is created to remember also becomes a place of forgetting." Well written, and *Chettria Patrakar* is glad to report that, following this article, the director of the Lahore Museum has persuaded the CDA chairman to abandon the temple-to-restaurant plans.

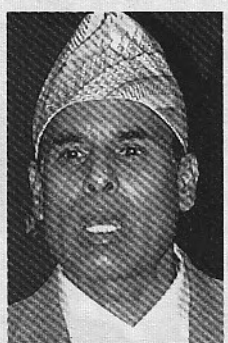
Maran

Egg in the face of the Indian Ministry of Communications, as well as Internet service providers (ISPs) all over the country. The Ministry was inept all right in its initial request for the blocking of 17 websites and blogs preaching religious zealotry. But then the ISPs responded to the call by simply blocking access to internationally respected domains such as Google's Blogspot and Yahoo's Geocities, through which users would have gotten to the offending sites. The bureaucrats in the communications ministry left the response to the public outcry in the hands of a lowly officer, and the Secretary for Telecommunications simply hung up on reporters. Minister of Communications Dayanidhi Maran was keeping a low profile while on a visit to San Francisco. The world has changed underneath our feet, and our bureaucrats and ministers would not even know it!



Colombo says: pay up

This is probably not the way to protect and promote the local film industry, but Colombo filmmakers have hailed a decision taken by the government to impose a levy on imported films and docudramas shown on television. It is said that this will be a boost to the local film industry because, previously, the airtime and sponsors were all monopolised by foreign productions. And so the government will be levying a tax of LKR 75,000 for every half hour of feature films and docudramas. However, films with Tamil-language content are exempted because Sri Lanka has very little Tamil production. Foreign commercials aired on television stations will now be taxed a whopping million rupees. All this must have local producers ecstatic, but the question is whether the viewing public has been cheated in the process. We shall see, depending on how the quality of Lankan production improves in the next few years.



Former Information Minister Tanka Dhakal

There were some journalists, as well as many other supposedly public individuals, who believed that, when Gyanendra the king took over on 1 February 2006, Nepali society was in for the long haul. If, as with the case of Gyanendra's father Mahendra's takeover of 1960, this occupation were to last for three full decades, then it was important to start making compromises with the state. Which meant pandering to the royal regime, and also taking some of the largess that was liberally spread around by the royal minister for information and communication. So essentially, there were journalists who were on the dole from the king. Little did the poor souls expect that the regime would be overturned by a massive People's Tsunami in April, and lo-and-behold the list of journos on the take was made public by the ministry. Do we feel sorry for these guys (and a couple of gals), or do we applaud their comeuppance?

Some 'desi' students from the University of Maryland who had decided to take up speaking Sanskrit in daily life have banded together to promote the language via the Internet. The group is called 'umd_sanskritam', and on 11 July, the day when Hindu chelas pay respects to their gurus, it launched its website at *www.speaksanskrit.org* ("The one-stop Sanskrit place"). In addition to coordinating the Sanskrit activities in the Washington DC area, the website aims to function as a repository of Sanskrit resources, link together Sanskrit activities around the world "and also promote Sanskrit through fun, and such activities as blogging and forums." The website already has mp3 versions of stories, songs, conversations and videos of skits performed during various Sanskrit workshops. The group's motto is a mite all-encompassing - but then everything in Sanskrit is slightly ebullient and grandiose wouldn't you say? - *"Rachayema Samskrita Bhuvanam"* (We shall create a Sanskrit world).

If one went by the coverage in the New Delhi media, it would be impossible to know that Bangladesh is in the midst of political turmoil. There has not been a single story in the main papers or television channels, let alone any sustained coverage of the systemic crisis that has engulfed the Dhaka polity. Esteemed editors seem to pay attention to Bangladesh only if the story is related to the exodus of migrants, the ISI network and the rise of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. As a result, most Indians have little clue about the impending elections in Bangladesh, the distortions that have crept into the system of caretaker government, or even the nature of the religious rightwing. When will Delhi journalists break out of their insularity, and not merely descend on regional capitals after a crisis erupts? *Chettria Patrakar* sees little reason for optimism there, if the disproportionate space given to fashion weeks - not to mention the neglect of the periphery within India itself - is anything to go by.

Who says death will be my end? A river I am, into the sea I shall flow. Nice lines to remember Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Urdu poet and a 'remnant' of the Progressive Writers' Movement of 1930s Lahore, who passed away recently.

- Chettria Patrakar

In the dominion of paranoia

Me Lord
We really don't need such a season,
That keeps converting dreams of commons –
Into common cemeteries.
And the system stands immobilised,
Its head hung down its chest,
Like a slave
— *Gurmeet Bedi in* Kathghare mein Mausam

Bring 'em on: photographs of the first 400 US soldiers killed in Iraq.

The 11 July mayhem in Bombay sent South Block into a paroxysm of panic, and its diplomatic reactions became, perhaps predictably, banal. Blame was summarily laid at the doors of 'terror camps' in Pakistan. A planned visit of Indian parliamentarians to a Commonwealth consultation meeting in Islamabad was immediately cancelled. The foreign-secretary-level talks between the two countries have been put on hold. After having survived the Delhi bazaar attack and the Benaras temple attack, the India-Pakistan peace process was finally derailed by what happened to the Bombay trains.

General Pervez Musharraf did offer to cooperate in investigating the minutely planned and brutally executed terror attacks, but the fear of public reaction had Prime Minister Manmohan Singh look the other way. It may have been hoping too much for India to accede to such an offer, but it would have been nice, and would have signalled a new level of bilateral relations. Unfortunately, what is known as the 'composite dialogue' evidently has yet to deliver a level of mutual confidence to make such a departure possible.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri's crude attempt to link the blasts to the Kashmir question was of course in extremely bad taste, but everyone in the know in the Subcontinent understands that General Sahib's Oxbridge FM is a showpiece. He has so little to do that he is prone to venting his frustrations through provocative but meaningless observations.

Whenever a blast or attack rocks India, it has also become necessary for Nepal and Bangladesh to brace themselves. And indeed, the post-bombing fallout was immediate as far as Kathmandu was concerned. Two Pakistani nationals camping in the capital were summarily arrested from a local hotel in the dead of the night, allegedly on a tip-off from Indian security agencies. They have since been implicated in a four-year-old RDX-possession case, though their role in the Bombay blasts is unclear. A part of the fallout seems also to have been apportioned to Bangladesh – a key suspect is said to be living in Dhaka.

Something as devastating as the Bombay train blasts are also bound to buffet the larger region and parallel conflict arenas. The newly rigid stance of India, as evident in the "zero

tolerance" rhetoric of Prime Minister Singh, is bound to impact the Jaffna Tigers. The LTTE's mea culpa statement over the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi has incensed a section of Indian intelligentsia. They are now being portrayed as an ungrateful lot in the vernacular press, since they attacked one of their main, though surreptitious, benefactors. Hot pursuit may be out of the question for the moment due to geo-strategic complexities and the decisive influence of the Left Front in the Indian ruling coalition, but there is no mistaking a new exasperation – if not belligerence – in statements emanating from New Delhi.

The 'War on Terror' in Southasia is not as hot as in Beirut, Basra or Baghdad, but the rhetoric of the brawny Bush and brainy Singh are beginning to sound frighteningly similar. What we see is that even gentle sardars will convert to harsh satraps as exigencies of strategy and diplomacy create their own logic.

The Bush Effect

Years from now, when academics look back and study the context of Israel's vicious attacks on the headquarters of the Palestinian government and the housing complexes in Beirut, they will attribute this and other acts of mindless governmental violence to a new trend in the diplomacy of aggression, which has its origins in The Bush Effect (TBE). This phenomenon must have originated in the nuclear-proof bunker where the shaken Texan was packed off to by his Pentagon minders in the wake of 9/11. Panic reaction is the fundamental feature of TBE.

A demonstrated disdain for international agreements, domestic laws and diplomatic convention is the second most important aspect of TBE. For a while, everyone who looked brown and 'Muslim' was hounded as a suspected terrorist in the Land of the Free. There was never any legal ground for the ceaseless pounding of Afghanistan, and most of the charges against Saddam Hussein were blatant fabrications to justify the occupation of Iraq. But the world could do nothing to stop the marauding Bush-Blair duo. Due to TBE, the emblematic image of the United States of America is no longer the Statue of Liberty. Rather, it is the blindfolded Guantanamo Bay detainee in orange prison garb, being pushed from room to room by the guarding marines.

The third dimension of TBE is its extreme, obtuse, black-and-white simplicity: there is no room for ambiguity in the 'for or against us' categorisation. Unfortunately, this transforms even disinterested parties into unwilling enemies. Americans can take on Iran, Syria, North Korea and a few others on their own – after all, they (the Americans) spend more on weapons than rest of the world combined. But that is unlikely to make America any safer. It is the unmistakable lesson of history that most empires disintegrate due to becoming over-stretched. But histrionics rather than historicism dictate decisions in regimes under the spell of TBE.

Unilateralism is yet another TBE characteristic dreaded by all sensible governments and policymakers on the planet. This is the diplomatic version of the law of the jungle, where the strongest is free to feed on the relatively weak and helpless. The Unilateralism of Bush implies that all creatures are equal, but that one of them is more equal than all others – and is thus empowered to ignore anything and everything on the basis of perceived self-interest, from the Kyoto Protocol to the International Court of Justice and every other international agreement or institution that may stand in the way of America the Good.

The last but not least noteworthy aspect of TBE is its unpredictability. The Bush Effect can strike at any moment, anywhere, and without any warning – like the remote-controlled drones that land unbeknownst in the centre of Beirut and the villages of the NWFP. The US 'War on Terror' has no spatial or time dimension; it is endless by definition. Such a war cannot be sustained without the unflinching support of a significant section of the population; and even as his popularity meter dives, Bush has been able to maintain bipartisan consensus for his Wild West adventures. No country, with the possible exception of American protégé Israel, gives such a carte blanche to its chief executive to wage a war that has no likelihood of demonstrable victory. Nobody in Southasia thinks that this model of aggressive counter-terrorism can succeed in one of the most diverse societies of the world. That is, nobody but Narendra Modi, who is much more to the Bush model than Manmohan Singh.

The Modi Factor

Some of the most prominent victims of 7/11 in Bombay were rich diamond merchants of the Gujarati community, who habitually travel in First Class compartments on the commuter trains. Never known for exercising restraint, the Bharatiya Janata Party leader Lal Krishna Advani immediately dispatched Modi to Bombay. The diabolical director of the post-Godhra massacre subsequently mesmerised his fawning followers in the BJP and Rastriya

Histrionics rather than historicism dictate decisions in regimes under the spell of The Bush Effect.

Swayamsebak Sangh (RSS) with the merits of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), the drawbacks of due process of law, and the advantages of the politics of revenge.

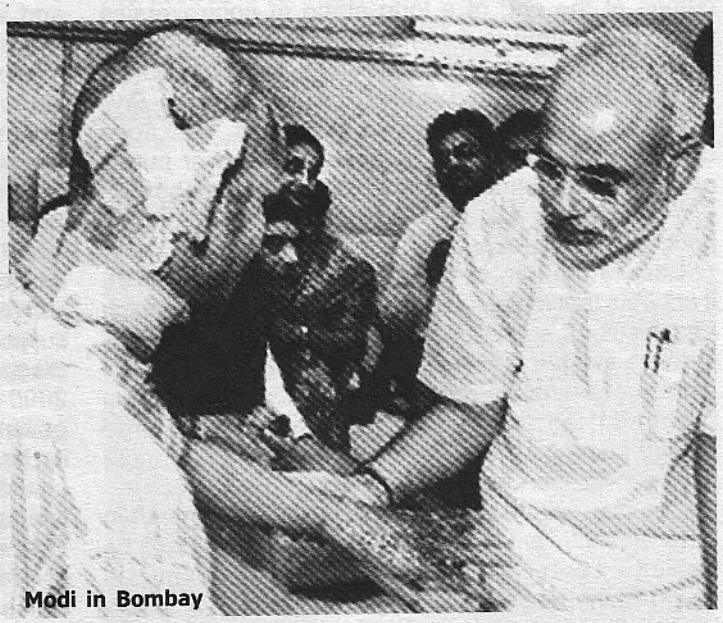
In the West, Bush personifies American exceptionalism, a trait not uncommon even among relatively liberal citizens of the United States. Deep-seated insecurities of a country built upon the confiscated continent of an exterminated population are what have given rise to an alarmism that makes some Americans blindly justify everything their state does, including the Abu Ghraib misconduct, the Mai Lai massacre, the aggression in Afghanistan, the occupation of Iraq - take your pick.

Antagonism of certain middle-class Indians seems to be fuelled by a similar guilt, but one of a different provenance. Some of this guilt would come from not having participated in Independence struggles, of having been supporters of Indira Gandhi's dreaded Emergency regime, of defending the Narmada project devastation, of merely being ostentatious consumers in a dirt-poor country. Perhaps all of this makes this particular section of the middle class feel highly insecure, and there is no dearth of scare-mongers to feed on their anxieties. Modi manipulated these fears and rose as undisputed messiah of *Apnu Gujarat, agavun Gujarat* (Our Gujarat, Unique Gujarat). Modi is the messiah of communal exceptionalism inspired by TBE. But its roots exist in all other Southasian societies.

Collaborators of the Pakistan Army in Bangladesh are perhaps progenitors of militant Islamism, in a country built upon the idea of cultural rather than communal identity. Old associates of King Mahendra were the prime movers of King Gyanendra's regressive experiments in Nepal. Beneficiaries of military munificence in Pakistan have repeatedly thwarted all moves of democratisation in that country. The depopulation policies of the ruling dynasty in Thimphu were probably a direct result of its implication in the suppression of all subjects: the pushing out of the Lhotshampa increasingly appears like an act of compensation for the sprawling Drukpa network of cousins, in-laws and sundry other lackeys. Lhotshampas were doing well and giving inferiority complexes to royal relatives. Potential challengers had to be forced out to keep the dynastic domination intact. Just as fear begets aggression, paranoia gives rise to ferociousness and violence.

The problem with TBE and its TMF offshoot is that these tendencies will further exacerbate an already tense communal environment in the Subcontinent. The Southasian response to acts of terror - and the bombings in Bombay were unjustifiable, indefensible, reprehensible and condemnable acts of pure terror - needs to be much more nuanced. What is required is a two-pronged approach: creating public opinion against fear, and strengthening institutional capabilities of countering rather than fighting terror.

The paranoid are by nature edgy, ready to hit or strike back in an unpredictable way. Gandhi considered it a moral rather than political problem, and suggested the path of Satyagraha to cure the social malaise. No matter how trite and simplistic it may sound to some, it must be repeated: Satyagraha is the only long-term solution to social violence. For the medium term, the media must use its muscle to create public opinion against all transgressions of accepted behaviour. The



Modi in Bombay PTI

short-term answer lies in patient and painstaking investigation, and prosecution of those found guilty of committing such heinous crimes against humanity. Knee-jerk reactions, pronouncements of not kneeling before terror, and make-believe arrests in the country and elsewhere have no meaning. Gandhi's land must come up with a better alternative than to succumb to The Bush Effect.

The communalisation of censorship

Censorship in India is increasingly out of the hands of government, and in the grip of self-appointed politico-cultural guardians.

BY **AMARDEEP SINGH**

The recent agitations in India against *The Da Vinci Code*, the US conspiracy film about the Catholic church, took some observers by surprise. For those who have been following the drift of India's media culture over the past few years, however, the real surprise was that the film was introduced in the country at all. Indeed, the movement to ban *The Da Vinci Code* comes at the end of a long string of controversies involving religious communities who claim their sentiments have been hurt by films – including Deepa Mehta's 1996 *Fire* and Rahul Rawail's 2005 *Jo Bole So Nihaal*, to name just two examples. Religious conservatives have also instigated riots over purely non-religious films, such as the lesbian-themed *Girlfriend*, which was also vehemently criticised by gay-rights groups in India.

Despite the turn to globalisation and liberalisation, it appears that India is in the midst of a spike in banning and resultant self-censorship. Censorship continues to thrive in India – though in a new paradigm, with the Indian government reduced to the status of an enabling bystander, as the threat of communalist-inspired theatre-burnings make directors and producers more circumspect than they need to be.

This new culture of censorship is cultural rather than governmental, which is to say that while it tends to be backed by political parties, it is intensely communal. In the British Raj, as well as through most of India's independent era, the main motive of state censorship in the domain of print was anti-popular: it aimed to stifle political subversion, whether it was anti-imperial propaganda in the 1910s or anti-Congress party writing in the 1970s. Up until the banning of Salman Rushdie's allegedly anti-Islamic *The Satanic Verses* (one month after its 1988 publication) most works prohibited by New Delhi were political in nature, and criticised either a historical nationalist figure or the current administration – this is why Michael Edwards' *Nehru: A Political Biography* was banned in 1975.

Since India became the first country to ban Rushdie's book, however, censorship has become increasingly 'communal', and works about religious figures and mythic cultural heroes have had to confront censorship. When a book or film makes it to the market past the censors, it is still liable to arouse protests and violence, forcing publishers and producers to withdraw the 'offending' work. In 2004, American religious-studies professor James Laine's book *Shivaji: A Hindu King in Islamic India* provoked the trashing of Pune's staid Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute for helping the author with his research, even after the book had been withdrawn by its publisher.

As far as cinema is concerned, the official censor board had historically focused on vanquishing sex on the screen, rather than what was perceived as political subversion (though politics was unquestionably also suppressed). Today, the film industry has also been dragged down by the new censorious culture. Between 2000 and 2004, the National Democratic Alliance government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, did its best to ban any film critical of its policies. The attitude is exemplified by the prohibition slapped on two political documentaries, Anand Patwardhan's film *War and Peace*, which focused on the nuclear tests of 1998, and Rakesh Sharma's *The Final Solution*, which took on the Gujarat government of Narendra Modi over the 2002 riots.

With a secular United Progressive Alliance government led by the Congress party currently in power, the central government strictures may have been loosened, but state and non-state actors have already gotten the taste of censorship and bannings. And so, even where the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and the Supreme Court have ruled in favour of films such as *The Da Vinci Code* (with changes inserted in deference to Indian Christians),

The irony is that the threat to security from censorious religious groups is the threat they themselves pose.

seven individual states have still found reason to ban the film. And in what may be the most absurd case of censorship of all, the state of Gujarat attempted to ban the inoffensive film *Fanaa* – not because of any objectionable content, but rather because actor Aamir Khan had the temerity to criticise Chief Minister Modi's government's handling of the relocation of villagers displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Helpless censors?

There have been numerous attempts over the years to reform film censorship. A 1970s book provocatively called *Bare Breasts and Bare Bottoms* protested the incoherence of censors' approaches to representations of sexuality, seething against the censors' almost fetishistic concern that hemlines be maintained at a certain length, or that the camera not linger too long on certain parts of the female body. After the filing of an official committee report in 1976, some liberalisation was sanctioned, but not much really changed for Bollywood – except perhaps that the word 'censor' was replaced by 'certification'. In 2002, the chair of the CBFC, Vijay Anand, tried to initiate another round of reforms, but he was quickly forced to resign.

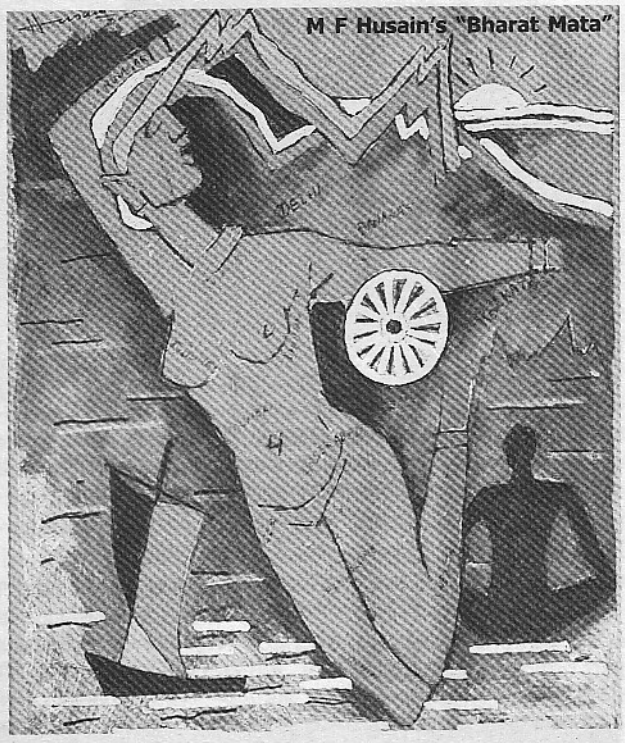
Little of substance, perhaps, can be done on the official front now, anyways. The communalisation of politics has created an atmosphere where the expectation of societal censorship is playing a role in stifling creativity, even more than the post-production act of the official censor. Most of the time, agitations by an 'offended' religious community are pre-emptive efforts – driven by the *expectation* of insult, rather than the actual experience. In many cases, what is deemed offensive is vaguely defined, without regard to the contextual aspects of a book, film or work of art, which might explain or mitigate a potentially insulting image or phrase.

Take Bombay artist M F Husain's work *Bharat Mata,* which was the target of a nationwide campaign and court case this past spring. The central figure's nudity is respectful and beautiful, rather than exploitative, but has nevertheless been adjudged offensive by the cultural guardians of India's self-image. Some paintings by Husain that feature Hindu deities in suggestive poses might admittedly be deemed offensive, but surely in this painting it is simply the idea of a nude Mother India that has led not just to criminal proceedings against the artist, but the threat of violence as well. One leader of the far-right Shiv Sena has offered INR 50,000 to anyone who will chop off Husain's hands and deliver them to the Sena leader, the fiery but aging Bal Thackeray.

Similarly, the controversy over the film *Jo Bole So Nihaal* (a comedy involving a Sikh policeman) emerged despite the filmmakers' extensive efforts to have the film approved by the leaders of the Sikh community in advance of public screening. In the end, the only objectionable aspect of the film cited by the Sikh organisations that condemned it was the use of the religiously-significant phrase in the title. But while that phrase perhaps suffers somewhat from association with what is a B-grade spy film, the Sikh faith is neither criticised nor attacked in the script. The subsequent agitations inspired a reactivated wing of the Babbar Khalsa (one of the oldest militant Sikh separatist groups) to set off bombs in two theatres in New Delhi, killing one and injuring almost 50.

Censorship devolution

While India as a whole seems to be marching towards liberalisation on both the political and cultural fronts, the future of censorship remains uncertain, partly because of a possible contradiction in the Indian Constitution itself. The very first section of Article 19 guarantees freedom of expression, but the second clause subsequently indicates that the government retains authority "to legislate concerning libel, slander, defamation, contempt of court, any matter offending decency and morality, or which undermines the security of or tends to overthrow, the State." It is this text that is repeatedly cited by the state when it agrees to demands by religious groups to ban works of art: the security of the state. But security for whom, and from what? The irony is that the threat to security from censorious religious groups is the threat they themselves pose. It is hard to understand why the religious groups responsible for fomenting riots against offensive works are not being prosecuted, and in their



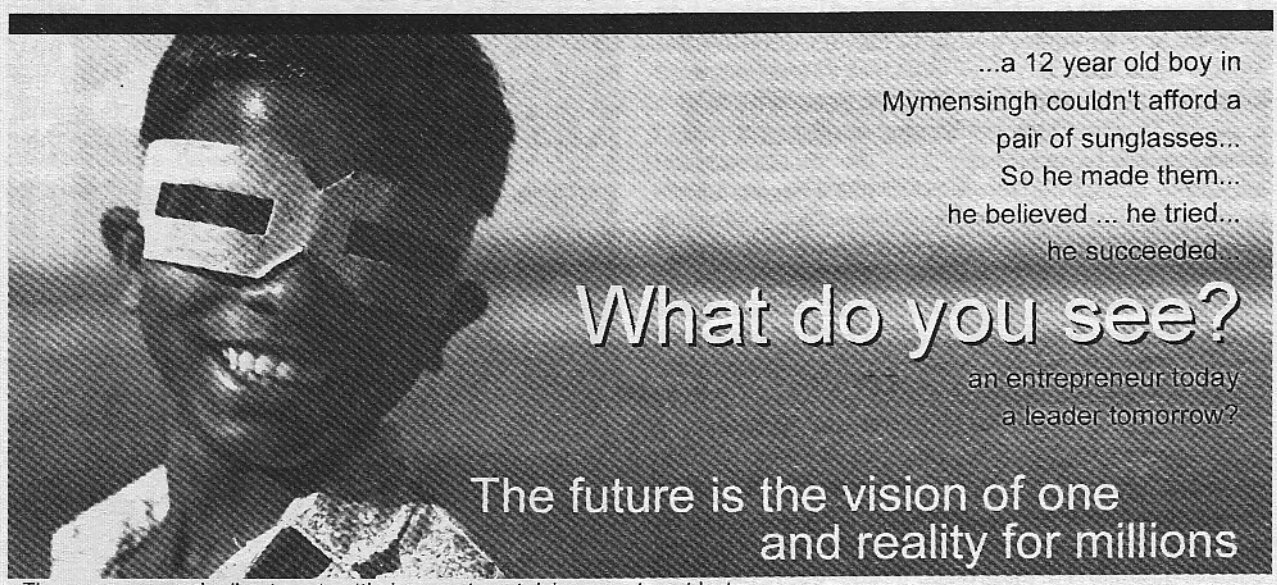
M F Husain's "Bharat Mata"

Most of the time, agitations by an 'offended' religious community are pre-emptive efforts – driven by the expectation of insult, rather than the actual experience.

places are writers, artists and filmmakers.

Certainly the question should be asked: What about images that are specifically created to offend, such as the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed? Or, along the same lines, what should be done with a film that fans the flame of communal hatred? With the anti-Islamic cartoons, it is always the prerogative of news organisations to decide whether or not to print a certain kind of image; the state need not get involved. Self-regulation could also work quite well in cinema. One could argue that a number of communally-inflected films were indeed released in the 1990s and early 2000s – the worst offender probably being the Partition super-hit *Gadar* in 2001, which featured a heavily slanted representation of Islam and Pakistan. And yet, these saffronised films were rubber-stamped by the BJP-friendly censor board of that period. Still, despite the surge of communally-themed films in the mid-1990s, it is worth noting that no film led directly to any reported act of violence against religious minorities. The attempt to suppress controversial material, on the other hand, has often had that result.

Though the current shift towards the 'communalisation' of censorship is not driven by the government, the government will have to take a leadership role in correcting the trend. An obvious solution is to abolish the current system of censorship by government altogether, removing it as an object in the agenda of religious groups. The maintenance of a censorship system in an otherwise free society is based on a paternalistic and oversimplified concept of what literary and artistic representations actually do. The paternalism is a holdover from colonialism, and is gradually declining as the authority of India's old elites gives way to the new, technocratic, free-market order. But the misconception of the nature and function of the work of art remains widespread. It is mistaken to believe that watching or reading violent films and books will induce masses of people to commit acts of violence. In a mature democracy, questions about how to discuss religion ought to be worked out through public debate. Instead, what we have seen is the cancerous growth of a culture of banning and censorship, which exploits an aspect of the government's paternalism for communalist purposes – not to maintain an environment of mutual respect and tolerance, but to undermine it.



There are some who live to get settled, some to get rich, some to get lucky.
And then there are the likes of those who once believed we would fly.
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New nationalism and neo-liberal cruelty

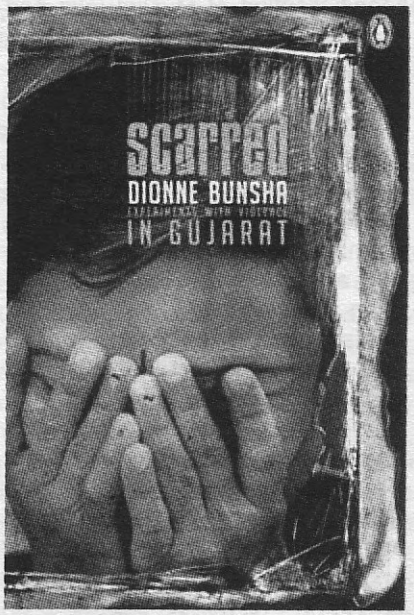
BY **VIJAY PRASHAD**

In February 2005, the Asian American Hotel Owners' Association (AAHOA) invited Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi to headline their annual meeting. A group of Indian Americans protested. Modi, after all, had had his hand on the levers of power when Hindutva's armies had killed over a thousand people in February 2002, in the wake of the death of a group of Hindutva activists in Godhra, allegedly by a Muslim mob. Some held him personally responsible, either for sins of commission (he set the forces in motion and purposefully held back the police) or for sins of omission (he failed to prevent the riots or to stop them once they began). Either way, Modi did not look good. He was bad for Brand India.

But not to the leaders of AAHOA. To them, Modi was Gujarat. M P Rama, AAHOA's vice chair, wanted Modi because his organisation "saw a great business opportunity. We told Narendrabhai Modi to come and tell our members about Gujarat's potential." As it turned out, the US government denied Modi's visa application. Gujarat's strongman stayed home.

Everyone knows about Narendra Modi, and about the post-Godhra massacre. But what is astounding is that, like other modern pogroms, the guilty go unpunished and the survivors continue to suffer. Dionne Bunsha, a correspondent for *Frontline*, covered Gujarat's trials for the magazine and has now written a book from the survivor's point of view. *Scarred* takes us from the train fire at Godhra to the refugee camps across the state. With forensic clarity, Bunsha shows us how the BJP and its *Jung Parivar* unleashed terror across the country, and how the BJP-controlled state government worked its malevolence against Muslims.

This is not the story of a 'failed state', but of incredible efficiency: the carnage went smoothly, as the saffron forces murdered Muslims and destroyed their economic base. Authoritarianism in power faces a conundrum. It is never good at the articulation of popular grievances, or at preparing solutions for them. Instead, it offers a narrative of the Final Battle between Good and Evil, between Hindus and Muslims – where the ultimate destruction of the latter will inaugurate a Ram Rajya, in which there will be no want and justice will reign. The only way to address the pressing needs of the people, then, is to enjoin them to kill Muslims. Bunsha's book shows us how this political ideology functions in everyday terms, and what it means to bear the social costs of this sort of messianic fascism.



Scarred:
Experiments with violence in Gujarat
by Dionne Bunsha
New Delhi:
Penguin
2006

Bigotry and *haftas*

A month before Godhra, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) hosted Modi for a New Delhi conference titled 'Resurgent Gujarat: Business Partnership Meet 2002'. The theme was to celebrate the shift of the state's economy "from a predominantly agrarian one into a major industrial power house". The businessmen wanted the state to create "a more business-friendly environment", which meant less regulation, no unions and more profits to corporations.

Beneath the high growth figures, however, lies a different Gujarati reality. Unemployment is up, as is the depth of poverty and agrarian stagnation. Literacy rates of just 69 percent lag behind neighbouring Maharashtra (77 percent), not to mention Kerala (90 percent). Gujarat also manages to get just ahead of Bihar for the lowest rate of school attendees. The state's sex ratio is in decline, and one-in-four atrocities against Dalit women takes place there. The collapse of one lakh union textile jobs and the growth of the 'casual' sector create social frustration that is fodder for the rightwing mischief-monger.

Bunsha introduces the reader to Hiren, the son of a retrenched mill worker from Ahmedabad's Gomtipur area. Unlike his father, Hiren is an

ardent BJP supporter, and the local bootlegger. "I earn my living through cheating. I take *haftas*," he explains. "After the BJP government came, the Hindu bootleggers have more power than the Muslim ones."

The BJP does not offer union jobs, but it cultivates gangsterism and bigotry. The essence of the BJP economic plan is to give free reign to major corporations, and to alleviate social distress through the cannibalisation of Muslim jobs and communities. A recurrent theme in the speeches from Modi and others is that the Muslim population of Gujarat is an economic leech. When asked about the plight of refugees, Modi lashed out: "What should we do? Run relief camps for them? ... We have to teach a lesson to those who are increasing the population at an alarming rate."

Many heard those words loud and clear, and acted on Modi's wishes. In Naroda Patiya, Ahmedabad, two Modi followers, Bhavani Singh and Suresh, caught Kauser Bano, slit her pregnant body, pulled out her unborn child and said, "Look, we have sent your child to heaven before he even arrived in the world." Bigotry is an easier coin to distribute to the disenfranchised working-class, particularly when the ultra-rich roam free of taxation or any moral constraint.

Help from abroad

Non-resident Indians (NRIs) play an important role in Modi's landscape. Bunsha notes that NRI money flooded into Gujarat's Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) to facilitate the riots. "In several villages like Padoli", she writes, "there were reports of rich NRIs instigating mobs with the temptation of money and liquor, and funding the operation by providing cash, weapons and gas cylinders."

But the NRIs did not only fund the pogrom. They have also become a fundamental contributor to the foreign investment in the state. AAHOA's M P Rama noted that Gujarat's government has been "rolling out the red carpet" for NRI investments. Gujarat is desperate for this capital inflow, banking on the good feelings of NRIs for their homeland, and knowing that commercial capital is loath to enter a state governed by a man prone to create social instability for ideological and electoral gain.

Where the banks fear to tread, Modi wants the NRIs to come running in. In October 2002, at the founding meeting of the Group of American Businesses in Gujarat, the state's industry minister, Suresh Mehta, urged the business leaders to "re-brand" Gujarat. "Some doubts have been created in foreign countries," he noted, as the group's vice chairman and Motif CEO Kaushal Mehta urged industrialists to "create brand awareness about Gujarat in the US". The post-Godhra massacre had tarnished Gujarat's sheen.

The NRI position vis-à-vis Hindutva is significant, because it tells us something of the altered notion of nationalism for neo-liberal authoritarian regimes. They are more prone to understand nationalism as the patriotism of faith and of the bottom line. The rights of the citizenry are less important than the imaginary claims of a faith community, or of capital, upon the nation state. This is a new kind of nationalism: a sense of fealty that transcends the constitutional identities born out of a long anti-colonial struggle, and cemented with the promulgation of a republic. Modi's India is neo-liberal India – better able to appeal to the imagination than to the Constitution, more prone to violence than to the creation of well being. The NRI is no longer a brain drain; it is now a cash cow.

Of course, the NRI does not do the actual killing. The assassins are local, and they come from all castes and communities. Bunsha offers us glimpses of the Dalits, Bhils, Patidars and Brahmins who wielded the axe and carried the torch. But we do not hear much either from or about them. These are the elusive characters of communal riots, the ones who act but who do not occupy the main stage of our narratives about them. We, the genteel section of the petty bourgeoisie, tend to imagine that the less cultivated, the BJP-types, buy off the loyalty of Dalits and Bhils with liquor and cash, and that once plied, they blindly do the bidding of the masters.

But there is also ideology at work, or else there is a sympathetic conjoining of interests. In 1999, Hindu Bhils killed Christian Bhils in the Gujarati district of Dangs at the behest of the VHP and Bajrang Dal, but also to increase their market position in a collapsed economy. Hindutva appeals to oppressed castes because, on the surface, it sets aside the vertical caste hierarchy for a horizontal Hindu comradeship. The Brahmin-Patidar alliance in Gujarat is firm thanks to Hindutva – unlike the far more honest caste battles in Uttar Pradesh, which enable the growth of parties inimical to Hindutva, even if for opportunistic rather than programmatic reasons. Cut loose from the welfare state, other castes seek patronage from these local hoodlums, who dole out favours and operate the new, communal License Raj.

Bunsha's account is about bad times, but it is not pessimistic. There are many heroes here: people who shielded others, and state officials who risked their jobs to disobey Modi's demands. There is also the memory of another time, of the important role played by the Majoor Mahajan Sangh (the Gandhian mill workers' trade union) during the 1969 riots in the state. The 150,000 members of the union took to the streets and factories to close down the aspirations of Hindutva's armies. The death of the union and the rise of neo-liberal cruelty removed the main obstacle to Hindutva. But even without unions, the people are not entirely cowed. In October 2002, when Modi traveled to Surendranagar for an election meeting, the crowd revolted. They threw chappals at the chief minister, who fled the scene behind police lathis. It is such events, unlike Modi's contentious Gujarat Gaurav Yatra, which help to restore Gujarat's pride. Other histories in the state are still waiting to be redeemed.

Defocusing, from health to trade

BY **HARI VASUDEVAN**

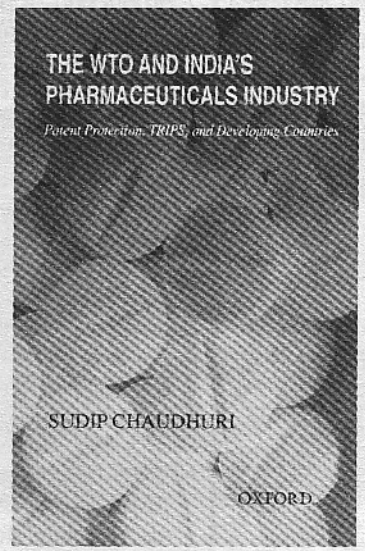
In writing about the effects of the World Trade Organisation on the Indian pharmaceutical industry, Sudip Chaudhuri provides an incisive account of the 1994 international trade agreement known as TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights). Through the course of this informative, well-researched work, Chaudhuri scrutinises how inefficient government is often what limits the public benefit of TRIPS – indeed, as much as patent protection itself. In the end, such analysis makes this work necessary reading for Southasian supporters and critics of the WTO alike.

Such arguments are particularly important in the current Indian context, amidst assertions of the government's commitment to rebuilding the country's skeletal health system. Other Southasian readers will find interest here as well, for *The WTO and India's Pharmaceuticals Industry* is a warning about how the jeopardy that India's low-cost drug industry faces will threaten the health care industries of Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and others.

Chaudhuri's cardinal conclusion is that the patent protection demanded by TRIPS is not necessary for the stimulation of the international pharmaceutical industry. Furthermore, application of such commitments in the developing world puts public health at risk without serious economic benefit in other quarters.

The author analyses the strong foundations of the Indian drug industry as it stood at the end of the 1980s, just before the 1994 passage of TRIPS by 125 countries. Chaudhuri links that strength with several factors: Indian public-sector interest in bulk drug production during the 1960s, a patents regime set up in 1970 that revised one leftover from 1911, and strong regulation of foreign-capital investments in the industry during the subsequent decade. These developments had fundamentally altered the prevailing situation, wherein India used to import life-saving drugs, and local production was of marginal importance to health care. While major multinational companies (MNCs) did have a presence in India, their job was to sell drugs designed elsewhere – at extremely high prices.

At that time, the country's capacity to produce the chemical material that lay at the heart of innovative drug formulations was limited. Poor expertise and patent laws leftover from colonial times prevented the growth of sturdy production capacity in low-cost 'generic' drugs, those whose patents have expired. Even when new processes for drug manufacture were pioneered in India, judgments on patent issues favoured the company working with the patent. Attempts to forge a new approach to the patent regime were delayed by the lobbying of multinational companies such as Pfizer.



The WTO and India's Pharmaceuticals Industry: Patent protection, TRIPS and developing countries
Sudip Chaudhuri
New Delhi:
Oxford University Press
2005

The Patent Act of 1970 subsequently removed the need for Indian producers to abide by international patents. Thereafter, foreign companies operating in India had to establish production capacity in the country itself. Under these laws, by the 1980s additional research and reverse engineering (re-inventing a product that has already been developed elsewhere) had led to a strong output of generics by both public-sector enterprises and private companies. Determined not to lose the Indian market, the MNCs began their own production, thereby contributing to local professional expertise.

Bowing to dollars

This state of affairs has begun to change, however, due to India's concessions to WTO demands regarding TRIPS. Countries did not need to accede to TRIPS mandates on all products until 2005. But in the case of the pharmaceutical industry, multinationals and others could file their claims for patent respect from as early as 1995, which could then be the foundation for exclusive marketing rights. In 1999, New Delhi passed an ordinance that enforced respect of international patents, which has subsequently been followed up by legislation that amends the 1970 act.

In this context, Chaudhuri is worried about both access to and the ultimate fate of new life-saving drugs in India. He argues that new drugs will become inaccessible, and that the situation gives multinational companies and their products a dangerous degree of pre-eminence in India, by diverting them from required research specific to the region. The author forecasts

Vacancy Announcment with UNDP Country Office Kabul, Afghanistan.

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a process of subordination and networking that would suddenly draw Indian private capital into the workings of the multinational company. This could take place through the licensing of new molecules, outsourcing and the like. Not only would the sanctity of the patent prevent the creation of high-priced multinational-designed equivalents in India, but circumstances could deter Indian companies from such a challenge because of their own interests in the product, both at home and abroad. Such a situation partly explains the lack of serious foreign direct investment in the Indian pharmaceuticals industry, despite TRIPS-oriented legislation.

There are options available within WTO regimes, however, to vary and moderate property-rights protection to ensure prices lower than standard. Chaudhuri notes that these have been poorly utilised by both public and private entities in India. Among the permissible gambits are 'compulsory licensing', which, once the basic royalty has been paid, entails local production of a product under license regardless of a pending patent. This way, such an approach is not influenced by an MNC's mark-up after producing the drug elsewhere – although things do get much more difficult if the low-priced drug is then exported.

A growing number of exporters (especially small outfits) now have their eyes trained on unregulated markets in Africa, Latin America and Asia. After gaining footholds in those markets, however, the ultimate prize is the US. To all these exporters, compulsory licensing offers limited rewards, since its basic guaranteed access is to the domestic market. Chaudhuri points out that gaining access to the US market is ultimately a possibility for only a very few.

Meanwhile, the Indian government's compulsions on small producers to follow WHO 'good manufacturing practices' jeopardises the future of most of those producers. The way that the government applies such policy, together with its failure to use TRIPS allowances to set aside WTO requirements when drugs are essential, indicates poor strategy and public commitment.

But these developments in general, Chaudhuri implies, are only to be expected from the prevalent circumstances in India, where the history of the link between pharmaceutical companies, the state and the public shows general misuse of popular trust. According to one recent assessment, India is ranked below Chad and Bangladesh for health care to the populace. The poor government commitment to health services, coupled with the simultaneous outright manufacture of spurious drugs, indicates a fuzzy sense of priorities at home – as does the ups and downs in the history of price regulation before the 1990s.

Past follies should be the signpost to the future. According to Chaudhuri, and backed by significant additional research, thoughtless interaction with TRIPS will be disastrous for India and for developing countries in general. Awareness of this agreement's loopholes and pitfalls is absolutely necessary.

A fanciful World Bank manifesto

BY **FAISAL BARI**

Analysing the growth performance of Southasian countries, a new World Bank report published in June argues that, despite some major roadblocks, the region has managed to maintain fairly high levels of growth for more than a decade. Furthermore, that the pattern of that growth has led directly to a significant reduction in poverty. Attributing this success to the reforms undertaken by regional countries, authors Shantayanan Devarajan and Ijaz Nabi claim that maintaining a 10 percent rate of growth for roughly another nine years is the key to bringing poverty levels down to single digits. But achieving steady high growth will be a challenge. Drawing out a list of possible obstacles, "Economic Growth in South Asia" suggests policy prescriptions to tackle these constraints.

"Economic Growth in South Asia: Promising, un-equalizing, ... sustainable?"
by Shantayanan Devarajan and Ijaz Nabi
World Bank
June 2006

This is a strange piece of work: a mix of analysis, hypothesis, make-believe and wishful thinking. While it is hard to understand the purpose of this report*, it does throw up interesting issues that must be contested.

First of all, the growth indicators of SAARC countries are reviewed only for the last five years. The timeframe seems inadequate, particularly because the authors want to attribute high growth rates to policy reforms that, even according to them, the "governments undertook in the last two decades". More importantly, was it really the reforms introduced under the structural adjustment programmes that led to this growth? In that case, which specific reforms were the most crucial?

The lack of analysis in terms of connecting the reforms to the high growth, the extremely short period under review, the tendency to downplay other factors that might have helped achieve this growth – all this makes the analysis more speculative than anything else.

There is a possible explanation for such a flawed hypothesis: the Bank was involved in financing most of the reforms under discussion, and both of the authors are employees at the Bank. Devarajan is the Bank's Chief Economist for Southasia, while Nabi is Sector Manager for Economic Policy for the region. It seems that the authors have carefully selected the five-year period to confirm the success of Bank-sponsored policies. This would provide legitimacy to the reform programme, as well as create the intellectual atmosphere for a follow-up.

The authors attempt to prove that, over the same period of growth, poverty has decreased in Southasian countries. This seems to be supported by the data provided. To take the example of Pakistan, however, the argument that poverty has been reduced cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. Some argue that, while the absolute number of the Pakistani poor may have come down, the severity of poverty for some has increased in recent years – due to the structural transformation occurring as a direct result of the reforms. In addition, the connection between growth and poverty reduction is surely not automatic and pre-specified. In other words, there must be ways of ensuring that growth has the largest poverty-reducing impact possible, but the work by Devarajan and Nabi fails to address this issue.

Even with these debates aside, to assume that the underlying relationship between poverty and growth would remain the same if similar growth rates were sustained for another decade requires a leap of faith. As significant structural transformation occurs, there is the elasticity of poverty vis-à-vis income to consider, and negative trends in the pattern of income distribution.

*This report can be found at *www.siteresources.worldbank.org/SOUTHASIAEXT/Resources South Asia_growth_June 2006.pdf*

Now that inequality and low productivity are being recognised as constraints to maintaining growth, the obvious solution is to accelerate the efforts of the state in improving these conditions.

Ideological blinders

The authors do acknowledge that income, asset and wealth inequalities have increased substantially over the identified period of high growth. But conveniently, they fail to attribute this to the reform process. Given that the increase in inequality has been even more persistent than either the sustained high growth or the reduction in poverty, the connection between 'reforms' and inequality should be obvious – especially to those who have a penchant for drawing quick linkages when it suits them. The authors have predictably chosen not to comment on this aspect, which can be ascribed to ideological blindness or institutional loyalty.

The work identifies a number of constraints that can curtail high growth rates in the future. These include increasing inequality, an absence of openness and export-orientation, low technology-intensity, scarcity of skilled workers, lack of quality infrastructure, high cost of doing business, and low savings and investment rates. The authors then derive policy recommendations that are likely to ensure higher growth rates. These have to do with increasing incentives for savings and investment, attracting foreign capital and technology, reducing inequality, resolving conflict, upgrading infrastructure, improving human capital, and increasing openness and regional integration.

While there are some country-specific suggestions, the focus remains on this generalised set of recommendations, which throws up some interesting issues. For one, many experts have already enumerated the role of these factors as contributing to growth. In that sense, there does not seem to be much added value in this literature. At the same time, there are many factors that scholars have previously emphasised but which the Bank authors have chosen to ignore; for instance, the role of institutions of justice, and fair and transparent governance. Or, the issue of land reforms, which has a clear linkage with income and asset inequality.

It can be instructive to try and understand why certain areas have been selected by the authors, and others neglected. For example, while highlighting the importance of bringing backward regions to the fore, the authors confine themselves to suggesting growth and investment strategies. Issues related to distribution through national taxation, land reforms and social security networks are not mentioned. Similarly, the work strongly emphasises the idea of service delivery, but there is almost no discussion of how services for the poor are to be financed, and what the responsibility of the state should be in this regard.

In general, both the procedure for the selection of issues for discussion, and the policy identified for addressing those issues, is either whimsical and ad hoc, or based on criteria that are not shared with the reader. Once again, it is hard not to ascribe these lacunae to ideological and/or institutional prejudice.

Unanswered questions

There are other, more critical, problems with this effort. Growth and poverty reduction are important goals for all countries, and economic expansion is widely considered to be a necessary condition for poverty reduction. But surely there needs to be some debate on the sources of this growth and its linkage with improving livelihoods.

Structural adjustment programmes forced Southasian governments to, among other things, cut expenditure. More often than not, the cuts happened in the development sector, which led to relatively lower investments in health, education, infrastructure and service delivery. It is important to recognise a possible link between this reduced expenditure and higher inequality, and the low human development indicators across Southasia today. Privatisation, de-regulation and liberalisation, as well as the other components of the reform programmes promoted so assiduously by the World Bank, have in all likelihood contributed to increasing inequality.

Now that inequality and low productivity are being recognised as constraints to maintaining growth, the obvious solution is to accelerate the efforts of the state in improving these conditions. But will an expansion in these areas not lead to higher state expenditures, possibly larger fiscal deficits and some of the very things that will go against the much celebrated 'reforms' process of the past? For instance, what if settling conflicts requires more active intervention in markets, or more elaborate taxation structures? How do we square these circles?

The authors ignore the possibility that some of the 'constraints' they have identified might have been created or exacerbated by reforms themselves. The more important question is whether addressing human development, infrastructure needs and inequality is possible with the policy space available under the Washington Consensus and the 'structurally adjusted' economies. There is a fundamental incompatibility between such social welfare initiatives and the Bank's prescription of a one-size-fits-all blanket reform package.

"Economic Growth in South Asia" can be understood as an attempt to claim success for Bank-supported programmes, and as a tool for identifying areas that the Bank might be interested in financing in Southasia in the coming years. As an analytical or academic effort, however, it is quite forgettable.

Vacancy Announcment with UNDP Country Office Kabul, Afghanistan.

Post of: Programme Manager – Level: ALD4

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a leading UN organisation in Urban Development Group (Promotion of Sustainable Livelihoods) , wishes to recruit a highly experienced Programme Manager (International professional) leading the implementation of the UNDP Urban Development Group which aims to carry out capacity building for regional authorities in monitoring and evaluation of both foreign aid and government development projects and leading the strategy development and implementation of the overall UDG programme, advise and advocate with the Government, in particular, the Ministry of Urban Development on Urban Policy matters and provide strategy guidance, apply results based management, operational oversight, ensure coordination and synergy with other relevant programmes and ensure effective system, processes and staff capacity to ensure that the programme attains to it objectives.

The successful applicant will build on the major achievements to date by providing effective leadership; providing strategic vision and guidance to the programme and its senior staff; developing a resource mobilisation and partnership strategy; advising the UNDP Senior Deputy Country Director on various aspects of the programme, working under the supervision of the UNDP Deputy Country Director and Assistant to Country Director.
Please refer to detailed Terms of Reference in the UNDP Website: **www.undp.org.af**

Qualifications: An advance degree (with 10 years experience) in urban, public administration, management, architecture or civil engineering.(minimum 10 years of experience), management/implementation of field based programmes.(with at least 5 years direct experience) in urban development or economic regeneration programmes-within a urban setting. Demonstrable experience of working or collaborating with government ministries or agencies in developing countries with a proven track record of capacity development (preferably in the urban or related sectors).

Skills: Team leadership; Excellent communication skills, written and spoken, in the English language knowledge of Dari and Pashto is an asset. Excellent report-writing skills and knowledge of project monitoring evaluation. Extensive knowledge in urban planning/development policies, organisational administration, institutional development.
Duration: Six Months (with possibility of extension)
Position: One
Closing date: 31July 2006

Applications: E-mail a one page cover letter and CV to Human Resources Officer at UNDP stating post title 'UDG Programme Manager' to:
vacancies.afghanistan@undp.org

The United Nations Development Programme in Nepal

is looking for a dynamic, results-driven Nepalese citizen for the position of

Human Resources Associate (GS-6)

Main Responsibilities

Under the overall supervision of the Deputy Resident Representative (Operations), and direct supervision of the Chief, Human Resources Unit, the Human Resources Associate plays a key role in the team responsible for managing UNDP's Human Resources services. Responsibilities include:

1. **Ensures administration and implementation of HR strategies and policies focusing on achievement of the following results:**
   - Full compliance of processes, records and reports and audit follow up with UN/UNDP rules, regulations, policies and strategies; implementation of the effective internal control.
   - CO HR business processes mapping and elaboration of the content of internal Standard Operating Procedures in HR management in consultation with the direct supervisor and office management, control of workloads of the supervised staff.
2. **Implements HR processes focusing on achievement of the following results:**
   - Organization of recruitment processes including drafting job description, provision of input to job classification process, vacancy announcement, screening of candidates, participation in interview panels. Review of the recruitment processes conducted by projects. Provision of information for elaboration of recruitment guidelines for the office and projects.
   - Input and tracking of all transactions related to positions, recruitment, benefits, earnings/deductions, retroactivities, recoveries, adjustments and separations through Atlas.
   - Provision of information on benefits/entitlements to the Staff Members and Experts.
   - Maintenance of the CO rosters including e-rosters.
   - Preparation of cost-recovery bills in Atlas for HR services provided by UNDP to other Agencies and/or its projects.

Minimum Qualifications

- Bachelors Degree, preferably Masters Degree in Human Resources Management, Business Administration or Commerce faculty;
- Minimum of 5 years' relevant work experience, preferably with exposure to international HR practices;
- Excellent advanced computer skills (especially MS Office and database);
- Experience in labor laws; Human Resources policies; and contract and payroll administration is an asset;
- Excellent spoken and written communication skills in English and Nepali; and
- Outstanding interpersonal skills in client relations and in achieving client satisfaction are essential.

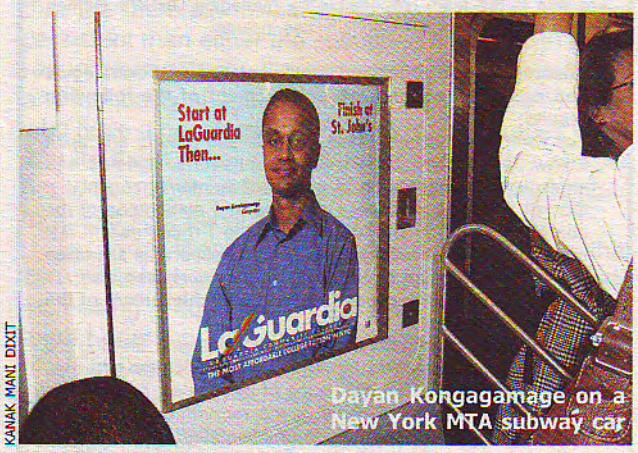
Applications should be submitted **no later than 4 August 2006 by email, to: hrmu2.np@undp.org by mentioning 'Application – Human Resources Associate' in the Subject** or in a sealed envelope to **UNDP Operations Department (Ref: HRA/MG), UN House, Pulchowk, P.O. Box 107, Kathmandu, Nepal**

Applicants must submit the updated standard UN Personal History Form available from the UN House Reception or the UNDP webpage http://www.undp.org.np/vacancy.htm

WOMEN, INDIGENOUS AND DISADVANTAGED PERSONS ARE STRONGLY ENCOURAGED TO APPLY

Only those candidates who have been shortlisted will be contacted for recruitment processes.

Home and the world



KANAK MANI DIXIT

Dayan Kongagamage on a New York MTA subway car

The name of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, today identifies the richest Southasian (male) to the world. Lakshmi Mittal, of Mittal Steel, is an Indian based in the United Kingdom. He made his money in the Soviet Union, and is suddenly in the limelight because he has dared to invade the bastion of Western Europe, attempting a hostile takeover of the French steel-maker Arcelor.

And so the name of the goddess – depicted in calendar art with a mouse for a consort, and assorted swans and white elephants hanging about in a paradisiacal grotto – is one that generates concern throughout Western industry for the acumen of can-do Indians. Truth be told, the ten richest men of Southasia, according to this year's *Forbes* list of the world's most wealthy, may be Southasians, but they are all Indians – from Azim Premji of Wipro and Kushal Pal Singh of DLF, to the Birlas, Godrej's and the Ambani brothers. And there is a pleasantly disproportionate representation of Calcutta, rather than of Bombay or Delhi, in terms of the schools and colleges these heavyweights have attended.

As Mittal and the others make the financial headlines, the infiltration of the Occident by Southasians continues apace. In the United States, for example, the robust dimensions of this presence can now be seen in the undergraduate college graduation rolls. For example, the list of the graduates of Columbia College class of '06 in New York shows a significant proportion of what some like to call 'desi' surnames.

But analysis of this list again shows the great preponderance of graduates of Indian origin, whether they are children of US citizens or foreign students. While Muslim names may be from other parts of the world as well, it is fair to say that Muslim Southasia is little represented in this list, and there are more individuals of Bangladeshi than Pakistani origin. There is not one Sinhala name there, while Nepali and Sri Lankan Tamil, or Fijian or West Indian names, would be hidden in their one's or two's, if at all.

The size and weight of the Southasian community in the US is going to become more obvious by the day, because the tide of immigration that started in the 1970s by dint of hard immigrant labour is now rising to middle- and upper-income categories. As such, they will become advertising targets. In the New York subway this summer, there is an advertisement for the La Guardia Community College, which as a matter of course shows a man of Sri Lankan origin as the model student.

Today, the Southasian may be over there, sinking roots deep into Western societies and making good for themselves and immediate families. But when all is said and done, those who will do the most good for the home country and region are the labourers who remit money – not those from the middle class who go with the ability and intention to migrate, and gain green cards and citizenships. Thus, it is not the Nepali migrant to the United Kingdom or the United States who has helped the economy of Nepal survive through these past years of violence and political turmoil. Instead, the liquidity of the economy has been guaranteed by the labour – village migrants – working under harsh conditions in Malaysia, Korea and 'Saudi'.

Thus we have the big name of a Mittal, a Shashi Tharoor or an Amartya Sen, along with tens of thousands of other Southasians, all seeking success on Western shores -- even if some of them may hold 'desi' passports. They may make us all proud, these Southasians of the globalising world economy. But it is the migrant workers traveling east and west who help keep the home economies buoyant, whether it is in Kerala, Bihar, Khulna, rural Punjab-Sindh, or the Nepali midhill and tarai. These unsung, unglamorous migrants are the ones who will be returning before long to be the real engines of growth in the backward regions of Southasia.

The wheel will turn, and the poorest regions of Southasia, those that export this migrant class, will be the ones to benefit from the return. The poor shall yet, we would all hope, inherit the earth.

Kanak Mani

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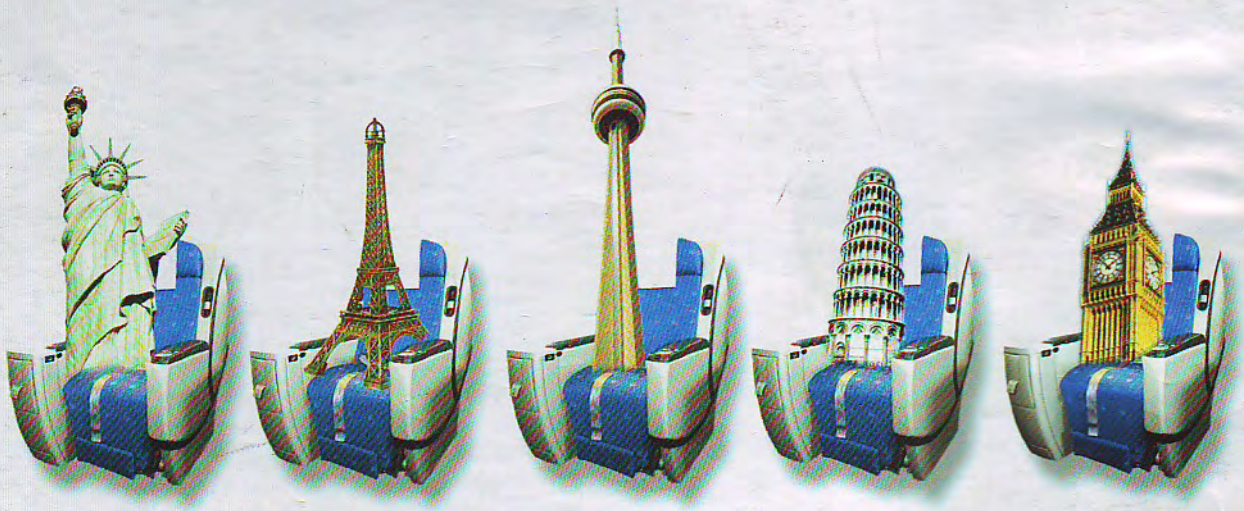

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