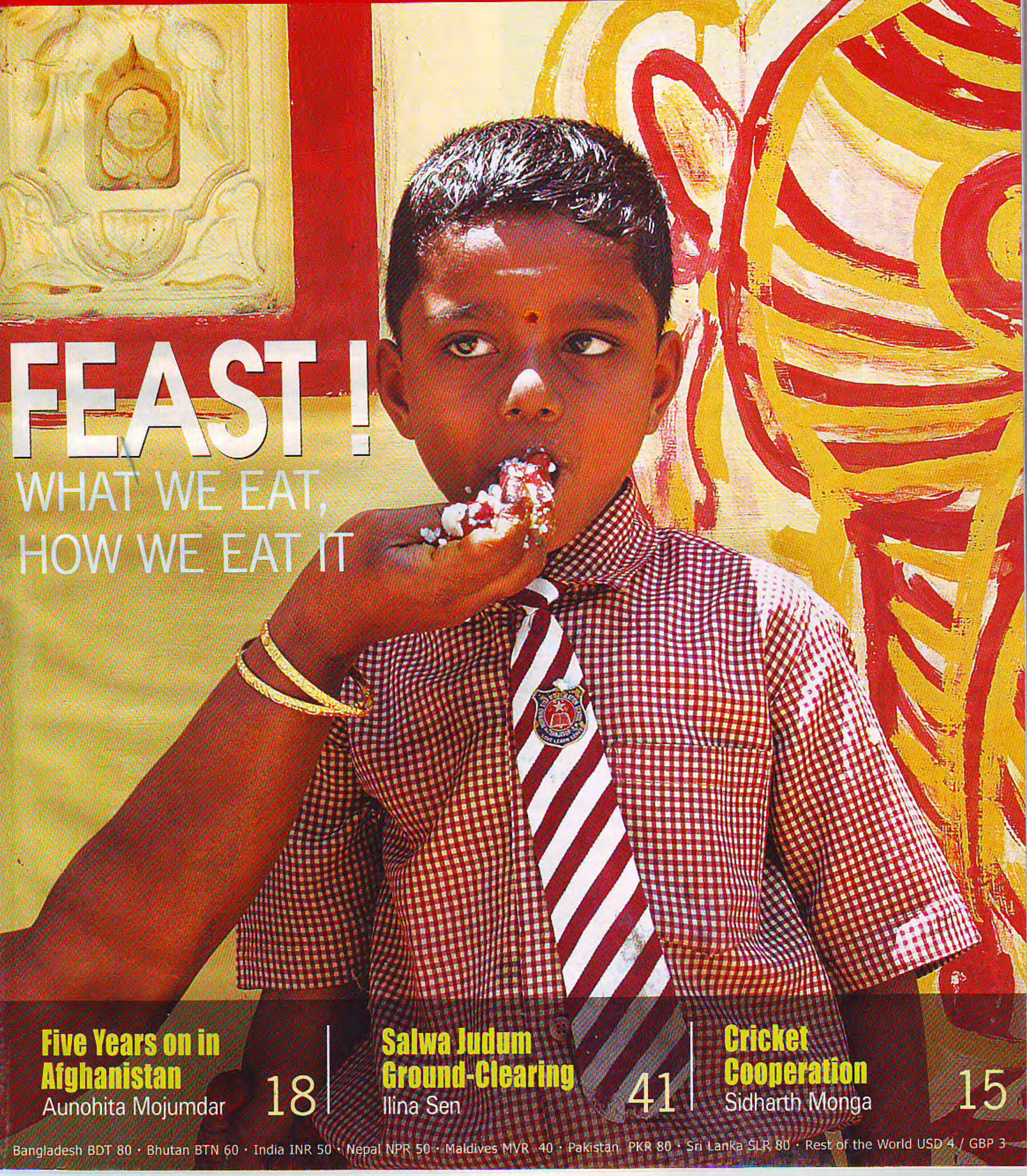
November 2006 Vol 19 No 8

HIMAL

SOUTHASIAN

BANGLA TEA PICKERS 67



FEAST !

WHAT WE EAT, HOW WE EAT IT

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Bangladesh BDT 80 · Bhutan BTN 60 · India INR 50 · Nepal NPR 50 · Maldives MVR 40 · Pakistan PKR 80 · Sri Lanka SLR 80 · Rest of the World USD 4 / GBP 3

Name : Adam Stevens
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Feast!

Cover photograph of schoolchild in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, by Maciej Dakowicz

We cannot remember when we have had such a lot of fun preparing *Himal* as with this issue on food. We gave our contributors no guidelines; we simply let them loose into the world of Southasian cooking and eating. It is clear that Southasians write much better on food than they do on geopolitics, veg or non-veg. We salivated over each article, from pork (in Guwahati) to mutton (at a dhaba on the Delhi-Chandigarh highway) to coconut concoctions (in Kerala). And what a smorgasbord of authorship we are presenting the reader with this issue – a Nepali journalist reviews an Islamabad eatery, a Dhaka dancer tastes Malabari cuisine, a Karachi-wali waxes eloquent on New Delhi chaat, and a Puerto Rican food scholar goes through plebeian fare to suggest the need for some high cuisine. Sure we have not covered every corner of Southasia, but then the intention is not to be encyclopaedic, but to provide a taste of what's out there. Enjoy!

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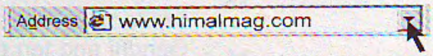

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The same country

My initial reading of Prashant Jha's 'Gujarat, another country' *(See Himal Oct 2006 cover story)* instilled in me a sense of impotence. It made me feel that nothing could be done. It seemed to be the residue of the note on which the writer concluded. It came across as a reality which I could comfortably disregard as 'another country'.

I wonder whether the title really attracts the reader to the cause that the writer is attempting to communicate. The account portrays an extremely morbid depiction of reality. From the beginning, where Jha writes, "The borders on the ground merely reflect and reinforce the polarisation that has already taken place in the minds of ordinary Gujaratis", to the end, which states that "No one knows how many Sauyajyas are in the making in Gujarat", there is no hope. And yet the writer advocates that, "what is needed is a social movement for Gujarat to cleanse itself". There seems to be a contradiction here, perhaps indicating a sense of being unable to foresee a change. I wonder whether Jha was able to distance himself from his emotions while narrating the account. One gets a sense of being overwhelmed by the reality experienced.

When I first read the piece, I felt like putting it aside after a while. I got the same sense while watching Rakesh Sharma's Gujarat documentary *Final Solution*. Both narratives created a 'defensive' stir within me. What does an account of this sort do to the reader? What is the purpose behind writing it? Who is writing it, when is it written and what is the context in which it is being written? As a friend commented, Jha's piece destroys all notions of secularism that a young, educated Hindu Indian harbours. Just like the Muslims have been depicted as being pushed in an all-encompassing social-political-economic-topographical manner, this article also embodies an excess. I wonder whether such a presentation aids in the movement towards a social change that the writer advocates.

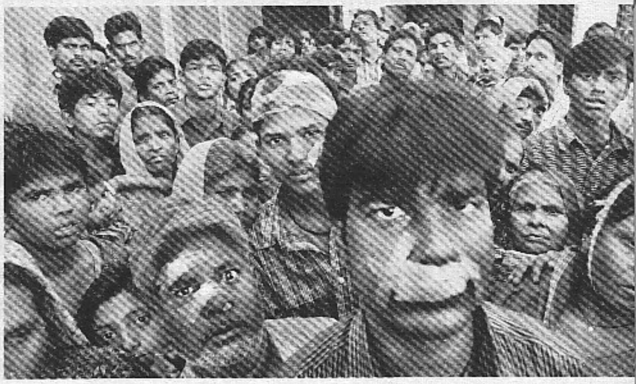
I don't imagine a linear movement, but I do imagine a space where trauma of the nature that the article describes can be brought out and spoken about. The talking will have to be done by both Hindus and Muslims, and it will take time. However, 'Gujarat, another country' doesn't provide a sense of reaching that stage. It does not propel the reader in that direction. It creates boundaries between the reader and the subject.

The emphasis on Narendra Modi as the sole perpetrator seems to be over-simplistic. Understandings such as "Gujarat has gone into its extremist cocoon willingly and alone", or that, "The elevation of Narendra Modi as chief minister has everything to do with what Gujarat has become" seem to merely scratch the surface. Does this imply that if Modi were gone things would change? Doesn't the society in Gujarat bear the responsibility as a collective? What about the intellectuals? Do they become agents of the same power that the article vehemently opposes?

Should Hindu-Muslim relations in Gujarat be seen in isolation? Is it really that different from any other place where riots would have taken place? Or even in a place where riots haven't taken place? If one scratched beneath the surface elsewhere, what would one find?

I would prefer the understanding provided by Paul Richer in *An Introduction to Deconstructionist Psychology*: "Social systems are characterised by inertia. Change is slow and rarely the result of individual efforts. Social systems are at work to sustain themselves so that the most deconstructionist movements will never deconstruct to chaos, but at their best, will loosen, create some slight flexibility, some momentary social tolerance."

'Gujarat, another country' provides an impressive account of things that exist but that people don't want to talk about. The field work done by Jha comes across as being both extensive and insightful. The account points to a society characterised by inertia, perhaps not ready to look at what has happened. However, it also creates stereotypes about the Gujarati Hindu middle class; it provides a linear narrative about the rise of communal tensions, and it oversimplifies matters by pointing fingers at Modi. How does one engage with Narendra Modi, anyway? Bajrangi Patel and Modi will perhaps ignore the analysis, as coming from a minority-appeasing pseudo-secularist. But 'Gujarat, another country' leaves one clueless about how to engage with such people – traces of whom, I sense, exist in the majority at large. Muslims feeling alienated is common rhetoric. But a point that still needs addressing is, what interest does doing so serve the Hindu?



The narrative ends with a sense of frustration, of feeling like a Muslim in Gujarat. Perhaps what it calls for is hyper-activism, but it fails to implant a sense of responsibility and agency in the reader, or in Sauyajya.

Ashis Roy
New Delhi

Send your comments, questions and corrections – or anything else – to editorial@himalmag.com

REGION

New club rules

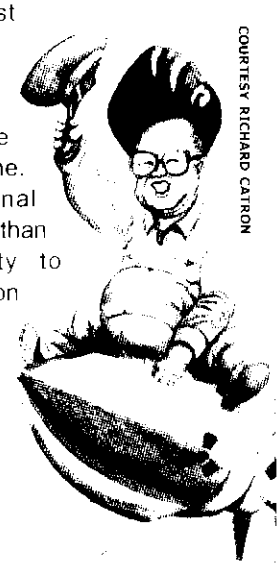
Contrary to what the recent cacophony of voices would suggest, the global nuclear order was dead long before Pyongyang decided it was time to cross the threshold. It was dead because those countries with nuclear weapons have not shown commitment to move towards disarmament, as they promised in the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It was dead because Israel, followed by India and Pakistan also built nuclear arsenals, with some countries watching and others clapping on the sidelines. It was dead because of the existence of a vibrant proliferation network, which involved governments, middlemen and top scientists passing dangerous secrets in an illegal, transnational marketplace. The nuclear order had to die, because it was based on a morally wrong and politically naïve principle: that a few countries could be nuclear powers and bully others based on this strength, while all the rest (including those who were nuclear-capable but decided not to proliferate) had to remain silent spectators.

North Korea is an irresponsible state run by a vainglorious man who inherited his dictatorship, and who has no respect for international law. His nuclear programme and tests must be harshly condemned and sanctions slapped. But the self-righteousness and criticism emanating from the two nuclearised Southasian countries is difficult to digest. Look at the arguments India, responsible for sparking off the nuclear race in the region, made to justify its tests – a discriminatory nuclear order, a hostile security environment, strategic depth. These are precisely the reasons cited by Pyongyang for having gone nuclear. Yet, as New Delhi inches closer to becoming a formal part of the nuclear club, it does not sense the hypocrisy inherent in its being judgemental. Some call it realpolitik, but the truth is starker: the strategic community in India lacks a moral centre.

But of course, to understand the recent tests in the Korean peninsula, one needs to look elsewhere – at Washington DC. By including North Korea in its 'axis of evil', attacking Iraq based on a lie, and now ratcheting up pressure on Iran on equally flimsy grounds, George W Bush's administration has harmed the international system in more ways than one. It has created insecurity among states and regimes, some of which have come to believe that possessing real WMDs is the only way to deter the US's military onslaught. We wonder whether President Bush's record in office has anything to do with Kim Jong-il going nuclear, and we are inclined to believe so.

Several immediate concerns have come to the fore in the wake of the test – the nature of sanctions, China's role and influence, the implications vis-à-vis Japan and South Korea, and options for the US. These are important questions, which will decide the way East Asia looks in coming decades. But beneath the clutter lies a more fundamental issue – which way the world is headed on the nuclear question.

The choice is fairly straightforward. The nuclear status quo is now a thing of the past. In the quest for 'security' and the perceived need to assert their military strength, there will be more countries that will head the nuclear way. Japan may move away from its pacifist Constitution; countries in Africa and Latin America may rethink their renunciation of nuclear weapons; if pushed to a corner, Iran might decide to further accelerate its programme. As the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency warns, more than 30 countries have the ability to steer down this path. The other option – and, we believe, the only sane choice – is step-by-step disarmament. The nuclear-haves must live up their commitment to reduce, with the goal of finally eliminating, their nuclear arsenal. The age of two sets of rules is over. The choice is ours.



COURTESY RICHARD CATRON

BHUTAN | NEPAL

Shipping out?

It seems serious, though you can never quite tell about this sort of thing. Certainly the early October announcement by the United States that it is willing to take in almost 60 percent of the Bhutani refugees languishing in Nepal is some of the most serious rhetoric to arise from the 16-year-old issue in a long while, if not since the very beginning of the ordeal. The news was followed by reports that several other countries, including Canada and Australia, have offered to take in smaller numbers.

The refugees themselves are taking the sudden development very seriously indeed, although for seemingly diametrically opposed reasons. Following the US announcement, secretaries at six of the seven refugee camps in southeast Nepal publicly lauded the offer, assuring naysayers that the Thimphu government could still be effectively pressured by refugees who resettle abroad. Others, particularly several high-profile refugee leaders, including onetime prisoner of conscience Tek Nath Rizal, have long warned against such resettlement offers for the possibility of splintering the refugee cause.

They decry the US offer, and UNHCR for being amenable to the idea. Rizal believes that such initiatives provide tacit approval to Thimphu's early 1990s expulsion of the Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa, and he has accused the US along with the international community of "working to defend the Bhutanese king".

Rhetoric aside, we agree with that stance, in part. There is strength in numbers and there is the possibility of dispersal of the issue as refugees are resettled. Thimphu would surely benefit from third-country resettlement, which smacks as an unfair release of the guilty party. At the same time, 16 years worth of unity has done little to comfort the 106,000 Lhotshampa, who continue to wait in declining conditions on borrowed land with little future. Now could be the time to graciously accept the situation as a critical humanitarian one, rather than simply as a political one. As foreign governments – most notably the US – draw up policies regarding the Lhotshampa, they must take care to clarify to Thimphu that it would be absolutely unacceptable for the royal government to see the partial or complete emptying out of the camps in Jhapa and Morang districts as a green-light to fill them back up, with the depopulation targeting the remaining Lhotshampa in Bhutan, thought to number a little more than those in the camps.

Even though we feel the injustice that would be caused by resettlement letting Thimphu oft the hook in terms of having to face a complete repatriation, even more important is the need to salvage the humanitarian situation. With Nepal as the aggrieved state unable to force India to bring its influence to bear on Thimphu, it is better to consider the resettlement offer now that it has been made credibly.

The tenacity of the US on the Lhotshampa issue deserves a salute, not only for deciding on this current step but for a decade of taking real interest in the situation of the Lhotshampa at a time when India in particular has been decidedly lukewarm. *Himal* continues to stand by previous editorials in these pages, which have argued that the ideal way for this issue to have played out would have had the Kathmandu government successfully tri-laterilising the issue by bringing in New Delhi. But if matters go a different route, particularly with the Nepali government currently grappling with its own massive internal issues, India is not let off of the hook. Policymakers must now move to assure that similar depopulation actions are not triggered against other Nepali-speaking communities in India's Northeast by the fact that resettlement seems to come so 'easy' for them.

Rizal and others are now anxiously awaiting the 16th round of bilateral talks between Kathmandu and Thimphu, tentatively slated for 21 and 22 November, saying that Washington DC, Kathmandu and UNHCR should hold off making any decision on resettlement until after the summit concludes. And indeed, with the sudden movement on the refugee issue in international circles, the Bhutani government may surprise everyone and see the issue in a new light. But given the track record of the previous 15 meetings, it is best not to build hopes on that one.

NEPAL

The 'politicalisation' of the Maobaadi

There was a time when the rebellion of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) used to be compared to the predecessor insurgency of the Sendero Luminso (Shining Path) in Peru, and its leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Chairman 'Prachanda') to Abimael Guzman (Presidente 'Gonzalo'). But times have changed.

Guzman's 'outing' was when he was captured in a Lima safehouse in 1992 and publicly paraded about in a cage by then-President Alberto Fujimori. On 13 October this year, he was again sentenced to life in prison, following a year-long retrial. In the case of Dahal, on the other hand, on 16 June this year the home minister went to fetch him in a helicopter from a village redoubt in central Nepal, and brought him to Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's residence in a flag-mounted vehicle. In a crowded and hastily organised conference under a naked light bulb, in the presence of the entire political leadership of Nepal, Dahal held forth for nearly an hour. It was an extemporaneous tour de force, a far cry from the rantings of Gonzalo from his Lima cage.

The 12-year rebellion in Peru started in 1980 and ultimately cost nearly 70,000 lives; the decade-long conflict in Nepal began in 1996 and notched up a little over 13,000 deaths. It was not until the Shining Path decided to stop killing *campasinos* in the *altiplano* and to take the war into Lima that the Peruvian state became particularly concerned. In the Nepali instance, the Maoists decided to pull back just before their spiral into anti-political mayhem began.

The turning point could be said to be the Maadi blast of 5 June 2005, in which a bomb blew up a crowded bus in the Maadi Valley of Chitwan District, killing 35 villagers. Nepal's active media and civil society were suddenly able to turn the mirror on the Maoists, and a process of introspection seems to have begun in an organisation that still retained a political core amidst the militarised cadre. The Maobaadi response turned out to be quite the opposite from the bloodletting that continued in Peru even after the massacre of 69 peasants in the Andean village of Lucanamarca in 1983.

Actually, the Nepali Maoists seem to have decided to alter the course of their revolution as far back as 2003, in order not to go the way of every other Maoist movement. To begin with, the Maobaadi movement had become big

Caged Guzman, 1992

AP

enough to credibly reach for national positioning; at the same time, continuing on with armed conflict would undo all that had been gained. The decision to go for "open competitive politics" was the result of an insurgency that had not lost its political core to mindless violence, though getting very close to it, one which realised that both internal and external factors would disallow the takeover of Kathmandu Valley by an armed insurgent force.

Internally, even though thoughtless scholarship had it that the Maoists controlled up to 80 percent of the national territory, the rebel leadership itself knew that their fighters and militia were merely filling a governmental vacuum. The fact is the rebels were unable to set up a compact zone or a base area; the best they could do over a decade-long war was to attack district headquarters at night, never able to keep them during the following day. Externally, the international community would never 'allow' a Maoist takeover of Kathmandu, and the Maoists were quick to realise the Indian determination on the matter.

It was when the Maoists essentially gave up their People's War without actually saying so – claiming to be experimenting with communism in the 21st century, and learning from the mistakes of Stalin and Mao to boot – that the political parties moved to engage with them. This is what led to the supercharged People's Movement of April 2006, which brought the Maoists above-ground and into Kathmandu. By participating in the People's Movement without the gun, the Maoists gained a modicum of respectability, something that their military adventures of a decade had failed to deliver.

Dismantling the war machine

Now the challenge begins. There is no doubt that the CPN (Maoist) leadership is genuine in its desire to abandon warfare and join open politics. That resolve is the saving grace of the present situation in Nepal, and is also what makes the country a unique place for experimentation with peacemaking. The challenge, though, is how efficiently and convincingly the leadership can bring the fighters, militia and cadre into the flow.

How will a military machine be converted into a political party? The difficulty lies in the fact that the Maoist rank-and-file have been drilled with revolutionary fervour and talk of takeover of the state by force of arms. They have lost comrades in battle, and been blocked off from other avenues of individual progress for having been handed the gun. In addition, there will be a large group, gathered during the rapid Maoist expansion in the late 1990s and early 2000s, whose political commitment is suspect, and who are obviously enjoying armed power and the livelihood gained from it.

The political transformation of the Maoists will require something more than 'arms management'. This euphemism is used by all parties in Nepal, and means disarmament of the Maoists, while ensuring that the Nepal Army is kept within barracks. The military structures and thinking that have defined rebel behaviour will now be the most crucial to transform if the Maoists are to evolve into a peaceful political force. This transformation seems to be happening at a pace that could be faster, and indicates a danger for the 'politicalisation' of the CPN (Maoist).

There is an increasingly evident separation between what the Maoist leadership says and what their cadre do. While the level of armed violence is down drastically for a country that a year ago was seeing an average of seven deaths per day due to army and rebel action, the fact is that the threat of the Maoist gun is currently still very much in effect. There is continuing harassment of the population on the back of this armed threat, in the form of country-wide extortion, abductions, activities of 'people's courts', and takeover of numerous state functions, including policing and collecting customs duties. The political parties, at the ground level, find it difficult to enter areas where Maoist diktat still runs deep.

Indeed, ground-level animosities in general remain very high, and Maoist activists are more often than not carrying out localised vendettas. A reservoir of resentment is building against the Maoists among locals for having for so long had to follow Maoist decrees backed by threats of violence. This lack of coordination between Dahal's statesmanship at the top and Maoist coercion on the ground creates obstacles for the 'politicalisation' of the CPN (Maoist).

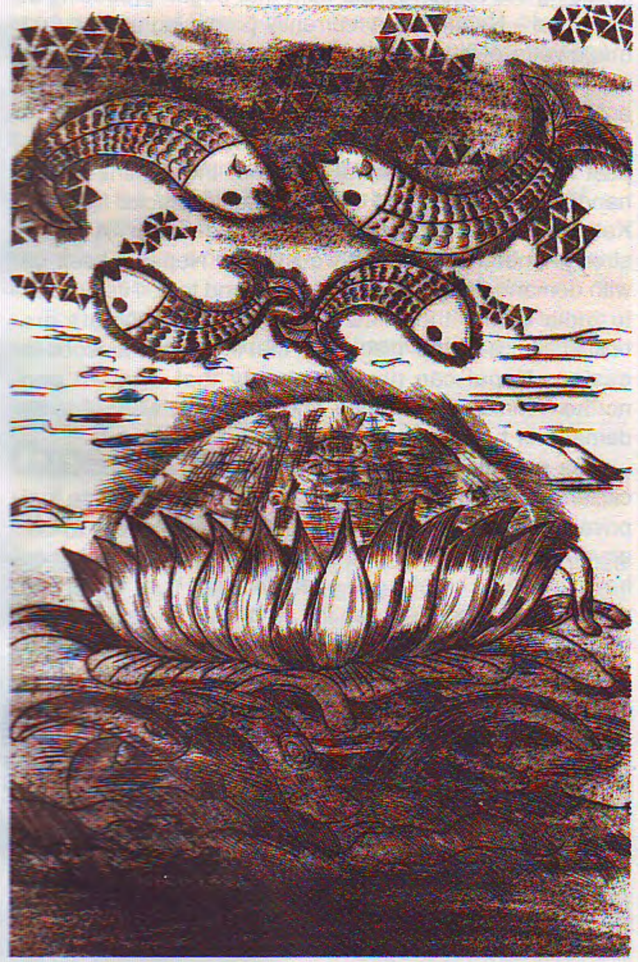
The Maoist cadre now seem to be engaged in a last-minute show of force and fundraising, at a time when the state does not exist in large parts of the country. This lack of governmental presence is due to the fact the Seven-Party Alliance government (SPA) is a confused entity, currently applying all of its available energy to the peace process while neglecting to govern and administer. The inability to energise and deploy the Nepal Police, in particular, has put the public at the mercy of the Maoist ground-level cadre in villages, towns and now cities, which has also fuelled copycat rebel groups and bandit units alike. The Maoist leadership must understand the need for an effective police force, for when the peasantry may rise up against their local commissars and activists, especially in areas where there has been a harsh and heavy hand over the years.

It is obviously time for the Maoist leadership to rope in their wayward movement, and bring it in line with the plans to join open politics – to jettison the militaristic ways for the political way. Doubtless they will have to confront many contradictions in the process – most importantly the need to cajole the cadre away from the love affair with political violence after having groomed them for it – but the rest of Nepali society is bound to show forbearance and understanding, as Dahal and his cohort engage in dialectic. Everybody, including the SPA politicians, wants lasting peace, for which there is a willingness to make space for the Maoists.

With India having withdrawn its objections to the involvement of the United Nations in monitoring the ceasefire and constituent-assembly elections, the stage is set for an internationally supervised 'arms management' process. The negotiations between the SPA and the CPN (Maoist), essentially between Koirala and Dahal, have proceeded in fits and starts, but the movement has been consistently forward. The sticking point at this time is the schedule under which the Maoists will lay down their arms, for they are already committed to the UN for placing their fighters in up to seven cantonments.

The Maoists are extremely keen to join the interim government, which would organise the constituent-assembly elections, optimistically slated for early June 2007. Since it is not conceivable that one of the parties in the resulting eight-party interim government would have its own independent army, the need to lay down arms is clear. While Prime Minister Koirala has insisted on complete disarmament before the Maoists could join the government, it is likely that the rebels will be allowed to join with a credibly scheduled process of disarmament after their fighters are firmly located within cantonments. Once the Maoists are in government, and have firmly put their lot in with the political process and the constituent-assembly elections, the hope is that they would be hemmed in enough to rope in their wayward cadre and provide relief to the general public.

Showing remorse is probably the most difficult thing for a revolutionary Maoist group to do. About the time that Abimael Guzman was being handed his sentence in mid-October, Pushpa Kamal Dahal visited the survivors and victimised families of the Maadi blast in Chitwan. He apologised. This was without doubt the proper way to move towards converting the CPN (Maoist) into a political force, and the rest of Nepali society can only hope for more of the same – a show of genuine transformation from the top, which would force the rank-and-file to follow. Already, Chairman Prachanda has done more than Presidente Gonzalo could ever have been expected to accomplish. ▲



'Fishing in Swamps'

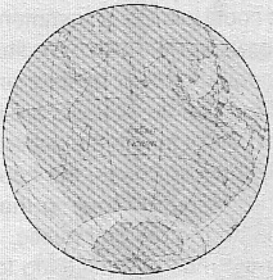
In this engraving by **Venantius J Pinto**, the fish ichythys represents followers of Christianity, but also other religious minorities. Come election time, political parties turn their attention to areas otherwise left in complete neglect, and fish for votes, often by inciting communal hatred. The stems and roots of an outwardly attractive and enticing lotus – symbolic of Hindutva – disappear into murky, black waters below. In the dim light one can see them twisted and intertwined, capable of ensnaring what comes their way.

But an image, of course, can be viewed in countless ways. And it is hard during this season of festivity not to be distracted from the political, at least for a brief moment, by the culinary – for fish, like religion, can be nourishment. Seen in this light, the black space beneath the lotus can be interpreted not as sinister, but rather as the cool after sundown, when the family gathers at home to eat the day's fresh catch. While politics may divide, food unites – not only in the table over which a family breaks bread, but in the communities its practices bring together, and in the enthusiasm it provokes at home and away. Swamps are no place for fancy fare. During the pre-monsoon festivals, 'Fishing in Swamps' reminds us that it does not take much to make a feast. ▲

This is part of a regular series of *Himal's* editorial commentary on artwork by Venantius J Pinto. Engraving/Drypoint on Arches Cover White, Print size: 17"x22.5", Image size: 8.75"x11.75", Edition: 15+AP. Printer: Vijay Kumar, 2000.

INDIA

India heads down under



Reports have recently surfaced of a top-secret project by the Indian government to lay claim to broad tracts of the Indian Ocean floor, where lies a bounty of mineral and petroleum reserves. The project, said to have begun in 2002, includes a joint effort by oceanographers and diplomats to carry out the task of asserting sovereign right over the seabed.

The push comes ahead of a new international law, scheduled to go into effect in 2009, that will allow certain ocean-bound countries to claim territory all the way to the edge of the continental shelf on which they are located. Currently, India claims the legally stipulated 370 km band of nautical territory that surrounds it. But under new UN guidelines this could be almost doubled to nearly 650 km, assuming that the country can prove its inherent – and unique – link to the continental shelf.

According to a 2000 study by the International Seabed Authority, India's extended continental shelf holds more than two billion barrels of oil and gas, in addition to a wealth of minerals.

In September, researchers finished exploring 32,000 km of the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. But while the ministries of Earth Sciences and External Affairs are hoping to finalise the area for which they will be staking their claims within the coming two months, the details of that claim are being kept top secret. Neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, are doubtless hoping to stake claim to what is being referred to as the "final frontier". ∆

PAKISTAN / AFGHANISTAN

Stay awhile

UNHCR

In mid-October, Pakistan finally started the formal registration process of the millions of Afghan refugees that live within its borders. Those registered will be eligible for official identity cards, valid for three years, which recognise them as Afghan citizens living in Pakistan.

The USD six million registration exercise, the first-ever for the Afghan refugees, is slated to be completed by the end of the year. Only those refugees that were included in an early 2005 census will be eligible for registration. Although around 130,000 Afghan refugees returned to their homeland during the first half of 2006 alone, the refugee agency UNHCR estimates that around 2.5 million remain in Pakistan, with another 900,000 in Iran.

Returnee rates have plummeted as fighting in Afghanistan has increased this year. Those rates are now 60 percent lower than they were during the same period last year. Since UNHCR began its returnee operation in 2002 – the largest such programme it has undertaken anywhere – around 3.7 million refugees have voluntarily returned to Afghanistan. ∆

INDIA / NEPAL

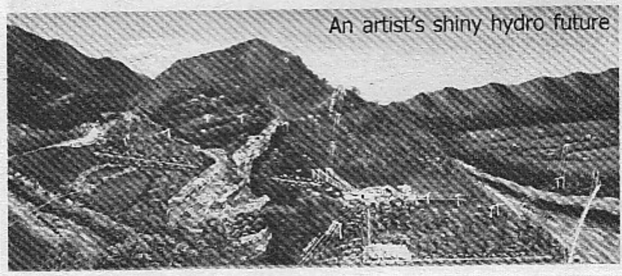
Now you try

Where the government has failed, the private sector will now give it a go. In mid-September a two-day summit took place in Kathmandu between private-sector interests from Nepal and India, aimed at jumpstarting Nepal's as yet miniscule hydroelectric industry. Several hydro projects within Nepal were up for grabs, and by the end of the summit investors had agreed to build two crossborder 220-kilovolt transmission lines, although no timetable was initially set.

Nepal and Bhutan have two of the highest hydroelectric potentials in the world. But while Bhutan has been able to nearly float its economy due to India-built hydro projects – including the massive Tala dam that began producing in late June – Nepal is only currently producing around 600 megawatts of hydro energy (out of a total 83,000 MW potential). The country is forced to purchase power on an annual basis from energy-strapped India.

Given this atrocious record of implementation over the past fifty years, the central theme of the summit was a handing-over of parts of the hydroelectric sector from the Kathmandu government to the private sector. A future strengthened hydro sector would allow Nepal to keep up with demand during the dry months, and to sell its surplus to India during the monsoon. Nepali technocrats are bullish after a recent 'discovery' that the early monsoon in eastern Nepal can provide energy that western and northern India need in their driest months, when energy demand is highest.

The organisers of the Kathmandu meet and Nepali citizens now have to watchdog the process to ensure that private sector involvement can indeed open doors where government was unable to do so. At the same time, they have to keep a careful eye open, to make sure that these new 'private interests' keep the emphasis on the interests of the Nepali people. The hydropower sector in Nepal is notoriously inefficient and corrupt. ∆



An artist's shiny hydro future

HIMAL HYDRO

INDIA / BURMA

Closing doors, **opening** windows

H S DEJONG

The misty borderland

After a 'breakthrough' during mid-September talks between the Indian and Burmese home secretaries, New Delhi has moved fast to capitalise on a new opportunity. At the annual meeting, Rangoon had agreed to launch an operation targeting Northeast militant groups that are operating out of Burmese borderland territory.

New Delhi claims that several militant groups in the Indian Northeast are operating out of Burma, including the ULFA, NSCN (K) and NSCN (IM). The two countries share a 1650 km-long frontier.

The proposed operation, which would be similar to the 2004-05 anti-insurgency operation that flushed out ULFA fighters from southern Bhutan, was originally slated to begin during the coming winter. By the first week of October, however, a senior rebel leader with the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland reported seeing hundreds of Burmese soldiers moving into rebel-held areas, as well as "98 trucks, loaded with weapons and ammunition being sent by the Indian government," crossing into Burma through Moreh, in Manipur. New Delhi's military supplies to the junta were subsequently confirmed by a high-ranking Indian Army official days later.

Just weeks after New Delhi received Rangoon's promise of cooperation, a delegation of Indian officials visited Moreh, one of the most heavily used trade points between the two countries. The visit came immediately before a project to fence off the entire international border was slated to begin. A continuation of New Delhi's fence-building policy carried over from the Pakistan and Bangladesh frontiers, this India-Burma barrier is intended to cut down on contraband (drugs and weapons) and movement of insurgents. As the fencing got underway, however, New Delhi received an official complaint from Rangoon. The construction is said to be presently suspended.

Meanwhile, India's Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh on 29 September announced that a new free trade policy would be implemented, doing away with the current limit of 22 select items. A new INR 700 million facility is now being constructed to facilitate greater bilateral trade at Moreh, and a new bus service to the border point is planned. The latter will undoubtedly become more important once border fencing resumes. ∆

INDIA / PAKISTAN

Crossborder banking brightens

The governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, Shamshad Akhtar, has confirmed that plans are going forward that would allow two Pakistani and two Indian banks to open crossborder branches. Akhtar made the announcement during a Bombay meet organised by the Indian Banks' Association and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

Although Akhtar said that several banks on either side of the border had expressed interest in tapping their neighbouring markets, she declined to name the financial institutions ahead of receiving a regulatory green-light. After a period of privatisation, Pakistani banks are now about 80 percent privately held – and evidently itching to expand their horizons. ∆

PAKISTAN / AFGHANISTAN

Span the **Khyber**

STEPHEN LUSCOMBE

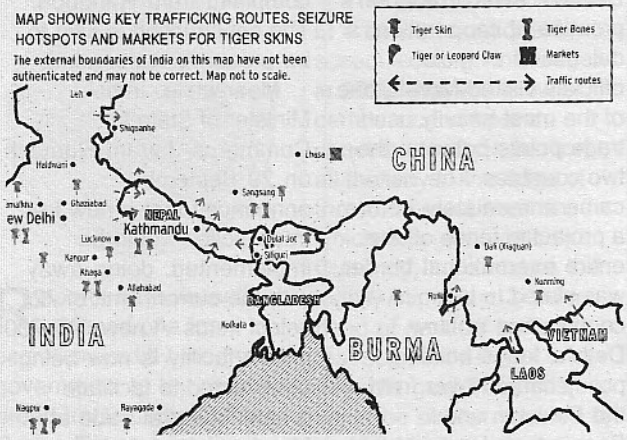
Even as Kabul and Islamabad hurl accusations across their porous border regarding the aiding and harbouring of Taliban militants, the two countries are making headway in opening up some new frontier-crossing points.

On 14 September Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz attended the inauguration of a refurbished crossborder highway running from Torkhum in the Northwest Frontier Province to the Afghan city of Jalalabad, up and across the fabled Khyber Pass. Islamabad funded the new construction at a cost of nearly PKR two billion. At the ribbon-cutting, Aziz, accompanied by several other Pakistani ministers, stressed that Afghanistan's economic stability would benefit the entire region. He announced that the Pakistani government would be assisting in making the Torkhum-Jalalabad section a two-way highway.

The prime minister also spoke of the possible extension of the railway line from Chaman on the Pakistani border to Spin Boldak in Kandahar province, southwest of the Khyber. The following week, there were reports that Islamabad had invited foreign investment in two railway lines – the Spin Boldak track, as well as a second one into Iran. Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said that Pakistan Railways was ready to start the trains running to Afghanistan as soon as "the brotherly neighbouring country" gave the go-ahead. ∆

REGION

Not for lack of **warning**


MAP SHOWING KEY TRAFFICKING ROUTES. SEIZURE HOTSPOTS AND MARKETS FOR TIGER SKINS

The external boundaries of India on this map have not been authenticated and may not be correct. Map not to scale.

EIA

One of Southasia's most instantly recognisable animals could well completely disappear from the wild, says a report released in late-September by the Wildlife Protection Society of India and the international Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). The two organisations warned that the Royal Bengal tiger was facing imminent extinction in India due to an ongoing illegal pelt trade between the Subcontinent and Tibet, through Nepal. The report, "Skinning the Cat", made similar warnings about other large Southasian cats, including the snow leopard.

Despite tiger hunting having been outlawed in India in 1972, and international legislation banning the trade in tiger or leopard parts coming into effect three years later, the smuggling of pelts has today become a multi-million dollar business. Despite the use of traditional small-scale trading routes, "Skinning the Cat" says that the illegal sector has all of the trappings of an international organised crime operation.

With tiger pelts in Lhasa selling for around USD 20,000 a piece, the lure of big – and relatively easy – money has been disastrous for India's tiger population. While a century ago the tiger worldwide – including the Royal Bengal and other species – stood at around 100,000, today it is down to 5000, with half of that living in the Subcontinent. Poachers kill an estimated 200 tigers every year in India alone. EIA investigators say that tiger pelts have become status symbols in an increasingly prosperous China, to whom roughly 80 percent of the skins are sold.

But while India, Nepal and China are all signatories of international and national regulations banning the sale or trade in these items, "Skinning the Cat" suggests that not only is enforcement not nearly strong enough – in some places it has actually weakened in recent years. After associating itself for centuries with the Royal Bengal tiger's stoic face in tourism campaigns, India may soon be forced to distance itself when the day dawns that the last tiger has been killed. Δ

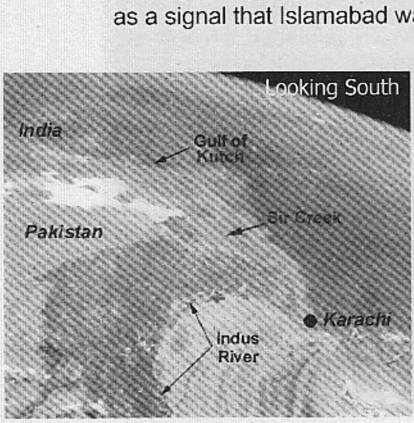
INDIA / PAKISTAN

Dividing the marsh

An unsung breakthrough has taken place regarding the four-decade standoff over Sir Creek, the 60-mile estuary in the Rann of Kutch, which separates Gujarat from Sindh province. Following the optimism of a May meeting, Manmohan Singh had announced in September that he was preparing a proposal for joint petroleum exploration in the area with Islamabad.

Sir Creek has long been viewed as one of the more 'solvable' of issues between India and Pakistan, and an agreement was reached later that month that will now launch a five-month joint survey of the area. Officials say that the findings of the survey, to start in November, should also allow the two countries to formally demarcate their international frontier through the soggy marshland.

Pakistan has long rejected India's suggestion that a border simply be made down the centre of the estuary. While some in India have interpreted this hesitancy as a signal that Islamabad wants to lay claim to the mineral and petroleum deposits that are thought to lie underneath, others suggest that complete Pakistani ownership would make it easier for Pakistan-based militants to sneak into India.



NASA

What a breakthrough it would be if, in the aftermath of a survey and agreement, there were actually to be a joint investment in exploration. Δ

REGION

Joint **Himalayan** study

Starting in the middle of October, scientists from Bhutan, China, India and Nepal will be traversing the Himalayan mountain range in an extensive joint research programme, unique particularly for the many countries involved. Although myriad scientific expeditions have studied individual areas of the Himalaya through the years, the new cooperative project will for the first time bring together disparate groups to conduct comparative research on the north versus south sides of the Himalayan chain.

Such collaborative scientific work has not previously been allowed to take place due to both the prohibitive nature of the region's geography itself, as well as the difficult political relations in the sensitive rimland over the past half-century. According to the Chinese Academy of Sciences, under whose aegis this project is taking place, 13 scientists from the four countries will begin a one-month expedition in mid-October, comparing the landscapes, climates, wildlife and social cultures on the opposing Himalayan faces. Δ

SRI LANKA

Militarising the island

A new report has found that Sri Lanka is Southasia's most militarised country. No surprise there, you might say. The Bombay-based Strategic Foresight Group (SFG), in a report titled "Cost of Conflict in Sri Lanka", said that the country has 8000 military personnel per million citizens. This is twice the number for Pakistan – commonly believed to be the region's most heavily militarised society – which has just 4000 military men per million. Other regional countries boast significantly lower numbers: 2700 for Nepal (which saw dramatic increase in military combatants in the last few years), 1300 for India and 1000 for Bangladesh.

And Sri Lanka did not come out on top only in terms of security personnel ratios. For military expenditure compared to GDP, Colombo is again ranked first, at 4.1 percent, a figure that does not take into account money spent by the LTTE. This compares to 3.5 percent for Pakistan, 2.5 percent each for India and Nepal, and 1.5 percent for Bangladesh.

Colombo's current military budget – which was as high as 6.3 percent in 2000 – was significantly higher even than other war-torn countries, including Burma, Colombia and Sudan. More worryingly, the SFG study was conducted off of figures collected from 2004-05, well before the current upsurge in violence. According to reports in early October, Colombo is now planning to increase its defence budget by 45 percent for next year – to nearly USD 1.4 billion. Military purchases are likewise projected to triple.

PAKISTAN

Appeal for **Kalat**

For the first time in 130 years, a grand jirga of Baloch sardars took place in late September. The group of prominent elders condemned the 26 August killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti by the Pakistan Air Force, calling for an investigation into the death by an international medical board. The sardars urged Baloch unity so that Bugti's "martyrdom" would not "go in vain", as well as the formation of a clear plan that would make them "owners of their resources". The group also vehemently derided a previous government-sponsored 'jirga', which had announced the end of the sardar system in the area.

The jirga also looked into some other areas, which is bound to increase headache for Islamabad. Meeting in the Shahi Darbar (royal palace) in the former state of Kalat – the entire event was chaired by the Khan of Kalat, Mir Suleman Dawood – the jirga's members emphasised a problem that they say has been persistent for more than a half-century. According to a tripartite Partition-era agreement between the state of Kalat, the colonial government and the new Pakistani government, Kalat was given a measure of independence, but was soon forced to join Pakistan. Claiming that the agreement had been violated ever since, the jirga agreed to ask the International Court of Justice at the Hague to intervene.

INDIA

Justice stayed

Mohammed Afzal Guru, the prime accused in the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, was originally scheduled to be hanged on 20 October. Days before that date, Afzal's death sentence was stayed. As human-rights activists and legal scholars review the case, what is revealed is a conspicuous lack of justice at several levels.

Afzal's confession to aiding the conspirators was given under duress in police custody, allegedly without having been offered a lawyer. Afzal also underwent two trials without the legal counsel of his choice, before courts decided against him. For the state to kill over a crime when the accused is proven guilty is an issue that divides plenty of people. But the systemic flaws underscored by Afzal's case should not divide anyone.

No matter what is believed of Afzal's motives – and there are many opposing views – it is clear that he was compelled to support the State Task Force of Jammu & Kashmir for years, and tortured into informing on others. In this regard, Afzal's treatment is paradigmatic in a place where many have information on the militant movement, regardless of whether they are directly involved. It is no wonder that his case has come to represent the lack of justice for an entire people, as well as the pitfalls of a system that includes the death penalty as a punitive option.

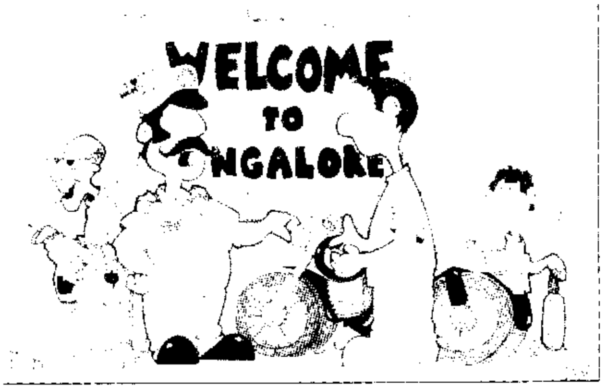
India is one of five Southasian countries that continue to allow the death penalty, the other three being Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and China. The other five regional countries have either passed de facto bans on the practice, or outlawed it entirely. The first to see fit to do so was the Maldives in 1952, while the most recent was Bhutan in 2004.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, Mirza Tahir Hussain, a British national who has been in prison for the past 18 years on charges of killing a taxi driver, has received another presidential stay of execution. Hussain has been given several such stays since December 2005. Around 250 others in Pakistan are currently awaiting execution.

INDIA

Corrupt company

tikka masala



No cash? No problem - I take credit cards!

COURTESY SUDEEP BOSS

With people comes corruption? That seems to be the indication of Transparency International's latest study on bribery. According to TI's Bribe Payers Index, released in early October, the world's two most populous countries, India and China, are also home to the companies most ready to pay bribes to do business in other countries.

The study looked at the world's 30 largest exporters, which together make up about 80 percent of global exports. Also making the top five were Russia, Turkey and Taiwan.

While some observers have suggested that the Sino-Indian proclivity to grease the trade wheels is linked to these countries' recent dramatic rates of industrialisation and development, it is more likely that this is simply an 'export' of a vigorous national industry in both cases. Meanwhile, TI also has another category of countries: those most likely to pay bribes only in developing countries. TI singled out France and Italy on that score, with the US tied with Belgium about a third of the way down. Unmentioned in the tally, however, is who's doing the receiving of all this under-the-table money.

Tourism minister caught dreaming

A recent miscommunication between Islamabad's ministries should have some cheeks glowing red with embarrassment - or frustration. Appearing at the Wagah border on 27 September, on the occasion of World Tourism day, Pakistani Tourism Minister Nilofar Bakhtiar announced that Pakistan would begin offering visas-on-arrival to citizens from 24 countries, including India. The minister further elaborated that Pervez Musharraf himself had drafted the new legislation.

The following day, however, the Tourism Ministry released a hasty clarification: Islamabad would indeed be offering visas-on-arrival to citizens of more than 20 countries, but not to the eastern neighbour. Saying that Bakhtiar had been "misquoted" by the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan, the ministry said that the duration of visa validity would simply be extended as far as Indian visitors were concerned.

INDIA / PAKISTAN

Elders' stipends restored

In the midst of heightened tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, Hamid Karzai's government has decided to reinstate a long-halted programme of paying stipends to tribal elders in Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal regions, harkening back to a time when loyalties were up for grabs. The monthly stipends, which reportedly vary from PKR 1000-40,000 (USD 17-660) depending on an elder's influence, were stopped in 1992 after the fall of communist president Mohammad Najibullah's government, with the takeover of a relatively Pakistan-friendly Mujahideen government.

In North and South Waziristan, Kabul is now paying around 2000 elders on a monthly basis. Not only have the amounts of the stipends increased, but so have their number. In Khyber Agency alone, for instance, the number of stipends has increased from 100 to 250 since 1992.

The sudden restart of the old crossborder programme has Islamabad on edge. One Pakistani newspaper quoted an anonymous analyst as suggesting that Kabul may eventually want to use the stipends to fund "sabotage activities" within Pakistan.

INDIA / PAKISTAN

Kashmir **'not pressing'**

Although some will cry foul, for the first time in 13 years Kashmir was not included on the United Nations Secretary-General's list of 'festering' global problems, in his annual report released in New York in late September. The Himalayan state was first included as a pressing dispute by then-Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1993, over India's strenuous objections. Since that time, the conflict has been included in the report every year, oftentimes being categorised among the worst conflicts in the world.

In recent years New Delhi has reportedly stepped up attempts to have the reference to the Vale removed, a campaign that met with success this year in the immediate run-up to the 61st General Assembly in New York. Indeed, only Pakistan formally objected to the move to de-list the issue. The omission does not take Kashmir off of the Security Council's official agenda, however, where it has remained listed since 1948.

Observers say that New Delhi's success this year reflects the rising position of India within the UN system.

Trophy for Yunus

This year's Nobel Prize makes Bangladeshis stand up proud, and with it comes recognition of the innovative NGO sector in Muhammad Yunus's home country.

BY **AFSAN CHOWDHURY**

For Bangladeshis it was much greater than winning the World Cup. No levity intended. For a country very short of anything to celebrate, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank was the best thing to happen since Bangladesh gained status as a legitimate cricket-playing country. It has made every Bangladeshi walk taller than they have before.

A Bangladeshi is generally looked down upon everywhere he goes. Only a citizen of this country can understand the collective shame that is heaped on everyone who is stamped by that identity. On the day the Nobel Prize committee announced the award, the joy that swept the country and its huge expatriate population was as if each and every citizen had won the prize. Yunus had brought home the trophy.

It is fitting that the Nobel committee recognised Yunus as a 'peace' person rather than as an economist, although his main work does deal with an innovative method of credit access that has gained global credibility. Grameen Bank lends miniscule amounts of money to the poor in Bangladesh to initiate self-employment projects. It has reached millions of people, and while it is not a 'miracle' solution to endemic poverty as some have said, Bangladesh and many of the world's poor have not yet found a better option.

Professor Yunus had been on the list for the Nobel Prize for over a decade, something for which Bill Clinton deserves significant credit. Before he even became US president, Clinton had stated outright that "Yunus deserves a Nobel Prize", after he had witnessed the effect the Grameen micro-credit model had had on his native, impoverished Arkansas, having helped many to overcome deep poverty. Such words awakened the world to a model that broke conventional banking and economic wisdom, and it came from a country practically written off in most parts of the world.

Nothing micro about it

When the initiative began, it was not universally welcomed by the international economic community, and the major financial institutions were harshly critical. Most of the arguments against Grameen were economic in nature. The far left also criticised the bank for being a US ploy and an extension of the market economy. Like all visionaries, however, Yunus carried on till the proof of his work lay in the pudding, and almost everyone was lapping it up.

Credit-related activities have always been part of Bangladesh's development approach. NGOs such as ASA (the Association for Social Advancement) are considered larger operators than Grameen Bank in the micro-credit sector, while BRAC (the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), the world's largest NGO, runs multiple programmes including micro-credit operations in Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Uganda. Micro-credit operations have become key entry points for these organisations.

While one wonders in dismay at the performance level of the state players and other national-level actors – politicians, bureaucrats, academics, media and other professionals – the much maligned private-sector development arena has developed an impressive score sheet. Societal institutions seem to have had far greater effect than has the state in Bangladesh, and NGOs have become a legitimate presence, generating more livelihoods than any other, and almost entirely without the taint of corruption. It will be increasingly difficult to ignore the Bangladeshi NGOs, particularly with this new international recognition of Yunus and Grameen.

In the end, this Nobel Prize is a victory for a people lost without a leader. The third Bengali Nobel laureate and the first Bangladeshi Nobel Prize winner reflects what is possible when innovation is applied in the developing world. Bangladesh shares the prize with every citizen of Southasia, and the developing world at large. ▲

Habarane, 15 October

AFP

To the table, again?

Engagement at the talks table between the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers was further bruised by two of the bloodiest incidents of the Sri Lankan conflict. Is a new ceasefire agreement possible, to replace the now-tattered one from 2002?

BY **BENITA SUMITA**

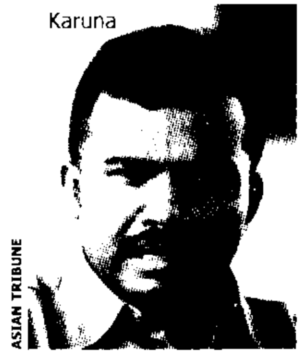
If past experiences are anything to go by, the increase in violence over the last several months in Sri Lanka will not have surprised many observers. All previous attempts at negotiating a peaceful solution to the island's 23-year-old conflict have eventually erupted in spurts of assassinations and violence, followed by a weary return to the negotiating table. The current resolution efforts, brokered by Norwegian negotiators, have witnessed similar patterns of undeclared war and fragile peace. Today, we are in a period of the worst violence since the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) was signed in 2002. The Norwegians nonetheless appear determined to see the peace process through – enough to ignore the increase in hostilities since July.

Regardless of what observers or combatants said at the time, by the end of July Sri Lanka was at war. On 22 July the LTTE shut the water sluice gates at Mavil Aru, triggering a humanitarian crisis in nearby villages and, as a September report by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) states, creating "a situation conducive to direct conflict between the two parties". This led to an offensive by Sri Lankan forces, which continued even after the Tamil Tigers re-opened the sluice gates days later. Sri Lankan troops advanced into LTTE-controlled areas of Jaffna in the north and Sampur, close to the northeastern port of Trincomalee. According to President Mahinda Rajapakse, these strategic areas were captured "in the name of national interest and for the welfare of the people". Several demands by the Tigers requesting the Sri Lankan forces to withdraw to the original ceasefire lines have subsequently been declined.

New forward defence lines are also being formed in the south of the island, where the much-needed 'southern consensus' seems to be finally emerging. Sri Lanka has for decades debated a common agenda between the main political parties of the south; but now that it has been formulated, bloodier battles seem in store. According to a 7 October interview conducted by *The Hindu* with G L Peiris, the chief peace negotiator for the United National Party (UNP)-led United National Front (UNF) government, the consensual accord that has been reached between the main southern-Sinhala political parties – the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party – goes beyond the peace talks with the LTTE. The agreed-upon Common National Agenda, Peiris notes, considers resolving the ethnic issue as the "paramount duty of the state".

This responsibility includes the duty to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, which also involves a military response to terrorism, Peiris added. Such an agenda closely toes the Sri Lankan military offensive line of the last several months, and also breaches the essence and spirit of the CFA. That agreement states in its preamble: "The [Sri Lankan government] and the LTTE recognise the importance of bringing an end to the hostilities ... [which] is also seen by the parties as a means of establishing a positive atmosphere."

Peiris further reiterated President Rajapakse's stance on returning to the negotiating table after rendering the Tigers militarily weak. This two-pronged approach seems like a middle path in comparison to Chandrika Kumaratunga's war-for-peace strategy and Ranil Wickremasinghe's negotiations-only tactic. Unlike those two leaders, however, President Rajapakse has garnered the political support he needs to see his plan through.


Karuna

ASIAN TRIBUNE

With a seemingly weak LTTE, the government and the Tamil Tigers have agreed to head back to the negotiating table after an impasse that has lasted since the rebel group first walked out of negotiations (started in 2002) in April 2003. But the question is, have the rebels actually lost strength in the interim? Will the Colombo government be speaking from a height at the new talks, slated for 28-29 October in Switzerland? Or will the LTTE use the period of negotiations to recoup and rejuvenate their military might, as it has done during previous interims of negotiated calm?

In any case, further military face-offs can be anticipated in light of the present developments. Although the renewed call for talks by both parties is largely unconditional, there are minor hiccups. The government has retained its right to retaliate if the LTTE launches any attack – an option that it is maintaining with an iron fist. Retaliations that the army began towards the end of July have become bloodier. In one of the latest defensive strategies, the Sri Lankan forces claim to have taken the lives of 400 LTTE cadres in a five-hour-long battle in the Jaffna peninsula in the second week of October.

On the other hand, the LTTE claim that their attacks are in response to the government forces' attempts to infiltrate their territory. In one such defensive response on 16 October, the LTTE carried out a suicide attack in Trincomalee District that proved to be the most fatal such attack in the history of the Sri Lanka conflict. The toll is said to be over a hundred, which included civilians and navy sailors waiting to head to their combat destinations, as well as another 150 wounded. The incident was similar to the LTTE's very first suicide attack in 1987, which also involved detonating an explosive-laden truck. This increasingly restive situation can be explained by the fact the Tigers have never before headed to negotiations from a militarily weak position. Perhaps the rebel group is trying to gain ground ahead of the upcoming talks.

Obstacle course

There are other obstacles looming before the government and the LTTE, as well as the negotiators and international community. The emergence of a 'southern consensus' is a welcome turn of events, particularly in a situation where a fractured and dangerously competitive agenda on the part of Colombo's political parties has been proving fatal to the peace process.

That consensus, however, is far from complete. G L Peiris might be content with the silence the Sinhala-chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has observed so far on the understanding that has been reached between the UNP and the SLFP, but it will not be long before that silence is broken. This hush can also be attributed to the fact that the Common National Agenda may not be entirely outside the JVP's interest, since the government has reiterated its military stance against terrorism, which is in line with the party's no-compromise strategy towards the LTTE. Meanwhile, neither protest nor consent has yet been heard from the Buddhist-dominated Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). Perhaps the southern consensus will witness a shake-up with the signing of an agreement between the UNP and SLFP on 15 October. The support of these hardliners is crucial for Norway, which is more often than not seen as favouring the LTTE. The international community must now push for further mutuality in advancing the cause for a common understanding in the south.

Obstacles may not only arise from the south. The Colombo government and the LTTE may be the primary protagonists in the island's conflict, but the brunt of the violence and bloodshed is not contained between these armed sides. Civilians have lost homes, livelihoods and lives. Even foreign NGOs have been made scapegoats in this bloody war. In May, a foreign aid worker was killed and several civilians injured when grenades were lobbed into an area where several INGOs were providing tsunami relief in Muttur, in Trincomalee District; the NGOs have since withdrawn

Sri Lanka has for decades debated a common agenda between the main political parties of the south; but now that it has been formulated, bloodier battles seem in store.

PATTAYA MAIL

Peiris

from the area. Then in August, 17 aid workers were killed, most of them Tamil, allegedly by government military forces. On 5 October, the Geneva-based International Committee of Jurists announced that the Colombo government had refused to allow it to send an observer to investigate the massacre. Indeed, definitive identification of the perpetrators in both of these incidents is yet to be determined.

Meanwhile, civilians in Muslim-dominated Muttur are extremely vulnerable. With several aid agencies looking to wash their hands of the situation, residents are attempting to flee Muttur town following threats by the LTTE. But since the mid-August takeover of Muttur by the Sri Lankan security forces, its inhabitants have been stopped from leaving. Those who had already left are now being forced to return, although the situation is still uncertain and unsafe.

It is in the face of such uncertainty that the Colombo government and the LTTE are heading for renewed talks. If hostilities are not brought to a standstill before the Geneva negotiations, it is likely that the deadlock will continue without a chance of being broken in the near future. A workable ceasefire is even more crucial, with the 2002 agreement having long been mercilessly breached by both sides. The government and the rebel group must seek to rebuild trust, and do away with opportunism and hidden agendas.

Carrot and stick

Bilateral talks are not enough, however, when there are several other stakeholders in Sri Lanka's war and peace. In order to sustain the talks this time around, Norway as interlocutor needs to recognise the 'spoiler' dynamic. Most important among those spoilers is the Karuna faction – the allegedly government-supported group that split from the LTTE in 2004 – which has recently been recruiting ferociously. Groups such as Karuna's and other paramilitary outfits need to be roped into the larger framework of the talks. Although the government denies any link with these various groups, a degree of covert pressure on the state could bring these spoiler elements into the fold of the peace process.

But the most pressing task for Norway is keeping checks on the government and the LTTE. So far, the ceasefire monitoring mission has not been able to bare its teeth – if indeed it has any – other than to monitor hostilities and present cautious reports on the violations by each party. Pressure points can be installed into the peace process if donor countries and agencies can be made responsive to such reports and humanitarian crises. The island's development policy has thus far been carried out distinct from efforts at resolving the conflict.

This increasingly restive situation can be explained by the fact the Tigers have never before headed to negotiations from a militarily weak position. Perhaps the rebel group is trying to gain ground ahead of the upcoming talks.

Even the UNF government's two-pronged 'Regaining Sri Lanka' strategy of 2002, which entailed creating 'peace dividends' through a large-scale, economic reforms-driven development agenda, was unable to bridge the gap between development and peace. Although the negotiations were running aground in the second quarter of 2003, the Sri Lankan economy was galloping ahead thanks to the repeated bailouts by arguably conflict-blind development assistance. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the island's economy grew 7.9 percent in the first half of this year alone.

There is an urgent need for a carrot-and-stick approach in Sri Lanka's peace process, a part that can be played by international actors with stakes in the country's economy. Merely tightening the purse strings on reconstruction and rehabilitation in conflict-affected regions has proven insufficient as a conditionality check on the peace process. Peace conditionality weaved into aid, including development aid, may indeed prove fruitful. As the British conflict scholar Jonathan Goodhand observed in a 2001 conflict assessment of the island, all conventional aid programmes are channelled only through the Sri Lankan government, which was a crucial bone of contention between Colombo and the LTTE during the 2002 talks. Even joint Tsunami reconstruction efforts in 2004 in the east failed on this count.

Regardless, these would constitute second steps in the process, which could be put in place only after the government and the LTTE come to a degree of understanding. As and when the government and the LTTE go into negotiations, one needs to watch President Rajapakse's strategy of talking to a militarily-weak LTTE. This will also be a trial of the Scandinavian negotiator's patience and determination to take the peace process to its logical conclusion. Lastly, with increased international pressure on the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE to cease the bloodshed, there will be a testing of Japan, the US and other donor countries that have growing interests in the island nation. Concrete talks with more than mere face-value promises can be a strong foundation for further multi-layered talks at various levels of society, and a definitive path to peace. ▲

Project Afghanistan and the thinking enemy

Five years of backward progress on securing the country now has NATO forces taking over security in Afghanistan. With few of the lessons of the past having sunk in, it appears unlikely that the country will breathe easier in the coming year.

BY **AUNOHITA MOJUMDAR**

Security in Afghanistan has hit the lowest point since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. This year has seen pitched battles between the anti-government insurgents and the newly deployed NATO forces. As the country approaches the first anniversary of its first democratically elected Parliament based on full adult franchise, it seems as if the hopes of the international community and the Afghan citizens could be belied.

Suicide bombings are now a regular feature in the country, with nearly 80 thus far this year alone. Kabul increasingly resembles a city under siege, with more bunkers, roadblocks and barbed-wire fences than at any time since 2001. Both the development arm of the international community and the military forces are now agreed that Afghanistan has entered a 'critical' year.

This is a far cry from the end of 2001, when the US-led Coalition Forces claimed they were mopping up the remnants of the Taliban, and the US Defence Secretary said there were not enough good targets for the US to bomb. The turnaround in the security situation seems to have taken most of the international community by surprise, and the determination and desperation of the Taliban are often being cited equally as 'new' factors in the equation. During her visit to Afghanistan this year, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repeatedly exclaimed that the international forces were facing a 'thinking enemy', and needed to change strategy – as if that had been an unexpected factor, and the entire military strategy of the last five years had simply been based on the assumption that the enemy could not or would not 'think'.

Yet even with the changes in strategy now being employed to combat the Taliban, there is little evidence that the international community and its military strategists have really learned from the experience of the last five years. The slow but steady deterioration of the security situation has not been in spite of the military strategies implemented, but largely because of them – strategies that have been short-sighted, and focused on piecemeal solutions. This is an approach that continues to inform military operations even now, with compartmentalised policies, exhibiting little understanding of the interlinkages of reasons causing the instability.

Hunting down, moving on

In September, newspapers, radios and TV stations could not get enough of Afghanistan. The fifth anniversary of the attacks of 11 September 2001 was an occasion on which to review 'Project Afghanistan', chalking up the pluses and minuses. While the significance of that date cannot and should not be forgotten, it is unfortunate that Afghanistan and its future continue to be viewed through that lens. The rationale for revisiting Afghanistan on the occasion of 9/11 is not just some quirk of chronology or news cycle. It continues to be the most important date for viewing Afghanistan because Afghanistan itself has never really been central to what has taken place in the country since then. Rather, it has been a staging ground for the agendas of other countries, ranging from the benign to the self-absorbed interests of major powers.

When the US-led coalition led the attack on Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, there was little attempt to gloss over the fact that it was to be a war of retribution. In pursuit of that end, more than one compromise has been made over the past five years – shortcuts and half measures that have led to the inevitable consequences of an unstable and unsustainable path of post-conflict reconstruction.

In the immediate aftermath of the US-led bombing there was no attempt to either reach a peace agreement or accommodate different political interests in the new democratic framework. The more patient process of arriving at a wider political consensus, which could have helped stabilise the country, was considered to be unadvisable as it might have led to a broader political leadership that would be more 'messy' to manage. Far better, the logic seemed to go, to install a government with a compliant leadership, one that would predictably follow the agenda of the power players of the international community.

Though the late 2001 Bonn Agreement was

And Afghanistan burns

presented as the roadmap for the process of reconstruction and stabilisation, the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) ultimately stayed confined to Kabul. It was only in September of this year that NATO expansion was completed to cover the rest of the country. Whatever the reasons for the apparent inability of NATO to expand its operations during the long hiatus, it certainly left the US-led Coalition Forces free to carry out their missions in the 'war against terror'. The approach to dealing with the issue of security and stabilisation of Afghanistan was ultimately compartmentalised, with the US forces targeting only the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Rather than a holistic approach that would include removing the warlords and commanders, and installing legitimate state security forces, these same potentates and illegitimate armed groups were used to carry out operations against the targets. The US forces took the help of anyone they felt had some muscle power in an area – often warlords with track records in human-rights abuses that left little to distinguish them from the demonised Taliban. The idea seemed to be to get the targets in the US radarscope first, and deal with other issues later. Never mind that these same warlords terrorised the population, and had been responsible for much of the violence, murders and rapes in their areas over the last two decades.

The methods used to carry out operations in populated areas were also rough and ready. By entering homes and carrying out searches in the very conservative areas of the south, the international forces alienated most of the populace. Having seen through operations in an area, troops would move on, making no effort to secure the areas where they had combed. This approach of hunting down and moving on left the local population angry, alienated and with no means to defend itself against the return of anti-government insurgents. It also left the local commanders in a strengthened position, their use of force having been legitimised by their close cohabitation with the international forces.

9/11 continues to be the most important date for viewing Afghanistan because Afghanistan itself has never really been central to what has taken place in the country since then.

With reports of alienation, the military forces then hit upon the idea of mixing up civilian and military duties. Though the intention may have been a good one – to win the hearts and minds of the people – the approach was as thoughtless and short-term as any other. The PRTs (provincial reconstruction teams) were supposed to be the civilian face of the military carrying out development projects. Rather than securing an area and making it possible for development agencies to carry out their tasks, the military itself spent vast amounts of money on construction of infrastructure. This led to a blurring of lines between the soldier and the civilian, making it easier for the anti-government forces to turn all internationals or those working for international agencies into legitimate targets.

Dysfunctional cooperation

Any process of working with the moderate Taliban was haphazard and sporadic. There were victorious announcements of Taliban leaders joining the government from time to time, but no clarity on the criterion for engagement, let alone defining parameters of a cohesive peace process.

The efforts on regional cooperation were equally dismal. The US initiated a process of border cooperation, a trilateral initiative involving the US and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Despite claims of working closely with the Islamabad government, an ally in the 'war on terror', there was little to indicate that the US government was seriously analysing the causes of terrorism from across the border. Rather than look at the reasons behind the rise of armed groups, including the denial of democracy, most of the international community chose to support, either vocally or silently, the military autocrat in Pervez Musharraf in the hope that one man would deliver the goods.

The result of five years of diplomatic efforts was evident during the visit of President Musharraf to Afghanistan in September. The Pakistani government signed an agreement with the tribal elders of North Waziristan on the issue of crossborder terrorism a day before President Musharraf's visit. But the Afghan government was not consulted on an agreement that would have a direct bearing on its security, and the Pakistani president did not even exhibit the courtesy of informing Hamid Karzai prior to his arrival in Kabul.

Despite the rhetorical support for democracy, the international preference for authoritarian methods as far as Afghanistan is concerned has been evident again and again. If a military dictator was the preferred mode in Pakistan, in Afghanistan no effort was spared to ensure that the presidency of Hamid Karzai would be strengthened at the cost of other state institutions. Political parties were not allowed to contest in the parliamentary elections, hardly surprising since President Karzai himself has no domestic political base or party *(See Himal Sept-Oct 2006, "Afghans go for Parliament")*. The result, of course, has been a Parliament that has great problems of authority.

Democratic processes have not been allowed to take root, and powers have been concentrated in the hands of one man. In recent weeks President Karzai himself has been criticised for failing to deliver on a number of fronts, as if the fault lay with him personally rather than the lack of strong institutions.

Even as the security situation deteriorates, enough is not being done to reassign responsibility acceding to experience. The US-led Coalition Forces are still carrying out their combat operations as part of the 'war on terror', and are charged with carrying out anti-terrorist operations. The NATO-led ISAF forces, meanwhile, declare that they are mandated to support the Afghan government, which is facing insurgency. While 'terrorism' is linked to an international dynamic aimed at destabilising large parts of the world, 'insurgency' includes those whose aim is to specifically destabilise the Kabul government. As for the issue of the narcotics trade, this is left to the responsibility of the Afghan national army and the police.

The compartmentalised approach continues despite the apparent understanding of the interlinkages between the three crucial arenas – terrorism, the ongoing insurgency, and the drug trade. Though there is recognition that the anti-government insurgency is also fuelled by terrorism, and vice-versa, there is a feeling that the 'global' war can be fought by the Coalition Forces, and the national war by NATO. Though drug money fuels both terrorism and the insurgency, and drug barons have a direct stake in destabilising the state, neither NATO nor the Coalition Forces are willing to undertake direct operations on this front.

Unfortunately for Afghanistan, there seems to be little to suggest that there will be any real change in the current approaches of the international actors. If the situation does unravel completely there will always be a scapegoat person or issue found to take the blame for the international failure – be it Hamid Karzai, Pakistan, the lack of good governance or inadequate aid. If all else fails, the anti-government forces can always be blamed for behaving in ways in which they were not supposed to have done – for thinking and evolving their strategies in ways with which the international forces are apparently unable to deal. The ultimate excuse, as already hinted at by Condoleezza Rice, is that the insurgents 'think'.

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DEVADATH

FOURTEEN WRITERS ON A WORLD OF FOOD | ILLUSTRATIONS BY **BILASH RAI**

The creeping crypto-nationalist cuisine

There is a radical shift in food culture underway in Southasia, even though there is nothing that you could identify as a regionwide cuisine.

BY **ASHIS NANDY**

As in many other places in Asia, the concept of food in Southasia is changing, quickly and dramatically. Do not be taken in by the difficulties faced by the multinational corporations and global fast-food chains in trying to make inroads into Southasian societies. That is a minor digression from the more radical changes in food habits as part of changing lifestyles. I draw your attention to the following developments, which have taken place during the last two decades or so.

First, the culture of food in Southasia is now more clearly split into two parts. For one segment of the population, food is a means of survival, and a matter of back-breaking, daily grind. For the other, food is part of 'high culture' – it carries codes of social conduct and status gain, markers of urbanity and cosmopolitanism, and implicit statements of arrival.

This split was always there, and not merely between the rich and poor. The colonial clubs in what were then called the 'old presidency' towns were the sites where you could sift the 'truly cultured', urbane, settled elite from the newly rich, the upwardly mobile, first-generation city-dwellers. But never was the split so pronounced as it is now. Never would we have found in India, for instance, among the educated middle class, so many who find out from the newspapers and glossies where the rich and trendy go to dine, gossip and display their designer clothes. These recruits to a new food culture seem completely unaware of the 25,000 farmers who have committed suicide in the past decade. Nor do they seem aware of the way farming as a means of sustenance for a majority of Indians is quickly collapsing as a 4000-year-old way of life – instead becoming, for many, a disposable adjunct of urban-industrial life. I have seen, with only slight variations, similar attitudes in other parts of Southasia, China and Thailand.

Second, among an increasing number of Indians the difference that previously existed between everyday food and festive food – the food that one consumed during marriages and other special occasions, sometimes on holidays – is diminishing. With prosperity has come the capacity to afford festive food every day, as well as the tendency to display one's prosperity through the food one consumes or offers to guests. The ultra-elite may have learned to make a status statement through salads, nouvelle cuisine and low-calorie diets, but those who are first-generation entrants into the middle class have not. Data suggest that about half of India's burgeoning middle class falls into the second category.

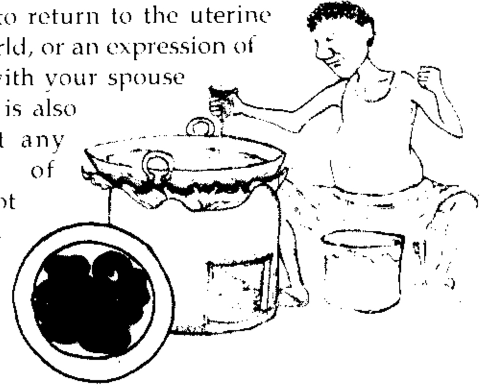
Understandably, diseases associated with prosperity and civilisation are spreading like epidemics. Indians in the first world already have thrice the rate of cardiovascular ailments, compared to the natives'. Many now flaunt their scars of cardiac bypass as symbols of arrival into high society. Nobody seems to mind, and the multiplying private clinics and hospitals are happy. As I have said elsewhere, many in our part of the world would rather die of the diseases of the rich than those of the poor. Who wants to exit the world shitting and vomiting from cholera, when you can exit more grandly in a five-star hospital after coughing out a million rupees or so?

Third, everyone knows that there is no singular entity called Southasian food that is comparable to, say, French or Italian food – though French and Italian cuisines are not monolithic either. No one expects an artificial entity like Southasia to have an identifiable style of food. Why only Southasia? It is doubtful if in two of its largest constituents, India and Pakistan, there is anything like an identifiable national cuisine. Certainly in India, Indian food, like Indian society, is a collection of highly diverse cuisines and cultures of food, sometimes in dialogue, sometimes not. In a globalising world, it is no longer possible to deploy the curry or the tandoor as markers of Indian food. Indeed, in India, recognising the different regional styles and making them marketable is becoming a major concern of the hospitality industry.

Yet at the same time, some regional preparations are becoming redefined as crypto-national, by shedding some of their traditional associations. The process seems to reflect some of the same needs that have produced in other countries fast-food chains and clear hierarchies of cuisines, in terms of their social status and appropriateness in formal occasions. Parts of South Indian cuisine have now become valued aspects of pan-Indian food, both as fast food and as substitutes for conventional breakfast cereals. Likewise, a distinctive mix of Punjabi and Mughal food has become the fallback menu of most new Indian restaurants, both in and outside India. Are we witnessing the fragmentary emergence of national cuisine(s) in India? Or is this only an artefact of widening tastes and cultural exposures in the Indian middle class?

While there may not be, strictly speaking, national food cultures in much of Southasia as yet, some of the food cultures in the region are caught in a different game. They are being increasingly seen as part of a lifestyle that is being re-imported from the Southasian diaspora in the First World as part of the 'authentically' Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi. This new concept of authenticity tends to underscore, and sometimes even freeze, the fluid boundaries of cuisines in their countries of origin. This fluidity has been maintained by the units through which culinary traditions have been transmitted over generations in this part of the world – through families, castes and other small local communities. Of these, the family has been the most important.

There can be no generic concept of authentic Southasian – or for that matter Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi or Tamil – cooking. There can only be authentic family traditions and sometimes local traditions. When you nostalgically look back at your mother's cooking as the last word in a cooking style, it is not merely an attempt to return to the uterine warmth of a lost world, or an expression of your exasperation with your spouse or domestic help. It is also an admission that any generic concept of authenticity does not ring true to you, despite the advice of knowledgeable food critics and expert chefs.



Mountain meal memories

Hard work yielded so little in the Garhwal hills, but the taste was there to stay.

BY **PUSHPESH PANT**

The winters used to be long and hard at Mukteshwar, a small hill station at around 8000 feet in the Garhwal hills, where I was born and grew up more than half a century ago. Hoarding foodstuffs – both basic and fancied – would start quite early in October. *Barees* and *mangodis* (lentil-paste dumplings, spiced and blended with grated cucumber or shredded greens) were mass-produced at home, vegetables were dried in the sun, potatoes and other 'starchies' were buried underground to be dug out during the snowbound months.

My mother sure knew how to transform adversity into delightful variety. Winter was when we proudly reclaimed and proclaimed our *pahari* heritage. Making a virtue of sheer necessity, our meals showcased the central Himalayan culinary repertoire. Watery *aloo ka thechua, muli ki baant, gaderi ke gutke* with *jambu ka chownk, bhatiya jaula* served with generous dollops of *gaay ka ghee* – all these ensured that the familiar delicacies prepared in times of greater plenty were not missed. We the children were regaled with folktales and snatches of songs, some of which would describe the ingredients of dishes that, to be frank, were something of an acquired taste.

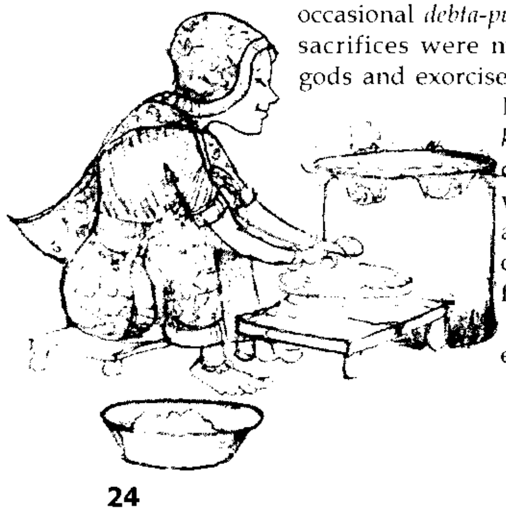
It is not easy to sustain nostalgia triggered by fading childhood memories of meals in the mountains. We counted ourselves among the fortunate. Most others nearby lived hand-to-mouth all the year round. Food in the hill villages has always been frugal. The terrain is harsh, and it is difficult even after backbreaking labour to make the earth yield her fruits generously. Those beautiful terraces can be killing fields.

The hill folk have from time immemorial counted their blessings gratefully. The poet Gumani, who three generations ago was equally well known in Kumaon-Garhwal and in Nepal, penned a poem in the early 19th century that listed the highly valued delicacies of this region. The fruits mentioned are bananas, lemons, pomegranates, sugarcane and oranges, accompanied by thick rich milk and granular ghee. Pride of place is reserved for aromatic rice – boiled, baked or flattened, or fashioned into dumplings – completed by crisply fried leaves and tender stalks of *arum*.

It is useful to remember that this was an affluent poet's ideal meal. The hill man's everyday fare was incomparably Spartan – bare sustenance to keep body and soul together, belonging to a realm where taste did not matter. Alas, things have not changed much over the past two hundred years.

Shraddhas and daal-bhaat

As we grew up it was made painfully clear that dietary deprivations are assumed in *pahari* villages. Individuals and communities look forward to celebrations when feasting relieves the tedium, and the luxuries usually beyond reach can be savoured in small quantities. The festivals of Tyaar, Dasain and Ghughutiya provided a few occasions, as did the occasional *debta-puja*, in which ritual sacrifices were made to propitiate gods and exorcise disturbing spirits. Marriages – *byaa kaaj* – promised and delivered mouth-watering goodies, as did *shraddha* ceremonies, annual funerary feasts.



The menu for each of these events was prescribed by custom, and usually adhered to strictly. For a *baraat* banquet, *lagad* – a *puri* made with whole-meal flour – was paired with *alu* or *pinalu-gaderi ki sabzi*, a tuber dish prepared with aromatic *jambu* (Himalayan chives) imported from Tibet. This was supplemented with *gaduwe ka gajaika*, a mashed, sweet-and-sour ripe pumpkin. The chutney most preferred was made with *darhim* (pomegranate), and the calibre of the cook was tested by the quality of his mustard-laced raita – a nose-tingling, eye-watering delight that leaves the much-touted Japanese *wasabi* smarting and gasping for breath.

Guests were happy to leave with full stomachs. No one bothered about frills like dessert – *kheer* or *halwa* – in the countryside. Only the arrivistes in towns like Almora and Tehri – those immigrant Brahmins from the plains, always eager to show off their refinements – took the trouble to burden the bell-metal *thali* with add-ons like *barha* (deep-fried lentil dumplings), *singal* (doughnut-shaped semolina confections) or *suji* (halwa). During a visit to Kathmandu years later, while being treated to an 'ethnic' meal at the Bhancha Ghar restaurant, the glimpse of a *kansa* thali opened the floodgates of my memory, rekindling the glow of dying embers in a long-lost hearth.

Shraddhas were different. The Brahmin being fed was seen as a vehicle transporting the tasty sustenance to the departed ancestors. The gullible *jajman* gladly made available for his ravenous *purohit* expensive and rare preparations. Kheer would be made along with raita; *saunth ki chutney* (ginger chutney) or *darhim ka chowk* to accompany luscious puris, along with an assortment of dry and curried vegetables. For the truly orthodox, *seedha* (ample dry rations) was gifted so that the good man could treat himself and his family at home.

Careful readers must have noted that no mention has so far been made of the staple *daal-bhaat*. Food cooked with water – rather than fried in ghee or oil, or boiled in milk – is considered impure by Hindu tradition. Until a couple of generations ago, strict rules even dictated who could cook rice for whom within the family. Convention decreed that such fare was to be kept out of the public domain. Bhaat cooked in the morning was consumed inside the kitchen where only the equally 'pure' (or those of higher birth) were admitted. Brahmins employed as cooks were the safest bet. Daal more often than not was homegrown *masoor*. Variation on this was rare, and when opted for meant un-husked, whole or split *maas*. This lentil is believed to be hard to digest, and took a long time to cook in pre-pressure-cooker days. It was treated as a specialty item for festive feasts.

At shraddhas, it was the quality and purity of ingredients that was valued above all else. Almost a hundred years before the WTO and the emergence of the 'intellectual property' regime, the unlettered Himalayan villagers had perfected geographical indicators for the ingredients most in demand – *gaderi* from Lobanj, *jambu* (chives) from Munshyari-Dharchula, *katiki mau* from Kapkot, and so on. This last was only matched by the priceless catch of the death-defying, daredevil honey hunters of Nepal.

Stuff of life

These memories of mine were rendered green again by the late professor L S Baral, sometime chairman of Nepal's national academy. He was not only an eminent scholar but also a lover of good food, as well as a walking encyclopaedia of Nepali-Uttarakhandi cultural interactions and shared inheritance. He is the one who encouraged me to look beyond the exclusive Brahmin kitchen, and to seek acquaintance with plebeian pleasures such as *bhutua* (also called *ranga bhoota*, slow-cooked offal) and *haant* (minimalist mutton curry with the thinnest of gravies, so as to extend it as far as possible).

'Bhutua' translates as 'a sharing', and nothing could be more apt. It was cooked with whatever was cheap and at hand – in most cases this included some oil, some onions, lots of red chillies and salt. The goat was pit-roasted before cooking. This feast, a rustic barbeque certainly not for the squeamish, was a one-dish community meal at which nothing was wasted. The trotters were used in a stew called *gadue ka shurua*, and the *siri* (severed head) provided prolonged consternation as it was either expertly or ineptly split open.

But I digress. Such surfeit of culinary riches came one's way seldom at most. The regular repast of these hills was *rwat-saag*. *Rwat* of course is roti, the stuff of life. The poor prepared it with coarse *madua* (ragi), which is often described as sweet because even this was sometimes scarce; the better-off used only wheat. *Palang*, a type of spinach, was valued more than other greens, and prepared as *tapakiya*, *tinariya* or *kaphu*. The first two were recipes for a dish of small portions meant for 'barely tasting', while the last one had a porridge-like consistency and was doled out in more generous helpings. *Sishunda* (nettles) was gathered and cooked only by the abjectly poor. Prescriptions and prohibitions reigned supreme when it came to vegetables as well, and until the early 1950s the elderly avoided exotic imports to the hills such as peas, beans and tomatoes.

In the springtime month of Chait, with the winter behind them, the sons and daughters of the Himalaya were struck by another strain of sweet melancholy. This was the season for pining and despatching gifts of food to daughters married far away. *Bhituli* ('small gift') was mostly a hamper of *shai*, halwa prepared with rice flour. The poor, more often than not, could not even come up with this care package with ease. This is what lends heart-rending poignancy to the *riturain* Himalayan 'songs of separation', which mirror the *brahmaasa* genre in the Ganga plains. In this era of email and user-friendly STD-enabled PCOs, it is difficult to imagine what a sweet morsel must have meant, even if it arrived stale to the faraway daughter. Shai in the hills of Uttarakhand is today as rare as singers of riturain.

The pace of life has accelerated, and much that was considered exotic has become common. Who has the leisure or patience to slowly cook *rasa* or *thatwani* in a cast-iron *karhai*, or *manso* in a *pital ki tauli*? *Dahi* is no longer set in a wooden *theki*; as a matter of fact, these objects are now manufactured in the plains to be sold as souvenirs.

These observations and memories are not meant to be a lament for what is perhaps irretrievably lost. But is it not pertinent to ask how long the mountains can retain their identity, when their children forget the taste of their salt? What has been the trade-off? Has plenty really vanquished scarcity?

The chaateries of North India

A Karachi-wali pines for the gol-gappi-walla of Delhi, and can't have enough of the fare at Nathu's, Haldiram's and Saagar.

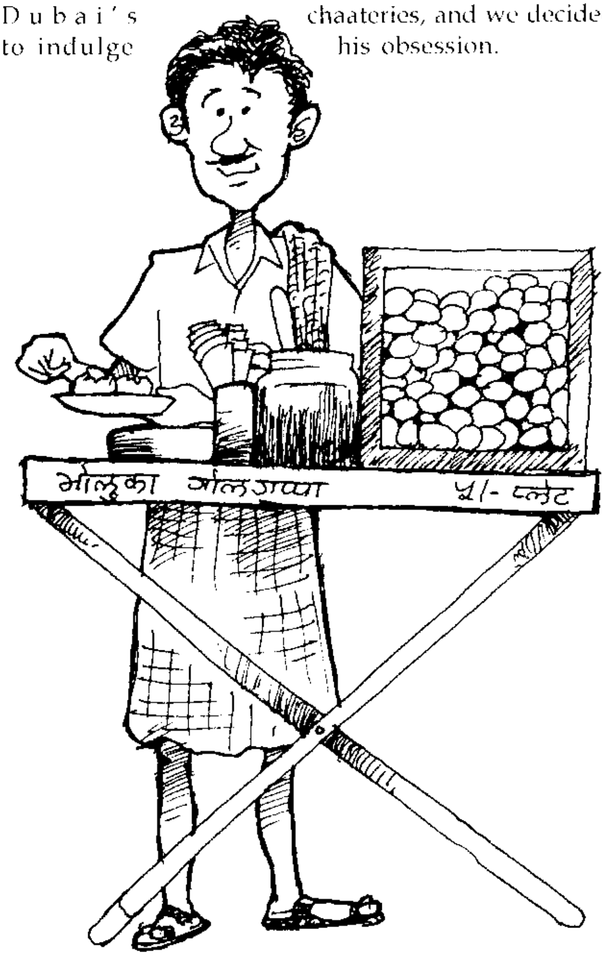
BY **SAHAR ALI**

As I sit down to write this it is the start of Ramadan, and what better time of year to talk about food. Across Southasia, Muslims are denying themselves food and drink during daylight hours, in order to experience the hunger that reminds them to be grateful to Allah for his benevolence, and to be generous towards those less fortunate. But a majority of non-Muslim observers, as well as many Muslim *rozedars* (fasters), are convinced that Ramadan is not so much about fasting as it is about feasting.

I lived in Dubai during the late 1990s, and my non-Muslim friends there could not wait for the Holy Month to arrive. Once it did, they all started clamouring for invitations to *iftaar*, the ritual break of the fast at sunset. In the offices of the newspaper where I worked, the fasters were few but the partakers of iftaar many – and the latter were always the first to arrive at the canteen for the modest servings of *pakoras* (gram flour dumplings) and fruit, sometimes not even waiting for the *azaan* to signal the end of the fast.

It is Ramadan, then, a time for fasting and for food. And for no other reason than that it is also a kind of food, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about *chaat* – that most delightful of all North Indian snacks. I discovered chaat rather late in life. It is something many Southasian women are introduced to in college, thus beginning a love affair that continues for the rest of their lives. But while I received my college education in a land that may be blessed with five rivers, it has no idea whatsoever about chaat. In Lahore, what passes for chaat is the confused mix of *aloo* and *choley* served at the dozens of *khokas* in the winding lanes of Bano Bazaar and Anarkali. The setting is quaint but the food downright unappetising for my 'upper-class' palate, with operative letters being *u* and *p*, as in Uttar Pradesh.

Yes, it was in Lahore that I first discovered chaat, and discovered that I did not like it. A second revelation, however, came in Dubai. My father, who grew up eating chaat in the small town of Badayun in western UP, lost touch with the taste of his youth when his family migrated to Pakistan in the 1950s. When he was posted to Dubai four decades later, he took us with him in the search for that tantalising taste in Indian restaurants across the tiny Arab emirate. We tried *dahi bhallas* that were not so *bhala*, *aloo tikkis* that were quite icky, and *gol gappas* that were not quite so *jhakkaas*. Having already developed an aversion to chaat, I became even more disenchanted with this most unsavoury of savouries. I tried to convince my father that what he was looking for would be impossible to find. It was the taste of youth, and not of chaat, that he craved. And that, sadly, was long gone. But my father insisted on eating his way across Dubai's chaateries, and we decided to indulge his obsession.



Great gol gappas

In November 1998, just before I moved back to Pakistan, I decided to take a trip to India. My first stop was Delhi to visit my friend Raman Kwatra. I had one evening in Delhi before I caught the overnight train to Gorakhpur to visit my maternal uncle's family in my mother's childhood home.

That evening in Delhi, after a hectic afternoon's shopping, Raman decided to treat me to his favourite snack – *gol gappas*. We arrived at Nathu's in Bengali Market, and as soon as I realised it was a chaat joint I could not hide my sudden lack of enthusiasm. After all, I had been envisioning scrumptious skewers of tandoori paneer. It was only by reminding myself that Nathu's would probably serve some sort of paneer – most likely pakoras – that I was able to put on a brave face. But Raman had other ideas! He insisted that I try the *rava* (*sooji*, or semolina) gol gappas.

In most North Indian chaateries, the gol gappa counter is often situated just outside the restaurant entrance, around which hungry customers gather with disposable plates. The *gol gappi-wala* prepares each gol gappa by hand, and then serves it to you individually. This is a wonderfully personalised way of eating, but to my unenthused palate I found the process rather unhygienic. But Raman continued insisting. Not wanting to offend my host, I finally relented.

I held my breath as I gulped the gol gappa – and could not believe my tongue! Even before I had swallowed the mouthful – the delicious sweet-and-sour tastes of the tamarind chutney, yoghurt and mint water making passionate love to my taste buds – I motioned to Raman that he dare not think of eating a single rava gol gappa, having noticed that there were barely a half-dozen left.

Since that day, if there is anything that matches my love of Indian cinema, it is my devotion to Indian chaat. Whenever I travel to Delhi I make daily pilgrimages to Nathu's or Haldiram's or Saagar, or any other chaatery recommended by friends or family. I will even eat at a *thela* if a more hygienic chat joint is not in sight.

I have also been able to take my father along on some of these trips, where sojourns to Nathu's and Haldiram's are again a daily ritual. Eyes always larger than our stomachs, we let loose on rava gol gappas, aloo tikkis, mixed chaat plates and *lachcha tokris*. While he rediscovers the tastes of his youth, I make up for my chaat-deprived childhood.

Back home in Karachi, Ramadan is the time to recreate the wonderful flavours of North Indian chaat. Because I love to cook almost as much as I love to eat, come Ramadan I make sure that we are well stocked with tamarind chutney (which we call *sonth*), boiled potatoes, yoghurt, *choley*, *paapri*, green gram and other items that go into a plate of chaat as can be found at Haldiram's. Sadly, rava gol gappas are beyond my amateur skills. But some things are better left to experts.

God's own canteen

A Dhaka connoisseur savours divine cuisine in backwoods Kerala.

BY **LUBNA MARIUM**

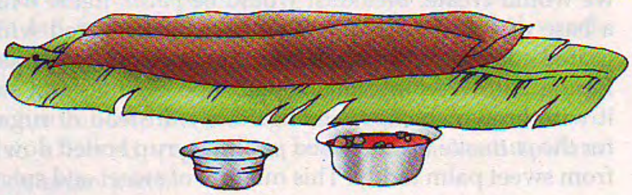
Back from Kerala after a two-year stint as a foreign scholar, I used to love informing friends and family in Bangladesh, while reaching for a sip of refrigerated water on a hot, sultry day, that Keralites have no notion of cold drinking water. Of course I had been taken aback when, on my first day at Calicut University, I was served a glass of hot water, in the lightest shade of peach, to go with my lunch. After my first tentative sip of the lukewarm herbal water, however, I was hooked. It was certainly refreshing. I later came to know that herbal water is part of Kerala's rich ayurvedic tradition, and the best protection against any water-borne disease.

I first arrived in Calicut during Onam, the festival season, and God's own country – as Kerala is touted to tourists – was living up to its name. Breakfasts were mouth-watering savouries such as dosas, idlis and appams – made of toddy-fermented rice-batter – served with freshly brewed coffee. Women flitted about in pristine off-white saris with gold borders; homes were brightened with floral designs made with all hues of flower petals; and *sadyas*, or festival feasts of sumptuous vegetarian dishes served on banana leaves, comprised every meal, even in the university canteen. What I also found was that God loved coconuts. Coconut trees swayed whichever way your head turned, and the Keralite platter abounds with every concoction imaginable of the fruit's white flesh.

Festivities over, dress and cuisine changed dramatically. The white saris were shelved, banana leaves swept off the table, and vegetarian meals swiftly replaced with biriyanis and *meen*, or fish, curry. It hit me then that I was in Mappila country. The Mappila, called Moplah in Malayalam, are the Muslim community of Kerala; the Mapilla platter, a mix of Keralite and Arabian cuisine, is conspicuously non-vegetarian. The pity was that three years in Madhya Pradesh learning Sanskrit had made me a vegetarian. When I shook my head and explained, the canteen boy jovially retorted, "But Madam, meen is *jala-kusum*, flower of the waters!" Within six months, the Bengali in me gave in to his gentle persuasion. Mapilla curry doesn't just taste good, it looks great as well. The fish curry is made with garlic paste, onions and red chillies, and seasoned with mustard seeds and curry leaves, giving the thick curry, glistening with oil, a rich reddish-orange colour.

Have you ever noticed that your idea of 'home' takes shape only once you actually leave it? After a few months of thick, parboiled rice, which Keralites will die for, along with the tangy, tamarind-flavoured curry called sambar and coconut chutneys, my Bengali heart started yearning for a simple meal of *daal-bhaat*. I dreamt of delicate sun-dried rice, which Malayalis scoff at as far too feathery-light, and lentils cooked the North Indian way – without a hint of sourness. When requests for white rice and daal, made by a few of us North Indian students, were summarily ignored by the canteen cook, we actually took up this very grave matter with the vice-chancellor, and compelled him to serve plain *daal-chawal* at least twice a week. The lengths to which people go to recreate home!

On the other hand, what I always brought home from Kerala were banana chips fried in the very special Calicut style – with spices and curry leaves. But the thick, black Kozhikode halwa, made of molasses, wheat flour and ghee, never found favour in Bangladesh. No one can make sweets like Bengalis do. ▲



What the winds brought us

Centuries ago, traders and missionaries brough good taste to Kerala.

BY **ANITHA POTTAMKULAM**

As a kid with a sweet tooth I looked forward to trips to my hometown in Kerala, Kanjirapally, not just to meet my cousins and for the river baths but also for the temptations of Kunjus – a bakery and, at that time, a 70-year-old institution. It was an overnight train ride to Kottayam from Madras, and then a winding, 45-minute drive to the town. Kanjirapally is on the Western Ghats, and sits at what is almost the absolute centre of Kerala. As we drew near, the urban atmosphere of Kottayam would give way to rubber estates, and we would catch glimpses of gracious homes surrounded by guava and other fruit trees. But it was only the sight of Kunjus, my personal landmark, that would alert me that we were home.

The lure of spices has long attracted traders from West Asia and Europe to Kerala. In the annals of Pliny the Elder, the 1st century Roman chronicler, it is said that the Keralan port of Muziris – today known as Kodungallur – could be reached in 40 days from the Egyptian coast, depending on the strength of the

monsoon winds. It is believed that St Thomas the Apostle reached Kerala's shores in 52 AD on a merchant vessel plying between Alexandria and Malabar. St Thomas established seven Christian communities under the East Syrian order, and the present-day Syrian Christians in Kanjirapally are said to have descended from these original groups. Christianity here has the flavour of antiquity. The old church Pazhyapally, in Kanjirapally, was established in 1449.

As it is known today, Kanjirapally was founded by a group of men whose privileged and exclusive way of life here was funded primarily by the rubber estates they developed. This prosperous lifestyle has been satirised in many Malayalam movies, where the rubber planter from Kanjirapally is shown as self-important and comically out of touch with reality.

But questions of history and social relations did not concern me during my childhood sojourns here. Rather, what I remember is calling – or persuading my older cousins to call – the Kunjus bakery in order to place our orders for pastries. My favourite was the jam roll, a sponge cake smeared with fresh pineapple jam made from the locally grown fruits.

The real treat in Kanjirapally, though, was the meals we would create. Breakfast would be *puttu,* made with a base of rice flour and a little salt, then layered with grated coconut and steamed in a cylindrical container. Piping hot, we would mix it with ripe bananas and eat it with brown chickpeas or fish curry. Instead of sugar for the *puttu* we usually used *paani,* a syrup boiled down from sweet palm toddy. This mixture of sweet and spicy was wonderful.

During holidays when our extended family would invariably meet in Kanjirapally, no one was ever in a particular hurry to finish their meals. Mealtimes would subsequently merge seamlessly – after breakfast the orders for second cups of coffee would go around, and so the morning would continue. As 11 o'clock approached, homemade fruit cake would appear, as would *churuttu* – a sweet made with roasted rice, coconut and *paani* – or mangoes.

After moving far enough through the morning after breakfast, lunches and dinners would be a treat for all – provided they were non-vegetarian, as vegetarians received only the scantest of nods in our house. For those not from Kerala, the reigning mascot of Syrian Christian cuisine is surely its spicy beef fry. The beef is diced and cooked with crushed ginger, garlic, onions, chilli and coriander powder, pepper and salt. Once the meat has cooked well and imbibed all these flavours, oil is added and the dish is roasted till almost black.

In our house, however, seafood was a particular delight. Kerala fish curry, made with *coccum* (a type of tamarind) for its distinctive tartness, tends to enliven even the most jaded taste buds. And the best accompaniment to fish curry is tapioca, which we either boiled very simply with a little salt, or spiced with mustard and curry leaves. Roast duck appeared on the table every time my aunt visited from the rice-growing area of Kuttanand. Meat, fish and prawn pickles all abounded, as did mouth-watering *chamanthis,* or chutneys. To this day, *unakka chemeen chamanthi* – made of dry prawns, coconut and vinegar, mixed with brown Kerala rice and crisp papadams – strikes me as one of the most satisfying of preparations.

Food of welcome

Traveling north from Kanjirapally is a beautiful drive, with views of everything that has made Kerala famous – lush green fields, muddy rivers and a languidness unique to the region. Teashops that serve *ethekka appam* (banana fritters) and sweet tea are particularly worthwhile stops, though more unique cuisines wait further down the road.

One of the most distinctive communities of north Kerala is that of the Moplah, the Malayalam-speaking Muslims. They, like the Syrian Christian community, find their origins in the trade that has for millennia taken place across the Arabian Sea. The Moplah are said to be descendants of marriages between Arab merchants and local Kerala women. Having existed with a distinct culture since the 8th century, the Moplah are one of India's earliest-known Muslim communities.

The Moplah are extremely hospitable, and food is their language of welcome. Perhaps the best way to taste their cuisine is to attend a wedding, and I have several cousins who have gate-crashed for the lure of Moplah food. In the old days, the groom was served his wedding meal in a particular order of courses. First came the *mutta malla,* literally 'egg-garland', a sweet dish made with egg yolk strained into hot syrup. A noodle-like egg dish is then served with *pinnathappam,* a preparation of egg-white, in the middle.

Next comes the *alisa* and biriyani. Arab influence is particularly evident in the *alisa,* a distinctively flavoured porridge of wheat and meat, usually lamb. The meat is cooked together with wheat, onion and cinnamon, after which the whole thing is mashed. Golden brown fried onions are added, and the dish is finally served with ghee and sugar.

The aromatic Moplah biriyani is a very well-known dish, usually served with *einthappam* (date) chutney. Fish biriyani – more special, I find, than the usual mutton and chicken varieties – is often made with seer fish, and has a myriad of flavours. Fish masala is prepared first and then layered with cooked rice, saffron and fried onions. Finally, no Moplah wedding could be complete without the *neichoru* (ghee rice), which has onions, cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. This is delicious with mutton curry. ▲

Veggie living, contemporary thinking

Who knew that being a Buddhist and a vegetarian could be so difficult?

BY **SUJEEV SHAKYA**

When emails and SMS messages leave my computer and cell phone during Dasain – the post-monsoonal Nepali carnivore carnival – wishing everyone a sacrifice-free holiday, much electronic venom is inevitably spat in return. In Kathmandu just two decades back, to be a vegetarian by choice was to belong to a species difficult to understand. When I returned in 1989 after schooling in Kalimpong and Calcutta, finding vegetarian food at a Newar *bhoj*, or feast, was as difficult as in the steakhouses of Texas. Sweetmeats would be piled on my plate as substitutes for all the dishes that were either prepared of meat or meat sauce, or cooked in animal fat.

So, I started eating a few dishes in which the meat was well altered, such as the ubiquitous momos or tender barbeques. When asked whether I was a vegetarian or a non-vegetarian, I would answer that I was a 'non-bone-etarian', which meant that I ate anything that did not have the look of meat, and did not come with spare parts such as bone, fat or thick – and I mean *thick* – skin.

In Kalimpong, we had grown up as vegetarians partly because, as Shakyas, we were perceived to be practicing Buddhists. In my ancestral town of Patan in the Kathmandu Valley, however, one could not be both a Shakya and a vegetarian. My desire to learn and understand the vast range of Newari cuisine thus led me to remain a 'non-bone-etarian' until I learned enough to cook for myself, without necessarily having to taste.

The questions one is asked with regard to vegetarianism in Nepal are not about religion, but rather about how one substitutes for protein intake. Vegetarianism in Nepal is associated with deficiencies in diet and, therefore, health. Many of my cousin-sisters who had been adamant about not eating meat gave in to family pressures and started to do so during pregnancy. When my Gujarati wife – a Jain, and thus a vegetarian as a matter of faith – proceeded to bear and nurse a child without touching meat, some of my relatives thought that we were in for serious health troubles.

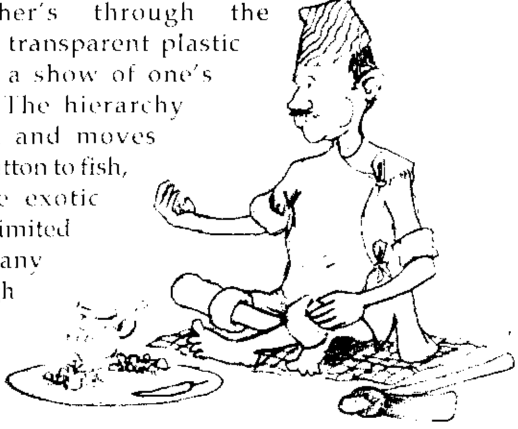
Even highly educated, widely traveled Nepalis join many Americans and Europeans in asking about protein supplementation. In contrast to a Hindu-dominated India, where that religion has a strong vegetarian association, in the erstwhile Hindu Kingdom it was until recently difficult to maintain a Hindu identity by being vegetarian. The worship of *Shakti* in Nepal and Northeast India made animal sacrifice – and therefore meat-eating – an integral part of life, particularly during festival times. The same *Shakti*, reflected more as *Amba* in North India, requires one to be vegetarian during the 10-day Dushera festival. In South India, on the other hand, where vegetarianism is usually directly related to faith, animal sacrifice has been substituted with the breaking of coconuts painted with faces. This brings up the perhaps controversial question as to the correlation between animal sacrifice and education.

Living green

As the years pass, finding vegetarian food is becoming easier, and the variety of choices available outside the home has also increased. In the early 1990s, locating vegetarian momos (thought by the editor of this magazine to be a contradiction in terms) in Kathmandu was as difficult as finding veg samosas in Dhaka. Being a vegetarian by choice is much easier than being a vegetarian by religion. I never did mind cooking meat, or sitting in a steakhouse eating salads. Those who are vegetarians for religious or cultural reasons, however, often cannot do this, and it must be difficult to always have to carry one's food.

The last decade has been a good one for vegetarians, as health consciousness has been on the rise, as has the fad for Buddhism. More and more global youth icons are vegetarian, so there are new modern role models over and above the Shankeracharyas. New technologies, including devoted websites, have also allowed veggies to track down hard-to-find vegetarian joints.

In the parts of India and Nepal where the cheaper beef is taboo, eating meat is indicative of affluence. Carrying meat bought from the street-side butcher's through the neighbourhood in transparent plastic bags is definitely a show of one's spending power. The hierarchy begins at chicken and moves upward through mutton to fish, prawns and more exotic seafood. Pork has limited acceptability in many communities, though upmarket Chhetri families revel in hybrid boar – skin, fat,



In the erstwhile Hindu Kingdom it was until recently difficult to maintain a Hindu identity by being vegetarian.

meat and all!

The type of meat served at festivities and feasts is important and indicative of social strata. In the Kathmandu Valley, communities for whom buffalo meat is acceptable eat meat more often than do communities where the hierarchy begins at chicken. This also explains the heavy meat-eating in Bangladesh and Pakistan, where consumption of beef, affordable to almost everyone, is not met with general disapproval.

For the rest of us, the advent of cold storage and the improvement of supply chains have made most vegetables available perennially. One can now find greens in abundance in Kathmandu, and dishes of exotic plants are available in many restaurants. The city's Japanese, Thai, Chinese, Tex-Mex, Korean and Italian restaurants serve a variety of leafy delicacies. In the Thamel tourist district, there is an Israeli restaurant that serves only vegetarian food, and there and elsewhere Chinese restaurants serve meat substitutes made of soy and other protein-rich foods.

Traditional cuisines of the Nepali hills – from Newari to Thakali – do not use a wide variety of vegetables, as their repertoire is largely restricted to what used to be available in local markets. Most East and Southeast Asian cuisines, on the other hand, incorporate wider varieties of vegetables and greens, often mixed with meat and seafood. The demand for vegetarian food by a staunchly vegetarian Indian community added the introduction of other Asian cuisines, which has made Nepal's cosmopolitan capital a haven for good veggie eating. Unlike in India, where restaurants have to adapt to the Indian palate in order to succeed, in Kathmandu success lies in authenticity.

The acceptability of vegetarianism and respect for this lifestyle choice is on the increase. One is no longer ridiculed for 'eating grass', or considered poor for not cooking meat at home. Changes in eating habits due to health concerns and vegetarianism's newfound contemporary associations have made it easier for the once-harassed veggie to live with respect. It would be interesting to undertake veggie tours in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where the movement is also said to be slowly gaining ground one hears. ▲

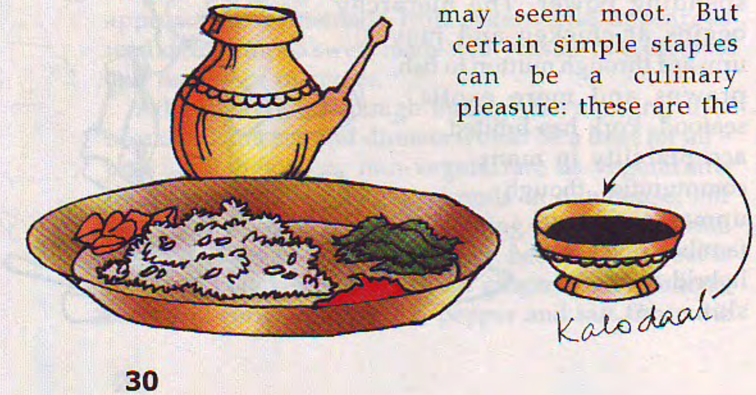
A basic Kathmandu thaali

Time may be the most important ingredient in creating a good meal.

BY **SHANTA BASNET DIXIT**

I could not get the strong smell of *aloo* and *chamsoorko ras* out of my mind. This stew of potatoes and a sharp, slightly pungent green was all I wanted to eat and nothing more. I was not able to, though, and thankfully my daughter grew up just fine, and does not drool all over the place. If a pregnant woman does not get to eat the food she craves, so the Nepali saying goes, the child will drool. But I was in New York in the 1980s, and chamsoor proved far too difficult to find. So I delivered my baby girl without having satiated the craving for so simple a dish.

Does one live to eat, or eat to live? I guess in a country – indeed, a region – like ours, where so many must toil day in and day out just to be able to get by, the question may seem moot. But certain simple staples can be a culinary pleasure: these are the dishes that drive a powerful nostalgia when overseas, and that one does not tire of eating every day. Cuisine is varied according to community in Kathmandu, and Newari cuisine is obviously the most authentically 'Nepali', but for many of the valley's families, the menu for such a meal would read along the lines of: *kalo daal* (black lentils), *bhuja* (rice), *kauli aloo* (a dish of cauliflower and potatoes), *saag* (greens), *tama aloo bodiko ras* (a stew of bamboo shoots, potatoes and black-eyed peas), and *golbhedako achar* (tomato chutney). As the cherry on the top, one can drizzle a generous spoonful of *ghiu* (ghee) over the pile of rice. Of course, this thaali can be varied by substituting the tomato achar with potato *alooko achar*, but the *kalo daal* cannot be changed!



Kalo daal is *maas* daal that has been cooked over slow heat in a deep iron pan – the long-term leeching of the iron is what makes the lentil black. This is probably one of the few dishes in the world that is decidedly black, and not from being burnt. A well-used pan is often thinned out at the bottom and will eventually develop a hole, the family having been fortified by the iron. These days the busy householder cooks the daal first in a pressure cooker, and then pours it into the iron pot to allow it to turn its satisfying dark colour. Mixing in dried chives that have been fried in a ladleful of ghiu is another indispensable step.

The golbhedako achar has to achieve the right colour and texture. Ginger and garlic contribute the main flavours, along with salt, chilly pepper and Szechwan Pepper. In the old days, the tomato went through muslin cloth, but these days it can go through the food processor.

Kauli aloo may seem a simple dish to the diner who does not cook, but its preparation takes care. To get the right combination of tough and seasoned potato and cauliflower that is soft but not disintegrating, the two have to be cooked separately. Or, at the very least, the *aloo* must be cooked beforehand, and the *kauli* added to it. It is best to add only ginger (no garlic, onion or tomato) to the spices that go into this item, and a generous amount of coriander leaves should be sprinkled just before serving.

The *aloo tama bodi* dish is quintessentially Nepali. It takes a lot of tomatoes, which give it its great colour. The bamboo shoot is fried separately, and then added to the dish once everything else is cooked. Again, this item takes no onions. A meal containing aloo tama bodi needs to be planned ahead of time, as the black-eyed peas need to be soaked overnight. In cases of emergency, a pressure cooker will do the trick, of course, but the taste is not the same.

If a rice cooker is used, it is turned on half an hour before the meal is to be served. With the power cuts these days we have sometimes had to cook our rice in the pressure cooker, and the taste has been surprisingly good.

The 'cultured' way to eat with your hand is to eat with your fingers, and preferably the tips of the fingers, using the thumb to prompt in the food that the five fingers have so caringly shaped into a perfect morsel. It should take several moments to get the next bite ready, and only chewing slowly allows a person to take maximum pleasure from the food. Of course, some people will eat with food all over their palms, and gulp it down as if there were no next meal, but this is not the sign of a good eater.

King kebab

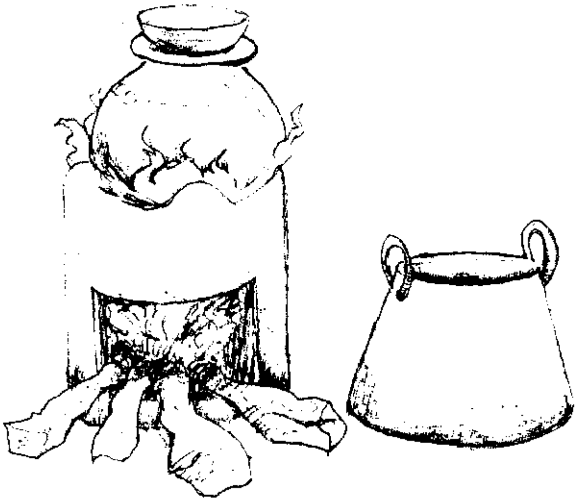
The meal described above is complete in itself, but some people are not satisfied unless there is meat. A common non-vegetarian addition would be a dish of chicken or mutton. The chicken for this set should come with a thick gravy, made with lots of tomato and some onion. Ginger and garlic are also needed. The masala (consisting of cumin, coriander and a host of other spices) was traditionally made at home, allowing for variation from household to household, but now commercial preparations are preferred by most people.

Connoisseurs will grind their own spices to specification. These sorts also will not consider the broiler chicken (the caged variety that is locally known as *syankhine*, or *bikase kukhura* – 'development chicken' – whose origins lie in the 1960s introduction of 'improved', mass-bred varieties), and would rather go for free-roaming fowl that have developed tight muscles and pecked at a variety of different foods. However, free-range *syankhine* chickens are getting to be a luxury these days, even as chicken has dropped from being regarded as a delicacy to being common fare.

The other and traditional carnivorous alternative – in an upright Bahun household, at least – is of course goat meat, or *khasiko masu*. Mutton is usually prepared in the same way as chicken, but during Dasain – the 10-day festival that usually falls right after the monsoon – mutton gets a completely different treatment. The kebab that is prepared over long hours is definitely something to write home about.

Experts separate different cuts of the Dasain goat for different preparations. King kebab gets the best cuts. As a household cooking for Dasain will usually be dealing with 6-8 kilos of kebab, this meat gets a very special treatment. The masala (garam masala, prepared as per family custom) has been freshly ground in the preceding week. Some ginger has been sliced and some ground. Garlic is peeled and crushed. Buttermilk or yogurt is added to the meat, and in some cases even a squeeze of lime juice. Next comes mustard oil, fresh from the traditional oil presser of Khokana town, and a small teaspoon of ghiu finds itself atop a huge pile of meat. Salt to taste, and some turmeric. One onion (according to my mother) must be chopped and thrown in, and the whole thing marinated – not set to marinade, mind you, but mixed by hand for 20-30 minutes before it is allowed to sit for a while. Salt must now be added if still needed, and of course chilly pepper.

Once enough fuss has been made over the meat and it is ready to be cooked, oil is heated in a deep pan with a thick bottom – earlier this was done in rounded pots called *kasaudi*, which would sit over a wood-burning stove. Then several bay leaves are thrown into the oil before putting in the meat, fistful by fistful, never by pouring. The meat is then cooked over a slow heat for at least four hours. Well-cooked



kebabs would keep for weeks into the upcoming winter in pre-refrigeration days. The slices of ginger, which become dark brown and indistinguishable from the meat, are as much a delicacy as the meat itself.

Chiura (beaten rice) and kebab is a staple combination during the festival season, and especially good with a pickle of ripened cucumber. The sour cucumber pickle, slightly gelatinous but crunchy on the rind, is a perfect digestive for the protein-laden Dasain diet.

The dessert for this menu is *sikarni* (called *shrikhand* in parts of India), prepared by hanging yogurt in muslin – this task has not yet been perfected for the food processor. After most of the water has dripped out, the yogurt becomes doubly concentrated. Sikarni's creamy texture is achieved by then squeezing the yogurt through the muslin. Sugar and cardamom create the basic flavouring, but people often add saffron and dried fruits to make the dessert more attractive.

A good meal is not over until the host offers a selection of dried fruits and spices. Beetle-nut for some people, but not for me! ▲

Hash and mutton: Stalking the alleys of Peshawar

Peshawar's old markets are a paradise of meat delicacies and unconventional appetisers.

BY **AURANGZAIB KHAN**

What the guidebooks will not tell you about Peshawar's famous Namak Mandi, or Salt Bazaar, is the easy access to a pinch of hash to go with the traditional meat fare the street is celebrated for. The herbal intoxicant is known to lend an edge to appetite. And what better place to get the juices flowing than Namak Mandi, where you can sink your teeth in all the lamb you could dream of?

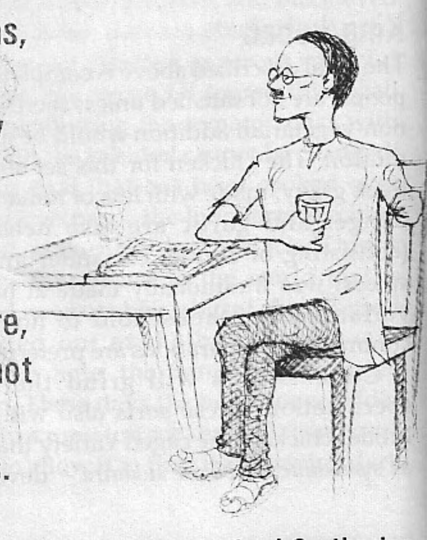
It is not for nothing that of all the eateries in this bazaar in the heart of the old city, the Charsi Tikka shop draws customers in droves. The name is a nod to the combination of hash and mutton that has become something of an epicurean delight – much like red wine with meat. But while you would be lucky to find wine or any sort of alcohol in the conservative Northwest Frontier Province, the Spartan rooms in the Namak Mandi restaurants where people sit to eat meat are often smoky with the scent of cannabis.

But to dwell on charas is to distract from the sumptuous delights that the bazaar specialises in. While a pinch certainly helps to sharpen the appetite before an order of the market's traditional fare, anyone would find themselves drooling over the meat dishes served here without even the unconventional appetizer. From the sizzling *tikka karahi* – lamb stewed in its juices and fried in fat with a liberal mix of tomatoes, ginger and green chillies – to the barbecued rib chops served with lemon, a gourmet heaven can be found beneath the crumbling rooftops of Namak Mandi.

And if you find you cannot stop eating or feel a little bloated by that large glass of lassi served with the tikka karahi, worry not. There is always a steaming cup of Peshawari *kahwa* (green tea) handy to ease any glutton's pain. Packed with a therapeutic punch not unlike that of a dose of Pepto-Bismol, green tea has been used for centuries in these parts to address troubles of indigestion. A delicious cup of cardamom-rich kahwa may be just what is needed to make room for that bowl of *kulfa* – kulfi served with almond and vermicelli – sold at the stalls of the ancient Kisa Khawani Bazaar, the Story Tellers' Market, just a few streets away.

But vegetarians, be warned. While you may find the odd vegetable or dal dish at a restaurant here, Peshawar is not known for its love of greens. Those with a craving for chlorophyll are better off buying fresh veggies from the Sabzi Mandi, and cooking at home. And let us not rush to say *bon appetit* to the traveler who finds himself in this city during the month of Ramadan. The streets sleep then, as all shun physical indulgence in keeping with the spirit of fasting. Expect to be served frowns and not food if you go looking to eat in a public place in Peshawar during the holy month. ▲

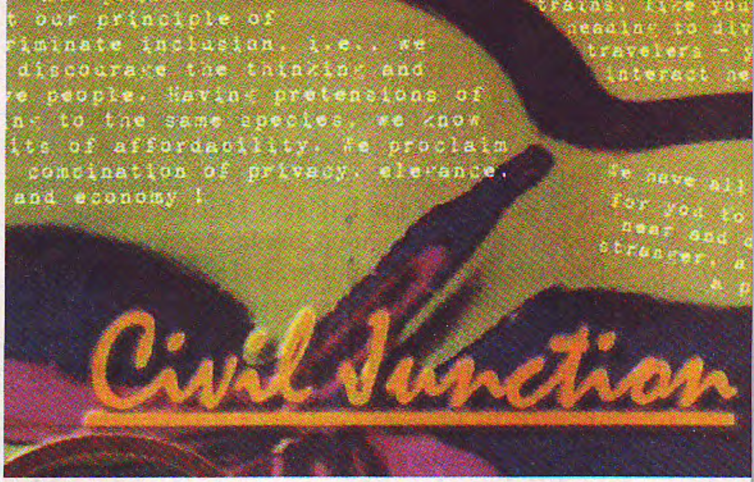
But vegetarians, be warned. While you may find the odd vegetable or daal dish at a restaurant here, Peshawar is not known for its love of greens.



Civilised junction

An Islamabad restaurant is trying to put as much emphasis on the intellectual space it offers as on its menu.

BY **MANISHA ARYAL**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Civil Junction

CJ menu

In his hometown in Punjab province's Burewala, Arshed Bhatti grew up during General Zia-ul Haq's rule reading signs painted on the walls of barber shops: *Yahan siyasi guftagoo mana hai* (Political discussions prohibited here!). Although such signs will not be found in Pervez Musharraf's Pakistan, Bhatti believes that years of military rule have hacked away at the roots of civil society, killing prospects for social and political activism.

Bhatti, a development consultant by profession, set out to change all this.

On 19 November 2002, when the present Parliament was elected to office, he started the restaurant Civil Junction. Situated in the heart of military-ruled Islamabad in the upscale Gol Market, Civil Junction serves as "a platform for diverse civic trains … coming from and heading to divergent destinations." Civil Junction, or CJ as regulars fondly call it, has put a lot of thought into its menu, and gives its visitors quite a bit of food for thought. Connoisseurs are invited here for "coffee, conversation, meals and tolerance".

CJ's menu will draw a chuckle from even the most politically jaded:

Liquid Affection

Civil Military Mix, aka Dudh Soda – Meek and mild civil milk is mixed with uniformed but effervescent soda; higgledy-piggledy saccharine elements of intelligentsia are whimsically added to sweeten the mix. Taste may vary as it is a 'work in progress' recipe, albeit with decades of experimentation. It has particular digestive value for progressive and democratic stomachs.

Madhuri Masti – Vibrant, vervy, refreshing, desi, dynamic drink. A tribute to subcontinental femininity that – being basically brilliant and talented to the core, with an abundance of charm and intelligence – keeps dazzling despite the patriarchal haze.

Pak Bharat Dosti – Surprisingly unsurprising mix of fresh orange with equally fresh lemon; the natural affinity of the two produces a cool, refreshing blend. It tastes great but the supply is uncertain. Orange denotes India (size, variety, juicy); Lemon, Pakistan (wider use, more acidic, omnipresent).

This, and the CJ concept itself, could only have been concocted by someone like Bhatti, whose pre-Partition family history gives him a different take on the 'other side'. His family had come to settle in the village called '561 EB' in Pakistan's Vehari District, after having left Farid Kot, now in east Punjab in India, not long before his birth. Pak Bharat Dosti and the other fruity concoctions at CJ are freshly squeezed and full of longing, and come for rupees 99 or less.

Ready for the main course? Here is a sampling of the brilliant selection:

Military Intervention – Some like it, some hate it, but all take it. A beefy main course, quietly cooked in a political pressure cooker. Served with an opportunist selection of VVIP (Various Vegetables in Pakistan).

VVIP – Various Vegetables in Pakistan! The combination of VVIP keeps changing with seasonal change in political alliances, governments and climate. You can ask for boiled, stir fried, well baked, or properly cooked ones, depending on your grudge against VVIPs.

MMA – Murgh Malai Aloo – A unique culinary alliance of poultry, vegetables and diary! Hale and hearty potatoes, baked conservatively, sprinkled with aggressive spices; no gravy. Sounds hot but easy to chew. Served with LFO (Light Fried Onions).

PML – Pure Mutton League – It's the 'Establish-ment's' favourite bite; comes in many varieties with a new suffix every time. Tribute to leadership on a plate; the less said, the better.

Dhoka Dahi – A Pakistani socio-political specialty. Deceptive yogurt mix! No one pays or gets paid for it; it's free accompaniment with most transactions.

For those unused to navigating the bewildering maze of Southasian politics, here is a map that may help to understand this nifty menu. 'VVIPs' is perhaps the most obvious. It stands for, of course, the Very, Very Important People of Pakistan. The MMA in Murgh Malai Aloo stands for Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, an alliance of around a half-dozen powerful religious parties, with strongholds in the Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan. LFO stands not only for Light Fried Onions but for Legal Framework Order, which covers the constitutional amendments introduced by General Musharraf three years ago. The LFO gives unchecked powers to the general-president, including the authority to dismiss an elected Parliament and government, and to further legitimise his rule. The PML in Pure Mutton League stands for the Pakistan Muslim League. The Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam), or PML-Q, is the party currently in power, and is a centrist political force descended from the original PML, which laid the foundations of the present-day state of Pakistan. Many factions of the PML have existed, however, and others are designated by the suffixes F, N, J and Z.

To return to food, a personal favourite is the ubiquitous Pakistani *karrahi*. But CJ's version takes you to a different plane of gastronomic pleasure, with a political twist:

Deep Fried Opposition – The most popular dish in Pakistan, aka chicken karrahi. It is slaughtered; cut into as small and as many pieces as possible; battered, salted, spiced and what not! Your best chance to take your bite too.

After the main course, and if still in the mood, the endorsement goes to the mouth-watering, fruity dessert called Sham Democracy. Bhatti's restaurant recommends that this follow an order of Military Intervention. It is described as "scapegoat's milk, mixed with contentious split-milk allegations and promises of reformed grazing!"

Siyasi guftagoo

The restaurant does not drive away customers with a discreet waiter foisting a bill on your table. In fact, you have to implore the waiter to bring it out. This, says Bhatti, is to encourage visitors to stay on and get to know others who may be "not-of-your-kind". The restaurant itself, which extends to a courtyard with citrus trees, stays open 22 hours a day, with a two-hour bathroom break at 5 am.

In the quad, under the orange and lemon trees, it is not odd to chance upon bearded International Islamic University students, engaged in earnest *"siyasi guftagoo"* with their tank-top- and faded jeans-clad contemporaries from Quaid-e-Azam University.

For the cold Islamabad winters, and for long, involved conversations, there is an equally inviting hot-drinks selection.

Hot, Warm N' Heated

Vajpayee's Cup of Coffee (our hot favourite) – Old, poetically smooth, chronically alone, mythologically brewed, firmly soft and – in short – more than you can expect. There is no foreign hand in its making. It's well cooked, not raw. Served with conservative cookies.

Musharraf Guespresso (our best bet) – Not old; anybody's guess! Seasoned and intensely mature! Khaki, softly firm, brewed under high pressure of discipline. Its base is very, very strong and the real kick is in the aftertaste! Served with handpicked cookies.

Unclear Qahwa – A very hot and heated drink. It is extracted from grassroots, enriched to enviable limits; very transparent formulae, can be swapped with any T-technology. It was originally nuclear, but its representation has recently been twisted. Comes with traces of ambiguity, in a suspicious saucer and with crumbling cookies.

Bhatti started out with a simple idea four years ago – he wanted to start an affordable coffee shop that would stay open till late – really late! This was a revolutionary concept for Islamabad, which begins to doze off at around 9:30 pm.

Bhatti wanted to provide a place where the city's residents and visitors could lounge around for as long as they wanted. He found a rundown, two-storey building with a courtyard, rented it and set about converting it into a political space.

Today, Civil Junction is a full-fledged restaurant with an upper deck, where Bhatti's dream of a vibrant space for civil society is slowly being realised. Civil Junction encourages and facilitates the flow of ideas. Be it underground rock bands, development forums or minority groups – they all have a place at CJ, where they can discuss ideas without fear of censorship from the management.

With CJ, it is the menu that draws in the curious. Then, something primal within them seems to respond. And conversations start to flow. At one point CJ decided to sell its menu as an experiment. They have now sold more copies of this than cups of coffee.

▲

A dhaba to die for

The new flyover doesn't keep loyalists from stopping at the best dhaba between Delhi and Chandigarh.

BY **S S RAY**

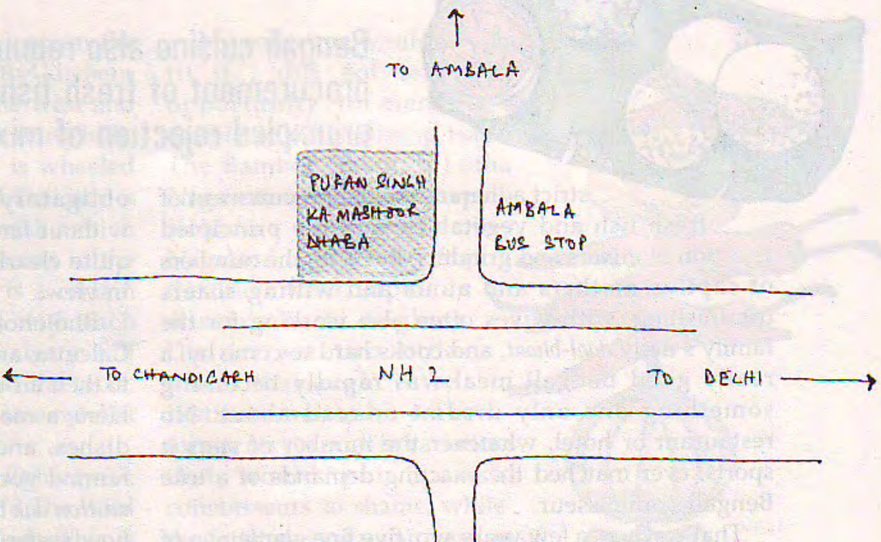
For regulars on the Delhi-Chandigarh route, a stopover at Puran Singh ka Mashoor Dhaba is an absolute must. Those familiar with this eatery try their utmost to reach here well before 2:30 in the afternoon, by which time the much sought-after mutton curry usually runs out.

Puran Singh ka Mashoor Dhaba (translated as 'Puran Singh's super-duper eatery') is right on the intersection, across the road from the Ambala bus depot. Its visibility has recently been reduced due to a flyover constructed astride its length, which enables Delhi-Chandigarh traffic to zoom past, effectively avoiding the Ambala congestion. But that does not deter those looking for the tastiest mutton curry on the go.

This dhaba has been serving highway travelers for at least three decades, and used to open only for lunch. The story goes that army veteran Puran Singh's neighbours used to bribe him with a bottle of liquor every day to down shutters in the evenings so that they could also find some custom. With him open, they had no hope.

The present dhaba is fairly large, with a seating capacity of 70 to 80 people, depending on how hungry customers are to mind a bit of a squeeze while dining. The offering most in demand is without doubt the mutton dish – Rs 80 per plate, and really enough only for one person, unless you are a spectacularly small eater. It is accompanied with hot, oven-fresh tandoori rotis. The green salad, comprising mainly of onions, lemon and green chillies, is complimentary.

The chicken curry is by now almost as famous as the legendary mutton version, the mainly Punjabi crowd having a particular fondness for it. In addition there is the *keema* curry, with pieces of liver and kidney – passable, with the gravy tasting oddly similar to the mutton curry. There is also, of course, the mandatory tandoori chicken, again an all-time favourite. It would be unfair not to list the vegetarian offerings, such as the very common *shahi paneer* (cottage cheese in a creamy tomato gravy), mixed vegetables, *dal makhni* and *raita*. Even these meatless dishes have some takers!



For all the varied offerings, however, a good meal at Puran Singh's would consist of unadulterated mutton curry and tandoori rotis, washed down with something bubbly to settle the oil and energise you as you hit the road. A meal for two comprising of at least two dishes would cost about Rs 300.

A word of caution though: those hunting for the dhaba for the first time often confuse it with the two other Puran Singh dhabas, located immediately before the real one when approaching from the Chandigarh end. The authentic one is on the corner across from the bus stop, and is the largest of all the surrounding eateries. Leave the driving to those on the flyover for a bit. ▲

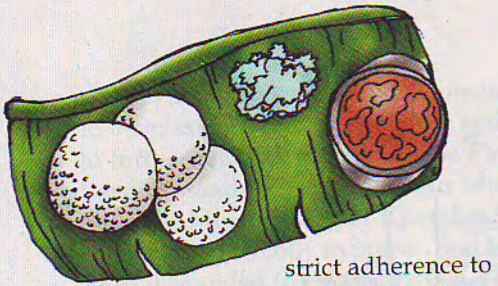
Bhojohori Manna inspires

Finally, real Bengali food in Bengal.

BY **DEB MUKHARJI**

The Bengali has about him an intellectual air but remains equally essentially a gourmand. The demands of his cuisine are such that a satisfactory meal is (or, as we shall see, has been) only to be expected at home. It is all about the delicacy of taste; and the dollop of fragrant ghee, the slice of lemon and the green chilli at the periphery of the dish are as indispensable as the sequence of service. The *karela* (bitter gourd) or *neem-begun* (aubergine) at the beginning and the chutney at the end serve as bookends to *shaak* (spinach or other greens), *shukto* (bitter mixed vegetable), *dal-bhaja* (fried lentils), fish and meat. The meal would, of course, end with *doi* and sweets.

Admittedly, the full spread would be on display only on special occasions and feasts and, perhaps, *Durga Pujo* in more affluent localities. But the principles remained the same, and no Bengali true to his salt would ever dream of mixing up the order of things, even if the number of dishes were restricted. Bengali cuisine also requires



Bengali cuisine also requires strict adherence to the procurement of fresh fish and vegetables, and the principled rejection of mixers and grinders.

strict adherence to the procurement of fresh fish and vegetables, and the principled rejection of mixers and grinders. But with the numbers of captive mothers and aunts and willing sisters diminishing, with wives often also working for the family's daily *daal-bhaat*, and cooks hard to come by, a really good Bengali meal was rapidly becoming something one only dreamt or read about. No restaurant or hotel, whatever the number of stars it sports, ever matched the exacting demands of a true Bengali connoisseur.

That is when, a few years ago, five fine gentlemen of Calcutta took matters into their own hands. Distressed that authentic Bengali cuisine was becoming rare at home and unavailable outside, and inspired by Bhojohori Manna, the world-conquering hero-chef of a song by the famous Bengali singer Manna De, they decided to set up an eatery carrying that mythical name.

My first acquaintance with Bhojohori Manna was at their first outlet, on Ekdalia Road. It was a most unostentatious little cabin, and required faith to enter. As is still the rule today, reservations were not made and you needed to wait your turn. But the waiting time was never too long, as the turnover was rapid. The dishes available at any given meal were not many and changed by the day, but kept to the Bengali culinary ethos. I remember my first meal at Ekdalia Road comprising bhaat, daal, *dhokar dalna* (fried lentil strips in gravy), *topse maach bhaja* (fried topse fish), *daab-chingri* (shrimp cooked in coconut water) and *shorshe ilish* (hilsa fish cooked in mustard oil). The obligatory slice of lemon and green chilli came without fanfare. The prices were amazingly low, and quite clearly had the constraints of the middle class in view.

Bhojohori Manna now has three other outlets in Calcutta, and some of my subsequent visits have been to their air-conditioned restaurant on Hindustan Road. Here, a more expensive menu offers a wide range of dishes, and the most popular are *barishali ilish* (to remind you of where the best ilish comes from) and *mutton dak bungalow* (anyone over 50 should remember how yesterday's *khansamas* prepared their mutton). No less evocative – and true to life – are the *goalondo steamer curry*, a powerhouse of nostalgia, and the *dhakai kachhi* biryani, without which there is no Dhaka wedding or serious party. I should leave you to check out the rest of the menu in person, but cannot help mentioning the *murshidabaadi raan* and the pomfret *paturi* (pomfret cooked in banana leaf). I only hope that after they open their branch in Dhaka next year, Bhojohori Manna will add to their menu some of the wondrous *bhartas* from Bangladesh, ranging from the skins of vegetables to *shutki* (dried fish) and ilish.

A visit to Bhojohori Manna is a must, including for non-Bengalis. Seated here are artists such as M F Hussain and Taslima Nasreen, ordinary people like us, and the suited Chinese gentleman at the next table using his fingers to negotiate his ilish maach in a tribute to Bengali cuisine. Even my mother and sister would have agreed that Bhojohori Manna passes their exacting test. ▲

Who needs butter chicken?

The search for (and the finding of) a proud Assamese tradition of food.

BY **SANJAY BARBORA**

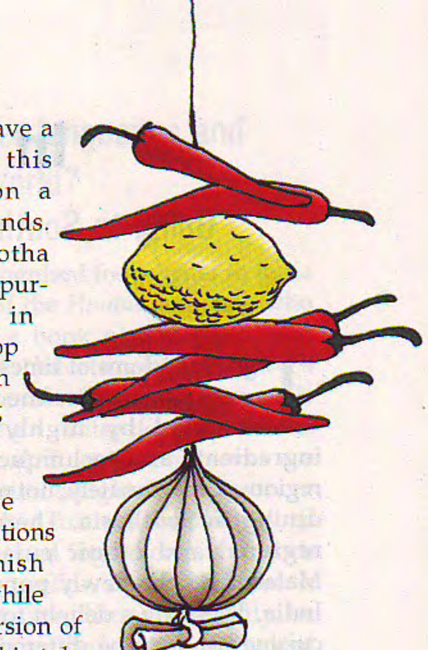
An academic friend who frequents Guwahati never fails to point out how, and how quickly, food taboos have changed among the Assamese. However, like many of us who live on the edges of the culinary empire of butter chicken and sad versions of Chinese food, his enthusiasm wears thin when it comes to locating a restaurant in Guwahati that actually reflects these radical changes.

Paradise Restaurant in Chandmari is the most popular place to take visitors wanting a taste of Assam. Truth be told, though, it was always a bit embarrassing to explain the various bowls that would be placed before the guest, as the Paradise serves a very watered-down version of upper-caste food. Furthermore, one receives reactions along the lines of, "This is a lot like Bengali/Oriya/mild North Indian food." Still, one did not give up on the restaurant. Perhaps its beer licence has had something to do with that.

An inquisitive eater needs to leave Guwahati to realise that there is hope for regional food. South of the Paradise on Highway 37, which links Assam to its gastronomic hinterland, a perfect example of the reassertion of regional identity can be found in a restaurant called GAM Delicacy. The décor here is distinctly Southeast Asian, though we call it northeastern. The waiters have all the confidence in the world as they serve up *anja*, or curry, of smoked pork and bamboo shoot; duck with black pepper and gourd; indigenous *bao* rice (at least it says so on the menu), and other food that is common in the kitchens of non-Brahmanical households in both the west and east of the Brahmaputra Valley and its adjoining hills.

The self-assurance with which all this is wheeled up on sturdy bamboo trolleys at the GAM Delicacy is reminiscent of the unmatched pride with which Chinese waiters serve their delicate dim-sums in the upmarket eateries of Hong Kong. There is a certain pride one feels in ordering food served with such elegant buoyancy. This is why the place is always full of people elbowing each other for a seat at the table, even though they might have cooked the same meal at home the night before.

It only gets better as one moves east on Highway 37. Barely an hour from Guwahati is Sonapur's The Wild East (House of Ethnic and Indigenous Food). This is the place mobile people head for over the weekend, to have their share of pork and bamboo shoots, dried fish with chilly paste, and fried silkworm with clams (the last only served on Sundays).



My colleague would have a fit if I did not take this opportunity to mention a couple of other dining finds. The Bamboo Shoot, a Lotha Naga eatery on the Dimapur-Kohima highway in Nagaland, and the Rooftop Restaurant in Diphu in Assam's Karbi Anglong District are two little places that ought to be institutionalised. The former serves pork in variations that would put Spanish connoisseurs to shame, while the latter does a mean version of chicken with sesame, Karbi style.

Butter chicken is slowly losing out to local cuisine in Northeast India, and this is good for the region's soul. ▲

Le Saigon: Hanoi in Dhaka

The presence of a Southeast Asian eatery has brought an unexpected flavour to Dhaka.

BY **RUBANA**

Another day, another Thursday. The Lounge Lizards, a certain trio, or Imran with his band, would sing for a blasé Dhaka crowd suffering from acute fatigue stemming from the chronic boredom of dull weekends. But not anymore. Some of the humdrum has been shaken up by the new presence of Le Saigon – Dhaka's first authentic Vietnamese restaurant, the latest addition to the culinary options offered on Gulshan Avenue, the 'Sukhumvit of Dhaka'.

Le Saigon's owner came up with the idea of setting up Dhaka's first Vietnamese restaurant during a 2004 appointment to the Vietnamese embassy in Dhaka. At that time, an embassy official had asked him to promote Vietnamese tourism, and to help out with some tour packages being offered by a few local operators. The official also asked the visitors if they would be interested in setting up a restaurant.

One of the visitors, named Shammu, was moved to make a trip to Vietnam. The name 'Le Saigon' was chosen due to Shammu's fascination with drama-laden Vietnam-related movies – the last days of Saigon, the way then-South Vietnam lost the war, the scenes of the American embassy staff fleeing by helicopter. 'Le', meanwhile, references the French influence on Vietnamese culture, an effect felt particularly in Saigon, with its wide avenues, boulevards, sidewalks bustling with cafes, art galleries, silk markets and pastry shops.

So the work began. Within eight months, a dilapidated house on Gulshan Avenue was turned into an authentic Vietnamese restaurant. All of the restaurant's partners flew to Hanoi in November 2004, and over a period of four days they interviewed nearly 30 chefs. Along with a couple of Vietnamese cooks, they brought back a load of antiques with which to decorate the new establishment.

Then the kitchen went to work. Two of the chefs selected in Hanoi introduced the new cuisine to Dhaka's connoisseurs on 1 June 2005. Among the top favourites have been the rice-flour pancakes stuffed with crab meat, shrimp mousse on sugarcane, sautéed beef with onions and black-pepper sauce, oven-baked snapper with herbs and root vegetables, catfish stewed in caramel sauce, fish soup with turmeric and fruits, seafood *lau* (hot pot), and beef-roll stuffed with melted cheese.

And today? Dhaka-wallas love both the food and the restaurant itself – swinging along to the weekend music, remaining indifferent to the tight seating. But much of Le Saigon's popularity is due to what it offers beyond its menu and décor – an attempt to offer a warmth to its clients that differs slightly from the everyday Bengali heat. It is the warmth of the Mekong Delta, imported to the Ganga Brahmaputra Delta. ▲

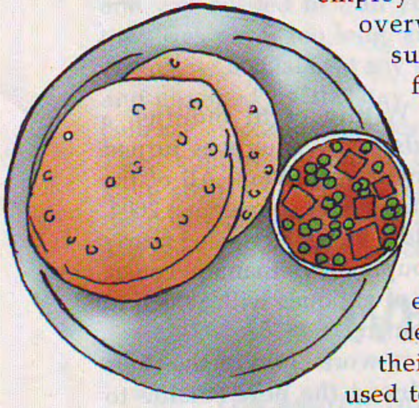
In search of a high cuisine

Going to Southasian restaurants should not feel like attending a funeral.

BY **ZILKIA JANER**

The kingdoms of times past had 'high cuisines' composed of refined and exclusive dishes created by highly skilled cooks using ingredients and techniques from a multitude of regions. Unfortunately, not much is left of such grand dining in Southasia. There are indeed countless regional and ethnic cuisines, from Newari to Malabari to the newly popularised dishes of royal India. These are a delight to explore, but a true high cuisine needs to be different from daily fare in the quality of the ingredients and in the sophistication of the techniques employed in preparation.

It has been argued that a high cuisine only exists in societies that are very stratified. Southasian societies are as stratified as societies can be, but they still lack such a cuisine. I would suggest that it may in fact be the extreme level of stratification that explains this absence. While it is common for Southasia's educated and professional classes to employ cooks at home, the overwhelming majority of such cooks receive no formal education or training. They prepare a limited range of dishes that they learned in their own homes or under the instruction of their employers. The elites depend on their cooks for their daily meals, and are used to eating whatever these cooks set on the table. The convenience of having somebody prepare their meals seems to have significantly more weight than the householder's interest in cultivating their own tastes and their employee's skills. This means that the elites end up eating pretty much the same food as everybody else.



Southasia's privileged differentiate their food from the food of the masses not by building on the old royal cuisines, but by eating foreign dishes, predominantly Western. When it comes to the culture of food, colonialism seems to have been passively accepted. By leaving local and regional cuisines out of the realm of fine dining, the elites mark their difference from the common folk, while also accepting a status of cultural inferiority at the international level.

With a few notable exceptions, the relatively rare 'fine' restaurants in Southasia that actually offer Southasian food serve either a weakened or a mummified version of the local cuisine. The weakened version is often the result of trying to cater to what is perceived to be the tastes of foreigners or clientele from other parts. Restaurants that favour this strategy make good business but not very good food. They seem to be ashamed to serve local food as it really exists, and they also lack the confidence to refine it according to a region's own taste paradigms.

Other restaurants do serve unadulterated local foods but they behave like museums, collecting and displaying dishes of a long-dead or endangered tradition. In high-end Nepali restaurants in Kathmandu the food is good and the atmosphere elegant, but the local food culture is not presented as either alive or vibrant. Eating in these establishments feels like attending a funeral. Delhi restaurants, meanwhile, pretend to be museums of Mughlai cuisine, and serve a predictable set of uninspired versions of old dishes. Butter chicken and toxic-red-coloured tandoori chicken have little similarity to the royal dishes that are described in historical records. Where does one have to go to savour apricot-flavoured lamb or duck stuffed with walnuts and cherries? There are fewer and fewer cooks who know the old royal cuisines firsthand, and their knowledge is likely to die with them. Meanwhile, some of their invaluable learning has become the patented property of big hotel chains. The search for high Southasian cuisine seems to be a job better suited for archaeologists and historians than for gourmet food lovers.

The problem is not that traditional dishes have been changed. On the contrary, for a cuisine to be alive its fare must be constantly evolving. The problem occurs when the changes that are effected come from the desire to make the cuisine palatable to

With a few notable exceptions, the relatively rare 'fine' restaurants in Southasia that actually offer Southasian food serve either a weakened or a mummified version of the local cuisine.

Is Southasian high cuisine going to be extinct, like so many other languages and cultural expressions apparently incompatible with the modern world?

outsiders, instead of from within the logic of the cuisine itself and according to the taste preferences of the people who cook and eat it regularly. To reclaim the gourmet repertoires of the past, a new Southasian high cuisine must start by respecting their logic, aesthetics and epistemology, instead of submitting to the standards of Western cuisines. Foreigners, for their part, should train their palates and learn to appreciate real Southasian cooking.

The mutilation and subordination of local cuisines in the fine-restaurant scenario is even more shameful when we consider that their rightful place is taken by second-rate renditions of Western and other foreign cookery. Kathmandu stands out as an exception in Southasia, because there you can find excellent cooking in a variety of international cuisines. But elsewhere, to have a 'Western' meal means to eat either fast food at a McDonalds or a Pizza Hut, or outdated French dishes at an expensive hotel restaurant.

Those preparing Western cuisines in Southasia are unlikely to have had any direct knowledge of the dishes that they prepare. They also have little access to crucial ingredients such double-cream butter, cheese or wine. Their knowledge comes almost entirely from the manuals that the French painstakingly put together in the 1970s in an effort to standardise their cuisine and present it to the world as a model for emulation. As has been the case in other realms, the written word is vanquishing orally transmitted knowledge.

Lagging respect

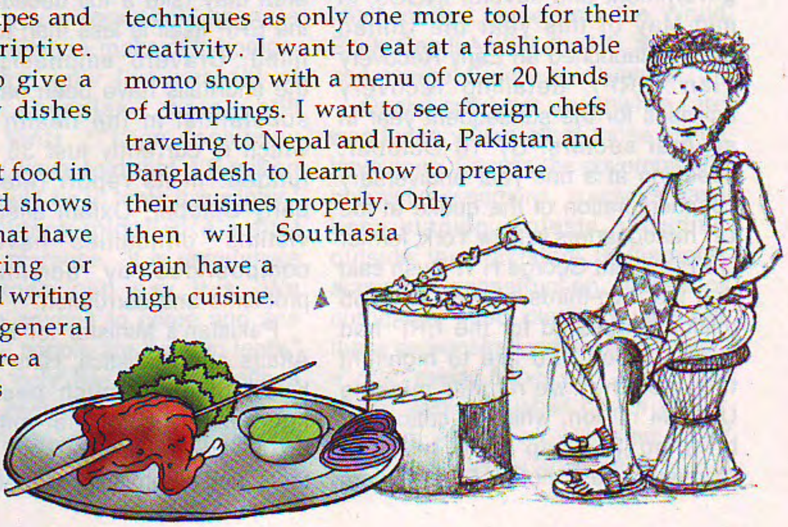
There does need to be a systematic effort underway to put Southasia's culinary knowledge into writing. Writing down recipes, and writing about food preparation and consumption, has been a fundamental part of the creation of high cuisines elsewhere. It is important to systematise recipes and techniques, but this need not be prescriptive. Such documentation is rather intended to give a solid culinary foundation on which new dishes can be built.

At the moment, the status of writing about food in the Subcontinent is quite rudimentary. Food shows and cookbooks present traditional recipes that have not benefited from professional testing or development. There is a growing trend of food writing in newspapers, composed mostly of general information and restaurant reviews. These are a start, but a few distinct and confident voices are needed to help launch a revival of Southasian cuisines as high cuisine. There is no such voice right now.

Currently, the most recognised food writer in India is probably Vir Sanghvi of the *Hindustan Times*, who has recently published a book of collected food columns titled *Rude Food*. Unfortunately, Sanghvi's desire to be considered a man of the world turns his essays into little more than pretentious lessons in Western high dining. Out of 65 essays, only seven are devoted to what he calls "desi delights". The rest rave about foods alien to Indian cuisine, from hot dogs and risotto to the most prized ingredients of French cuisine (foie gras, caviar, truffles, oysters). His book reinforces the idea that fine dining can only be Western. Indian cuisine is treated as an attachment that you need to outgrow in order to prove your food-expert credentials. There is no need to point out that this is the exact opposite of what is required for us to overcome the colonisation of Southasian culinary knowledge.

Southasians have successfully contested the colonial myth of the superiority of Western culture, so why are they accepting a second-rate status in the realm of fine dining? Why are they not bothering to stimulate the continuous development of local and regional cuisines towards a high-cuisine level? Where are the artists of Southasian cuisine? How are they to be trained and sustained, with neither the old apprenticeship system nor the professional schools that have taken its place elsewhere? Is Southasian high cuisine going to be extinct, like so many other languages and cultural expressions apparently incompatible with the modern world?

The next time I visit Nepal I want to see Nepali dishes served with pride at my hotel restaurant. I want to listen to my friends enthusiastically discuss the menu at the newest Nepali eatery, and debate the merits of its interpretation of classic dishes. I want to see cooks who use Western ingredients and techniques as only one more tool for their creativity. I want to eat at a fashionable momo shop with a menu of over 20 kinds of dumplings. I want to see foreign chefs traveling to Nepal and India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to learn how to prepare their cuisines properly. Only then will Southasia again have a high cuisine. ▲



See no suffering

A year after the Kashmir earthquake, nearly as many survivors are facing a bleak winter as did last year. Oxfam says things are bad, Pervez Musharraf says not. The truth is somewhere in between.

BY **SHAFQAT ALI**

APPLY THE GOOD GOVERNANCE RULES
APPLY THE GOOD GOVERNANCE RULES

INP

The 8 October 2005 earthquake killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan-administrated Kashmir and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), but the after-effects could be said to be equally catastrophic. Up to 140,000 were left injured, around 11,000 orphaned and up to 2.8 million made homeless in the immediate aftermath. And according to the international aid agency Oxfam, roughly 1.8 million remain living in temporary and inadequate shelter today – nearly as many as were forced to face the high-altitude winter last year. While no one could rectify the loss of life, reconstruction and rehabilitation should have been possible on a far larger scale than what has been witnessed. Despite an international outpouring of support, both the relief work and funding process, particularly by the Islamabad government, have been problematic from the start.

Winter fell almost immediately after the 7.6-magnitude quake struck, and many died from the cold. With snow already falling by early October this year, aid agencies say that close to a billion more dollars is needed immediately to avoid a second wave of suffering in quake-hit areas.

In conjunction with the Pakistani government and several INGOs, in mid-May of this year the United Nations launched an Early Recovery Plan (ERP), detailing recovery activities for the subsequent year in several sectors. By 10 October, speaking at a one-year anniversary commemoration of the quake at the UN headquarters in New York, former US President George H W Bush said that just two-thirds of the USD 255 million requested for the ERP had been fulfilled. "I'd like to highlight the fact that we're still missing USD 94 million, which is critical for bridging the gap from relief to recovery," Bush noted. "The sectors that remain under-funded are water and sanitation, housing and support to vulnerable people."

While appealing in late September for full funding for the Early Recovery Plan, Kathleen Cravero, the UN's Global Director for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, noted that even with topped-up assistance, recovery in the area may take a full decade. While the ERP itself is less than two-thirds filled, Cravero emphasised that the shortfalls have been particularly substantial in the health sector, which is currently just 35 percent funded. In its report released in early October, Oxfam alleged that victims' difficulties have been compounded by administrative problems and corruption.

Pakistan's Minister for Economic Affairs and Statistics, Hina Rabbani Khar, disputes such pessimistic figures. She says that only about 35,000 people are currently living in tents, and emphasises that efforts are being made to provide permanent shelters for those in need. Of the USD 6.7 billion pledged by the international community after the quake, Khar says that Pakistan's Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) has dispersed about USD 5.4 billion. But she, too, has sought more funding to help with the rehabilitation of the survivors. "One of the challenges continues to be to be able to manage the transition between relief and reconstruction," she said recently. "That is one of the reasons why the UN and the ERRA launched the Early Recovery Plan." Khar's statistics leave out the hundreds of thousands of survivors who are not currently living in the tent camps, but also have not yet been able to rebuild their homes to sufficiently guard against the coming winter.

Surplus, shortfalls

There has been important progress made. When the Early Recovery Plan was created, its aim was to restore livelihoods, reduce disaster risk and protect vulnerable groups. The UN's preliminary assessment of the ERP's progress shows that the projects planned thus far have indeed been largely successful in addressing the priorities of the people, and consistent with the government's reconstruction plan to "build back better". After the ERRA review, the plan now consists of initiatives in eight sectors totalling USD 270 million, for which around 62 percent of the funding is on hand.

International support is making it possible for the initiation of nearly 80 percent of all activities in the education sector, 71 percent of the governance initiatives and 64 percent of the livelihoods-funding requirement. One third of all funds received, USD 55 million, has already been expended by projects within the plan. Given such figures, Pakistani authorities express confidence that the rest of the funding gap will soon be addressed.

Substantial obstacles remain, however. The World Bank estimates that the cost of reconstructing shelters along prescribed criteria has increased dramatically from the early estimates. About 70 percent of particularly vulnerable families live in areas where winter conditions are extremely harsh. More than a million people also lost their jobs after the earthquake. With Bank assistance, 85 percent of the more than 240,000 eligible families are currently receiving livelihood support in the form of cash grants of PKR 3000 (USD 50) per month. This six-month livelihood-support programme is currently nearing completion, however, and an extension is needed until permanent arrangements can be made to accommodate these individuals and families.

To improve access in these remote areas, a roads-reconstruction programme has been approved by ERRA. Of the USD 467 million needed for the roads project, USD 296 million (including USD 100 million from the World Bank) is currently available through various donor commitments. The Bank notes that this leaves a financing gap of about USD 170 million, with poor or unreconstructed infrastructure having a drastic impact on the ability of housing reconstruction to continue on schedule.

The Bank estimates that 2.8 million people lost their homes in the earthquake, and over 570,000 more houses were damaged, of which 90 percent require complete reconstruction. A year on, close to 75 percent of those in need are in the process of receiving ERRA housing grants worth around USD 467 million. Under the plan, homeowners with demolished houses will receive a total of around USD 2500, while those with damaged houses will receive a third of that amount. Reconstruction has begun on just a quarter of these cases, however.

The groundwork has indeed been laid. Meanwhile, 450,000 people have signed the paperwork required to reconstruct their homes, and over 80,000 supervisors and homeowners have been trained in earthquake-safe construction designs. Adherence to designs approved by ERRA is being required for all rebuilding activities. But late or nonexistent disbursal of funds, as well as damaged infrastructure, has forced many to put off any rebuilding plans until spring – two winters after the quake.

Islamabad's response

Pervez Musharraf has been optimistic about the reconstruction and rehabilitation process. On 5 October he claimed, "Pakistan is now being referred to as a model for meeting tragedy of such epic proportion." He has also hit out at Oxfam for predicting that quake survivors would spend a second winter in makeshift homes, saying that only five percent of affected peoples were still living in tents. "These doomsday predictors have said that 1.8 million people would be in tents this winter," the president told ERRA's first annual conference. "It is unfortunate how anyone can say this. We challenge anyone to come and see how many people are living in tents." But while 'only' five percent continue living in tent camps, hundreds of thousands more are estimated to have returned to dilapidated houses that have not been rebuilt and cannot withstand the winter.

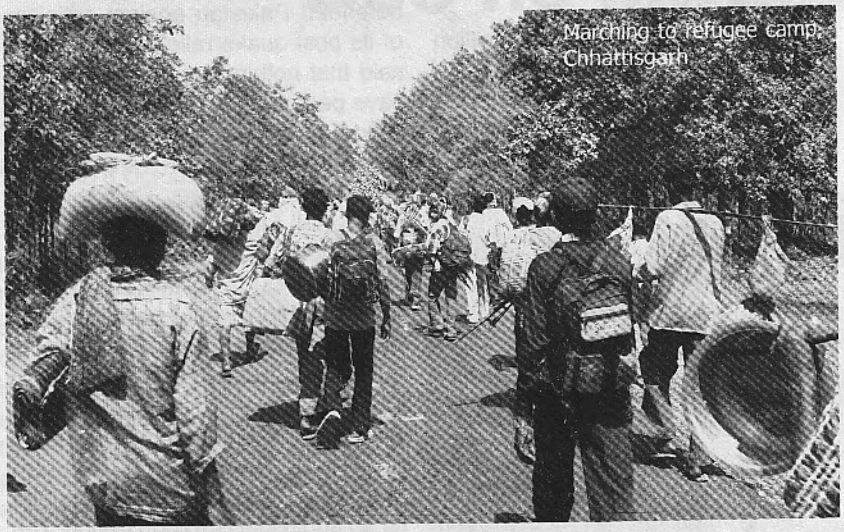
President Musharraf also defended Pakistan against criticism of its post-quake relief efforts: "They said that nothing was being done to save people, but nobody died due to lack of medical attention. Then there were predictions of famine, but nobody died of hunger. They said that people will freeze to death, but it did not happen."

The president promised that reconstruction would be completed within five years, with 600,000 homes built by the end of 2008 to accommodate 3.5 million people. That number was originally pegged at 400,000, leading President Musharraf to declare an urgent need for an additional USD 800 million. The president largely dismissed charges of corruption, saying that any dishonesty that may have happened took place at lower levels, and lauded the transparency of Pakistan's funding disbursement.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz concurs that the reconstruction and rehabilitation work is in full swing. He said recently that the government has distributed almost USD 743 million among affected people, and that Islamabad's main priority now is to shift all those who have been living in camps to permanent homes. Towards that end, the prime minister announced a donor conference to be held in Islamabad in October and November of this year. The last such conference, backed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on 19 November 2005, raised around USD 6.7 billion. Much of that came from the World Bank, Saudi Arabia, the US, the UAE and several European countries.

Quake survivors, meanwhile, are wondering where all of those riches have gone. Despite the government's optimistic assertions, survivors have been staging protests, including outside the Pakistani Parliament, accusing reconstruction officials of corruption. Many placards waved at these demonstrations are full of anger – *Stop taking bribes* and *Spend the winter with us* – while others simply beseech whosoever will listen, *Build our homes before snowfall.*

Ground-clearing with the Salwa Judum


Marching to refugee camp: Chhattisgarh

TAPAS PAL, APDR

Chhattisgarh is rich in minerals, but they are to be found under tribal lands. Hence the establishment's support for a paramilitary group that seeks to evacuate the tribal population from its ancestral lands.

BY **ILINA SEN**

On 12 September, a huge rally of indigenous people from more than 15 villages around Dhurli, in Dantewara District of Chhattisgarh, marched to the offices of the district administration in Dantewara town. They were there to protest the process of forced land acquisition that was to make way for a proposed steel plant owned by the massive Indian multinational Essar Group. Under the banner of the Adivasi Mahasabha, a mass-based indigenous-rights organisation, speakers at the rally alleged that a special *gram sabha* held three days earlier had taken place under inappropriate circumstances, and that over 6000 police personnel had coerced the people into giving their consent for the land grab.

Also present at the gram sabha had been the district magistrate and police superintendent, as well as Mahendra Karma, the leader of the notorious anti-Naxalite group Salwa Judum (Campaign for Peace). Individual villagers had reportedly been taken into a closed room under police escort, threatened with weapons, and made to sign papers that signified their consent to the land deal. The few villagers who resisted were taken into police custody and kept in the Bhansi police *thana* for over 24 hours, until the meeting was over.

For the past year, Dantewara District has been a troubled area. To a large extent, it has been the rise of the Salwa Judum that has divided society, split communities and led to conditions approaching those of civil war. Officially described as a spontaneous peoples' uprising against Maoist violence, the Salwa Judum has enjoyed the patronage of the state government, the state unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the leader of the opposition in the state assembly, sections of the Congress party, the state police and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

Currently active in the Bijapur and Bhairamgarh areas of Dantewara, the Salwa Judum has facilitated the creation of a cadre of vigilante youth who are trained and armed by the government, and euphemistically termed "special police officers". It has led to the forced displacement of thousands of people from 'sensitive' villages that are suspected of being sympathetic to the Maoists. The displaced are put in 21 relief camps, supposedly under police protection in the name of security. Conditions in these camps are subhuman. Each family is given a single tent in which to live, where they sleep on a rubber mat on the ground. There is no drinking water, nor lighting or health facility; food arrangements made by the police department broke down long ago. There have been several outbreaks of illness and diarrhoea, which have claimed several lives.

In the past year, the rise of the Salwa Judum and the subsequent misery to which the people of Dantewara have been subjected have received some attention among India's intelligentsia. The current phase of local struggle, however, including the fight against the takeover of lands, remains relatively unknown. Most importantly, the interconnections between the area's natural resources, the corporate takeover bid of these resources and the state-sponsored violence is little understood.

Exploitation, unionisation

Dantewara is the southernmost of the 16 districts of the six-year-old state of Chhattisgarh. Formerly part of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh is a state rich in minerals and forest products, and boasts fertile alluvial plains. Dantewara alone has huge reserves of iron ore, tin and (it is whispered) uranium. The presence of these minerals has fuelled the industrial zone that cuts through the state's belly, and has also given rich royalties to successive national governments through lucrative export deals. The most well known of these, between the Japanese government and the National Mineral Development Corporation, has for three decades sent iron ore from the Bailadila mines in southern Dantewara to Japan through the Vishakhapatnam port. A special railway straight from Bailadila to Vishakhapatnam was built in the late 1960s with Japanese funding.

Despite the small island of 'development' around the Bailadila mines, Dantewara District has remained both poor and isolated from the rest of the state and country. Communication infrastructure is meagre. Literacy levels are low, dipping to just 29 and 14 percent for rural men and women respectively. Out of its 1220 villages, 214 do not (even officially) have a school. In 1161 villages, there is no medical facility. For large sections of Dantewara's indigenous peoples, rain-fed agriculture and collection of forest produce are the only livelihood options. Disturbances in the ecosystem have subsequently created major crises for the region's Adivasis; as late as 2004, people here were starving to death.

The history of modern political mobilisation in Dantewara dates from the early 1970s, under the aegis of the Communist Party of India (CPI). From its beginnings in the trade unions of the Bailadila mines, the party spread to the rural areas, building up a movement around issues of control over mineral resources and employment in the mines for local people. The Bailadila trade-union movement faced brutal state repression in 1977-78. The Maoist movement has subsequently had a significant presence in Dantewara since the 1980s.

The earliest issues taken up by the Maoist-led Dandakaranya Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (Indigenous Peasant Labour Organisation) revolved around the corruption of government officials, and the exploitation and oppression of local Adivasis. As the Maoists gained strength and influence, they extended their sphere of activity. Along with building up a militant force, they established structures to give direction to civilian life in the areas they controlled. The village-level *sanghams* were their primary governance organisations, which were set up to replace the traditional structures of authority. Through them, an attempt was made at setting up what the Maoists termed 'people's rule'. Ordinary governance functions were conducted by the party leadership, as were development works, education and other welfare-type responsibilities.

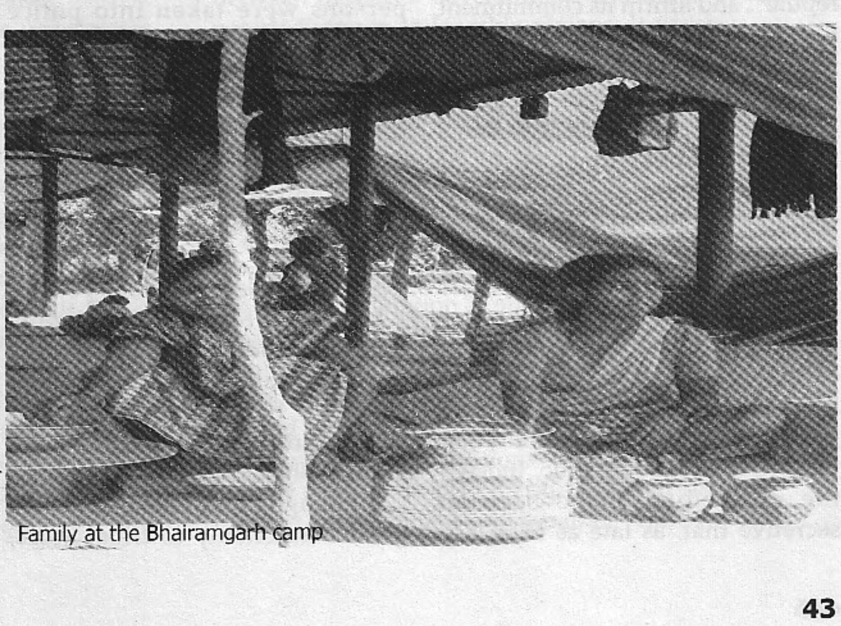
The Maoists continued to consolidate their hold on the area through the 1990s, although there were earlier state-sponsored attempts to control their influence. By 2000, when the state of Chhattisgarh was created, the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) (People's War) controlled large tracts of forest areas in the districts of Dantewara Bastar and Kanker, as well as adjoining forest tracts of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Orissa. This was an area as large as Bangladesh where, for all practical purposes, the writ of the Indian state did not run.

Multinational takeover

The creation of Chhattisgarh brought the official agenda of development and governance much closer to the communities of Dantewara than at anytime in the modern era. As in other new states, in Chhattisgarh there was an attempt in the official discourse to link the formation of the state with the people's demands for greater autonomy. The new state was launched with much fanfare on 1 November 2000. During the inaugural ceremonies, the state's first chief minister, Ajit Jogi, declared Chhattisgarh to be the richest state in the country, although inhabited by its poorest people.

If there was any hope that the development vision of the new state would be rooted in indigenous perspective, however, it was quickly belied. It soon became clear that the new state had been born in the context of globalisation, and that the political agenda behind the policy of power devolution was in fact the opening up of third-world resource bases for first-world markets. It is this understanding that has propelled the agenda during the following six years.

Today the state officially prides itself on its new industrialising face. One of the first institutions to be established was the Chhattisgarh Industrial Development Corporation, which immediately busied itself with negotiating development loans from the Asian Development Bank and other international financial



TAPAS PAL, APDR

Family at the Bhairamgarh camp

institutions. By 2005, new industrial growth centres were established in the districts of Mahasamund, Surguja, Kawardha, Dhamtari and Raigarh. The previous year, an industrial policy was formulated with the expressed objective of creating "an enabling environment for ensuring maximum value-addition to the abundant, locally available mineral and other forest-based resources." The policy also sought to attract direct investments, including those to "the most backward tribe-dominated areas", and to woo investors (including NRI and FDI) with a host of incentives and tariff concessions.

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Current developments in Dantewara need to be seen against this international backdrop, including massive new multinational-owned constructions, as well as the resistance of the local people and the urgency of the state government to re-establish its control over the district. In late 2005, two MOUs were signed by the state government with Essar and the Tata group, both of which assert the commitment of the state to industrial growth through the agency of "industrial houses of repute", and affirm its commitment to make available required land, mining leases, power and water.

The agreement with Tata also contains a confidentiality clause that precludes disclosure of information on the terms and conditions of the MOU to any third party, which is in violation of the Right to Information Act. This clause was the source of a major fracas in the state legislature in early 2006, when the government refused to accede to a demand from the Congress party opposition that the MOU be made public. Indeed, the proceedings have been so secretive that, as late as February 2006, a BJP MLA in whose constituency the Tata steel plant was proposed to be built publicly admitted that he had no knowledge of the plans for industrialisation in the area.

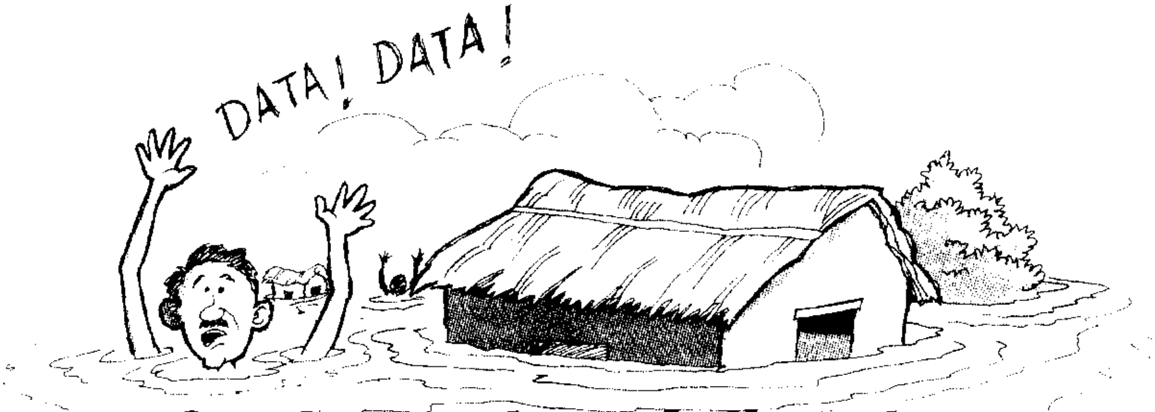
Land for Tata's steel plant and mining activities is proposed to be acquired around Lohandiguda and Bhansi; land for Essar's installations will be in Dhurli. In both areas, there is fierce opposition to the land acquisition, and over the past six months multiple demonstrations have been held in Lohandiguda, Jagdalpur, antewara and other proposed acquisition sites. These areas are largely inhabited by tribals, and covered under the 1996 Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA. There is an implicit assumption in this Act that the natural resources of a region belong to the local citizens, and for any exploitation of these resources the village community (in the form of the gram sabha) must give its consent.

Here lies the source of the agitations in early September. The 9 September gram sabha at Dhurli had been preceded by two others, on 30 August and 30 June. Four persons were taken into police custody in Dhurli preceding the second of these; human-rights groups campaigning for their release were informed that there was considerable "factional" tension in the village, and that the arrests had been made in order to ward off any untoward incident. Upon their release, all four persons – Hingaram Kunjam, Gundaram, Vijja Patel and Budhram – reported that they had been intensively "advised" not to oppose the Essar land acquisition at the subsequent gram sabha.

Although PESA intended to give greater autonomy to tribal areas, and was part of the declared effort of the Indian state to decentralise governance and give greater space to local self-administration, today the decentralisation agenda seems to be in conflict with the globalisation agenda. And judging from the examples of Bastar and Dantewara, it is clear which agenda will have the nod of the state establishment during such conflicts.

In 2001, the villagers of Nagarnar, a prosperous agricultural comm-unity close to Jagdalpur, refused to give up their lands for a proposed public-sector steel plant. District-level authorities subsequently proceeded to falsify the gram sabha registers, forcibly handing over land to the National Mineral Deve-lopment Corporation. When the village people protested, they were lathi-charged and arrested; the police released them only on the condition that they accept compensation cheques for the land acquired. That plant is still not functional today – the land acquired stands unproductive, with only a wall and a signboard proclaiming the existence of the Nagarnar Steel Plant.

The Indian state is compelled to gain control over the large forest tracts in Dantewara that have been wrested by the Maoists over recent decades for one reason: last acquisition for corporate control. The reclaiming of the resource-rich land, the militarisation of Dantewara, the forced displacement of communities, the attempt to find the 'final solution' to the Maoist problem, the need to discern industry-friendly 'friend' from oppositional 'foe' – all of these stem from a common source. The Salwa Judum,purportedly here to 'rescue' the people of Dantewara from Naxalite violence, is in reality the military arm of the India Shining brigade.



In the wake of disaster

With a new regional disaster-management centre now open, leaders need to recognise that this important cooperative initiative cannot be hobbled by the usual crossborder prejudice, particularly in the sharing of data.

THARUKA DISSANAIKE

At the 13th SAARC Summit, in Dhaka in November 2005, the heads-of-state of the seven regional countries decided that the time was ripe to incorporate into the end-of-session declaration a reference to 'disasters'. This was the first time that such a reference was included. Southasia had just been hit by two of the worst natural disasters in modern history – the December 2004 Tsunami and the October 2005 Kashmir earthquake – without counting the many 'everyday' disasters that seem to plague the region. The final version of the Dhaka Declaration subsequently urged individual governments to "put into place a permanent regional response mechanism dedicated to preparedness, emergency response and rehabilitation."

So the idea of a regional centre for disaster management was conceived, the mandate of which was to coordinate "activities in disaster management such as early warning, exchange of information, training and sharing experiences in emergency relief." The leaders also went a step further, calling for a comprehensive framework on early warning and disaster management for the entire region. Big words and bigger ambitions – especially in a region where institutions multiply like dragonflies in the summer, but ultimately have little effect on the everyday governance of the countries of Southasia. In terms of preparedness and risk reduction, however, the Dhaka Declaration missed the long-term objective of disaster management. These two essential elements, after all, would ensure that less people are exposed to hazards, and that those who are suffer less damage and displacement.

Fast-forward to Delhi, August 2006. At a South Asia Policy Dialogue meeting in the Indian capital, disaster-management experts again mulled over the idea of regional cooperation, and agreed that a coordinated early warning system would be a positive step, as it would force the sharing of the heavy burden of emergency response and expertise between the region's countries. The Delhi Declaration binds governments to consider the links between disasters, development and the situation of people living in vulnerable regions. It urges governments to prepare and protect people from natural hazards, rather than simply preparing for smooth emergency relief. According to a decision taken at the Delhi meet, the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (DMC) will come into being in October in New Delhi, parented by India's National Institute of Disaster Management.

The challenge ahead will be to save the DMC and the Delhi Declaration from becoming just another inoperative SAARC programme. Previous SAARC summits and meetings have, after all, already established a Meteorological Research Centre, a Coastal Zone Management Centre and other such fairly ineffective institutions. Both of these named centres could now play a critical role in regional disaster management and weather-related information-sharing. Up to this point, their effectiveness has been compromised by the persistent ills that plague such regional offspring – lack of funding, lack of profile, lack of coordination and the like. Whether the new institution will have the foresight and maturity to carry out the priority activities of the Delhi Declaration will depend on the political will of the member countries and their respective ministries.

Sabotaged development

An increasing body of evidence points to intrinsic links between recurrent natural hazards, poor environmental management, and development programmes that fail to succeed at poverty-reduction. In short, if disasters are ignored, there is a good chance that development initiatives will be stunted by the human and economic costs extracted by natural hazards. Communities that have to live with recurrent disasters – drought, earthquakes, floods, cyclones – will find it hard to crawl out of the poverty trap when their livelihoods are under regular threat.

Development projects can often make communities more prone to disasters, by altering river flows and drainage patterns, and through massive deforestation. At the same time, when natural hazards result in disaster, countries often find that much of their national income is suddenly drained on rehabilitation and relief for victims.

Understanding this context is all the more important for Southasia. With a quarter of the world's population, the region is home to nearly half the world's poor. Disasters here come in all forms. Persistent drought and, alternatively, monsoon flooding is a constant threat in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Cyclones wreak havoc upon coastal areas of India and Bangladesh. Earthquakes and landslides are everyday realities for communities living in Nepal and parts of India and Pakistan. The major impact of such disasters is upon the poor, whether they live in flood plains, coastal belts, arid lands or mountain slopes. Often their livelihood is based on subsistence farming or fishing, which is invariably destroyed in the disaster.

"Southasia has been a region of mega-disasters," said Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil at the inauguration of the South Asia Policy Dialogue, as explanation for why the region's countries are suddenly keen on disaster-management policy changes. In the past, SAARC countries have differed widely in the ways they have approached these issues, and mostly there has been a flurry of activity in the wake of disasters. Bangladesh, with its long history of natural disasters, in 2003 became the first country to establish a separate ministry for disaster management, and to incorporate disaster risk-reduction into its national environmental programmes and Millennium Development Goals-related pledges.

India has now enacted comprehensive legislation, and set up decentralised institutional structures at state and local levels to deal with disaster management. A good example of such a working structure is the manner in which the Tamil Nadu state government handled the post-Tsunami reconstruction in its coastal areas, setting its own policies and procedures for crisis management. After the massive earthquake that destroyed many communities in Kashmir last October, Islamabad is also looking at putting in place legal and institutional systems for better disaster management. In the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, several important actions were taken in Sri Lanka dealing with disaster management. Parliament passed a disaster management act, a ministry and a national centre were created, and a Roadmap for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management was adopted.

Despite these positive moves elsewhere in the neighbourhood, however, reactive policies still dominate in Nepal, where the state remains sluggish on disaster management initiatives, and on installing systems for preparedness. Bhutan and the Maldives, meanwhile, lag still farther behind, and are considered the most neglected countries regarding disaster policy and relevant information-gathering.

Unless and until disaster planning is incorporated into the general development plans and poverty-reduction strategies in all of these countries, there is little hope to emerge from the recurrent cycle of disaster-driven poverty. But even where policies are relatively strong and commitment is apparent – Bangladesh, for instance – there is a mismatch in implementation. The problem with putting policy to practice lies in the nature of governance in Southasian countries – top-down approaches and lacks of transparency, accountability and popular participation.

Climate of uncertainty

Climate change today is a reality. In few places is this as apparent as in Southasia, where the transformation of climate has overturned the familiar patterns of weather into unpredictable and erratic seasons. Farmers who used to swear by monsoon seasons today shake their heads in bewilderment as their crops fail due to either too much rain or outright drought. In 2005, a large part of North India suffered unusually low winter temperatures, killing more than 100. A mere six months later, a heat wave killed almost 330 in the same region. 500 were killed in wind storms in Afghanistan, and another 900 in India and Pakistan due to unusually heavy snowfall, avalanches and rain in the Kashmir region. The change in global temperature and climate has not been concretely linked to an increase in disaster incidence, but scientists the world over agree that the ferocity and frequency of disasters such as cyclones, hurricanes and earthquakes have increased.

While disasters may not respect political boundaries, there is much that Southasian governments can do to create regional information-sharing for better disaster-readiness. Individual countries, especially the economically weaker ones, can gain significantly with better regional cooperation. Take, for instance, rainfall data related to the flows of the Brahmaputra, Ganga and Meghna rivers, which often cause dire flooding in Bangladesh. Studies have shown that rainfall data from the upper catchments of India and Bhutan can help to measure river flows downstream, allowing experts to predict floods at least a month in advance. But to date, such simple information as rainfall data is not accessible between regional institutions.

There have been positive examples of cooperation, as well. Sri Lanka has been able to borrow heavily from the reconstruction experience of both Gujarat after the 2001 earthquake, and Tamil Nadu's disaster-resistant housing designs following the Tsunami. But sharing information alone is not adequate, if the inherent lessons are not absorbed and learned. Even after the experience of the Tsunami, Sri Lanka was caught unaware when recent conflict in the northern and eastern parts of the country again pushed tens of thousands from their homes. One relief worker was recently heard commenting, "We have yet to learn to even set up proper camps for displaced people."

The SAARC Disaster Management Centre now has the opportunity of bridging some of these gaps – building connections between countries that today carry out little in the name of regional cooperation, and jealously guard their own turf. The Delhi Declaration sets out clear priority areas for regional action, which can readily form the core of the centre's work. Early warning mechanisms would be a crucial starting point, beginning with the sharing of weather and river-flow information throughout the Subcontinent. Another of the new centre's functions will be to guide countries towards incorporating disaster preparedness into their development planning, as India has promised to do in their 11th five-year plan, currently under formulation.

With the intentions, priorities and initial infrastructure now in place, the challenge for the centre – and its participating governments – will be in rising above the foggy politics that often cloud the vision of Southasian leaders, particularly in terms of crossborder cooperation. With the powerful rhetoric of the inauguration in mind, a path now needs to be set for a productive regional programme, one that will benefit both the region's powerful and weaker countries.

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Poor America

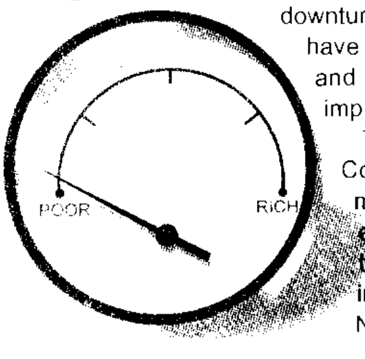
On the eve of important elections, the United States is hurting more than anyone lets on. How will this affect the rest of the world?

JOHN SAMUEL

The idea of the American dream – that vague but iridescent image of the US as a cultural melting pot of opportunity and freedom – has long been an enviable and profitable one. Over the past two centuries, the American boom was largely driven by this image, which drew ambitious and talented people from across the globe, including Southasia. What allowed the US to emerge as the global soft-powerhouse, at the forefront of ideas, markets, education, science, technology and communication, however, is currently at risk of fading away.

The rise of neoconservative politics and an overwhelming dependence on unilateral military might has steadily undermined the American dream and its concomitant multiculturalism, not to mention the country's economy and international goodwill. US foreign policy is quickly losing its ability to create consensus or peace, and is increasingly defined by its capacity to create confrontation, violence and war. If the US were to lose its global 'brain gain' appeal, it would lead to unexpected economic consequences. Given that the US remains one of the most significant global trading partners – including for India and China – the ramifications of such a downturn would have worldwide and long-term implications.

The US Congressional midterm elections taking place in early November may indicate the shape of things to come. This is particularly so at a time when, as the 2008 presidential campaign is already gearing up, the ruling Republican party is experiencing drastically low popularity numbers. This may be due to stalled foreign policy or the incontrovertible domestic economic slowdown.



ROSHAN TAMANG

In an effort to shore up support, George W Bush recently boasted that "the economy is powerful, productive and prosperous". The reality, however, is far from soothing. With an estimated growth of 3.5 percent this year, unemployment at just 4.6 percent and fat profits all around, the economy certainly seems robust. But the US trade deficit, both in absolute size and as a percentage of GDP, is unprecedented. It reached USD 800 billion in 2005 – almost seven percent of GDP – and has accumulated USD 4.5 trillion since 1990. Scrap metal and waste paper are now two of the US's biggest export items. Former Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker puts the chances of a major financial crisis in the US within four years at 75 percent.

Running on empty

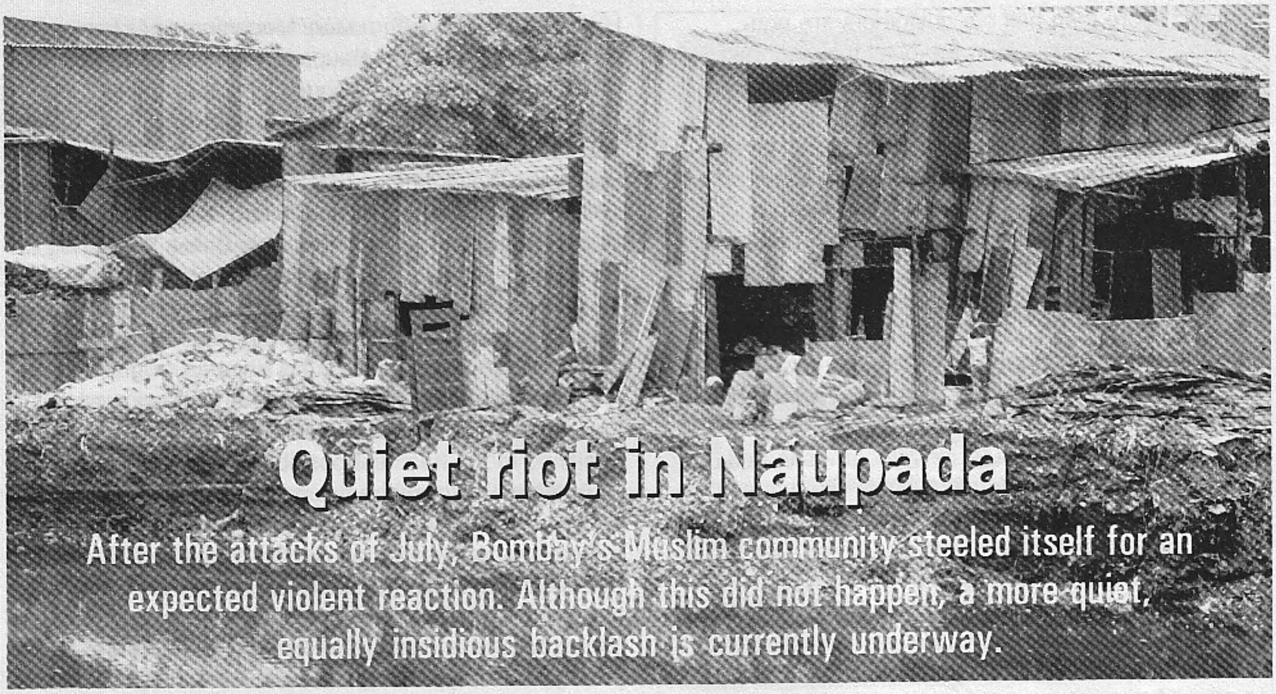
At the moment, the US remains the largest buyer in the global economy. But it is currently consuming about USD 800 billion more than it is producing, and households spend around USD 500 billion more than they earn. The country also suffers from negative savings and a low rate of investment; indeed, a substantial amount of the savings and investments of the global economy has now shifted to Asia. As a result, the US on a daily basis borrows around USD 3 billion from the rest of the world, largely by selling US treasury bonds. It is this buying and borrowing that is keeping the country's economy apparently robust, but it is a process that is far from sustainable.

There is also a large chunk of US dollars remaining outside the US. While Japan currently has around USD 1 trillion in American currency, China and Saudi Arabia are not far behind. To manage its increasing debt, there is the possibility that the US will be forced to trigger a devaluation of the dollar, along with raising interest rates in the US. Each of these could have a drastic impact on the global economy.

None of this means that Americans themselves have been insulated from the growing problems. The war in Iraq and the larger 'war on terror' have sapped funding for social-sector expenditure, including for education and health care. When Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans in August 2005, the myth of the American dream was exposed for all to see. The rising tide of economic growth had obviously failed to lift the boats of the poor. An estimated 37 million of the country's 300 million people are poor in the US, many of them people of colour; at 12.7 percent, that poverty rate is the highest in the developed world.

Inequality, too, is on the rise. The US's Gini index, a measure of income inequality, is the highest in the developed world. An American chief executive now earns 300 times the average wage, tenfold more than in 1970. Other indicators of economic vulnerability include the proportion of people working, and the stagnation of middle-class income levels. Additional oil price hikes could easily exacerbate the economy's condition.

The current state of affairs has not been lost on the American psyche. A recent survey found that more than 60 percent of US citizens are sceptical of free trade. Another survey found that nine out of ten worry about their jobs going overseas. The American dream has indeed arrived at the crossroads.



Quiet riot in Naupada

After the attacks of July, Bombay's Muslim community steeled itself for an expected violent reaction. Although this did not happen, a more quiet, equally insidious backlash is currently underway.

BY **SONIA FALEIRO**

On 11 July 2006, seven bomb blasts erupted across Bombay's suburban railway, the city's lifeline, killing 200 people. The blasts reminded the world of India's continuing battle with Islamic militancy. A look at the events of subsequent months, however, highlights the impact the blasts have had on the city's Muslim population.

The second detonation on 11 July took place on a track overlooking the predominantly Muslim neighbourhood of Naupada, in Bandra. This explosion ripped the train compartment open in a shower of blood and limbs. Shocked residents rushed to the scene to help, carrying the dead and injured from the wreckage. People tore the clothing off of their own backs, grabbed their shawls, their *lungis* and the covers from their beds as they scrambled to stem the flow of blood. Over the following weeks, having zeroed in on Islamic militant group Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) as its main suspect, police picked up 70 men from Naupada. Resident Liyakat Sheikh says wryly, "One moment we were saving lives; the next we were accused of taking life."

In the aftermath of the blasts, Bombay's Muslims feared a violent reprisal from the majority community, one that would mirror the riots that took place in the city from December 1992 through January 1993. That violence followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists. The riots killed over 1000 people, and demarcated Bombay's neighbourhoods and residents on religious lines. Just a few months later, on 12 March 1993, 15 serial explosions, masterminded by members of the underworld and Islamic militant groups, struck the city's most famous landmarks, including the Bombay Stock Exchange, killing 257 people. The blasts were believed to be payback for the demolition.

It is not surprising, then, that post-July, Bombay's Muslim community was tense and on guard. But when the reprisal came, it was not violent – at least not physically so. There have been no riots, no killings. But the Muslim community is instead being subtly reminded that they practice the same religion as the members of Lashkar-e-Toiba. In a sophisticated backlash, they are being made to pay for the sins of LeT through loss of income, police and public harassment, and a curdling of employment opportunities. Says Ram Puniyani of the group EKTA, which works for communal harmony: "The blasts confirmed for many the popular psychology that to be a Muslim is to be a terrorist."

Passive-aggressive polarisation

While stray incidents of violence have been reported since mid-July, community leaders and police have worked to prevent public flare-ups. Yasmin Ali Shaikh of the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust says, "We put up signboards in sensitive neighbourhoods, saying *Do not get provoked*. We immediately organised dialogue between the two communities."

Many of the city's Muslims are restricted to Muslim-majority areas like Naupada and Nagpada, where they work as daily wage labourers or own small businesses. The loss of even a single day's work can have a significant impact. Yunus Khan, a newspaper vendor in Naupada, says, "Our houses aren't stocked with rations. If we don't go to work one day, we don't eat the next." Mohammed Taj Qureishi, a tailor in central Bombay's Nagpada, has seen his earnings plummet by 50 percent. "More than half our customers are non-Muslim," he explains. "After the blast they stopped entering Muslim neighbourhoods. Mothers tell their daughters 'There are other tailors.'"

Maulana Sayyed Akhtar, of the Madarsa Minara Masjid on bustling Mohammed Ali Road, sums up the situation: "When people are afraid they migrate, leaving behind their businesses, however profitable." He adds, "Ultimately, that impacts taxes and the government's revenue." Akhtar says that after the 1992-93 riots, two lakh Muslims – at the time 17 percent of the city's population – left their jobs and schools, and returned to their villages. "Mobs armed with lists of addresses identifying Muslim residences systematically went through neighbourhoods and attacked their victims. We didn't know where other Muslims lived, but they knew every detail. So, of course, people fled. Tailors, bakers, street-side vendors – all gone."

This July, the city returned to work the day after the blasts, and the immediate economic repercussions were limited. But a fear of – and a separation from – the Muslim community blossomed. Some Hindu housing societies banned Muslim tenants. There have been two reported incidents of Muslim men being beaten up and thrown out of moving trains. The jeers of *Go back to Pakistan!* are more frequent. On the broken walls that surround one impoverished Muslim neighbourhood, someone has plastered new posters exclaiming in Hindi: *This is a Hindu nation!* Mohammed Nizwan, a garment exporter from Naupada, can only laugh bitterly: "I don't even have a passport!"

Some Muslims, like Nizwan, blame the police for not stemming the current spurt in anti-Muslim propaganda. He recalls the words of a police inspector during the 1992-93 riots: "'When I'm in uniform, I'm a policeman. When I'm in plainclothes I'm a Shiv Sainik,'" referring to the Hindu nationalist political party famous for its anti-Muslim rhetoric. Others, like Akram Qureishi, find comfort in publicly condemning the terror groups that perpetrate such acts. "Terrorists have no religion but the religion of bloodshed," he says, to encouraging nods from his group of young friends. "They should be punished in the harshest possible way."

Anti-Muslim reactions are not new to the community. Activist Khatoon A G Shaikh, of the Mahila Mandal Federation, works with the Muslim women of Naupada. She says one of her greatest struggles is ensuring that the women receive their voter's identity cards on time. "Being Muslim, women, and illiterate, they are the last priority," she says. "They have no vote in who will represent them in the government. They are silenced at every step." Muslim men in the area complain of interminable delays vis-à-vis travel documents and other paperwork. "Our name gives us away," Akram Qureishi sighs. Local tailor Farhan Sheikh says that, during festivals, "Policemen enter the neighbourhood and prevent us from the ritual of slaughtering goats. Do

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we enter Hindu neighbourhoods and prevent families from celebrating Diwali?"

Fear psychosis

Still, many Muslims who lived through the dark days of the 1992-93 riots are comforted by Bombay's response to the 2006 blasts. "One thing the communities share is our distrust of politicians," says Akram Qureishi. "There is the understanding that they manipulate the public for their own benefit. The other factor responsible for this relatively calm response is the fact that we've gotten used to bomb blasts. It's happened before. And sitting at home from work, or harassing other people, is not going to put food on anyone's plate, whether that person is Muslim or Hindu."

Nevertheless, suspicion of the Muslim community now has a sharper edge. One reason is that the net is wider now; the blast suspects are not uneducated youth but include a businessman, a computer engineer and a commerce graduate. Muslim leaders fear this will impact the employment opportunities of educated youth, exacerbating the economic downslide of the community. "Muslims are feeling vulnerable. They are suffering heightened fear psychosis. Over the years this will increase the sense of alienation of young Muslims from the mainstream," says Puniyani.

Feroze Ashraf tutors 400 Muslim postgraduate students every day from suburban Bombay's Jogeshwari and Juhu slums. Every one of them was present for class the day after the bombings. Ashraf credits this surprising attendance record, among other things, to the realisation that, now more than ever, there is a need for Muslim youth to secure their future. "Every time members of our community are involved in a terror attack it impedes our efforts to take our children forward," he sighs. "It's just another problem for us."

In Bombay 2006, young Muslim men with or without criminal records are routinely picked up for questioning – during religious festivals, even when terror attacks have occurred elsewhere in the country. "They stop boys without explaining why and ask them their names, where they're going, where they're from, what their father does," says Yasmin Ali Shaikh. "They search their bags, abuse them in the vilest language. Even if a boy isn't a criminal, if he's repeatedly arrested he will come into contact with criminals and become one. The police made criminals of many young boys after the riots of 1992-93."

This summer, Bombay did not erupt into communal riots, perhaps indicating that the city has learned from its past. But hostility is finding other means of release, manifesting itself in insidious ways that, too, damage the Muslim community's well being. Paranoia, prejudice and stereotypes have gained muscle. And it is in this way that terror groups, who thrive on carnage, ensure that the negative impact of their actions continues long after their victims have been carried away, and the tears shed for them have dried up. ▲

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Vacancy Code : 2006/GLO/AFG/14
Post Title : Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Technical Advisor
Post Level : A3*
Project : Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan
Duty Station : Kabul, Afghanistan
Duration : 6 months, renewable
Closing Date : 9 November 2006

The Mine Action Programme in Afghanistan (MAPA) is operating under the responsibility of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) and is executed by UNOPS. The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan (MAPA) includes the Mine Action Centre (MACA), five Area Mine Action Centres (AMAC), with two sub-offices and up to 16 NGOs working as implementing partners. The MACA plans, manages and oversees all mine action activities for Afghanistan. It provides technical support and ensures the proper integration of mine action into wider humanitarian assistance programmes; the MACA also supports the development of national institutions. The responsibility for national technical management and development of EOD operations falls with Operations Department, MACA.

Duties and Responsibilities
The Technical Advisor for EOD will be responsible for the management of Explosive Ordnance Disposal as part of mine action activities for the MACA. He/she will report to the Chief of Operations. The Technical Advisor for EOD's main focus will be assisting in the implementation of the MACA EOD management plan to ensure that standards are met. The EOD Officer shall be fully familiar with the International Mine Action Standards.

Required Competencies & Knowledge
Leadership - Proven supervisory ability and/or technical leadership. Ability to maintain effective working relations both as a team member and team leader.
Planning & Organizing - Ability to organize, plan and implement work assignments, juggle competing demands and work under pressure of frequent and tight deadlines.
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Technological Awareness - Solid computer skills, including proficiency in word processing and databases.
Professionalism - Sound knowledge of, and exposure to, a range of mine action issues, including the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS).

Other Requirements
Education - First level university degree in the field of social science, management, engineering or related field or equivalent military qualifications such as junior staff college or strong demonstrated experience in the field of Explosive Ordnance Disposal.
Work Experience - At least of 5 years of progressively responsible experience in explosive ordnance disposal operations (military and/or civilian) of which 3 year should have been in mine action related activities.
Languages - For the post advertised fluency in written and oral English is required. Knowledge of a second official UN language is an advantage.
Other Skills - Understanding of UN mine action programmes, policies, and coordination mechanisms desirable. Training in landmine and unexploded ordnance disposal techniques, as well as the application of various clearance technologies is desirable. In depth knowledge of International Mine Action Standards is required.

Submission of Applications
Qualified candidates may submit their application, including a letter of interest, complete Curriculum Vitae and an updated United Nations Personal History Form (P.11), to mauiobs@unops.orq. Kindly indicate the vacancy number and the post title when applying (in the subject line by e-mail).

Additional Considerations
Applications received after the closing date will not be considered.
Only those candidates that are short-listed for interviews will be notified.
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UPIASI

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3. Applicants must be 45 years old or younger at the time of the application deadline. However, those up to 50 years old proposing to do research in the field of Humanities may be given special consideration.
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Waiting for justice

Recent legal movement on long-pending, high-profile court cases may bring some relief to victims, but it also highlights the dysfunctional, nearly inhumane nature of the Indian judicial system – particularly in cases of state complicity.

BY **SUBHASH GATADE**

Hashimpura youths, 1987

MILLI GAZETTE

After 13 years, Bombay courts in September finally began to return verdicts on the 1993 bomb blasts in that city that had left 257 dead and 713 injured. The findings included the convictions of five Bombay policemen. Over the years, nearly 700 witnesses had been called and 35,000 pages of evidence racked up. But the number that continues to be discussed with the most awe – and anger – is '13', as in *13 long years*. Other cases in India suffer for being less sensational, and are forced to wait even longer for justice – if it comes at all.

According to an *India Today* article from 2003, "Between 1954 and 1996, almost 16,000 people lost their lives in 21,000 incidents of rioting, while over one lakh were injured. Only a handful have been held accountable." One such 'incident' was the 1987 massacre of 42 Muslims by a group of PAC (Provincial Armed Constabulary) personnel at Hashimpura in Uttar Pradesh. It has taken 19 years to even file a chargesheet for the case, which finally took place mid-July of this year. The following month, the Supreme Court succeeded in having the case transferred to Delhi – four years after it had first ordered the action. But for the perseverance exhibited by a few committed activists, the tragedy at Hashimpura would have joined the growing pile of largely forgotten massacres in the history of post-Independence India.

Ujma, who lives in Hashimpura, Meerut, never celebrates her birthday. She was born 19 years ago, and little time goes by without either her grandmother or mother recalling that terrible day. On the day of her birth, 22 May 1987, a communal conflagration suddenly ignited in their city. The Congress party was in power then, both in the state and at the Centre. The riots were fallout from the decision by Rajiv Gandhi's government to open the gates of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya to allow Hindus to worship at a shrine there. After both police and PAC personnel were posted at the mosque, a curfew was imposed to contain the escalating unrest in Meerut.

On that late May evening, hours before Ujma was born, her father, a daily-wage labourer, was at home when a PAC team stormed in and demanded he come with them. Days later, his body would return, riddled with bullets. Under circumstances similar to that of Ujma's father, 41 other Hashimpura residents, from ages 14 to 70, lost their lives that night. All of them were shot at point-blank range, and their bodies subsequently dumped in a nearby canal. No PAC member allegedly implicated in the incident has yet been forced to leave his job.

Sluggish investigations

A 1994 report by the Central Bureau of Investigation shed more light on what happened in Meerut on that summer night. At around eight in the evening, 40 to 42 alleged rioters were loaded into a PAC truck, ostensibly to be taken to the police station. Instead, the platoon's commander reportedly drove them to a canal of the Ganga in Ghaziabad, where they were "unceremoniously" shot down.

Commenting on the massacre, Vibhuti Narain Rai, then-superintendent of police in Ghaziabad, wrote in a later study critical of the police actions: "Most of the police personnel posted in Meerut saw the riots as a result of Muslim 'mischief', while ignoring the role of Hindutva groups in fanning them. They claimed that Meerut had become a 'mini-Pakistan' because of 'Muslim intransigence', and that it was necessary to teach the community a lesson."

Reports by senior journalists such as Nikhil Chakravarty and Kuldip Nayar, and organisations including the People's Union for Civil Liberties and the People's Union for Democratic Rights, revealed that the incident was largely a case of cold-blooded murder on the part of the PAC personnel. Chakravarty compared the event with "Nazi pogroms against the Jews, to strike terror and nothing but terror in a whole minority community". A report filed by Amnesty International in the immediate aftermath of the massacre stated that, "There is evidence to suggest that members of the PAC have been responsible for dozens of extra-judicial killings and disappearances".

The state government of Uttar Pradesh also asked the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) to look into the incident. This investigation was only completed in 1993, and its report did not come out until the following year. Even after this delay, there was massive procrastination in implementing the report's recommendations, with orders issued only in 1995 and 1997. Even then, the state government recommended action against only 19 policemen, even though the CID report had recommended action against 66. Due to the fact that most of the accused were public servants, the state government's sanction was needed in order to prosecute them. Even the 19 individuals named in the report did not comply with the court's summons – despite six bailable and 17 non-bailable warrants issued between January 1997 and April 2000. Although all of the accused were in active service when the court issued the summons, the government declared them 'absconders'.

According to Iqbal A Ansari, an Aligarh lawyer and founding member of the Minority Council, an organisation that has long worked for justice for the Hashimpura victims: "The UP government says that the INR 40,000 it paid for each of those killed is enough. It needs to be kept in mind that Hashimpura's is a case of custodial killings by PAC, not that of killings during riots because of failure of governance, as was the case in 1984 in Delhi, for which the Delhi High Court awarded compensation of INR two lakhs [for each person killed]."

A close look at the trajectory of the case exposes connivance between the state and police machinery in denying justice to the victims. This delay in justice, it should be noted, cannot be pinned on any one political group – the case has dragged on for nearly two decades due to the apathetic attitudes of several mainstream political formations.

If the Supreme Court had not intervened in the Hashimpura case, the legal process would have been postponed still further. But in 2002, following complaints that the accused were "exerting pressure and influence" to stall the proceedings in Ghaziabad, an appeal to the Supreme Court succeeded in getting the case transferred to New Delhi. The state government subsequently delayed appointing a special public prosecutor, and the framing of charges eventually took four years, until this past July. A three-judge bench headed by then-Chief Justice A S Anand lamented, while hearing a petition on the Meerut case: "We are at a loss to understand why the state has been taking this matter so casually, and why we were not informed over all these years of the correct position," referring to the inordinate delay in appointing a prosecutor and framing the charges.

'84, '87, '89, '92-'93, '02...

Hashimpura is not an aberration in post-Independence India. Indeed, it is one in a line of furious riots that have taken place in the Subcontinent during the past half-century, as well as their unjust aftermaths. The pattern playing out in Hashimpura has been repeated time and again: people lose their family members and friends to terrible violence, and spend much of their remaining years battling for justice. The guilty, meanwhile, remain free years and even decades after the atrocities.

The events of 1984 can be seen as a watershed in the history of communal violence in India, and the whole of Southasia in the post-Independence era. While the region had previously experienced riots, the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on 31 October of that year, followed by

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the organised massacre of Sikhs with the collusion of the Congress party, ushered the region into an era dotted all too frequently with pogroms and genocidal assaults – many of which enjoyed the active connivance of the state.

Of what took place in 1984, Supreme Court lawyer H S Phoolka wrote in 2004: "4000 innocent citizens belonging to the Sikh community were massacred in Delhi, and another 3000 were massacred in other parts of India. The government recorded a figure of 2733 deaths for Delhi alone ... Even after the horrendous task of pursuing the cases for 20 long years, only nine murder cases have resulted in conviction, which is not even one percent of the official figure of killings." None among the senior politicians or senior police officers of the time were included in the list of accused.

The scale of the 1989 riots in Bhagalpur District in Bihar dwarfed any previous riot in that state. Indeed, a 1990 report prepared by the People's Union for Democratic Rights called the violence "the largest Hindu-Muslim riot since 1947". The first round of rioting went intermittently from the third week of October until early December. More than three months later, in March 1990, rioting again erupted in the town. During the course of the riots, over 2000 people lost their lives, a majority of whom were Muslim; 11,500 houses were also torched, and nearly 50,000 people displaced. In Chanderi village, women and children under the protection of the local police were slaughtered by a mob. Despite the ferocity of the Bhagalpur riots, the subsequent delivery of justice was no different from that in many other cases. Of the 864 cases filed by the police in Bhagalpur, 535 were closed, and most of the accused were acquitted for lack of evidence.

The run-up to the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 witnessed rioting throughout India, which only increased in the demolition's aftermath. Although thousands of people died in the tumult, there have been almost no significant convictions to date. Even though the Liberhans Commission, appointed by the then-Congress government of P V Narasimha Rao to look into the causes of the demolition and riots, has yet to submit a report, there is reason to believe that little will change after it does so. Its fate will undoubtedly be similar to the report of the Srikrishna Commission, which investigated the 1992-93 Bombay riots, and whose recommendations are by now largely forgotten.

Reports by various human-rights groups, and the various recommendations and strictures passed by the Supreme Court and the National Human Rights Commission, have castigated Hindutva organisations for their roles in the Gujarat genocide of 2002. The names of scores of activists of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal, including members of the ruling BJP, found mention in the numerous First Information Reports filed by victims. But subversion of investigations and justice for the surviving victims is continuing with impunity. Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who allegedly spearheaded this organised attack on minorities, is still holding the reins of power *(See Himal Oct 2006, "Gujarat as another country").*

Teesta Setalvad and Javed Anand, leading anti-communal activists and editors of the Bombay-based *Communalism Combat*, wrote in an editorial in late 2004:

> For the perpetrators of a pogrom or genocidal killing, impunity from prosecution and punishment appears to be guaranteed in advance. Armed with this impunity, the mass murderers have mastered techniques of subversion of investigation. And the destruction of evidence is now 'in-built' into the very modes of killing adopted. This was clearly visible in Gujarat, where a chemical powder was extensively used while burning people so that no trace of the victims remained and which made it all the more difficult to count the dead.

In a newspaper article entitled "1984 in the Life of a Nation", also printed in late 2004, Supreme Court lawyer Indira Jaisingh noted:

> Our legal system has failed to answer the question: What is the constitutional and personal responsibility of the head of state for mass killings ... Apart from holding all those who committed the acts of killing liable, we also have to hold liable people in positions of power, who not only failed to prevent the killings, but encouraged by hate speech, justified it as an understandable response.

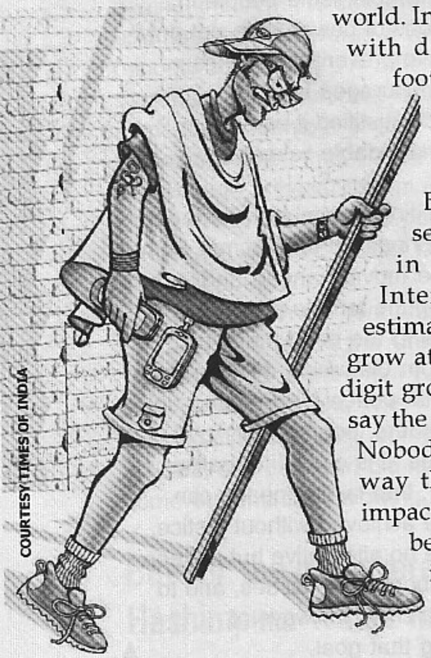
Revisiting communal carnage always brings up a dilemma. Some advocate moving ahead and forgetting the terrible past, questioning the good that would come from disturbing delicate inter-communal peace by dredging up past murders, pogroms or genocides. It is crucial to realise, however, that lasting peace can never be achieved without justice. We have no alternative but to keep talking about these issues, and to keep searching for ways of achieving that goal.

SOUTHASIASPHERE C K Lal

Gandhi and ten percent growth

Killers have vanished in the crowd
And in search of her disappeared son
The old women slices partially rotten guavas
Placing unspoilt portions in the bowl
– *Ashok Vajpai in* Jeene Ke Liye

The largest electorate in the world debunked the 'India Shining' campaign with the derision it deserved, but its hangover remains. The mood among the rich in the world's 12th richest country is still upbeat. The expanding consumer base of 250 million (Pawan Varma, the Page Three chronicler of the middle class, thinks it has already reached the half-billion mark) makes marketers around the globe salivate. The prospect looks even better when they see that colas with dangerous levels of pesticide can freely be sold, despite overwhelming evidence that the liquid in question is a silent killer. Savvy salesmen project superlatives from their laptops to lure coverts to free-market fundamentalism. Comparisons are drawn between an elephant and a dragon to show that the pachyderm may be slow to begin, but it is steady and reliable, hence a better long-term bet.



COURTESY: TIMES OF INDIA

Japan, South Korea and China galloped past the Subcontinent in terms of exporting to the world. India is supposed to be trotting along with domestic consumption in a sure-footed way. The annual growth rate of the country's gross domestic product has averaged over 8 percent for the last three years. Based on 10 percent growth in services and nearly 9 percent growth in manufacturing output, the International Monetary Fund has estimated that the Indian economy will grow at 8.3 percent. From there to double-digit growth is not such a long journey. So say the soothsayers of the market economy. Nobody seems to be bothered about the way this rate is being achieved, or the impact it will have on a country that has begun to import food for the first time in decades.

The fact that over tens of thousands of Indian farmers have committed suicide in recent years is seldom mentioned in the circle of go-getters. But can a country sustain its unity while 600 million farmers struggle for survival and 250 million of their compatriots shop till they drop in the swanky malls that have sprouted in the metropolises? The annual income of the richest Indian is reported to be nine million times that of the poorest. Over 25 million members of the comfortable class are morbidly obese, in a country where half the population suffers from chronic malnutrition. *Whether India becomes* a 'developed nation' in 20 years will depend not upon how much foreign investment it attracts or how well it expands its physical infrastructure, but upon the attention its leaders pay to the depth of animosity that will develop between islands of prosperity and the sea of poverty. It is relatively easy to make growth forecasts. The tsunami of backlash builds unnoticed and hits unexpectedly.

In the coming decades, for better or worse, it is the stability (or otherwise) of Indian society that will determine the fate of all of Southasia. The Begums of Dhaka, courtiers of Thimphu, Bahuns of Kathmandu, generals of Islamabad, schemers of Colombo, and powerbrokers of Kabul may foam and froth at the regional hegemon, but the policies of New Delhi will have more significant repercussions for their economies than will their own domestic strategies. In the open market, after all, the biggest producer and buyer set all the rules. That's the way markets operate.

Initial trends, however, are alarming. Gross inequalities of Indian society are getting grosser. The eruption of mutinies, the rise of saviours on horseback or the spread of gunpoint legitimacy can only be countered if the runaway economic growth is matched by prudent steps for social justice. Sadly, globalising Indians marked the centenary celebrations of the Mahatma's Satyagrah with 'Gandhigiri', a concept that matches the naivety of trickle-down theory. It tickles the imagination, but diverts rather than draws attention to the real issue: social problems cannot be addressed by economic tinkering. Political action is needed to tackle the problem of relative poverty and the social inequality it breeds.

The third way

Throughout human history, the twins of capitalism and imperialism have prospered by exploiting the excluded. Romans had their serfs. Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Italians, French, Germans, Dutch and English had their overseas possessions. Russians and Chinese had internal colonies to plunder. The Soviet Union was kept afloat by the produce of Eastern Europe and the energy reserves of Central Asia. Since the Great War, Americans have had the world to do with as they please. Japan, the Johnny-come-lately of the affluent world, and the aspiring upstarts of Singapore and Korea, are riding on the back of the American Empire. Their independent economic strength has yet to be tested. But no matter how big the empire, its carrying capacity will be limited. Even if it wanted to, the US cannot let India become the next Japan.

The alternatives proposed for capitalism – Marxism, Leninism, Maoism – are hardly alternatives. None of the various forms of communism question the fundamental premise of capitalism that supply and demand are interdependent. Capitalists believe that the market determines the relationship between supply and demand. Communists are convinced that the state is a better moderator of price fluctuation induced by the supply-demand gap. Any of these two theses would have worked had there been a natural limit to human want. As Gandhi repeatedly said, the earth has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for anyone's greed.

Communism has conclusively failed. Despite Fidel Castro and Brother Number One looking pensively towards Hugo Chavez, the spread of state-centric socialism does not appear to be imminent. Even though socialism is much more humane than capitalism or communism, it did not work because it raised the aspirations of populations higher than what could justifiably have been met. Meanwhile, the collapse of capitalism may not be as spectacular, but the Third Way promised by Tony Blair has proved to be a non-starter.

Capitalism with a humane face is as oxymoronic as vegetarian hunting-animals; at best, some of them are exceptions. No rule can be derived from it for replication. But this does not mean that human civilisation is destined to die out. There is a third way – the way of Gandhi. The poor, the outcaste, the untouchable, the child, the infirm, the disabled and all other traditionally marginalised groups are meant to live at the mercy of the mainstream in capitalism and communism alike. Only in the *Swaraj* of Gandhi can they live a dignified life like everyone else. But the mainstream will not let its privileges lapse so easily. So the Southasian society awaits the coming anarchy.

Since the free-market model is city-centric, rural India has begun to invade its urban centres. Those who get to live in slums are relatively lucky – a large number of immigrants to the town spend their lives on the pavement. To nail rural folks in their villages, the Indian Institute of Public Administration has come up with the idea of Providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas (PURA), an ambitious scheme to transform well-off villagers into free-spending consumers. This plan fails to recognise that it is the lack of opportunities, rather than that of amenities, which drives villagers to lives of indignity in cities.

But the mantra of the market is efficiency, excellence and economy. It has no place for semi-literate labour forced out of farms due to the urban bias of government policies. India is said to enjoy a competitive advantage over even China in terms of labour; the International Labour Organisation predicts that by 2020, India will have 116 million workers in the age bracket of 20-to-24, to China's 94 million. But some of the most robotised industrial facilities are being built in one of the most populous regions of the world. The spinning wheel is not a marvel of technology, but it engages more people, requires less capital and does not demand a degree from the Indian Institute of Science to make, run or repair.

The third fault-line could prove to be the most fatal. The market demands uniformity – one law, uniform banking and insurance, similar transportation, convertible currencies, consensual media and one language. It has no place for cultural diversity – call them community-specific family laws or interest-free banking oddities if you want, but they are real – and marketers use all their might to create uniform, predictable and unsuspecting consumers. Resistance to the process is human and natural. One could say that a million mutinies of the 21st century began with the box cutters that destroyed the twin towers. If the market does not respect different cultures, it cannot get respect from those who have nothing but their cultures to cling to in times of adversity.

The '10 percent' class of Southasia will have to go back to unadulterated Gandhi to learn the ways of coping with the woes of 10 percent economic growth. There is no other way to understand the silent rage of women whose sons keep 'disappearing' in the maelstrom created by markets.

Capitalism with a humane face is as oxymoronic as vegetarian hunting-animals; at best, some of them are exceptions.

Cricket cooperation

YALE GLOBAL

With the population, money and fervour, Southasia has become the powerhouse that drives global cricket. While teams in the region have found a way to work together, it doesn't mean that they always play fair.

BY **SIDHARTH MONGA**

Just 11 days before the Calcutta inauguration ceremony of the 1996 cricket World Cup – being co-hosted by India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan – a bomb exploded on 31 January in Colombo. Sri Lanka had been looking forward to an event that would be the most significant turning point in its cricketing history. But after the blast, Australia and the West Indies refused to turn up for Sri Lanka's party, and forfeited their league matches.

There was obviously more at stake than the USD 6 million that the Sri Lankans would lose if the matches did not take place. When Australia and the West Indies realised forfeiting one match would not hamper their chances of qualifying for the quarterfinals, there was nothing Sri Lanka could do. They were so desperate to host the match that they offered to arrange practice in India, and to charter special aircraft to bring the teams to Colombo. The sports minister, S B Dissanayake, even offered to stay in the same hotel as the teams to reassure them.

And then, India and Pakistan came together to help out. The PILCOM (Pakistan-India-Lanka Committee), under Jagmohan Dalmiya, stood firmly behind Sri Lanka, and sent a joint India-Pakistan side to play a match in Colombo. "It is a measure of our solidarity with the Sri Lankans; but more than that, it will prove that conditions are conducive to playing in Colombo," Dalmiya said at the time.

"They made more money with that one match than they would have made with those two," J Y Lele, former secretary of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), jokes now. This was neither an isolated act of cooperation nor an accidental one – not the first, not the last. Even though the teams would fight in the future over the spoils of PILCOM and many other issues, they would appear united. Just like typical brothers – not particularly cordial at home, but ready to join hands to fight outsiders.

In one voice

Cricket's Southasian unity began in June 1983, when the then-head of the BCCI was refused tickets to the World Cup final held in England, a final India would go on to win. By the time the next World Cup came around, four years later, India and Pakistan joined hands to bid on and organise the event. Just before the games began, the two countries played a friendly cricket-for-peace match. The event itself was a huge financial success, and cricket caught the imagination of Southasians like never before.

This unity has only strengthened since then. In August this year, when Pakistani skipper Inzamam-ul-Haq forfeited the Oval Test against England after umpire Darrell Hair penalised Pakistan for alleged ball-tampering, the BCCI said they did not want Hair to umpire in the Champions Trophy being hosted in India in October and November. When South Africa moved out of a tri-series in Sri Lanka this year, again out of security concerns, India decided to stay on and play a bilateral series. Whenever a Southasian bowler is suspected of an illegal action (Muttiah Muralitharan, Shoaib *Akhtar, Harbhajan Singh, et al), it* always becomes an issue of Southasian browns versus the white world.

In his book on the 1987 World Cup, English writer Martin Johnson calls cricket a major form of escapism in India and Pakistan, as a poverty-stricken land. Apart from these two countries putting their troubles aside, Johnson had seen Sri Lanka playing in Madras, the separatist violence back home far from memory. It was the attitude of patronisation evident in Johnson's prose towards Southasia that infuriated locals. They decided therefore to create conditions where people came and performed in Southasia. Thus it was that three (and later four) Southasian boards went into International Cricket Council (ICC) meetings as one. "We had a realisation then that almost all the sponsors of the game came from Asia, and we needed to capitalise on that," says Lele.

Dalmiyan economics

Indeed, the money was there, as was a sense of cooperation and angst against white prejudice. The situation called for a leader who would have commercial acumen and political grasp. Jagmohan Dalmiya had both and more. He was not only a master of realpolitik and a genius with money, but he had an uncanny knack and unorthodox means of striking deals. He enriched the BCCI in the late 1980s and early 1990s by capitalising on the opportunities that India's satellite-television boom presented. After making the BCCI the richest cricket board in the world, he became president of the ICC in 1997, and filled up its coffers as well. Dalmiya was the main professor of this experiment in cricket cooperation between Southasian countries. He also became the president of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC), which would serve as a forum for all the Southasian Boards to unite on issues.

If anything can unite more than money, it is the threat of losing that money. The game's old guard hated Dalmiya and his clout, and he eventually had a bitter fallout with the ICC. When it came to selling the broadcasting and marketing rights for the World Cup and other ICC events, a Southasian company was deliberately sidelined. In 2000 Rupert Murdoch's Global Cricket Corporation (GCC) bagged the rights for USD 550 million, even though Zee TV had bid USD 100 million more. The cricket commentator and analyst Harsha Bhogle wrote at the time that it was an obvious move by a power bloc to counter the Southasian administrative offensive.

To protect Murdoch's interests, the ICC included a clause that prohibited players from endorsing products other than those of Murdoch's sponsors during any ICC event. As expected, this now famous ambush-marketing clause hurt the Indian players the most, who were brand ambassadors and models for the variety of products swarming the Indian market. Dalmiya backed the Indian players again, as major stars threatened to boycott international tournaments. The contracts were revised for the time being, and the India team signed them just in time for the ICC Champions Trophy 2002 to start.

The chaos over the marketing of the game continues. Dalmiya has been dethroned in India as well, and BCCI's vice-president Lalit Modi is now looking after the commercial aspects of the game. With the BCCI going aggressive over the Southasia-hosted 2011 World Cup, the international old guard has started hating Modi more than it did Dalmiya. India wants to retain the rights to marketing an event they believe to be their own, while the ICC wants an arrangement similar to the existing one. The race card is also being played again. "The entire structure of the ICC needs an overhaul," Modi has written. "It's time we had a chief executive who comes from Afro-Asia, someone who understands the problems of a majority of ICC members and doesn't heed just the affluent alone."

The colour polarisation

Things have come to such a pass that whenever an issue arises that concerns Asia, the cricketing world ends up being split down the middle. The equation in this situation is simple enough. India has the most to lose in terms of money if the ICC dictates the marketing strategy, and tries to protect the interests of its chosen sponsors. To ensure that this does not happen, India needs political weight in the ICC. In a pure cricketing sense, India may not be a much better team than what it was two decades ago, but as an administrative money-making unit it has emerged as the strongest in the world. This has helped facilitate the unwritten compact between the Southasian boards, where they support each other in the fight against the 'white enemy' – whatever may be the real, unstated interests. Suddenly, India not wanting Hair, or playing matches in Sri Lanka to prove conditions are conducive, starts to make sense.

The white-brown divide is convenient, and gains legitimacy when the same Australian team that refused to play in Sri Lanka goes ahead with its schedule in England after the 7/7 London blasts. But now the racism has taken a new turn, too: with the aggressive, counter-attacking Southasian being seen by some to be engaging in reverse racism. The slightest of strictness shown against a brown man is seen as the white man's conspiracy.

"Cricket is no more an English game," wrote veteran sports writer Simon Barnes in 1990. "It has been subject to the influences of, to name but a few, Islam, Indian politics, Partition, Tamil separatism ... Benazir Bhutto, the question of trade embargo, the question of diplomatic relations, the pleasure of drugs, the morality of liars, the morality of money..."

Many of the accusations of systemic racism ring false. The ICC's headquarters has moved to Dubai from London. Not long ago, its president was a Pakistani, the vice-president a South African, the head of the technical committee an Indian, and the head of the panel of match referees a Sri Lankan. Its 10 permanent members include four Asian countries, two African countries and the West Indies.

Still, the beauty of racism is that Southasians can use the brown colour whenever anything goes against them. Soon, a Britisher would not be too far off the mark if he said cricket is now ruled by Asians only, and serves their purpose alone. "Cricket is not a simple game. It just started off that way," Barnes wrote, with great foresight.

Dost

BY **KYLA PASHA**

There's this friend of mine, this old friend.

Not a childhood friend, really. Though, it's odd – I couldn't tell you how long we've known each other. Sometimes it seems like we've just met. Sometimes… I don't know what it seems like sometimes.

She has this round face, you know? Like God made her by shaping her clay in a bowl or something. And her hair is so curly, it's like someone wound it extra tight around their finger, just to make her cry. She looks just like a ball of dough, actually. But not as white; she's kind of dark actually. But not really black either, God forbid! Who looks at black people? I don't know about you folks, but on our side, no one cares for dark skin.

Though everyone looks at her. She's very pretty, *mashallah*.

I think we met in nursery school. Or maybe at the cricket ground…? I used to play with the boys back then. And those damn boys used to let me play with them too. And do you know? I hit such amazing sixers! You'd be dumbfounded. Sachin is nothing compared to me! But no one ever really thinks to ask about my sixers. This one time, a boy walked up and wrapped himself around me. He was kind of big, in tenth class. I was little, in fifth or sixth. I was in the garden outside, don't know what I was doing – must have been skipping rope. It's sort of a habit, skipping rope.

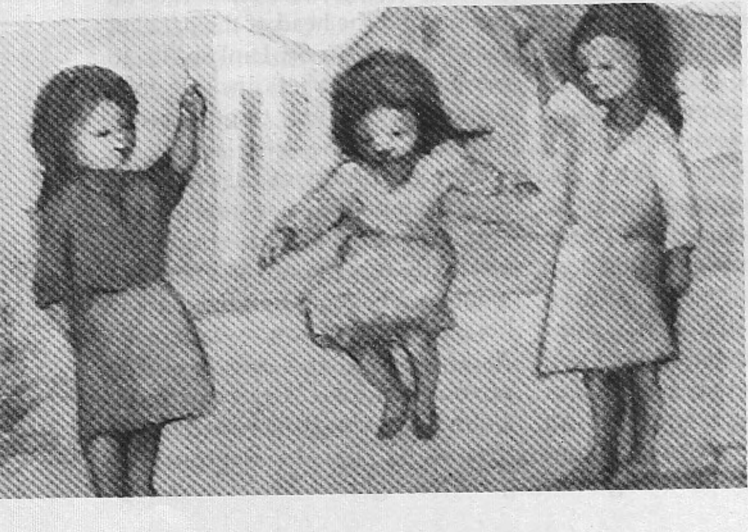
A PAKISTANI WOMAN ARRIVES IN INDIA FOR THE FIRST TIME AND SPEAKS TO AN INDIAN AUDIENCE.

I was in the garden, behind the hedge. He's my cousin on my father's side. Now he's in the army, did you know that? All the boys in our family have done really well for themselves. I have four other brothers, in the army, just like him. Really gave it to those Indians the last time! *[big laugh]* Sent them home crying, the bastards!

[Suddenly quiet] I'm so sorry! It's just… it's habit! Sometimes, we just talk like this over there. But they must be someone's brothers too, I guess. Uff, I don't know why I said that army thing. I'm here for something else.

I was telling you that I skip rope. I'm very good. I've never tripped. And oh yes, I remember now. ~~I was~~ skipping rope when I saw him. I said, salaam, but I didn't stop. He says to me, "Listen." And I said, "ji?" He said, "Put me in it too." And I laughed and said, "Boys don't skip rope." And can you imagine, he got all upset! Snatched the rope and threw it to one side, and then came and stuck himself on me! I kicked him a few times. Then I saw this big bamboo stick standing nearby. Smacked him with it a few times, ha! And he didn't ask me about my sixers either – but he figured it out!

My friend was telling me that she has a charming relative like that on her side too. Older than this even! And she didn't have a bamboo stick with her. What can we do.



AMOS LANGDOWN

But you see, me and my friend, I think we met in the cricket ground. We both loved cricket. I am completely in love with Wasim Akram. That bowling motion…! And that smile…! Hy…

She doesn't like him. Says his nose is too big, looks like a parrot. She prefers Agarkar. Says he has a sweet face. Can you imagine? And then she objects to Wasim's nose! If our Ajit went to Calcutta, his nose would arrive three days before him!

If you ask me, it's an India-Pakistan thing for her. Because who doesn't love Wasim? Seriously, tell me. Is he a good bowler or not? Well then!

No? He's not? What planet are you…? Anyway, never mind. Whatever you like. I didn't come here for cricket, did I? I came to tell you that at the cricket ground, the two of us, we used to skip rope together. Even two ropes sometimes. We were such experts and that if there were a rope-skipping event at the Olympics, we'd win the gold, hands down. They wouldn't even get anyone else to compete!

But even in the Olympics, you have to go from your own country, don't you? So what would we have done...?

It's an old habit with us, skipping rope. The thing is, we're not either of us very fond of just sitting around. I don't know about her, but my family used to yell at me all the time: "Why don't you stay in one place! Are you a boy? Running around all the time!" I ask you, do boys skip rope? Ever? Their feet are always on the ground. And they stand there with their fists on their hips like they're some sort of double-handled *lota*, they're so proud of it!

So I would get beaten up. Four brothers of my own and then uncles' and aunts' sons besides. I used to really get it. "Act like a girl! Respect your brothers!"

I don't know what went on with my friend. She has a father, his brother, aunt's husband, a grandfather and one mother. And they all seem really nice from far away. God knows what's on the inside with everybody. My brothers are also really polite and nice with outsiders. But her elders are really affectionate with her. They hug her even. Mine do too, but less. I mean, I have young men for brothers, they've got their honour, their image, they can't go around hugging me all the time! But with her, sometimes, when she was little, they used to keep her in their lap for hours. Sometimes one, sometimes another. They love her a lot. But she never smiles when she sees them.

But what am I talking about? I don't know her from childhood! We met in college. We used to scale walls in college. The market across the road had this wonderful homemade ice cream. And the man who made it made only a little, so it was gone really fast. In the middle of the school day, we'd scale the wall and go get so much ice cream that we'd almost explode. Only then would we come back. Other girls thought we went out to see boys! What would we want boys for!

Listen, saying a thing straight up is a little hard. I mean, it's scary. You're not my own, you know? I mean, you're like my own, and eat more or less the same things. Actually, if you don't mind, can I say something? Delhi's kebabs are really just so-so. If you want kebabs, come to Lahore! They're so good, so good, you'd think you were in heaven!

My friend really likes kebabs. She really wants to taste Lahori kebabs just once. But when will she ever come to Pakistan? Even for me, this is the first time here.

But what do I keep going on about! All my life I've been skipping rope, and I've made such a friend that I don't even realise: this is the first time I've skipped such a long rope, you see! Border sized. It's the first time I've come. When she called me and they gave me a visa.

But then... where did we meet, before this? *[yells off-stage]* Hey! Do you remember? Did we just meet today?

No, no, I just remembered... The Sri Lankans invited all the Southasian rope-skipping women for a contest. I mean, after all, what ropes don't they skip in Sri Lanka these days? Decimated the place. I mean, you have to scale the walls at some point. But it's strange that I didn't remember this before. But the world is an awfully strange place anyway.

So they invited us there. Obviously, I won.

[Off-stage voice] It wasn't you, bitch, it was me!

[Yelling off-stage] Shut up, you liar! It was me! Anyway, we talked a lot over there. They gave us the same room there, so we made friends quicker.

But tell me honestly. People say that couples are made in heaven. But I say, there are very few couples on earth that look like God was around when they were made. I think that friendships are made by God. Because even if she were in Timbuktu, we'd have met, and been friends.

She's the one who called me here. She was saying, *Come, meet everyone. They're nice people. Like me.* And what could I say? If I've made friends with one, then... But listen, I gave Agarkar a long nose, then I said that army thing. God knows what you're thinking of me. Before you start throwing tomatoes, I should just say what I came to say:

This is the first time I've stepped over such a long rope. I've done it now out of love. And, I just came to say salaam.

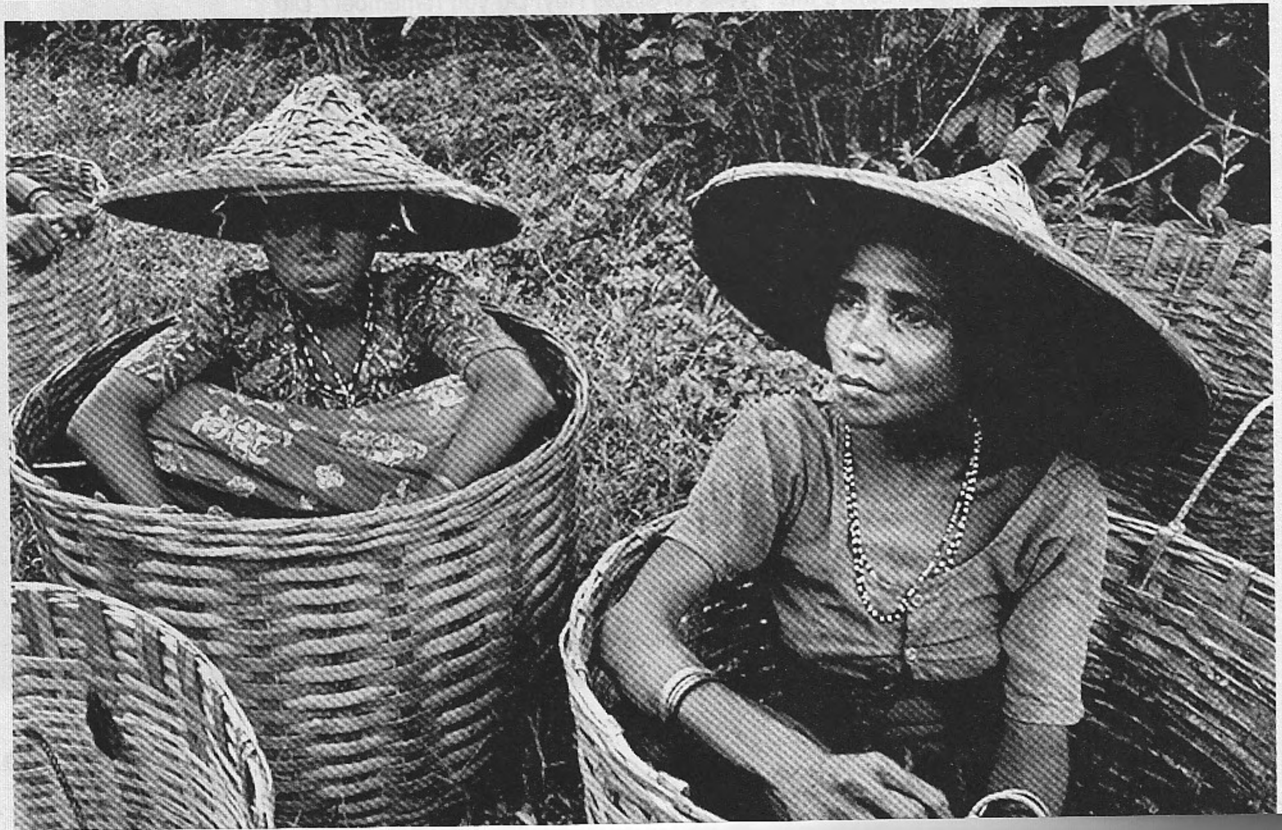
Dost *is a one-woman play written for and performed by actress Pooni Arasu. It has been acclaimed by audiences throughout India.*

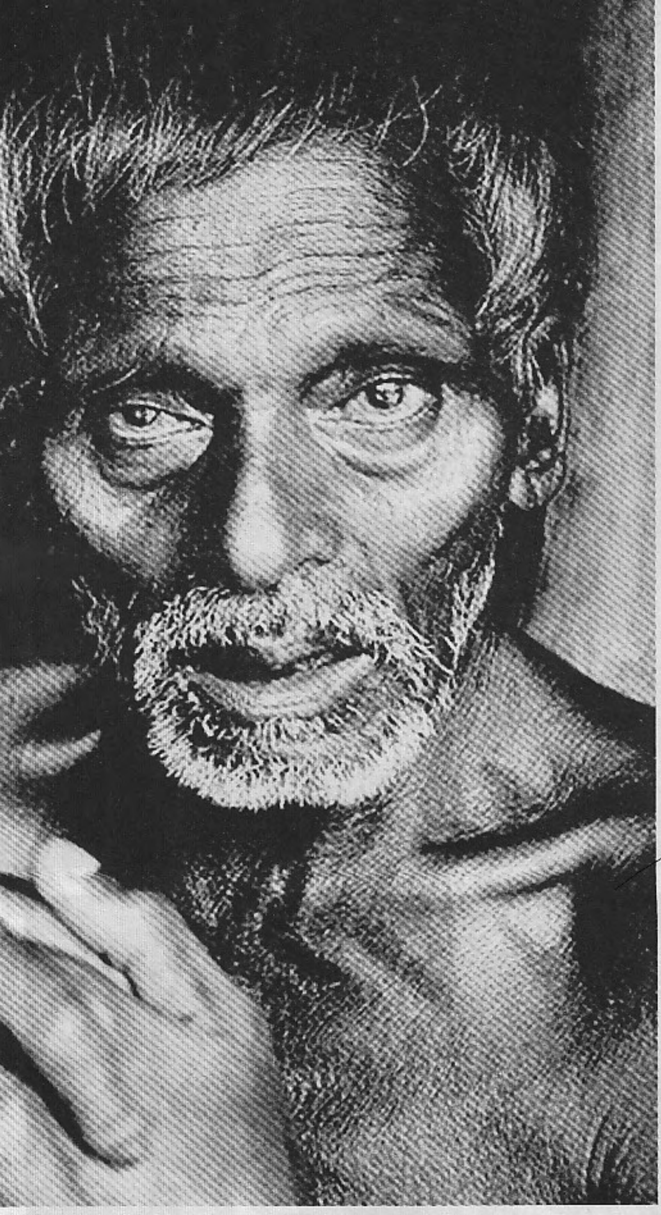
Dark times in the green hills

PHOTO BY **MUNEM WASIF** | TEXT BY **MAHFUZ SADIQUE**

It has been a long day's picking for the women of Rema. A walk along the narrow path that snakes through the Rema Tea Estate in the Habiganj District of Bangladesh's hilly northeastern region leads to a crossroads. A group of women emerges from the dark green of the tea plantation. Wiping the sweat off their faces and shoulders with the faded edges of their saris, they sit inside their *thukris* (baskets) to rest for a while, chewing on the dry rotis they have brought for lunch.

Their men have gone to fetch water. The men do not do any picking, though they do the rest of the work – like cutting plants and weeding – in the long journey from the tea plant to the steaming cup. These images by Munem Wasif show the hard lives of the workers behind that unseen process. Wasif captured these stills of their hidden stories at Rema, Ratna and the Kapai Garden of Lashkarpur estate, three of the tea estates that dot the vast plains of the greater Sylhet division.



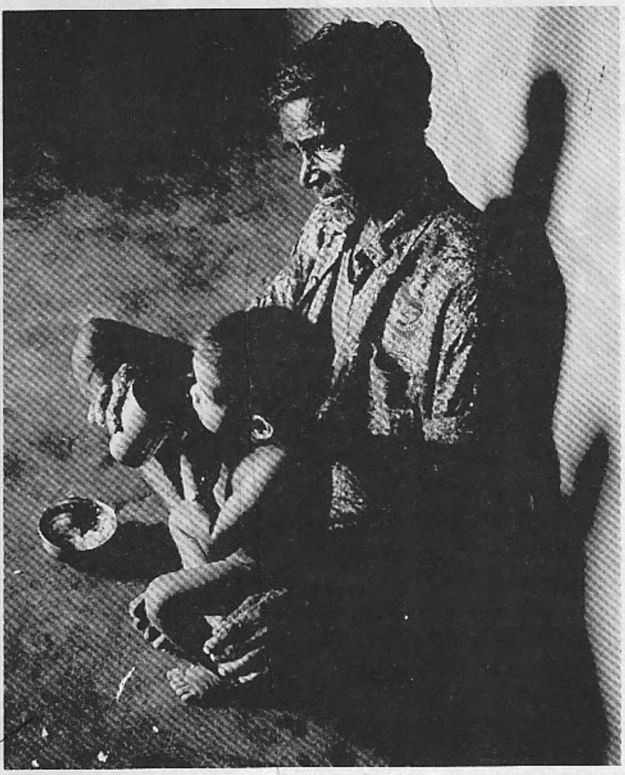


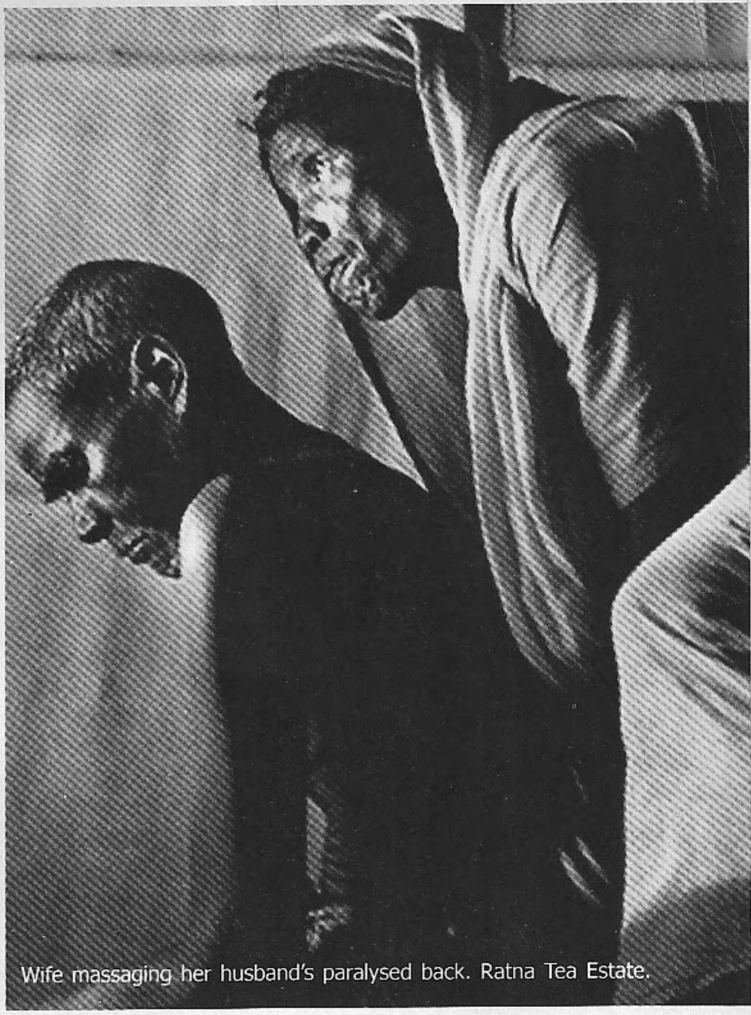
These tea estates have been operating in Bangladesh for more than a century, and Wasif's photographs show the dark legacy of that past. With no education and miniscule salaries, generations have ended up tied into this trade as modern-day bonded labour. For a day of picking, tea workers receive as little as 27 taka, all of 38 US cents.

Bangladesh's Tea Board data show that around 41,400 women, 39,700 men and 9700 teenagers are currently registered tea workers. In addition, nearly 7000 children are said to be working on these plantations for less than the meagre minimum wage.

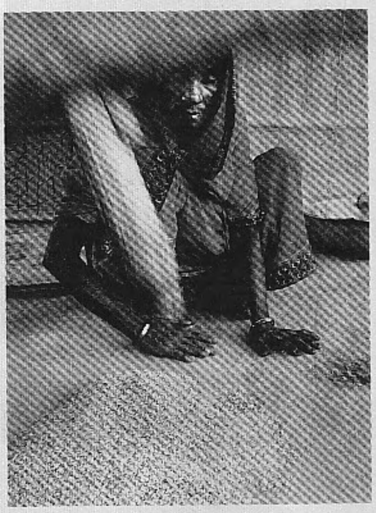
The systemic deprivation of the workers continues even as the tea industry of Bangladesh declines. According to official records, the number of tea gardens is down to 162 – with 132 in Sylhet, 25 in Chittagong and five in Panchagarh. Altogether 44 tea gardens have stopped production altogether. Meanwhile, out of a total of 114,900 hectares that used to be under tea bushes, today only 52,200 hectares are actively being worked.

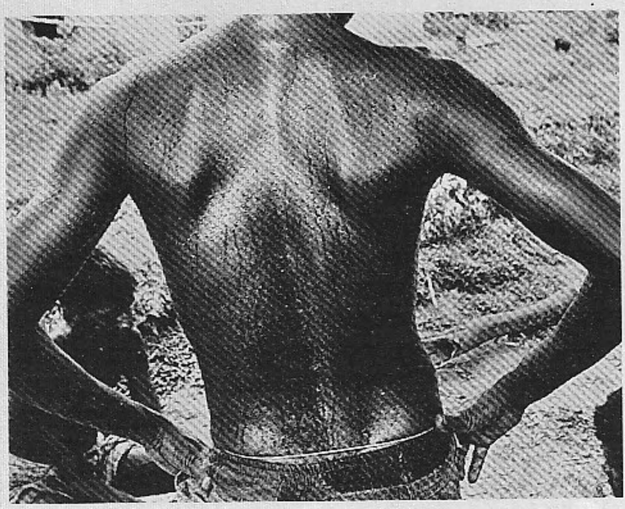
There are several reasons for this decline, and why there is such poor maintenance of the plantations.





Wife massaging her husband's paralysed back. Ratna Tea Estate.





A severe drought in 2005 is said to have killed 10 percent of the bushes. While local demand for tea is up dramatically, the primary incentive for tea producers has been the lucrative export market. However, stiff competition from within Southasia and elsewhere has hit Bangladeshi tea hard. Many of the traditional estates are owned by British firms that are in the process of packing up and leaving. Earlier this year, one of the oldest tea estates in Bangladesh, James Finlay, sold its stakes to locals.

The closure of the tea gardens and the decline of the industry as a whole have hit the tea labourers as well. The Rema tea garden, where Munem Wasif took some of these photographs, has been closed for nearly a year. All those pictured will presently be unemployed. ▲

Organiser
Is the media anti-Hindu?

Journalists have no clue what to make of this one. A special issue of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh magazine *Organiser* has recently grappled with the question, Is the media anti-Hindu? Hindutva-wallahs have long complained that the English-language media is crowded by pseudo-secularists who do not understand Hindu grievances. And while that was the overwhelming sentiment in articles that came in the issue, there was a note of dissent from an unlikely quarter. Praveen Togadia, known as a rabid fanatic, lauded the Indian media for its courage and impartiality. So *India Today* got a pat for showing the plight of Kashmiri Pundits, CNN-IBN for "carrying its torch against jihad", the *Indian Express* for reporting on victims of terrorism, and NDTV for walking into madrassas in Deoband and filming "their fierce teaching without being afraid". How are the media bosses to react to this praise?

After an 11-year-long court battle, Anand Patwardhan's 1995 documentary *Father, Son and Holy War* was finally telecast on 8 October by the Indian public broadcaster, Doordarshan (DD). The film deals with the connection between communal violence and the male psyche, and was rejected by DD repeatedly, even after court injunctions. When asked what DD found so hard to swallow in his film, Patwardhan said: "When a government and its bureaucrats become averse to the slightest sign of criticism, it signals a lack of self-confidence … In India the BJP openly stifled the secular voice while the Congress merely gave it lip service." The saving grace appears to be India's robust and liberal Constitution.

Garibi Hatao, 'Remove Poverty', is back as the government of India's big slogan. The ruling Congress party has rediscovered the cry that was first popularised by Indira Gandhi more than three decades ago, and editorial writers are busy speculating what the move means. Is it, as seems obvious, an attempt to project a pro-poor image? Or does it symbolise the return of the Congress to the Indira brand of politics? But attempts to fit the slogan into a grand political narrative might be excessive, for the explanation lies in the linguistic proclivities of Oscar Fernandes, India's Minister of Programme Implementation. He is a non-Hindi-speaker, who finds it easier to pronounce and understand the popular term *hatao*, or 'remove', rather than the Sanskrit *unmulan*, or 'alleviation'. And it was Fernandes who suggested that what is easier on the tongue is naturally more effective. For once, a simple explanation where people had begun to seek symbolism.

Pervez 'I' Musharraf is hard at work to please his American taskmasters. Sample this from his recent visit to the US: "I'm the greatest believer in democracy… I've empowered the people and the women … We have three women fighter pilots… I've liberated the media… I have a holistic strategy on terrorism … Only five percent go to extremist madarsas, the other 95 percent go to progressive normal schools." Hmm. And he was given a standing ovation by the Americans.

India's National Readership Survey 2006 (NRS) has come out with some interesting data about the state of the national media. The reach of the press medium, both magazines and dailies, was found to be around 222 million, with an almost equal number of readers in rural and urban India. The number of people watching satellite television has increased to around 230 million in an average week. The battle is intense in the English- and Hindi-language newspaper segment – *Dainik Jagaran* and *Dainik Bhaskar* have more than 20 million readers each. NRS reports that the *Times of India* continues to be the most read English-language paper, with around 7.4 million readers; *The Hindu* has meanwhile edged out *Hindustan Times* for the second spot, with a little over four million readers. The world's media moguls are watching all this with interest, for this is the only major market where the print media is growing so.

After Bombay, Delhi has emerged as the next site for the Indian media war. *India Today* might soon launch a morning daily, while *DNA*, the Zee-*Dainik Bhaskar* collaboration, is all set to launch an edition in the capital. And how have the two leaders in the market responded? The *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*,

HOPES SHAME INDIA
Hindustan Times
The Statesman
THE TIMES OF INDIA
After Glory, The Shame
Shame at Athens: Drugs do India

IBN

arch-rivals, have decided to jointly launch a morning paper! Media analysts see it as a pre-emptive move to consolidate their monopoly in the market, aimed at preventing outsiders from grabbing a share of the advertising pie. Analysts are betting that Samir Jain of Bennet, Coleman (publisher of TOI) will summarily fold the daily and dump HT as soon as the outside threat is warded off.

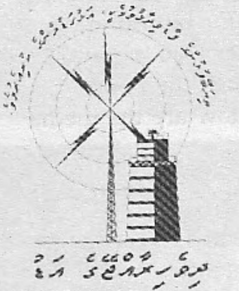
How about some introspection in the editorial offices of Kathmandu, Dhaka and Colombo? The Indian media is often bashed, with good reason, for not looking at regional issues and not adequately covering its neighbours. But do those in the other countries know enough about the way India is evolving? The Kathmandu-based Kantipur Group has a correspondent in New Delhi who confines himself largely to issues that have a direct linkage with Nepal; while Himalmedia, the country's other big media house, has no India correspondent at all. Little is known in Colombo and Dhaka about the complex changes and developments taking place in either Delhi politics or other corners of India. This absence is even more striking because changes in India often have a direct impact on the neighbours. The neighbouring intelligentsia relies almost *exclusively on Indian media to form its opinions* about India. Let us hope other Southasian countries accelerate their effort to understand India, even as the Indian media wakes up to the reality beyond its own borders.

A group of Indian ministers has recommended giving the green light to the Community Radio Policy, drawn up by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. If approved by the cabinet and 'notified', the new policy will allow civil-society organisations, NGOs and other non-profits to apply for community-radio licenses. Citizen radio would suddenly be a reality. If it comes through, the policy will finally put an end to a discriminatory broadcast system that allows corporate houses to buy FM frequencies, but under which communities cannot own and operate their own stations – often leaving them with no other choice but to buy air time from existing All India Radio stations.

UNESCO

Radio Lumbini, Nepal

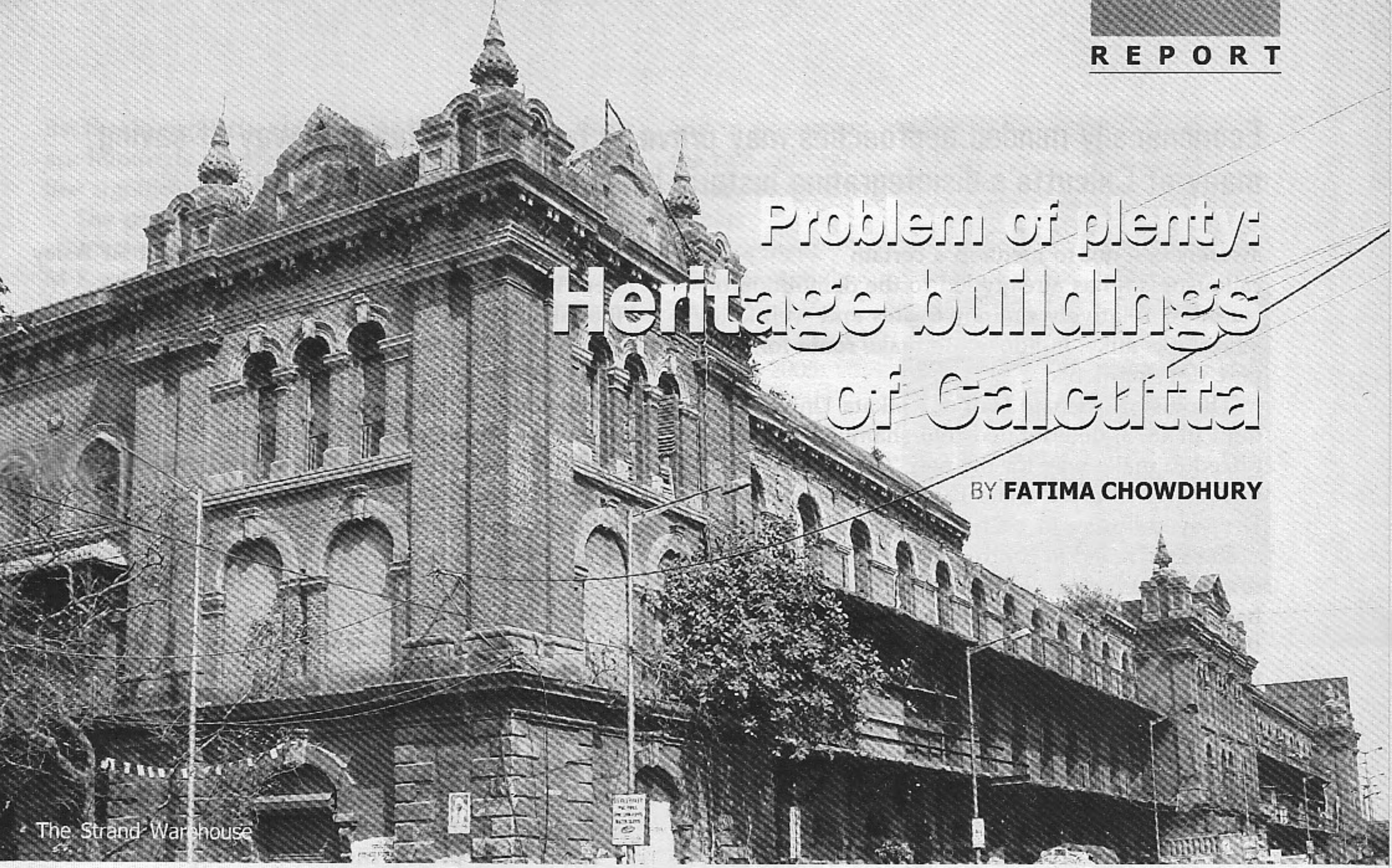
In the Maldives, the government has made it official that private parties will be able to acquire licenses to start their own television and radio stations from November. Around 38 groups have thus far applied for the heretofore impossible licenses. The only authorised broadcasting media have long been the government-owned Television Maldives and Voice of Maldives radio broadcast. And it seems to be the season of liberalising license regimes. The Nepali government has awarded licenses for five new television channels in Kathmandu, and 50 more FM radio stations across the country. Since June 2003, the then-government of the autocrat Gyanendra had decided to stop issuing new licenses for both FM radio and TV channels. The new government has also decided to encourage community-based FM radio by adopting flexible and transparent procedures, while issuing licenses at low registration fees.



Voice of Maldives

Watch for a blog that will be the first of its kind in the region. The site, *www.kafila.org*, is to be hosted by a team of 17 people, among them some fine young thinkers in the Indian intelligentsia. Select academics, film scholars, writers, journalists and artists have come together to create a platform for alternative viewpoints on diverse issues. The site, to be launched on 1 November, stems from "the recognition that the space of critical public discourse has been so completely colonised by the corporate media that dissenting voices rarely, if ever, find any sustained reflection there." Kafila is clearly left-liberal in orientation, and *Chhetria Patrakar* hopes it will provide space for reasoned arguments, and not fall prey to leftist dogmatism – the bane of many such endeavours.

– *Chhetria Patrakar*



The Strand Warehouse

Problem of plenty: Heritage buildings of Calcutta

BY **FATIMA CHOWDHURY**

As Calcutta's economy booms, its historic buildings often are the first to go. But a newfound awareness of the city's architectural legacy may have come along just in time.

The majestic old red-brick building stands silently, overlooking the congested streets and lanes below. The paint has long faded from its walls, making way for black stains and a hint of green from the vegetation that is seeping through fine cracks in the building's facade. The architectural beauty of this structure's intricately decorated arches and imposing pillars rarely find an admiring glance, however, as pedestrians scurry past. Those passers-by are not necessarily oblivious, but simply have become so accustomed to this building's existence as to take it for granted. But like other Indian metropolises, Calcutta has awakened to the chime of development; in that process, the survival of old buildings such as this one - and the city's architectural legacy as a whole - is being challenged by new ideas and aspirations.

More than most, the city of Calcutta has seen it fortunes rise and fall with the dictates of time. Once the capital of colonial India, it has witnessed the turbulence of Partition, endured the scourge of floods and famines, and experienced great human misery and indifference. It has housed social reformers and Nobel laureates. It has even changed its name. While the stories of the past have long receded in the shadows of modern-day living, their presence continues to echo through the city's magnificent architectural monuments and buildings. Even though the skyline has dramatically changed to accommodate high-rise apartment complexes and contemporary architecture, the city's 'heritage buildings' retain a colonial charm that is unique to Calcutta.

The state of heritage buildings has always been something of a contradiction of circumstances. At one time, these buildings were taken for granted and seen as mere vestiges of a time gone by, whose value depended on the economic condition of their owners. Today, there has been a shift in this mindset, as a growing handful of people have begun to think of heritage buildings as treasures in need of active preservation. But even while this architectural legacy is now starting to be considered as an economically viable investment, it is simultaneously economic considerations that threaten its very existence.

A number of these heritage buildings do remain well maintained, such as the Victoria Memorial built between 1906 and 1921, and the stately Writers' Building, built between 1776 and 1780, which now houses the secretariat of the West Bengal government. For each of these exemplary cases of scrupulous maintenance, however, there are many others in various stages of deterioration. The lack of

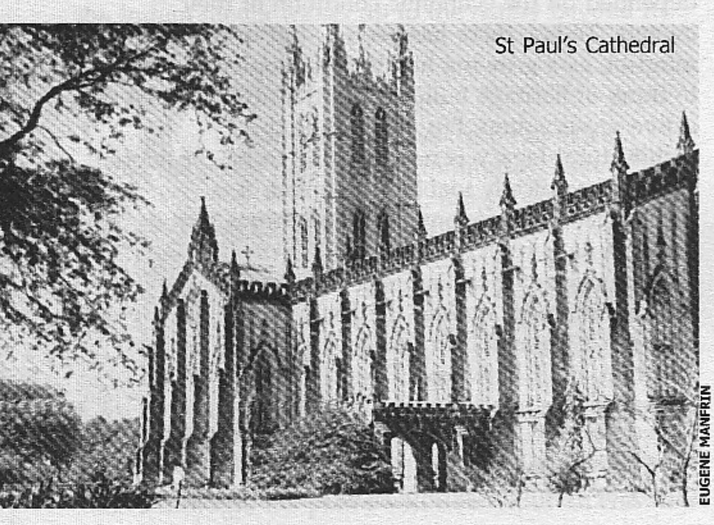
Economically minded approaches may prove to be the only feasible way of saving many of Calcutta's disintegrating historic buildings before it is too late.

awareness – not to mention a certain callousness – has already led to the demolition of countless relatively unknown sites and well-known landmarks alike, bulldozed to make room for new developments.

The historic Senate Hall at Kolkata University, built in 1873, deteriorated into shambles and was forced to make way for the new 'Centenary building' in 1956. Then there is the 121-year-old Star Theatre. Destroyed by fire in 1991, the subsequent renovation of the theatre led to controversy when the city decided to turn part of the structure into a cinema hall, and give it over to private operators. Despite that debate, such economically minded approaches may prove to be the only feasible way of saving many of the city's disintegrating historic buildings before it is too late.

Calcutta's historical shopping district, New Market, characterises the struggle of the old world to keep pace with the new. Dating back to 1874, this area was originally called Hogg Market after Sir Stuart Hogg, the then-city commissioner. Archival photographs of the market show ornate fountains and benches, all of which have long ceased to exist; today, only the gothic clocktower stands as a reminder of times gone by. A modern photograph would present a disheartening sight of blackened walls, grinding traffic and overall filth. In 1985, a part of the market burned down, and little sensitivity was shown in the inevitable re-construction. The government is currently considering restoration plans, however, that could prove to be more in line with the site's original design.

The Eden Garden, now best known for its cricket grounds, is an interesting example of a heritage site that has survived the onward march of development, albeit in an evolved form. The Garden was built in 1877 by then-Lieutenant Governor of Bengal Sir Asley Eden. With its open, lush fields overlooking the Hooghly, it quickly became a popular place for the Calcutta elite to stroll. Today, a sizeable portion of the park has been covered by a cricket stadium and sports complex. The surroundings have become harsher, with concrete buildings now blocking off the serenity of the riverside. The existing garden still retains many of the elaborate Victorian statues, fountains and lampposts, however, and there are still those who come here to stroll.



St Paul's Cathedral

EUGENE MANFRIN

Drowning in history

It is of course a difficult task to protect Calcutta's – or any city's – historic buildings, given rising maintenance costs, insufficient funds, unauthorised occupation, litigation costs and the like. In addition, there is the pervasive apathy regarding the preservation of 'old things' – much less for anything as ethereal as architectural legacy.

The laws to protect historic buildings in Calcutta were promulgated in 1980, and amended a decade later to be more comprehensive. According to the Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act of 1980, the term 'heritage building' means "any building of one or more premises, or any part thereof, which requires preservation and conservation for historical, architectural, environmental or ecological purpose"; this also includes the protection of land adjoining such a structure.

It is important to distinguish between *preservation* and *conservation*. The former is described as taking necessary measures to "maintain the building precinct or artefact in its present state to prevent and retard deterioration". 'Conservation', on the other hand, is somewhat more ephemeral: protecting something with an eye towards retaining its significance, whether architectural, historical, environmental or cultural. The Municipal Corporation also recognises the idea of a 'heritage precinct', which applies to the extended area surrounding a historic building that shares "common physical, social, cultural significance".

While there are clear penalties attached to destroying heritage properties, there are no clear guidelines for making alterations, thus making it easy to conveniently manoeuvre around the spirit of these laws. Nearly all such statutes have been rendered ineffectual by poor implementation and a scarcity of political will, making historic buildings easy prey for vested interests eyeing economic gains.

The Municipal Corporation has currently listed over 800 heritage buildings in the city based on their architectural and historical significance to Calcutta, a list that is regularly updated. At the same time, there are hundreds of other heritage buildings considered less significant, many of which are in a sorry state.

The problem is not the scarcity of such historic structures in Calcutta; rather, the opposite is true. G M Kapur, the West Bengal state convenor of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), points out that the abundance of old architecture in Calcutta has led to an attitude of indifference. "There are so many heritage buildings in the city that there is complacency as to their existence. But if we do not begin to value these buildings, they are going to slowly disappear." While some have argued that this architectural 'legacy' actually represents colonial conquest, Kapur notes that these structures were built by Indians, using Indian materials: "Heritage buildings should be seen as being very much – and importantly – Indian." To this end, INTACH not only undertakes restoration projects, but also initiates awareness campaigns through publications, workshops and media outreach.

In 1984, when INTACH started its chapter in West Bengal, there were only a handful of people concerned about Calcutta's architectural history. This was not surprising, given the economic stagnation that had plagued West Bengal since Independence. At that time, industries had abandoned the state, even as the government struggled with unemployment, weak infrastructure and turbulent politics. Growing levels of migration into Calcutta only added to the pressure on services. Given such circumstances, there was a general disinterest in both government and civic bodies to invest money in heritage projects in the face of more pressing problems. At the same time, however, construction activity in the city flourished as housing needs rapidly expanded. As one of the rare well-performing sectors, the government encouraged housing construction in an effort to keep the economy moving. Such a scenario inevitably led to the demolition of many historic buildings that had become difficult or financially draining to maintain.

Times have changed in Calcutta in recent years. The government has begun endorsing foreign direct investment, much of which has arrived in the form of information technology and electronics industry projects. The rise in spending power in the city is visible in the new restaurants, shopping plazas and enormous apartment complexes springing up throughout the city. The economic boom has also meant a shift in the ways that civic and political bodies look at heritage buildings – albeit epitomised by two contradictory attitudes. First, development has meant a crushing need for space, which has made heritage buildings more vulnerable. At the same time, there has been an awakening to these buildings' valuable potential in attracting tourism and in preserving the rich cultural history of the city. Urban Development Minister Ashok Bhattacharya emphasised this point in 2005: "Heritage can play a vital role to focus on national identity and pride, and should be considered as an essential element in sustainable development."

General Post Office

New organisations have been able to tap into and energise these trends. Groups such as INTACH, Action Research in Conservation of Heritage (ARCH), and websites like *kolkatainformation.com* have been able to act as support sites for concerned citizens. The establishment of the West Bengal Heritage Commission in 2001 was a small but crucial step in energising architectural heritage activism. The Commission's aim to look beyond Calcutta – to include nearby cities like Bankura and Burdwan – has allowed for a significant broadening of scope, and has roped in new sources of pro-conservation energy. Such dynamics have begun to prove successful – if slowly so – at turning back what had long appeared a losing battle.

Economic restoration

Conservation activists around the world have been forced to turn to the hard realities of economics in the broader attempt to make architectural heritage a viable part of modern-day processes. In Calcutta, 'progress' has not only meant new buildings and office complexes, but also a development pressure to make up for lost time. This has meant rapid and largely haphazard urbanisation, which has not always been well-planned and which has paid scant attention to retaining any core historic heritage.

Manish Chakraborti, the conservation architect who founded ARCH in 1999, feels there should be a more 'social entrepreneurial' approach to preserving Calcutta's heritage buildings. This means, he says, that an economic rationale for restoration needs to be established. It is a concept that has been adopted successfully in Europe, where heritage buildings are not only tourist attractions but also used for offices, apartments and showrooms. In India, Rajasthan has become a highly successful tourist destination, where one can not only admire the old world through monuments

There is a pervasive apathy regarding the preservation of 'old things' – much less for anything as ethereal as architectural legacy.

but experience it through heritage hotels and related cultural shows.

Chakraborti emphasises that the re-use of old buildings is a way forward for a city and its economy, as the process includes a value that cannot otherwise be purchased. These ideas are intricately linked to modern civic attitudes about the past: urban centres need to be able to view their old buildings as more than just relics, but as integral and even useful parts of the landscape. But this will be a difficult ideology to propagate, Chakraborti notes: "The real-estate players are mostly the short-term players looking for quick profits with the least motivation to preserve heritage buildings. And the long-term players that do recognise the value of old buildings are few in number."

It is here that a role can be created for architects to become more imaginative in bringing together the past and present. As the late Pakistani architect Zaheer-ud-din Khwaja once said: "I feel that the younger generation of our architects should avoid being carried away and copying fracases from architectural magazines. They should have an independent, practical approach based firmly on architectural principals and the history of our cultural heritage, so as to have sympathy and empathy with our regional architecture."

In Calcutta, the Grand Hotel is a good example of an economically viable heritage building that has retained its 'old world' charm, while providing the demanded comfort of modern facilities. The mesmerising grandeur of the hotel creates an ambience that becomes inseparable from the larger idea of the city of Calcutta. The various social clubs that were built by the British during the 1800s are another example of Chakraborti's 'social entrepreneurial' approach to heritage conservation. These popular clubs preserve the history and architecture of their respective buildings, while at the same time providing members with modern dining, entertainment and accommodation facilities. In this process of cultural reclamation, such structures can no longer be considered mere residue of British rule – once again, they have become an integral part of the city's cultural fabric.

Fair trial

Whether well-maintained or not, Calcutta's historic buildings of all sorts must be seen as more than just museums. Instead, they must be allowed to become commercially viable properties, which can be put to use without being destroyed. This needs to be a process beyond just renovation and restoration, to encompass redevelopment.

With the current spike in conservation awareness, many have become optimistic about the future of the city's architectural legacy. Take, for instance, Dalhousie Square – now renamed B B D Bagh, after the three Indian freedom fighters who attacked the then-Inspector General of Prisons, during what was considered one of the more crucial parts of the freedom struggle in Bengal. The 2.5 km area in the heart of the city's business district has as many as 50 colonial buildings, including the Writers' Building, General Post Office and Lal Bazar, which is the police headquarters.

In 2005, Dalhousie Square was included on the biannual list of the world's 100 most endangered sites put together by the New York-based World Monuments Fund. Through a joint effort by ARCH and INTACH, Dalhousie Square is now the first 'Heritage Zone' in the city, with far-reaching plans afoot to revive the area. This means that authorities will be taking into consideration both the buildings and the surrounding environment, to create an ambience that celebrates the area's historic social and cultural significance. "The Dalhousie area was the seat of the first capital of the British Indian Empire, and it remained so for 137 years," Calcutta's mayor, Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya, said recently. "The area is now lying in a sorry state. We must preserve its colonial architecture and maintain the area in a befitting manner." Other heritage sites – Princep Ghats, Metcalfe Hall – have also been renovated, each of which brings a renewed energy to the city.

While many other projects are currently under consideration, steps to re-discovering Calcutta's past have only just begun. Most importantly, focus on a few grand heritage edifices must not obscure the need to preserve hundreds of more-modest structures – residences and office buildings alike – that must be conserved. If the city is to be serious about its newfound zeal for renovation, related laws need to be made more effective, and both funding and concrete plans need to be put in place to allow for timely intervention.

True, with Calcutta still plagued by development problems and teeming with under-privileged citizens, some critics question the usefulness of 'architectural legacy' and the conservation of old things. But as Sir Patrick Geddes, the Scottish biologist most well known for his pioneering work in Southasian urban planning, once wrote: "I do not advocate for the retention of things useless … I only plead for a fair trial before condemnation … and the open-minded consideration of each survival of the past and its value, whether as an actual asset or a possible one." ▲

Identities in an uncertain history

BY **AMIT DHOLAKIA**

In her earlier works, Nira Wickramasinghe, a history professor at the University of Colombo, explored diverse themes as ethnic politics, the role of civil society and the politics of clothing in Sri Lanka. In this new 360-page book, she offers up a narrative history of 20th century Sri Lanka through the prism of 'identities'. Groundbreaking changes in the modes of writing, understanding, interpreting and explaining history have occurred over the past two decades. Setting off from the post-colonial, post-structuralist and post-Orientalist historical perspectives that have been evolving through a loosely connected body of literature since the 1970s, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age* then breaks free from these previous approaches to make its own significant contribution to Sri Lankan historiography.

Critically interrogating the founding texts of Sri Lankan history, Wickramasinghe argues that the prevalent liberal, Marxist and nationalist interpretations of modern Sri Lanka succeed in telling only a part of the country's complex story. These approaches undervalue the role of the common people in major political developments, and the evolution of social identities. The book attempts to correct the biases of the positivist and static view of what constitutes political history, by exploring the impact of colonial and postcolonial knowledge and rules on the Sri Lankan people's consciousness, culture and identity. She challenges the idea of an essentially stagnant Sri Lankan society unaffected by colonial-era happenings.

The author works to deconstruct established understandings of national, ethnic and religious identities in Sri Lanka. She does this by decoding the myths of their continuity and monolithic character, which have long constituted the standard fare of most of the narratives of Sri Lankan nationhood. The Sinhala, Tamil, Buddhist and Sri Lankan identities have been continually constructed and reconstructed over the last hundred years in response to the political conditions of the colonial and post-Independence eras.

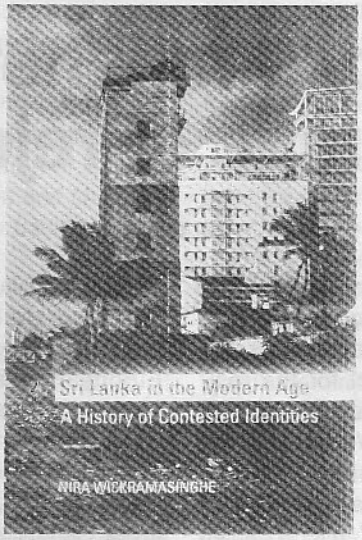
Wickramasinghe does not write 'ordered' history. She purposefully inserts disjunctions and discontinuities to open the reader's eyes to the uncertainties of history and identity. How vaguely defined identities were transformed into those of nation and territory forms the central theme of her book. The interaction between identities and their political milieu has taken place in many forms and through a multitude of agents. The cases analysed here demonstrate how Sri Lanka's communities negotiated modernity during the period of late colonialism, and how political consciousness was culturally grounded. The author's goal is to unravel the many layers of multifaceted associations between culture, identity and politics. The book sensitises the reader to the fact that Sri Lanka's multiple identities have not remained passive or dormant as social symbols. They have also been politicised into passive social movements and sometimes violent rebellions.

Apolitical splendours

Readers need not be misled by the book's title, and identify *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age* as a typical political history of the island nation. The book belongs to a different genre of Sri Lanka's political history than the type popularised by earlier historians such as K M de Silva, James Manor, James Jupp or C R de Silva. 'High politics' is only a peripheral subject of this work. The narration of regime changes or activities of political parties are conspicuously absent.

Of course, the author does discuss all the familiar political themes of modern Sri Lanka: the colonial conquest, Tamil migration, constitutional developments after Independence, Tamil separatism and violent ethnic conflicts, the role of the welfare state, the rise of civil society and so on. However, the point of reference for these themes is not the state or elites, but rather people and their political and cultural understandings.

This book is an illustration of a 'history from below' – an examination of the national from the local perspective. Wickramasinghe forcefully states that "writing a political history of the 20th century that does not incorporate the richness of multiple experiences is … an enterprise that lacks heart and soul." She therefore attempts to understand 20th century Sri Lanka not in the context of its institutionalised politics, upheavals and conflicts, but rather through the prism of its peoples and identity-centred politics. The study, therefore, captures the many-


Sri Lanka in the Modern Age
A History of Contested Identities
NIRA WICKRAMASINGHE

Sri Lanka in the Modern Age:
A history of contested identities
by Nira Wickramasinghe
University of Hawaii Press, 2006

splendoured aspects of the recent history of the country: the lifestyles, food and drink habits, changes in clothing, preferences for cosmetics and the like.

Through the exploration of images, practices and symbols, the book reflects upon the role of identities in addressing the country and its meaning. It highlights the growing recognition that there is no single, definitive interpretation of what constitutes Sri Lanka. The alternative perspectives presented here challenge the traditional and often misleading perceptions and representations of Sri Lankan nationhood, and suggest possible lines for its reinterpretation. The Sri Lankan nation thus becomes 'an imagined community' and an area of contestation.

Such an approach is in line with the post-Orientalist interpretation of the construction of social identities in Southasia. It resonates with what such scholars as Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha and Gyanendra Pandey accomplished during the 1980s under the rubric of subaltern studies – which studied history through the perspectives of non-elites – and later with respect to nationalism in India. While this work may not exactly be a subaltern history, it is an effort in that direction.

At another level, Wickramasinghe's work demonstrates flexibility in transcending many of the limitations of the subaltern project in India, particularly its Marxist shadow and the over-privileging of the peasantry as the 'underneath' of society. Importantly, unlike some of subaltern studies, her project does not remain one of fragmentary local histories – local and community histories are also contextualised within the national political context. Avoiding dichotomous ways of interpreting history, the author has not posited the local against the national or the non-political against the political, but sought to uncover the connections between them – though, in some cases, such connections are not very apparent.

Wickramasinghe has traversed vast ground in this theoretically informed and conceptually sound volume, a work that should be valuable both for the interested lay person and the professional historian. The author has the ability to write lucid, eloquent and absorbing history, and her narrative and absorbing style is coupled with a discursive approach that makes the work eminently readable. There is a dearth of good general histories on modern Sri Lanka, with most of the extant works on the era limiting themselves to examinations of specific themes such as ethnic politics, religious conflict and communalism. The present work is one of the very few books available that functions as a general history of 20th century Sri Lanka, albeit one that focuses on the evolution and transmutation of identities. The one disadvantage is that the book's wide canvas has left little scope for the author to dwell on any one aspect intensively.

Histories of peoples and communities – as distinguished from histories of the state – are difficult to write, and still more difficult to interpret. Wickramasinghe's critical reading of modern Sri Lankan history has raised a series of timely and trenchant questions. Hopefully this will inspire other scholars to carry out deeper investigations into the areas of modern Sri Lankan history into which she has delved, and to help to correct some of the biases and silences in the conventional histories of Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age* also engages in several boundary-crossing disciplinary experiments to appear, in the end, as a mixture of history, anthropology, cultural studies and political theory. The book should prove useful in furthering our understanding of the complex relationship between social identities and political process in the context not only of Sri Lanka, but of the larger Southasia as well.

Modernity's magnetism and the rage of rejects

BY **C K LAL**

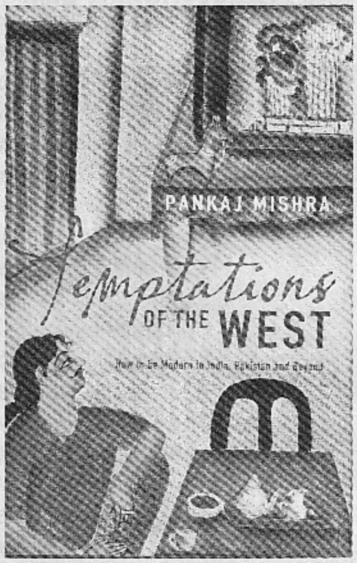
Ways of interpreting 'modernisation' in the West differ from the ways it is understood elsewhere. In the West, modernisation is seen as the triumph of rationality over tradition. But for the rest, traumatised by experiences of colonialism in direct or indirect forms, modernisation is not what Westerners think or say, it is what the colonial masters did and their progenies still do. Modernisation is a synonym of Westernisation – or worse, 'Westoxication', a term Iranian scholar Ahmad Fardid coined to depict minds "plagued by the West".

In trying to explore 'how to be modern in India, Pakistan and beyond', Pankaj Mishra has consciously ignored the urge of emancipated serfs to ape their former masters. He begins instead in 'An Area of Darkness', with all its Naipaulian allusions, at a time of turmoil wrought by repeated failures in replicating the European enlightenment, the European industrial revolution, and the European political experiments of Fabian Socialism, Marxism, Leninism and fascist Nationalism.

Mishra's Benaras reeks of decadence: an opium-addict, Panditji, in a half-derelict house; a scrawny boy who throws grenades at his former tormentors; a Brahmin student who loves Gandhi, hates Nehru, reads Faiz but is a contract killer. As the author absorbs the absurdities unfolding all around him, he reads the American literary critic Edmund Wilson to maintain his balance – and perhaps to prepare himself for membership in the select club of literati that prosper by pandering to the prejudices of the West. Some day, V S Naipaul is going to be blamed for inspiring a whole horde of what Gandhi once dismissed as "literary drain inspectors".

The book's chapter on Allahabad is written with feeling, and succeeds in capturing the mysteries of modernity in a stagnant society. Politicians of Prayag – both practising and wannabes – hope to achieve success in life. The model they have was given to them by the British, improvised upon by Jawaharlal Nehru and perfected by Indira Gandhi. It is based on the supposed glory of Mauryan or Mughal India, which can once again be achieved if only everyone follows the prescriptions of the Empire – of London or New Delhi – without questioning its intentions, instruments or methods.

Long after the yoke of colonialism has been cast off, its scars remain, most prominently on the psyche of the colonised population. The politicians of Prayag are politically free but psychologically shackled: they want to get ahead in life and then stay there at all costs. The author attributes this proclivity to status anxiety. That is part of the explanation, for sure. Missing from Mishra's account is the sentiment behind the alternatives that Gandhi and Jayprakash Narayan espoused, but that have never been tried by any of the mainstream parties: being true to oneself is the only guarantee of longevity in politics.



Mishra's chapter on Ayodhya is a politically correct, left-liberal interpretation of an important stage in the evolution of militant Hindutva. But it has neither the passion of a committed activist nor the detachment of an outside analyst. His explorations of Bombay and Bollywood are equally weak, lacking the sensitivity inherent in his experiences of Benaras and Allahabad. The author traverses the metropolis with the impatience of a reporter on an inflexible deadline – much of the research is done in advance, meetings are kept to a minimum and character profiles are impressionistic, lacking deep background or fresh insights.

Modernity's hammer

The second part of *Temptations of the West* begins on a bleak note. The massacre of 35 Sikhs in 2000 at Chitsinghpura has never been convincingly explained. Mishra takes unsuspecting readers into the labyrinth of insurgency and counter-insurgency, in a region that continues to carry the brutal legacy of a leader without ideology (Sheikh Abdullah), a king without values (Maharaja Hari Singh), a statesman without convictions (Jawaharlal Nehru) and a "pork-eating barrister from Bombay" who does not need to be named.

But even here, the author sometimes gets carried away by the prejudices of his target audience. A sentence such as, "The Pakistani army itself was infiltrated by Islamic fundamentalists; and the possibility of these fundamentalists seizing political power in a nuclear-armed Pakistan is ever present" may sound fine to a reader of *The New York Review of Books* or *The Times Literary Supplement*, but to a sceptical Southasian the London-based author needs to offer a little more by way of explanation for audacious observations such as this one.

Collusion of conflicting emotions is the central theme of the chapter on Pakistan. This is a country that was once imagined as the secure homeland of all Indian Muslims. It has turned out to be one of the most unsafe places in the world, including for the Muslim citizenry. Iqbal dreamt of fraternity, but the country he inspired into being is known for extreme fractiousness. Jinnah hoped for a Muslim-majority state administered in a secular manner, but the society he left behind is notorious for flashes of fanaticism. It is difficult to say what really went wrong with one of the biggest experiments of political engineering in human history – tearing apart a common culture and shared civilisation to create two unequal countries – but it is definitely not what the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington calls the 'clash of civilisations'.

Temptations of the West:
How to be modern in India,
Pakistan, Tibet and beyond
by Pankaj Mishra
Picador, 2006

Mishra captures the bewilderment of common Pakistanis through characters he catches off-guard – the frustrations of a sub-editor in Peshawar, the rage of a retired army general in Rawalpindi, the disenchantment of a former serf in Karachi. Their stories reveal the fragility of a state caught on the anvil of obscurantism as the hammer of modernity pounds incessantly.

Despite the risks taken in reporting from a conflict zone, stories from Afghanistan often lack the authenticity of firsthand accounts. Some of Mishra's factoids are indeed interesting: "Afghanistan … supplied 87 percent of the world's heroin," "28 out of the country's 32 provinces now grow poppy," and "the CIA was complicit in the drug trade." But so what? This chapter needs a premise to give meaning to diligently compiled details.

The chapter on Nepal is quintessential parachutism – reporting done on the run so as not to miss the fleeting interest of a Western audience in a country before it falls off the map. It has all the works: conversations with a businessman in touristy Thamel, an encounter with the father of the progenitor of armed insurrection in idyllic Chitwan, and the roar of former US ambassador Michael Malinowski: "These terrorists, under the guise of Maoism

Regional Advisor (Center of Learning-EVAW)

Oxfam

Ref	INT1930
Region	South Asia
Location	New Delhi
Division	International
Position Type	Open Ended
Job Family	Programme
Grade	C1/ National
Closing date	3 Nov 2006 (23:59 GMT)

Job Profile

Oxfam GB is an international organization working with others to reduce poverty and suffering, in over 70 countries, across the world. South Asia region supports six countries Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

The objective of the End Violence Against Women (EVAW) advisory team based in South Asia is to help define, develop and deliver a strategic and high quality advisory service to different regions on ending violence against women. This will be achieved through leading, coordinating and supporting delivery of the We Can Campaign, supporting the development of a significant body of experience and expertise on addressing violence against women. We are looking for a Regional Adviser (Center of Learning - EVAW) to support the campaign by developing and disseminating learning from We Can campaign through the Centre of Learning network.

Dimensions

- Coordination and delivery of agreed plans or strategies. Strategic inputs especially in shaping learning objectives for EVAW regionally and globally.
- Providing specialist advice and specific skills to regional teams and allies.
- Represent Oxfam in coordination meetings and some external relationships.
- Required to analyse and use programme information to support strategic planning for significant impact in one programme area.
- Active role in campaigning, lobbying and advocacy on EVAW issues.
- Produce clear and quality reports that demonstrate good accountability.

Key Responsibilities

- Take direct responsibility for developing and disseminating learning from We Can campaign through the Centre of Learning network.
- To support We Can campaign teams in other South Asian countries as and when needed.
- To actively support development of an organisation wide network on EVAW/gender equality work practitioners.
- To maintain regional overview of campaign through participation in strategic planning and documenting and disseminating the campaign development on an on-going basis.
- To respond to information and reporting needs by the line management and donors in relation to the current campaign and Centre of Learning initiatives.

Skills and Competence

- Well-developed analytical and planning skills.
- In-depth knowledge of specific area of work with a postgraduate qualification in the related field of study.
- Ability to identify and implement opportunities for innovation.
- Proven ability to develop and manage institutional relationships.
- Excellent communication and representation skills.
- Strong understanding of gender and HIV/AIDs issues and experience in integrating these into programme practice.

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or the so-called 'people's war', are fundamentally the same as terrorists elsewhere – be they members of Shining Path, Abu Sayaf, the Khmer Rouge or al-Qaeda."

What redeems the Nepal section, however, is even weaker account of Tibet in the last chapter of the book, dismissed simply as 'A Backward Country'. *Temptations of the West* appears to be a collection of rehashed articles previously published elsewhere. The connecting theme of modernity appears to have been superimposed as an afterthought.

Fred W Riggs, the International Relations professor who coined the concept of a 'prismatic society' evolving on the threshold of tradition and modernity, uses the terms 'ortho-modern' and 'para-modern' to refer to the aspects or repercussions of modernisation considered to be positive and negative respectively. He says:

> We have yet to see, I think, that the negative consequences of modernity, its para-modern aspects, are as much a product of modernisation as the ortho-modern achievements which we justifiably celebrate. In popular usage, 'modernity' refers only to 'ortho-modernity,' and the 'para-modern' consequences of modernisation are viewed as residues of traditionalism. We still need to learn that the para-modern is truly modern – the dark side of the moon is as lunar as the bright side. From its early beginnings, the para-modern and the ortho-modern have been linked and both are equally 'modern'. This point is so important that it bears frequent repetition.

In *Temptations of the West*, Mishra shows the 'para-modern' part of modernity without understanding the processes at work in Southasian societies. That is just as well, because when the author is brilliant when he shows rather than tells, but his tales turn out to be tiresome. The pathos of the seemingly distracting description of the jade-green shawl of a grieving mother in Chitsinghpura leaves the reader shaken. In comparison, Mishra can also repeat clichés, such as: "Tibetans now confront a dissolute capitalism: one that seeks arrogantly, and often violently, to turn all of the world's diverse humanity into middle-class consumers."

Naipaulian parallels with the plot notwithstanding, much of Mishra's prose is laboured, a distinctive mark of writers who have learned English as a second language and are overeager to display their mastery over the masters' phraseology. Mishra's Southasian cows are emaciated, dogs mangy and every human character best exemplified by his flaws. Had these stories been woven into a novel, it would have been a riveting book. But in the form of non-fiction, the book has too much detail and too little insight to make it an interesting read. But the curry-kebab crowd in the West will undoubtedly love *Temptations*: it is conveniently middle-brow, affirms prejudices and leaves the status quo unquestioned. It has already been declared "a very good and original book" by a haughty *Economist* reviewer. A more critical reader is left to wonder, however, what is so original about blaming the victim for the pathologies of colonialism; Orientalists have been doing it for centuries. ▲

Dooty par jaana hai

BY **UMA MAHADEVAN-DASGUPTA**

Sadat Hasan Manto, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Suketu Mehta and Gregory Roberts are only some of the many writers who have written about Bombay. The city contains a multitude of stories, and books will certainly continue to be written about it. *Sacred Games*, Vikram Chandra's 900-page epic of crime and punishment, is the newest entrant to this distinguished list.

Seemingly everything about the author's life has gone into the making of this novel. The made-for-cinema style of storytelling draws from his film family. The narrative elegance is shaped by his apprenticeship with the American writers John Barth and Donald Barthelme. The self-assured prose comes with experience – Chandra's debut novel, the magic-realist *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, and his collection of interconnected short stories *Love and Longing in Bombay* won awards and acclaim. Even Sartaj Singh, the compelling protagonist of *Sacred Games*, comes from one of the stories in Chandra's second book.

Sacred Games is made up of all this, and much more. Meticulously structured and tautly told, it is the kind of novel that one reads hungrily, turning the pages but lingering over every paragraph and sentence, wanting to get to the end but not wanting the book to end at all.

Sacred Games
by Vikram Chandra
Penguin/Viking, 2007

The novel begins with one of the casual, absurd little tragedies that dot the landscape of this unforgiving city. A man has just thrown his wife's pet Pomeranian out of their fifth-floor window. When the police break in, the wife has a knife in her hand. Throughout "Policeman's Day", the opening chapter, inspector Sartaj Singh will continue to encounter absurdities, as he drops in at the commissioner's press conference, puts the fear of the law into a delinquent boy at his mother's request, and makes a preliminary check into a violent killing in his territory. He also fleetingly remembers the words of a murderer who managed to get out on parole: *"Paisa phek, tamasha dekh"*(Throw money and watch the fun). Which, Sartaj reflects, is the truth about life in this city: "If you had money to throw, you could watch the spectacle – the judges and magistrates trapezing blithely, the hoop-jumping politicians, the red-nosed cops."

So it has been that kind of day for Sartaj Singh, in that kind of world – collecting *hafta* from a dance bar, informing the bar manager about an impending raid, even fixing up the arrest of a few dancers ("The new shosha is ruthless discipline and honesty," he explains with irony). But he also promises that the girls will be dropped home before dawn. All in a day's work. It is only as Sartaj is dropping off to sleep that he gets a phone call asking whether he wants the gangster Ganesh Gaitonde.

The novel alternates between the story of Gaitonde's rise and fall with that of Sartaj's slow, low-profile, exhausting investigation into the gangster's death. The contrast between the impersonal, task-oriented titles of the Sartaj chapters ("Investigating Women", "Burying the Dead", "Investigating Love") and the self-aggrandising titles of the Gaitonde chapters ("Ganesh Gaitonde Sells His Gold", "Ganesh Gaitonde Acquires Land", "Ganesh Gaitonde Explores the Self") reflects the choices each has made in life. Parallel strands of the plot move in different directions: while Gaitonde tells his life story, from his nightmarish small-town childhood to his comet-like flourish across Bombay and beyond, Sartaj tries to piece together a record of the past to prevent horrific destruction in the future.

The novel achieves its coherence from this puzzle. The basic plot is a cops-and-robbers story, but as this story progresses we see games being played at deeper levels. Gaitonde begins his career by calling the shots, but soon becomes a pawn in bigger games. Sartaj is also playing a part in an operation far larger than himself – but, not being a shooting star like Gaitonde, and instinctively understanding at least some of the rules, he survives.

Duty was love

The narrative is not only about moves and countermoves. It is sustained by its moments of intense feeling – the suddenness of loss, the pain of having to betray a friend – but the melancholy wisdom that it offers is that the losses and betrayals are also part of the game. Meanwhile, other disparate characters wash up on the shores of the story like migrants to this island city by the sea, and the novel manages to hold them all together. Teeming with people and their individual histories, the book races back and forth between past and present, darkness and daylight, like the trains that whip across the cityscape.

One of the striking things about the novel is the sheer ordinariness of its central protagonist. Sartaj is not a typical hero, is not squeaky clean or incorruptible. Rather he is already part of the system, in his forties, recovering from a failed marriage, struggling with loneliness after a day's work. Yet we also see in him a man with a job to do, trying to do his work steadily, a man who has not forgotten how to think or feel, and who is not without a sense of personal ethics.

西藏扶贫基金会

TIBET POVERTY ALLEVIATION FUND
Terms of Reference: Project Director

Background
Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund has proposed to USAID a project designed to demonstrate ways to increase and diversify employment and income generating opportunities and to improve basic health conditions for ago pastoral and pastoral communities living in the Tibet Autonomous Region with a total population of 39,173 villagers. Project activities will seek to:
1. Increase incomes of poor households and communities above the government's 1,300 RMB average family annual per capita income poverty threshold through the provision of skills training, and provision of credit;
2. Strengthen livestock management and rangeland protection practices.
3. Support Tibetan culture by supporting the development of traditional artisan ;
4. Introduce improved family and community health, hygiene and nutrition practices.

Responsibilities of the USAID Project Director
1. The USAID Project Director will provide overall leadership to the TPAF staff for implementation of USAID project activities. He will also collaborate closely with staff of World Education implementing their subcontract.
2. Provide ongoing leadership, supervision and support to all USAID funded project staff to help ensure timely, effective implementation of all project activities;
3. Oversee project staff work plans, operating procedures and reporting responsibilities to help ensure the timely and effective monitoring and reporting on project implementation;
4. Provide regularly quarterly reporting to the donor on the progress in implementing all project activities;
5. Ensure regular reporting to the TAR Government (Poverty Alleviation Office and Foreign Affairs Bureau) on USAID Project activities.

Requisites
1. Prior development experience in an Asian developing country and experience with USAID operating procedures preferable;
2. Prior experience with EXCEL and Quickbooks accounting software preferable;
3. Basic speaking knowledge of Mandarin and/or Tibetan preferable.

Duty Station - Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region

Salary - $45-50,000 annually with benefits

Contact - Arthur Holcombe, President, TPAF at arthurholcombe@tpaf.org
Tel.: 617-491-8689

As Sartaj makes his way through the city's streets, moments of Bombay description are quite remarkable. Here is an ironworks shed in a fictionalised version of Dharavi:

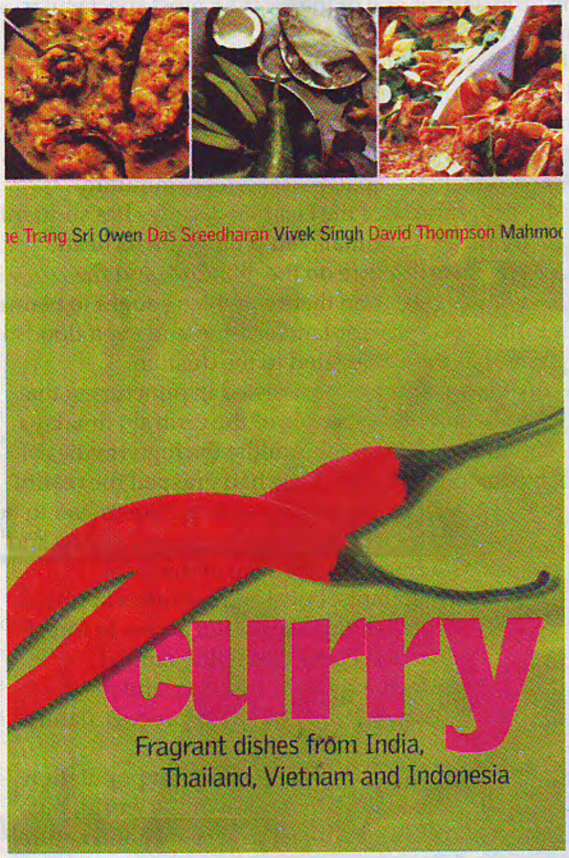
> There were no lights inside the workshop, just two livid streams of sunlight pouring through the roof, heating the glow of the molten iron as it slushed into the moulds and the faces of the nearly naked men who worked the bellows with their feet, stepping up high and then down in a slow and endless climb.

This is a novel of Bombay – where ordinary working people read the *Mid-day*, hang onto train straps, grab a *vada-pav* after work, while crime and policing are supposed to be side stories that happen around them. But as violence long ago became a central narrative in this city, a great deal of the novel is set within the minds of this policeman and criminal, who are more like each other than they would imagine. Their thoughts curve obsessively around Bombay's streets, inhabiting its spaces, possessing its geography, shaping it with their longings, caring for its safety. "A low, yellow haze flitted behind the buildings as Sartaj drove. The streets were quiet. Sartaj imagined the citizens sleeping in their millions, safe for one more night…"

Sacred Games is also a great novel of India. In one inset, Sartaj's mother remembers her childhood during the Partition riots. In another, a retired intelligence officer remembers the turbulences of later decades – China, Naxalbari, East Pakistan, Sikh militancy, "This constant long war, with its hidden and unsung victories" – and also the sub-plot of a Yadav making a career within a Brahmin-dominated organisation. With notable effortlessness, the novel traverses the history of the Subcontinent, recalling not only the many griefs but also the steady struggle forward.

Chandra's prose is an uncompromising blend of Bambaiyya Hindi and English – no italics, no translation, no glossary – creating an edgy strangeness that keeps us attentive to the nuances of words: a *ghoda* in the underworld, *khoon* in Punjab, a 'device' in the language of intelligence agents, *moksha* in the language of religion. Language is also a powerful way for the characters to shape their destinies. They struggle with its complexity, creating new vocabularies, articulating their feelings, trying to make meaning of their experiences.

Gaitonde hungers to learn English, works hard at it, orders a prostitute to "speak English" while they are having sex. Sartaj remembers his father taking an English word and making it his own, saying *"Arre chetti kar, dooty par jaana hai,"* (Hurry up, I have to go on duty) to fashion the simple sense of duty that guided his life. At the end of this splendid novel is another quiet realisation about the interconnectedness of the world and the inevitability of loss: "There was no avoiding this conundrum, no escape from it, and no profit from complaining about it. Love was duty, and duty was love." ▲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Fragrant dishes from India,
Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia

Curry

Fragrant dishes from India, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia

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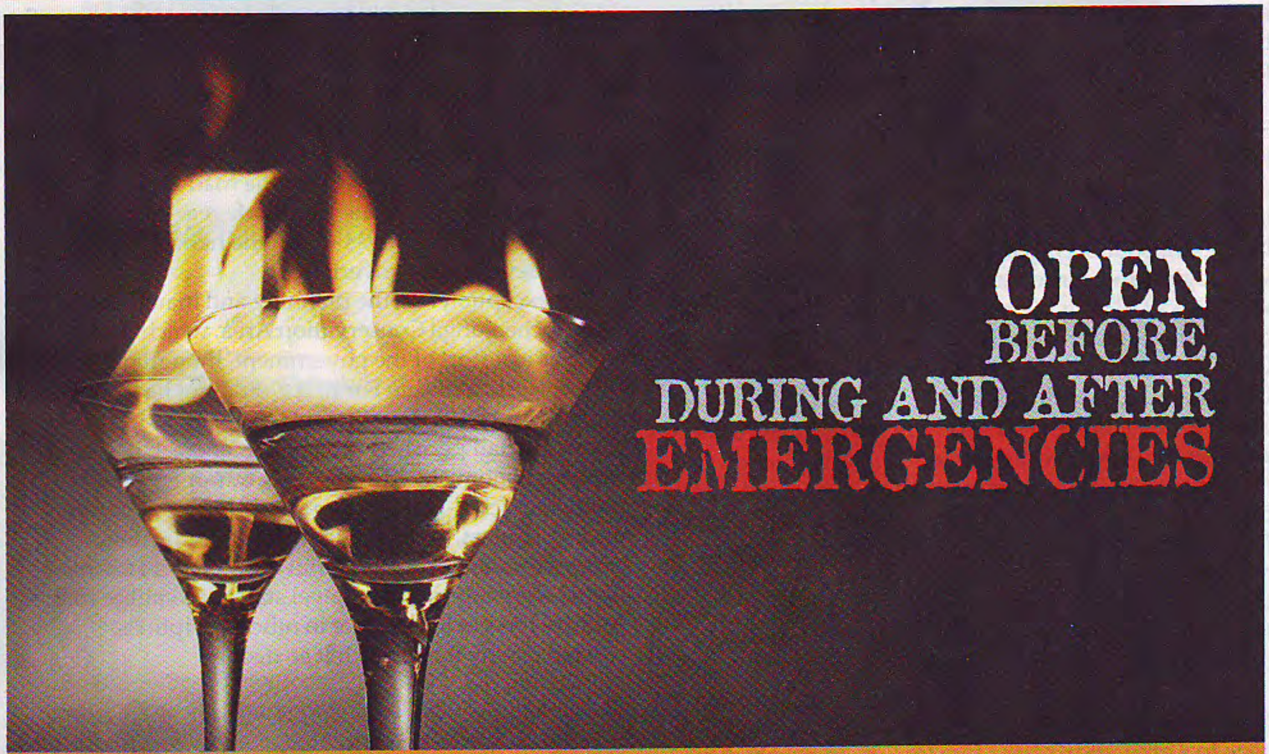
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Departure of a climax species

On the way up

KANAK MANI DIXIT

It used to be that the sound of helicopters in Nepali skies was cause for dread, for two reasons. First, it could mean there was an insurgency attack somewhere, and the helicopters were ferrying the dead and wounded. The thud of MI-17 helicopters after dark caused added anxiety for beleaguered civilians in remote district headquarters. Second, in the latter days of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, a 'Royal' Nepal Army unable to take on swift-footed insurgents on the ground had decided on a strange tactic: lobbing mortar shells from helicopters onto populated hillsides. They scared the rebels alright, but also everybody else in the line of mortar fire.

KUMAR ALE

Harka Gurung, who died

With a ceasefire in place since April and the Maoist leaders to be found in Kathmandu seminar halls (and suddenly taking to foreign junkets), the guns are now silent in Nepal – although their threat remains. The Maoists still hold the gun in their hands, hoping to gain maximum mileage during the ongoing negotiations. Meanwhile, the military helicopters are mostly grounded, as are the chartered private rotary wings that in the past have landed stuffed with the bodies of dead policemen.

But helicopters still cause death in Nepal. On 23 September, an MI-18 crashed headlong into a clouded hillside in eastern Nepal, instantly wiping out a whole category of wildlife and conservation expertise, including, as one report had it, "outstanding planners, biologists, botanists, geographers, ecologists, sociologists and conservation managers". In this group was Harka Gurung, a longtime, multidisciplinary pillar of Nepali geographical scholarship. Then there was Gopal Rai, Minister of State for Forests and Soil Conservation, as well as his wife. Narayan Poudel was director-general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation; Mingma Norbu Sherpa hailed from the Khumbu heartland of Nepal, and was director of the World Wildlife Fund's Eastern Himalayas Programme; Chandra Gurung, from Sikles village in central Nepal, gave life to the innovative Annapurna Conservation Area Project; Tirtha Man Maskey was a forester who gave life back to the gharial crocodile by developing innovative breeding in captivity…

The list goes on and on. This was a dedicated group of Nepali and international conservationists, on their way back to Kathmandu after Minister Rai, on behalf of the government, had officially transferred management of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area to local communities. At the ceremony prior to boarding the helicopter, Mingma Norbu Sherpa had said that it was "a historic day for one of the world's most spectacular natural treasures".

If there was one discipline where modern-day Nepal had developed some top-notch expertise, it was in the arena of wildlife conservation and habitat protection, particularly where it came to involving communities in habitat protection. Nepal's successful community-forestry programme of the last two decades has suddenly turned the study of Himalayan ecology on its head. Across Nepal, forests are on the rebound, and the 'Himalayan degradation theory', which sought to blame the midhill peasantry for land erosion and even floods in the plains, has been relegated to the dustbin.

Many of the experts who assisted in puncturing that theory on behalf of the people of the central Himalaya perished in the MI-18 crash, amidst the high ravines of the Kanchenjunga region. They had grasped the reality that in populated regions, forests had to be protected and wildlife conserved first and foremost for the sake of the local inhabitants. Local communities in turn benefited through better access to forest produce, cultural stability amidst dislocating modernisation, and enhanced tourism. In the process, nature got conserved.

Nepal, having the highest population density for any region of the world, but endowed with natural beauty and natural resources, was the ideal laboratory for seeking an evolution away from the colonial era practice of promoting wildlife reserves to the exclusion of the people. Indeed, those in the helicopter were a climax species of sorts: of conservationists who understood both natural science and people science. At a time when Nepal has entered a confusing transitional phase on the road to peace after 11 years of violent insurgency and state reaction, there have been almost no initiatives worth the name from the interim seven-party government.

The exception was the planning and inauguration of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, which stands alone as an effort of the government, though prodded on by the World Wildlife Fund. It would not have mattered quite so much if a dozen people from any other discipline had perished in a helicopter crash in Nepal – be they economists, educationists, administrators, politicians, civil-society actors, NGO administrators, urban planners, architects, journalists, or business proprietors and executives. But these conservationists of Nepal were international-level stars, of a calibre that the country has yet to generate in other disciplines.

That is why the loss is felt so deeply.

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