March 2007 Vol 20 No 3

HIMAL SOUTHASIAN

CULTURE OF THEFT 44

SOUTHASIAN CENTURY

India discovers the region

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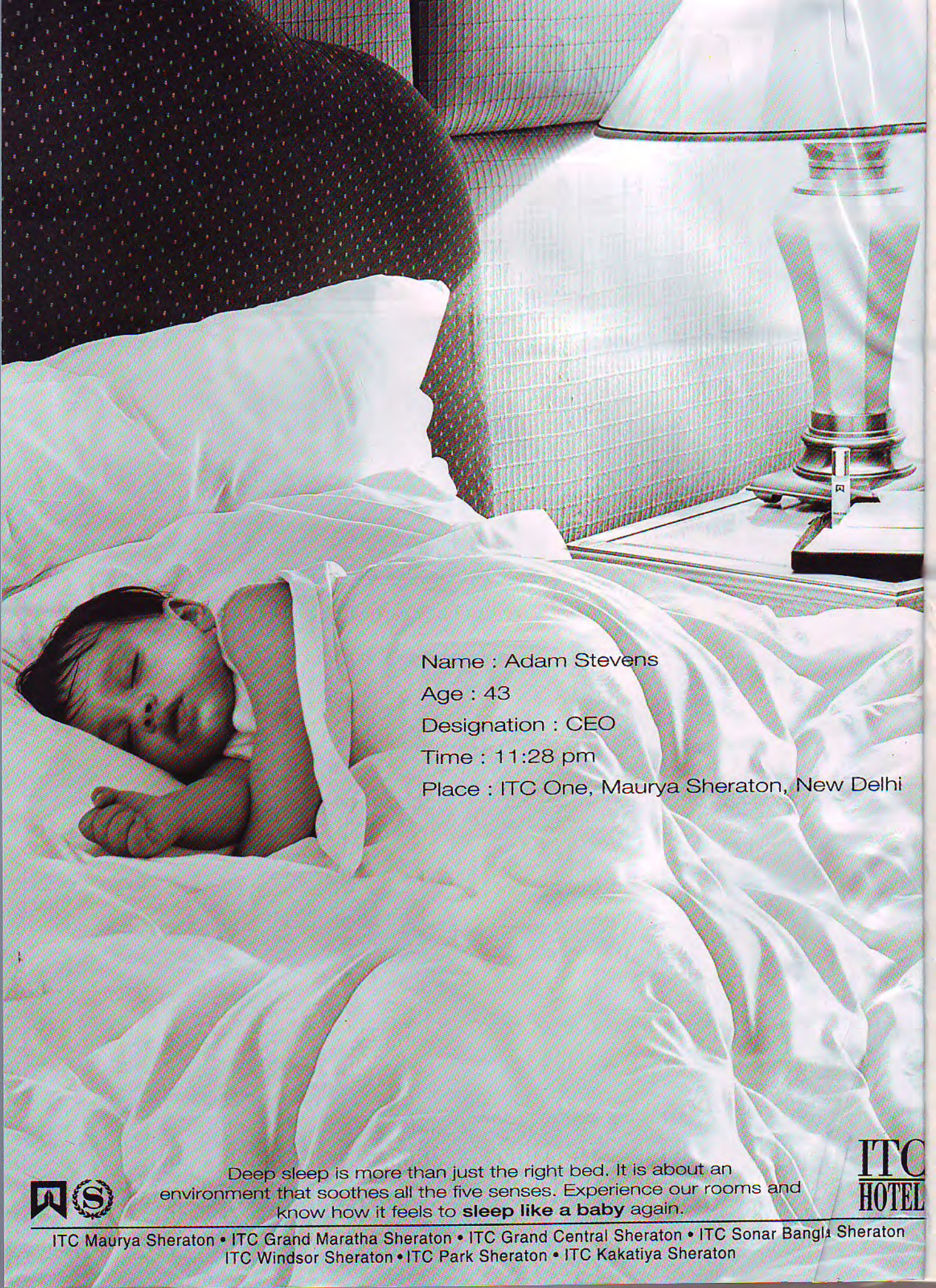

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India discovers Southasia

It has taken two long decades following the establishment of SAARC, but India finally seems to have boarded the Southasian train. As New Delhi prepares to take over from Dhaka as chair of SAARC during the first week of April, the managers of Indian foreign policy are giving out enthusiastic sound bites on Southasian regionalism. They say that it is in India's self-interest to make peace with its neighbours. All of which is great news for those of us who believe that regionalism's dividend is not only a safer Southasia, but also a more prosperous one.

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Office address
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Mailing address
GPO Box: 24393, Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel: +977 1 5547279
Fax: +977 1 5552141
editorial@himalmag.com
subscription@himalmag.com
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Contributors to this issue

Asif Saleh is the founder and executive editor of Drishtipat, a Bangladeshi diaspora human-rights organisation based in London. He is also a regular op-ed contributor to *Daily Star*.

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

C Raja Mohan is a professor at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and a consulting editor for the *Indian Express*.

Dilrukshi Handunnetti is investigations editor at *The Sunday Leader* in Colombo. She is a lawyer by training.

Dinesh Kumar Mishra is an activist, engineer and convenor of the Barh Mukti Abhiyan. He is based in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand.

Imtiaz Ahmed is a professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka. This article is based on a keynote paper presented at a seminar organised by the Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh, in April 2006.

Moeed Yusuf is a consultant on economic policy at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute in Islamabad, and is a regular commentator for The Friday Times.

Moyukh Chatterjee is a student of Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics.

Mritiunjoy Mohanty is an assistant professor of Economics at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta.

Pankaj Sekhsaria is author of the book *Troubled Islands*, a collection of writings on the indigenous peoples and environment of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, published in 2003.

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta is a journalist and educator in Delhi. A former TV anchor, he has co-authored a book on coalition politics in India and directed several documentary films. Research assistance for this article was provided by Pratibha Mahindru.

Patrick Hoenig is a visiting professor at the Academy of Third World Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi.

Sabir Nazar is a Lahore-based cartoonist with *The Friday Times* and the *Daily Times*.

Siddharth Anand is a Delhi-based journalist.

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

Surendra Mohan is a long-time socialist leader from New Delhi.

Ted Riccardi is professor emeritus at Columbia University, and author of a Sherlock Holmes novel. He is currently affiliated with the Social Science Baha in Kathmandu.

Urvish Kothari is a journalist based in Ahmedabad.

Cover image: Subhas Rai

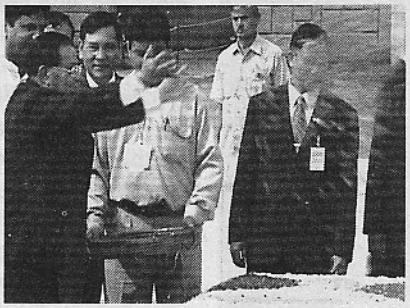
Creative diplomacy

The cover stories on Burma in the February issue of *Himal* provided new perspectives in looking at the relationship between Burma's pro-democracy movement and India's civil society. The stories covered a host of issues that have long baffled academia, policymakers and political activists alike. The essays presented not only reflected the complexity of the 'Burma question', but offered alternative ways in dealing with it.

Two perspectives are currently emerging on this issue. On the one hand is the 'traditionalist', who argues for isolation of and sanctions on Burma, and supports such measures as tools for regime change. The 'realist', on the other hand, believes that efforts toward political change need to take into account Burma's complex history, society and politics, and to support engagement based on such an understanding.

The essays presented are evidence of this divide. The traditionalist sees the issue of Burma in a narrow, binary perspective, by reducing it to 'democracy v tyranny'. The realist perspective is essentially a reaction against such an approach. Furthermore, the two differ on what issues should receive the most emphasis. The traditionalist focuses on democracy and political change, which the realist thinks undermines equally important challenges – poverty, development, health and education, and the like.

Thant Myint-U (*"Reframing the 'Burma question'"*) belongs to the realist school. While he admits that the Rangoon junta is responsible for many of the problems that Burma faces today, he believes that a good understanding of the country is crucial before making a judgment on the problem. The question of what comes first – development or democracy – is similar to the chicken-and-egg puzzle. Myint-U argues that economic development can open up "real options" for democratic change in the context of Burma. This point needs to be taken into account by both the regional and international communities while formulating policies on the 'Burma question'.



Burma's geo-strategic importance has been changing, primarily as a result of its recently discovered oil and gas reserves. While pro-democracy supporters have raised strong warnings against any cooperation with the junta in this sector, linking energy policy to democracy is, at best, an ineffective criticism. Regardless, the neighbouring energy-hungry economies will remain focused on one thing in particular: how to keep their economic engines running. Because protest against such policies may not "cut much ice", as Kim notes in his article (*"Oil in the eyes"*), the focus needs to be on building constituencies that can act as pressure groups towards various governments and corporations.

Soe Myint has offered a more sensible argument in his essay on India's Burma policy (*"Government to government: The distasteful Burma-India embrace"*). Though critical about New Delhi's engagement with the junta, he also identifies the shortcomings of the pro-democracy movement. Kim likewise says that two factors are responsible for the failure to instil support from the Indian political and intellectual classes: "West-centric" tendencies and lack of a "strong public campaign within India". This perspective provides a more balanced view in seeing the movement vis-à-vis India.

The effort by *Himal* in bringing out the cover package on Burma is highly appreciable. In the words of Thant Myint-U, this can be seen as "the first step to knowing better how to help Burma today". This calls for all concerned to see and deal with the 'Burma question' as it is, not just how it should be.

K Yhome
New Delhi

Can't fire me...

The February article "Indian Blogs and MSM" by Shivam Vij refers to the Indian Institute of Planning and Management (IIPM) sending me a legal notice, and discusses its aftermath. He writes: "In the brouhaha that followed, the management institute even managed to pressure the employer of one of the bloggers into sacking him." This is factually incorrect. IBM, my employer did not sack me or pressurise me in any way. I resigned on my own.

I am surprised to see such an error in an article by Shivam Vij, who was one of the bloggers actively involved in spreading awareness about this issue. I am certain he knows that I resigned and was not sacked: he himself wrote so on his own blog, and has been in regular touch with me over email.

Gaurav J Sabnis
Pennsylvania State University

Shivam Vij responds:

An editorial in *Business Today* magazine had given the impression that, "depending upon whose version you believe", Gaurav Sabnis either resigned or was sacked. I wanted to maintain the ambiguity by saying that he had to leave, but in a hurry ended up writing that he was sacked. I maintain the highest respect for Mr Sabnis's brave conduct when faced with bullying from a powerful, unethical institution. I regret the inconvenience thus caused to him.

Send your comments, questions and corrections to editorial@himalmag.com

NEPAL

A country in interim

NEPALNEWS

Mourning the first 16 killed in the Tarai uprising

Nepal's mainstream politicians understand both how to fight an autocratic king and how to negotiate with insurgents. But they sure do not know how to deal with agitations for rights by historically disfranchised communities. Partly, this is due to an unwillingness to share political space; partly, it is an inability to show sensitivity to something as dearly held as a community's identity.

Nepal has been on an anarchic rollercoaster since King Gyanendra's autocracy was defeated last April, with the attention of Kathmandu's political class and civil society turned on getting the Maoists to finally relinquish their guns and enter the political mainstream. Even while the community leaders in the Federation of Nationalities, for example, fumed at not being consulted, the politicians and Maoists devoted themselves to writing an unnecessarily detailed interim constitution, to pave the way for the insurgents to join the interim Parliament and interim government. It is now the task of the interim government to organise elections for the Constituent Assembly before the monsoon season in early June, but the many unresolved issues confronting the populace are making that date look well nigh impossible.

The agreement on the holding of a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution was a face-saving move for the Maoist leadership, which had given up its 'people's war' midstream as unworkable. But the need for a new constitution was more deeply felt by the various communities of the diverse Nepali populace – differentiated by class, caste, ethnicity, faith, language, region and even altitude – who had come to believe that the restructuring of the state through a new constitution was needed in order to access the rights and opportunities thus far denied them. The eight political parties in command – now including the Maoists – barely made a show of consulting the leadership of the various communities in the decisions they made over the autumn and winter of 2006-07.

The flare-up in the Tarai plains is part and parcel of a willing lack of understanding and sensitivity towards 'non-establishment' communities by all – including the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which is beginning to look like any other hill-centric *pahade* party. There are several reasons why the Tarai erupted over the course of January and February, but the most important is that the peoples of plains origin felt that they would be under-represented in the all-important Constituent Assembly elections, and thereby lose yet another opportunity to be counted as full citizens.

Madhes Movement

The mixed-ballot system agreed upon by the eight parties for the Constituent Assembly polls – in which half of the seats would be contested under the traditional direct-voting system, while the other half would be assigned through a system of proportional representation – was not considered adequate because the electoral constituencies discriminated against the densely populated Tarai (also known as Madhes, a more culturally invested name that some prefer). More importantly, the Tarai populace had long experienced candidates of hill origin being given a disproportionate number of tickets come election-time.

The Kathmandu politicians proved unable or unwilling to understand the depth of feeling that united the various communities of the Tarai – from the 'indigenous' groups such as the Tharu, across the caste spectrum to the speakers of Awadhi, Maithili and Bhojpuri, and to the country's normally ultra-docile Muslims. All these communities came together against the reality and perception of hill domination, which had not only denied them access to jobs and opportunities – the army has historically been out of bounds, for example – but even to a national identity that was fashioned around the markers of midhill caste and ethnicity.

Complicating the government's response was the presence of the CPN (Maoist) as a belligerent newcomer to power in Kathmandu, and one still in the process of dropping its arms. A Maoist splinter group was part of the Tarai furore, and so the Maoist command was all for crushing the agitation. In the meantime, even while Kathmandu's politicians sought to blame both India-based Hindutva elements and reactionary royalists, the Tarai rose up in a movement that can only be likened to the People's Movement of April 2006. This was a plains population demanding its right to be part of the Nepali state and mainstream society.

Before anyone knew it, Nepal was ensconced in a hill-plain communal divide. An under-motivated and leaderless police force – which had languished for too long, as Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula focused on his assignment as the main interlocutor with the Maoists – was let loose on the demonstrators. Thirty-one people died, most of whom were of Tarai origin, with neither the rest of the country nor the world taking sufficient notice. Meanwhile, hill people lived under increasing insecurity in the eastern half of the Tarai.

Girija Prasad Koirala, for whom this new stridency and

violence linked to identity politics seemed uncharted terrain, made a ham-handed attempt to stop the agitation with a speech that did not even pay respect to the memory of the dead. Another speech followed, promising additional seats in Tarai constituencies to cater to population concentration. This proved a temporary palliative, while the Tarai activists demanded the resignation of Sitaula, which was not forthcoming – the Maoists in particular rushing to his defence.

As we go to press, the Tarai is again gearing up for agitation. There is every likelihood that the organisations of hill ethnicities will make renewed demands for further representation. It is also likely that Dalits from both the hills and the Tarai will be the next to rise. The Maoists have raised unrealistic and impractical hopes of self-rule by calling for 'ethnic federalism' in a country where the castes and ethnicities have largely been geographically inter-mixed over the past century and a half. Following the violence of the Maoists (and now their splinter group in the Tarai), there is a feeling gaining ground that it takes violence to be heard in the power corridors of Kathmandu.

No rest in sight

If the simultaneous – and often violence-prone – risings of suppressed voices and communities were not enough, the situation was compounded by Prime Minister Koirala's government's inability to get a handle on administration and establish a sense of rule of law. While the Maoists have now (it is fervently hoped) handed most of their guns to United Nations monitors, their militarist mindset nonetheless remains in place. How Constituent Assembly elections will be able to take place in the midst of ongoing intimidation by former insurgents is a crucial question just beginning to exercise human-rights defenders.

As if Nepali society did not have enough problems, King Gyanendra seems to think that it will not be long before the confusion and chaos will bring him back to centre stage as something of a national saviour. Though such an assumption would be extremely dim-witted, this is by now his known trait, and is apparently why he tells visitors to the Narayanhiti palace to "wait and see". As if on cue, Gyanendra made an unauthorised, self-laudatory address to the country in mid-February on the occasion of Democracy Day, providing additional ammunition for those who believe that the autocrat in him is still biding its time. It increasingly seems that Nepal's historic monarchy will be done in by the current incumbent – and that there will be few tears shed.

It is impossible to say now how the Nepali polity will evolve in the months ahead, between political elites trying to protect their entrenched interests, an autocratic king thinking he can still make a comeback, a Maoist force hardly humbled by the evaporation of its 'people's war', and communities all over agitated about losing a place at the table. Things seem to be nearly beyond the grasp of the ailing 85-year-old Koirala, who succeeded in besting the king and negotiating with the Maoists. Will he be able to respond to the clamour for inclusion and finally take a well-earned rest?

INDIA/PAKISTAN

The tragedy and promise of Samjhauta

As soon as the peace momentum between India and Pakistan picks up, expect a dastardly militant attack. The killing of innocents has come to reflect both the strength and the vulnerability of the peace process: it shows that extremist groups feel so insecure about their political space that they are willing to engineer terrorist attacks, with an eye towards creating misunderstanding and derailing bilateral engagement. Unfortunately, they have often succeeded in their aim, most significantly after the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001.

In the past few years, we have argued in these pages that the people and governments of India and Pakistan are on the same side, battling against radical violent outfits opposed to reason and moderation. It has not been a popular position, with many pointing to the deep-rooted conflict between the two countries. Some Indians claim that this school of thought ignores the reality of 'crossborder terrorism' supported by Islamabad, while many Pakistanis talk about the Indian reluctance to move on Kashmir as indicative of New Delhi's underlying motives.

On 18 February, militant groups took to a characteristically brutal way of clarifying the political equation – as well as where they stood – for both policymakers and the public at large. The blasts on the Delhi-Attari-Lahore Samjhauta Express, which took place immediately before midnight, killed 68 people, most of them Pakistanis. The symbolism of the attack could not have been starker. Here were passengers, most from Muslim families divided by Partition, returning home on a rail link that epitomises both people-to-people contact and basic inter-state cooperation. It was the first time that Pakistani civilians had died in a terrorist attack on

REUTERS

Indian soil. The blasts on the Samjhauta Express were clearly aimed at devastating the process of India-Pakistan rapprochement.

The attack came at a time when both establishments had made progress on Kashmir, and were the process of preparing their domestic constituencies for compromises that have long been unthinkable. But if the aim was to disrupt this bilateral engagement, it did not succeed. In a marked departure from the past, New Delhi and Islamabad resisted indulging in any blame game, instead cooperating with each other to help victims and arrange crossborder travel for relatives. The Pakistani foreign minister, Khursheed Mahmood Kasuri, kept a scheduled visit to New Delhi a few days after the blasts, and the two countries even inked a deal on nuclear-risk reduction. If anything, the Samjhauta attack appears to have brought New Delhi and Islamabad closer together – seeming to convince India that not all terrorist attacks are instigated and supported by the Pakistani government, while giving Pakistan a chance to understand what India has gone through for years.

Fundamentalist anxiety

It is not yet clear who was behind the attacks. Indian intelligence agencies are being unusually circumspect – and responsible, one might add – by not immediately indulging in the crossborder blame game. Meanwhile, sections in the Pakistani media are pinning the blame on Hindu fundamentalists, who are not happy with the bilateral talks. While there is no doubt that Hindu fanatics are capable of unimaginable atrocities, their modus operandi has usually been in the form of pogroms and targeting of minorities in riots. It is more likely that the blast is the handiwork of militant groups with vested interests in perpetuating the conflict, who are worried about the impending compromise on Kashmir.

While some reports suggested that there was a demand from the Pakistani side for a joint probe, the fact that the attack happened in India obviously gives New Delhi the right to investigate the incident. In the immediate context, the broad contours of the process ahead have been agreed on by both sides. Pakistan will cooperate with Indian agencies if requested. Indian investigators will share whatever information they have been able to gather on the blasts with their Pakistani counterparts, at a meeting of a recently formed anti-terror joint mechanism scheduled for 6 March.

But the blasts have implications that go beyond the short-term investigation process. It is inevitable that in last-ditch attempts to retain some political relevance, militant groups will continue to engineer such attacks. The Samjhauta blasts reveal the common challenges both sides face, as well as provide an opportunity for them to cooperate more closely on three fronts – intelligence sharing, enhancing people-to-people contact (but with more security and support in place), and moving towards a broader political settlement on Kashmir and other issues. At the same time, both establishments need to convince all domestic groups, in a broad-based consultative manner, that they are not selling-out but moving towards a win-win solution.

Strengthening the peace process, and taking it to its logical conclusion, is the best way to marginalise and defeat extremist groups that thrive on the fragility of bilateral ties. But the Indian and Pakistani authorities must surely brace for more attacks, and prepare the public for the need nevertheless to keep the rapprochement process alive. Only then can we salvage something from the horrific tragedy of Samjhauta.

INDIA

Still Shining India

The paradoxes that abound in a rich country with poor people are legion, and the Indian condition is no exception. The yawning chasm between the cruel realities on the ground for the majority and the rarefied heights in which the thriving classes luxuriate was aptly illustrated at the recent Aero India 2007 show. The premier – and only – air show of Southasia had apparently 'arrived'.

THE HINDU

Taking place 7-11 February at the Indian Air Force base in Bangalore, Aero India 2007 presented some of the most advanced machines currently available to men and states – from luxurious private jets, to fighters, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, light combat helicopters and Multirole Transport Aircraft. The Americans, expectedly, showed up in full force, including Lockheed Martin, Boeing and Raytheon. Ironically, today the market for the mighty machines for the air is in the countries of the global South. While there was military hardware aplenty, Aero India was less about militarism than about objects of desire, made available to those classes that see their own development as particularly removed from the process of attending to the concerns of the great unwashed masses.

The atmospherics emanating from the breathless Indian national media could not have been better. Lakshmi Mittal had recently bought up Arcelor Steel, Tata had just taken over the Anglo-Dutch Corus, and K M Birla's Hindalco was soon to follow with an all-cash buyout of the American Novelis. Greeted as a unique hero at Aero India, Ratan Tata, at 69, became the oldest man in the world to fly an F-16, and his sortie received blanket coverage. Although no price was too high in Tata's takeover of Corus, the headline- and caption-writer forgot to mention his reluctance to pay fair compensation for the land his multinational had acquired in Singur.

This dual approach to economic acquisition by the state-supported corporate class typifies the Shining India culture that was the undoing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2004 general election. Evidently, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance under Manmohan Singh has not yet learned the lesson either: that chasing the stars in the firmament of an illusory Still Shining India can bring grief to both the ruling party and the populace at large.

The wages of inflation

While the aircraft were conducting their acrobatics in Bangalore, in the Indian *mandis* the price of onions was soaring, as was that of wheat, pulses and vegetables. Inflation is at 6.5 percent and rising, which mocks the much-vaunted nine percent growth rate, and puts in the shade the rising stock-market indices. Long before the BJP coined the slogan 'Shining India', it had stars in its eyes. The party presumed that a rising stock market, high growth rate, the nuclear muscle acquired with Pokharan-II, and the opening of the Indian economy to Western goodies would keep it in power. This blinded the party to the reality of how inflation bites. In 1998, the rising price of onions dealt it a resounding defeat in assembly elections in Delhi, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

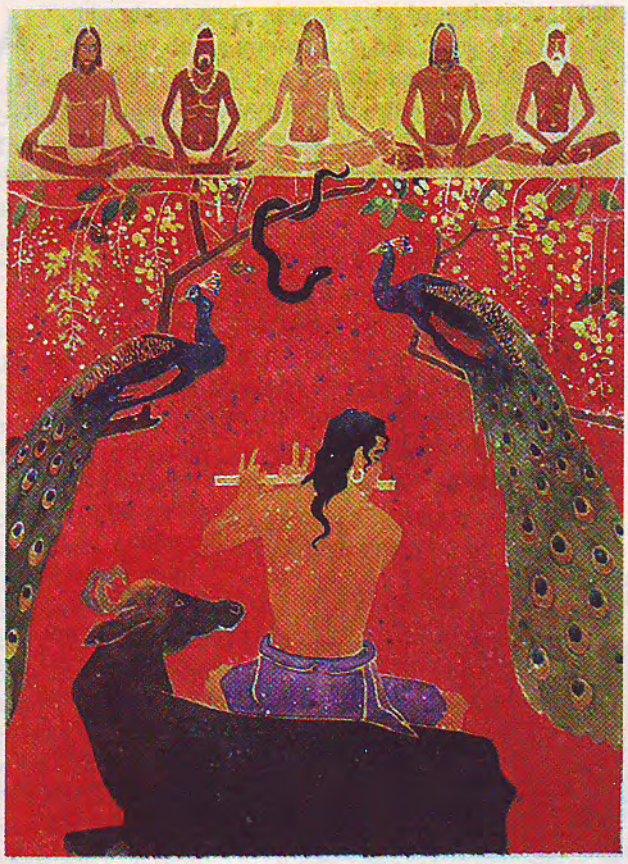
The BJP refused to see the real India's impoverishment because (thanks to the Kargil conflict) in 1999 it returned to office, proceeding to project the feel-good factor right through to 2004. Although the Congress party benefited in the ballot from the BJP's blindness, it is now confronted with an acute economic crisis of its own. Inflation, like death and taxes, spares no one. While some sections may capitalise during instances of significant inflation, nobody is unaffected by the all-around increase in prices. The poor no doubt take the worst beating, which can become calamitous in a climate in which the government is acquiring land for private business ventures. Suicides by farmers are now reported in a few states, but continued neglect may turn a seasonal crisis of migration into a perennial, large-scale problem.

The choices are stark. Either the elected elite and their privileged props in the economic driving seat (along with the media) can wallow gleefully in the global acquisitions of the Tatas and Birlas, and celebrate Shilpa Shetty's winning of 100,000 pounds on the Big Brother show. Or, they can pay a little more attention to the likes of Amartya Sen, who has continually reiterated the case for involving the poor in development by providing them access to basic nutrition, immunisation and education. Thanks to Sen, there are now other Nobel Prize winners – Joseph Stiglitz, Martha Nussbaum, Mohammad Yunus – who are taking a lot more interest in where India should be headed. A little more attention to the words of these 'worriers' and a little less preoccupation with the 'celebrating classes' may not change the economic climate, but it could at least send a different signal about the political direction India is taking.

'Ranjha'

The fakir Ranjha is a character important to Punjabi folk culture. He is symbolic of creativity and creation – upon his arrival in a village, cows begin to give milk, a barren garden turns green and people become happier. Where before there was stagnation, society experiences a new beginning. Nature and humanity thrive. Ranjha is just one among the population, but his energy and optimism serve to catalyse action around him.

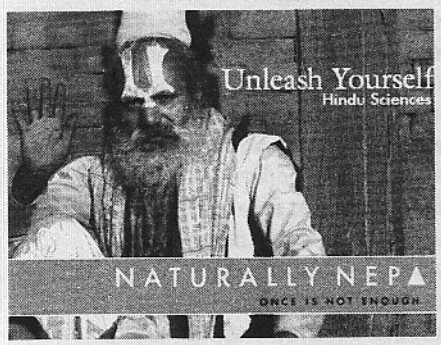
In this painting by **Sabir Nazar**, the folk hero plays his flute before a group of five. According to tradition, these are the five Sufi saints who bless Ranjha with his beloved, Heer. But the Ranjha of Nazar's painting can also be seen as a part of this collective. His dynamic presence is reflected in the vitality of the red that fills the space around him. Framing Ranjha in tribute are two vibrant peacocks and flowers in full bloom: symbols of the beauty and creative potential inherent in the world around him. It is this innate potential that Ranjha works to awaken with his tune, and so his representation as part of a group is significant. Ranjha is a leader and yet an equal part of the greater whole. The serpent suspended on the branch above him links him to the plane on which the others sit, reminding us that the six are connected – as we all are to our communities, as nations are across artificial divides.



Watercolour, 24" x 36"

REGION

South Indians for Nepal, tourists for **Southasia**



The Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), eager to benefit from the thus-far little-tapped market of South India, recently mobilised a promotional campaign targeting tour operators and the press in Madras. Aimed at significantly increasing the number of Indian tourists in Nepal, the campaign, called *Naturally Nepal – once is not enough*, is focused in particular on "religiously-inclined" potential travelers from South India. In 2006, Indian tourists accounted for 33 percent of Nepal's arrivals. Actually, there are many more who do not get counted, as they come by land over the unregulated Nepal-India border.

Separately, a recent report by the United Nation's World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) found that Southasia saw a 10 percent increase in tourist arrivals in 2006. Most of this increase is credited to the Subcontinent's largest country – India experienced a growth in arrivals of around 13 percent, with 4.43 million tourists arriving through the year. The UNWTO noted that 2006 was a record of sorts for tourism the world over, with the number of tourist travels increasing by 4.5 percent to 842 million globally.

Southasia as a whole is expected to attract 11 million visitors by 2010 and a whopping 19 million by 2020, almost doubling its share of global arrivals from 0.7 percent in 1995 to 1.2 percent by 2020. Although undoubtedly good for the region's economies, this still strikes us as fantastically low. Δ

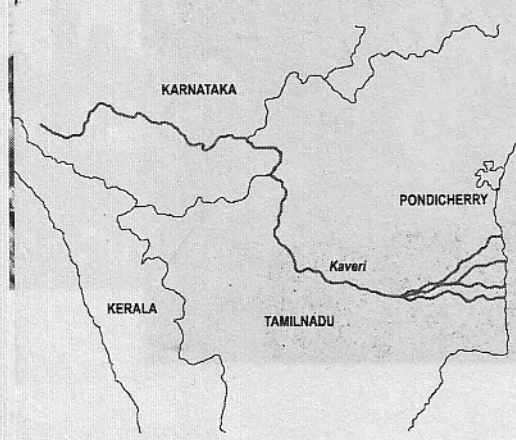
INDIA

Three **happy**, one **angry**

A century-old dispute was resolved in mid-February by a tribunal that worked for 17 years, but the number of satisfied parties appears to be countable on one hand. Water from the Kaveri River, labelled an 'interstate' river by the Indian Constitution, will now be distributed among four states. Tamil Nadu is to get 419 billion cubic feet of water a year, while Kerala will receive 30 billion, and Pondicherry seven billion.

An unhappy upper-riverine Karnataka, set to receive 270 billion cubic feet – less than half of what it says it needs – declared it would appeal the verdict. Around 16,000 security personnel in Bangalore were placed on high alert surrounding the announcement, hoping to prevent a repeat of the 1991 anti-Tamil riots that claimed 18 casualties. Days before the decision was announced, police had already arrested 700 people in order to quell possibilities of chaos. The atmosphere remained tense, however, with many schools across Bangalore choosing to remain closed, and the Karnataka Tamils Federation writing to New Delhi and local officials asking for security.

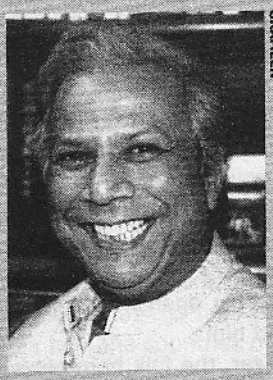
If Tamil Nadu and Karnataka were independent states, there would probably be war. Here, one sees the advantage, perhaps, of the subsumation of various identities into the Indian Union. But there are others who disagree vehemently with this notion. Δ



REGION

Regional **sage**

Using the bump and clarity that only a Nobel Prize can afford, recently anointed laureate Muhammad Yunus has been waxing eloquent for the good of Southasia as a whole. He recently encouraged Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to push forward plans to establish a common passport for the people of Southasia. "Fighting poverty in Southasia is the biggest challenge," Yunus said. "This region has great potential to emerge as the world's strongest economy, particularly in human resources. If there is a common passport for the region, it would help greatly in fostering people-to-people cooperation."

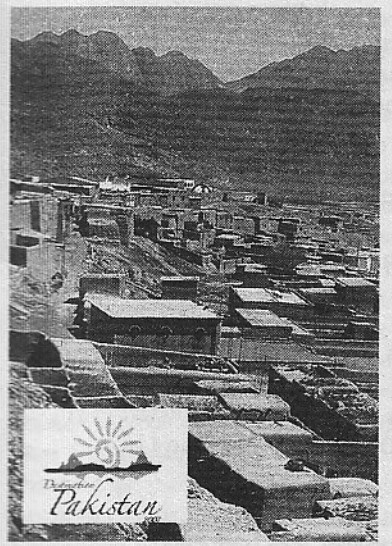

GRAMEEN

Weeks later, Yunus gave rise to several more regional visions: of a highway network connecting India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and of the establishment of 'SAARC scholarships' for the region's universities. He also offered an explanation for the waning interest in and influence of SAARC. "The future of SAARC hinges on improved relations between India and Pakistan," he noted. "As there is no amicable resolution to the disputes between these two countries, our work as SAARC members is not complete."

Now that Prof Yunus has decided to form a new political party in Bangladesh, might we suggest that he not give up his love for Southasia? Δ

PAKISTAN

Destination **Balochistan**



'Visit Pakistan Year' got off to a grand start last month, as Tourism Minister Nilofar Bakhtiar declared that the country was opening its doors to more tourists by relaxing its visa policy for 24 countries, including India. "The government wishes to show a positive image of the country, where visitors from abroad are welcomed with open arms," she declared.

Referring to the 23-27 February 'Sibi Festival' in Balochistan, Bakhtiar said that the province could become a major tourist hub. She noted that Islamabad was determined to promote tourism in Balochistan, and had prepared financial packages to do so. "There are scores of beautiful and historical places in the country that can be of great interest to foreigners," she said. "Balochistan's geographical diversity and extremely rich culture makes it a unique and picturesque destination for foreigners."

What Minister Bakhtiar did not mention is that Sibi is the hottest region of Pakistan, without a beach in sight. Well, it might be hot, but at least there is no humidity!

SRI LANKA/PAKISTAN

Arduous armoury

Sri Lanka's recent decision to employ Pakistani help in building an armoured brigade for its army has ruffled more than a few feathers in New Delhi, especially as it comes in the wake of Chinese forays into Sri Lankan affairs. Others, meanwhile, feel that the development implies that the Colombo government has no intention of forging a lasting peace with the LTTE.

But their view is contradicted by the fact that several Sri Lankan generals have argued that, even if Sri Lanka did need a full-scale armed brigade, the tanks being bought from Islamabad would be useless in the marshy, jungled north and east of the country, where the LTTE is most active. It has also been noted that the Al Zarar tanks on offer are over 50 years old and most likely damaged, making the USD 100 million price tag appear rather steep.

THE MALDIVES

Governance referendum set?

The Maldives' Elections Commissioner K D Ahmed Maniku announced in late January that appropriate changes would be made to referendum procedures so that the People's Special Majlis (Constituent Assembly) could finally conduct a country-wide referendum on a future government system. The government hopes that handing over such power to the Majlis will take care of accusations of a lack of neutrality in the electoral process. "We made the guidelines on their request. We have forwarded it to them. They will now know where to proceed from here," Maniku said.

Some members of the Majlis, however, who had earlier criticised the commissioner's actions for lacking transparency, claimed that they had not actually received the guidelines. The Maldivian referendum, originally slated for September 2006, was postponed after spats among political parties delayed the process of amending the Constitution. The ruling Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party is pitching for a presidential system, while the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party wants a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy.

SRI LANKA/INDIA

Lankan oil up for grabs

As part of its plan to be extracting oil within the next three years, Colombo has asked for an advance of USD 100 million each from India and China to secure blocks for exploration off Sri Lanka's northeastern coast. The island's government says that seismic data shows the presence of more than a billion barrels of oil in the area. Colombo paid USD 10 million for seismic surveys last year, a year after it set up its new Petroleum Resource Development Ministry.

China and India will also have to pay a USD 10 million security deposit, and refrain from competitive bidding, the Sri Lankan Petroleum Minister A H M Fowzie said. "Out of the eight identified oil blocks, we have given one each to India and China on a 'nomination basis' due to the close friendship between the nations," he noted.

Reports recently surfaced that India was buying an oil block in Mannar in Sri Lanka in return for building a 160-km-long railway route from Colombo to Matara in the south. It has been confirmed that India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corp Ltd (ONGC) has been awarded that block. As of now, we have not heard of the LTTE laying claim to the undersea oil and gas off the northeastern coast. But it shouldn't be far off.

ONGC

BURMA

Christianity watch

Anti-Karen victim

HRCP

A report claiming that the Burmese junta is scheming to drive all Christians from the country was released at a late-January meeting of the United Kingdom All-Party Parliamentary Group on Burma. The findings cite an official document leaked from Burma's Ministry of Religious Affairs that reportedly bears the brazen title, "Programme to Destroy the Christian Religion in Burma."

The document allegedly describes 17 systematic procedures aimed at the elimination of Christianity from the country. Among other things, it orders the imprisonment of anyone who espouses or preaches Christianity within Burma's borders. Critics have warned that the policy appears to be part of a country-wide scheme to create a homogenised Buddhist, Burmese-speaking populace. "Citizens who do not conform to the regime's version of these," the report says, "face potentially serious consequences."

An estimated 27,000 members of the Karen tribe, the majority of whom is Christian, were driven out of eastern Burma in 2006. Burma is currently ranked 18th on the UK-based Open Doors World Watch, an index that ranks countries according to the level of persecution experienced by Christians. Other Southasian countries ranked highly on the list are the Maldives (at number five), Bhutan (six), Afghanistan (11) and Pakistan (16).

PAKISTAN/AFGHANISTAN

Afghan camps to close

As part of the ongoing project to repatriate around 2.5 million Afghans living in Pakistan within three years, Islamabad announced in early February that by August it would close four Afghan refugee camps in Balochistan and NWFP. Perceived by the Pakistani government as security threats, the three-decade-old camps are home to around 300,000 people.

While the camps of Katchagari and Jungle Pir Alizai are to be shut down by 15 June, Jalozai and Girdi Jungle in NWFP have until 31 August. The decision was made by a commission that included representatives of the Kabul government and of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. The commission stated that the refugees would be given assistance either to return to Afghanistan or to relocate to other camps.

Promises of help have not allayed the fears of many refugees, however, who speak of lack of property, shelter and jobs in Afghan-istan. Still, Islamabad is intent on its goal of removing all Afghans from its soil, especially since both Afghanistan and Western countries have accused it of sheltering Taliban insurgents.

Jalozai camp, soon to close

INDIA/BANGLADESH

Taslima wants to stay

Writer Taslima Nasrin, who fled from her native Bangladesh in 1994 following death threats from Islamic fundamentalists, recently appealed to the Indian government for Indian citizenship or permanent-resident status. Nasrin, who was given a six-month residential permit last year that expired in January, said of India and especially West Bengal: "I feel at home here and have received the love of the people."

Nasrin left Bangladesh amidst much controversy, and to date her books are banned in the country. Asked whether she wished to return to her homeland, Nasrin lamented having the right to visit taken from her, and added: "My parents have passed away. So the persons closest to me in Bangladesh are no more. It is more of having my rights to visit the country where I was born and grew up rather than purely emotional reasons."

Nasrin's appeal to the Foreigners' Registration Office was supported by the likes of writer Mahasweta Devi, litterateurs Sunil Gangapadhyay and Dibyendu Palit, and economist Amlan Datta, who pointed out in a statement that, "to have to live far away from the people who speak the language of her heart, the language in which she thinks and writes, is like death to a creative writer."

While the Indian government might be wary of disapproval by conservative politics in Dhaka, the current turmoil in Bangladesh would seem to allow New Delhi to do the humane thing and allow Nasrin at least a permanent-resident status.

TIBET/NEPAL

'Normal' border management

PAVLE KOZJEK

Chinese border security with Tibetan children, Nanga La

News released in February detailed how Chinese authorities had systematically tortured and abused Tibetans detained after a high-visibility shootout on the Tibet-Nepal border in September 2006. That encounter, which was widely reported on by the international press, ended with one casualty and at least 25 Tibetans being taken into custody by the Chinese authorities, including more than ten children aged 10 to 15.

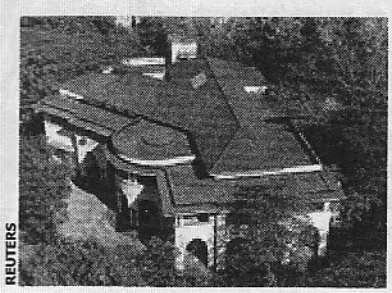
According to the follow-up, what was supposed to have been a detention period of a few days extended to months. One of the detained recalled that the older prisoners were continuously beaten, while some of the children suffered abuse in prison for more than three months. Chinese officials have denied the accusations, claiming also that all the children were treated properly and immediately released. They also called the opening of fire on unarmed Tibetans trying to cross Nanga Pass into Nepal a part of "normal border management."

INDIA/PAKISTAN

Jinnah House settled

The controversial question of the ownership of the Jinnah House, the Bombay residence of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, has finally been settled. Neither the state of Pakistan, nor Dina Wadia, Jinnah's daughter, will now own the historic building. Instead, the villa and its 2.5-acre property overlooking the Arabian Sea will be turned into an art and cultural centre for SAARC.

Sanjeev Kohli, deputy director of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), said, "We expect the centre to be thrown open to the public on 15 August this year, to coincide with India's 60th anniversary celebrations." Currently held by the ICCR and previously the official residence of the British deputy high commissioner, the house will be renovated to resemble its original state. It is slated to have exhibition spaces, an audio-visual library, a concert hall, an open air performance area, a seminar room and a café.



REUTERS

We might add: if it is to be a SAARC cultural centre, then it would be more appropriate to open the doors on SAARC Day, 8 December.

BURMA/INDIA

Crackdown as appeasement

A week after Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited Rangoon in mid-January asking for help in wiping out rebels in India's Northeast, the junta began an offensive against the insurgents stationed east of the border. The Burmese military is said to have burned down the general headquarters and two camps of the separatist National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K).

The NSCN-K, which reportedly has at least 50 camps and 5000 soldiers in Burma's Sagaing District, confirmed on 31 January that at least three of its cadre and about a dozen Burmese soldiers had been killed. NSCN-K leader A Z Jami said: "Heavy fighting is going on with a brigade [of about 3000 soldiers] of the Myanmarese army using mortars and rocket launchers, launching a massive assault on our cadres since the weekend."

Although Rangoon has yet to acknowledge the crackdown, another NSCN-K leader insists that it is a deliberate plan to appease India. "The offensive by the military junta has the backing of the Indian government, with most of the weapons used in the operation supplied by New Delhi," he said.

NAGALAND POST

NSCN-K cadre

PAKISTAN/INDIA

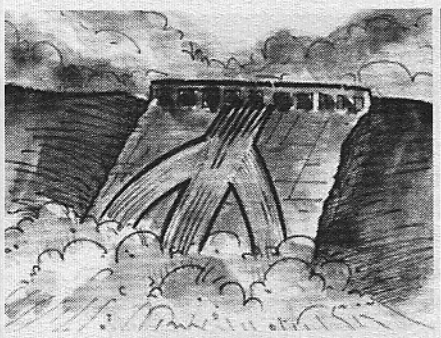
Pakistan puja

On 16 February, the first ceremony of worship since Partition in the famous Katasraj temple complex in Pakistani Punjab was attended by Indian Hindus as special guests of the Islamabad government. The renovation of the Shiva temple was started in 2000, when the foundation stone was laid by Bhartiya Janata Party leader L K Advani during a visit to Pakistan. Thereafter, General Pervez Musharraf sought India's help for the reconstruction, and a team was dispatched to the site by the Archaeological Survey of India.

The conservation is nearing completion of its first three-year phase, and has cost the Islamabad government around PKR 60.3 million. "This is perhaps the first time an Islamic government has restored a non-Islamic religious monument," said BJP Secretary Balbir Punj during a recent visit to Katasraj. A three-member Pakistani delegation also recently toured India, analysing the architecture and customs of Hindu temples in Benaras, Pushkar and Ajanta Alora. During that visit, the delegation was also advised by Advani to urge Islamabad to conserve and renovate the historic Hinglaj temple in Balochistan, the Shiva temple in Karachi and the Lav temple inside the Lahore Fort.

INDIA/PAKISTAN

Baglihar win-win



COURTESY: DWYNN RONALD TRAZO

Headway was finally made on the Baglihar dam controversy in February, when a 'neutral expert' appointed by the World Bank concluded that, contrary to Pakistani accusations, the dam was not in violation of the Indus Waters Treaty. With India also being asked to reduce the dam's height by a metre and a half, however, both countries eventually were able to claim "victory".

The Baglihar project on the Chenab River in India was designed to produce 900 MW of power for Jammu & Kashmir. Its resolution is the first Indo-Pakistani dispute to be settled through third-party mediation with the consensus of both parties. "We are happy overall. The dam structure is intact, the changes are only marginal," India's Water Resources Minister Saifuddin Soz said. Pakistan's Power and Water Minister, Liaqat Ali Jatoi, added: "This was a successful day for Pakistan, as the decision has come in its favour. The neutral expert clearly said the design was in violation, that India's calculation on free board was inaccurate."

The debate over the project began two years ago, when Islamabad complained to the World Bank that India could use the dam to flood Pakistani fields or hold back water at any time, and also that it violated the 1960 Indus Water Treaty, which otherwise had stood the test of time. That treaty had outlined that, while India would get water from the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej rivers, Pakistan was to have exclusive access to the Indus, Jhelum and the Chenab.

INDIA/BURMA

To **Burma**, multimodally

India is preparing to set up a transportation project worth USD 1.1 billion in Burma, a move seen by many as part of New Delhi's continuing efforts to secure its influence in the face of China's growing presence in Burma. With New Delhi investing USD 100 million and Rangoon contributing USD 10 million and providing the real estate, points in eastern Mizoram are to be connected to the Sittwe Port by a shipping link, which will then be connected to Kaletwa in Burma through river transportation.

Such a multimodal transport scheme was first proposed in 2003 by New Delhi. The project will also include the construction of a road from Kaletwa to Mizoram. The plan has already been approved by the Planning Commission in New Delhi, and looks ready to be certified by the cabinet once issues of sustainability and commercial viability are cleared up. India has extended Burma a soft loan to contribute towards the USD 10 million that Rangoon with pitch in.

AFGHANISTAN

Rich Afghans, **poor** Afghans

New Delhi announced an aid package of USD 100 million to Afghanistan in late January, bringing its total assistance to the country's reconstruction effort to USD 750 million. India has also asked Pakistan to allow land-based transit facilities to Afghanistan, with an aim at bolstering trade and bilateral ties between the two countries.

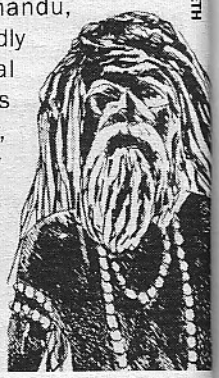
Around the same time, the New York-based Human Rights Watch announced that Afghanistan and its international backers had not made a significant difference in the lives of ordinary Afghans in 2006, having failed to secure basic needs like security, food and healthcare. Overall, more than 4400 Afghans died in conflict-related violence last year, twice as many as in 2005 and more than in any other year since the ousting of the Taliban in 2001.

Meanwhile, recent reports of massive levels of corruption in Afghanistan are likely to influence the outcome of a pending agreement between the US and the EU to grant USD 13.7 billion to the country. According to US and British officials, almost half of the foreign aid given to Afghanistan thus far has been siphoned off by tribal leaders and corrupt police. This follows similar complaints on the part of the US State Department and the Pentagon that the Afghan police force was draining money from aid packages. At this pace, don't be surprised if Afghan tribal chieftains emerge as some of the biggest moneybags in Southasia – and start their own development projects!

NEPAL/INDIA

Beware the babas

In mid-February Nepal's government mobilised security forces along its open border with India to restrict the influx of *sadhus* during the festival of Maha Shivaratri. The Home Ministry reportedly had dispatched a secret circular to district headquarters to thwart a possible 'ultra-Hindu' demonstration in Kathmandu, about which the government had reportedly received tips. Every year, the festival celebrated in honour of Shiva attracts thousands of sadhus from India. This year, authorities were concerned that they would congregate to rally for the reinstatement of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom, a plan that was allegedly hatched in the aftermath of the much-hyped World Hindu Conference held on 21 December in Lucknow.



COURTESY: G S PEETH

Pseudo-innovation in Dhaka

Can an unelected, military-backed government be just what Bangladesh needs? Many hope so.

BY **ASIF SALEH**

The passion for taking Bangladesh back from the grip of near-self-immolation was in evidence at the premier of a documentary called *Deshantori* (The Migrant), in London in early February. Currently causing a stir among Bangladeshis both in and out of the country, *Deshantori* explores the deep frustration of today's young generation. It also asks why, 35 years after independence, a generation that was once making sacrifices to create a nation is now making sacrifices to leave the country by any means. During the discussion that took place after viewing the film, blame for this dynamic was invariably aimed at Bangladesh's political parties. Indeed, the parties form a topic – and target – that has been on the lip of every Bangladeshi in recent weeks.

President-in-shadow Ahmed

As Dhaka's military-backed interim government gets on with its anti-corruption agenda amid cautious cheers from the public, Bangladeshis at home and abroad are arguing over what kind of government system can both be functional and deliver for the long-beleaguered people. With civil-society leaders moving towards a more hands-on political approach at the same time as politicians are being thrown in jail for alleged corruption, Bangladesh seems to be going through its biggest round of political shifts since the restoration of democracy in 1990.

There was a widespread sense of the surreal when, during the first week of February, agitated MPs from the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who otherwise could never even sit together for a meeting, were suddenly packed up side by side in micro-buses and taken to Dhaka's Central Jail. The tables had turned. As newspaper story after story is published detailing the misdeeds of the immediate past BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami government, the picture that is emerging is not pretty. It portrays a reckless regard for rule of law and for Bangladesh's institutions. Whether the transgressions were as monstrous as misappropriating thousands of crores of taka and crippling the power sector by taking massive bribes from incompetent companies, or as relatively paltry as localised stealing of relief material, the fingerprints of former ruling-party MPs seem to be everywhere.

Nowhere is this damage more distressing to see than on the country's constitutional offices. The Public Service Commission, for example, the body responsible for appointing officers to public bodies, appears to have been practically selling question papers and government jobs to the highest bidders. The chief of the commission has been accused of sitting with a computer analyst and updating the result sheets of administration entrance examinees in exchange for handsome rewards. The surprise is not that such a thing had been taking place, but how open and unchallenged it was, with everyone from bottom to top sharing in the loot.

The malaise appears to be so deep-rooted that there is worry that as soon as the political parties are back in power, there will be an inevitable return to business-as-usual. Hence, there are petitions circulating, asking for a referendum to keep the interim government in power for longer than initially indicated. Regardless of the practicality of such a proposal, the current government is clearly enjoying huge popularity, and has larger changes in mind. Initially coming in with a mandate to do nothing more than hold a free and fair election by the end of January, the government's focus is now becoming more diverse and proactive. The advisers are taking policy decisions on matters such as corruption, the power sector and upgrading the Chittagong sea port – long-term issues that beg the question as to just how long they intend to remain in power.

Long-term interim

Thus far, no definitive timeline on that question has been given. Both the government-formed technical team and the army have made presentations about possible timeframes for drawing up a new voter list and distributing voter-identification cards. With the army stipulating a timeframe of eight months, the election is unlikely to take place before the end of this year. If that assumption is correct, it is likely the interim government will take more long-term decisions over the next nine months.

The army appears to be firmly behind the idea of a long-term engagement of the interim government. The previously low-profile military chief, Lieutenant General Moeen U Ahmed, has become significantly more visible in recent weeks, but has stressed that it is civilians, not the military, that are running the government. Taking on the unusual responsibility of talking about government policies, on 9 February he described Bangladesh's current state as that of a train off its track. He said that chances to fix things

COURTESY: G S PEETH

do not come often, and so the government is now trying to get the train back on track.

There is a split in Bangladeshi civil society, however, on just how much time the interim government should be given to do so. Some urge that institutional reform should be a priority no matter how much time it takes, while others suggest that the priority should be on setting a date for the elections, to avoid further erosion of the polity's democratic basis. Who wins this argument will determine the direction of Bangladeshi society in the days to come.

Regardless of what the military is saying, it seems clear that there are two parallel strands in the military combine. The first such sign came with the late-January promulgation of laws curbing press freedom, which pointed to a hard-line approach within the state of emergency. Two days later, amid widespread defiance from editors, the 'information adviser' backtracked and announced that the media-gagging laws were not going to be implemented after all. Those laws do remain in place, however, and the press has remained somewhat cautious about what it chooses to report.

The interim government appears keen to move quickly on the issue of corruption in politics. Government officials have stated in no uncertain terms that they view ensuring "clean" candidates for the election as being a critical part of their responsibilities. After reforming the anti-corruption commission, stern ordinances have been passed barring anyone accused of graft from taking part in the election, even if an appeal remains pending in court.

The political parties are now struggling to regroup. The BNP, which is taking the brunt of the anti-corruption drive with most of its leaders either in jail or absconding, is trying to figure out a response. The Awami League has started calling for an early election, as it senses a good possibility of victory in the current climate. Even though the caretaker government is largely implementing the AL's 31-point election-reform proposal from last year, the AL is neither getting any credit for it nor is it willing to wait much longer in fear of a regrouped BNP or a completely changed political landscape.

Citizen's power

With so much negative publicity about the politicians, Bangladeshis may have tuned out the traditional parties for the time being. Indeed, many seem to be enjoying the ride in uncharted territories. Civil-society leaders are suddenly wielding a lot of weight in policymaking, and can be seen everywhere – holding roundtables, putting in reform proposals and appearing on TV talk shows that are receiving higher ratings than the entertainment programmes.

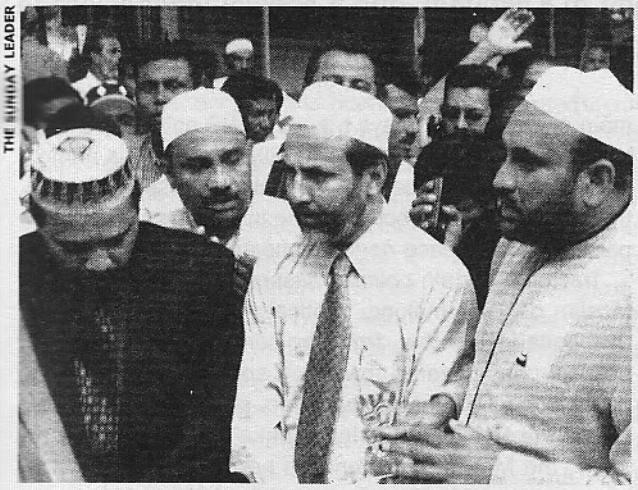
Civil society is also fancying its own chances in politics. Recent Nobel Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus, who has long been rumoured to harbour political ambitions, has now made it official that he will run for office in the coming election. To test the water about forming a party, he wrote an open letter to the country, asking for the people's opinion on his political aims. The positive response was overwhelming, and on 19 February Yunus announced the formation of the Nagarik Shakti (Citizen's Power) party, which promises to contest for all 300 parliamentary seats in the coming election.

It is tempting to think the Citizen's Power party will enjoy the support of civil-society leaders, the current administration and Western diplomats. But one cannot underestimate the grassroots activism of the existing major parties with their large networks. It remains to be seen what impact Yunus – without the Grameen brand – will have in the rural areas, where AL and BNP workers have long dominated. It may prove difficult to be effective on the national political scene depending on the stature of one individual.

News of the new competition seems already to have engendered some qualitative political changes. As Yunus is likely to pull in the independent and disenchanted vote, the political parties are scurrying to shore up their bases. The Awami League has already cancelled the heavily criticised memorandum of understanding it had signed with Islamist leaders. BNP honchos have also reportedly started a move inside the party to drop politicians who are known to be corrupt, and to bring back politicians who had been marginalised over the past five years by Tareq Rahman (Begum Khaleda Zia's son) and his powerful businessman friends.

As in other countries, Bangladeshis are starting to ask some core questions: If democracy can be manipulated to serve a chosen few, is it practical in developing countries? If democracy is defined by an election in which the winner takes all for the following five years, and where non-governance replaces accountability with the cost of destruction of democratic institutions, how is it possible to have a system in which checks and balances are required in order to prevent abuse?

For the time being, Bangladesh seems to be trying out a pseudo-innovative model. Tacitly supported by Western governments, the military has decided to be a behind-the-scenes force in backing the interim, non-elected civilian government, with an eye towards fixing the country's broken institutions before handing over democracy to the politicians again. However, history shows that, just as night follows day, military governments that start with a clean agenda end up as part of the problem. The exception this time around, it is hoped, is the blend of the might of the army and the good intentions and competence of the civilian administrators. Only time will tell how well this blend will work. ▲



Athaulla (r) and Hakeem (m) near a Muslim burial ground

The wages of passivity

Sri Lanka's Muslims have long kept quiet while Tamil militancy has made its own demands. Now they are becoming restive, fearing that silence may have cost them too much.

BY **DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI**

If you were to go by the international headlines, the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict appears to engage only the two main communities, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Yet when the conflict exploded into war in 1983, and in the more than two decades following, it was not just the two communities locked in battle that suffered. The impact of the internal war on the island's Muslim community has been massive – and severely overlooked.

In Colombo, when issues of politics or peace deliberations arise, the 'Muslim question' has long been confined to intellectual debates and dinner-table discussions. This continues to this day, despite the fact that representatives of the Muslim community have for decades worked with the country's majority-led governments. This has included the premier Muslim party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which reached a position of veritable kingmaker during the early 1990s. Nonetheless, Muslim concerns today appear as invisible at the national level as they ever have.

"There is a great disconnect," admits veteran Muslim politician and current governor of the Western Province, Alavi Moulana. "Somehow, even combining forces has not helped provide powerful representation to Muslims." Moulana says that Sri Lanka's Muslim community is a peaceful one, and has regularly sought to adopt a conciliatory position on the ongoing conflict. As such, the seniormost Muslim politicians were always identified with the country's two main political parties – the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) – before the need for separate Muslim-only political parties became an overt requirement.

The political landscape in Sri Lanka has changed drastically since 1983. "The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was the answer to a huge political void created by the previous Muslim political leaders, who allowed themselves to be completely absorbed into mainstream political parties that had little sympathy for the Muslim cause," recalls the SLMC's head, Rauff Hakeem. The SLMC is the country's largest Muslim party, enjoying significant support in eastern Sri Lanka, where Muslims make up about one-third of the population.

Hakeem emphasises that these historical wrongs have contributed significantly to the present plight of Sri Lanka's Muslims: "We are sandwiched between two communities. We are also victims of ethnic violence that was neither our creation nor our seeking. As a community, we have little hope. We opt to work with governments, hoping to give expression to the Muslim concerns, but we do this as a separate political entity."

In late January, Hakeem and his group of four parliamentarians formally joined Mahinda Rajapakse's administration, claiming that the new alliance sought to draw attention to a "community that is politically denied" – and, hopefully, to do so from a stronger political vantage. "By being in the opposition, we cannot positively influence change," says Hakeem, who, on 28 January, was appointed Minister of Posts and Telecommunication. "We joined the government primarily with a wish to pressurise the government to resume peace talks. Secondly, we want to be accommodated as a separate Muslim delegation at future peace talks."

Other Muslim politicians and activists – including National Unity Alliance (NUA) leader Ferial Ashraff and the head of an SLMC splittist group, A L M Athaulla – are similarly adamant that their community needs "special facilitation". Notes Athaulla, now the Minister of Water Supply and Drainage: "The war has impacted terribly on the Muslim community. We have been systematically driven out from the northeastern areas we traditionally occupied. Originally, colonisation brought in large numbers of Sinhalese to the east. Then

'We included certain conditions: a separate Muslim delegation at future rounds of peace talks, a renewed call for a separate Muslim unit in Kalmunai, and a special mechanism to ensure human security of the Muslims making the northeast their home.'

the LTTE evicted us from the north. Is it because we as a community did not believe in wielding guns and demand for a separate state?"

If the gun has fortunately not yet become an exercisable option, the push for a separate Muslim 'unit' certainly has. Even detractors of the SLMC acknowledge that the party's creation in September 1981 (under the powerful leadership of the late M H M Ashraff) was a turning point in Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. The key achievement has been the party's articulation of the need for a separate Muslim administrative unit in the east.

Administrative homeland

The relationship between Tamils and Muslims had been strained ever since the Muslim trading community first arrived in Sri Lanka – this tension has increased significantly since the outbreak of war. In 1990, the Tamil Tigers evicted over 16,000 Muslim families from their ancestral homes in the north. Some 6000 more were thrown out following the outbreak of war in 2006. Thousands of Muslims continue to live in refugee camps, with resettlement being a slow or nonexistent process. These systematic evictions and rights-violations, Hakeem says, stoked the Muslim community's desire for a political party to speak on its behalf.

The Muslims of the northeast now constitute 38 percent of the island's total Muslim population, while 62 percent make the south and central areas their home. Muslims constitute only eight percent of Sri Lanka's nearly 20 million-strong population. "Unlike the Tamil community, Muslims do not flee as refugees to South India. This increases the number of internally displaced Muslims," notes Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services Minister Abdul Risath Bathiyutheen. "We may be just eight percent of the country's total population. We have always lived as a separate community. And although we speak Tamil, it is only fair to acknowledge our separate identity."

"The LTTE would not willingly share power with the Muslims in the northeast," SLMC's Hakeem agrees. "Though speaking Tamil, we are a separate community with a defined identity. The LTTE had little tolerance of our desire to have a separate Muslim delegation during the peace talks that followed the 2002 truce. As such, a separate administrative unit became a must, in order to protect our political interests."

Many Sinhala political leaders acknowledge that Muslim views have often been excluded in Sri Lankan peace-making efforts. "This happened primarily because the conflict was and still is between the two main communities," says a senior UNP politician close to the peace talks, who was unwilling to give his name. "It takes a while to become so inclusive, especially with the LTTE strongly objecting to the inclusion of other parties [in the peace negotiations since 2002]".

Tracing a certain political desperation underlying Muslim decision-making, political analyst Jayadeva Uyangoda insists that, from the commencement of a political phase geared towards a solution, the Muslim dimension was conspicuous by its sheer absence. "Since the signing of the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord in 1987, the Muslim question was never given due consideration. Muslims were largely victims of communal violence, despite having no direct role in the conflict."

What has perhaps hurt the Muslim community the most in recent years has been the merging of the northern and eastern provinces following the signing of the 1987 accord. That agreement paved the way for the Tamil community to claim the merged provinces as its collective homeland, a position strongly opposed by the Muslims. "There is no denying that the Muslims were overlooked from the very first. We strongly feel that the eastern province should be treated as separate. It is a multi-ethnic province," claims Hakeem, who continues to urge immediate political action to change the situation.

Having joined with the administration, Hakeem now hopes to be able to act more forcefully on the issue. "We included certain conditions in our memorandum of understanding, including a separate Muslim delegation at future rounds of peace talks, a renewed call for a separate Muslim unit to be carved out in the eastern district of Kalmunai, and a special mechanism to ensure human security of the Muslims making the northeast their home."

At the moment, those hopes seem a long way off. "The east is now a pot boiler," says Sunanda Deshapriya, an activist. "The violence has spilled over. Muslim politicians and thousands of civilians suffered at the LTTE's hands, and due to the military engagements between government forces and the LTTE. Muslim communities remain passive victims." Others warn that that passivity may be waning. Many observers, including Risath Bathiyutheen and A L M Athaulla, worry that with the increasing insecurity, Muslim youths may soon feel compelled to arm themselves – both in self-defence, and as a way to be heard. Such a move would be a significant and unfortunate change from the peaceful politics in which the older generations have for so long placed their faith.

The Ganderbal exhumations

BY **PATRICK HOENIG**

There is good news from Kashmir. The diligent reader of the Indian national press will be informed that wildlife poaching is down to almost nil. This is thanks to arms licenses for individuals having been suspended in Jammu & Kashmir after the outbreak of the insurgency a decade and a half ago. Of course, staying away from the deep, dark forest is also what common sense commands. Who in his right mind would want to run the risk of being encountered brandishing a firearm, and having his comparably benign poaching intentions mistaken for militant ones? Thus, the snow leopard, the spotted and the musk deer, the Himalayan black bear and the Pir Panjal markhor goat make merry in the absence of human poachers.

The media in Kashmir do not supply such happy news. Instead, the local papers are awash with stories of encounters – real or fake – between security forces and militants, as well as crackdowns, disappearances and intolerable living conditions. The current official optimism on both sides of the border notwithstanding, the truth is that the area is locked in a cycle of violence and counter-violence, exacting a blood toll from both combatants and civilians. In a 2006 report on patterns of impunity in J & K, the watchdog organisation Human Rights Watch held Indian security forces to account for systematic torture, disappearances and arbitrary detentions, while denouncing similar acts perpetrated by militant groups. Such has been the case for years.

In January, following the exhumation of at least five bodies in the district of Ganderbal, internal investigations revealed that army contingents and police units in J & K had killed innocent civilians in cold blood in order to pass them off as militants and thereby to receive rewards and promotions. Horrific through this revelation was, it did not surprise many. Some major Indian media outlets had little to say about the findings. Others expressed shock as, unlike ordinary criminals (who shame only themselves), the police and army personnel involved in the atrocities had "disgraced their uniforms and their country". The Indian defence minister duly gave assurances that human-rights violations would "not be tolerated", and that every complaint would be looked into by various officials. A simple word of sympathy for the victims' families, however, was not forthcoming.

The fake encounters most recently revealed could be just the tip of the iceberg. In late August, the Srinagar-based Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) put the number of people who have vanished from J & K since the outbreak of militancy at a staggering 10,000. Now this figure has come under attack. APDP has drawn criticism from the authorities for "lacking an organised data bank", while a human-rights activist has been accused of "shoddy research" for having mistaken 'IB' (Intelligence Bureau) for 'BSF' (Border Security Force), and for having written 'J' instead of 'G' when referring to G Branch, the BSF's intelligence wing – as if getting the alphabet right is so important in establishing state responsibility.

What one does know is that the constant exposure of the Kashmiri people to violence – physical, psychological, sexual – has led to a significant deterioration of mental health across age groups and genders. A 2006 survey on the psychosocial status of the population of J & K found that more than half of the interviewees (56 percent) was easily frightened, almost two out of five (38 percent) felt 'worthless', and more than a third (34 percent) had thought of committing suicide in the month prior to the interview. How does one square such findings with upbeat accounts by the national and state governments on the improving security situation and the restoration of normalcy in J & K?

Following the exhumations in Ganderbal, the people of J & K will have hard questions for ex-Chief Minister Muhammad Mufti Sayeed about what his "healing touch" did for the bruised Kashmiri soul. They


INDIAN EXPRESS

Father of false-encounter victim

may also want to ask the current Chief Minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad, what exactly he meant when he said that his opponents in the state assembly were "being emotional" in demanding an immediate troop withdrawal from J & K. But the hardest question yet may be reserved for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh: In line with his "zero tolerance" policy on human-rights violations, will he support India's signing of the UN's new International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance? The convention opened for signature in early February, and its 'right to know' provision will be an important stepping-stone to meeting the demands for justice by the grieving families of Ganderbal. Barring that right, in today's Kashmir only one thing is certain: the brighter day will always be tomorrow.

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India realising Southasia

Finally, South Block seems enthusiastic about the region.

BY **KANAK MANI DIXIT**

India has been the latecomer to 'Southasia'. As the most populous and powerful country, at the very centre of the region, after 1947 India assumed for itself the mantle of historic, civilisational 'India' without a thought to what the others lost in terms of heritage, identity and governance. A large nation-state both by virtue of its size and the history at its command, India has been locked for too long in a small-country mindset. As such, it has alternated between being the regional bully (remember Farakka) and the munificent squire (the Gujral Doctrine). The xenophobia and blinkered nation-statism of newly formed political elites impacted each Southasian country, and most importantly Big India, long keeping the region of Southasia from being realised. Regionalism would be impossible so long as the country that hosts 1.1 billion of Southasia's population of 1.5 billion – and more than two-thirds of the subcontinental expanse – were to insist on going it alone because it felt it did not need the others.

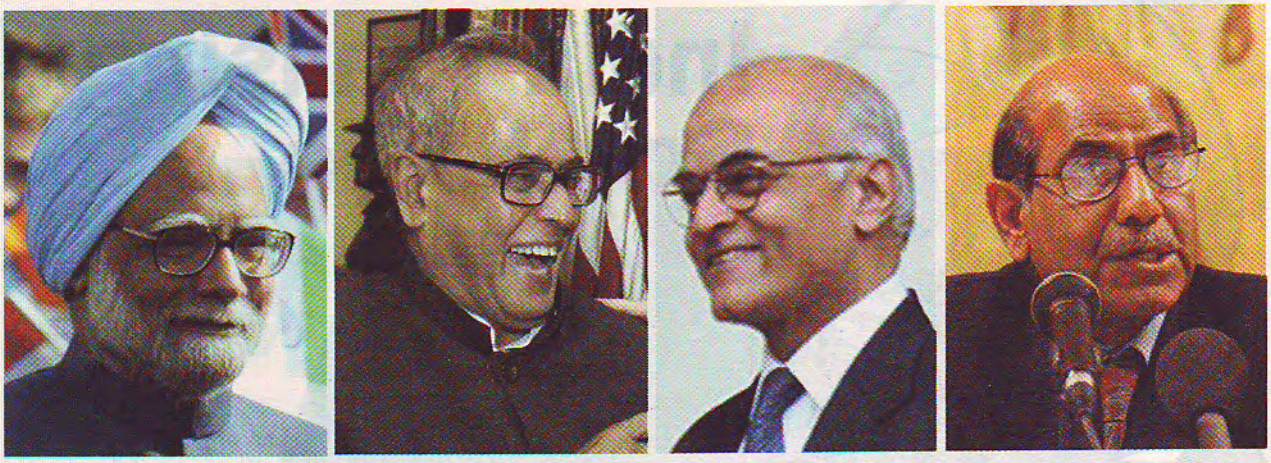
While Bangladeshis first got excited about 'Southasia' back in the time of Ziaur Rahman, postcolonial India's interest simply did not spark. Indians were reluctant participants at the SAARC table, mostly in the unkind belief that the others were ganging up on them. But all this has been changing over the last handful of years, and Indians are suddenly to be found agreeable to regionalism to a surprising degree. India's chairmanship of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), starting with the scheduled summit in New Delhi in the first week of April 2007, is an opportunity to put a definitive stamp on the Indian discovery of Southasia.

As New Delhi seeks a place at the table of the global powers, it realises the need to have a tidy home turf. Its economic growth since the mid-1990s has also given India the confidence to be more broad-minded. This accelerating transformation is noticeable in the very acceptability of the term *Southasia* among the mainline Indian intelligentsia. It only came upon this term in the late 1990s, whereas Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Pakistanis and Nepalis had picked it up more than a decade earlier. And so, for example, the proprietary reference to 'Indian Subcontinent' in New Delhi's seminar halls was dropped for simply the 'Subcontinent' – until, at long last, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, speaking in early February 2007 to a group of regional editors at a curtain-raiser to the upcoming 14th SAARC Summit, referred to the "South Asian Subcontinent".

Whether New Delhi's *bhodrolok* takes ownership of Southasia would be an academic question if regionalism were not of utmost relevance for the well being of the mass citizenry of Southasia. The fact is that a 'Southasianism' which adds an accessible layer of overarching identity to existing and acceptable cultural and national identities, will directly and indirectly better the quality of life across a region that houses a fifth of the world's population – and a majority of its abjectly poor. A regionalism that can hearken back to cultural commonalities and a long, shared history will raise the threshold for conflict and promote intellectual and commercial give-and-take that will enrich all, especially those in today's beleaguered crossborder regions. That Indians are opening up to Southasia, and that New Delhi's foreign-policy establishment maintains its commitment to regionalism is dictated by self-interest, means that, two decades after the establishment of SAARC, the hurdles are cleared to realising 'Southasia'.

Himalayan confidence

Other than the sheer impossibility of escaping the blighted neighbourhood, it is the economic progress made by a globalising India that has given New Delhi's power elite the rationale to address the region. This



India's 'Southasianism' is being defined by Prime Minister Singh, and Mukherjee, Menon and Saran

newfound confidence is actually most obvious in the lowering of paranoia with regard to the Himalayan rimland. The 1962 border war with China in India's north and northeast raised a national-security sensitivity in connection to the high frontier that had bordered on the unreasonable. With the recent jettisoning of Sino-Indian tensions – ushered in by Beijing's 2005 recognition of the Sikkim annexation, the high expectations of economic relations with China, and the acceptance of the Himalayan ridgeline as no longer a strategic buffer but a porous economic frontier, India has finally lowered its guard on the Himalaya.

Proof of this departure is available in New Delhi's willingness to live with the presence of a United Nations arms-monitoring mission in Nepal, and in the treaty revision with Bhutan of early February 2007, which released Thimphu from New Delhi's foreign policy and security umbilical. The dynamics in the Himalayan rimland are emblematic of a more general lowering of crossborder suspicions by the New Delhi foreign-policy establishment. Though the Kashmir issue has many complicated facets, the reduced Himalayan paranoia will clearly also impact on the one problem that fuels India-Pakistan acrimony, which in turn impacts on Southasian regionalism as a whole.

The self-confidence evident in New Delhi's Himalayan dealings is found elsewhere as well, including in India's relations with Pakistan. There was a time, not so many years ago, when one militant attack would be enough for nervous politicians and diplomats in South Block to scuttle talks with Islamabad, even pushing them back by a year or three. But in 2005 and 2006 India stayed the course with Pakistan, despite an attack on a Hindu shrine in Benaras, another in a crowded marketplace in the Indian capital, a serial blast in Bombay's suburban trains, and a series of incidents in Jammu & Kashmir. Despite these horrific attacks, New Delhi did not fall back on the rejectionist jingoism that had marked the earlier era. In fact, its dogged pursuit of what is known as the 'composite dialogue', which has continued also after the attack on the Delhi-Lahore Samjhauta Express of 18 February, proves that the rapprochement with Islamabad is indeed now built on the foundation of mutual need. This, in turn, firms up the basis for regionalism in general, which has been held hostage for too long by hostility across the Wagah-Attari frontier.

Saran and Menon

Serious Indian academics, who have heretofore shunned the study of Southasian regionalism in favour of relations with the West, or restricted themselves to the tense India-Pakistan theatre, have begun to turn their focus onto the larger neighbourhood. The fact that South Block and the Indian foreign-policy establishment is in 'Southasia mode' means that the region will be taken seriously by a circle of strategic analysts beyond just the 'track-two romantics' – those regularly derided by the powerful analysts who reside within New Delhi's Ring Road. South Block's new approach is also linked to the fact that the big boss today is an economist-prime minister, who comes with little geopolitical baggage and speaks from the heart about making borders irrelevant. Manmohan Singh's oft-repeated quote relates his dream of having breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul.

If proof were needed of the evolved mindset of South Block apparatchiks, it can be read in the bowing-out speech by the immediate past Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, delivered before the Indian Council of World Affairs in September 2006. Saran proposed 'interconnectivity' as the primary focus of India's 'look regional' policy (*see Himal October 2006, "Connectivity as India's foreign policy"*). Current Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon maintains that India's focus on Southasian regionalism is realistic, and should be believable because it is based on New Delhi's political and economic self-interest. Speaking to the Southasian editors gathered in Delhi in early February, he added meaningfully, "After all, this is our Southasia!" Menon believes that Southasia's countries had to become comfortable and confident in their own nationalisms before they could embrace regionalism – a process now nearly complete.

Shyam Saran's push is to propose interconnectivity through reviving links, as well as developing new grids – rail, road and air transport, transmission lines and natural gas. His emphasis is also on recognising that India's border regions, particularly those adjoining Nepal and Bangladesh, are among its most underdeveloped.

In essence, New Delhi's neglect of the neighbourhood has been reflected in the neglect of its own borderlands. There is now a multi-crore rupee programme underway to upgrade all of India's border points, including customs infrastructure from the Burma-Mizoram border, all the way west to the Punjab-Punjab frontier. New Delhi is also concentrating on upgrading highways in these regions, recognising, for example, that the highway from Calcutta to the Petrapole border point on the road to Dhaka is an embarrassment to India, beyond restricting movement and trade with Bangladesh. The same can be said for roads and connectivity elsewhere within the Indian 'periphery'.

The Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi seems to be coming around to the understanding that communications between the border states and neighbouring countries must be encouraged, not controlled by an imperial New Delhi fearful of fissiparous tendencies. It is known that the New Delhi bureaucracy has been uneasy with Punjab state Chief Minister Amarinder Singh's contacts with his counterparts from Punjab province in Lahore. And it is unclear whether South Block's growing enthusiasm for crossborder interaction is shared by the intelligence agencies under the Ministry of Home Affairs in North Block. However, a senior Indian diplomat in New Delhi confirms: "There is now less and less resistance to letting the border states develop their own relationships across the international borders."

SAARC v Southasia

Over the years, the vision of Southasia has been weakened by excessive reliance on the SAARC model of seven capitals trying to work in unison (soon to be eight, with Afghanistan's membership), which has made India at once the most powerful and least interested in Southasia. It is also necessary to distinguish between the somewhat stunted organisation of SAARC and its secretariat located in Kathmandu, and the many-layered entity that Southasia is and can be. A concept of regionalism complementary to that of SAARC would be one that constitutes the cumulative total of bilateral relationships, including the crossborder relationships between India's and their immediate neighbours.

This latter, alternative view of regionalism jives with the apparent willingness of New Delhi to 'let its border regions go' – ie, to develop their individual crossborder relationships. Simultaneously, such a version of regionalism would in one stroke also make irrelevant the biggest knot in the evolving Southasianism: the overwhelming asymmetry presented by the sheer geostrategic and economic power, physical expanse and population of India – a country in the centre of the region, bordering all other countries, none of which adjoin the others (other than Pakistan and SAARC newcomer Afghanistan). The Indian Union taken as a whole would never feel the urgency to develop a sense of regionalism, because most parts of its larger economy and society would not reap the advantages of regionalism the way the bordering states would.

It would be naive to believe that India's neighbours will rush to welcome India's discovery that there is a 'region' out there. Just as India long felt that SAARC was an attempt by the smaller countries to gang up against it, so now, with India going regional, the neighbours may regard New Delhi's turn of attitude as merely strategic – an increase in stature with which to throw its weight around in the international arena, and even manage a seat in the Security Council. Most importantly, India's discovery of Southasia will be seen as an attempt by New Delhi to infiltrate the neighbourhood's economies for the benefit of Indian multinationals. Indeed, India's current agenda seems to be not so much the promotion of people-to-people contact as that of opening to commerce through a liberalised trade regime. Pakistan is wary of being swamped by Indian goods; and Bangladesh, which is already seeing a strong Indian multinational presence, may be alarmed enough to implement harsh protectionism.

But it would be backward-looking to regard India's regionalism as guided only by economic hegemonism. Such a view would deny the smaller neighbours any agency in understanding and countering conspiratorial designs of the Indian behemoth. Further, surely there are establishmentarian and commercial interests in India as well that will be threatened by a loosening of trade regimes.

It would also be important for New Delhi's foreign-affairs managers to be aware of the deep suspicions that will greet even their well-intentioned initiatives. How should New Delhi respond? In the economic arena, according to one senior Indian official, "India can allay suspicions by being unexpectedly magnanimous, by not demanding reciprocity for the trading concessions it provides. The Southasian trade is such a small part of India's portfolio that we would not hurt, while we would certainly be able to puncture the envelope of suspicion." That might be easier said

The transformation in New Delhi's attitude is noticeable in the very acceptability of the term *Southasia* among the mainline Indian intelligentsia.

than done, however, as the Indian sectors that would lose out in a liberalised regime would surely lobby to halt such a process.

Small countries are always suspicious of large neighbours, and Southasia is no exception. Here, tactical anti-Indianism is the recourse of politicians in the countries surrounding India, particularly when in the opposition. While such wariness of Indian designs exists across the board, the most significant worries about hegemonic India tend to be harboured by the intelligentsia in Bangladesh and Pakistan – and that is where scepticism about India's regional turn would also be deepest. But given the fact that Bangladesh has been the most consistent promoter of SAARC since Gen Ziaur Rahman mooted the idea of the organisation in the mid-1980s, it will be Islamabad that will need the most convincing – also because it has thus far been the most protected from Indian commerce. In the case of Pakistan, rapprochement is also complicated by the matter of Kashmir, which in turn impacts on the entire fabric of Southasian regionalism.

As the Indian policy-shift towards regionalism accelerates during the year it chairs SAARC, what model will New Delhi choose? The core idea connected to regionalism is obviously that of loosening borders, in terms of both commerce and people-people contact. Here, the example of Nepal to the north and Sri Lanka in the south will be instructive for India and the other Southasians. Nepal has had an unregulated open border with India since the signing of a 1950 treaty on peace and friendship. Over time, this frontier will probably evolve into a regulated open border, at which point it will provide the model for the increasingly straight-jacketed Southasian frontiers regime. Sri Lanka's relationship with India has evolved as economically the most mature, based on a bilateral trade agreement that many say can set an example for other economies of Southasia.

Despite all the possibilities that beckon, however, India's own intentions are not yet perfectly clear. While it may be that some Indian diplomats hold grand visions, there are various players in the Indian state, with different and shifting agendas. All of which is exemplified by the fact that, even while Manmohan Singh talks of opening borders, his government pushes ahead with the massive project to fence the boundaries with Bangladesh and Pakistan. It is not clear who benefits from the fencing, other than producers of concertina wire and cement. The kind explaination to such contradictions is to suggest that North Block is yet to imbibe the new approach proposed by South Block, just across the yard on New Delhi's Raisina Hill. If such is the case within India's own ministries, the neighbours should be forgiven their suspicions.

The three layers

Once India accepts its presence and role in 'Southasia', and a workable Southasian model is found – one different from but complementary to the capital-centric and diplomat-led SAARC formula – it is then that Southasia the region will become a full reality. How will it transform, and how should it? Southasian regionalism is of limited use if it is to be nothing more than a talisman or a marker of identity for the people of the Subcontinent and Sri Lanka. Regionalism must deliver a 'peace dividend', as well as the advancement of the social and economic potential of the mass of Southasia's citizens. Barring incidents that will derail or delay the process of regionalisation, for now the fact that India is on board for reasons of its own self-interest, and is pushing interconnectivity and economic interaction, indicates that the focus on and rationale for regionalism are where they should be.

Southasia may change in ways inconceivable today, and at this stage there is no need to wax utopian about a Southasian passport, a Southasian seat at the Security Council, or a Southasian currency. It is enough to have modest horizons – of a SAARC counter at airport immigration, or of visas on arrival, as Nepal gives to all visitors and Sri Lanka to all Southasian nationals.

As for longer-term integration, the region will benefit massively if India allows its constituent border regions to interact with its neighbours. Simultaneously, given that India makes up much of the Subcontinent's land area and population, regionalism will go part and parcel with true federalism within India. Though some will consider this too open a definition of regionalism, there is no doubt that Southasia will come into its own only when India – and Pakistan, and the other countries in their own ways – becomes truly federated. It should not be forgotten that parts of India, too, are parts of Southasia!

Southasian regionalism will be impossible at this delicate preliminary stage, however, if it is seen to harm national identities and establishments. But it will thrive when we are able to acknowledge our identity as being attached not only to the national, but also the local and regional. It is the wresting of this last layer of identity in the mid-20th century which harmed the populace in ways that run so deep. Aside from wars fuelled by un-tempered ultra-nationalisms, it has kept Pakistanis, for example, from claiming as their own much of what India celebrates as its history.

Regionalism has the potential to deliver economic and social progress to all corners, through a many-spangled peace dividend, and the activation of commerce and comparative advantage. As the most powerful country in Southasia, said now to be focused on the pragmatics of avowed self-interest, India's leadership of SAARC during the coming year must see the acceleration of regionalisation. Southasia has waited for this – for India to be truly on board – since SAARC was founded in 1985. India was the sleeping giant amidst Southasia thus far, but it seems to have woken up. Let it not return to its derisive slumber.

India's new regionalism

The Indian establishment has finally accepted that the country's border regions need to be dealt with on a connective rather than separative basis. That's great timing, as New Delhi takes over SAARC leadership in April.

BY **C RAJA MOHAN**

BILASH RAI

In his annual address to the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in January, Manmohan Singh embarked on a rare public musing on the potential consequences of expanded regional cooperation. Insisting that the destinies of the Southasian peoples were interlinked, the prime minister said, "I dream of a day when, while retaining our respective national identities, one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul. That is how my forefathers lived. That is how I want our grandchildren to live." Prime Minister Singh's speeches to the FICCI have tended to be dry perorations on economic policy. But this year's presentation underlined a new national priority that is at once economic, political and strategic: that of taking the leadership in promoting a new regionalism within the Subcontinent.

Manmohan Singh's remarks were not a one-off. His foreign minister, Pranab Mukherjee, as well as his foreign secretary, Shiv Shankar Menon, have in several recent statements begun to articulate a very different approach to Southasian regionalism. Unlike previous bouts of regionalism – for example, under the

foreign-policy stewardship of Inder Kumar Gujral during 1996-97, which also delivered the 'Gujral Doctrine' – the present emphasis on deepening regional integration is rooted in both political realism and economic pragmatism.

Manmohan Singh believes that India's new regionalism must be rooted in self interest. He and his advisers insist that the opportunity to hold the 14th Summit of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in New Delhi during early April must be utilised to demonstrate India's commitment to deepening regionalism. It is not that India is unaware of the SAARC organisation's many weaknesses. Nor does it delude itself that SAARC can be made into a dynamic body overnight. What New Delhi does believe, however, is that unilateral initiatives can in fact accelerate the inevitable trends towards a reshaping of the region. Four broad imperatives have begun to define India's new regionalism.

A peaceful periphery

The first imperative is based on the recognition of the urgent need to elevate the region in India's diplomatic priorities. Since the nuclear tests of May 1998, India's foreign-policy emphasis has tended to be on so-called 'big power diplomacy'. The recasting of India's relations with the United States, expanding engagement with China, restoring the old partnership with Russia, establishing a strategic dialogue with Europe and rediscovering the potential for bilateral cooperation with Japan have all been part of a new dynamism in India's foreign policy. The economic reforms since 1991 and the consequent rise of India in the global arena have also set the stage for an omni-directional and multi-layered interaction with all the major powers. India's diplomatic activism Westward ultimately culminated in the Indo-US nuclear deal of July 2005, which would allow the US to supply nuclear material for use in India's civil nuclear sector.

While the New Delhi government continues to focus on the unfinished agenda of implementing the nuclear deal, it recognises that great power relations are now in flux. With the US deeply divided at home over Iraq, and the other powers anticipating significant changes in US foreign policy after the upcoming general elections, India is conscious that further initiatives with the major powers must wait. Meanwhile, New Delhi believes that it must now purposefully focus on its own region. It has also come to see that India's aspirations of becoming a great power on the world stage cannot be realised without an effective regional policy.

For most countries, the central burden of diplomacy is of dealing with neighbours. For a great power, whether extant or rising, the challenge rests in sustaining or cultivating influence in its own environs. Preventing other great powers from fomenting trouble in one's own region while simultaneously seeking influence in the 'backyard' is also part of being such a power. Without enduring primacy in one's own neighbourhood, no country can become a credible global power. This simple truth has finally begun to be applied to foreign-policy making in New Delhi – and hence the rise of the new Indian emphasis on a "peaceful periphery". As Foreign Secretary Menon told a group of Southasian newspaper editors in February in New Delhi, India needs a peaceful neighbourhood for its own interests: "India needs a peaceful periphery if we are to achieve our own goals for ourselves. It is in our self-interest to work with the rest of Southasia." Much like China during the 1980s, which posited that a peaceful periphery was crucial for its new grand strategy, India has recognised that creating a stable and prosperous neighbourhood is the key to redefining India's global role.

Central to the strategy of constructing a peaceful periphery is the resolution of long-standing problems with the neighbours. At the top of this list have been Jammu & Kashmir and the boundary dispute with China. For the first time in decades, India has embarked on purposeful negotiations on both of these issues. While there is no guarantee of diplomatic success on either, there is no denying that considerable progress has already been made on both fronts.

On the boundary dispute, India and China have agreed on a set of guiding principles for final settlement, and are now focused on hammering out a mutually acceptable territorial adjustment. Meanwhile, all indications are that the back-channel negotiations between New Delhi and Islamabad have acquired an unprecedented momentum in recent months. Settlement of either of these disputes will lead to a fundamental transformation of the security environment in the Subcontinent. Above all, the very attempt to negotiate these politically explosive issues at home suggests that New Delhi is increasingly ready to come to terms with a pragmatic definition of its territoriality.

Over the last six decades, India has not worn its incontestable regional primacy with ease. Its attempts since Independence at developing a Monroe Doctrine for the region, as well as its demands that the neighbours respect its dominance, have not really succeeded. Perhaps nothing exemplified New Delhi's insularity more than its insistence on maintaining outdated old treaty relationships with Bhutan and Nepal.

The fact that India is now approaching its relationships with Nepal and Bhutan with greater realism is also a harbinger of shifts elsewhere. External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee told an audience in New Delhi in January: "India's commitment to develop political relations with its Southasian

neighbours on the basis of sovereign equality and mutual respect is underlined by our recent decision to upgrade the 1949 Friendship Treaty with Bhutan, and our willingness to review the 1950 treaty with Nepal. Amidst the increasing globalisation of Southasian economies and polities, there is no question of India pursuing the outdated idea of an exclusive sphere of influence. India's strong support to the entry of China and Japan into the SAARC as observers underlines India's commitment to open regionalism in the Subcontinent."

Security multilateralism

The new emphasis on the 'regional' in Indian foreign policy is also being located in a full appreciation of the 'global' in the Subcontinent's international relations. Southasia is no longer the backwater of global politics that in the past allowed India to deal with its neighbours in an essentially bilateral framework. In both the economic and security realms, the new wave of globalisation has begun to transform the region as a whole.

Just as India has benefited from globalisation, so have the other economies in the region, and fast growth today marks the entire Subcontinent. Amidst historically unprecedented prospects for the elimination of poverty in the Subcontinent, the world's major economic actors are interested in the Southasian market as a whole, even though India may be a large part of that whole. Southasia's economic ties with the rest of the world – especially neighbouring regions such as the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and Southeast Asia – have acquired a strategic dimension. Amidst the rising economic profile in Southasia of other powers, particularly that of China, India can no longer treat regional economic relationships as a mere summation of New Delhi's bilateral ties.

The region's security situation has also become increasingly globalised. Be it the sources of international terrorism in the northwestern parts of the region, the role of the Pakistani state in combating al-Qaeda or the maintenance of nuclear stability between India and Pakistan, Southasia affects the world, which in turn impinges on the region in an unprecedented manner. The internal conflicts in Sri Lanka and Nepal have increasingly seen the involvement of the international community – with the involvement of Norway as well as other powers in the former and a United Nations monitoring mission in the latter. Such developments challenged the traditional Indian policy of trying to keep the major powers and third parties out of Southasia when it came to security matters. Somewhat reluctantly, India allowed the Norwegian mediation of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2000. Since then it has worked more actively with the US, the European Union and the United Kingdom in overseeing the democratic transition in Nepal.

There is a new recognition in New Delhi that working with other powers, which share its interests, would make it easier for India to manage the region's security affairs. Letting other powers share the burden of regional peace has by no means reduced India's centrality in shaping the security outcomes in the region. That certainly was the case in Nepal's democratic transformation. India may find it both necessary and comfortable to move away from the traditional impulses of either unilateralism or bilateralism towards a leadership role in a new form of security multilateralism. To be sure, Indian attitudes towards China's role in Southasia remain more complex, but New Delhi has found that it can 'manage' Beijing: it found ways to keep Chinese officials informed of its initiatives during the Nepal crisis of 2005-06.

Economic unilateralism

India's economic dynamism since the early 1990s has provided new opportunities for the country's engagement with the rest of Asia. Yet New Delhi has found difficulty in leveraging its new options within Southasia. To be sure, amidst the new enthusiasm for globalisation in the Subcontinent, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) came into being in 2006. But in terms of scope and ambition, SAFTA is pedestrian in comparison to other regional free trade agreements. Neither Islamabad, which has insisted that SAFTA will not apply to its relations with New Delhi, nor a sullen Dhaka is cheerful about regional free trade with India. While its free trade with Sri Lanka has shown positive results, India must take a considerable portion of the blame for the lack of momentum in overall regional economic integration.

Meanwhile, China has put its new economic clout to good use by seeking to integrate crossborder regions with its own economy, and creating new sources of political influence. In contrast, India has persisted with a protectionist policy that has been reluctant to open its market to its neighbours. While China has been willing to live with trade deficits with most of its neighbours, India has trade surpluses with each of its own. All these neighbours, meanwhile, continue to complain bitterly about the trade barriers imposed by New Delhi.

There are now signs of change in this sector as well. External Affairs Minister Mukherjee has acknowledged the challenge of recrafting India's economic policy towards its neighbours. Speaking to a summit of SAARC editors in February, Mukherjee said: "India is conscious that no Southasian nation can succeed on its own. Globalisation and the advent of modern technology have endowed us with options that never existed before. We must create a stake for every nation in the economic success of the other. As we prepare to host the next SAARC Summit, India

With the US deeply divided at home over Iraq, and the other powers anticipating significant changes in US foreign policy after the upcoming general elections, India is conscious that further initiatives with the major powers must wait.

will take the initiative in accelerating regional economic and political cooperation." The Delhi SAARC Summit of 3-4 April could give clear signals that New Delhi has finally come up with a strategic approach to regional trade, one that understands the importance of creating long-term economic interdependence.

The signals emanating from New Delhi indicate that that there is substantial political will to move the Southasian region towards shared prosperity. Demonstrating such will involves unilateral initiatives to promote economic cooperation in sub-regional, Southasia-wide and trans-regional frameworks. A generous policy on offering better market access to its immediate neighbours should help New Delhi transform the commercial dynamics in the region. India also needs to give up its traditional opposition to financing regional trans-border projects by such institutions as the Asian Development Bank. Letting the Indian private sector take the initiative on regional economic cooperation, reducing the salience of government-to-government negotiations, lending strong fiscal and other incentives for Indian private direct investment in the neighbourhood, and building a semi-autonomous development fund for the region are some of the other moves that New Delhi is likely to, and should, focus upon.

Transforming Southasian space

One of the many unfortunate consequences of Partition has been the sundering of what, until then, had been a single economic space. The political splitting of the Subcontinent did not necessarily demand an economic splitting of the region's market. But thanks to long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan, and inward-looking economic policies in most Southasian countries, trade barriers steadily became higher along the region's new orders. Meanwhile, some of the old frontiers – such as between India and Tibet – were shut completely to commerce and people-to-people contact.

While some of India's borders – with Nepal and Bhutan – remained open, New Delhi's approach to the country's frontier regions increasingly acquired a security orientation, to the detriment of the needs of the people on the two sides of each of the frontiers. As a consequence, many traditional transport corridors were closed, and people in the frontier regions were denied easy access to what were once intimate spaces. It was not just crossborder connections that suffered. The tensions with Pakistan and China also meant that India allowed much of its own trade and transport infrastructure to erode. In some areas, especially on the Sino-Indian border, there was a conscious policy not to develop the border regions. Even along the open frontier with Nepal, India let the border infrastructure largely disintegrate.

New Delhi eventually began to recognise that this approach was no longer sustainable. The new imperatives of trade liberalisation demanded a fresh approach to national thinking on frontiers. India's border states also began to mount pressure on New Delhi to facilitate crossborder trade and contact, to which the Indian national leadership responded by at least beginning to talk about the importance of open borders and liberal visa regimes. These political good-intentions were not easy to translate, as new security concerns about crossborder terrorism permeated the Indian establishment.

Despite the emerging security concerns, New Delhi has continued on the path towards a liberal frontier regime. In the last few years, the Indian government has taken decisions to upgrade border infrastructure on all sides, enhancing crossborder connectivity as well as upgrading links between the frontier regions and the rest of the country. This involves not merely building better and more-modern roads, but a fundamental restructuring of the administrative infrastructure relating to customs, trade facilitation and visa procedures. Although India has opened up some traditional trade routes – at Nathula, the road between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, and the Munabao-Khokrapar rail link between Rajasthan and Sindh – there is considerable resistance within the various layers of the national establishments towards taking the new logic forward, on either promoting crossborder trade or people-to-people contact. But at least the foreign-policy establishment seems clear on this one.

A more creative Indian policy towards the frontiers must be premised on the historic opportunity that awaits New Delhi today: the potential to overcome many of the negative consequences of Partition. While there is no reason or incentive for India to reverse the political split of 1947, the new imperatives of globalisation and regional integration now demand that India conceive its borders as vibrant zones of economic cooperation rather than lines of separation. It is this changed context that allows Manmohan Singh to dream of returning to the ways of his forefathers on India's frontiers. If India initiates and persists with a creative regional policy, that dream could well become a reality in the not-too-distant future.

India-Pakistan roadblocks to regional peace

India-Pakistan peace will energise Southasia as a whole. However, mere liberalisation of trade will not lead to bilateral normalcy. Its main benefits would accrue to India in the medium term.

BY **MOEED YUSUF**

India's remarkable macro-economic turnaround since the early 1990s has put it on the pat to global recognition. Yet several incisive commentators have noted in recent times that the country continues to be held back from realising its true potential because of unresolved political tensions with its neighbours, especially with Pakistan, the second largest player in the region. Indeed, India's relationship with Pakistan has largely come to shape the geopolitics of the region as a whole. Given the overbearing size of the two economies and their military strengths, these two countries alone largely dictate the extent of integration possible within the region as a whole. It is therefore no surprise that persistent hostilities between New Delhi and Islamabad over nearly six decades have left Southasia as economically one of the least integrated regions across the globe.

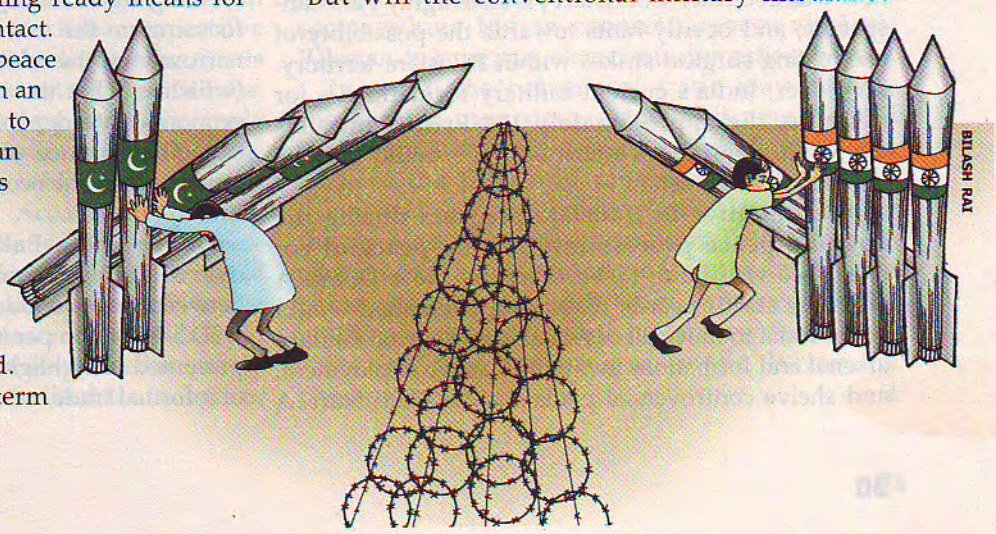
That the future of the Southasian region largely depends on the course India-Pakistan relations end up taking is a given. The utmost importance being accorded to the ongoing peace process is therefore warranted; but there is also the suggestion that a successful end to the peace bid would automatically lead to complete 'normalisation' of relations. The two 'automatic' outcomes suggested are a move away from high military expenditures and enhanced economic ties, with the latter also providing ready means for enhancing people-to-people contact.

This premise is incorrect. The peace process will lead to no more than an opening to continue on the path to normalisation. Before the latter can be achieved, two major concerns will have to be addressed: the ever-increasing disparity in military balance vis-à-vis India, and India's potential to flood Pakistani markets economically when trade ties are liberalised. While both of these are long-term concerns, and their outcome could well decide whether Pakistan and India manage to co-exist as peaceful neighbours, by no means will they be direct results of the peace process. A distinct, equally elaborate process will have to be followed to achieve these ends.

Neighbour-specific militaries

Let us begin by considering the issue of disparity in military strengths. In absolute terms, India's conventional military spending and capability is substantially greater than Pakistan's. Ignoring the tactical elements of warfare, an objective macro analysis of the two sides' military capabilities leaves no doubt that India could overwhelm Pakistani defences with little difficulty. The nuclear option then acts as a potent deterrent for Pakistani military planners, to some extent thwarting the possibility of Indian adventurism. Notwithstanding the liberal view that the presence of nuclear weapons ought to lessen the pressure for conventional military expenditure (and that, if not, they should go), an outright emphasis on nuclear weapons is virtually impossible – and dangerous – given the geographical contiguity between the two sides. In essence, Pakistan cannot divorce its nuclear capability from the excessive disparity vis-à-vis India in the conventional realm.

But will the conventional military imbalance



BILASH RAI

It is no surprise that persistent hostilities between New Delhi and Islamabad over nearly six decades have left Southasia as economically one of the least integrated regions across the globe.

decrease if the peace process delivers tangible progress in terms of improved bilateral relations? Clearly not. Consider that India today faces a 'vision-capability' dilemma. India's national elite views the country as deserving a global power status. Nonetheless, India's present military capability by no means conforms to that of a global power. That capability may qualify India as a strong regional entity, but its might is not remotely comparable to that of the US, Russia or even China. The result has been an elite consensus to push aggressively for a military modernisation plan.

With regard to the equation vis-à-vis Pakistan, what this implies is that India will continue to upgrade on an accelerated path, thus putting more pressure on Islamabad to increase its own spending. The already resource-constrained Pakistan is unlikely to keep pace even in its quest to maintain a semblance of parity within a clearly asymmetric relationship. This in turn would imply that the military equation between India and Pakistan could become just as lopsided as the current military equations between India and its other Southasian neighbours. While other regional countries have come to terms with such disparity, there are several factors that will not allow Islamabad to accept this outcome, including India-Pakistan's history of conflict and mutual suspicion, and Pakistan's own vision of itself as a pivotal state within the Muslim world.

Add to this the fact that, despite India's global ambitions and its emphasis on tying its military modernisation to a quest for 'global power' status, much of its war-fighting machine remains Pakistan-specific. Measures in recent years to enhance air superiority and artillery capability, for example, are targeted towards active fighting with Pakistan. India's new war doctrine, 'Cold Start', is also highly Pakistan-specific, and openly hints towards the possibility of conducting surgical strikes within Pakistani territory. Moreover, India's current military formations – for example, the approximately 150 Prithvi missiles deployed along the western border – could only be used against Pakistan.

The initiative to translate progress during the ongoing peace process into lasting peaceful co-existence will have to be taken by New Delhi. A welcome start towards reassuring Islamabad would be for India to move all of its Pakistan-specific military arsenal and formations away from active deployment, and shelve controversial plans such as Cold Start. A complete dismantling of its Pakistan-specific capability would be the ultimate objective.

For its part, Pakistan ought to reciprocate the Indian initiative, first by moving its actively deployed arsenal away from the eastern lines, and then by dismantling part of its war-fighting machinery. (Pakistan would still not be able to eliminate most of its capability, given its largely India-centric outlook and its smaller size.) Some prominent Indian academics, such as Bharat Karnad, have already argued for the need to provide Pakistan with increased confidence in Indian thinking, by employing unilateral military concessions. Without such a show of magnanimity from India, suspicions in Islamabad on the strategic front cannot be expected simply to disappear.

In fact, were India to continue on its modernisation plan without altering its Pakistan-specific designs, the end result could be a renewed arms race or a further lowering of the nuclear threshold – both of which would bode ill for stability in bilateral relations. Again, this could take place despite progress in the peace process.

Troubled interdependence

The second major issue is that of economic interdependence between Pakistan and India. Interestingly, economic interdependence in the Southasian case is not being portrayed as merely a means for economic gains. Rather, the contention is premised on the liberal economic theory of interdependence, which argues that economic interdependence is likely to ameliorate bilateral tensions. In the context of this discussion, then, this would imply that enhanced trade ties would in turn ensure peaceful co-existence. But is that really so?

The theory of economic interdependence in no way suggests that peace will be an inevitable outcome of enhancing trade. There are three prerequisites for this theory to work. First, the trade volume has to cross an unspecified 'critical' point. Second, trade in terms of volume is not enough. Instead, production factors or interaction that ensures integration of the two economies, and thus increases inter-dependability, is an imperative. Finally, both countries should be viewing trade ties from the liberal perspective – ie, focusing on the macro benefits of trade, rather than narrowly on the relative gains between the two sides (which is what the international-relations theory of economic interdependence predicts countries would do). The absence of even one of these conditions would cause the economic interdependence-to-peace link to fail.

In the India-Pakistan context, the literature overwhelmingly points to a huge trade potential between the two sides, with estimates ranging from USD 5-15 billion per annum. A supporting point often presented to highlight potential is the enormous value of informal trade, which is believed to be three to four

times that of formal trade. None of the studies, however, has actually conducted a careful analysis to realise the strong structural similarities in production patterns and consumer preferences on both sides. In essence, most analyses simply toe the popular line without approaching the issue holistically. Only a handful of relatively visionary undertakings confess that, while gains are theoretically possible, they will not be forthcoming unless production structures are altered, and in some cases overhauled. Moreover, a recent unpublished analysis of the potential for formal trade (conducted by this writer) under the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) suggests that trade volume would be no greater than USD 3-4 billion.

The more important question, then, is whether this volume is enough to cross the critical point. In large part, this depends on the type of integration trade ties allow for. Here again, the outlook is pessimistic, as current patterns of trade would lead to primary or manufactured goods being transferred from both sides, but not necessarily integration of production – in the sense that a single product is produced with inputs from both the Pakistani and Indian industries.

The third condition for the economic-interdependence theory – a balanced trade equation – is also missing from the India-Pakistan context, since the balance will likely be skewed in India's favour. First, the list of items that could potentially be exported to India is much smaller than the corresponding import list. This implies that, in the near future, Indian exports to Pakistan are likely to be significantly higher than Pakistani exports to India. A good measure of this is informal trade: very few Pakistani items are being traded informally with India, compared to the huge influx of smuggled Indian products.

Next, some of the sectors that could potentially export products to India may only be able to do so in the long run. This is because Pakistan's manufacturing industry is set up to cater to small markets, and in most sectors is functioning near full capacity – although there are some important exceptions. Therefore, for some time to come, Pakistan would be unable to utilise its advantage in products in which it has a competitive edge. To the contrary, Indian exports to Pakistan could begin almost instantly. This implies a huge short-term impact on some of Pakistan's less-competitive industries. Notwithstanding vested interests, this is the ultimate fear of those opposed to trading with India.

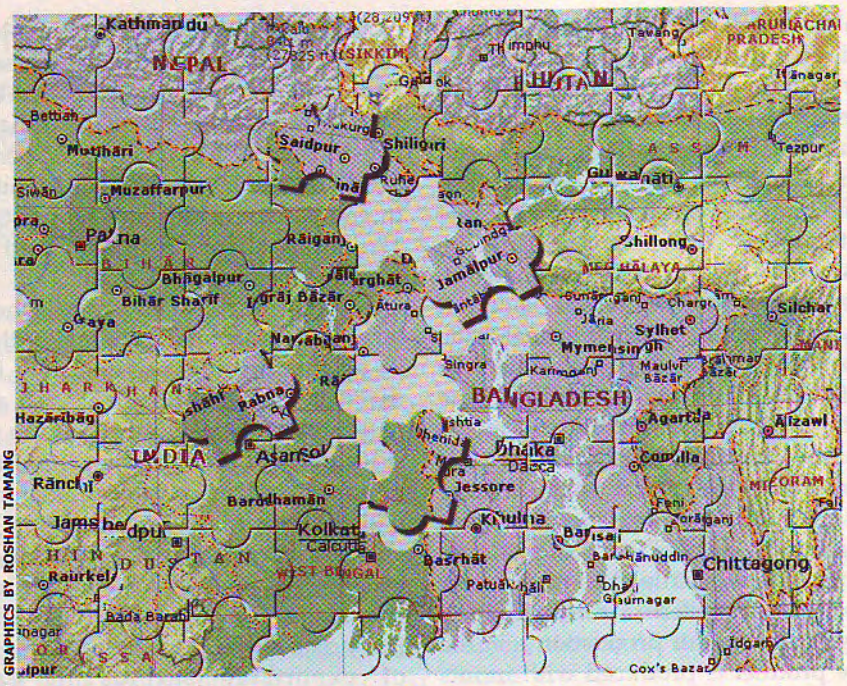
Another factor acting against the possibility of trade is the high hidden barriers to trade and the domestic subsidies that exist in India, which make certain sectors artificially competitive. According to a study by the International Monetary Fund, India's 'closeness of economy' rating is extremely high, at eight out of ten. A 2004 World Bank report also ranks India as one of the ten most closed economies in the world. What this means is that Pakistan as a less-closed economy would be losing more in a liberalised trade regime, unless correctives are put in place ab initio. A comparison of the relative 'closeness' of the Pakistani and Indian economies is provided by their non-tariff measures-coverage ratios. In India's case, this ratio is estimated at a staggering 72 percent for primary products and 59 percent for manufactured goods. In comparison, Pakistan's ratios stand at seven and 17 percent for primary and manufactured goods respectively.

Looking strictly at Southasia, where India's market leverage is astronomically higher than that of any of its neighbours, it is self-defeating for New Delhi to maintain barriers to trade at such a level, since they naturally evoke reluctance on the part of the other sides even to allow Indian imports. Consider that although India accorded Pakistan most-favoured nation status in 1995-96, Pakistan has not yet been able to experience tangible gains in terms of exports, even in commodities for which it has a comparative advantage. This is largely due to hidden barriers on the Indian side. (The only other reason could be lack of exportable surplus in Pakistan, which also undermines the contention about high trade potential.)

In reality, issues of hidden barriers and domestic subsidies are underpinned by deep structural problems, and thus cannot be addressed immediately. It is equally unrealistic to expect India to overhaul its subsidy structure in the short term, given the political ramifications. In the long term, however, India will have to address these issues – if for no other reason, due to increasing pressure from trading partners whose access to the Indian market is currently hampered.

On the trade front, the real possibility of a breakthrough lies over the long run. Over time, Pakistan could develop niches for certain products in the Indian market and consequently increase its export potential, something it is unlikely to be able to do in the short term. Similarly, in the long run Pakistan could increase its production capacity multi-fold, if it is able to invest wisely in line with its created niches. Finally, once India manages to lower its barriers, Pakistani exports can be expected to gain from increased market access, especially in the agriculture sector where Indian competitiveness vis-à-vis Pakistan, in large part, stems from domestic subsidies.

In short, the balance of trade may become comparable over time, a fact that would instil confidence in Islamabad and perhaps allow trade to surpass the threshold required for the liberal theory of economic interdependence to be realised on the ground. Whether economic interaction is allowed to flow without any consequential gains in terms of positive spin-offs for bilateral peace in the interim, however, depends on how confident both sides feel with the progress made during the peace process. ▲



The Indo-Bangla SAARC puzzle

The several long-running issues in the relationship between Bangladesh and India can be resolved by acknowledging that bilateral relations have necessarily to be supplanted by the regional and multilateral.

BY **IMTIAZ AHMED**

As would be expected, the conventional thinking on Southasian inter-state relations is predominantly bilateral in nature. As such, readers should be unsurprised by the following exchange, which took place on the floor of the Indian Rajya Sabha on 17 February 2006, when two members asked Manmohan Singh a three-part question:

(a) whether Indo-Bangladesh relations have deteriorated recently;
(b) if so, the details thereof and the reasons therefore; and
(c) what steps are being/have been taken to improve our relationship with Bangladesh?

The prime minister's response is not available to this writer, but it can be said with some confidence that he did not say anything that would have embarrassed his official position or that of the government of Bangladesh. This became clear when then-Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia visited India a few weeks later – incidentally after a gap of over seven years, during which time no Bangladeshi prime minister came to Delhi. Nonetheless, the words that Prime Minister Singh had for her and the public were only the most laudatory: "Bangladesh is a country with which we have intimate ties of friendship," he noted, adding, "A peaceful, strong, prosperous and stable Bangladesh is in India's interest. It is in the interest of Southasia and all." Prime Minister Singh did not hesitate to web the relationship between India and Bangladesh within the framework of Southasia and beyond. There are good reasons for this.

Two issues are critical here. First, Bangladesh-India relations are faced with a multitude of puzzles that need to be responsibly addressed, with or without feelings of either friendship or animosity. Second, regional and global scenarios have transformed relations between the two countries in several key areas, both for the better and the worse; this is where a sheer bilateral perspective has come to be a handicap. Let us look first at seven of the stickiest puzzles facing these two countries.

Seven puzzles

Border fencing. At an estimated cost of INR 11.3 billion, the Indian government has undertaken to fence off the entire Indo-Bangladeshi border, a project stipulated to end this month. This will include a combination of actual border fencing (2409 km) and border roads (797

km). But with the fencing near completion, why has India thus far failed to stop the flow of Indian goods through informal routes, a smuggling trade that comes to around USD 2 billion per year? A sub-puzzle may be added here: Why spend INR 11.3 billion, when it takes only ten rupees (the cost of a pair of scissors) to cut through the barbed and concertina wire?

Enclaves. Between them, Bangladesh and India have as many as 225 parcels of land that are geographically located in the other country. Out of these, 119 are 'exchangeable' and 11 'non-exchangeable' Indian enclaves in Bangladesh – this last referring to land that may be legally Indian, but to which India lacks even access. Bangladeshi enclaves in India total 95, out of which 72 are exchangeable and some 5129 acres are non-exchangeable. In May 1974, both countries agreed to exchange the enclaves, and to allow the areas' inhabitants to decide whether to stay or move to the parent country. While Bangladesh enacted legislation to actualise that agreement in November 1975, India has yet to do so three decades later.

Crossborder militancy. India and Bangladesh each periodically blame the other for harbouring insurgents antagonistic to their national interests. India accuses Bangladesh of allowing access to the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), while Bangladesh alleges India's role in harbouring the Shadhin Bangabhumi Andolon (SBA) and United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), as well as criminals or local *mastans* wanted in Bangladesh. India currently claims there are 119 anti-Indian insurgent camps inside Bangladesh, while Bangladesh alleges the existence of 39 in India.

Illegal immigration. In 1998, the West Bengal government said that one million Bangladeshis were living illegally in its territory; the Bharatiya Janata Party then put that number at ten times that figure for the whole of India. Samir Guha Roy, of the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta, says both of these estimates are "motivatedly exaggerated", and puts down West Bengal's population problem to migrants from neighbouring states of India. Regardless, there is no doubt that the term 'illegal' in this situation is a misnomer. There can be illegality only when there is something legal. In the case of Bangladesh and India (as well as Pakistan), legal migration is impossible other than through the arduous process of marriage. Indeed, in the absence of a 'legal migration regime' in Southasia, migration has come to hold meaning only in the sphere of illegality, and as such remains vulnerable to the power of the non-state (ie, the 'dubious and shadowy' elements), with the state becoming a mere spectator. Only a 'legal migration regime' between India and Bangladesh could end this misnomer. Anyone violating it could then be rightly called an illegal migrant.

Goods transport. The territoriality of India and Bangladesh and the legacy of Southasian politics have made the transport of goods from the Northeast to the rest of India (and the world) a laughably cumbersome process. Assamese and Tripuran goods, for instance, must currently travel 1400 and 1645 km respectively to reach the Calcutta port. This distance and subsequent transport cost could be reduced drastically if the Chittagong port were to be used instead, or if goods were simply transported to Calcutta through Bangladeshi territory. Why is Bangladesh not taking charge of this issue – for instance, developing the required infrastructure – and making a reasonable if not a hefty profit from it? Trans-shipment would require some reciprocity, and the opening of the Northeast market to Bangladeshi business would be an obvious one.

Trade deficit. In 2005, India's official exports to Bangladesh stood at USD 2.1 billion, while its imports from Bangladesh amounted to only USD 144.2 million – a trade deficit of about USD 1.8 billion in New Delhi's favour. At the same time, recent figures have shown that China has replaced India as the largest exporter to Bangladesh. This only indicates that Bangladesh's trade deficit with China – which stood at USD 1.6 billion in 2004-2005 – is destined to become even larger, surpassing even that with India. If this is the case, why is there so much fuss in Dhaka about Bangladesh's deficit with India, with hardly any corresponding furore regarding China? Is India's nationalist fervour in the age of globalisation helping China to befriend Bangladesh – and to further capture its markets? Trade deficits, it seems, are a political issue, conveniently expressed in the language of economics.

Water rights. There was hope in Bangladesh that, with the 1996 signing of the Farakka Agreement (which stipulated that any Indian activity that may affect the Ganga River would require Bangladesh's consent), water disputes with India would come to an end. But with the planned construction of the Tipaimukh Dam on the Barak River in Manipur, there is now a creeping fear that in order to assuage India's thirst for irrigation and urban water, all of the 54 rivers that Bangladesh shares with India will be made to dry up. Water disputes have now returned to civil and political agendas with a vengeance in Dhaka. Added to this is the idea of river-linking, mooted in India, which strikes fear in Bangladesh. Although the grandiose project's implementation is currently limited to South India, there is no guarantee that the rivers in the north would not follow once the southern linking is implemented. Indeed, if India's conscience is to be found in the words and deeds of activists such as Medha Patkar, Vandana Shiva and Arundhati Roy, then that crossborder 'water war' has already begun.

Multiversity of globalisations

With the persistence of and the dynamics between all of these issues, it is easier to understand the

The response can never be national isolation or a hyper-reproduction of the national-security state. Rather, for unlocking and resolving these puzzles, a greater hope lies in the regionalisation of Bangladesh-India relations.

widespread worry of 'invisible hands' in Bangladesh and India that have vested interests in keeping alive these puzzles and in creating new ones. Over the years, theories have arisen that the CIA, ISI, RAW, DGFI, South Block, Hawa Bhavan, the Jamaat, the Jewish lobby, the RSS, the World Bank, fanatics, fascists, communists (the list is unending) must have had a hand in the deterioration of Bangladesh-India relations.

But successfully unlocking these puzzles is significantly more difficult. Falling back on conspiracy theories would be to fix the contention to post-Westphalian notions of bilateralism, while discarding the quantum leap that has been made in the past three decades in multilateral engagements between people, communities and enterprises – nationally, regionally and globally. Emerging regional and global scenarios have added fresh munitions to these puzzles, and have transformed Bangladesh-India relations both positively and negatively.

Reforms and economic globalisation have had a spectacular impact on India's economy, and India's steady integration into the global economy is inevitably felt across the border in Bangladesh. There are currently more than 100,000 Indians working in Bangladesh, mostly in globalised ventures. Now that production has become international along with trade, investment and finance, the opportunity exists to engage in creative economic ventures for both India and Bangladesh without the prejudices of the post-Westphalian or 'modernist' nation state. Take, for instance, the French cement plant in Sylhet, on the border of Bangladesh and Meghalaya: it uses limestone transported by a conveyor belt from a quarry in Meghalaya across the national border and to the plant. But economic globalisation is only one of the versions of globalisation. Two other versions – reverse and subaltern – are equally critical.

Two good examples of 'reverse globalisation' are Bollywood and what goes internationally in the name of Indian cuisine. While the Southasian diaspora has certainly played a role in reproducing these particular examples, reverse globalisation has had its most formidable impact with regard to religious discourses. The post-national Southasian diaspora, particularly in West Asia and coupled with the reality of global anti-Muslim sentiments, has inevitably become attracted to a puritan form of Islam – subsequently helping to promote Wahhabism back home and thereby adding to the power of fundamentalist forces. Similar dynamics can be seen with the India Development and Relief Fund, a US-based charity that has long funded efforts to champion the cause of Hindutva outside of India.

The third version of globalisation, that of the 'subaltern' or the dominated and marginalised, has had both positive and negative variants. The former in particular refers to the global networks that have been set up to resist economic globalisation – the profusion of activism on environmental, labour and human-rights issues. But there is also a further subaltern variant, very negative in nature. This refers to the relationship between and amongst those 'dubious and shadowy groups' – the smugglers of goods and people, producers of illicit weapons, and the like. These networks now go beyond nationality, ethnicity, race and religion. It must also be noted that a national resolution of regional or post-national insecurity further empowers the dubious elements of subaltern globalisation.

While the puzzles informing Bangladesh-India relations have attained new dimensions due to these various new forms of globalisation and multilateral engagement, the response can never be national isolation or a hyper-reproduction of the national-security state. Rather, for unlocking and resolving these puzzles, a greater hope lies in the regionalisation of Bangladesh-India relations.

Indo-Bangla relations and SAARCisation

The UNESCO Constitution, echoing the words of an anonymous poet, proclaims that "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." If so, it must be admitted that the puzzles informing Bangladesh-India relations result from a precise mindset, and that any resolution of these puzzles must be sought in first changing that mindset – particularly that ingrained in notions of bilateralism and mutual intolerance. And what will come as a surprise to many is that putting the India-Bangladesh relationship on stable foundations requires looking beyond Dhaka-New Delhi bilateralism to SAARC regionalism or multilateralism.

A Southasian University could be a good starting point, an idea to which Manmohan Singh committed India during the last SAARC Summit. In fact, over the past decade, a team of Southasian scholars have been looking into this idea, exploring possible curricula and organisational structure. Their conclusion is to have issue-based faculties spread throughout the region, which would provide an environment for post-national discourses free from the constraints of the reasoning of the state. Such an idea of a regional centre

of learning would ipso facto define the future terms of Southasian relationships, including that of India-Bangladesh. Preliminary technical meetings for such a university are slated to take place in March.

A second idea is for a Southasian Mobile Museum. When post-colonial India requested that the famous Koh-i-noor diamond be returned, Pakistan also quickly laid its own claim to the piece of rock, as did Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The British could only enjoy this intra-regional bickering, and discarded the claims as unworkable. The Koh-i-noor could easily be brought back to Southasia after the creation of a post-national mobile museum, where the diamond and other artefacts transferred during the colonial era could be brought back and displayed in each of the Southasian countries on a rotating basis. Millions in Southasia would line up to have a glimpse at the things that had contributed so much to the making of the Westphalian state – and to its healthy demise.

Finally, a Southasian Library could also make a difference in this exercise of de-puzzling the mind. The modern age could not have come about without the Bodleian Library at Oxford, the first public library in modern times. Similarly, a Southasian Library, with thematic branches spread throughout the region, could have a significant hand in connecting Southasians. Regional scholarship would at once cease to suffer for want of access to knowledge. In an age that has transformed the dictum *knowledge is power* into *power is knowledge*, one must be wary of the fact that 'borrowed knowledge' is bound to produce 'borrowed power' or 'colonised minds'. Both India and Bangladesh must wake up to this reality and make knowledge-production a Southasia-wide exercise, if puzzles are to be resolved and breakthroughs to be made in the state of their relationship.

Puzzles are created by humans and can only be resolved by humans. What is required above all is trust, free from the 'realist psychoses' of fear and inferiority complexes. When it comes to Bangladesh-India relations, the latter, mainly for reasons stemming from 1971, has an advantage over the former, due particularly to its accumulation of good friends and lobbies across the border. Bangladesh, on the other hand, devoid of any such experience of helping India, remains largely without a crossborder lobby. The failure to cultivate time-tested friends in India lies squarely with the Dhaka government and the Bangladesh elites. But it must be added that civil-society groups, too, have had limited success on this front. There is, however, some hope to be found among Indians who have lived and served in Bangladesh, including the 100,000 or more who today function as professionals within the Bangladeshi economy. Ultimately, by reaching across multiple borders, that number can be dramatically increased in all directions.

A win-win FTA

Despite worries that the smaller country would get swamped, the India-Sri Lanka free trade agreement has been positive for both sides.

BY **PARANJOY GUHA THAKURTA**

In contrast to the sometimes difficult political relations between India and Sri Lanka, economic ties between the two have expanded impressively in recent years. Despite a number of problems, the Indo-Lanka free trade agreement, which came into effect in 2000, has become a model of economic cooperation - one that has benefited the smaller partner relatively more than the larger one.

India's political relations with its southern neighbour have had their share of difficulties. Colombo has occasionally accused New Delhi of turning a blind eye to the overt and covert material and moral support given to the LTTE by supporters of their separatist militancy in Tamil Nadu. Indian fishermen have been frequently arrested for fishing in Sri Lankan waters. There are also outstanding issues relating to the settlement of Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu, and the granting of citizenship to Tamil-speaking people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka.

On the economic front, however, Indo-Lankan relations have increasingly been on an even keel. The bilateral trade and investment links have deepened and widened considerably over the last seven years, despite areas of contention and dispute. The signing of the bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) marked a turning point in economic relations between the two countries. The FTA is considered to be a shining example of economic cooperation in Asia: while it has helped both countries expand trade, as suggested above, Sri Lanka has gained disproportionately. This is arguably the most noteworthy aspect of the FTA, although there have been surges in the import and export of certain items that have disrupted industries - and jobs - in both countries.

For the first time in a decade, Sri Lanka's exports to India dropped in 2006 - from SLR 56.2 billion in 2005 to SLR 50.9 billion in 2006 - primarily due to problems with exports three commodities that can be imported duty-free under the FTA: copper, pepper and *vanaspati*, a cooking medium made from vegetable oil. India's exports to Sri Lanka, on the other hand, went from SLR 145.6 billion to SLR 187.6 billion during this period.

India and Sri Lanka have historically had close economic ties, and during colonial rule the production structures of both countries were subservient to British interests. But while India started opening its economy to the world during the late 1980s, this process began in Sri Lanka much earlier. In 1977, the Sri Lankan rupee was unified and subjected to a 'managed float', which was followed by privatisation and deregulation of various sectors of the economy. Unlike India's, international trade accounts for a substantial segment of Sri Lanka's economy. Foreign trade as a proportion of gross domestic product is barely one-fifth in India, against three-fourths in Sri Lanka.

From the late 1960s until the end of the 1990s, there were a number of inter-government joint committees and commissions to facilitate trade, investment and technical cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. Since the free trade agreement was signed in 1998, it has largely received the support of the political classes in both countries, even after the national governments of both countries were subsequently voted out of power.

Total trade volume

Whereas the bargaining process to finalise the 'negative lists' - that is, those items that would be excluded from the free trade agreement - was supposed to last only two months, the process ultimately took much longer, and the FTA did not become operational for an additional 14 months after the signing in December 1998. During this period, fears were expressed that the Sri Lankan economy might be swamped by exports from India. In particular, Colombo appeared reluctant to give up revenues that accrued from imports of automobiles. As far as India was concerned, there were apprehensions that 'cheap' tea from Sri Lanka would ruin the fortunes of tea plantations, especially those in South India, and similar fears were raised about the fate of garment manufacturers.

Eventually, tariff rate quotas were imposed on trade in tea and garments, meaning that duty concessions were allowed on trade in these two items subject to quotas. Rules of origin were also specified that were broadly aimed at encouraging the two countries to source raw materials needed for exports from each other, rather than from third countries. Colombo agreed to increase the 'margin of preference' for bulk imports of cement from India, and New Delhi agreed to offer more ports of entry for Sri Lankan tea and garments.

India, which was mainly exporting agricultural items to Sri Lanka until the late 1980s, is currently a major supplier of industrial goods and services. Sri Lanka's main imports from India include machinery, cotton yarn, fabrics and certain garments, primary and semi-finished iron and steel, sugar, wheat, pharmaceuticals, fine chemicals, cement, and paper and wood products. India's principle imports from Sri Lanka are non-ferrous metals (mainly copper), spices (mainly pepper), refined vegetable oil, electronic goods, electrical machinery, scrap metal, paper pulp and chemicals.

For India, Sri Lanka is a relatively small market, accounting for roughly two percent of total exports and less than one percent of total imports. In 1998, India was ranked 21st for Sri Lankan exports. By 2000, however, this ranking climbed to 16th, then to 4th by 2004 and 3rd the year after, preceded only by the US and UK. After the implementation of the Indo-Lankan FTA, Sri Lanka's imports from India have stabilised at around 15 percent of total imports. India is now the largest source of imports

for Sri Lanka, followed by Singapore, Hong Kong and Iran.

The most impressive outcome of the free trade agreement has been the sharp rise in the total volume of trade. Total bilateral trade between India and Sri Lanka had been more or less stagnant at around USD 500 million a year during the latter half of the 1990s. This figure doubled to USD 1 billion by 2002, and nearly doubled again to almost USD 2 billion by 2005. Close to 90 percent of Sri Lanka's exports to India and roughly 45 percent of India's exports to Sri Lanka are covered by the FTA.

India's exports to Sri Lanka rose from INR 22.6 billion in 1999 (before the FTA) to INR 59.5 billion in 2004 – an annual increase of 40 percent. Imports, meanwhile, rose from INR 2.2 billion to INR 16.8 billion – nearly 170 percent per year. Thus, in this five-year period, India's exports to Sri Lanka doubled, while imports from Sri Lanka went up fivefold. The dramatic manner in which the pattern of trade between the two countries changed is evident from the fact that the trade balance in India's favour declined from 15:1 in 1998 to 3.5:1 in 2004 (see *Table 1*).

Tea and vanaspati

Despite the overall gains that accrued from the Indo-Lankan free trade agreement, problems cropped up with respect to trade in specific items. There was a spurt in exports of cement from India to Sri Lanka from INR 692 million in 2000-01 to INR 1.3 billion in 2003-04 – a [illegible]b of more than 80 percent. The Indian market has also been flooded with copper, pepper and vanaspati (see *Table 2*).

At present, more than half of Sri Lanka's exports to India is copper and copper products. Copper imports have risen from nil to INR 4.8 billion in 2005-06, and Sri Lanka now has more than an 80 percent share in India's total copper imports. Imports of pepper have gone up almost threefold, from INR 160.5 million in 2000-01 to INR 445.6 million in 2005-06, increasing Sri Lanka's stake in India's pepper imports from 26 to 37 percent.

Contrary to initial expectations, exports of tea and garments have not surged, with imports of both of these items still less than five percent of the quotas specified in the FTA. In fact, Sri Lanka's tea exports to India have come down, from INR 87 million in 1999-2000 to INR 38.9 million in 2005-06. In a development that caught nearly all involved off guard, Sri Lanka's share of total tea imports by India crashed from 34 percent to barely 3.7 percent during this period.

The most contentious issue plaguing the FTA has been exports of vanaspati from Sri Lanka to India. Since Sri Lanka does not levy any customs duty on imported palm oil used in the manufacture of vanaspati or other products, following the implementation of the FTA ten manufacturing units were set up in Sri Lanka (with an investment of around USD 100 million), specifically to export these items to India at low prices. Interestingly, most of these units were set up by Indian businessmen. Exports of vanaspati went up from 80,000 tonnes in 2002 to 165,000 tonnes in 2005 – by which time Sri Lankan vanaspati was accounting for around one-sixth of India's total annual vanaspati market. In value terms, vanaspati exports from Sri Lanka to India rose from INR 120,000 to INR 6.6 billion between 2001 and 2006, and Sri Lanka's share in total imports of vanaspati by India jumped from nil to 63 percent during the same timeframe.

In June 2006, New Delhi decided to restrict Sri Lankan vanaspati by canalling all imports through the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation. The ten vanaspati units in Sri Lanka subsequently shut down operations, with the owners complaining about New Delhi's "unilateral" decision to raise this non-tariff barrier in "violation of the spirit of the FTA". The FTA specifies that up to a limit of 250,000 tonnes of vanaspati can be exported from Sri Lanka to India, although only 100,000 tonnes had actually been shipped in at that point. While the Commerce Ministry in New Delhi contends that this quantity is adequate to ensure capacity utilisation, vanaspati manufacturers in Sri Lanka claim the quota can be finished in six months. After initial resistance, Sri Lanka agreed to cap exports of vanaspati and bakery shortening to 200,000 tonnes a year in late 2006.

Duty-free imports of high-quality black pepper from Sri Lanka was also resisted by farmers in Kerala and Karnataka, resulting in an imposition of an annual limit of 2200 tonnes of pepper imports by India from Sri Lanka. Copper exports from Sri Lanka to India have also been controversial, since businesspersons have imported copper scrap to Sri Lanka without paying any import duty, and then melted and re-shaped this into ingots for sale to users in India. Sri Lanka has no copper mines of its own, and there have been allegations that these smelters violated the rules of origin in the FTA by not adhering to the stipulated value addition norms of around 35 percent. Twenty secondary copper smelters were set up in Sri Lanka by Indian businesspersons after the FTA. After India slashed import duties on copper scrap in 2006, most of these smelters became unviable and had to shut down. Imports of copper items by India from Sri Lanka subsequently jumped from less than USD 2 million in 2000-01 to nearly USD 19 million in 2002-03 and USD 82 million in 2003-04.

The other major problem that remains pending is a subsidy claim of INR 7 billion made by Lanka IOC Ltd, the Sri Lankan affiliate of the Indian government-owned Indian Oil Corporation, one of India's largest public-sector

Table 1:

Sri Lanka's trade with India, before and after the FTA

Year	Imports (SLR/million)	Exports (SLR/million)	Import/Export Ratio
1998	35,522.9	2279.4	15.0 : 1
2000	45,477.1	4217.3	11.0 : 1
2001	53,750.0	6265.7	8.6 : 1
2002	79,847.1	16,152.9	4.9 : 1
2003	103,871.7	23,275.1	4.5 : 1
2004	137,403.9	39,004.4	3.5 : 1

Source: Sri Lanka Customs

corporations. The claim made by Lanka IOC – which by now controls roughly one-third of retail sales of petroleum products in Sri Lanka – is being disputed by Colombo, and no solution appears to be in sight. Sri Lankan Commerce Minister Jeyraj Fernandopulle has also voiced complaints from his country's exporters about local taxes that have been imposed by the Tamil Nadu government, as well as about corruption among Indian customs officials. Meanwhile India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Nirupama Rao, has publicly expressed the hope that the quality of Indian investments in Sri Lanka would improve so as to help create more jobs.

Comprehensive partnership

Despite the glitches, there is much to be applauded in the newly articulated economic relations between India and Sri Lanka, as evident in the signing and implementation of the FTA. India became the largest foreign direct investor in Sri Lanka in both 2003 and 2004, with investments of around USD 200 million; currently it is in fourth place after Singapore, the UK and Australia. Major Indian investments in Sri Lanka include a 300-megawatt power plant; while India's Oil & Natural Gas Corporation, Ministry of Railways and the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation are also looking at possible collaborative ventures. India is also engaged in building hospitals and educational institutions in Sri Lanka. The investments by Sri Lankan businesses in India are relatively smaller, but have taken place in units producing biscuits, apparel, pre-fabricated furniture and stainless steel.

Table 2: India's imports from Sri Lanka (selected items)

Pepper							
Imports							
(INR, million)	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Sri Lanka	307.7	279.1	160.5	570.5	352.6	357.9	445.5
Total Imports	513.6	610.0	607.5	1338.2	1123.1	1084.6	1210.2
% Share	59.9	45.8	26.4	42.6	31.4	33.0	36.8
Tea							
Imports							
(INR, million)	1999-00	2000-01	20001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Sri Lanka	87.3	71.0	114.6	42.9	31.7	49.1	39.0
Total Imports	255.4	424.2	661.1	1234.8	630.1	1453.4	1071.2
% Share	34.2	16.7	17.3	3.5	5.0	3.4	3.6
Copper							
Imports							
(INR, million)	1999-00	2000-01	20001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Sri Lanka	0.0	0.0	152.6	335.6	3368.4	4722.9	4807.0
Total Imports	3371.6	916.6	631.9	1135.5	4833.6	5819.8	8024.6
% Share	0.0	0.0	24.2	29.6	69.7	81.2	59.9
Vegetable Oil/Vanaspati							
Imports							
(INR, million)	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Sri Lanka			0.1	0.0	0.0	869.1	6588.5
Total Imports			2820.2	1523.9	1198.0	2216.8	10,467.0
% Share			0.0	0.0	0.0	39.2	62.9

Source: Indian Ministry of Commerce

It is argued that India could reap re-export benefits through Sri Lanka, which has been granted "GSP plus" – GSP stands for generalised scheme of preferences – status by the European Union, thereby enabling it to export at relatively low duty rates. Further, the 2005 free trade agreement between Pakistan and Sri Lanka could help the latter position itself as a conduit for a significant amount of India-Pakistan trade that currently gets surreptitiously diverted through Dubai and Singapore.

By mid-2007, India and Sri Lanka hope to sign a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) that would incorporate existing bilateral agreements on avoidance of double taxation and investment protection, besides cooperation in air services, tourism, small enterprises, space, information technology and agriculture. In addition, the proposed CEPA would expand the scope of the FTA and include in its purview investments and trade in services. Towards this end, the trade and investments baskets clearly need to be diversified. Automotive components and pharmaceuticals are two areas offering investment opportunities for Indian firms in Sri Lanka. Overall trade could also pick up through introduction of new ferry services between Tuticorin and Colombo.

Referring to the India-Sri Lanka FTA, the economist-Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, has said that "smaller and poorer countries benefit more from RTAs [regional trade agreements] as their trade becomes more balanced." At a time when multilateral trade negotiations at the World Trade Organisation are stuck – primarily on account of deep divisions between the US and Europe on the one hand and developing countries on the other, over the issue of reduction in agricultural subsidies – it is not surprising that more RTAs are becoming operational.

In South and Southeast Asia, free trade agreements are slowly but surely becoming more popular, despite making halting progress on account of individual governments remaining protectionist. The case of the India-Sri Lanka FTA indicates that such agreements could result in the creation of more opportunities, rather than more threats.

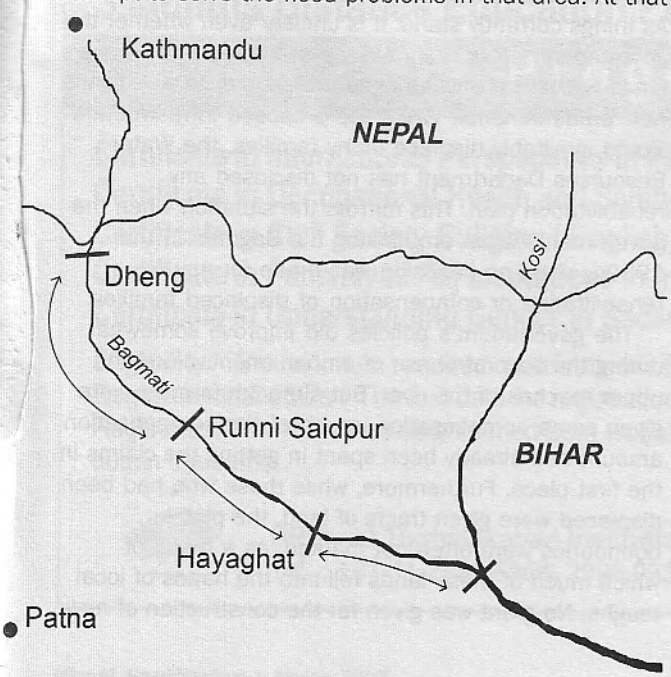
The Bagmati's final sealing

The middle section of the Bagmati River in Bihar is too unstable for embanking, but the Patna government is attempting to push through an INR 8 billion project to do just that.

BY **DINESH KUMAR MISHRA**

The Bagmati River runs down from the Himalayan midhills surrounding Kathmandu Valley, entering India at the Sitamarhi District of Bihar. In Khagaria District, the river joins up with the Kosi River near Badla Ghat. The Bagmati's total catchment area of nearly 13,300 sq km is divided roughly evenly between India and Nepal, and its basin is among the world's most fertile regions, mainly due to the significant amount of silt carried by the river. The slope of the ground through which the river moves flattens out almost entirely once it enters the Gangetic plains, where the river's heavy silt load causes the Bagmati to meander.

South of the border, hydrologists divide the flow of the Bagmati into three distinct segments, each around 90 km in length. The lower reaches, although prone to overflow, are considered to be relatively stable, and hence were embanked during the mid-1950s in an attempt to solve the flood problems in that area. At that time, the upper and middle segments were left alone, with officials saying that it was unwise to embank the unstable portions of the river.



Yet even while this conclusion was being drawn, one of the most unstable rivers in the country, the much larger Kosi, was being embanked just to the east – a decision that drew wide acclaim from the local communities. To the west of the Bagmati, an ambitious irrigation project on the Gandak River was launched at the initiative of India's first president, Rajendra Prasad. Sandwiched between these massive projects, community leaders in the Bagmati basin had little to boast about. Thus they came under compulsion to demand an embankment project of their own. Local farmers were opposed to any such move, warning that their productivity would suffer if their lands were deprived of the yearly addition of fertile silt that came along with the floods. They also noted that the inconvenience posed by the monsoonal floods was relatively modest, with the inundations never lasting for longer than two or three days at a stretch.

Such protests fell on deaf ears, amidst politicians and bureaucrats who knew only the logic of man-made 'training' of rivers. By 1965, official efforts had begun to tame the Bagmati in its upper stretches, including a proposal to build embankments at an estimated cost of INR 31.7 million. Over the next two decades this estimate was revised upwards several times, ultimately to around INR 604.8 million by 1981. Despite local resistance, roughly 85 km of embankments were constructed during the 1975-77 State of Emergency under Indira Gandhi, from Dheng (near the Indo-Nepali border) to Runni Saidpur.

Even after this work was completed on a third of the Bagmati's flow in Bihar, the middle 90 km of the river, between Runni Saidpur and Hayaghat, was still rated as too unstable for any similar construction. As a result, that middle reach – which passes through the localities of Aurai, Katra and Gai Ghat – continues to take a large,

Embankments are political and technological quick-fixes, which have disastrous societal and environmental consequences.

yearly toll on life and property. During the monsoon, floodwater that flows out onto the surrounding land through breaches in the embankments in the upper reaches tries to re-enter the river in its un-embanked middle stretch, even as the water in that middle section attempts to spill into the countryside. This results in chaos, as nobody can determine from which side to expect the floodwater and its accompanying sediments.

That may now be changing. Last November, the Patna government sent a proposal to New Delhi for the embankment of this middle section – at a cost of INR 7.9 billion – along with the strengthening and raising of the existing embankments throughout the river's course in Bihar. The proposal brought up several urgent issues, each of which needs to be addressed before any embankment work can begin. First, the government and various experts have regularly argued over the past several decades that the middle reach of the Bagmati was too unstable to allow for embanking. Has the river stabilised itself over the past 30 years? Given that such a dynamic is a hydro-geological process that would normally take thousands of years, this is highly unlikely.

Banking on embankments

Farmers welcome floods because silt contained in floodwaters provides the fields with an annual supplement of nutrients. Embanking rivers causes that silt to be trapped within the embankments, both depriving farmers of its benefits and causing the level of the riverbed to rise. While engineers must then keep raising the embankments in order to keep pace with the rising bed of the river, there is also a limit to which embankments can be raised and maintained. Will embanking the entire length of the river do away with this problem? Will it prevent seepage through the embankments into the surrounding land? These are issues planners in Patna must think about.

There is also the question of whether the reinforced embankments could ultimately prove more effective in preventing rainwater from entering the river, thereby worsening the current waterlogging of the surrounding land. Such conditions already exist in the embanked lower and upper reaches of the Bagmati. Furthermore, in addition to the nutritive aspect, the spreading of silt during floods is a process by which rivers perform the task of land-building. Embankments and other structural measures do nothing to route the silt. If a dam is built to contain floods, its reservoir becomes filled over time. If a ring bund were to be built around a settlement, the deposition of silt subsequently takes place outside of it, exposing the so-called protected area to the dangers of breaching – greater dangers than those posed by floods from an un-embanked river.

When a free-flowing river crests its banks during the rainy season, only the top section of the river, rich in micro-nutrients, spills into the surrounding lands. When breaches exist in embankments built along a river, however, a significantly larger cross-section of the river's flow is allowed to run out of the man-made bounds. This results in the spreading of coarse sand, often rendering the surrounding area into a veritable desert. As has been seen along other parts of the Bagmati, nobody takes responsibility for such eventualities, or for the subsequent loss of livelihood for local farmers. Can raising and strengthening the embankments reverse these conditions? Can officials give assurances that the new and reinforced embankments will not breach?

The Water Resources Department in Patna has thus far maintained that the ultimate solution for the basin's flooding problem is in the construction of a dam at Nunthar in Nepal, and has long postponed intervention in that hope. An expert-committee report by the Patna government in May 2006 not only found almost no likelihood of a dam being built at Nunthar in the near future, but more importantly that such a dam would not be able to hold back flooding. Finally, with the much-hyped river-linking proposals floated during the time of the Bharatiya Janata Party government in New Delhi, focusing on irrigation rather than on flood control, a new approach is clearly needed for the communities of the middle reaches of the Bagmati basin.

No assurance

As things currently stand, it is unclear even whether the government would compensate those farmers whose lands will become waterlogged or sand-filled due to the new embankments. While the proposed infrastructure would inevitably displace many families, the Water Resources Department has not disclosed any rehabilitation plan. This mirrors the situation when the government began embanking the Bagmati in the 1950s, when no provision was made for any rehabilitation or compensation of displaced families.

The government's policies did improve somewhat during the second phase of embankment, along the upper reaches of the river. But although farmers were given some compensation, much of the compensation amount had already been spent in getting the claims in the first place. Furthermore, while those who had been displaced were given tracts of land, the plot boundaries were often not marked, as a result of which much of these lands fell into the hands of local toughs. No grant was given for the construction of new

houses, nor was any land allotted to those whose agricultural plots were trapped within the embankments. Indeed, many of the displaced families are today still living on the embankments, risking eviction at any time. No assurance has been given that such oversights will not be repeated this time around.

According to a notification by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in September 2006, any project that is likely to adversely affect the environment must receive the ministry's clearance before construction can begin. This notification also ensures that people likely to be affected by the project are given information about possible impacts beforehand, and that their concerns and suggestions are recorded in public hearings. No such move has yet begun in the middle reaches of the Bagmati.

The amount being proposed for the final Bagmati embanking – nearly eight billion rupees – is an enormous sum, and cannot be wasted on a project with uncertain, and even potentially harmful, results. The last government in Patna, led by the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), did not take up any work on flood control along the Bagmati beyond irregular maintenance. The current proposal thus points to a major shift in official policy towards the state's rivers. This may be because the new government wants to be seen as doing something for the benefit of people affected by monsoonal flooding – which was also why the decision was made to embank the dynamic Kosi River during the late 1950s, going against a century-old debate that favoured leaving that river alone. At that time, the government had wanted to prove that it could make its own decisions and create infrastructure denied them by the British. But why does the Patna government want to do something as ill-advised in 2007? Before any action is taken, this policy shift needs to be clearly ascertained as being for the common good of Bihar's people.

Embankments are political and technological quick-fixes, which have disastrous societal and environmental consequences. Due to the silt-laden nature of Himalayan rivers, they also create enormous problems for future generations, who will have to take up the challenge of dismantling embankments. A sizable population in the upper reaches of the river is opposed to embankments there, and advocates systematic demolition of the same and leaving the river to its own devices. Those sentiments are shared by many living in the middle portion as well, who are organising themselves to resist the proposed new construction. Given the presence of embankments in the upper and lower Bagmati, it is true that the community along the middle stretch between Runni Saidpur and Hayaghat is in double jeopardy – the regular floods and the problems emanating from the upstream embankments. And yet, the answer does not lie in embanking this portion as well.

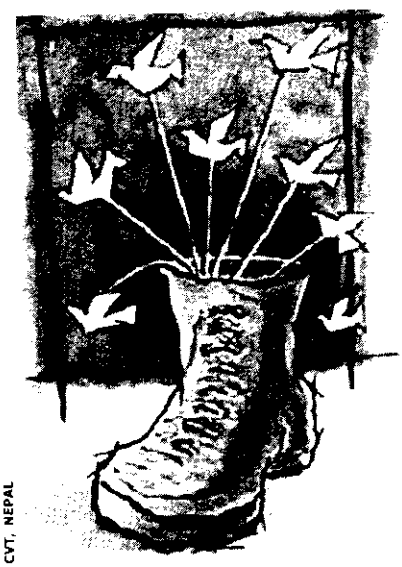
Rocks under the tide of nationalism

As Nepal's transition back to peace and democracy turns turbulent, there are lessons to be learned from others' experience in the neighbourhood.

BY **SURENDRA MOHAN**

For outside observers, the picture currently emerging from Nepal seems rather depressing: the continuing ill-health of 85-year-old Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala; the reluctance of the Nepali Congress and the Nepali Congress (Democratic) to unite; the 'ethnic' demands being raised by the Madhesis, janajatis and other communities; the mistrust about the real intentions of the Maoists – inspired partly by the US lobby, partly by the behaviour of the Maoist cadres themselves, and partly by the general deterioration of law and order in Kathmandu and the rest of the country. Indeed, the Nepali state today is experiencing crises from all sides.

Similar growing pains have been felt elsewhere in Southasia during the process of nation-building. India and Pakistan started their independent journey with the mighty troubles of settling hundreds of thousands of refugees, dousing the fires of communal frenzy and building up their economies and societies. Burma was simultaneously facing similar challenges. With the advent of freedom in these countries and the surfacing of new crises, one scholar memorably noted that, after the tide of nationalism had ebbed, all the rocks that had been hidden within it were emerging into view.



CVT, NEPAL

Indeed, before long the Indian state was dealing with several other problems. Separatist demands were made by the Tamil, Sikh, Naga communities and others. Rulers of the princely states of Hyderabad, Junagarh, Jodhpur and Gwalior initially refused to accede to the Union, until confronted by the firm hands of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Meanwhile, the Jammu & Kashmir problem remains, even after India and Pakistan have fought three wars and the limited conflict in Kargil.

Gandhi's guidance

The ongoing case of Nepal is no different, and the current dynamics must be understood against the experiences of the country's neighbours. Refusal to be overwhelmed by a succession of crises, along with a determination to resolve them with fortitude and insight – these are the hallmarks of statesmanship, which leaders in India displayed in those early years. Leaders in Pakistan and, later, Bangladesh, were unable to do so, and as a result, the people subsequently had to undergo long periods of authoritarian rule.

Nepal's leadership has conducted itself remarkably during the last two years of tumultuous changes. In April 2006, peaceful popular revolt brought the surrender of the monarch's absolute authority. Democratic political parties came to an agreement under the guidance of the country's tallest leader, Prime Minister Koirala. The Maoists, who had waged a decade-long armed insurgency, were brought into a continuous dialogue, leading to their eventual agreement to give up arms and renounce violence. The challenge posed by the Madhesi movement was met by the government's agreement to restructure the polity along federal lines. If a general consensus can now be achieved to redraw the map into linguistic-cultural regional entities, the aspirations of several other groups will also be met. This is the process that has taken place in India, and could offer crucial resolution to Pakistan as well.

The Nepali leadership, which has grappled with such enormous challenges, will not be fazed or overawed by the crises that the country currently faces. The two important tasks at hand now are the adoption of the constitution through the Constituent Assembly, and, prior to that, the redrawing of electoral districts. Now that the process of the surrendering of arms by the Maoists is coming to an end, the induction of the former rebels into the Council of Ministers is the first charge. But as it moves in that direction, the government will have to deal wisely and firmly with the sectional violence in the Tarai, which could also lead dangerously to counter-violence in the Kathmandu Valley and elsewhere in the hills. Committed cadres of the various communist parties could certainly play a positive role in spreading the message of pluralism and territorial fellowship. But the main test is for the democratic parties – particularly the two groups of the Nepali Congress,

which have been trained in the ideals of democratic socialism – to take the lead.

It is a common experience of all democracies that, when power is finally attained, those who have struggled and sacrificed for it want to find places for themselves in the new space. Old values inevitably recede into the background. The peculiar problem currently faced by Nepal's Maoist leaders, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka 'Prachanda') and Baburam Bhattarai, is the economic rehabilitation of their cadres, who – except for those to be absorbed into the armed forces – have no ostensible means of livelihood. The leaders of the democratic parties also have to ensure the economic security of their workers.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi spelled out a vision for such situations, even though the party he led for a quarter-century eventually rejected it. It may serve Nepal's political class to study Gandhi's vision as a means of tiding over immediate challenges, even while accepting the efficacy of that vision for the long-term construction of what is widely being termed a 'New Nepal'. Gandhi called for the rebuilding of society and economy through service, in implementing a programme of spreading education; helping rural communities to organise co-operatives and small industrial units for processing agricultural and forest produce; reconstructing small-scale watershed-development projects; installing small electricity-generation units. The main priority in all of these was to create employment opportunities, in particular for the rural youth.

A long time ago, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) decided to undertake such a programme of constructive work and social reform. Unfortunately, today no one can say what has happened to it. In 1949, the eminent socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia, on behalf of the National Executive of the Socialist Party, placed before the party's national conference a programme for national reconstruction, based mainly on the above precepts. Although party workers enthusiastically implemented the rural-development programme for more than a year, that spirit was subsequently quashed – due, in part, to the preparations for the 1952 general election, followed by depressing election results and the subsequent quarrels among leaders that led to a split in the party.

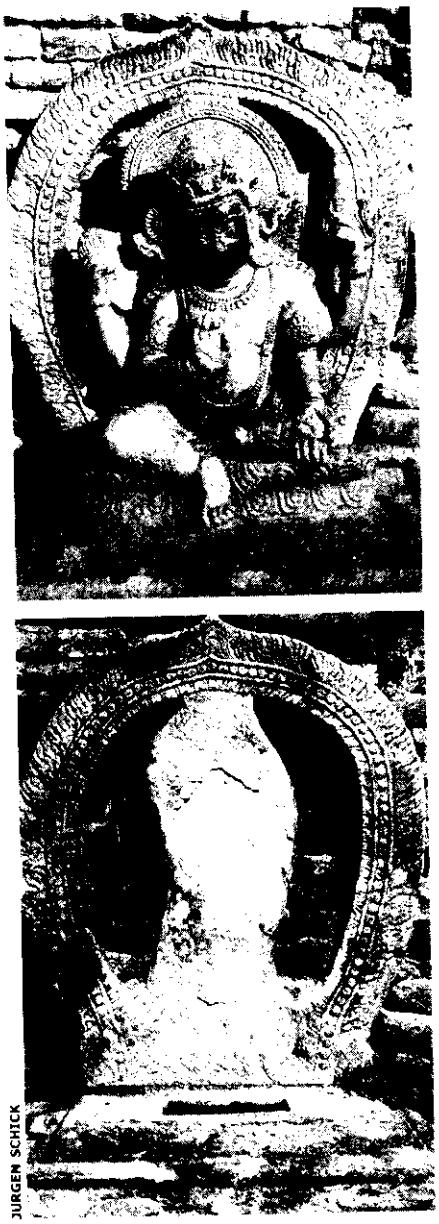
That, however, was a specific case. The people of Southasia need intelligent discussion on a broad range of issues, including family planning, dowry, divorce, women's rights, untouchability, caste- and gender-based prejudices, health and nutrition, sanitation and exercise. The most important issues, however, remain democratic practice, egalitarianism, and mutual tolerance and respect.

One immediate possibility for Nepal's leaders would be to hold joint study camps comprising workers from all the eight political parties. Intellectuals, academics, civil-society leaders, journalists and other professionals may also contribute to these study camps. This could make possible the collective discussion of the above issues and programmes, and allow for a new spirit of joint work in nation-building to gather steam. Perhaps the simple act of men and women from different backgrounds working side by side could itself help to reduce the current distances and tensions in Nepal.

Studies in the psychopathology of culture

The art of Nepal – a belated, blunt and sometimes obscene review of books on the subject.

BY **TED RICCARDI**



JURGEN SCHICK

Top: The deity Kumar, outside a temple in Pharping village, 1983
Bottom: After its theft, 1987

The Kathmandu Valley, it was said back in the 1950s when Nepal opened its portals to the modern era, had more statues of gods and goddesses than people. This is no longer so, in particular because over the decades the deities have been stolen by the thousands from public and private places, to such an extent that there are very few left to steal. The thieves have moved on, mostly. Idol theft in Kathmandu is of a dimension different from the Pharoanic loot along the Nile or the desecration of Gandharan sites in Punjab and NWFP. The Hindu-Buddhist-Varjrayan statuary of 'Nepal Valley' represent a living, contemporary faith. The statues were dragged from pedestals and yanked from alcoves by a brazen contraband industry that included the common thief, the Nepali middleman, the foreign scholar, the diplomat and the art collector – leading all the way to museum curators and art historians who produce heavy volumes on Himalayan art. Unkempt deities – who, till the moment of theft, were receiving offerings of flowers, rice *achheta*, vermillion and water – are now lonely, polished objects spotlighted in museum showcases and on private manties.

Ted Riccardi, a Himalayan scholar, saw it all happen during his work in the Kathmandu Valley from the 1960s through the 1990s. He knew some of the crooks, saw how they worked, and had the perspective and empathy to know that the common Kathmandu criminal was no more to blame than the soft-spoken curators and historians in New York, Hong Kong or San Francisco. This article represents a cry of anger and frustration at the desecration of Kathmandu Valley, and the denigration of the simple faith of the people by forces beyond their comprehension – a cry that speaks of the hundreds of thousands of devotees who suddenly found that their gods had gone missing. The thieves who are named in these pages also represent entire categories of those who evaluate, assign value, auction, buy and exhibit the valuable, stolen iconography of Kathmandu. You know who you are.

There is one more thing to add to Riccardi's presentation. It is an incontrovertible fact that every ancient stone and bronze statue from the Kathmandu Valley – to the very last one – that now finds itself on an overseas pedestal, is a stolen item (see *Himal October 1999, "Gods in exile"*). Not one of them was gifted or handed over with the agreement of the faithful. Every museum and collector who owns a Kathmandu Valley statue of antiquity must regard it as being 'on loan', to be returned when Nepali society finally wakes up from its headlong entry into the modern era – and, amidst political stability and modern-day self-awareness, asks for the statues' return. At that point they should be handed back to the faithful, and placed in their original positions.

– Kanak Mani Dixit

Let us take an object – a statue, a piece of stone – standing alone somewhere in a field. The only people who know of its existence are the farmers who till the soil around it. For them, it may have some importance, or it may not. It may function as the equivalent of a rabbit's foot or a horseshoe or any other good-luck charm. Or, it may be the object of the deepest veneration. No matter. There is not that much difference. The people who live near it may not know its correct name. They may not even know its sex, if it has any. It is there; that is all. One morning, it is no longer there. It has been taken in the night.

Let us look at this object again in its new location. It now graces the galleries of a great museum. Instead of a horseshoe, we now have a work of art – an object no longer of religious or superstitious awe, but one of aesthetic appreciation. It is an object quantified, put on view for the public as an example of the universal genius of the human race, photographed and presented to an ever-wider audience in the publication series of the museum. The object is insured, traveled, displayed in Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland by proud curators and directors who are doing precisely what they are hired to do.

The photographs: Ah, the photographs. Surreal they are, pushed against pure white, antiseptic backgrounds; one can see the pores of the gods. *Vasudhara, my dear, you look prettier than ever.*

My friends: Some of my best friends are scholars, diplomats, collectors, dealers. I forgive them all. They are the necessary links in the system – the transformers, the creators, life-givers, the makers of art, the true artists. Without them, there would be no art.

The lady from Colorado: Boulder-San Francisco-Honolulu-Hong Kong-Bangkok-Kathmandu-Colombo (avoid India at all costs)-Seychelles-Nairobi-Rome-Paris-London-New York-Boulder. *Whew!* We made it, our little old retired schoolteacher. In Kathmandu, she bought an old book in front of the Annapurna Hotel. She paid a few rupees.

The generosity of the donor: We thank all of you generous donors who turned small purchases into large tax breaks.

The Western middleman: He is at the low point in the chain, for, like all microbes, he must feed on one kind of object in order to transform it into another. He certifies its death, wraps it in burlap, crates it and sends it on to its new life.

My beloved countries: America and Nepal, the two poles of absurdity. To live in these two, of all possible places, is to have one's soul torn, one's mind permanently disoriented. Stay home, buddy. America: leader of the free world, the best hope of humanity. Nepal: leader of the bottom, a bathtub without a drain, a forgotten cesspool amid the green hills. Why do I choose the cesspool?

The Indologist: Another absurdity. The master and custodian of dead Indians. He can yet save himself by forgetting the dead and studying the dying. Indology as cultural pathology.

What is wrong with *Playboy*? With *Penthouse*? With P Pal's *The Art of Nepal*? Nothing, nothing at all. All art is pornography.

Vishnu sleeps. When he awakens, nothing will happen.

Collectors are not as bad as dealers. They too are victims rather than actors, addicts rather than peddlers.

All right, children. How many of you know where Sankhu was, where Changu was, where Dhumbarahi was? Raise your hands, children.

In the room, people come and go, talking of Michelangelo. "I wonder if you could take a couple of pieces out for me...?" "Of course, I'll put them in my household effects."

Guess where I spent the Vietnam War? In Kathmandu. It was nice. Every two weeks, it was said that our Chief of Station flew to Saigon with fresh asparagus for our ambassador. Urschleim: the great thief. He is alive and well, pullulating in Kathmandu.

Question: What is the colour of green Tara's pubic hair? Only the director knows, or maybe even he does not know.

Artibus Asiae: Like most Latinisms, it too hides its obscenities.

Metamorphosis: When Herr Urschleim awoke that morning he found that he had turned into a Buddha, his soul oppressed within the heavy grey stone. He could not move, but he could see. He remembers little of what transpired later, except that he was carefully packed – certified, that is. The appropriate bribes were given, and he was shipped to California, where he now sits in Los Angeles, gasping, thirsting, pleading for help, for liberation, from the visiting schoolchildren.

As in all 'primitive' countries, in Nepal there is no information, only rumour. This is healthy and natural, for one knows immediately the possible human motives behind what one hears. No one believes anything for very long. Indeed, belief and knowledge are impossible. In America, we have tried to banish rumour. Instead we have information: rumour for which one pays or to which one subscribes, in which the human motives are no longer discernible. Hence, the creation of objectivity: of belief and knowledge.

In Nepal, there are no art objects, no art; only good and evil.

The restoration of Swayambhunath: A large international effort has restored the great stupa of Swayambhunath to its pristine condition, according to a report from UNESCO. You may now see it at its new location in New York, at Rockefeller Plaza.

Article I: Corruption obeys the law of conservation of matter.

Article II: Nothing can be created out of nothing. One has only the transformation of one form into another. Because nothing can be created out of nothing, the transformation of a cult object into an art object must be accomplished by death and rebirth: hence the intervention of various kinds of bacteria.

A middle-aged lady, intrepid, intelligent, enthusiastic,


BILASH RAI

stumbles over some ancient terra cottas. Such beautiful things for me. And LA. Typhoid Mary. The carrier. The moral dolt.

High above a Newar town, there is the Buddha that Laid an Egg. The egg remains, unnoticed. The Buddha is gone. Art as titillation. Preserve of the Hugh Hefner of Oriental art. His books appear monthly. Orwell. *Nepalese Days*. Economic development as a racket.

The third world and how to lick it

Pashupatinath Mandir: Few people know about the statue of Bhairava there. Even fewer have seen it. It is a secret place. Only women may see it. It has a large phallus, erect, 25 inches long. Women come here, those who are desirous of children. They revere it, their barrenness goes, their fertility is restored. Children come.

There are other places like this, most of them unknown. In Pharping there is a great big rock in town that women worship in the deep night. It works. Children come. In other places, lingam stones appear naturally out of the earth and women worship them. In Nepal, the soil and the people are fertile.

In Kathmandu live Ram and Sita, the ideal Nepali couple. They have been married for a little over a year and have one child. Being a modern couple, they practice birth control. Ram uses condoms when he makes love to his wife. They are available free at various clinics, and come in many colours: pink, green, blue, yellow, white. The Contraceptive Retail Sales (CRS) outfit has its storage rooms labelled *pink*, *green*, *blue*, *yellow*, *white* – for good organisation and easy access for happy, modern couples.

Sita does not like condoms. Neither does Ram, but they are a modern couple. Every night, after they make love, Sita sneaks out of the house in the darkness and walks hurriedly to the temple. There she stands in line until her turn comes and she can worship Bhairava in private. Then she goes home and lies next to her sleeping husband. In Pharping, the men sleep in the night. The darkness is thick, languorous. The women come and go, worshiping stones.

An urgent meeting

Place: The Embassy, Kathmandu.
Time: Indeterminate, anytime from the early 1970s on. A Top-Secret Meeting.
Subject: The Population Council. In its latest report, the Council expresses dismay that the population growth rate in Nepal continues to rise, despite the best efforts of HMG, AID, UNICEF.
Present: The Ambassador; DCM Bustard; Political Officer Rufus; Admin Officer Arder; AID Director Valentine; Chief of Station Rimsley; and Resident Anthropologist and Cultural Expert Mary Loganberry. In short, the Country Team. They are seated in a secret room within the embassy around a large table. The ambassador, visibly annoyed at being called to a meeting in the early morning, speaks first.

Amb: Bustard, why are we here?

DCM Bustard: Better ask the AID director, sir.

Amb: Valentine, why are we here?

Dir Valentine: We have a bit of a problem, sir.

Amb: How long is this going to take, Valentine?

Valentine: I hope not long, sir. It has to do, sir, um, with the Nepalis.

Amb: Who?

Valentine: The Nepalis ... the Nepalese, sir.

Amb: Well, what have they done, now?

Valentine: They're, ah, reproducing, sir.

Amb: So what? I rather like them. Happy people, I tell you! Always smiling, charming lot, always laughing, they know what life is about, Valentine. You know, Bustard, I bet they didn't know they were poor until we told them they were! *(laughter)* And the kids! Have you ever seen such beautiful kids? Why, they're always playing, having a good time even in those shitty streets.

Valentine: That's the problem, sir.

Amb: Valentine, what can we do about the shit in the streets?

Valentine: I mean the kids, sir. They're the problem.

Amb: Bustard, what time is it? I have to work out with the Marines this morning.

Bustard: It's exactly 11:05, sir.

Amb: Valentine, get to the point. You have five minutes.

Valentine: All right, sir. In brief, we have dumped 25 million dollars in contraceptives into this country – mainly for condoms – and they haven't worked. The birth rate is rising drastically. We have another 25 million dollars budgeted, and we have to find out what is wrong.

Amb: Maybe it was a lousy bunch of rubbers. Maybe they had holes in them. Maybe the Nepalese don't use them. Maybe...

Valentine: They use them sir, and they don't have holes in them.

Amb: How do we know?

Chief of Station: May I answer that, sir?

Amb: You may fire when ready, Rimsley.

Rimsley: German intelligence, sir.

Amb: German intelligence? What the fuck has German intelligence got to do with this?

Rimsley: We get daily reports from the Germans, sir. Rubber usage is up...

Amb: Fuck it, Rimsley. How many Germans are there in Nepal? How can we trust these reports? Do we have a German in each bedroom?

Bustard: I'll explain, sir. German participation is indirect, not direct. They run the waste disposal unit here, sir, and their intelligence people provide all kinds of information to us – on the Russians, the Chinese, etcetera. The Germans have a fairly sophisticated set up, sir. I can tell you what, for instance, your former-Soviet counterpart has had for dinner for the last five nights, and how he is feeling. *(laughter)* Coprology is a rather recent entry into the intelligence field, but a valuable one. Condomology is the most recent.

Valentine: Well, sir, their condomologist knows exactly the number of rubbers used on any night. Favourite colours, everything. We have the figures right here. The Nepalese are using condoms. And they are having babies.

Amb: Why?

Valentine: Mary Loganberry has the answer.

Amb: Who the hell is Mary Loganberry?

Bustard: Mary Loganberry is our cultural anthropologist, sir. She's kind of the academic check on what we do – the one who has the real insights into the culture, knows the language, the people thoroughly, mixes with them, eats their food, drinks their water, listens to their gripes...

Amb: Who's paying her?

Valentine: We are, sir. She's been here for a long time, and we put her on contract to find out what we're doing wrong. Loganberry, why don't you tell us what you think?

Loganberry: Thanks, Val. First, Mr Ambassador, this is my first meeting with the country team, and I want to say how important I think it is to have a cultural input into the whole developmental process...

Amb: Loganberry, you have two minutes. Then I am going to get up. And the meeting will be over.

Loganberry: Sir, it's simple. Rubbers work in other countries, but because of the beliefs of the people, they don't work here. The people want and need children. They use condoms to prove how modern they are, but then they go back to old potent ways to have children. The most important remedy here is *coitus lapidarius*, or, in English, sir, lapidary intercourse.

Amb: Lapidary intercourse? What is that?

Bustard: Sexual intercourse with a sacred stone object, sir, symbolic of course.

Loganberry: Thank you, Mr Bustard. Lapidary, or 'lithic' intercourse as it is sometimes called, occurs in many places, but it is particularly powerful here in Nepal. I have watched thousands of women at night on their way to the temple where they have intercourse with the great stone penis of Bhairab – symbolic, of course, but nevertheless effective.

Amb: Loganberry, you are out of your mind.

Loganberry: Unfortunately, I am not sir. I have done some scouting around at night, and I am sure that I'm right. In Pharping last night, for instance, hundreds of women had sex with a big stone in the central square – symbolic, of course.

Amb: Loganberry, even if you are right, how do we stop it? It's their country; they can fuck whatever they want.

Loganberry: We can't stop the fucking, sir, but...

Valentine: We can stop the rise in the birth rate!

Loganberry: By covering every stone in this valley with rubber. It's the only way.

Amb: You're crazy, Loganberry. I've had enough of this academic crap.

Valentine: The ambassador is quite right, Loganberry. To make rubber condoms for every stone lingam in the valley would be prohibitive. We ran a few preliminary cost estimates – you know, for different sizes, training of personnel to put them in place, how long they last and how often they have to be replaced. It's too damn expensive.

Rimsley: Sir, I think we can help, me and the boys.

Amb: How, Grimsley?

Rimsley: It seems to me, sir, that what we have to engage in is a massive disinformation programme. We have to destroy the belief of the people in the efficacy of the old ways.

Amb: What do you want us to do, Crimsley? Put ads in the *Gorkhapatra* saying that Pashupati is a fake?

Rimsley: No, sir. I am thinking of nothing public. A covert operation, rather.

Amb: What?

Rimsley: Very simple. We have the Bhairab statue stolen and shipped out of the country. The birth rate should go way down.

Amb: Brilliant, Rimsley. It's good. And cheap. Approved! And Rimsley?

Rimsley: Yes, sir?

Amb: I want the dick for a paperweight.

Rimsley: Yes, sir!

(Laughter. Exeunt omnes)

The books

Herr Urschleim is having a nightmare. He dreams of being on a beach in Italy at the end of the war, as his brother and sister begin to cover him with sand. Suddenly, he cannot move. The sand is heavy... He awakens. His soul-head hits the top of the grey stone statue in which he is encased. He peers out. Some workmen appear carrying a crate. The curator directs them to unload the statue carefully and place it opposite Herr Urschleim. The museum now has two great pieces: the Buddha that Laid an Egg, and the great Bhairab – minus its penis.

Let's get serious, you say. Enough of your asshole remarks. Let's get down to the books. Let's have a solid review of them.

All right: They are printed on glossy paper. They weigh almost two kilos each. There have hundreds of pages and illustrations – many in colour, the rest in black-and-white. Sumptuous, limited productions. All joint publications of museums and universities.

What did the authors do?

They conducted.

Now you are really being nasty. Books are all alike. You know what a good editor can do for a book.

Precisely. Books are not written, but managed, conducted.

Let's talk about these books please.

All right, let's talk about them. What about them?

Are the authors accurate?

It depends. There are mistakes.

Like what?

Well, some of the pictures are upside-down.

Why do you say that?

Because, for instance, every object I have seen of this kind has been a lid, not a bowl. Fruit bowls are common, say, in LA, but not in Kathmandu, not even in the 7th century.

OK, smartass. What else?

Some of the authors seem to have trouble adding. At one point, 880 and 301 are added together for a grand total of 1090.

Big deal. Can't you say anything good about the books?

The pictures are pretty.

You've reviewed the books. Now let's look at the culture.

I can't. It hurts too much.

The culture

The National Museum, Chauni, Kathmandu: A true wonder, this museum, a veritable flea market, filled with Ranesqueries. Walk slowly through it, look in the nooks and crannies, and you will find jewels. Do not hurry. The jewel in the lotus is the most incredible piece of Americana – a Red Ryder Daisy BB gun.

The Kathmandu Zoo: A chicken in a small cage looks out stupidly at the children that gawk at it. Label: Rhode Island Red. It too is gone. A fundamental condition of economic development is the systematic degradation of a people's culture.

The dealer: as vile as a Patan alley. Small, obscure eyes that move lasciviously over the stolen object the way a tongue moves around a clitoris. Art as salt-meat and peach.

How do art historians know how old an object is? This is one of the better-kept mysteries. ▲

Exhuming Accountability

Conference on transitional justice in Southasia

23-25 January, Kathmandu | Hosted by *Himal Southasian* and the International Center for Transitional Justice

Across Southasia, social movements have worked to demand justice and accountability during the region's darkest hours – involving pogroms against minorities; human-rights abuse in the context of armed conflict; abuse and impunity by entrenched economic elites; violence against Dalits, indigenous communities and migrants; violence against women; militaries operating with state-sanctioned impunity within and across borders; violations by armed opposition groups with little accountability to local communities; the global 'war on terror' and its perverse dynamics in the region; and forced evictions of communities by dams and mines, urban real-estate mafia, or feudal landlords.

The demand for justice is a persistent feature of the Southasian public realm. In Bangladesh, families of those killed in the Liberation War still call for acknowledgment and 'memorialisation'. The struggle against the impunity enjoyed by the masterminds of the Gujarat carnage of 2002 continues in courts in Ahmedabad and Bombay. Victims of the excesses of the long sequence of autocratic regimes in Pakistan have been calling for fundamental institutional reform of the state. Survivors of the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 in Sri Lanka continue to demand accountability and reparation. At the same time, there have been atrocities which have been neglected, such as the killing of thousands in the Assamese hamlet of Nellie in 1983.

On 23-25 January, *Himal Southasian* organised a conference on the issue of accountability for mass atrocities carried out against citizens in the various countries and sub-regions of Southasia. Scholars and rights defenders gathered in Kathmandu to share their experiences and insights, with the ultimate goal of ensuring that excesses be investigated and addressed for the sake of justice and reconciliation, as well as to prevent future abuse. The conference was co-hosted by the International Center for Transitional Justice, supported by the International Development Research Centre, and convened by Vasuki Nesiah and Kanak Mani Dixit.

Here we present an abridged version of the presentations made at the conference by some of the participants, who are among the foremost scholars and activists dealing with accountability and impunity in the countries of Southasia. A complete transcript of the presentations and discussions will be published as a further follow-up to the "Exhuming Accountability" conference. Details on the panels and participation are available at *www.himalmag.com*.

The pan-regional problem

SIDDHARTH VARADARAJAN

Why are we speaking of Southasia? Is there any value in clubbing the experiences and practices of the entire Subcontinent into one meeting? There are valid reasons, primarily because of the pan-Subcontinental institutionalisation of certain state practices as well as of certain practices of those who purport to be resistance. In India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, systematic violation of international humanitarian law by both state and non-state actors in conflict situations is something which is very much present as a common theme.

The second commonality is the presence of, for want of a better term, ethnic or demographic cleansing. Virtually all of our counties have had episodes in the past in which large movements of people have been forced by either the state or non-state actors. Distinct from a process of demographic shifting have been anti-minority massacres. We've had specific instances of high levels of targeted violence, most often with state complicity against minorities – the bomb blasts and pressure on the Shia in Pakistan, the low-intensity violence against the Hindu minority in Bangladesh.

The fourth commonality in the context of conflict is systematic violence against women. The fifth commonality which I see in the architecture of insurgency and counterinsurgency is the problem of disappearances, which we have in J & K, the Northeast, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan. The last point of commonality is that of impunity. Impunity is enshrined not only in the judicial or political practices in Southasia, but also in our national laws. When you have a situation wherein officers cannot be prosecuted for doing things in the line of duty, when you have impunity enshrined in law, you have once again a good reason to take up the issue of transitional justice at a pan-Southasian level.

The second question that I think is worth asking, particularly given the linkages of the transitional-justice phenomenon to the international criminal architecture, is: Which is the best forum in which to seek justice – international, national or regional? I think that even though the emergence of the International Criminal Court and other forums becomes an additional point of pressure, justice that comes through a national forum is likely to be more durable, more transformative.

This brings me to the third question. Can there be transitional justice without transition? Because if you look at the examples of what is classified as transitional justice today – the cases of South Africa, Guatemala, Chile, Argentina, and Peru to a certain extent – virtually all of these mechanisms arose out of the context of a political transformation. We must not lose sight of the fact that it is the transition that is the key to the realisation of justice in many respects.

Can the struggle for justice help us bring about political transition? Can we think of justice as transformative justice in the political sense? I think we can. It's significant that in the past decade the ability of ruling establishments across Southasia to get away with the kind of crimes they've got away with in the past has decreased, the political cost has definitely gone up. Compare the political fallout for the BJP as a result of the Gujarat massacres of 2002 with the political fallout for the Congress party as a result of the anti-Sikh massacres of 1984. There is a world of difference in the nature of public opinion, in the manner in which the media covered the incidents, in the archiving and documentation and the willingness to collate and bring this information into the public domain. All of these suggest that, in a sense, the preoccupation and struggle for justice does provide an impetus for us to bring out a reconfiguration of power equations in society.

Transitional justice cannot just be about addressing past crimes, or even about preventing future ones. It also has to help all of us in our own different regions put a closure on historically-evolved grievances. Unless the historically-evolved grievance of, say, the people of Kashmir is not addressed, unless their sacrifices are not respected, unless homage is not paid to all the people who were victim to the violence, it will be very difficult for people living in these societies and communities to feel a sense of closure.

Finally, while many of the issues that we raise concern questions that are beyond our domain, what we do control is the process of archiving, documentation, dissemination of information. These are significant efforts, which help to challenge the official silence or the widespread public apathy which comes about due to lack of information or ignorance; I think that this is something that we can do as individuals and as a collective.

Prosecutions

This panel probed questions about the politics of prosecutions and their contribution to accountability for mass crimes. At one level, legal accountability is often seen as the most central component of struggles for justice. We have pursued trials even when courts have been slow, judges conservative, police obstructive and the legal framework inhospitable. We have pursued trials even when courtroom dynamics have been alienating for survivors and for victims' families, and even when we have been able to convict only the lower rungs of a repressive machinery. Against this enduring commitment to seeking judicial avenues for redress, looking back at the history of prosecutions in Southasian countries, this panel explored ways to broaden and deepen the ways in which trials contribute to justice in its fullest sense. In particular, two issues were highlighted. First, it was asked whether prosecution processes define 'accountability' too narrowly. Second, the panel looked at whether it is possible to ensure that trial processes be rendered more 'victim friendly', and what specific reforms would be involved in making the legal system more accessible, prosecution strategies more responsive to 'victim' priorities, and the trial process less formal.

Strengthening prosecution mechanisms

VRINDA GROVER

The Indian context is not really a transitional-justice framework. You're not moving from one political configuration to another, nor is India a fledgling democracy. In India, non-prosecution would very much jeopardise peace, and therefore a lot of emphasis ought to be placed on prosecution in India. I think the people's desire to prosecute has shown that it could be an amalgam of retribution, assertion for equal citizenship by the individual and community, a need of acknowledgment, a belief in the deterrent effect of penal law, an enabling act to overcome fear and helplessness, a proclamation by survivors that they have been beaten but not broken, a reclaiming of democratic institutions – and it's a mix of all this that one sees when people urge for prosecution.

In the 1984 anti-Sikh massacre, it was interesting to see that there were criminal cases against some powerful Congress politicians, and a temporary setback to their political careers. However, what was required was that there must be direct evidence of their presence at the scene of the crime. Of course all of those prosecutions, at least at the trial court level, have failed, while some are still pending in the appellate court. In the present legal framework, the only avenue that is available is to invoke the law of conspiracy, or the law of abetment – both of which are totally inappropriate to address a mass-crime scenario.

Therefore, the current framework of the Indian penal code, the criminal procedure court and the Evidence Act is inappropriate. While it does note down the law of offences of murder, theft, rape, burning, looting, it does not take into account the dynamics of mass crime. A couple of the dynamics that have to be addressed by law are the dynamic of power and intent and the pattern that targets a group – which I think are defining features of mass crime – and that mass crimes are distinct from ordinary crimes, and cannot be committed without the sanction and complicity of those in positions of power, authority and responsibility. And therefore, one would argue for the creation of a separate offence in substantive law as well as in procedural law.

In substantive terms I think the offences of genocide and crimes against humanity need to be codified in substantive law. Individual criminal responsibility also needs to be brought in. The whole business of prior sanction required for prosecution of police officers or public servants, which is codified in the penal code in the Special Armed Forces Act, is now retained in the new communal violence bill. This bill makes a feeble effort to make public servants accountable, both for acts of omission and commission, but at the same time keeps the right of prior sanction very much intact. Again, in terms of substantive offences, the definition of rape is completely inadequate, as I think the Gujarat experience has shown clearly. There is a pending sexual-assault bill, and this needs to be drawn upon again before anything is done on the communal violence bill.

How do you make the investigation more inclusive and accessible – this is a key challenge. The victim should have a right to get a copy of the chargesheet, particularly in the case of crimes where you're saying there's complicity of authority and therefore the state as the prosecutor is not necessarily the custodian of societal interest in that circumstance. So a copy of the chargesheet, a copy of the orders, and an enhanced role of the victim's council will help. They have absolutely no information as to what is happening in those cases; therefore, some kind of system mechanism needs to be created which keeps them informed of what is happening as a matter of right.

Political consensus on impunity

SARA HOSSAIN

In the Bangladeshi context, the transitions we have seen have been from war to peace, and also from militarisation to a kind of 'civilian-isation' of our administration at various points. Those have been the contexts in which we've had to address prosecutions. In each of the transitions, we've seen political compacts that have been the foremost barriers to any form of accountability. So even following the genocide of 1971, an amnesty was granted to many of those responsible for the killings. The other military venture within Bangladesh was in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Again following the peace accord we saw a failure to set in place any accountability measures, and de facto amnesty was provided.

In the transitions from military rule to civilian rule, constitutional immunities were put in place each time to ensure that there couldn't be any effective prosecution for political killings and other human-rights abuses. Under the ordinary law, we have provisions that prevent effective prosecution of defence personnel, security personnel or state officials for human-rights violations. Currently we have the Rapid

Action Battalion, which has also been responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial executions in the last few years, with not a single prosecution or effective investigation to date.

So we have a chequered but consistent pattern of impunity and lack of accountability measures embedded in the law and the Constitution. It is not just the fact that the legal fabric is so weak in terms of ensuring accountability, but also that there isn't clear political consensus on these issues, and that our institutions are permeated by partisan politics that affects their functioning. Because of the way in which the 1971 genocide has been addressed – and even one of the most significant sets of killings, the disappearances of 14 December, when intellectuals were disappeared at the hands of the Pakistan Army and its local collaborators – despite investigations into those killings, and despite the issue having been kept in the limelight by the families of the disappeared, it has not been possible under any administration to even conclude an investigation into them. This is because the group involved as the collaborators of the Pakistan Army in the killings, the Jamaat-i-Islami, is involved in political compacts, either official or unofficial.

There is a need to create effective, independent political pressure for change. What we've seen so far has been largely an unfocused exercise where we've put a lot of hope and expectation on the possibilities of public litigation as an effective tool for opening up this process. But we've not married that to the ways in which you have to change the investigative machinery, and the way you have to critique the investigatory machinery on the ground. Without having done the work on the ground, it is almost impossible to rely on public-interest litigation to take you anywhere at all.

Structural issues in Nepal

MANDIRA SHARMA

In Nepal, we have very little infrastructure and very little institutional development in terms of dealing with violations committed by the state. That's where the fundamental problem lies. There are lots of problems with regards to the substantive legal provisions as well, because the existing legislation provides that in claiming or initiating the criminal investigations we have to go to the police. And when you go to file the FIR with the police against the police, you can imagine how they investigate the case. In the first place, we have been struggling even to register FIRs. Then the police, rather than doing investigations, attempt to pollute the evidence and falsify the documents. We haven't been able to bring even a single successful prosecution in the case of gross human-rights violations, largely because of these structures.

There have been a few encouraging developments from the courts. I agree that unless there is an independent judiciary and independent investigations it's very difficult to have a successful prosecution in the case of gross human-rights violations. But at the same time, there are some initiatives that are going on in the Supreme Court in the cases of disappearances, as we have been filing writs of Habeas Corpus on behalf of those who have been disappeared. The Supreme Court used to quash all those petitions, saying the writ of Habeas Corpus or jurisdictions of the writ is limited to testing the legality of the detentions. Now the Supreme Court has decided to have an investigations committee under the Supreme Court itself, and the committee has been looking at these disappearances. We are now pushing for an order from the Supreme Court in terms of having substantive legal provisions in dealing with the cases of disappearances.

Unless we have very substantial legal provisions to bring the prosecution, and independent investigations in cases of human-rights violations, it is very hard to believe that there will be successful prosecutions in Nepal.

Communalism and the courts

TEESTA SETALVAD

I'd like to put forward the proposition that when we're looking at the Southasian or Indian context, if we really want to understand what communalism is about, we have to understand the deep-rooted racism of caste bias. The everyday, deep-rooted caste bias is manifest in our institutions – the masculine contextualising or imagined notion of Hindu nationhood has its roots in caste as much as in community. We need to first understand the link between the caste bias that has run deep in our institutions for thousands of years, and a communal bias that has resurfaced over the last 150 years, and taken off particularly after Partition.

We've had a series of excellent judicial commissions looking at most institutions of communal violence. So the commission reports are good documentation, because they point to the genesis of communal violence, and the impunity enjoyed by police and perpetrators from civil society and the political class. But very rarely do they come to conviction. It would be ridiculous to suggest that the legal process is the only

way that one can fight this. At least in terms of Gujarat, one sees the legal battle as just part of the significantly larger political struggle against fascism in that state today. And it's ironic that the struggle against fascism has today been reduced to a rigorously-fought legal battle. The culture of impunity that has grown over the decades has contributed to graver and graver communal mass crimes taking place.

We've tried to build up the legal struggle in Gujarat. We've got 37 cases pending all the way to the Supreme Court – criminal to civil to writ to other forms of law – while at the same time, we're trying to argue for a discourse on mass crimes and a law for mass crimes. We don't know what kind of bill the government will ultimately come up with. The first two drafts were horrendous, because they didn't have three major things: they looked at only Indian Penal Code crimes, did not look at genocidal crimes, did not have a command of structure, and did not have a definition of mass crimes at all. So they seemed to want to give greater powers to the police, rather than empower the citizenry.

I also wanted to mention, in terms of communal violence, that there has been an inevitable prioritising of the major genocidal attacks or pogroms which have taken place against the largest minority, the Muslims. For instance, one of the cases where genocidal seeds were really visible was in Baghalpur in 1989. In three villages there, you had this mass massacre, and overnight you had these corpses being buried and cauliflower being grown over the corpses to hide the evidence. Many such markings on the genocidal map in terms of communalism have gone unchecked and have not been revisited by us because of limited capacity. But I think one thing recent efforts have shown is, if you keep at it, it is possible to revive some of these older cases as well.

Without sounding hunky-dory, we are only five years down the road in Gujarat. Meanwhile, other massacres are 20 or 30 years down the road, and have reached nowhere near where we are now. The Supreme Court and the High Courts have been pretty bad in terms of delivering judgements on communal violence. I'd like to present a few examples. One is related to 1992-93 Bombay, and involves the newspaper brought out by Bal Thackeray, which was used to orchestrate the pogrom. Citizens actually took the state to court, asking for action against Bal Thackeray. The High Court delivered a horrific judgement, saying that Thackeray had only written about the anti-national Muslims, so it was alright. And when that was challenged in the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court threw it out without even looking at the petition.

In contrast to that, a couple of the judgements and orders that have come out in the Gujarat-related cases have been relatively better. It will not do to sound as though the battle is nearly over, but for the first time, they have tried to capture the magnitude of the entire genocide in Gujarat, not simply the one incident that took place. We have a very long way to go, but I think one of the roots of trying to understand communal and caste violence is to see it as part of a systemic thing, and not just sporadic outbursts that take place when a Gujarat or a Mumbai or an '84 happens.

The Nellie massacre

MAKIKO KUMURA

The Nellie incident was a mass killing that took place in rural areas in Assam on 18 February 1983. There were 1600-3300 victims, mainly Muslims of East Bengal origin who had migrated during colonial periods. The attackers were neighbouring villagers, non-immigrant Assamese native people.

Between 1979 and 1985, there was a large-scale student agitation, which was called the anti-foreigners movement. It was led by the All Assam Students' Union, AASU, and its claim was to detect foreigners' names from electoral roles, delete those names and deport the people to their original countries. The targets were mainly Bangladeshis and some Nepalis. In 1980, AASU had several rounds of talks with the Centre, but no agreement was reached, partly because those people who had been suspected as foreigners – Bangladeshis, mainly Muslims – were vote banks for Congress. After 1980 the movement stagnated for a bit. In 1982, the central government decided to hold state assembly elections without revising the electoral rolls. Then AASU called for a boycott, and there were numerous violent incidents in Assam. Nellie was only one of them. More than one lakh people were displaced, and there have been estimates of 5000-10,000 people being killed overall. In many violent incidents, the attacking community and the attacked communities varied, but victims were mostly of East Bengal origin.

Right after the incident, 688 cases were filed with the police in connection to it. Among them, 378 cases were not submitted for lack of evidence. Only 310 were ultimately submitted by the police, but they were dropped during the rule of the Asom Gana Parishad, the AGP. There was one official committee set up, which brought out a report in May 1984, although it was never made public. There was another nonofficial inquiry by citizens, brought out in 1985, and it did some work including estimating the number of victims. The report showed the number was around 1600. Officially there has been nothing done on this incident.

I want to raise a few basic questions. First, when there were no trial cases, how can we seek justice for the victims? Apart from these trial cases, the only thing

that has been done for the victims has been compensation – INR 5000 for each deceased, and INR 2000 and two bundles of tin sheets for every surviving family. In this situation, what kind of justice can be possible? The issue is of responsibility and justice. In this case, involvement of the neighbouring villagers is very obvious. I see a problem in describing attackers as *puppets* and *goondas*, as some political scientists do. Local people admit to being involved in this incident; they should also be prosecuted, but both Congress and the AGP are reluctant to do anything.

At the same time, how do we look at the responsibility of those people who supply the necessary conditions for the massacre – in this case, the Congress, AASU and AGP leaders? Many of the decision-makers in the Congress, including Indira Gandhi, have passed away. Others might now be in power. What can be done in this situation? First of all, we should note that civil society and NGOs in Assam are very weak on Muslim issues. One group has come up with a project to make a documentary on the Nellie massacre, which I believe is a very good idea. But the same person who came up with this project says maybe we should do something on compensation, because that might enable the community to forget. I don't think this is the case; I think at least some type of legal prosecution should be done.

The argument in favour of compensation is partly motivated by the compensation that was decided for the anti-Sikh riots, which was INR 715 crores. But there's always a problem in the particulars of compensation. Very recently, for instance, there was a killing of Hindi-speakers in Assam. The central government decided to issue INR 7 lakh for each deceased. Whereas in 2005, following another ethnic clash in Assam, the victims only received three lakh. So the amount of compensation differs according to which group you belong to, and according to which particular race you are a part of. You can hardly call this justice.

It's been almost 24 years since the Nellie massacre and almost nothing has been done. What can we do to say we have not forgotten about them?

Mass crimes and gender

FARAH NAQVI

I'll base my comments on three experiences – sexual violence in peacetime, sexual violence in mass-crime situations (Gujarat is a particular example), and the violence in Chhattisgarh in central India. My first question is: When we say 'transitional justice and gender', transition to what are we talking about? Certainly when it comes to gender-based violence, I believe we are heading towards greater degrees of violence in times of both peace and conflict. The challenge is how to make both sustained healing and justice part of the same kind of processes in a long-term way.

I believe that mass crime and sexual violence do not represent any kind of epistemic break from the continuing pattern of systemic gender violence. Sexual violence was not a by-product of the mass crime that took place in Gujarat. A tentative estimate suggested well over 300-400 women were mutilated, brutalised, raped and subsequently burned. The kind of symbolism that enables this is a very classic kind of discourse. Very broadly, it's a discourse that goes back over a hundred years in its construction – the Muslim being the plunderer, the enemy, raping and defiling Mother India. And so, to recover the honour of the Hindu nation, you rape and defile Muslim women. So you have this discourse, which really creates a strong motivation for the defiling and the killing and the brutalising of the Muslim woman's body, for the emasculated Hindu male and the Hindu nation to recover its sense of self and of masculinity.

What do we do with this? One issue is the issue of access – a woman in peacetime accessing the law is impossible. In a mass-crime situation, with women on the run, it's not going to happen. You're also going to have the silence re-imposed on women –community honour is at stake. Then of course you have the limitations of the law itself. In the Indian Penal Code all you've got is a very limited definition of sexual assault, which is primarily focused on penile penetration. In other words, what happened to the women in Gujarat is not recognised in law anywhere – mutilation, the cutting, carving, chopping of breasts, penetration by a physical object, or if a woman was stripped and made to walk naked for three miles, there's no law that covers it. So we don't have the framework to deal with the variety and brutality of sexual assault that we saw.

When we prosecute for sexual-violence crimes, we often do it in the language of patriarchy, of 'honour', in language that says, 'Your lordship, this poor, unfortunate victim has suffered more in her body and her soul, and her honour has been destroyed forever.' Everyone who has dealt with sexual violence knows that, if you have a patriarchal judge and judiciary, this is the only way to win a case. The problem is that you do nothing in that to destroy the entire repertoire of symbolic honour, community honour, all of this honour being invested in the body of the woman that enabled the violence in the first place. It was precisely this construction that allowed the sexual violence, and it is precisely the same construction that we go back to when we seek justice for that.

Where do we go from here? The point is that, as a lawyer, you want conviction in that one case. But when we talk about mass crimes, is it really symbolic justice that we're seeking? And if it is symbolic justice that

we're seeking, well, there is a conflict in the minds of the lawyers and activists as they go into that courtroom. They have to ask themselves: Are we really just talking about this one case? And you have to talk about that one case, because you have the victim right there. So you will fight it in patriarchal language. And you will allow her to be victimised even more than she has been already been. But if you look at the long-term perspective, you might lose the case if you try and battle it in any other way.

Reparations

This panel explored how reparations policy can be developed in ways that underscore the fact that victims' rights have been violated, and that they are entitled to redress. While reparations cannot restore victims to the status quo ante, reparation programmes could advance a good-faith effort to address the injury suffered in ways that at least partially alleviate the suffering of victims. Historically, neither state practice nor human-rights jurisprudence has developed the principle of reparations in ways that signify recognition of state responsibility and victims' rights. At best, compensation has been meted out at the state's discretion as a welfare measure with short-term ameliorative effect. At worst – and in fact more frequently – compensation has been manipulated by politicians as a tool for political patronage, denied to political opponents and granted when it helps curry favour with political supporters. Moreover, in most cases reparations policy has been reduced to a discourse about monetary compensation, with little attention paid to the multiple dimensions of injury that reparations policy can help redress. This panel was chiefly concerned with the challenges of developing reparation programmes that are internally coherent and fair to the entire group of victims in the context of a riot, cases of mass disappearances or other contexts of widespread human-rights abuse.

Reparations and redressal

NITYA RAMAKRISHNAN

How do you reconcile truth commissions with the ordinary process of law? You can't have a notion of reparation unless you already have in place a mechanism against impunity, and a mechanism which enables accountability. In India, the manner of understanding reparation has been for the Supreme Court to say, 'We will not let the victim fall back on the procedures for claiming damages. Instead, we shall straightaway say that, for violations of fundamental rights, there will be a compensation fixed by us.' Apart from this, the state will file criminal prosecutions; and if the victim wants a specific redressal in addition, she or he can be relegated to the normal courts.

If there really weren't systems in place for recognising reparations and all their ramifications, I think there are a few other things we must go back to. First, we must have a concept of mass crimes as a violation that is very different from individual occurrences such as murder. It must enter the judicial conscience; it must enter an institutional conscience, a collective conscience, that mass violations are quite apart from individual murders and rapes and so on. They happen in a situation of mass fear: the mass fear enables them. The next thing to recognise is command responsibility. Because if you don't address these issues, no reparations are possible. This really stems from an understanding that reparation is not just for a victim, but that institutions have to be repaired. If you want to build an accountable system, then you must have institutions that will not allow these violations; and if these violations have occurred, the institutions have to be restored.

When these violations occur, there are many non-state actors. In Bangladesh in 1971, the local population behaved in strange ways. In Gujarat, the local population behaved in strange ways. In fact, the lower, marginalised rungs of society, in order to cross the margin and join the mainstream, often act as perpetrators. How do you deal with this? It is easy to focus on the state, but it's not so easy to figure out how to deal with this. So there may be options – whether you're going for truth and reconciliation, whether you're going for truth commissions just to get a preliminary understanding of what happened or just to get a basis for further prosecutions.

This is equally important if you want to have a sustained fabric of a nation. In Punjab there were people who committed suicide because they could not get justice, despite it being established that their children had been killed by the police. There are people who have refused monetary compensation because they felt that it was an affront to their dignity. So if you really want to have a healthy state, you cannot ignore these aspirations. But how to fulfil these aspirations must be clear in the law through the whole notion of reparations, which stems from two simple judicial principles. One is that there is no wrong, no right without a remedy; the second is that you restore proportionally, so if there's mass violation of rights, the proportionality issue is immense.

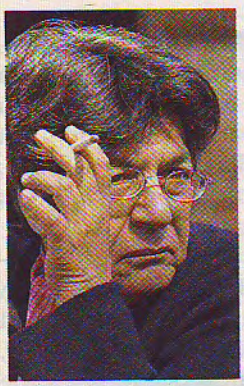
If you're talking about restitution to how things were

before the event occurred, I think the most important component is that the perpetrator should be brought to justice. When the state violates and turns aggressor, it is qualitatively different than any other aggressor. The reason why we're now left to the mercy of the courts, why courts can afford to soft-peddle these issues, is that there is no clear recognition of crimes against humanity by those in uniform. They can get away with saying that this is a death in an encounter and they're not even going to follow the procedure for inquiry. So unless it is brought into the ken of law, and therefore the ken of discourse, this is an aggression apart from any other.

Guarantees of non-recurrence are absolutely necessary, but when do you know that something will not recur? When do you know that punishment is assured? But there may be very transitional situations where, because violations are so diverse, you want truth and reconciliation and you think it is worthwhile to grant amnesty. There may be a situation in which you want a commission of inquiry to just know the truth – although the findings may not be used in a criminal trial – but at least you will know how to proceed. There may be a third situation where you want to lodge prosecution straightaway, because the systems are in place. But recognition in the law really is one way of saying, of having it enter the discourse, that we now know that a man in uniform who kills is an offender apart from any other killer or thief. Where a violation occurs, like that in Punjab, you can no longer say this is a war fought for the nation, and therefore we will brush things under the carpet. That very possibility of brushing things under the carpet must go.

Fractured region, divided people

NIGHAT SAYEED KHAN



I'm going to talk about partitions – the 1947 Partition, that of 1971, and the LOC in Kashmir, which may or may not be a partition. To my mind, they are all very different from what we've been talking about, because they involve at least two states, or different agencies in that process. None of these have actually come to any closure, despite those states being real.

In the Partition of 1947, three communities in particular were involved. The states were complicit; but the massacre wasn't by order of the state, and the armies as such were not involved in it. The violence against women was of very different kinds. There were six different ones: mutilation, rape, leaving women behind as barter, ranges of suicide, killing their own women, and abductions. There was also a breakdown of the state, and the state was preoccupied with reconstructing itself. The patriarchal state had let women down in a moment of crisis, so there was a resurrection of the state and not wanting to address women.

In 1971, which was an entirely different situation in that sense, it was the state versus the citizens. There was military action against civilians in Bangladesh. The enormous massacres, rapes, burning of villages, creation of women's homelessness, were not by-products. This was part of military policy. During this period, there were some generals who resigned, and they were brought back in court-martial proceedings. There were also some junior officers who refused to go; they were also court-martialled. But apart from this sort of thing, and a few individuals who may have been against it and raising their voices, there was an enormous silence in West Pakistan.

Some of us have always felt that the reparation and rebuilding of East Pakistan was the responsibility of West Pakistan, especially given that East Pakistan had been a colony of West Pakistan, and the amount of shifting income, etcetera, that had been used in West Pakistan. A commission was immediately set up, however its report was not released until 2000, three decades later. In 1996, the Women's Action Forum and many other organisations had sent an apology on their own behalves, because they could not get the state to move on the issue – they could not even get the public or civil society to sign on, including the human-rights organisations.

When the Rahman report was finally published, there had been no civil struggle to have it released. When it finally was released, however, and actually named the generals involved, even colonels, there was and has been no public outcry demanding prosecutions. There was again a debate triggered off by a women's conference in 2001, which had invited women from Bangladesh. This generated discussion in the press: 'Were women raped?', etcetera. The state was definitely complicit. More terrible than that is the complicity of West Pakistani society. How do we move to address this? The only way to do so immediately is through compensation to the state of Bangladesh itself.

I raise the LOC issue in the sense that it is again a question of two armies. But it is a national struggle and there are freedom fighters; but there are also those same ones that are called terrorists. In this case, the violence is by two states and there is violence within. Now here the issue of reparations, the issue of complicity, the issue of who will be responsible and how to move on, gets even further complicated. Even though we don't know what will happen to Kashmir, nevertheless I raise the question: What

about the compensations and reparations? Which state? Both states? To whom and by whom? And will Pakistanis and Indians, or Kashmiris, push India and Pakistan to reconstruct the physical damage, quite apart from getting involved in all the personal, physical, psychological, emotional violence of women who have been left alone, been widowed, of children who have been maimed?

Official commissions, truth and inquiry

Commissions are often the first step in responding to mass human-rights violations such as anti-minority riots. This panel was an avenue to examine the record of commissions in Southasia, and to look at the ambiguities and challenges entailed in the potential of commissions to contribute to justice struggles. The issues of *truth* or *fact-finding* capture some of these questions. On the one hand, commissions seem valuable in setting the record straight, in clarifying the legal and historical record regarding human-rights violations, in laying out an 'official truth' regarding what happened in a context of mass human-rights violations, who was responsible and who was victimised. On the other hand, rather than historical closure, the value of many truth-commission processes is precisely that they dejudicialise the historical record and demythologise official truths; that they enable space for a richer notion of truth than captured in the idea of forensic fact; and that, in this way, they constructively open up democratic space to enable collective discussions about fundamentally contested historical visions. In the Southasian context, the majority of commissions have been judicialised processes intended to clarify the facts and make recommendations – often behind closed doors. This panel looked at the role and function of commissions, and asked whether they can be structured and mobilised in ways that deepen and broaden their approach to justice issues.

The psychosocial dimension

GAMEELA SAMARASINGHE

My interest in transitional justice began when I studied how people spoke about their psychological distress and their suffering. Most of these narratives were very gruesome, with ideas of revenge – even wanting to eat the perpetrators up, not wanting to speak to them or even know anything about them. Who decides that a transitional-justice process would be helpful for these people, when they're talking about something else? And how can transitional justice be designed to satisfy these people?

There is evidence that transitional-justice mechanisms do not always have positive short- and long-term outcomes. For example, people may re-experience the suffering and distress they have undergone, or may face social stigmatisation and isolation after they have shared their terrible experiences. But there is also evidence that the very act of participating and benefiting from transitional-justice mechanisms can fully or partially restore a sense of control over their lives, a reinforcement of dignity, an increase of options for responding to felt or actual losses.

There are assumptions that there is a therapeutic value in the transitional-justice process for individual participants – that it is going to be helpful for them to speak about their experiences. But this is also something we have questioned. One of the most common assumptions in Sri Lanka is that the expression of emotions such as grief or anger during the narration of distressing experiences provides emotional relief. But there are concerns about this assumption. Narrating distressing stories and sharing personal experiences may actually make people feel that they have to focus on an experience in a more intensive manner. Intense focus on a personally distressing experience is likely to evoke associated emotions of sadness, anger, vengeance, humiliation.

There is an assumption that knowing the truth reduces distress. Knowing the truth is linked with the construct of closure. The establishment of the truth is said to allow people to review their own explanations of their experiences, and to sometimes accept other explanations made available through the transitional-justice mechanisms. But this may not be true for everyone, and its establishment may not lead to closure for everyone. Some people may feel further distress, because it may challenge or devalue their own explanations. This may cause them to experience lower self-esteem, guilt or insecurity. In some cases, people may feel more distressed once the truth is established, because it requires them to accept the death or disappearance of a family member or a close friend.

There is also the assumption that sharing experiences reduces a sense of isolation. It is assumed that people find it therapeutic if they come to know of others who have had similar experiences. But simply coming to know of many others having similar experiences may not always be therapeutic. It might

even make them realise that there are so many others who have suffered, and that can be even more distressing.

The other main issue is the potential risk of transitional-justice mechanisms to psychosocial well-being – for example, the problem of social distance and formality in transitional-justice mechanisms. It is important to be cautious about patronising and intimidating those who provide narrations. The issue of accuracy of narratives is also important. When you ask people to come speak about their experiences, they might be very distressed, and it might be difficult for them to be logical. For implementers of transitional-justice mechanisms, it is important to realise that they are in a position of superiority and competence, and that this can be further intimidating. There is also the lack of support and protection during and after the transitional-justice process. In Sri Lanka, for example, we don't have psychosocial support systems in place, and when you get people to speak about their problems, you also have to have in place a system that will support them.

How do we deal with multiple human-rights violations? In Sri Lanka, a person might have not only lost their property and land during displacement, but might also have suffered from landmine injuries. People who have experienced human-rights violations could question how just are the transitional-justice mechanisms that have been set up, if they target particular groups and not others, or particular issues and not others. People who have experienced human-rights violations, including sexual violence and discrimination, may question why their experiences do not merit transitional-justice attention. Such exclusion may lead people to question the sincerity of the process.

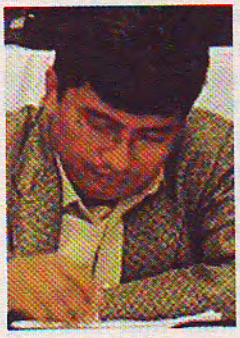
One last point is the question of labelling. The transitional-justice process may impact on personal identities and individuals and groups. For example, a person who does not identify herself as a war widow may be forced to do so simply because she is targeted as a potential recipient of a process.

Regional Human Rights Commissions

This panel critically examined the potential role of Human Rights Commissions (HRCs) in addressing accountability for mass human-rights abuses. The regional experience of such commissions has been mixed. In some cases, HRCs have been brave and visionary, providing a politically independent voice that has challenged the abuse of power. Too often, however, these commissions have also been timid institutions – too subservient to the status quo and open to manipulation by the powers of the day. Even when their integrity has not been compromised, HRCs have proved inadequate to the task of dealing with mass atrocities because their legal powers have been limited, their capacity already overburdened, and their mandate directed primarily towards addressing immediate individual complaints rather than mass atrocities. To some extent, transitional-justice mechanisms have developed precisely because HRCs and the routine criminal-justice system have proved institutionally inadequate to dealing with the scale and intensity of violations in the context of riots and prolonged civil wars, systematic violence against women and Dalits, communal massacres and counter-insurgency operations.

Human-rights commissions

SUHAS CHAKMA



Can the national institutions, created by the state either to scuttle international scrutiny or to address international scrutiny, establish accountability? I think not, but in exceptional circumstances, possibly yes. But it depends on many factors, including independent appointment procedures, powers and functions, adequate resources. But if you look at the institutions in Southasia, do they comply? Let's look at Nepal. I think this is the most crucial period, but since the members of the National Human Rights Commission resigned after the agreement between the seven parties and Maoists, there has been no commission. What about the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives? Since August 2005 there have only been three out of nine members, with no quorum to conduct the meetings.

If you look at the National Human Rights Commission of India, everybody knew that the chair, Justice Anand, was going to retire on this particular day. But the government never appointed anybody to replace Anand, so they appointed an acting chairperson who cannot deliver the work. There are only five members for a billion-plus population. Of course, NHRC of India has restrictions in terms of time – it cannot intervene into a complaint if a violation had taken place one year prior to the time of filing; it has to take permission from state authorities before it visits prisons. It also cannot investigate human-rights violations by the armed forces – but if you look at all of the armed conflicts in India and the violations in emergency situations, these have taken

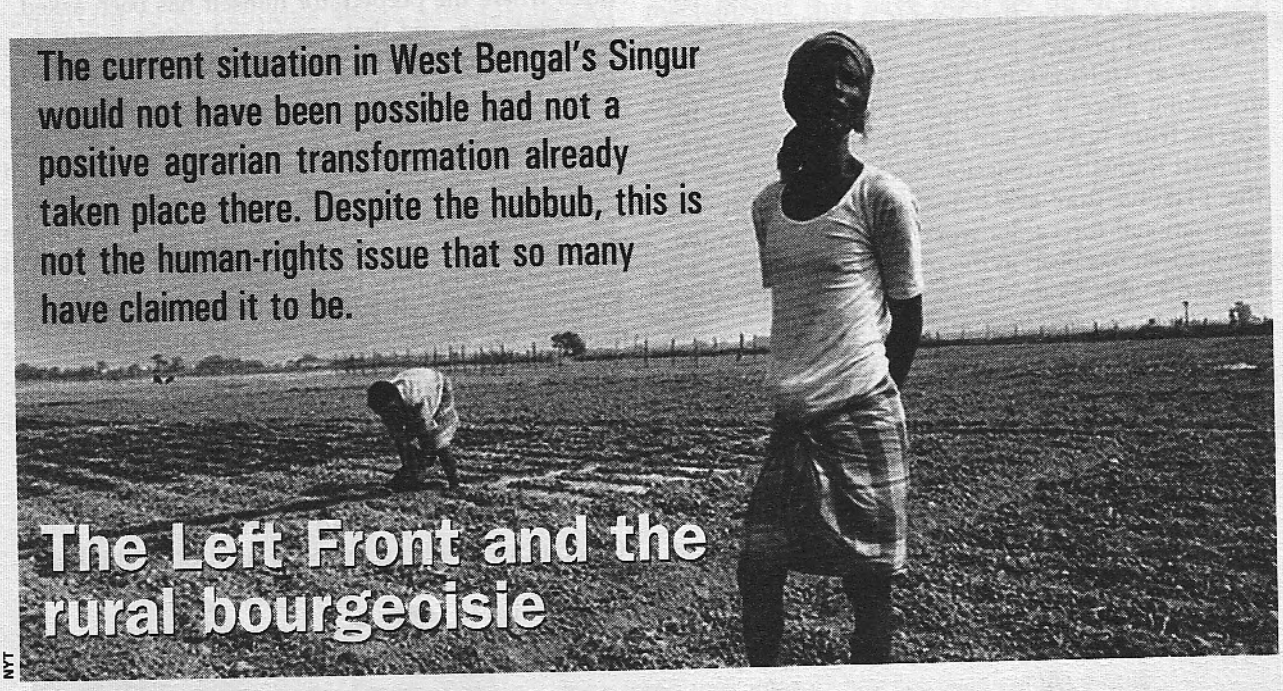
place under the armed forces.

In August 2005, the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission building was attacked and security personnel tried to burn it down. No investigation has taken place and no one has been taken in. When a national institution cannot protect its own self or establish accountability for having its headquarters set on fire, how is it going to protect victims and provide justice?

Look at Afghanistan. A large number of violations are taking place in the prisons, which are under the forces from NATO and the US. But the Afghan Human Rights Commission doesn't have access to the prisons that are being maintained by the international forces. Its work is extremely limited. Bangladesh has been in the process of establishing a Human Rights Commission since 1996 – 11 years. Officials have visited all the countries in the world that have commissions; there have been three draft bills, including two by the outgoing government, but no commission. Pakistan brought out a bill in 2004. Bhutan doesn't want to have any kind of commission.

In such situations, I don't think these are institutions that can provide justice. I think one of the key lessons is that if national institutions want to establish accountability, there needs to be a priority placed on the whole investigation process. Because if you don't do the investigation properly, how do you fix responsibility? And if you look at the NHRC of India, which has more resources than others, most of the time the commission just asks the same police officials to investigate into their own abuses. We have cases where the perpetrator himself has been asked to investigate, and that person submits a report to the NHRC and NHRC says, 'Ok, no violation has taken place.'

These are the negative aspects of the national institutions, but are there positive ones? Under exceptional circumstances. If the NHRC of India had not gone to the Supreme Court in the Gujarat case, if civil-society groups had gone on their own, would we have seen the same result? But Gujarat is different, because Gujarat divided the whole nation – you had the BJP on one side, you had other political parties on the other. That may not be the case when you have a situation of armed conflict. You will not find the NHRC intervening in an armed conflict situation. If the work on Punjab had not been done by a committee, NHRC would not have intervened. If the activists who had been following the Gujarat cases had not followed up, I don't think the NHRC would have intervened. You have to use the tools available.



The current situation in West Bengal's Singur would not have been possible had not a positive agrarian transformation already taken place there. Despite the hubbub, this is not the human-rights issue that so many have claimed it to be.

NYT

The Left Front and the rural bourgeoisie

BY **MRITIUNJOY MOHANTY**

What is now called the Singur controversy was sparked off by the decision of the West Bengal government to acquire 997 acres (affecting approximately 12,000 owners) of agricultural land, which it planned to grant to the Tata Group for the purpose of setting up a small-car factory. This land, which the Calcutta government says Tata chose over five other sites, is located about 40 km outside Calcutta, in the Singur block of Hooghly District. Given the intensity of cultivation and population pressure in West Bengal, the state government has always maintained that it would be difficult for expansion of non-agricultural activities to take place without the incorporation of land currently in use for agriculture. The state government claims, however, that care has been taken to leave fertile, triple-cropped land out of the acquisition process, proof of which can be sought in the irregularly shaped plot currently being offered to the Tata Group.

For the land being acquired, West Bengal's Left Front government has fixed compensation on the following basis: landowners are to receive INR 870,000 per acre for single-cropped land and INR 1,280,000 per acre for double-cropped land; sharecroppers are to receive 25 percent of the value being offered to owners – around INR 200,000-300,000 per acre. In December 2006, the government claimed that 7500 'man-days' of work had been created in the area, to offset some of the employment lost by the decrease in agricultural labour.

In addition, the Left Front (LF) government has put in place a training programme to provide skills to those who wish to seek employment in the Tata factory. According to the government, by early December, 1855 people – 1409 of whose land has been acquired, and 446 of whom are landless agricultural labourers – had enlisted in this government-funded programme. Training for the first batch had already begun in a newly established institute in the area.

For the Left Front government, acquiring land in Singur is a significant departure, as it seeks to change both gear and strategy in an effort to sustain the economic growth that West Bengal has seen over the past three decades. As the state Industries Minister Nirupam Sen put it in a recent interview, land reform, which had secured tenancy rights and was initiated when the LF was elected to power in the state during the late 1970s, was never an end in itself. "After successful land reforms, the decentralisation of Panchayati Raj, and the growth we have achieved in

the agrarian sector, if we do not go for industrial development, then the entire economy of the state will go to ruin," Sen noted.

Wherever one stands in the debate over Singur, Sen's point is not one that can be easily brushed aside. Therefore, if there is any reasonable case to be made for state aid (in the form of, among other things, acquiring arable agricultural land) to foster private-sector-led industrialisation, and providing that the state has a reasonable package for compensation and rehabilitation, then why has the Singur project generated so much controversy and resistance?

A differentiated peasantry

Indeed, there has been significant resistance. Between 9 May and 27 September 2006, there were nine meetings between various arms of government and local representatives, including four with the Krishi Jami Raksha Committee (KJRC, the formal name of the political coalition of 19 organisations that opposed the Tata deal) to discuss modalities of land acquisition. But despite extensive consultations, the government's own records suggest that no consensus emerged from these meetings on how to take the process forward. Not only were the KJRC-government negotiations fruitless, but starting from 25 May, when the visiting Tata team was gheraoed and had to be rescued by the police, local resistance continued in the form of numerous sit-ins and rallies.

On 25 September 2006, the day compensation for acquired land began to be disbursed, the block office was surrounded by thousands of protestors. What proceeded to take place is still unclear, but the police eventually resorted to a lathi-charge that killed one and injured many more. Finally, as fence-building was about to begin in early December, in the face of sustained efforts by political groups to occupy the disputed land, police resorted to firing to clear the area. The administration finally imposed Section 144 – a section under the Indian Penal Code that bans public gatherings of more than three people – so as to continue operations.

In order to understand this intense resistance, it would be worthwhile to look at the area's economy. The total population of the five revenue units (the smallest administrative unit in a district) where land is being acquired is 24,048, including 7710 'main workers', 1034 marginal workers and a non-working population of 15,304. If we take main and marginal workers together, 35 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture. This compares favourably with the India-wide average, where more than 55 percent of the employed workforce is agricultural. West Bengal has an occupational structure similar to the all-India average, and the bulk of its labour force too is occupied in agriculture.

Therefore, despite the fact that Singur is a prosperous agricultural area, it is considerably less agrarian than the rest of the state. By that yardstick, it is more urban than rural. The population is also reasonably well educated, with one estimate putting literacy levels at almost 75 percent. According to statistics from the government's rehabilitation package, among the first batch of 179 trainees, only 18 percent had education levels of less than Class X, and nine percent had graduate or higher degrees.

We know that there are approximately 12,000 people with land titles in Singur who will be compensated as part of the land-acquisition process. As noted, however, there are a total of 8744 workers (both main and marginal) in the area, of which only 35 percent (3055) is in agriculture. Of these, 1320 listed 'cultivation' as their main occupation, while another 156 listed this as their marginal occupation. Therefore, there are only 1476 people who would be classified as farmers, suggesting widespread absentee landlordism (even after accounting for the fact that some land-title holders probably belong to the same household).

There are a few other critical aspects of the area's agricultural practices that have come to light in the course of the debate over Singur. First, most single-crop farmers rely almost entirely on family labour for agricultural operations. Second, there is evidence of both perennial and seasonal in-migration of agricultural and non-agricultural labour into the area. As a result, according to one estimate, the agricultural labour force is effectively double the 1579 currently recorded. Third, there is considerable evidence of substantial private investment in irrigation and mechanisation in the area.

Given all this, what can we infer about the area's economy? First, all evidence suggests that not only is Singur an agriculturally prosperous area, but that commercially viable capitalist farming has taken root there. Second, despite the fact that it is an agriculturally prosperous area, agriculture is not the most important source of income or employment; as a result, there are land-owning households where agriculture accounts for only a small proportion of household income and employment. The shift away from agriculture would then explain the high degree of absentee landlordism. In all likelihood, a large proportion of single-cropped land belongs to households for which agriculture accounts for just a small proportion of income and employment.

Third, given that only 17 percent of the employed workforce is classified as being 'cultivators' (which would include both owner-farmers and *bargadars*, or

The Left Front government is correct when it claims that, unlike in other states, the process of land acquisition in Singur will not pauperise the peasantry.

sharecroppers), landowners who practice multiple-crop farming probably, in addition to working their own land, also lease-in – that is, access on a rental basis – a significant amount of land for cultivation. Fourth, bargadars probably also account for work done on a significant proportion of the cultivated area. Fifth, therefore, owner-cultivators and some bargadars use the land-lease market to operate as large capitalist farmers, who conduct agricultural operations on the basis of hired, often migrant, agricultural labour.

Sustained agricultural growth in the overall context of diversification away from agriculture, then, has created a differentiated peasantry. First, it has produced a large set of households with relatively small land holdings for which income and employment from agriculture now constitute a small proportion of total household income and employment. Second, this process has also created a smaller set of relatively larger landowners and tenant farmers, who have used the land-lease market to expand agricultural operations, thereby allowing them not only to grow but to accumulate as well. In other words, they practice commercial farming and see it as a way to make profit. This reasoning is supported by the fact that Singur has a fairly active land market.

To phrase it differently, a small, rural bourgeoisie has emerged that is driving the capitalisation of agriculture in the Singur area. Given prior land reforms, sustained agricultural growth and somewhat improved access to education has meant that this emergence has not taken place alongside the pauperisation of the small peasantry, as may otherwise have been the case. The incipient rural middle class has diversified away from agriculture. In a sense, this is the best kind of agrarian transformation that one can hope for – capitalisation of agriculture alongside a diversification away from agriculture.

Notice that for the emergent rural bourgeoisie – ie, the land owners who lease-in large areas of land, and bargadars who use the land-lease market to operate as large-scale farmers – the compensation offered by the government would seem completely inadequate. The land owner would be compensated on the basis of owned area, which in this case would be substantially smaller than his operated area. Furthermore, the bargadar in any case gets only 25 percent of land value as compensation. Perhaps most importantly, land for both of these sets of farmers is a source of profit and accumulation, not just income and employment. From such a standpoint, compensation levels would certainly be deemed inadequate.

There are peasant households in Singur, however, for which agriculture still accounts for the bulk of income and employment. Whether these peasants gain or lose will depend on whether they find other employment, and of what kind, after selling their land. If there is reasonable uncertainty of finding suitable work, then these peasants would be unwilling to sell, because without land they would not only have to look for work, but would also have to buy their grain (which at the moment they grow) from the market. Perhaps the worst off among these is the unregistered bargadar, who loses access to land and who, being unregistered, receives no compensation to boot.

Rural v industrial bourgeoisie

We are now in a position to discuss the major areas of contention between the state government and the KJRC, which can be broken down into four major issues. First, the government claims that it has letters of consent for 952 of the 997 acres that will be acquired. The KJRC says simultaneously that it has letters from at least 300 farmers, with land holdings of 184 acres, saying that they "have not and will not give our land to Tata Motors".

According to the official status report, by 2 December 2006, out of the required 997 acres, compensatory payments had been made for 635 acres of land to 9020 land title holders. The report also says that two days later, "post-award consent had been acquired for 332 acres". The report noted that there remained about 3000 title holders and bargadars who had not yet been paid. There are a couple of points that need to be noted about this. One, it is likely that some of the "post-award consent" for the 332 acres acquired by the administration from 2-4 December was the result of 'persuasion' rather than any voluntary process. As a result, with the backing of a full-blown political campaign on the issue of land acquisition, some of those who had been 'persuaded' might have decided to change their minds and declare their true positions to the KJRC – ie, that they did not want to sell.

Two, if one compares the average size of land holdings of those to whom payments had been made (9020 claimants for 635 acres) with that of those to whom no payment had been made (3000 land title holders for 332 acres), it is clear that the smaller-scale land owners were the first to sell to the government, while the larger-scale ones held out and were probably ambivalent. This is confirmed by the fact that the KJRC reports that it has 300 farmers with land holdings of a total of 184 acres (2.5 percent of landholders, accounting for 18.5 percent of the land to be acquired) who have signed letters stating that they do not want to sell. Our analysis suggests that landowners who lease-in land stand to lose from the compensation package, and it is the larger-scale landowners who are most likely to lease-in land. Therefore, all evidence would seem to suggest that the consent of large-scale landowners, if obtained, was probably not given willingly, and that it is they who

If the state government has been progressive in the design of the land-acquisition programme, it has been far less so in its implementation of it.

are most fervently resisting acquisition.

The second issue of contention between the West Bengal government and the KJRC is over the government's statement that 90 percent of the area being acquired is single-cropped. It would appear that the basis for this claim is somewhat dated, and in any case it is almost certainly an overstatement. Going by the assumption that the 300 farmers who have given letters to the KJRC are large-scale farmers, we would conclude that at least 18.5 percent of the land is double- if not triple-cropped. If we assume that all single-cropped land has already been sold to the government – that is, 635 acres out of 997, leaving 362 acres – given that such land owners would have the most to gain from the compensation package, then about 35 percent of the land can be understood to be double-cropped. The proportion of double-cropped land therefore probably lies somewhere between 18.5 and 35 percent.

The third issue is KJRC's claim that the government is acquiring land for the benefit of the Tatas at one-third the market price. While establishing a 'fair' valuation of land is always a tricky matter, there is very little evidence to suggest that the government has underpaid landowners. Indeed, all evidence would seem to point in the opposite direction – that the government has tried to evolve a mechanism for the determination of a reasonable price, taking into account a variation of capitalised future earnings, assuming that the land remains in agricultural use. One might argue that bargadars who get only 25 percent of land value as compensation are receiving a very raw deal. But it must also be recognised that the Left Front's land reforms only gave bargadars usufruct (usage without damage) and not ownership rights. Therefore, the KJRC is wrong to claim that the government is underpaying for the land. What it would probably like to say – but cannot publicly demand – is that the price currently on offer does not make economic sense for the rural bourgeoisie.

Finally, the fourth point of contention is the number of bargadars affected. The Nagrik Mancha, an NGO that has been working on the issue, claims that there could be up to 2400 bargadars in Singur, while the Sanhati Udyog, another NGO, has claimed that there are probably 1200 unregistered bargadars. Whereas the government's statement that there are approximately 400 registered and unregistered bargadars is almost certainly an underestimation, our analysis would suggest that the claims of both Nagrik Mancha and Sanhati Udyog are somewhat off the mark, and that the government's estimate is in fact much closer to the actual number.

What, then, is the upshot of all of the above? First, the Left Front government is correct when it claims that, unlike in other states, the process of land acquisition in Singur will not pauperise the peasantry. Indeed, as one would expect of a progressive government, some care has been taken to ensure that the interests of the small peasantry and the incipient rural middle class – the groups that constitute the overwhelming bulk of the 12,000 land-title holders – have been addressed. For most of these people, household income and employment have diversified away from agriculture, and therefore it is in their best interests to sell what small plots of land they have, particularly when the price they have been offered is relatively fair. This is why, for the most part, land sale has been voluntary.

Second, however, there is an emergent rural bourgeoisie, accounting for a small proportion of the title holders but a significant proportion of the land acquired, whose interests have been adversely affected by the acquisition. It is from this group that the vehement resistance has come, and what consent for land sale has been obtained from this it has in all likelihood been non-voluntary. This group is joined by a small contingent of peasants, including unregistered bargadars, whose livelihoods are probably at stake. If one leaves this last group of peasants aside (whose employment prospects it would be possible to improve through vocational training and job creation), then the Left Front government has chosen in its change of strategy to further the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie directly at the expense of the rural bourgeoisie.

If the state government has been progressive in the design of the land-acquisition programme, it has been far less so – and verging on the undemocratic – in its implementation of it. This is no small matter, not only because of the LF's avowed espousal of democratic politics, but also because in a democratic polity, process is almost as important as objective. And debate and discussion, even if strongly contested and acrimonious, form the cornerstone of that process. Outside of the role discussion plays in legitimisation, given that nobody is endowed with perfect knowledge, it also ensures that all possible and feasible options have been explored.

Unfortunately, both in the choice of strategy and in its implementation, the government of West Bengal, epitomised in the positioning and pronouncements of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, has adopted a 'my way or the highway' attitude. This is doubly unfortunate, because it is only a progressive government that has the theoretical wherewithal to understand that it is the very dialectics of successful growth that necessitate a change in strategy. But if the

Simply industrialising is not enough. The process needs also to be a kind of industrialisation that will lead to the generation of rural non-farm jobs, which allow for labourers employed in agriculture to move out and up.

manner of choosing and implementing that choice is undemocratic, or seen to be so, then it redounds on that choice and undermines an effort that perhaps only a progressive government can make.

Treading carefully

The government's rationale for the change in strategy – the need to generate industrial employment in small and medium enterprises so that overall employment generation is maximised – is important, because long-term economic success depends upon sustained increases in productivity alongside near-full employment of all available resources, including that of labour. Therefore, all successful development experience has been associated with two things: first, a close link between industrialisation and productivity; second, accelerated employment growth that has allowed a shift of labour from low-productivity primary sectors (agriculture) to higher-productivity secondary (industry) and tertiary (services) sectors. Given this, successful development in West Bengal has been necessarily associated with a sharp decline in the share of agriculture in both output and employment.

Put differently, in a largely agrarian economy (as most under-developed economies are), productivity growth is driven by capitalisation of agriculture and the generation of productive non-farm employment, thereby allowing labour to move away from agriculture. In a capitalist, market-driven economy, the former requires the emergence of a forward-looking rural bourgeoisie, while the latter requires the growth of manufacturing and, later, a services sector. The quicker both of these processes work, the quicker economic development is achieved. But notice that even if both processes work well, the share of agriculture in both output and employment declines – and, as a consequence, so does the relative position of the rural bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the non-rural bourgeoisie.

But if the process of growth in any case marginalises the rural bourgeoisie, why pick a strategy that directly pits the interests of the rural and industrial bourgeoisie against each other – particularly given that, by all accounts, it is a forward-looking bourgeoisie, interested in investing in the capitalisation of agriculture? In essence, why target multiple-cropped arable land for acquisition? The answer is not very clear, at least to this writer. In part it may be explained by the fact that Singur was the preferred choice of the Tata Group. It may be that it was also politically expedient, since this is an area dominated by the Trinamool Congress, which also represents the interests of the rural bourgeoisie. Given that the rural bourgeoisie would resist, it is perhaps better that the resistance be in Singur and the political battle be between the Trinamool combine and the Left Front; elsewhere, after all, the rural bourgeoisie might have been a part of a broad left coalition, and the political battle might have been fought within the Left Front.

If the Left Front wins this battle with the rural bourgeoisie of Singur – and if it has not been forced to pay too heavy a political price – then the terms of future negotiations will have been set and a signal sent to rural bourgeoisie elsewhere. But notice that even where it comes to picking a battle with the rural bourgeoisie (which it considers necessary for achieving its broader goal of industrialisation), the Left Front has treaded very carefully. As we know, the most productive, triple-cropped land has been left out of the land-acquisition process; and therefore, even though it is the interests of the rural bourgeoisie that have been hurt the most in Singur, it is not as if they have been wiped out.

It is just as well that the Left Front treads carefully. It is not clear, after all, whether its chosen strategy of industrialisation will generate the amount and kind of non-farm employment that will allow labour to shift out of agriculture in West Bengal. And if it does not, the growth puzzle will not have been addressed. The process of successful development sketched above is, after all, neither smooth nor automatic. First, there are many countries in which development does not fit this pattern, and is characterised by both under-development and mal-development. Second, even where growth is taking place in the right direction, in market economies the employment of labour displaced due to the capitalisation of agriculture is not assured. It is possible that growth will take place alongside increasing under-employment and unemployment. Third, for countries that come late into industrialisation (for instance, India and China), the process tends to be more capital intensive and hence industrialisation produces fewer jobs at every level of income. As a result of the above, for late industrialisers, the decline in the share of the labour force employed by agriculture tends to be much slower. In India, for example, even though agriculture's share in gross domestic product has declined to a little more than 20 percent, it still accounts for up to three quarters of employment.

Clearly, then, that such a large proportion of the labour force continues to be employed in low-productivity agriculture means that benefits from growth are very unequally shared, the lion's share

going to the very small proportion of the labour force employed in urban areas. As such, for India (and West Bengal), the generation of non-farm employment of a kind that allows labour to move out of agriculture is absolutely key to both growth and a more equitable distribution of the benefits of growth.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that a very large proportion of the labour force currently employed in agriculture has very low levels of education – on average between two and four years of schooling. The bulk of the non-farm jobs now being generated (mostly in urban areas), meanwhile, require average education levels of at least seven years. Job generation of the kind witnessed by the Indian economy subsequently does not match the skill profile of the bulk of available labour. This not only increases both under-employment and unemployment in the rural areas, but it forces people to remain in agriculture for much longer than they would care to. While this is an India-wide story, it captures the economic developments in West Bengal reasonably well – with the proviso that, given sustained agricultural growth in the state for the last three-odd decades, incomes in agriculture have fared much better than in other parts of the country. Regardless, there is no evidence that the sort of non-farm jobs that will be brought to the state by Tata's small-car factory and its ancillaries will be able to absorb the sort of labour that is currently employed in agriculture.

In a scenario such as this one, West Bengal (and, indeed, the whole country) faces some critical, difficult issues. Sustained increases in productivity are key to economic growth, and therefore the state has no option but to accelerate the process of industrialisation. But as we have seen, simply industrialising is not enough. The process needs also to be a kind of industrialisation that will lead to the generation of rural non-farm jobs, which allow for labourers employed in agriculture to move out and up. Otherwise, necessity might force the state to build alliances with the same rural bourgeoisie that it is today trying to marginalise, and generate non-farm rural employment that will absorb the labour that will continue to be made surplus in agriculture.

The final irony of all this is that success in Singur – in the sense of generating non-farm industrial employment – will not imply that the model will be successful elsewhere. As noted, Singur is much less agrarian than is the rest of West Bengal. With only 35 percent of labour employed in agriculture and a relatively better-educated workforce, Singur has already made the transition. The true success of this strategy will be when it will be able to absorb surplus labour in those parts of the state (and country) where agriculture still accounts for 50 percent or more of the workforce.

The oligarchy of filmi deviousness

Bhartendu's stage is on fire,
Distraught, in English,
People are running away.
– Byomesh Shukla *in Aadat*

Indian television serials are a lot better these days. They are skilfully scripted, carefully produced and cleverly stretched to last months, even years. Even more interesting, the commercials that accompany them are still more slick, more entertaining and retain their sparkle longer. Why so? Analysts offer an interesting explanation. Advertisers spend more money for the production of a one-minute spot than the production cost of several episodes of a soap opera. Copywriters are better paid than scriptwriters. In terms of time spent, actors receive more money for appearing in a commercial than they do for appearances in tele-serials. Advertising professionals that oversee the production of commercials are much more demanding than programme executives. Most of the time, anchors nowadays do not even need to say, "Don't go away". Millions wait for Juhi Chawla's current tease in the "Kya Family Hai" series of their own free will, and never get tired of Amitabh Bachchan's childish pranks for Dabur products.

It is not a coincidence that there are more Indian families with TVs than those with access to safe drinking water or modern toilet facilities.

Ads sell desire. Sometimes the object of desire is beyond the means or liking of the target audience. When that happens – and marketers monitor consumer reaction quite closely – alternatives are offered with *new*, *improved* or *affordable* tags. The idea is to let the buyer feel that his concerns are paramount. In the end, we do not buy things because somebody is telling us to do so; we acquire the advertised product or service because we want it, we need it, and finally, we cannot do without it. That is the way advertising works. That is also the reason the market demands that every household have a colour television. Medium becomes the message when everything the television shows is something for sale. It is not a coincidence that there are more Indian families with TVs than those with access to safe drinking water or modern toilet facilities.

The poorest of the poor are also potential consumers. The mind-spaces of even marginal consumers are minutely mapped to anticipate their taste, preference, priority, ability and willingness to pay. Commercials target their vulnerabilities with calculated precision: drink a certain brand of soda to keep your cool; buy another washing powder to get envious glances; this mint will turn every male into Prince Charming. Of course, viewers know that all this is make-believe, but they want to believe it all the same. This is the assumption that makes advertising work.

Guru's saga

Selling ideology, however, requires a more sophisticated approach. The cinema, with all its subtlety and nuance, is more suitable for the broad-spectrum treatment involved in marketing beliefs. A recent Bollywood blockbuster uses the medium's full potential to show that anything is possible for the conscience-free in the free market. In *Guru*, director Mani Ratnam – himself an established guru of his profession – portrays the rise of a middle-class Gujarati boy to the stratosphere of Bombay's wheeler-dealers.

The origin of the word *guru* is impressive. In Sanskrit it implies gravity, weight and importance, and is thus used for superior teachers or spiritual leaders. When it reached English – via either Hindi or Punjabi – the noun still retained some of its original gravitas. But in contemporary Hindi usage, the term carries a hint of negative connotation. When someone tell you that you turned out to be his guru, he is probably complementing your craftiness. Perhaps this is the meaning that Ratnam wanted to confer on his film's eponymous protagonist.

Gurukant Desai is a boy who finds the conventions of his environment cumbersome, and is ready to do whatever it takes to become successful. He marries for money so that he can invest the dowry and start his own business. He curries favour with an upright editor to gain entry into a textile-trading cartel. He bamboozles a senior government official and establishes himself in the trading community. In Guru's world, winning is not just everything; it is the very thing he lives for. (*Spoiler warning: skip the next two paragraphs if you don't want to know how the movie ends.*)

In the later half of the film, Ratnam gives his story a sudden twist, and makes the character of the editor realise that there is a sordid story behind the phenomenal rise of his protégé. An enterprising reporter uncovers the slimy underbelly of the shiny factories. Under- and over-invoicing, foreign-currency manipulations, siphoning off of investors' funds, bribery, tax evasion – all the things that ambitious entrepreneurs usually do – are chronicled in the courageous press of the old-school media baron.

Guru fumes, but there is little he can do to get back at his former mentor. So, he sets his small investors upon his critics. All those speculators who had multiplied their savings by investing in the fearless enterprise of the peerless manipulator come to the rescue of their saviour. The system succumbs. In an emblematic scene at the end, the schemer stands tall above small, faceless men and teases them: Don't we want more? The crowd roars in affirmation. The moral of the story: Greed is good, and all is well that sells well on the stock exchange.

Guru is an entertaining movie. It has all the works – lilting tunes by A R Rahman, a wet dance by Aishwarya Rai, and locales that make the audience gasp. It would have been nice to rate this movie favourably, but this column is not a review. Rather, it seeks to understand why, since the 1970s, Hindi films have denigrated everyone and everything but the business world – a clear contrast to the earlier, idealistic era when sincere workers would prevail over dishonest hoarders.

Winner's world

Guru follows in the tradition of the long line of Bollywood productions that try to establish the superiority of businesses. In the movies of the 1960s, mill-owners were often gullible but trade-union activists were invariably venal. Without anybody realising it, a negative image of trade unions was subsequently embedded in the minds of the masses. The films of the 1970s targeted the national government and irrevocably tarred the bureaucracy with the brush of corruption. *Angry Young Man* and *Don* were two sides of the same coin – deviants who sought to establish that recourse to law was pointless.

The dominant theme of 1980s films was the circumstances that forced honest entrepreneurs into embracing dishonest means. Movies of the 1990s disrobed politicians of any dignity – the police-criminal-politician nexus was pilloried so much that a Gandhi topi became a mark of ridicule. Few politicians deign to wear the cap today. Businesspeople, presumably because they were the ones to fund these extravaganzas, were spared – their misdemeanours were always minor. In the 21st century, Bollywood directors want us to believe that India is shining brightly, Indians abroad are partying hard and poverty is history in the Subcontinent. Even more dangerously, Bollywood wants to establish a new value: Not only is winning everything, it is the very essence of playing games, having fun or forming relationships. Considering the reach and influence of Hindustani films, that subliminal message should worry all Southasia.

When winning is everything, ethics mean nothing and morals count for even less. When self-proclaimed socialists such as Mulayam Singh and Nitish Kumar have no qualms in mobilising hardened criminals during elections, the less said about the powerbrokers of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the better. When winning is everything, violence occurs and common people suffer, as happened in Gujarat. *Guru* takes the stakes of winning to a new high in a soft, subtle way. Its consequences can be unpredictable – imagine thousands of entrepreneurs without scruples bribing, blackmailing or breaking everyone that comes in the way of their success. The deviousness of many may cancel each other out; or, more likely they will coalesce to establish an oligarchy that would make democracy meaningless.

Rumours have spread that the character of Guru was inspired by the life of Dhirubhai Ambani, the 'polyester tsar' who eliminated cotton and handlooms from India. There are many in Southasia who worship Ambani – reputedly the first self-made billionaire, and one who trampled everything that came in his way. "It behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming," warned the US poet Ralph Waldo Emerson during the 19th century. Ambani has replaced Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as the best-known Gujarati. This can only produce more Narendra Modis in the days to come.


NYT

Parzania and the dictator of Gujarat

Who was responsible for the ban on the release of *Parzania* in Gujarat? Apparently nobody.

BY **URVISH KOTHARI**

Gujarat, the much-maligned land of the Mahatma, refuses to move ahead on the path of tolerance or the road of repentance, at least officially. The unofficial ban on the controversial new film *Parzania* was a crude reminder to those who have joined the chorus of *Vibrant Gujarat*, led by Chief Minister Narendra Modi, of the state's unaddressed demons. The timing could not have been better. It was mid-February and the media was busy counting the amount of investment proposed at the recent Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors' Summit. The air was thick with a sense of euphoria manufactured by the state machinery and propagated by the mainstream press, when suddenly *Parzania* appeared on the scene.

The subject matter of *Parzania* – a film about hell on earth, in which a family loses a child in the 2002 Gujarat riots – was no secret, as it came to Gujarat after winning a number of accolades on the festival circuit. The film is based on a true story. Fourteen-year-old Azhar Mody, son of Rupa and Dara Mody, went missing in the carnage of February 2002, in which ex-MP Ehsaan Jaffrey (in whose house the family had been hiding) was burnt alive by a mob, and the police chose to stay away. Azhar's mother is still waiting to find her son. It was the suffering of the Mody family, friends of his, that moved director Rahul Dholakia to make *Parzania*.

The film was made in English, probably keeping the international circuit in mind, with noted actors Naseeruddin Shah and Sarika in the lead roles. There was no sign of protest when Shah and Sarika, on a pre-release tour, visited Ahmedabad and spent time with Rupa and Dara Mody. Indeed, the media had a field day with their visit. Even the announcement of the film's release date did not create much of a stir. Things started changing mysteriously only thereafter.

Gujarat ni asmita

The burden of banning the film fell to the very people who were supposed to screen it in the first place, the Multiplex Owners' Association (MOA). The MOA was put on the defensive from the start. News of the association's meetings with Dholakia and the postponement of *Parzania*'s release appeared prominently in the English-language press. During the course of the meetings, however, the name emerged of Babubhai Patel – aka Babu Bajrangi, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader. Thereafter, Bajrangi was projected as the saga's main villain, threatening theatre owners and forbidding them from screening the film.

The MOA tried to persuade Dholakia to invite Bajrangi to a preview show to get his clearance. When asked by a reporter about whether *Parzania* should be screened, Bajrangi simply said, "I need to watch the film first." After Dholakia refused to invite Bajrangi to a preview, the MOA turned to the police commissioner of Ahmedabad and asked him for a certificate of clearance for the film. He said that was not his job.

That proved to be the end of the road for *Parzania* in Gujarat. The MOA ended its efforts in resignation, and Dholakia flew back to Bombay disheartened. But the question remained: Who banned *Parzania*? It is hardly a mystery. None can be blamed other than Narendra Modi, firmly in saddle in Gujarat. Nonetheless, some NGOs and sections of the media have pretended naiveté, accusing Bajrangi and the MOA of playing 'super-censor'.

But would Bajrangi really be able to issue such diktat in Modi's Gujarat, when his onetime-almighty boss, VHP supremo Praveen Togadia, had been dumped by the chief minister? The activities of the Rashriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat, after all, revolve around Modi completely. Nobody challenges the man's word, and those who try to, inevitably fail. Modi may also be interested in sending strong signals to both his cadre and his detractors: Here I am, the sole protector of *Gujarat ni asmita*, the pride of Gujarat. Don't try to mess with that pride or you'll meet the same fate that this film did.

The Ahmedabad government has not claimed responsibility for the ban on *Parzania*, as it did in the case of the film *Fanaa*. The latter was banned due to the public sympathy the film's hero, Aamir Khan, had expressed for Medha Patkar, the longtime critic of the Sardar Sarovar Dam project. But such formal measures were entirely absent in the case of *Parzania*, where the ban was promulgated by an entirely predictable yet invisible presence. While murmurs of discontent are being heard from some sections of the Ahmedabad intelligentsia, at press time these have not gone beyond armchair activism. The Congress party, meanwhile, continues to act clueless, perhaps seeking to champion the cause of 'soft Hindutva', while the dictator of Gujarat stands by watching smugly.

Crossing a creek to reach their land. A bridge across the water was washed away by the tsunami, and the creek can now only be crossed at low tide.

Moving on from a cataclysm

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **PANKAJ SEKHSARIA**

If there is a single day for which the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will be forever remembered, it is undoubtedly 26 December 2004. For the small chain of islands located far from mainland India, this was a tryst with a cataclysm, as huge waves engulfed the coasts with unforgiving power and ferocity.

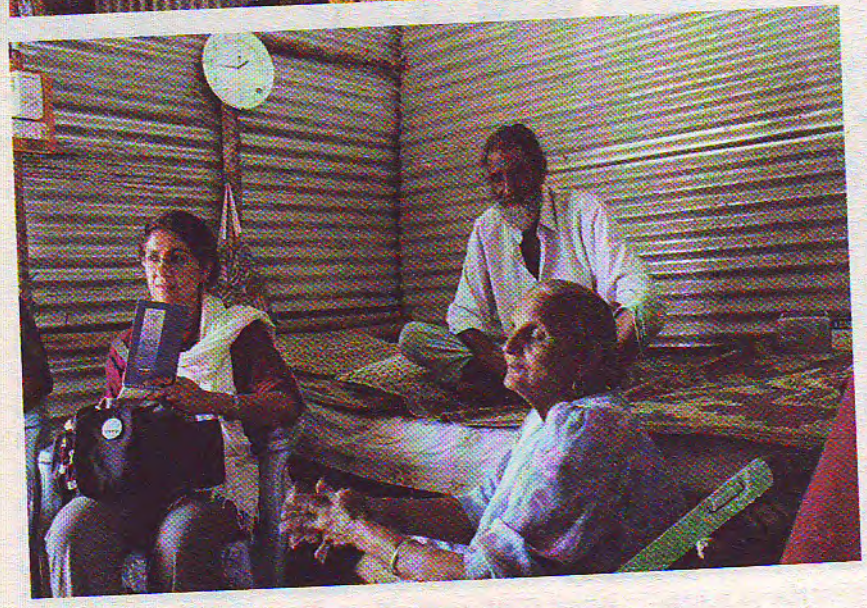
Submerged and dead coconut plantations in Chauldhari, a few kilometres from Port Blair.

A huge brown wall of dead coastal forests can be seen along the entire coastline of the Nicobar Islands. This photo is from the southern-most island of Great Nicobar.

An 11-photo compilation showing coral reefs thrust above the high-tide line off the west coast of Interview Island in the Andamans.

On the walk back to what was once home.

Children in the intermediate shelter in Chauldhari, near Port Blair in South Andaman Island.

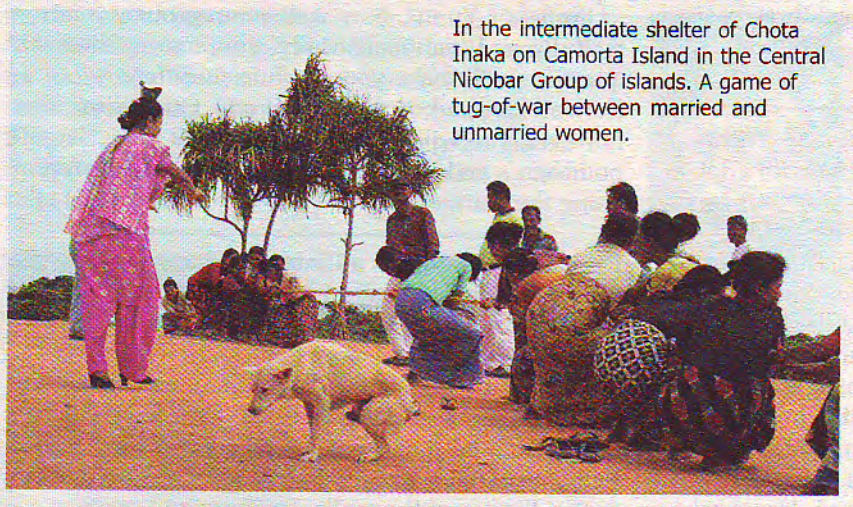


Havaldar Arjan Singh and his wife with a visitor in their intermediate shelter in Campbel Bay. 70-year-old Singh and his family have lived in Joginder Nagar for nearly three decades. The tsunami destroyed their house and inundated parts of their plantations. The road to the settlement was also washed away, and all the people here were moved to intermediate shelters made of tin sheets in Campbel Bay.

Official estimates suggest that nearly 3500 people were washed away on that day, while about 8000 hectares of horticultural and agricultural land were permanently submerged. Two years later, there are no clear answers as to how the recovery process is proceeding. Part of the reason for this is because the islands are an extremely complex place – geographically, logistically, demographically and culturally. Not only are the Nicobars distinctly unique from the Andamans, but there are substantial differences even between the islands that make up each group. The earthquake and tsunami of 2004 also meted out different treatments to the various islands – to their respective ecologies and to the human communities, if any, that inhabit them.

Less than 10 percent of the over 500 islands constituting the Andaman and Nicobar group have human communities. The rest are uninhabited. In more ways than one, then, the impact of December

In what remains of their home.



In the intermediate shelter of Chota Inaka on Camorta Island in the Central Nicobar Group of islands. A game of tug-of-war between married and unmarried women.

In December 2006, the construction process for permanent shelters had just barely begun.

2004 can only be considered a natural phenomenon. Indeed, it has been argued that this is precisely the type of event that could, over a geological timescale, have been responsible for creating the islands in the first place.

Due to a host of complex phenomena, it was the Nicobars that were the worst hit by the tsunami. Each and every member of the indigenous Nicobari community of nearly 40,000 was affected. And yes, the process of rehabilitation is far from over. It has, in fact, barely begun.

One of the least-known aspects of the disaster of December 2004 is the fact that the earthquake that catalysed the tsunami also caused a permanent and vast transformation to the coastline of the islands, particularly in the Nicobars. With a pivot located roughly around Port Blair, the Andaman Islands were thrust upwards by five feet in the extreme north, whereas the Nicobars subsided by anywhere from five to 15 feet. This is a permanent change, the likes of which are rarely, if ever, seen.

Do you know this man, seen here shaking hands with P Chidambaran, India's finance minister? Keep an eye on him, for he may have a role in your life without you having the faintest knowledge of it. He is Praful Patel, **Regional Vice President of the World Bank** – in essence, the satrap of Southasia. While the various regional governments may lend an ear to the Europeans or the Scandinavians or the Japanese, it is actually the World Bank (as well as its slightly poorer cousin, the Asian Development Bank) to which all finance ministers from Colombo to Dhaka to Kathmandu look to for the *big* money. And besides foisting the Washington Consensus on all recipients, the World Bank is also known to elbow other, more 'politically correct' lenders to create some space. Overbearing, if you will – though Mr Patel seems a nice enough guy in the photograph. He wants to expand loan assistance to India from the current annual average of USD 2.5 billion to USD 4 billon over the next three years. He currently doles out around USD 3.8 billion annually to all of Southasia.

NEW AGE

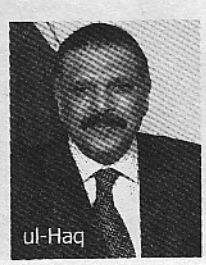
Mohammad Yunus Dada! As with a lot of *bhodrolok* and commoners alike, *Chhetria Patrakar* frets for thee. You had wanted the Nobel for long, and you got it. Southasia is proud. Now you want to use this space in the limelight – not just the Nobel, but your own luminous presence – to help make things right in a country where politics has become a bad word. Hosannahs for daring to take the plunge. In your open letter to the Bangladeshi public you wrote, "I know that joining politics is to become controversial. I am ready to take the risk." In Calcutta, you told reporters that you are keen "to create a new brand of politics".

Okay on all counts. But, sir, please note that henceforth you will be a politician rather than a service provider involved in 'social business'. Good politicians make compromises for the sake of the long-term; they develop a rhino's hide to protect themselves from the vilest of attacks, which they take as a given. Politicians are disliked – more than judges, generals and civil-society gadflies – because they are the most accountable, through both the ballot and continuous public scrutiny. CP is glad that you have chosen to float your own party rather than join an existing one – not only because they all seem equally distasteful, but because you would have had to fend off too many claimants for your lateral entry. You obviously have your Nobel kitty to finance the party, so the funding problem will not be there at first. Rather, you will immediately have to confront political reality by answering the hard questions. You will have to develop positions that you may not have had to till date (apologies if you already have a position on these, but we were not able to confirm by Googling).

Sir, what about human-rights abuse, and the summary justice conducted by the RAB? And the Biharis, should they be sent back? And what about the record of the Bangladeshi state in the Chittagong Hill Tracts? Do you want to take Bangladesh back to being a secular state? How about the Indian claim that there are Bodo and ULFA training camps in Bangladeshi territory? What do you say about river-linking projects? And natural gas, sir – should Bangladesh export natural gas to India? Is it true or not that Bangladeshi migrants travel (as they should) to India, something that all politicians cravenly deny?

Professor Yunus, how well, courageously, tactfully and 'nationalistically' you answer these questions will make you a politician different from all those who came before you. Otherwise, however, you will be just another politician – and they are found a dime for a dozen along the Buriganga.

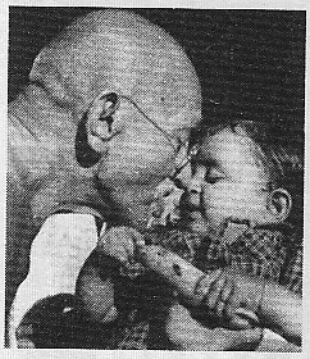
Fakir S Ayazuddin is an interesting, intemperate columnist for *The News* of Karachi/Lahore/Islamabad. Always worth a read for the fine challenges he places before both the state machinery of Pakistan and the fundamentalist forces. In his latest column, titled "Abject Surrender", he spews venom at Federal Minister for Religious Affairs Ijaz ul-Haq, for having succumbed to the dictates of the mullahs who would "put up a mosque by way of mischief and infidelity". The minister has apparently "redrawn the map of the tribal areas (where the laws of Pakistan did not apply) to include parts of Islamabad, the Federal Capital of Pakistan. His abject surrender to the Mullahs now gives them the right to stop any searching of their premises, and stockpile any manner of weapons within striking distance of the Presidency itself." Justifiably livid, the columnist refers to the recent attacks on the Marriott Hotel, at the very heart of the capital, and the blast at the airport, and



ul-Haq

states: "Yet with all the threats and acts of suicide bombers, an impenetrable madressah was allowed to dictate its own terms, and succeeded in forcing the government to condone an illegality. Religion is to be respected, always, but not when it is used to bludgeon the law of the land into submission. When it also flouts the words of the Holy Quran itself then we have a serious administrative problem. The Minister should be put out to pasture, perhaps as an ambassador to a faraway land where he should not be able to damage cast or creed." The rest of Southasia needs columnists such as this – sharp with the pen, but also with a point of view that is humanitarian and principled.

Blogs are fast catching on in Madhya Pradesh, as a platform for activists to voice concern on social issues such as safe motherhood. Check out, for example, *www.safemotherhood.blogspot.com*. Or *mpchildinfo.blogspot.com*, which deals with infant mortality and low nutrition levels among children. Meanwhile, *madhyapradesh.blogspot.com* is meant for those who want to discuss issues relating to the state. Anil Gulati, known as the **"Blogman of Bhopal"**, says the blogs help to "bring out issues from the districts which rarely find a place in the state-level media."



The *Indian Express* reports that **M K Gandhi the journalist** began his writing career "in the early 1920s, writing letters to the editor of a newspaper in Durban. He actually started his penmanship when an English daily reported about him wearing a turban in the court, and called him an 'unwanted guest'." As a journalist, Gandhi went on to become editor of the newspapers *Young India*, *Indian Opinion* and *Navjeevan*. Reminiscing about Gandhi the pen-pusher recently was Narayan Desai, son of Gandhi's long-time associate and secretary, Mahadev Desai. Pointing out how Gandhi was a stickler for both details and deadlines, Desai said: "Gandhi would insist that reporting be done from the point of the affected party, and that the writing should be simple in a language which could be understood by the readers."

The Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka has criticised **President Mahinda Rajapakse** for providing TV and radio licences to the formerly insurgent JVP party as a way of recognising the support it rendered to him in the presidential election campaign. Says the FMM in a press advisory, "Regrettably, it is the practice of

www.freemediasrilanka.org
freemedia movement

successive governments to show partisan favour in the provision of TV and radio licences to businessmen and political parties that supported them in elections, with scant regard for the ethics of such practices, or the serious implications on media regulations that are in place in part to ensure that such practices are kept at bay. The question now arises as to how many other political parties are entitled to claim a TV and radio licence given their support to the incumbent President and his government. This nepotism and political favouritism is detrimental to the development of free media."


Baru

Everyone likes to advise the media, most of all former journalists. The most recent in the line of media advisors is the **media advisor to Manmohan Singh**, Sanjaya Baru, an economist from the University of Hyderabad (Deccan) who turned to journalism before donning his present pajamas. Held forth Mr Baru before an international conference on media and governance: "Journalists cannot play a proper, meaningful role in the society and evolve unless there is an internal professional code of conduct for journalists ... Increasingly, media has become a commercial enterprise. One knows media needs commercial viability but it should not alter the shape of journalism and the role journalists can play. The perception of the fourth estate must change. The time has come for the media to introspect and look closely at the issue of governance in media." *Chhetria Patrakar* is all for a code of conduct, and is against the commercial enterprisation of media. S/he does not know, though, whether the time has come to look closely at "the issue of governance in media" – especially when it is an advisor to the prime minister who is thus advising.

– Chhetria Patrakar

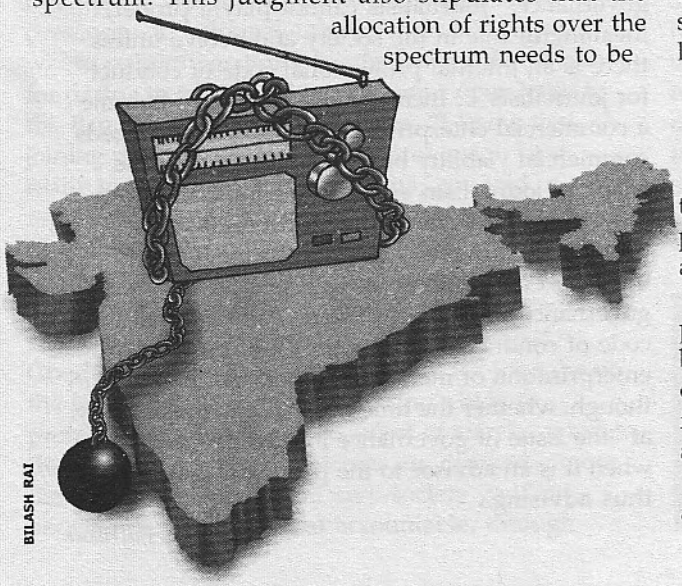
The shackling of community radio

While New Delhi coddles private-sector media, it stifles the public's right to community radio, with broadcasting guidelines that make a mockery of intelligence.

BY **SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN**

After India's first, rather grudging, opening of the airwaves for community use in December 2002, it took four years of intense effort by advocacy groups to obtain a policy even halfway meaningful. But when the fine print of the fresh set of guidelines on community radio (CR) services – issued last December – was studied, it became clear that the eligibility criteria laid down in the policy left significant room for ingress by bodies that have little to do with the purported aims of community radio. Worse still, the restraints that had been placed on those with the necessary credentials could, conceivably, entirely defeat the intent of CR. Viewed in substantive terms, the official announcement achieved little more than meeting the formal requirement of being a policy. This should count a dubious gain when viewed against other experiences in the neighbourhood – particularly in Nepal, but also to some extent in Sri Lanka – where community broadcasting has contributed significantly to the quality of the public discourse, despite lacking the benediction of official policy.

The constitutional position in India, as established in the Supreme Court judgment in the 1995 *Cricket Association of Bengal v the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting*, is very clear: the airwaves belong to the public, and the government has no enduring rights of ownership, even if it has for historical reasons established a custodial monopoly over the broadcast spectrum. This judgment also stipulates that the allocation of rights over the spectrum needs to be done by an independent group that is attuned to, in some manner, the public interest.



BILASH RAI

Over the past decade, acknowledgment of the significance of the so-called "airwaves case" has been rather slow and sporadic. Viewed against the judgement's criterion, however, the new community-broadcasting policy warrants little self-congratulation. It could be viewed as the partial restoration of an inalienable right of the people, which has long been denied by the state. But that still leaves considerable more ground to be covered before a full restitution of rights is obtained.

Clearances, conditions, scrutiny

With the position in law being unequivocal, why did New Delhi dither until 2002, and then bring in a policy that reserved community-radio licences only for "well-established education institutions"? Furthermore, why did it wait another four years to open the window of opportunity a crack, while still requiring CR applicants to meet a number of stringent conditions?

In the case of aspirants other than publicly funded and managed educational institutions, sanction for entering the community-radio domain would be subject to clearance from two ministries of the union government – home affairs and defence – not to mention the allocation of a radio frequency by yet another. Such procedures aside, CR operators would remain subject to ongoing scrutiny. Programmes broadcast over their stations are enjoined to serve a "specific well-defined local community" and to be relevant to the "educational, developmental, social and cultural needs" of that community. The guidelines in this manner confine "community" to a territorial definition – a specification that does not measure up to international best practices, which permit other forms of community identification, such as the occupational.

Advocacy groups had demanded that any CR policy, by definition, should not encumber broadcasters-to-be by laying down onerous eligibility conditions. Rather, the government was urged to allow for maximum freedom by specifying nothing more than a narrow list of ineligibility criteria.

Broadcasts that relate to "news and current affairs and are otherwise political in nature" are specifically

proscribed over community broadcasts. Sponsored programmes will likewise not be permitted, except where the sponsor is an arm of the government. Advertisements and revenue-yielding public announcements would be permitted to the limit of five minutes in an hour's broadcast. All earnings would need to be used in meeting operational and capital costs. If available, a surplus could, with the explicit written permission of the information ministry, be transferred into the primary activity of the organisation running the service.

It is among the most mystifying aspects of India's new broadcast policy that content restrictions are the most rigorous where community ownership, in the broadest sense, is involved. Satellite-television broadcasters – uplinking from or beaming content into Indian territory – have for long been under no restraint as far as news, current affairs and explicitly political content are involved. It was only in 2003 that New Delhi, roused from its stupor by the unyielding pressure of home-owned broadcast companies, decreed that foreign equity in companies engaged in "news and current affairs" would be limited to 26 percent. As foreign broadcasters (spearheaded by Rupert Murdoch's creativity) began conjuring up newer techniques of evading ownership limits, the Indian government felt compelled to continually tighten up enforcement mechanisms. Nonetheless, it is a fair surmise today that overseas enterprises have largely succeeded in dodging all efforts at restraining their stakes in companies directly engaged in broadcasting supposedly sensitive, political content in India.

Oligopoly FM

This regime of default-disguised-as-policy provides an instructive companion narrative to that which is prevalent in the realm of private radio broadcasting. In July 2005, policy guidelines were announced under which bids were invited for the second round of allocation of FM broadcast "circles", or geographical areas. While reluctant to yield their monopoly over the airwaves to any form of community control, New Delhi policymakers showed a greater inclination to treat their trusteeship over the spectrum as a resource to be milked for the greatest profit. Under the tendering principles drawn up, allocations were to be made on the strength of the entry fee offered by each bidder. Moreover, a share of annual revenue would be paid by the operator as a fee for the use of the broadcast spectrum. Advertisements would be the principal revenue source, but there would be no limit imposed on the quantum of advertising that each broadcaster could carry.

After the subsequent bidding for FM licences, the vast majority was granted to companies or entities that were already strongly established in other media sectors. Entertainment Networks (India) Ltd, a company owned by the Times of India Group (the largest print-media enterprise), won 25 FM broadcast

circles, to add to the seven that it was already running under its brand name, Radio Mirchi. South Asia FM Ltd, a company controlled by the Madras-based satellite broadcaster Sun TV, won 23 circles in the northern part of the country – apart from the 18 it won in the south through its affiliate company, Kal Radio Ltd. Sun TV, it should be added, had in early 2006 also bought up the newspaper *Dinakaran*, then ranked third in terms of readership in Tamil Nadu.

These are, of course, only the most conspicuous examples from the last round of FM radio licensing of how "cross-media ownership" restrictions are being continually shredded. In doing so, the pathway is being opened even wider for growing business monopolies in the media. Illustrative of the many other such cases are: the Rajasthan *Patrika* group, a significant newspaper player in the state, being awarded four FM circles; *Malayala Manorama* and *Matrubhumi*, the two largest newspaper groups in Kerala, gaining four each in their home state; and the *Mid Day* group of Bombay being given six circles, all of them in highly lucrative metropolitan cities. HT Media and Entertainment, a company controlled by the Hindustan Times Group – with its significant print-media presence in Delhi and Bombay – was awarded radio licences in both of these cities, with Calcutta and Bangalore thrown in as a bonus.

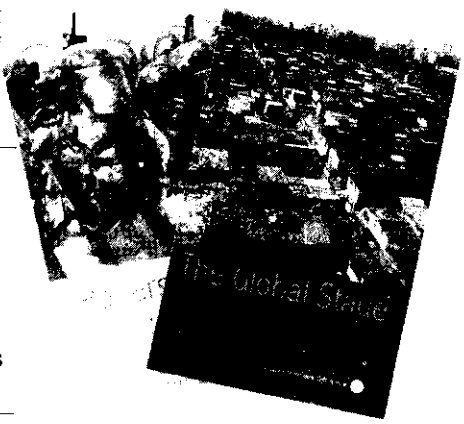
Beyond this story of consolidation by the media giants, a significant new presence was entering the scene. Adlabs Films Ltd, flush with an infusion of funds after its takeover by the Reliance-ADAG group (one of India's largest industrial conglomerates), won no fewer than 45 circles in the most recent round of FM allocations. All in all, these blatant concessions to corporate control over the airwaves should be seen in the context of existing global norms on cross-media ownership restrictions. Indeed, these norms have been repeatedly affirmed in India by broadcast legislation that, curiously, seldom makes it beyond the first drafts.

It might appear that an oligopoly of private broadcasters – however small in number – would be far preferable to a government monopoly. Interestingly though, in the doctrine of fundamental rights laid down by India's Supreme Court, the fact of monopoly ownership over broadcast platforms does not in itself constitute a curb on the twin rights of information and free speech. It is only from the denial of public access to the broadcast media that such an abridgment of rights could be deemed to occur. In other words, the existence of a monopoly broadcaster does not in itself negate free speech, provided that the right to public access is still ensured. The dominant idiom in media regulation in India, however, seems to view corporate control over the broadcast spectrum as a surrogate for public ownership. Meanwhile, the public's access to the airwaves, where it is allowed, would need to be mediated through an array of bureaucratic controls – in effect reducing the principle to a nullity.

Politics, aesthetics and a world of thought

BY **MOYUKH CHATTERJEE**

Since its inception in 1960, the London-based *New Left Review* has been a record of the intellectual journey of the global left. From Jean-Paul Sartre to Edward Said, Achin Vanaik and Radhika Desai, leading left intellectuals from around the world have used the pages of *New Left Review* to theorise on various subjects, from blockbuster films to the UN's bureaucratic intricacies. Despite the contributions of Southasian intellectuals, however, finding a copy of the journal has long been difficult in the Subcontinent.



Selections from New Left Review:
I: The Global Stage
II: Powers
III: Front Lines
IV: Other Worlds
edited by Susan Watkins
Seagull Books, 2006

Editors from Calcutta-based Seagull Books have now brought out a four-volume series of selections from *New Left Review*, offering a solid introduction for regional readers to this bastion of left thought and debate. From the 1960s, when a third of the planet had politically turned away from capitalism, to the 1990s, which may be called the decade of neo-liberalism, the agenda of the NLR has remained to respond to and explore changing conjunctures, or the meeting of events, in political discourse.

If the present situation is characterised by the primacy of American capitalism, with Europe aspiring to replicate the American model with doses of placatory anti-American rhetoric, then editor Perry Anderson delineates in the introduction to the first volume what have been the left's two principal responses. The first is *accommodation*, the attitude summed up by the idea that capitalism has come to stay, and that we must subsequently make our peace with it. The second is *consolation*, which is understood best as an attempt to find the silver linings in what seems an overwhelmingly gloomy environment. As such, caught in a world where there is a terrifying irrevocability to what is happening both outside and within ourselves, Anderson suggests that readers continue to read NLR for its "uncompromising realism" – its capacity to shock us into seeing the world as a "planet of slums" (to use Mike Davis's words), or into recognising that the UN may "be slotted into the framework of American hegemony as an auxiliary machine" (Peter Gowan).

So does the compilation of articles in *Selections* live up to the quality of the journal itself? The answer would be in the affirmative. Reading Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson on "Globalisation and Political Strategy" in the first volume, one is struck by the clarity of his approach, especially in confronting amorphous phenomena such as the global dispersion and reception of culture, technology and finance in the 21st century. Jameson deftly breaks globalisation down into its various aspects: the technological (communications and the information revolution), political (the fate of the nation state), cultural (the rise of nationalist politics) and economic (the US control over the international transfer of capital). Jameson also helps the reader to see the crucial interconnections between all of these. Refreshingly, the arguments are not diluted, even when the discussion is of forms of resistance that may be forged against the homogenising behemoth that is globalisation. Jameson argues for new solidarities, but dismisses the argument that religion – specifically Islam – may be the new site for resistance, arguing that religious solidarity cannot face up to the economic realities of globalisation.

In the same vein, intellectual historian Gopal Balakrishnan's excellent review of Marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's bestseller *Empire* offers a trenchant critique of post-modern fantasies – in this case, of the far left – that indulge in theoretical flourishes but have little to offer by way of a solid narrative of contemporary politics. Some may ask why such banal demands should be made on an academic work. The attempt to unite theory and practice, however, has long been a significant project of the left intellectual tradition. In this regard, Hardt and Negri are correctly chastised for allowing themselves to get so carried away in their celebration of diversity and their faith in post-modern theory that they ignore impending dangers and announce the dawn of a golden age.

Neo-liberal consensus

In the series' second volume, titled *Powers*, we are treated to a wide-ranging discussion of the world's major political players. Radhika Desai covers the 2004 elections and the

subsequent consequences of regime change in India. The US receives a lion's share of the analysis: Perry Anderson, Susan Willis and Robert Brenner focus respectively on aspects of coercion and hegemony, the post-9/11 scenario, and the US economy.

A particularly fine piece, however, is a discussion between the great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the German Nobel Prize-winning writer Gunter Grass, more famous in Southasia for sticking his tongue out at the Bengali *bhadrolok*. The interview is chiefly concerned with Europe and neo-liberalism, and specifically the relationship between Germany and France. In the course of their debate, Bourdieu and Grass produce an excellent portrait of the contemporary affiliations between intellectuals and the left in Europe. Their prescription for countering the rise of the neo-liberal consensus – comically, each of these great thinkers considers the other utopian – brings the two to agree on a need to transcend national barriers, albeit that Grass feels this can only be done through a return to the rationalist values of the Enlightenment, while Bourdieu emphasises the need for a new type of unionism.

On the whole, this new, four-part selection from *New Left Review* is an excellent and inexpensive invitation for Southasian readers to think beyond the boundaries of their own activism and thought. The compilation is strongly internationalist in outlook, and there perhaps are no regional titles that can boast of such an eclectic mix of literary theory, politics, philosophy and aesthetics from all parts of the world.

A quick intake

BY **SIDDHARTH ANAND**

There must be something about the Subcontinent that turns the most well-intentioned reportage into 'intensely personal stories'. An examination of the dustcover of *Inhaling the Mahatma*, Australian reporter Christopher Kremmer's latest book, reveals another *yatra* into India: "A country in the grip of enormous and sometimes violent change." While consciously avoiding the temptation to refer to 'heady mixes' and 'multi-layered tapestries', Kremmer nonetheless takes readers on the mandatory gut-wrenching bus ride along India's crowded highways, complete with argumentative conductor, mad-cap driver and blood-red sunset against hazy grey skies.

In *Inhaling the Mahatma*, Kremmer sets out on a personal pilgrimage to track down the stars, bit-players and near-anonymous set-extras of what has now become the great Indian transformation of 1991-2006. Using as a road map the experiences, recollections and impressions of his first Indian tenure – in the early 1990s, when he came as a foreign correspondent – Kremmer charts a compelling and competent course through the major landmarks of the last 15 years. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the Mandal Commission, the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the horrific killing of the missionary Graham Staines and his children and, of course, the rise of the call centre all find mention, sketched out in varying degrees of detail. While the writer's voice throughout the narrative is clear and lucid, it is perhaps the current moment in which this book has emerged that makes it particularly interesting.

The blanket coverage of the Great Indian Growth story, in both Indian and international media, seems to have created a space for a well-crafted retrospective – a book that looks back over the last decade and a half and documents the churning and rumbling that accompanied this transformation, while drawing lessons for further growth.

Inhaling the Mahatma
by **Christopher Kremmer**
Fourth Estate, 2006

Particularly refreshing is the author's self-reflexivity, and his conscious desire to appear different from the judgement-forming *goras* of old, the writers of the 'beggars, snake-charmers and elephants' genre of coverage that typified early reportage on the Subcontinent. He notes, for instance, "The longer I stayed, the less disposed I became to the foreigner's penchant for snap judgments and moralising about India. Instead of lecturing I began to listen." It is in Kremmer's listening, coupled with a disciplined ability to follow up on his stories, that his most interesting coverage emerges – stories of Ram devotee and hijacker Satish Chandra Pandey, court *munshi* Rai Jeewan Lal Bahadur, archaeologist and ideologue Swarajya Prakash Gupta.

Kremmer also analyses astutely the allure and electoral success of Hindutva, when he speaks of the power of the *bania* vote, the seduction of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's amiable façade, and Lal Krishna Advani's shrewd calculus. He points

out, for instance, that a significant number of people who supported the BJP in its rise to power were not uni-dimensional Muslim-haters, but came from the ranks of the small- and middle-scale entrepreneurs who missed out during the period now known as the 'license raj'. Upper-caste, middle-income *banias* continue to constitute a large portion of the BJP's vote base. Kremmer however, is less insightful in his evaluation of the Indian National Congress, and misses the contributions of V P Singh almost completely.

Gandhi v Singh

V P Singh – implementer of the Mandal Commission report, erstwhile Raja of Manda and rightly described by Kremmer as one of India's most "enigmatic" and "controversial" politicians. Coincidentally, this reviewer interviewed Singh in exactly the same circumstances as did Kremmer – in a dialysis room in Apollo Hospital in Delhi – and yet came away with a very different opinion. While the final assessment of the impact of the Mandal Commission report and its phased implementation in 1992 and 2006 is still many years off, Kremmer's view that Mandal and Singh were single-handedly responsible for unleashing "the caste card" seems uninformed and simplistic. "Before Singh's reign," Kremmer tells the reader, "India had chipped away gradually at caste injustice ... But the fiery rhetoric of caste politics tended to polarise rather than manage the issue."

Kremmer also suggests that Mandal was responsible for the collapse of the Janata Dal government of 1990, thereby implying that the populace had rejected Mandal and thrown Singh out of power – an implication that seems hasty and premature. The reasons for the fall of the Janata Dal were many, but a major one was the Bharatiya Janata Party's suspension of support for the national government, something that Kremmer fails to point out.

Kremmer's assessment of V P Singh appears particularly unfair when seen against his coverage of the Gandhi family. "By entering politics," he writes, "Rajiv had answered the call of his dharma, Hinduism's natural law of individual conscience and social responsibility." While Singh is depicted alone and abandoned in his "five-star hospital room", Rajiv and Rahul Gandhi are shown to be fulfilling their dharma: mingling with the sweaty masses, exercising the Gandhi charisma to the fullest, and explaining how V P Singh had destroyed Nehru and Gandhi's pet project – the creation of a 'perfect citizen', unhindered by caste, region or religion. Kremmer does try to temper his assessment of the Gandhis and the Congress party by making predictable references to the Sikh riots, the Bofors scandal and dynastic politics, but it is obvious where his sympathies lie.

In his essays on the need and purpose of writing, and on the idea of the audience, Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk notes: "I write because I want others, the whole world, to know what sort of life we lived, and continue to live, in Istanbul, in Turkey". Pamuk's essays were largely in response to criticisms directed at him by the Turkish state, which accused him of writing exclusively for a Western audience. Pamuk's response was to affirm the universal language of stories and books.

Kremmer's book raises similar questions – those of reading audiences – but for very different reasons. The primary issue is that the events covered in his book are events with which most well-read Southasians are already acquainted. This, in itself, can be seen as one of the book's strengths: it is a starting point for a dialogue with the Southasian reader. But Kremmer seems to have missed the opportunity to enter an already crowded genre and make his own space within it.

A Southasian umbrella university

Everybody welcomes the idea of a Southasian University; it's like mother's milk. But even mother's milk has to have the proper nutrients, or the baby will grow up malformed. The idea of a Southasian University is so overwhelmingly important that it must not be wasted at the altar of good intentions or individual ambition.

The very evolution of Southasia can be given direction by a Southasian University with practical, achievable goals and staying power. India's support for such a venture is critical, as it would be able to provide significant funds and faculty, and hopefully would have the circumspection not to smother the institution in India-centrism.

Manmohan Singh, in his speech at the Dhaka SAARC Summit on 12 November 2005, said that he would push for a Southasian University as a "centre of excellence". Said the prime minister: "We can certainly host this institution, but are equally prepared to cooperate in creating a suitable venue in any other member country."

It is said that Prime Minister Singh has committed USD 100 million to the idea, which is good of him. It now appears likely that the idea will see fruition at the upcoming SAARC Summit in New Delhi in early April. Unfortunately, what is currently known of the project does not inspire confidence. Pushed by the Dhaka-born scholar and international administrator Gowher Rizvi, the plan is to develop a centralised institution with "a single campus ... working under the direction of a single president/chancellor and academic council".

The proposed campus would be set up on a hundred acres in Dwarka – now practically a New Delhi suburb – which would attract scholars-in-residence and a Southasia-wide student body. The placement is already problematic. The first university of Southasia must be one that promotes a regional vision quite distinct from the capital-centric model of the SAARC organisation. As such, the university needs to be physically removed from any capital, in particular the region's most powerful one.

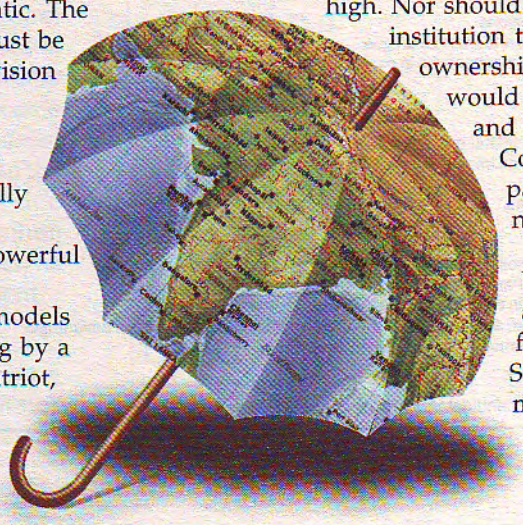
Fortunately, decentralised models have been developed, including by a team headed by Rizvi's compatriot, the political scientist Imtiaz Ahmed. The money that India seeks to invest in the Southasian University, together with contributions by other SAARC members according to GDP, could instead be made available to a Southasian University Grant Commission, constituted of top-notch academics and administrators from the region's countries. Such a commission could well be headquartered in New Delhi, but its core activity would be to detect, fund and monitor universities across the region. The commission would remain independent of national interests, not compromise on tokenism, and to institute stringent reporting requirements of the grantee institutions.

At least to start with, the Southasian University would not be a campus but an umbrella institution. It would provide support to select post-graduate departments in, say, JNU and Delhi University, Jadavpur University in Calcutta, LUMS in Lahore, Benaras Hindu University, Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, the universities of Dhaka, Karachi, Colombo and Madras, and so on. Many of these institutions delivered Southasia its intellectual stalwarts, the nation-builders of the modern era; now, most have deteriorated due to political interference and lack of endowment. It is important to revive these hallowed universities, rather than to build a spanking new one that would only further suck away energy and dynamism from existing institutions.

A lack of social-science learning has robbed Southasian society of an upright intelligentsia amidst dislocating modernisation and globalising regionalism. As such, it is important for the proposed university to make attractive once again post-graduate courses in history, political science, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, as well as education, public health, and science and technology. Those studies supported by the private-sector – information technology, medicine, engineering, business management – should be left out by the planners of the new institution.

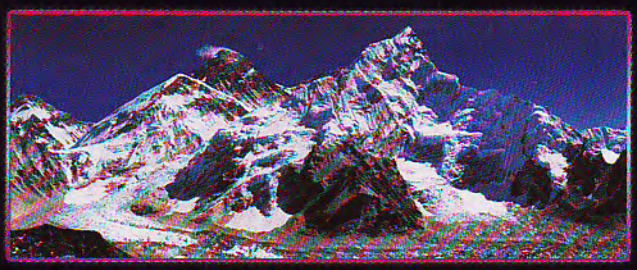
A Southasian University should be one that germinates and grows along with the multi-layered understanding of regionalism amongst our societies. It should not be an institution mandated from on high. Nor should the new university be a cyber-institution that floats in midair without ownership of its constituent units, which would be a danger. The departments and faculties under the Grant Commission must be proud of being part of the Southasian University network.

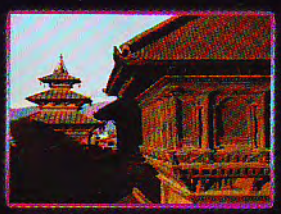
We must get the Southasian University right the first time around, because the costs of failure would be high. Manmohan Singh is a thinking Southasian; may he back the right idea.



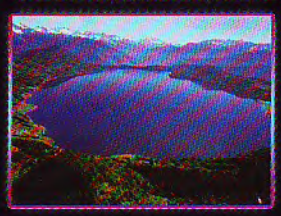
GRAPHICS BY ROSHAN TAMANG

Unleash Yourself





NTB **Nepal Tourism Board**



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