

# HIMAL

THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

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# HIMAL

THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

Vol 11 No 3 March 1998

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Cover art by Venantius J. Pinto questions the feasibility of the large dam option. Are these structures just fantastic exercises in thin air? The two-headed serpent gazing at Bhakra Nangal symbolises the promise of local progress versus the social cost of large projects.

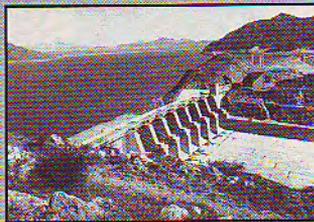
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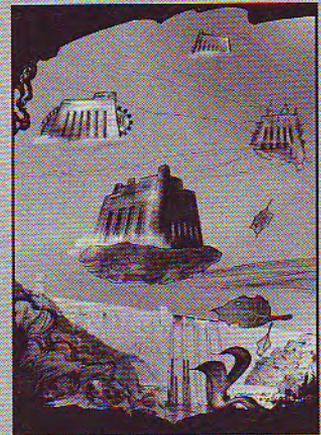
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**Pen on the loose**

Your story "Video Nights in Thimphu" in the Commentary section of the January 1998 issue is a sample of your shoddy reportage on Bhutan. When it comes to Bhutan, you also suffer from the same "loose pen that seems to want to pass comment on anything" that you attribute to someone else (Justice M.C. Jain of Rajiv Gandhi murder probe) in the preceding story "Raw Wound".

Juxtaposing juvenile delinquency with a murder outside a local disco does spice up your story. However, the murder that was reported as having taken place outside Club X, in fact, happened outside a hotel at the other end of Thimphu. We would appreciate if the record was set straight.

We cannot also help but comment on the only picture in the story and its caption. A little cross-reference would have revealed that the young man, far from being "unemployed" and "hanging out" outside the video parlour, actually owns it.

You also mention that of the 94 university graduates looking for jobs in 1994, only 15 were inducted into the civil service. Actually a total of 59 graduates out of 65 (the total number of non-technical graduates) were inducted into the civil service. These exclude the scientific cadre (doctors, engineers, etc), all of whom were employed in that year.

Your last paragraph grandiosely states that the supposed unemployment problem will eventually force Bhutan to ease up on its policies on tourism, foreign investment, forest-based resources and employment of expatriate labour. It is most baffling as to how employing more expatriate labour could possibly solve unemployment problems in any country. As for open tourism, unlimited foreign investment and indiscriminate exploitation of the forest, HIMAL seems unaware that indigenous culture and the environment are global priorities of the day.

It would seem it is your sublimi-

nal desire to see Bhutan become another Nepal as your title suggests. For the moment, we feel it's still "Video Nights in Kathmandu".

*The Management  
Club X, Thimphu*

*We erred in stating that the murder took place outside Club X. However, while it might have taken place on the other side of town, the point on rising juvenile*



*delinquency remains valid probably. We did not cook up the data on graduates, but instead took it from a UN document. Difficulties experienced by Bhutanese employers due to the restrictions on expatriate labour are widely cited as one of the impediments to the growth of industrial units (e.g. the latest plan document itself talks of liberalising such employment). By curbing growth, the*

*restrictions affect all employment, including local employment. As for the owner of the video parlour, we can only say that he was hanging out outside his shop. Editors.*

**Expatriates in Bhutan**

For the outsider, Bhutan is an enigma. In contrast to the sacred Buddhist-fortress-in-the-clouds imagery, we have the recent Amnesty International report (Commentary, February 1998) detailing the detention and torture of monks. Against the pretty Shangri-La tourist brochures, we have a *Kuensel* article attempting to explain the need to "compulsorily retire" 219 relatives of dissidents from the civil service simply because they are relatives of dissidents.

For the outsider, the opposing images cannot be synthesised into a sensible whole. One wonders, then, about the insiders, the people who might have the missing pieces, the links. How much do they know, and what do they do about what they know? Or do they walk around with their heads in the clouds?

A visitor, passing through, attempting to put together the

**KRISHNA'S CORNER**



**"AND NOW THE NEWS FROM ASIA: IN THE HEADLINE — MONICA LEWINSKY BUYS AN AFGHAN HOUND."**

**Vajra** (literally--flash of lightning), is an artists' condominium, a transit home for many, providing a base during months of hibernation and creative inspiration. Its isolation, graphic splendour and peaceful ambience, make an ideal retreat from the clock of pressure.

Ketaki Sheth  
*Inside Outside*

I stayed a week at the **Vajra**, by which time I had become so fond of it that I stayed another.

John Collee  
*The London Observer*



# in Kathmandu, the Vajra

Swayambhu, Dally Bijyaswori, PO Box 1084, Kathmandu  
Phone 271545, 272719 Fax 977 1 271695

pieces, finds himself facing a blank wall. No one on the inside wants to say very much. The retirement of 219 civil servants is the result of a National Assembly resolution passed last summer. According to Bhutan's national newspaper, relatives of dissidents are suspected of passing on sensitive information and state secrets, and in general of being untrustworthy. Several senior government officials boldly declared that no other country in the world allowed relatives of dissidents in its civil service, an obvious fallacy that no one bothered - or dared - to correct at the time.

What did the expatriate community in Bhutan think of this? Yes, they will admit, when pressed, that they have serious concerns. Yes, of course, they agree that it is not right to throw people out of their jobs when there is no clear evidence of any wrong-doing. And yes, naturally, this action will affect development programmes. Bhutan's civil service includes technical and administrative staff, doctors, nurses, teachers, and many of the 219 were in senior positions. Several of them were undoubtedly trained on foreign aid scholarships.

So, the visitor asks, what is being done? The expatriates look uncomfortable. They mention discussions at higher levels, meetings of diplomats outside Bhutan. All very well, but what is being done inside? Now the expatriate community looks nervous...one would almost say...afraid. No, one would definitely say afraid. One is tempted to believe them when they murmur about being culturally sensitive and not getting involved in internal politics. One is tempted...until one sees the fear, the quick glance over the shoulder to see who might be listening, the hurried leave-taking. Nice talking to you but we should be going. Have a good visit!

Passing through, one finds oneself wondering about what keeps these people silent. A subculture of enchantment, perhaps. Here we are in Shangri-La and isn't it nice. A subculture of fear is more

likely. As foreigners, surely they are in a safer position to speak out against so blatant an injustice. As the heads and hands of international agencies, surely they are morally and professionally obligated to speak out.

As foreigners in Bhutan, however, they are afraid to speak, period. Even to a visitor passing through. Afraid of what? Of being expelled from Shangri-La.

Surely, the visitor counters, staff of a donor agency wouldn't be asked to leave for expressing a contrary view? It has happened before, the expatriate says. (Interesting that the donor seems to need the recipient more than the recipient needs the donor.)

The visitor tries again: but surely by remaining silent you condone the action and pave the way for further "retirements"? The visitor's voice rises in frustration and the expatriate blanches. Nice to talk to you but we really must be going now. Have a nice visit!

*Name and address withheld upon request.*

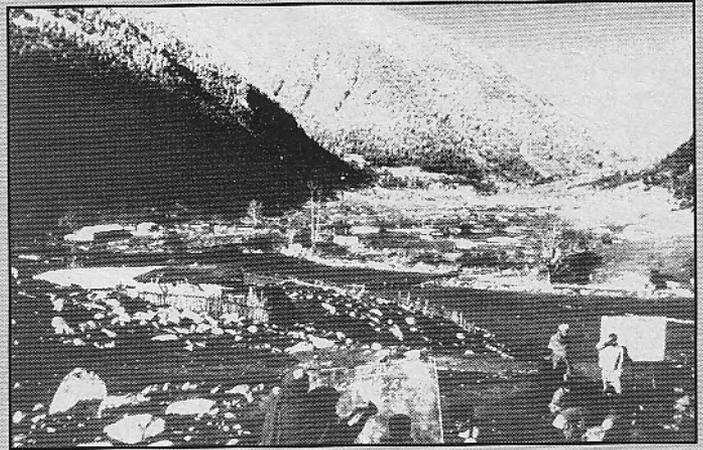
### For the park's sake

Apropos the very knowledgeable correspondence between John Mock and Salman Rashid (incidentally, both known to me fairly well) on the latter's article "Belligerent Villagers of Khunjerab" (March/April 1997), it is not hard to see that the Khunjerab National Park is nowhere near achieving its intended status.

That an area of this expanse and with such a difficult terrain is just being manned by a lone forester demonstrates amply the weak resolve and commitment on the part of the authorities. In order to

achieve the objectives set for the park, a much stronger administrative set-up than the one we see now is needed.

The importance of local participation in this effort cannot be overemphasised as the conflicts



posed by the pastoral economy lies at the core of the issue. The concerns of the Shimshal people whose level of awareness is informed by blunders of management and betrayals of commitments made in the past should not be very hard to appreciate. Unlike what Rashid says in his rejoinder (Mail, December 1997), Mock's "empathy" arises from his deep knowledge of the area and of Urdu and Wakhi, the dialect spoken by most of the KNP communities. We should value his interest in the development of the park.

I feel that if the World Wildlife Fund and the Khunjerab National Park management move together keeping in mind local aspirations and needs, the park could become not only a conservatory for its biological habitat but also a source of improved life for its inhabitants.

*Nazir Sabir  
Islamabad*

### Good riddance

I'm surprised to see in Syed Ali Hasan a person who has absolutely nothing positive to say about modern-day Pakistan and the Pakistani identity and yet still chooses to call himself a Pakistani ("Life in the ghetto", February 1998). Perhaps the misguided

young man has his own agenda and only time will tell what his true intentions are, but suffice it to say that Pakistan is much better off without writers of his ilk.

Rather than allow my letter to the editor continue to be a scathing commentary on Hasan, I would just like to point out that Pakistanis are not leaving Pakistan in droves for the reasons described by him.

As a Pakistani physician living and working in Toronto I deal with a patient population which consists largely of immigrants from developing countries, including Pakistan. Most of these people are economic refugees and immigrants in search of a better life - in plain and simple terms. There are a few bona fide political refugees from Islamic nations (including Algeria, Iran and Afghanistan), but I have yet to meet anyone who claims to be fleeing Pakistan for the reasons described by the writer. My own family, relations and friends from Pakistan who have settled in Canada are here for similar reasons of economic betterment.

As for the problems of Pakistan, I invite Hasan to visit any developing country in the world and compare conditions there with Pakistan. Today's reality is that there

remains much economic, political and social misery in the Third World, and people are moving out due to relatively easier access to travel. I only wish the writer would be more genuine in his concern for a country that most Pakistanis, including expatriates like me, love and cherish. He could start by admitting, as some of us do, that his reasons for remaining in the United Kingdom have less to do with Pakistan and more to do with his own welfare.

*Mohammed Mahmood  
Hazoor Elahi  
Toronto, Canada*

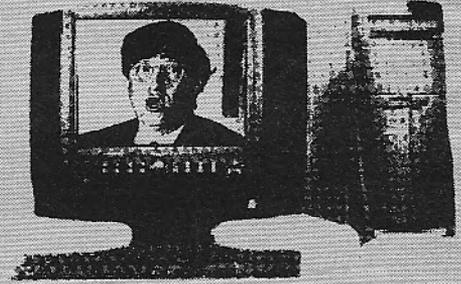
**Excellent leap**

Your article on Bill Gates and "leapfrogging" was excellent (January 1998). As an American who spent an enjoyable part of his life in Pakistan as a college professor, I would have loved to have had email in my Pakistan days to keep contact with friends and relatives. But technology does pay its toll on real human advancement. Oh, if only we earthlings knew how to strike a balance - for everyone's sake, whether West or East.

*Lester Merklin  
South Lancaster, Massachusetts*

**Just curious**

I feel your magazine is very good and the articles are easy to read, and the "coverage" very comprehensive and broad. However, I wish you could include a statement or indication of the editorial bias of the magazine. Religious, political, the region of interest, the scope of the magazine is what I want to know; right now, all I know is that you have contributing editors all over



the Subcontinent, but I don't even know what type of people they are.

*Hasan Murtaza  
Toronto*

*Editors: We have no editorial biases that we would admit to. The geographical focus of the magazine is South Asia, defined as encompassing everything within Afghanistan, Tibet, Burma and the Indian Ocean. Our contributing editors are all fine, upright, independent-minded people.*

**Great going**

Is this mediocrity conference a joke? If it is not, then I offer you my congratulations for a daring thought. However, why should a conference on mediocrity be confined to South Asia? There should be similar regional conferences organised for the Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, North America, Europe, to culminate in a World Conference on Mediocrity, to be organised in the capital of all mediocrity, Washington DC. I hope you agree and will proceed with the planning.

*Sreenath Balasubramaniam  
Madras*

*We are dead serious about the conference on mediocrity. However, please take note of the announcement at left. Editors.*

Himal Conference on South Asian Mediocrity, scheduled for 2 and 3 May, has been rescheduled for autumn 1998.



Watch this space for further announcements.

## Was he, wasn't he?

MUHAMMAD ALI JINNAH may be the founding father of Pakistan, and a seminal figure in subcontinental history, but his politics apart, little is known about the Quaid-e-Azam's family lineage, even in the country he helped establish. Ranging from sheer ignorance to misinterpretation, the Quaid's family history has been a subject of much mystery, as pointed out by Lahore journalist Khaled Ahmed in "Muhammadali Jeenabhai Poonja" (Jinnah's actual name) in the February 1998 Himal. Well, the mystery continues, only now the plot has thickened with the recent custodial death of a young man purported to be a poor descendant of the Quaid.

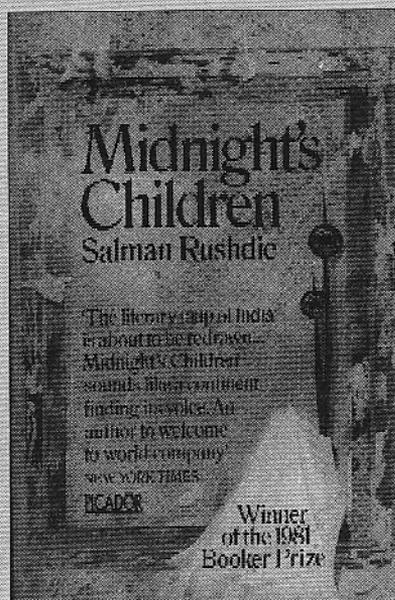
On the ninth day of the Islamic month of Ramadan, 18-year-old Sikandar Ali left his house in the slums of Karachi to buy *prathas* for *sehri*. The police picked him up from a street in Patel Para where a gang-fight was in progress, and took him to the station, where he was pronounced dead of a wound. The boy's mother, Khursheed, informed the press that the police had asked money from her, which she was unable to pay, living as she is by selling plastic bags and without savings.

The newspapers picked up the story with alacrity, maintaining that Sikandar Ali was the great-grandnephew (*parnawasa* in Urdu) of the Quaid himself. Some even mentioned the deceased's name as Sikandar Ali Poonja, Poonja being the surname of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's grandfather. The first reports said Sikandar was the grandson of Jinnah's niece Shirin Bai. However, the Karachi police was quick to issue a statement denying that Sikandar was one of the Jinnah family. Instead, the police said he was the son of a Baloch named Muhammad Ali.

But the *parnawasa* story would not go away. An old photograph of the boy's mother Khursheed standing behind Jinnah's sister Shirin Bai at Karachi's Mohatta Palace was dug out and published, which only went on to further confound the *parnawasa* theory. Some writeups now started proposing that the boy was the grandson of Jinnah's sister, Shirin Bai.

The real coup came when Jinnah's grandnephew Liaquat Merchant was quoted as saying that Sikandar indeed was from the Jinnah family. Merchant disclosed that the boy was the great-grandson of Nathoo Poonja, Jinnah's father's elder brother. But then, if Sikandar was Jinnah's uncle's *parnawasa*, how could he be Jinnah's *parnawasa* too?

Over to the Pakistani press to set the record straight.



## Midnight soil

IN "HOW 'HURT' can you be?" (February 1998), Sasanka Perera and Ameena Hussein-Uvais derided the Colombo government's ban on the filming of BBC's *Midnight's Children* serial. "India's Midnight Soil", is how *The Asian Age* columnist Farrukh Dhondy titles a piece on India's own earlier ban on the shooting of the same serial. Writes Dhondy:

*The irony of permission to shoot Mr Rushdie's novel is that the BJP, if it comes to power [after the forthcoming elections], would be the only party that has not been tried on the question. The Congress party banned his book and the National Front refused permission for the filming. The BJP, if it were still inclined to bait Muslims if and when it came to power, may do the right thing for the wrong reasons. It may very well consider favourably a licence for the BBC to shoot the film in Mumbai and wherever else. If the matter resolves itself in this way after the elections, it will and ought to be clearly seen as a deliberate provocation of the Muslim community, a demonstration that the new Hindutva-inspired state will ignore and even challenge everyone else's illiberal sentiments.*

*The only way to avoid this disaster is for all the parties to immediately publish and put to the test a new "literature" policy under which no book should be banned and permission to shoot all films up to and including *The Satanic Verses*, the railway timetable from Bahawalpur to Bhagwankot and the complete utterances of Kahlil Gibberish made automatic. The slogan of this policy must be, in the immortal words of Crawford Crow, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hoit me."*

SRI LANKA

## 50 SOMETHING

SRI LANKA'S BEST-KNOWN cartoonist, Wijesoma, neatly encapsulated what 50 years of Independence has meant for his homeland in a savagely effective cartoon published in the run-up to the 4 February golden jubilee. He showed a grinning, bloated politician in national dress, standing on a flag-draped dais being saluted by a parade of thugs, *mudalalis* (local moneybags) and assorted criminals swaggering by with hooch, knives, flaming torches and crude handguns. One of the marchers also has a politician in his pocket.

The point need not have been belaboured, but, for the record, it must be said that the United National Party (UNP), which claims credit for winning freedom for the country and which has governed Sri Lanka for most of the last five decades, has identified the "disease of politicisation" as the root of

ondary and tertiary education system that was the pride of South Asia. Her English language skills were something to boast about. There was good infrastructure and excellent public service. The economy, sitting pretty on a tripod of tea, rubber and coconut, was so strong that Ceylon even gave a loan to Great Britain to help fight World War II.

"We can go on *ad infinitum* about the good things we have lost," said the *Sunday Island* newspaper. "Most of all we have lost the [communal] harmony that was ours before the opportunistic 'Sinhala Only' advocates planted the first poisonous seed that has grown into the civil war that takes its daily toll."

The war in the north and east today costs the government nearly SLR 50 billion a year - a third of its total revenues. The death toll in 15 years of conflict is estimated at 50,000, 10,000 of whom were government soldiers. And the end to the fighting is nowhere in sight.

But the gains of Independence cannot be forgotten. Apart from the cultural and spiritual aspects, Lankans have been masters of their own destiny and the democratic system that is well entrenched has enabled peaceful transfers of power seven times in the past 50 years. The welfare measures in place during this period have brought about tremendous economic and social mobility for the less advantaged sections of the population. People of very modest origin have long adorned the professions, the government services, politics, business and commerce. In every field, people who have been born poor have reached the acme of achievement.

There are some who suggest that, if Sri Lanka had opted for a vigorous capitalist development model back in 1948 (instead of moving towards it now), the advantages at the end of the colonial era could have been maximised. Using the natural resource base and the natural attraction that the country holds for foreign investment, the results may well have been spectacular. Indeed, these possibilities could surely have been exploited but for the vigorous left movement that flourished in the island from the pre-Independence days. The welfare state that was pushed through has certainly provided gains, as stated above, but at what cost to long-term development is a question that requires pondering without ideological blinders.

The last 25 years have seen the old left all but wiped out, surviving today only by cling-



Don Stephen Senanayake, the first prime minister of Ceylon, and Chandrika Kumaratunga, latest president of Sri Lanka.



the country's present ills. The party, which, as much as anybody else, must plead guilty for being responsible for this sorry state of affairs, says it is looking for a new political culture to set matters right. And nobody would dispute its conclusion that "the people are disenchanted with the process of democracy itself".

Even as the jamboree celebrating 50 years continued, many asked what there is to celebrate. For the country has frittered away much of what it had when the British left in 1948: back then, Ceylon was much stronger in socio-economic terms than the Asian Tigers who have forged far ahead. It had a sec-

ing on to the *sari pota* of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The new left, represented by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or People's Liberation Front, was responsible for two abortive youth insurrections that cost the lives of tens of thousands of Sinhalese youth in 1971 and 1988-89 (*Himal, Sep/Oct 1997*), and is now more or less inconsequential. The market economics ushered in by J.R. Jayewardene in 1977 has been accepted by the ruling SLFP despite its leftist leanings and that is the way the country is likely to go in the foreseeable future.

But there remains the question of the civil war, now 15 years old in a country of only 50.

NEPAL

**POLITICAL PUS**

NOTHING BETTER EXPRESSES the state of Nepali politics than the question on everyone's minds these days: What next? A dysfunctional right-centre coalition government has just survived a no-confidence motion brought against it by an equally dysfunctional left-right opposition. Since Nepal's current "hung Parliament" has unsuccessfully tried every permutation possible with its collage of parties and fratricidal factions within parties, a sense of ennui shrouds the land. If there is one thing that Nepalis seem to be united on today, it is in the feeling that somehow, something, somewhere, will give.

This round of political drama started when Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, heading a clumsy coalition of left-wing rightists, right-wing centrists and regional opportunists, got wind of several far-right MPs of his own party secretly bolting over to his archrival within the party, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, to team up with right-wing communists to bring him down. In a lightning move, which took even his own coalition partners by surprise, he recommended dissolution of Parliament "since there is no possibility of it providing a stable government" and the holding of fresh elections.

Within hours of Thapa exercising his constitutional prerogative, the collage of far-right rightists, right-wing communists and, strangely, far-left communists were knocking at the gates of King Birendra's palace asking him to exercise another constitutional prerogative that gave them the right to call for a special session of Parliament whose

dissolution the prime minister had just recommended. The plot then started thickening.

Faced with contradictory constitutional claims, King Birendra decided to seek the legal advice of the Supreme Court, an action which has precipitated a political churning, the fallout of which will be evident in the days ahead. This move by the monarch was a break from the past when he had simply followed the advice of two previous prime ministers to dissolve the house and hold fresh election - although in the second instance when the prime minister was heading a minority government, the Supreme Court had overturned the monarch's action and reinstated the parliament. This time, King Birendra was seen as playing favourites against left-wing rightists and right-wing centrists, giving credence to the belief of some that the right and left extremists have often served as Trojan horses for the Palace.

It has been remarked that when politics wobbles, politicians elsewhere prepare for elections while in Nepal they begin to prepare legal briefs. All of January, the country was at a standstill as lawyers aligned with different political factions debated in court which of the constitutional provisions had primacy - the prerogative of the prime minister to recommend dissolution or the right of a quarter of the MPs to call a special session of the House whenever they feel the urge. Sacrificing professional integrity to the winter winds, lawyers who had previously argued for the right of the prime minister now argued against it, and vice versa.

---

*Far-right MPs wanted to team up with right-wing communists to bring down a clumsy coalition of left-wing rightists, right-wing centrists and regional opportunists.*

---

In a divided verdict in which senior judges over-ruled their own previous judgement, the Supreme Court recommended that the King ignore the advice of his prime minister and call a special session of the House to debate the no-confidence motion. The latest twist to the story is that Prime Minister Thapa, whose political guile has served him well since the

Panchayat years, survived the no-confidence motion and now continues to clock in at his office at Singha Darbar, the secretariat.

The (not-so-) United Marxist Leninists, which forms the main leftist opposition, despite being united in the vote against the government, has split vertically since its party congress in January. The primary causes for this were a severe personality clash at the top, the Mahakali border river treaty with India, seats in the politburo, and arcane Marxist jargons used to cloak all these issues. So deep were these animosities that practically no communist MP thought it worthwhile to attend Parliament (and sit with comrades) during the debate on the no-confidence motion in the special session they themselves had called for.

Having survived the no-confidence motion, Prime Minister Thapa quickly retracted his earlier recommendation to dissolve the parliament "since there is no possibility of it providing a stable government". He now said, "The situation has changed."

In these disturbed times, when coalitions are made and governments formed, only with the thought of earning corrupt income and ruling the roost during election time, all the primary actors seem to have emerged as losers. Thapa has kept his prime ministerial position, but finds himself confronted with a split in his already small party. His backer, Girija Prasad Koirala of the Nepali Congress, finds his hopes of heading a coalition government receding as fissures within his own party deepen.

The communists gambled and lost. Not only their hopes of getting their hands on the levers of the government but also their credibility as a responsible democratic force within the parliamentary system has crumbled. Indeed, it is widely believed that disappointed cadres of the UML have begun to drift towards the "people's war" of the Maoists as the only other alternative that is ideologically satisfying to them.

By failing to address constitutional contradictions, the Supreme Court, the legal profession, as well as the Kathmandu-based cognoscenti and journalists have failed to inspire hope or provide societal leadership. King Birendra, who has till now played a more or less correct role as constitutional head, has,

by ignoring the advice of an elected parliamentary prime minister, allowed himself to get drawn into the vortex of politics. He would have done well to keep out of it.

Because the middle ground in Nepali politics is today incapacitated by self-inflicted wounds, the extreme left and the extreme right can be trusted to clamour louder and more aggressively in the days ahead.

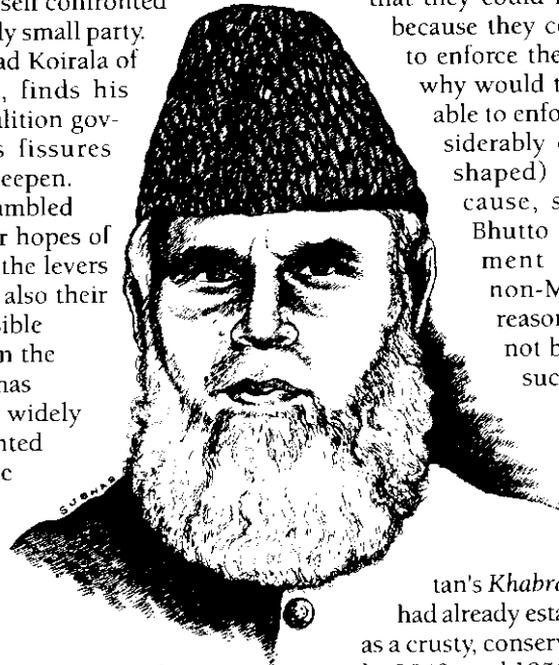
-Dipak Gyawali

## PAKISTAN

# WHO TRUSTS TARAR?

EVEN JOSEPH HELLER, creator of the absurd illogic of Catch-22, would have been impressed by the convoluted reasoning. A retired Supreme Court justice, offering his opinion on the suitability of judges belonging to the Qadiani faith - an offshoot of Islam that believes in the teachings of Ahmed of Qadian and which has been disparaged as blasphemy by the hardline Sunni orthodoxy - argued that they could not be good judges because they could not be trusted to enforce the Constitution. And why would the Qadianis be unable to enforce Pakistan's (considerably convoluted and reshaped) Constitution? Because, since Zulfikar Ali Bhutto changed the document to declare them non-Muslims, the judge reasoned, Qadianis could not be trusted to uphold such a provision.

When Rafiq Tarar offered such opinions as his personal "Catch-22" for Qadianis in Pakistan's *Khabrain* daily last year, he had already established a reputation as a crusty, conservative Muslim, who, in the 1940s and 1950s, had served in the fundamentalist Majlis-e-Ahrar organisation, a group so fanatical that they dubbed Pakistan's Western-educated and secular founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, "Kafir-e-Azam" (Unbeliever of the Nation) - in place of his traditional honorific, "Quaid-e-Azam" (Great



Leader of the Nation).

Today, Rafiq Tarar is President of Pakistan, the result of one of the most peculiar decisions of Nawaz Sharif's second premiership, and is eager to describe himself as a "liberal Muslim" willing to treat women and minorities fairly.

That is a claim few Pakistani human rights activists are willing to believe. "Before his elevation to the presidency, the former judge was not simply known for his orthodox views but was also seen as an activist reactionary," lawyer Asma Jehangir told *The Herald* magazine. Indeed, Tarar's ascendancy to the presidency on the last day of 1997 was almost halted after he delivered a veiled insult clearly aimed at recently-ousted Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, saying that the latter was a "judicial terrorist".

But the more puzzling problem for Islamahad's political elite boiled down to a simple question: Why Tarar? The new president appalled many politicians with his home-grown Punjabi style; some of them reported derisively that his family dried their washing from the roof of the presidential estate. Others were confused that a political unknown, regarded only as a lover of Sikh jokes and a favourite of Nawaz Sharif's father Mian Mohammed Sharif (or Abbaji, as he is known), could rise so high. What had happened to the presidential aspirations of Senate Chairman Wasim Sajjad, Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz and NWFP political veteran Fida Mohammed Khan?

In the weeks following Tarar's rise from obscurity, some officials argued that his ascension - along with a recent, and equally bizarre, government stand against Westernised pop music - owed much to Abbaji's clear in-

fluence over Sharif. Some senior Pakistani politicians, however, believe the selection demonstrates just how little the prime minister trusts even his most loyal aides, following a decade in which "trusted" presidents have regularly cashiered both him and his nemesis, Benazir Bhutto, with the military's connivance.

It is a decision which even some loyalists of the Sharif family worry may have unintended fallouts. Pakistani society in recent months has begun to fray badly on religious questions; Sunni and Shia rivalry has repeatedly spilled over into violence, most recently with a spate of killings and cemetery attacks in Lahore. Meanwhile, Islamist groups, like the neo-fascist Anjuman Sipah-e-Saba, are feeding worries among some minority leaders of worse to come. "If you allow an Anjuman Sipah-e-Saba to exist, you pave the way for the day when each sect has its own militia and its own thugs," one Shia landowner warns.

In such an atmosphere, Tarar's elevation may be seen as a symbol to Sunni hard-liners. After all, Tarar is accused by critics of battering a Qadiani legal clerk when he was practising in Gujranwala in the 1950s and of refusing, as a Lahore High Court judge, to allow bail to a lawyer accused of wearing a Qadiani amulet; in short, of establishing a record as someone more likely to exacerbate communal tensions than to alleviate them. For a pragmatic prime minister who wants to be sure he will never be dismissed by the president, Tarar may seem the "safe" choice. Safety for the country as a whole may well prove to be another matter.

-Farhan Haq

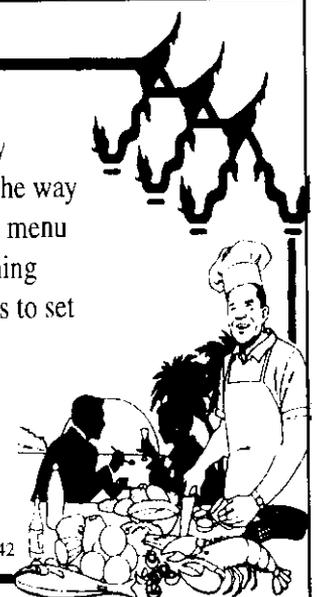
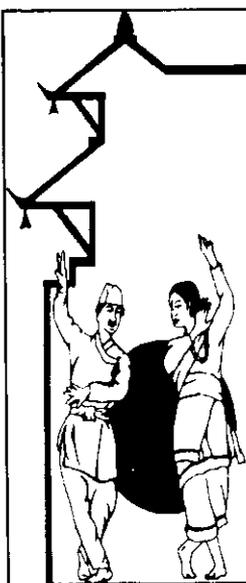
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On 5 and 6 April 1997, six hundred activists from all over Bihar and various parts of India gathered at the small hamlet of Nirmali, fast by the banks of the Kosi in north Bihar. They had come together to protest a process that had begun 50 years earlier at this very place - the selling of fantastic dreams.

On 6 April 1947, politicians and technocrats from Patna and Delhi had assembled at Nirmali to announce a high dam on the Kosi, at a site some miles upstream in the hills of Nepal. The 230-metre engineering wonder would rid Bihar of its woe of flood and provide "regulated" water for year-round irrigation. The Kosi would be converted from a river of sorrow to a watercourse of hope.

The Kosi High mantra is still being chanted by politicians and technocrats today, even though over the half century the public has transformed from gullible consumers of development dreams to people who will study their own interest in what the politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen/contractors promise. Big dams, wide highways, and large industries do not necessarily leave them salivating any more. The public now knows to look a gift dam in the mouth, but in their oblivious arrogance power brokers continue to promise the panacea of high dams to the floodplain residents everywhere.

When the state and establishment raided their fields, forests and valleys in earlier decades saying they had to suffer for the sake of the common good, the peasantry was at a loss to react. Today, however, there is awareness and reaction everywhere, with the villagers able to use the law, academia and public sympathy to

# Big dams, Bad economics.

Why build high dams if you're going to waste water and electricity?

by Ajaya Dixit

their advantage. The poorest peasants today know that water and energy have been mismanaged by the *Sarkar*, although they may not fully understand the ungainly model that is riddled with pilferage and inefficiency.

The urban population of India has expanded manifold over the last five decades. This population demands reliability in its drinking water and energy supply. The same is true for the middle-class peasantry which needs electricity to run tubewells for irrigation. But the electricity grid is just as inefficient as the canal systems of India. And so the politicians, bureaucrats and engineers choose what was till very recently the path of least resistance - construct dams, harrages and reservoirs.

The establishment, so used to riding roughshod over local sensibilities, has been unable to respond to the changed context. It has not yet even begun to consider the only two solutions available: firstly, conserve water and energy in the plains; secondly, when demand is still not satiated, negotiate fair payment for water and energy used with the upstream "stakeholders". Until the establishment makes this adjustment to its worldview and tactics, dam projects will continue to flounder from the Narmada basin to the Himalayan valleys. The public now knows, and until the power brokers know that it knows, and responds accordingly, there is no high dam going to be built on the Kosi or any other river.

### Evolution of a paradigm

There was a time when South Asians knew how to manage water skilfully, as one can see from Sri Lanka and the weirs constructed in South India by the Chola Kings to divert river water into artificial tanks. It was the colonial period, however, which shaped the region's modern-day approach to water management. The British, without any experience of barrage-building on their own rivers, opened up the Subcontinent to what is called the American model of massive impoundment, which had evolved in the United States in the early years of the century.

Many of the storage projects in India were built after the British had left, but the technology should never have been transplanted blindly. The North American terrain and society where the model was developed were quite different from South Asia's. The rivers there carry relatively little silt in comparison to the Himalayan torrents; the demography of water and electricity consumers itself was quite different; and the New World was hardly likely to see anti-dam activism when the native populations had been decimated.

In the colonial era and even later, the canals and barrages 'succeeded' mainly because of the political hegemony of the managerial class. The management of large water infrastructures was

guided by three objectives: revenue generation, administrative control and protective irrigation. Independence came, but the new rulers not only inherited a civil service but also the legal arrangements of the earlier era, some of which contradicted the very democratic aspirations fostered by self-rule. The Canal Act enacted in the 1870s, for example, gave sweeping and centralised powers to the Irrigation Department, which could ignore the farmers' sentiments with impunity.

In pre- and immediately post-independence India, resource-management decisions were dominated by the peddlers of technology. Inherited water development models were pushed without much reference to social realities. The path to national development began with the conceptualisation and construction of projects like Bhakra Nangal, Hirakud and the Damodar Valley Corporation. Several barrages, which include the Farakka, Kosi, Gandak, and Girjapur were built, all between 1950-1970, on the Saptakosi, Narayani, and Karnali rivers, copying the Sarada Barrage model, built by the British on the Mahakali in 1920.

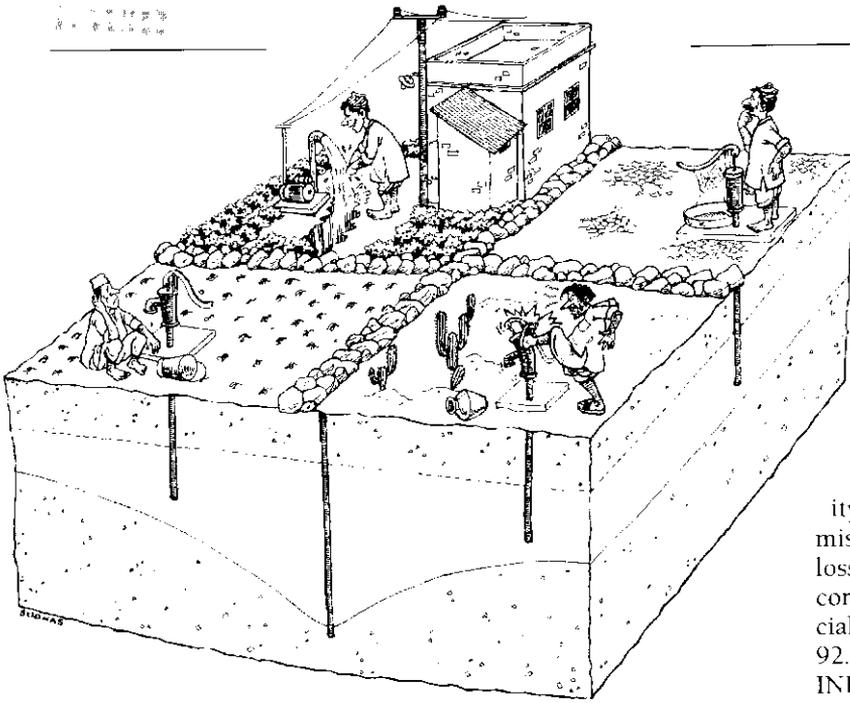
In the later years, economics, equity and even technology were sacrificed on the altar of populism. There are cases aplenty to prove the point. Only a few years ago, the new government in prosperous Punjab promised its farmers water and energy *for free*. In Andhra Pradesh, power which costs INR 2.85 per unit to generate is sold to farmers at 13 paise, prompting Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu to remark, "What more do the people want?"

It was not long before a socially aware, vocal and articulate lobby emerged to highlight the aspects neglected by the state-guided path to national wellbeing. This lobby emerged from the accumulation of painful experiences in the shadow of the 1600 dams and barrages that have been built in India over the course of the century. These include the pain of those evicted from dam and reservoir sites, the suffering of those left within embankments at the mercy of the flood, and the uncalculated devastation wrought across the land by waterlogging and salination. The activists who spoke for the people refused to be dazzled by the sweep and curve of concrete, or be carried away by the sight of a full reservoir reaching far into the horizon. Government was in trouble.

### Well, well, well

And so the activists challenged high dams on the basis of social equity; ecologists contested them on environmental grounds; and seismologists on the very instability of the ground. But the strongest ammunition against the high dam is economic.

Big dams as they are presently formulated and



sought to be built simply ignore market principles. They are too quick to generate supply even when the demand is 'fake'. For, when discussing the economics of water and energy, there is no getting away from the wastage and leakage, nor the fact that the high urban and rural demand is propped up by subsidies. And there is no ignoring groundwater: a primary reason to dam rivers in the hills today is so that the farmers of the plains can extract groundwater. This dam-to-tubewell linkage is very real, but rarely discussed.

Indeed, much of India's success in food self-sufficiency over the decades is ascribed to the emergence of mechanised pumps which pull up water from underground tables for use in agriculture. In order to make this resource available to peasantry all over, both the central and state governments have seized every opportunity to extend rural electrification, providing subsidies for purchase of pumps and laying flat tariff rates for electricity. There is a Million Wells Scheme in place today, under which small and marginal farmers can own their own pumps.

The cost of pumping is thus made negligible in comparison to the cost of electricity production, which leads to profligate use and high wastage, both of electricity and of the precious aquifers. Wells dry up, and salinity invades the underground tables. More significantly, however, the populist policy of subsidised access and flat tariff delivers a highly rigid system that no politician seeking public office dares meddle with. A well-intentioned measure soon becomes unrecognisable, a mass-based boondoggle.

Between 1970 and the mid-1990s, there was a quantum jump in the power consumed by Indian agriculture, from a mere 6 percent of the national electricity consumption to nearly 40 percent. The

low operating efficiency of pumps available in the market - less than 15 percent compared to an achievable 60 percent - made electricity use conspicuously wasteful. The blatant thefts, under-pricing and high "technical losses" (in transmission and distribution) have created what looks like an unbridgeable gap between the supply of and the demand for energy.

The gap between generation volume and the amount of electricity available itself is quite large. Writes B.S.K. Naidu, Director of WINROCK, India's energy programme: "We generate 4 kwh of electricity for end use of 1 kwh, 25 percent being transmission losses, and 66.7 percent end conversion losses." The upshot of such an arrangement, according to government estimates, was commercial losses amounting to INR 40 billion in 1991-92. By 1996-97, this figure had skyrocketed to INR 109.41 billion.

The handmaidens of malfeasance and maladministration in all this are the state electricity boards of each of the Indian states, which have been used by the political class as the agencies to placate the water- and electricity-using public.

### 200 million toilets

Besides mechanised pumps for ground water, the other major consumer of power in India is the rapidly expanding urban population and, within it, the multiplying middle class. The growth of demand has occurred with very little thought to wastage and the need to pay fairly for the supply. Hellbent upon emulating a Western lifestyle in South Asia, as now shown on television, the middle class is given to ever-more intensive use of water and electricity, in its air-conditioners, refrigerators, bathtubs and toilet cisterns. The demand for water and power is set to just grow and grow.

Unlike drinking water, consumerist demands for water and electricity are highly income elastic. One can imagine what will happen to demand for water when the additional 200 million homes in the Ganga plain begin to use the flush toilet, which converts 15 litres of treated water into sewage at the turn of a handle. This alone would require a storage reservoir in the Himalaya all by itself. There is no economic justification for not introducing the market principle into the pricing of water and power.

The demand for high dams, thus, is the result of bad economics and unrepresentative politics, reflecting a situation where no one wants to tamper with the vote. It has not helped that these macro issues relating to poor targetting and leakage in subsidy have never been highlighted by the mainstream media, nor by activists who have tended to pay attention only to equity and envi-

ronmental issues.

Projecting the rise in population, agriculture and industrial demands as well as household use as the population gentrifies, one estimate has it that there will be a 20,000 megawatt shortfall in the North Indian Grid by the year 2020. There is no way out but to produce more energy, say the planners. Thus, the path to bridge the supply and demand gap of water and energy is seen to have only one formula, and that is "augmentation of supply". There is apparently no consideration of the fact that correct and market-based pricing structure would lower consumption and hence demand. The demand for power and water is artificial because it would not exist if the pricing were realistic. In fact, at zero price, demand would be infinite constrained only by the physical limit to consumption.

Without management of both demand and supply, forecast of future demand merely reflects the position of those making the projection. It simply becomes an elegant statement of how the forecaster feels the world "ought to be". One thing is clear, besides the fact that existing projections of power and water demand are just too far off the mark to justify the investment of billions of dollars to augment supply, building high dams to provide water and electricity at present would be doing nothing more than rewarding the profligate.

### Nature of debate

The entire debate with regard to water and energy policy in India has been waylaid because of the diversionary option of large vs small. That is not where the discussion should rest, for the answer lies in correct economics rather than in being a pure breed environmentalist or marketeer. Instead, even those who prefer to discuss the genuine issues of energy and water are often pegged into predetermined slots as those for or against large dams.

On the one hand is the mainstream political system, its functionaries and minions, whose analytical framework treats burgeoning population as a given, and the time-proven path of "augmentation of supply" as the only option to fulfill water and energy needs. This is the hierarchical model of business as usual, buttressed by the business interests that gain from the building of large structures with rocks, steel and concrete. Speaking the language of extreme real-politik, they will confide that even though they understand that subsidies, for example, are only palliatives, the system itself is powerless to do anything about it.

At the other extreme stands the egalitarian critique of large-scale water development as a path based on excessive and unsustainable consumption. High social costs, environmental disrupt-

tions, risks due to seismicity, and excessive sedimentation are used as forceful arguments against the chosen path, by activists such as Sundar Lal Bahuguna, Medha Patkar and sympathetic scholars who recommend that local people try to stop projects in any which way they can.

Instead of synergism, there is tension between the activists and scholars who speak of *equity*, *efficiency* and *ecology* in water and energy management, and the political, bureaucratic and engineering leadership. In this highly acrimonious debate few are addressing the highly inefficient end-use and uncertainty of supply.

### Future pathways

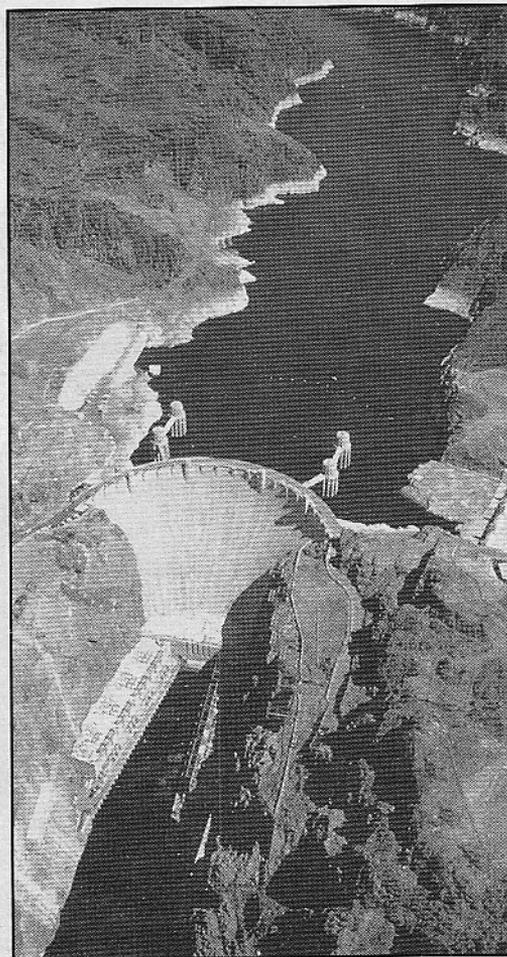
When it comes to power, how can new dams in the hills be justified when only a third of the total energy that is generated presently reaches the end user. It would be more rational to first deal with the existing massive loss before thinking of building dams.

There is then the question of curtailing demand by pricing the energy and water according to the cost of production. Indeed, high dams could be built and need to be built (seismic, environmental, social and other concerns having been addressed) as long as the demand is not artificial, and as long as the locals in the hills are able to negotiate from a position of strength for maximum benefit.

In the meantime, there are options. On the energy front, reducing pilferage and tariff rationalisation alone can save almost 4000-5000 MW from within India's existing supply system. This is equivalent to some of the large storage dams proposed. Vigorous end-use conservation measures, and grid management would bring additional gains.

Plugging leaks and promoting efficiency in water use through a

Sweep of concrete to set the heart racing. The Hoover Dam, Colorado.



policy of proper targeting of subsidy, and tariff that reflect the actual social and environmental cost would finally rationalise demand. Water consumption could also be reduced through, for example, promoting affordable low-volume flush cisterns. In the urban and industrial sectors, conservation and recycling would also make a dent in the demand.

These suggestions seem utopian when one looks at the political reality in the plains - made that much more stark during this election season. But there is no way around it: institutional innovation must be made in water and energy management. We must, for the moment, emphasise *scarcity* instead of *plenitude*, *rehabilitation* instead of *new construction* and *institutions*

instead of *technology*. Governments, first of all, must invert the current hierarchy of users so that those who expropriate water and energy supplies are made to pay the price.

The real issue about the management of water and energy in India is therefore about how these challenges are met. It is about bringing back an accountable and visionary body politic that seeks and promotes solutions that upturns the status quo. The over-consumptive approach that is steamrolling all of India, and also its neighbours, is most unhealthy.

A. Dixit is a water engineer and editor of the journal Water Nepal.

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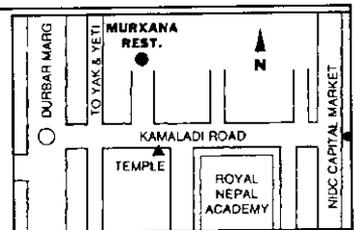


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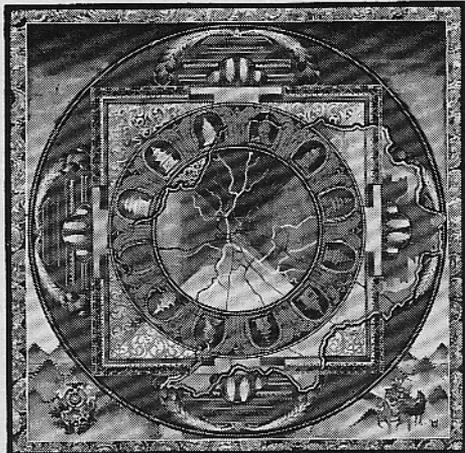


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# DAM

The World Bank and Big Business no longer seem capable of fighting the Dam Busters. So, this may be the beginning of the end...

by *Shripad Dharmadhikary*

In April 1997, there was a unique gathering at Gland, Switzerland. It consisted of people who have been on opposite sides of the most fierce and bitter of environmental controversies - the building of large dams. They were all there, the World Bank, the dam-builders and consultants on one side, and scholars and activists from the dam-fighting groups on the other. But the meeting did not descend into acrimony. Instead, it unanimously resolved to appoint an independent commission to review the experience of large dams worldwide. The commission would be asked to review the "development effectiveness of large dams" and to evolve standards and criteria for the building of large dams.

The commission was to have been set up in November 1997, but protests from the 'anti-dam' organisations about "lack of balance" in the names proposed delayed the process. Finally, in

January 1998, all sides agreed on the makeup of the body; 12 individuals, representing a broad spectrum of 'stakeholders'. (Representing the Subcontinent at the Commission are its Vice-Chairperson Laxmi Chand Jain, who, among other things, served in the Government of India's independent committee to review the Sardar Sarovar Project and Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.)

The setting up of the World Commission on Dams itself signifies, as nothing else can, success after years of struggle against large dams. But why would the World Bank and private industry, whose interests are at such variance with the activists on the ground, want such a commission?

### Growing resistance

The fact is that all over the world, it is getting more and more difficult - if not impossible - to

# FUNDAMENTALISM

build large dams. Today, there is hardly a region where large dams are not being challenged. To give but a few recent examples, a fierce struggle in France culminated in 1994 with the scrapping of the Serra de la Fare Dam on the Loire River. The last two phases of the James Bay project in Quebec in Canada were suspended following intense resistance, particularly by indigenous people.

In Thailand, the six-year-long campaign against the Nam Chaon Dam has forced the indefinite postponement of the project. And although the major fight against Pak Mun Dam was lost, enough awareness and pressure had been built in the country for the Prime Minister's Office to declare in 1995 that for the sake of environmental protection, Thailand would no longer build dams for power production.

The truth is that as experience of large dams emerged from around the world, reaching as far back as the 1950s Echo Park Dam in the US and in Tasmania in the late 1960s, the protestors gained strength. In fact, some anti-dam movements are now going beyond objecting to new projects; they are demanding that existing dam structures be pulled down and reservoirs emptied. In January 1998, the Quaker Neck Dam on the Neuse River in the US state of Maine was demolished: it was found 'guilty' of obstructing fish migration.

However, it is not only the dam struggles that are suggesting dam removals. Recently, Harza North West Incorporated, a consulting firm known for its large water projects, recommended that four dams in Oregon state be dismantled. These structures are on the Snake River, with a total installed capacity of 3033 megawatt, and had been blamed for the river's declining Chinook Salmon stocks.

## **World Bank no-no**

Perhaps what has ruined the prospect of large dams most is the dwindling interest among financing institutions. Till now, the World Bank has been the largest single source of funding for large dams. The Bank's involvement has also helped pull in finances from other sources. Between 1970 and 1985, an average of 26 dam projects funded by the Bank were being completed every year, with annual lending at around USD 2 billion (at 1993 rates). Subsequently, the

figure went down: from 1986 to 1995, the Bank approved 39 projects that included dams, i.e. about 4 per year.

The Bank has pulled back mainly because of the storm of opposition it drew for involvement in dams. This has had an immediate and significant impact on co-financing arrangements. Other sources of public funding are also in decline. This is how Martin Neuhas, Head of Energy and Waterpower Department of IHECO, Switzerland, described the financing of hydropower scenario in Asia, at a conference in November 1996:

*According to World Bank estimates 290 GW of new generating capacity will be required in Asia through the year 2004, meaning every month 2 to 3 standard combined cycle and/or hydropower equivalent would have to be brought on line. To finance this almost incredible and environmentally questionable target growth Asia requires in the running decade an investment of USD 450 billion or 30 to 60 billion per year... The international agencies such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc, with respect to the economic situation of member/donor countries, are rather reducing lending. In the meantime... institutional and commercial banks as well as the policy making governments are realising that scarcity of funds is the paramount limiting growth factor... Predictably, the new slogan, even panacea seems to be that there is no alternative to private industry.*

However, the private sector seems to be in no hurry to finance large dams - the uncertainties are just too high. This is the report of Patrick McCully of International Rivers Network on a September 1994 conference held in Frankfurt on private financing of hydropower projects:

*An air of gloomy resignation pervaded the meeting. Several speakers from the financing side of the industry emphasised that private industries are discouraged from backing hydrodams because of their high initial construction costs, long capital payback periods, terrible record of construction time and cost overruns, and high operating risks, especially because of their vulnerability to drought... financiers are dissuaded from funding dams because of "environmental" risks: delays because of opposition to resettlement and anti-dam*

*campaigns, and new environmental legislation to regulate how dams are built and operated.*

*Several speakers agreed that with few exceptions the only dams likely to be built on a wholly private sector basis in the near future are small to medium-size run-of-the-river hydrodams...*

The private sector as is its wont certainly would not hesitate to move in to reap the profits, but it is simply not prepared to take the massive risks that have become inherent in large projects. In fact, it is now clear from recent experience that private financiers will not enter the large dams business at all unless heavily backed by cheap public funds and governmental guarantees. They want the risks and costs to be handled by someone else, including the local people.

**Boo, indeed**

The private sector's occasionally mercenary attitude in the building of large dams is reflected in India's 400 MW Maheshwar Hydro Power Project, part of the ambitious Narmada Valley Development Project. Around five years ago, a memorandum of understanding was signed with S. Kumars, a private Indian textile company with no previous experience in hydropower, to build, own and operate (BOO) this dam.

It has been clear from the beginning that the Maheshwar project would rely heavily on public funds, and 'externalise' all social and environmental costs. The land which would be submerged is being compulsorily acquired by the government under the antiquated Land Acquisition Act. Neither is S. Kumars responsible for the resettlement of the displaced people. Further, this USD 428 million project will be financed substantially from public funds, including public financial institutions like the Power Finance Corporation (itself partly financed by the World Bank) under liberal terms.

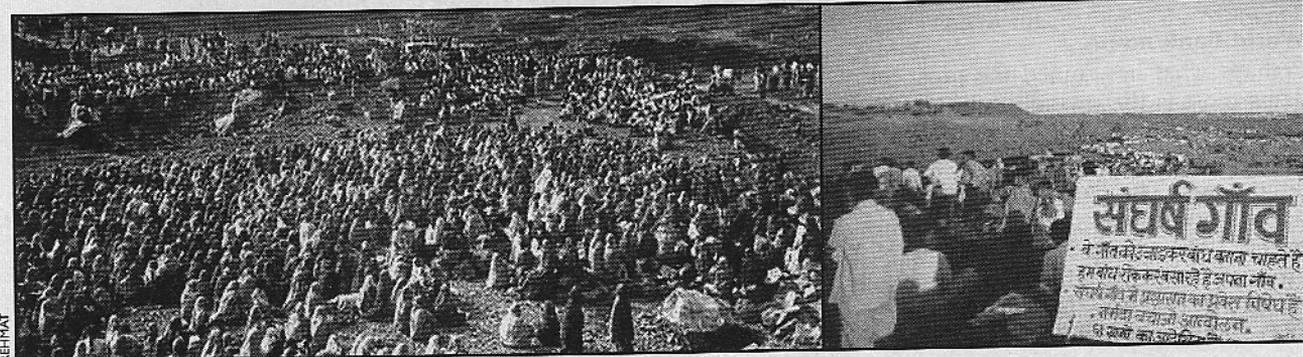
S. Kumars has been given the project under an assured 16 percent rate of return, and the company is protected against payment defaults by the Madhya Pradesh state government. The government has also agreed to absorb losses on account

of the reduced flow in the Narmada, which means that the Company is assured full payment even if power is not generated. Fortunately, there is now a check and balance against profiteering companies in the form of an aware citizenry. A strong people's movement has emerged against the Maheshwar project. In January 1998, 25,000 people protested at the project site, occupying it for 20 days, and sitting through a five-day hunger strike. The government was forced to order complete stoppage of work and a total review of the project, including not just the social and environmental aspects, but also the viability, the terms and conditions under which the project has been given to the private company, and the possible alternatives.

There are other examples, elsewhere. The Nam Theun II is a proposed hydropower dam on the Theun River, a tributary of the Mekong, in Laos. The project, with an installed capacity of 681 to 908 MW, is being touted as a dream venture to uplift the Laotian economy, with over USD 250 million of annual revenues projected - almost completely from sale of electricity to Thailand. The project, which will cost a whopping USD 1.5 billion, has been given under the BOOT (Build-Own-Operate-Transfer) scheme to a consortium, the Nam Theun II Electricity Consortium (NTEC). The NTEC comprises of Transfield, one of Australia's biggest private companies, and the Electricite de France, the world's largest state-owned utility, and three Thai companies.

Here, too, the private companies want the profits, but are not willing to share in the risks. They are demanding that the World Bank step in with a new guarantee mechanism, likely to be used for the first time. The Bank is asked to assume certain risks of the project on behalf of the consortium; if these risks do materialise, then the Bank will make good the loss. The Bank in turn will recover its investment fully from the Government of Laos. Thus, the risk is effectively taken up by the Laotian Government and people. The profits are the Consortium's, risk free. Transfield has now announced that it is not prepared to proceed without the World Bank guarantee. It is instead ready to opt out of the project even though

The gathered dam opponents at Maheshwar in mid-January and "Struggle Village".



REHMA

SHEPAD DHANNADHIKAR

that would mean losing the USD 30 million it has already invested.

Even as finances for large dams are drying up and the private sector shies away, the anti-dam movement has received support from the most-unexpected quarter: the official agencies. These agencies, and that includes the World Bank itself, have begun reassessing dam projects and for once are seriously considering issues that have long been raised by non-governmental organisations and people's movements. The results have generally vindicated those fighting big dams.

One of the earliest, and perhaps the most influential, of these studies has been the World Bank's Independent Review of the Sardar Sarovar Project in 1992, which finally forced the Bank to opt out of the Narmada project. The report, an outcome of over 10 months in the field and examination of every possible document related to the project, is considered a classic.

There have been other significant reassessments as well.

**World Bank OED Review of 50 Large Dams.** In August 1996, the World Bank's Operations Evaluations Department (OED), a semi-independent audit department, came out with a desk review of 50 large dams funded by the Bank. The review used three criteria to evaluate the dams: economic, social and environmental. But, as is usual with most Bank reports, the review's conclusions did not quite agree with the actual findings for the simple reason that in order to justify continued funding, the conclusions tend to gloss over the serious, even shocking, nature of the information revealed.

Nevertheless, the findings are interesting in themselves. The review classified the 50 projects into "acceptable", "unacceptable" and "potentially acceptable". It found that out of the 50 projects reviewed, five were unacceptable even by the Bank's own standards which were in force when they were cleared. They should never have been funded, or indeed built. (Among these are the Mangala Dam in Pakistan and the Kulekhani Dam in Nepal which have poor economic performance and unmitigated social and environmental impacts.)

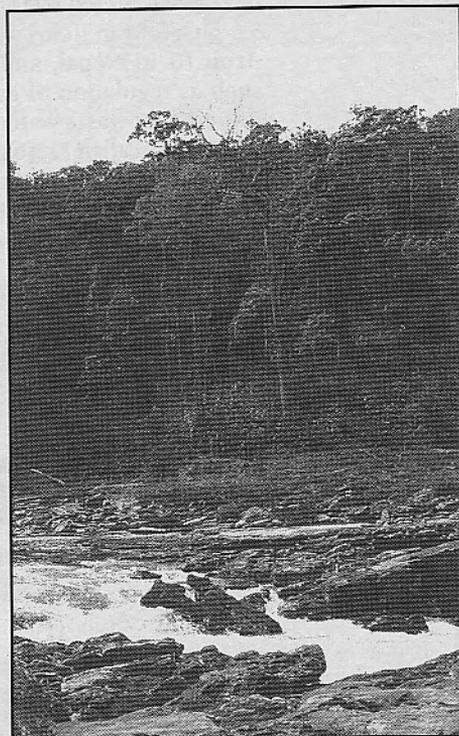
In addition, the review states that eight more projects were unacceptable under the Bank's present-day standards. A further 24 were "potentially acceptable" - defined as "projects associated with significant, albeit probably not major, social and environmental impacts, which would make them unacceptable by current standards unless remedial action was taken". In actual fact, since remedial action was rarely taken - and indeed, experience has shown that such remedial action rarely makes up for the destruction, these "potentially acceptable" projects would also count

as "unacceptable" from an independent non-Bank perspective. Only 13 out of the 50 projects were found to be "acceptable" by the OED review. Interestingly, the 50 dams reviewed do not include many of the recent controversial dams such as Arun III (Nepal), Sardar Sarovar, Subernarekha, Indravati (India), and Yacereta (Argentina). But it was this report that led to the meeting in Gland, and ultimately to the formation of the commission to review large dams.

**The Jay Hair Report on Pangué Dam, Chile.** The Pangué Dam on the BioBio River in Chile is being built by the private utility Chilean company Endesa. The World Bank's private sector funding section, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), is the funding agency. The project has come under heavy criticism and there is strong opposition on social and environmental grounds. The report of the independent study, headed by Jay Hair, former president of National Wildlife Federation, USA, is said to be extremely critical of the project. The Bank refused to make it public, citing "risks of litigation and legal liability" from Endesa.

The company was given the document to indicate which sections should be blocked out before its public release which was eventually done in July 1997. However, even the report censored by Endesa concludes that "The IFC did not follow fundamental World Bank Group requirements in any consistent or comprehensible manner throughout the development and implementation of the Pangué project." The study also casts doubts on Endesa's commitment to take measures for environmental mitigation and protection of indigenous populations who would have to be resettled.

**Review of the Sardar Sarovar and Tehri Dams, India.** Unrelenting activism has forced the Indian government to set up committees to review two of its most controversial dam projects - the Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) Project and the Tehri project. The report of the SSP committee, set up in 1993, acknowledged the correctness of many of the major criticisms against the project - including lack of land for resettlement, overesti-



Dam site on the Theun River, Laos.

INTERNATIONAL RIVERS NETWORK

mated water flow in the river and serious environmental worries. In the case of Tehri, after going back on its word many times, the government finally did set up two review committees. One is to look at the seismic risks, the other at the issue of rehabilitation and environment. The latter committee recently submitted its report, and highlights the serious problems with Tehri in the area of its focus.

### Emerging alternatives

One of the key mandates of the World Commission on Dams is to assess the alternatives to large dams. Well-documented and worked-out alternatives to large dams, both for energy and water, have been offered by the 'opposition', such as for Sardar Sarovar, Tehri and Poyamkutty in India, Arun III in Nepal, and Loire in France. Issues such as regulation of groundwater exploitation, recycling of waste water, especially for industrial use, the so-called "zero discharge" concept where industries are required to use almost 100 percent of their effluents, the need for conservation and efficient use of water resources, all are gaining increasing importance. This demand-side management, along with local community-based water management systems, revival of the traditional water-harvesting systems, and so on, is forming an equally important part of the alternative approach.

The alternatives proposed for irrigation and water are now so well worked out that Fred Pearce, journalist and author of *The Dammed* (The Bodley Head, 1992), stated that no more large dams will be built in the world, at least for irrigation and water supply purposes. Equally strong are the alternatives emerging in the energy field, such as demand-side management, conservation and efficient use, decentralised renewable resources including micro hydel and biomass, solar power, and the use of some lesser polluting resources such as natural gas as a transition to totally renewable energy sources.

There is enough indication that the worldwide struggle against large dams has entered a decisive, and probably the final phase. Protests are intensifying, large dams are increasingly difficult to build; the issues of biodiversity, social and environmental impacts are actually asserting itself to stop dams. And there are serious financial problems for large dams, with capital looking for greener pastures. All over the world, people are increasingly with the anti-large dam activists. This, more than anything else, makes it clear that for large dams, it is the beginning of the end.

*S. Dharmadhikary is an engineer with interest in renewable energy and alternative water management. He has been working with the Narmada Bachao Andolan for the last nine years.*

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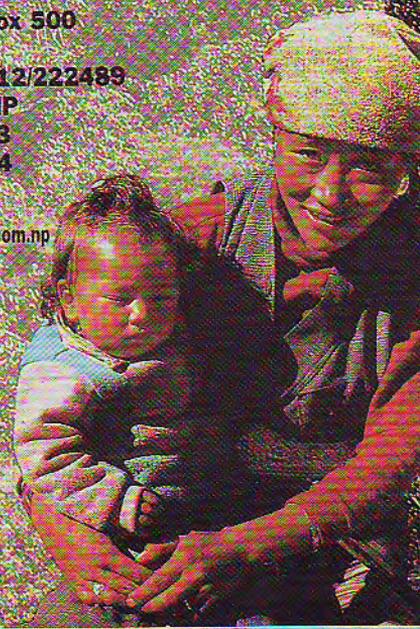
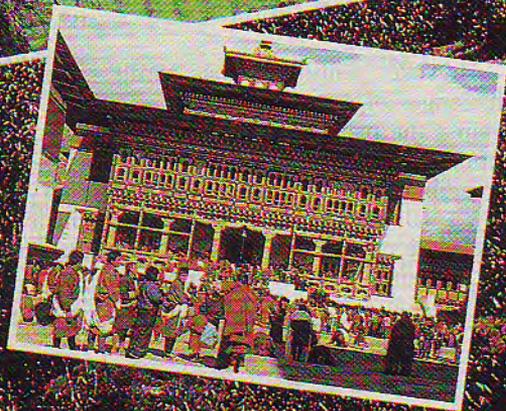
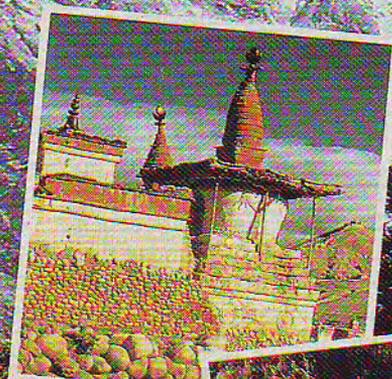
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Kautilya, the  
economist,  
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South Asia needs good dams, not  
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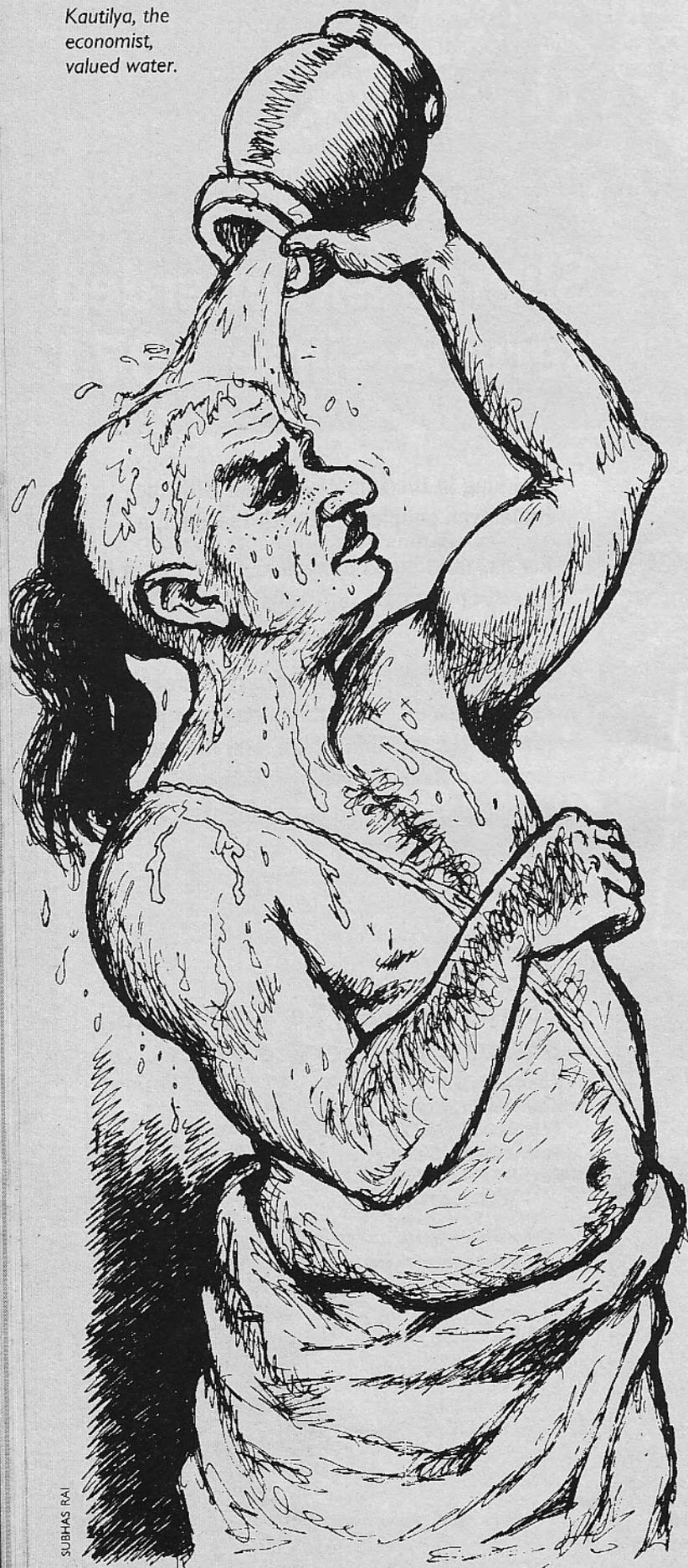
by Jayanta Bandyopadhyay

**W**ater has played a central role in ensuring human survival and progress over the 5000 years of South Asian history. The importance attached to water in the economic affairs in ancient times is evident from the fact that Kautilya, the well-known author of several important economic policy documents, operated the earliest known rain gauges in 400 BC. Human survival in South Asia is no less dependent on this critical natural resource today than it was in the era of Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

The lifelines of the Himalayan rivers carry an annual outflow of more than 1500 billion cubic metres (BCM) of water (one cubic metre = 1000 litres), making the Subcontinent the second-most water-rich region in the world, next only to Amazonia. All parts of the Subcontinent, except peninsular India, depend directly on the supply brought down by the Himalayan rivers. The fertile irrigated lands in the lower parts of the Indus and the Ganga-Brahmaputra basins today constitute the all-important bread basket for a staggering population of nearly a billion.

Taking full advantage of this natural gift, the region has expanded irrigation and increased food production with the help of new agricultural technologies. This has been useful in preventing widespread starvation or dependence on large-scale food imports in the years following independence from colonial rule. For example, in the case of India, the irrigation potential available in the immediate aftermath of Independence was about 20 million hectares. By 1995, this figure had gone up to about 90 million hectares - no mean achievement.

However, South Asia has hardly solved the challenges of water utilisation, seen especially against the background of an ever-burgeoning population. Food shortage continues to be a major problem and by the turn of the century the region will have about 300 million people living below the poverty line. The physical quality of life in South Asia obviously must be improved, given its low ranking in the Human Development



# Dams for the Third Millennium

Index (HDI). (Bhutan ranks 155 globally, Nepal 154, Bangladesh 144, Pakistan 139 and India 138 in the latest HDI.)

Additionally, we must not forget that the regional countries are now developing close links with the global market and the international trading system. Domestic land and water use will be influenced more and more by priorities of export. In water-scarce areas this will surely be in conflict with water allocation for human development. Urban demand may succeed in diverting supply from rural areas, commercial farming may continue to draw on underground aquifers at the cost of drinking water, and the presently low industrial demand for water will become substantial, if the industrial growth rate goes up to 6 to 8 percent, as everyone wants it to.

The growing demand for electricity will also look increasingly northwards to the Himalayan rivers. It is the heretofore abundance of the resource in the Subcontinent which has left us with supply-side management in water, which has in turn encouraged an inefficient and conservation-insensitive consumption culture. This is why a cultural push towards conservation sensitivity all over South Asia is urgent. But, while such objectives are important over the long run, there is no way of ignoring the need to 'augment' supply through storage reservoirs. In the case of India alone, the annual surface water demand for irrigation is expected to double from 360 BCM to 700 BCM in the 40 years between 1985 to 2025. The actual challenge to water management in South Asia is to ensure such a supply without creating major conflicts and human rights violation.

## Questioning dams

It is thanks to the rivers of the Himalaya that the Subcontinent can see fulfilment of this increased demand. The only hitch is that 80 percent of the annual water arrives in 20 percent of time, during the summer monsoon. This makes it very difficult to supply water when it is needed. The an-

swer, in the form of storage dams, was hardly new.

A blind, almost religious, faith in the efficacy of large dam characterised the attitude of South Asian politicians and administrators in the years following independence. Half a century later, the need for storage dams to provide the required fresh water supplies remains unaltered. The popular image of large engineering constructions has, however, transformed over time. A strong campaign against dams and other such developments is the result of a history of unwise decisions based on poor science and ignorance of local management practices.

The days when construction of a dam *per se* would be considered desirable as 'temples of modernity', are over. But throughout the South, new dams are being planned or constructed to safeguard food and water security, a need which has not gone away. There are presently 49 dams under construction in China, 99 in Turkey, 81 in Korea, 25 in Iran and 28 in India. Furthermore, many large dams are planned for the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin.

According to estimates for India alone, the total storage capacity in the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin may be almost quadrupled from the present

*Tarbela of the Indus: the biggest earth-filled dam anywhere.*



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38 BCM to 151 BCM on the basis of projected construction activities. The fact that these projects involve large volumes of water and large-scale engineering interventions need not *ipso facto* render them as objects of opposition. The water and energy are required for the human development of South Asia, which is the very reason why it is also imperative that the five decades' experience in building dams, good ones and especially bad ones, be considered.

One of the obvious results of the unscientific and largely anti-people approach taken since colonial times to dam construction has been the demand to altogether stop them. This is an excellent example of the fundamentalism of the construction lobby helping generate the fundamentalism of "no-dam" campaigners. With the World Bank now giving a negative signal on dam construction, however, South Asian countries have an opportunity to review their policies themselves and take independent decisions. It is now up to South Asians to use their own professional capabilities to critically review their policies on dams and take decisions in the best popular interest.

This might require some courage, too. In fact, some of the critics of dams have shown the way forward for a proper water development policy. For example, the sustained campaign for a comprehensive assessment of the Tehri Dam Project in the Uttar Pradesh hills by the Tehri Baandh Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti (Tehri Anti-Dam Struggle Committee) led to research activities that generated a wealth of new information on sustainability of big dams in the Himalaya. This, among others, has helped sustain the move for ecologically informed and economically wise assessment of large dams.

### Dual fundamentalism

In order to safeguard food and water security of South Asia, availability of larger volumes of water is essential. This needs storage dams. It is high time, the colonial heritage of looking at dams as an end in itself comes to an end, and as much a cultural transformation takes place to ensure that the water is used efficiently.

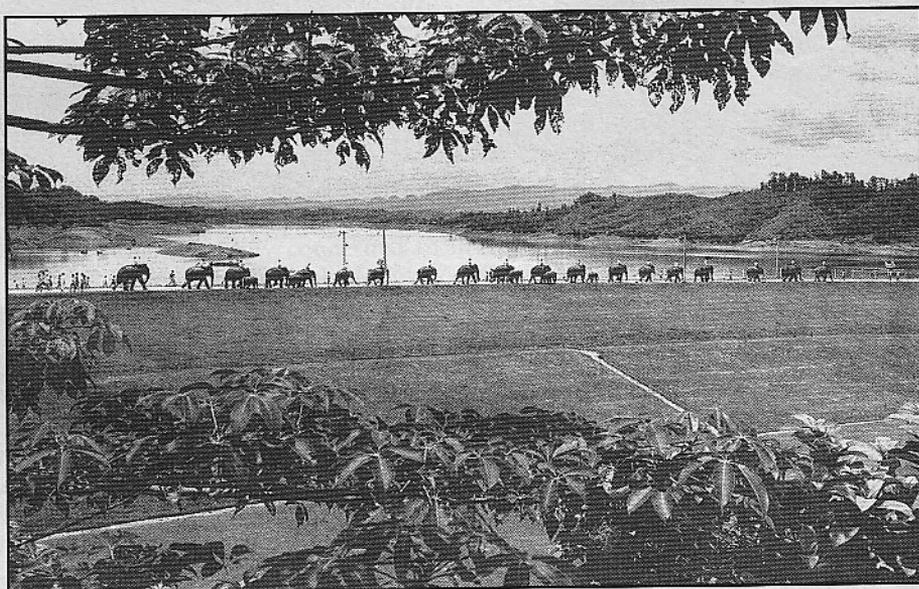
The serious gap in scientific and economic tools for assessing dams has to be bridged. Only then the process of transparent research and policy reformulation will be able to replace the dual fundamentalism of the influential and arrogant construction lobbies as well as the campaign-

ers for "no dams".

People in South Asia need more water but the region can no longer afford the luxury of economically inefficient investments in massive structures. The economics of large dams has to have incorporated within it values that respect human rights and ecology. The oft-repeated argument that 'some' people, who live in the submersion area, will have to 'sacrifice' for the 'larger' interest of the country needs to be questioned. These 'some' need not see themselves as sacrificing if the powers that be can actually guarantee more than adequate compensation, something that is well within the ability of the administrations to comprehend. Also, strong legislative changes to protect the economic interests of involuntarily displaced populations would go a long way towards ensuring that people do not necessarily see dams as an evil.

A great opportunity lies ahead for South Asia's decision-makers, on charting a way to use water

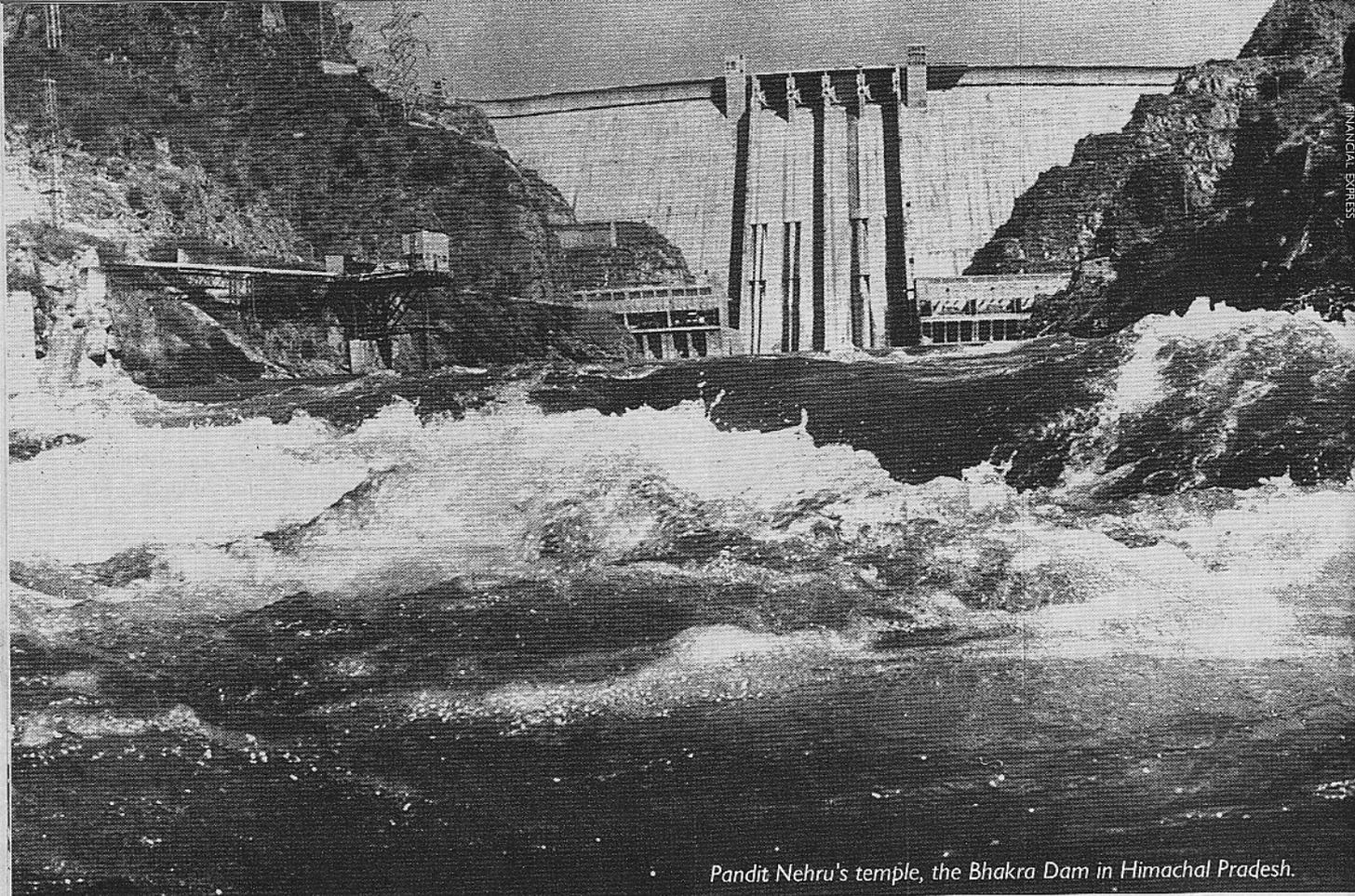
*Elephant procession atop Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hills.*



BION SAKKAR/DINK

for the common good. The destiny of the region, and the security of food and water for more than a billion, is now dependent fully on how the governments and those outside of government can create a new, holistic and human rights-conscious methodology for assessing dam projects. South Asia has good water, what it needs is good dams, whether large or small. Perhaps the 3000-year-old heritage of Kautilya's multidisciplinary intelligence needs to be employed once again to ensure water availability in the much-talked-about Third Millennium. ▽

*J. Bandyopadhyay is Professor of Science and Environment Policy at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. Opinions expressed in the article are the writer's own.*



Pandit Nehru's temple, the Bhakra Dam in Himachal Pradesh.

# Large dams, larger issues

Anger in anti-dam writings often act as mental blocks.

by Ramaswamy R. Iyer

Some time ago, the editor of *Himal* invited me to write a piece giving my reactions to the articles, reports and reviews published in the journal on matters connected with water resources, and outlining my own thinking on the issues involved. Let me begin by saying that I find myself in agreement with many of the things that have been said in those articles and reports. However, there are some aspects and features which trouble me. In what follows I propose to draw attention to certain general attitudes and intellectual tendencies, and refrain from trying to correct scattered instances of errors of fact or perception or understanding on specific matters.

(i) Many of the writers tend to believe that while their own motivations in opposing large

dams are the purest and noblest, those of the supporters of dams must be suspect. There is a tendency to look for hidden motivations, sinister influences, dubious funding sources, and so on. On the other hand, those who support dams speak of the "anti-dam lobby", question the bona fides of the NGOs concerned, and hint darkly at foreign funding. Some of the accusations on both sides may well be - probably are - true. However, there are honourable bureaucrats, engineers, and politicians (and even honourable World Bank officials!) who genuinely believe that they are trying to promote the cause of development as they see it. Equally, there are wholly honourable anti-dam activists who are fighting what they consider to be an evil. Not everyone belongs to a

'lobby'; and when all lobbies have been discounted, a sharp division in opinion still remains. It is this division which needs to be dealt with.

(ii) There is often a tendency to exalt the 'political economy' aspects over all others; but assuming that we are able to improve the processes of decision-making, eliminate corruption and collusion, ensure that the people's voices are heard, correct inequities in the distribution of water, neutralise the political power of the head-reach farmers, and so on, will large-dam projects become benign? If not, it needs to be recognised that the heart of the matter lies not in 'political economy' but elsewhere.

(iii) In many of the writings from Nepal, the anti-dam stance tends to get mixed up with latent anti-India feelings. The thesis sometimes put forward is that Indians (a combination of bureaucrats, engineers, politicians, potential consultants and contractors) are pushing for large projects and trying to persuade Nepal to undertake them; that the Nepalis are easily taken in; and that the Indians get their own way.

In Nepal, there is the view, shared at the official level, that projects such as Pancheswar and Karnali are good for Nepal as they will bring in massive revenues for the country from the sale of electricity to India. This also happens to be the view that prevails at the official level in the Government of India, though there *are* other views in India.

There is, of course, another view in Kathmandu: that the country should *not* go in for large, technology-driven, unsustainable projects based on exports to India, but should plan small, people-centred, environmentally benign ones with reference to Nepal's own needs. This is an internal debate in Nepal, and it is for Nepal to decide on the route it wants to take. If Nepal decides against large projects in the Himalaya, India cannot force it to undertake them. Those who wish to argue against large projects and in favour of alternatives should try and convert the dominant opinion in Nepal to their way of thinking, rather than portray India as the evil genius.

(iv) This kind of prejudice also colours the view that some of the writers take of non-official efforts at promoting inter-country cooperation. The Centre for Policy Research, Delhi; the Institute for Integrated Development Studies, Kathmandu; and the Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad, Dhaka, have been collaborating since 1990 on a Three-Country Study of the possibilities of utilisation of the waters of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna for the common benefit of all the three countries. Even these efforts are suspect in the eyes of some commentators in Nepal.

There are two kinds of suspicion: one is to

regard these efforts as a continuation of the pursuit of governmental objectives under a 'non-official' front; the other is to believe that the essential objective is to promote big projects. One reviewer, for example, states bluntly of the Three-Country Study (*Himal, July-August 1995*), "Big Brother comes out the winner as his is the only voice that is well articulated." Whatever the justification for the use of that expression in the context of inter-governmental talks, it is wholly inappropriate in the context of a collaborative study undertaken by three non-government academic institutions. CPR, BUP and IIDS worked as equal partners in this enterprise; there was no Big Brother or Small Brother among them. No *one* institution set the agenda or directed the studies; there were consultations at every stage. Nor were we acting under governmental influence.

I cannot speak for BUP in Dhaka or IIDS in Kathmandu, but in so far as the Delhi-based CPR is concerned, we kept a careful distance from the Government of India, and often expressed views and made suggestions which were quite different from the official line. Far from being under government influence, the intention was in fact to *change* governmental thinking.

As regards the promotion of big projects, that was not one of the driving forces behind the Three-Country Study. Those involved were primarily concerned to bring home to the three countries the folly of conflict and the wisdom of cooperation. In urging cooperation, we naturally had to deal with matters already under inter-governmental discussion, such as water-sharing on the Ganga (India/Bangladesh), and Pancheswar, Karnali (India/Nepal). At that juncture we did not want to complicate matters by entering into the large-dam debate; our project was about inter-country cooperation and not about alternative paths to development. Nevertheless, we showed our awareness of that controversy by including chapters on the large-dam question as well as on the seismicity problems in the CPR book *Harnessing the Eastern Himalayan Rivers*. However, since the governments were already talking about certain projects, we strongly urged a quick resolution of differences and a commencement of actual cooperation. (I may add that we did try, with varying degrees of success, to get diverse shades of opinion into our seminars and conferences, and that divergent views on large projects and on environmental issues were indeed heard.)

(v) The movement against large dams has associations with other related movements ("empowerment" of the people by restoring their control over community resources which have been appropriated by the State; reviving traditional and environmentally harmonious technologies; and so on). These movements are often accompanied by strong anti-establishment, anti-bureaucracy,



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(Dates not yet set: Bangalore, Bombay, Calcutta, Colombo, Madras, among others)

##### Overseas

7-9 March Princeton University, Princeton  
11-13 March Harvard University, Cambridge  
17-18 March University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
19-21 March Colorado State University, Denver  
26-29 March University of Alabama, Birmingham  
29-31 March University of Hawaii, Hawaii  
2-4 April University of Chicago, Chicago  
10 March-27 April University of California, Berkeley  
25-28 June Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- Aan Poove** (20 min). India, 1995, directed by P. Balan. *Seethalakshmi is "reborn" as Sridharan.*
- Achin Pakhi** (67 min). Bangladesh, 1995, directed by Tanvir Mokammel. *Sing to the memory of Lalou Shah, the bard of old Bengal.*
- Ajit** (28 min). India, 1996, directed by Arvind Sinha. *A servant boy in Calcutta works, speaks to the camera.*
- Amrit Beeja** (43 min). India, 1996, directed by Meera Dewan. *Traditional seeds are better than multinational seeds.*
- Ashgari Bai: Echoes of Silence** (45 min). India, 1997, directed by Priti Chandriani, Brahmananda Singh. *Once-acclaimed octogenarian singer lives in penury.*
- Aur Woh Raks Karte Rahi** (60 min). Pakistan, 1996, directed by Shireen Pasha. *Pakistani dancer Tehreema Mitha does Hindustani and modern.*
- Dry Days in Dobbagunta** (10 min). India, 1995, directed by Nupur Basu. *Anti-alcoholism in an Andhra village.*
- Father, Son & Holy War** (120 min) (TIED FOR SECOND BEST FILM AT FILM SOUTH ASIA '97). India, 1995, directed by Anand Patwardhan. *Machismo's singular contribution to communal violence.*
- Marubhumi** (52 min). India, 1995, directed by Amar Kanwar. *Interesting, how desert town Jodhpur gets its water!*
- Meals Ready** (46 min) (TIED FOR SECOND BEST FILM AT FSA '97). India, 1996, directed by Surajit Sarkar and Vani Subramaniam. *The importance of eating rice (in Tamil Nadu).*
- Mr Jinnah: The Making of Pakistan** (90 min). India and Pakistan, 1997, directed by Christopher Mitchell. *Quaid-e-Azam, there was more to him than we were told.*
- Mukhtir Gaan** (80 min) (SPECIAL MENTION BY THE JURY AT FSA '97). Bangladesh, 1995, directed by Tareque and Catherine Masud. *Archival footage of Bangladeshis singing for freedom.*
- Nusrat has left the building - but when?** (20 min) (SECOND BEST FILM AT FSA '97). Pakistan, 1997, directed by Farjad Nabi. *Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was already gone when he died.*
- Pastoral Politics** (29 min). India, 1996, directed by Sanjay Barnela and Vasant Saberwal. *Gaddi herders come up against environmentalism in Himachal.*
- The Spirit Doesn't Come Anymore** (38 min) (BEST FILM AT FSA '97). Nepal, 1997, directed by Tsering Rhitara. *Tibetan faith healer's son does not want to heal.*

For more details, contact TFSA Secretariat at Himal, Kathmandu. GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal.  
Tel: +977-1-522113/523645/521013 (fax) email: [himalmag@mos.com.np](mailto:himalmag@mos.com.np) URL: [www.himalmag.com](http://www.himalmag.com)

Manish Shrestha, Festival Director

anti-elite and anti-urban feelings. Elements of these are to be found scattered in the water-related writings published in *Himal*.

There is a degree of force and validity in some of these points of view; but the anger and indignation accompanying them can often act as mental blocks which prevent clear thinking and render communication difficult. However, this is a complex and difficult subject, which cannot be gone into adequately here.

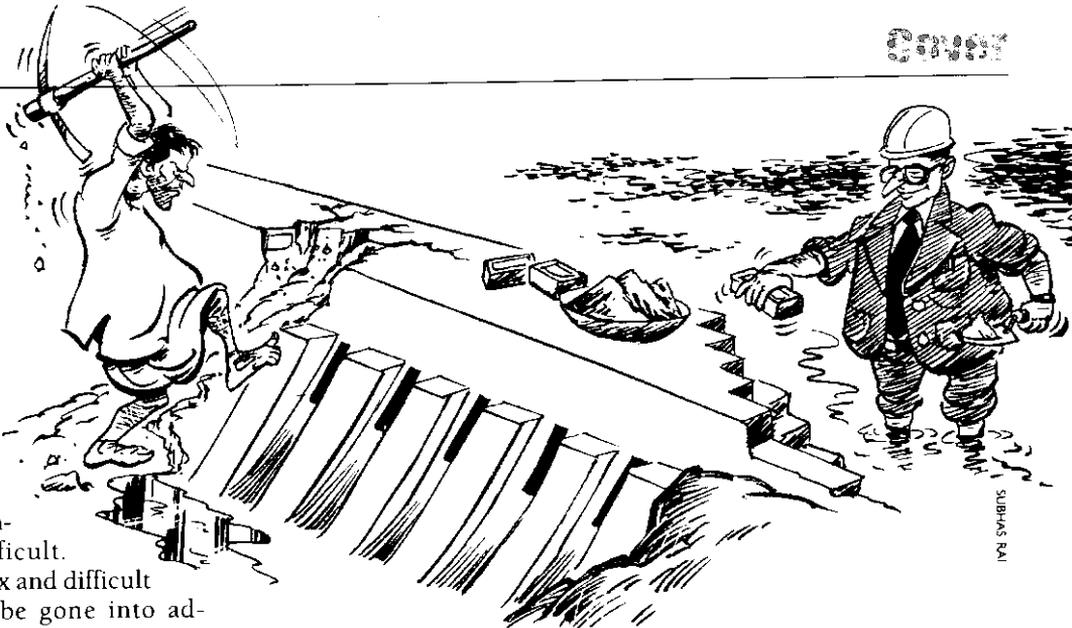
### Merging opposites

Having set forth in very broad outline some of the tendencies which hinder a constructive debate, let me now juxtapose the two conflicting positions on the large-dam controversy.

- There are those who believe that the projected future water and energy needs of a growing humanity are such that some 'mega' irrigation and hydro-electric projects are inescapable: that humanity *must* harness natural resources with the aid of science and technology; that the adverse impact of large-dam projects can be mitigated; that for the problems created by technology, answers will be provided by technology itself; that environmental concerns are important and must be taken care of but must not be overstressed or allowed to come in the way of development; and that, on the whole, large dams are necessary and good.

- There are others who believe that large-dam projects do more harm than good; that the proximate and ultimate consequences of this kind of intervention with nature cannot even be fully foreseen, much less mitigated; that such projects represent a technological hubris and a totally wrong and unsustainable kind of relationship with nature, which cannot escape eventual nemesis; that projections of future needs of water and energy should first be reassessed in the light of saner notions of development, and then met through a whole range of measures *not* involving 'mega' projects; and that large-dam projects are neither necessary nor good.

That is the debate that needs to be pursued. It cannot be said that the various pieces which have appeared in *Himal* undertake a proper examination of this central issue. Most writings in the journal and elsewhere tend to assert a particular view strongly, and sometimes elaborately; but one rarely comes across a comprehensive and rigorous examination of both propositions, lead-



ing to a firm and definitive conclusion.

Lest I should be accused of straddling the fence, let me declare my position on the controversy. I have gradually changed from a 'balanced' position (carefully set forth in an article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* of 30 September, 1989) to one of profound disquiet over the kind of relationship with nature that such projects and the underlying religion of Science and Technology represent, as well as over the other evils that accompany these projects such as collusion, corruption, inequity, etc.

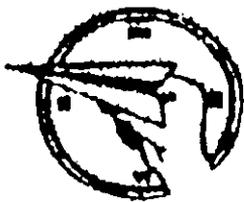
However, there are two questions to which I have not so far seen complete answers. The first is whether the 'alternative' means (economy in water use, local water conservation, micro-watershed development, traditional systems of water-harvesting and water-management, etc, in the case of water; and demand management, energy-saving, getting more out of existing capacities, extensive decentralised generation, non-conventional energy-sources, etc, in the case of energy) can adequately meet the needs of the projected magnitudes of future populations. I have seen assertions that they can, but not a definitive establishment of the proposition.

The second question is whether a ruling out of large dams alone will work without a radical turning away from all other forms of technological hubris and depredations on nature which together constitute our 'civilisation'; and whether humanity is capable of that kind of dramatic change in ways of living or is on an irreversible march towards doom. I can only pose these questions: I have no answers to give.

*R.R. Iyer is with the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi and is a former Secretary of Water Resources, Government of India.*

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MO. HAIN UDDIN/DHK



MO. HAIN UDDIN/DHK

# Guns and roses

PEACE SEEMED TO be at hand at the open-air stadium in Kagrachchary district in early February when, in the morning sunshine, regulars from the Shanti Bahini laid down their arms (or rather, stood them on a rack that had been provided) and agreed to revert from guerrillas to peasants. Shontu Larma, the man who led the insurgents to peace handed over his gun, Prime Minister Hasina Wajed responded with flowers. Then both leaders released the doves of probable peace.

But the way ahead remains precarious, not the least because Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party was shouting betrayal. Within the Chakmas themselves, fissures have appeared. Many members of the Hill Students and Hill Women's Fed-

eration have split from Larma, although he still commands the majority. The dissidents feel that the war booty will be grabbed by close associates of Larma and that the young people who were not directly involved in the fighting or who crossed over to India will get a smaller share of the peace dividend. "We are left with no option but to say that the peace treaty will not benefit the majority of the hill people," said a leader of Hill Students Federation to HIMAL. But others insist that the dissidents are in a minority and there is no appetite left for more war in the hills.

For the moment, the general mood is for peace. The last group of refugees have returned and they are keen to settle down and begin a normal life. However, at the

treaty signing ceremony itself, protest banners were held up and shouts condemning the accord were heard.

And there are other forces in the area which can cause trouble. The Bengalee settlers of CHT, one of the poorest and least popular migrant populations in the world, is now becoming increasingly defiant, partly in desperation and partly because of the increasing support they are receiving on the way to becoming future political pawns. Mainstream opinion is not in favour of moving them elsewhere. Clashes have already occurred between the Bengalees and the Chakmas.

On the other hand, whereas there were only two belligerent forces before in the hills, there are now suddenly more. There have been reports that the counter-insurgents created by the Government at the height of the insurgency may now act on their own; they have the weaponry to create problems. Also, the arrest of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) General Secretary, Anup Chetia, by the Bangladesh police and the accompanying threats by ULFA to extract revenge will also mean spilling of insurgency from India's North-east into Bangladesh, a fate it has escaped till date.

It appears that the hills may bleed again despite treaties. As the doves took to the air in the stadium in Dhaka, one could only hope for peace in our times.



MO. HAIN UDDIN/DHK

# Signs of the Times

IN EARLY FEBRUARY, readers of the *Times of India* were suddenly taken aback, pleasantly so, by the newspaper's sudden interest in human rights issues.

It started a "Human Rights Watch" section, and within a few days printed a prominent front-page announcement titled "Time to speak up". It asked, challengingly enough, "Can we allow the Enforcement Directorate to make a mockery of our fundamental rights as citizens and subvert our democratic principles?" The announcement stated that the Directorate, the federal agency which looks into fiscal misdemeanours, was given to acting with "arbitrary high-handedness" and asked readers to write in or call various TOI offices all over the country giving instances of how they were "humiliated, victimised, relentlessly persecuted" by the agency.

A worthy public cause taken up by a reputed national newspaper? It certainly looked like it. Except that investigations carried by the paper appeared only after a spate of reports detailing how the ED had been harassing "noted industrialist" Ashok Jain over alleged violation of FERA (Foreign Exchange Regulation Act). The Bombay-based Ashok Jain is none other than the chairman of Bennett, Coleman and Company, owners of Times group of publications, which includes TOI.

The campaign against ED began with a front-page report in which various Indian chambers of commerce and industry "deplored the grossly inhuman manner in which the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is ill-treating noted industrialist Ashok Jain." All

the TOI reports used "noted industrialist" or "a senior business leader", never letting on that he was the boss, save for one mention buried in an inside page.

The paper printed reports of other denunciations too, one of which interestingly was by the powerful Jain community threatening a non-cooperation movement if the ED did not get off Ashok Jain's back. Then came a series of articles of past excesses of the ED, along with comments from legal experts, all scathing in their attacks against the high-handedness of the agency. These included a report on how the All India Newspaper Owners' Conference denounced the Directorate for harassing Jain.

In the Indian media, there were just a few to call the TOI bluff. One such was the Bombay Union of Journalists, which issued a statement stating that "not only is this sustained campaign to get the Enforcement Directorate off Mr Ashok Jain's back a mockery of journalistic ethics, it also crudely exposes the real nature of 'freedom of the press' in the country."

The Union further asked: "Can a newspaper be run to further the personal interest of a person charged under FERA? Can precious space be wasted to drum up support for an accused? Do journalists have no options but to silently participate in such cynical and contemptuous artifices? Does the Press Council of India not have a suo moto duty to call a halt to this daylight tomfoolery immediately?"

*The Statesman* of Calcutta was apparently the only newspaper to have the courage to react against the

Can we allow the Enforcement Directorate to make a mockery of our fundamental rights as citizens and subvert our democratic principles? Can it unilaterally condemn a person as an economic offender, and use that as an excuse to strip him of every shred of dignity? That from the overwhelming public response to *The Times of India's* series highlighting human rights violations by the ED, harassment. It is not just industry associations which have officially denounced the Most of us have, at some time and in some measure, experienced the arrogance of authority. But few dare to speak up because they are afraid that they will find no redress, only more vicious retribution, questioning. Now *The Times of India* opens its pages to the voice of the people; provides a powerful platform to bring to public notice cases of wanton disregard of human rights, of arbitrary and brutal exercise of authority. Have you been humiliated, victimised, relentlessly persecuted without an opportunity to give your side of the case? Let us know. We will publish your experience — and guarantee you the protection of public opinion. Talk to us. Freely and frankly. For the greatest weapon of oppression is fear.

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Calcutta: Shikha Mukerjee Tel No. 2446700  
Or write to them in the respective offices of *The Times of India*.

prejudiced coverage by a 'sister' daily. It wrote at length in an editorial:

*FICCI alleges inhuman and high handed treatment. Mr Jain has received 22 different summons to appear and answer questions, he has ignored them all. It seems by now standard practice for him to check into hospital on receipt of summons; in one case he was fit enough to leave for London the next day, in another he attended long religious discourses in Delhi over 10 days.*

Apparently, the media baron has had no problems getting the "sick" certificates since he is a trustee of a Bombay hospital (incidentally, named the Bombay Hospital).

The decline and commercialisation of the TOI over the last few years under the leadership of Sameer Jain (Ashok Jain's son) has been a matter of grave concern for observers who follow the ups and downs of India's national English media. It seems that the Ashok Jain episode has succeeded in exposing the TOI more than it has the ED.

It must be reported in all fairness, however, that whatever might be its genesis, the "Human Rights Watch" has gone on to provide space for some real issues, as seen from these sample headlines in TOI: "NHRC [National Human Rights Commission] for CBI probe into custodial deaths"; "SC guidelines on arrest, detention reiterated"; and "US state department indicts India on human rights violations".

## Code of Ethics

A paragraph from the TOI Code of Ethics, as announced by the paper in its 16 October 1996 issue.

"Every journalist should ensure that professional objectivity is not influenced by personal likes, dislikes, friendship and ideologies. Journalists should refrain from being members of political organisations. Involvement in political activities, community affairs, demonstrations and social causes that could cause a conflict of interest with the discharge of professional duties should be avoided. Any situation of a potential conflict of interest (such as covering the activities of a club-organisation of which one is a member) should be brought to the attention of the Editor by the journalist concerned."

# Peace manoeuvres

IN THE RACE to set up international centres on this subject or that, successful host cities are those that take the initiative. And so Dhaka became the proposed venue for a South Asian training centre for international peace-keeping when it lavished its attention on a four-day conference on "South Asian Peacekeeping Experience" in early February.

On the whole, participants at the meeting pooh-pooed the idea of a standing United Nations army as impracticable, but supported the concept of a United Nations standby force, which could be quickly deployed when the need arose. Such a

stand-by army would have to be region-based, and ergo, there was the need for regional peacekeeping training centres. Asia would need one too.

Within South Asia, it was Nepal and Bangladesh whose geopolitical standing is still 'correct' enough to be able to be home to such a centre. Whether it was tardiness in Kathmandu or a show of camaraderie is not clear, but Kathmandu did not stake a claim.

Hosting the United Nations meet, where, incongruously enough, the United States Army's Asia-Pacific

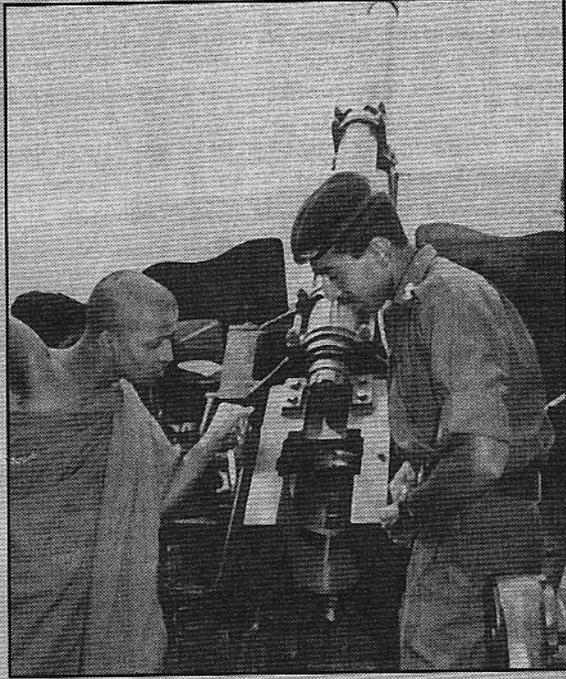
Chief of the Army Staff, Lt Gen Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman Bir Bikram referred to the recent accord with the Chakma rebels and said that by signing a peace accord with a section of its population that had taken up arms, Bangladesh had translated into practice the principles of lasting peace. "Bangladesh's decade-long experience in international peacekeeping qualifies Bangladesh to host the proposed peacekeeping academy," he reminded the gathering.

There was no point of order raised by the other South Asians present.

War machine in central Dhaka.



KANAK MANI DIXIT



## Big guns

WAH! NEPAL'S HIRSUTE Crown Prince Dipendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev visited Pakistan in mid-February, and they showed him a gun. The place was Wah, near Peshawar, which has an ordnance factory. Meanwhile, at the other end of the Subcontinent, at about the same time, a Sri Lankan soldier was showing an even bigger gun to a venerable *bikkhu*. Frankly, we are worried, at the great interest being exhibited on firepower by junior royalty and clergy alike.

# South Asia vs the Maghreb

**EPISODE:** NEW DELHI journalist (Sagarika Ghosh, d/o former Secretary of Information Bhaskar Ghosh) meets Laila Abdel Hamid, wife of an Algerian diplomat. What follows is the chronology of events as we have understood it through reported corroborated testimony.

**16 February:** In the upscale Khan market locality where diplomats and well-heeled Delhiwallahs shop for books and shampoo, journalist Ghosh parks her Maruti in front of housewife Hamid's Contessa. Latter asks former to move. Former apparently says, "Don't be silly, there is enough space for you." Not clear who, but one expresses rude sentiments. Matters complicated by English-French cross-lingual interface. The initial word is that Ghosh was dragged out of the car and thrashed on the ground, but later she responds to a question and states that she emerged on her own locomotion. (The Algerian ambassador subsequently maintains that Ghosh opened the door violently, which is what led to the fracas.) Several people, including a super-nationalist *panwallah* plying his trade within coughing distance, intervene and the two separate and get back into their cars. The mediawoman concedes to having uttered the expletive "bitch" at that point, whereupon diplomat's wife once again emerged and proceeded to thrash the *Bharatiya nari*. One bystander is quoted by a paper as saying, "She called us bloody Indians. How can we take that, especially when elections are going on today."

**Fallout:** The editor of *Outlook* magazine, for whom Ghosh works, writes a protest note to the Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral and Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath. The foreign office decides to upgrade a parking lot spat into a diplomatic incident and summons the Algerian ambassador, Abdelhamid Bereksi, over to express official "displeasure".



**Comment:** Editors need not write letters to prime ministers on matters such as this, nor should foreign ministries getting involved. Lack of perspective on the part of both. The Non-Aligned Movement gravely affected by this incident between two fraternal members.

**Internet gossip** (from the chat site of the New York-based South Asian Journalists Association):

- \* It's obvious that people's first instinct is to empathise with the poor pummelled journalist and berate the arrogant diplomat's wife. That's precisely why we need to look at this incident with a little scepticism...
- \* The question was why was the crowd incensed? Me thinks the

crowd was outraged at seeing two women having the temerity to fight like men.

- \* As a rising star of the Indian media scene, Ghosh's plight got greater coverage than it would have had she been the daughter of a silver trader from Old Delhi.
- \* I want to hear Mrs Algerian Diplomat's point of view, if only to learn more about the secret of her awesome strength.
- \* The Ministry of External Affairs should reserve gestures of official displeasure for differences on policy, not brawls over parking space.
- \* Just look at the elements: young mother, crying baby, arrogant diplomat, apathetic cops and enraged patriotic citizenry. Everything fits in a little too neatly.

## War movies

**EVEN WHILE PEACENIKS** try to mend the Indo-Pak fence, warmongers continue with their nationalistic atavistic baying. How to, otherwise, explain plans for a 13-episode docudrama entitled *Battle of Honours of the Indian Army*, scheduled to begin telecast on Doordarshan at the end of May?

The film is being made by Sinia Jain of Delhi, and as one news report had it, the story is about how "Indian regiments fought against overwhelming odds to win the battle and the war". Apparently, in the story line, the options are limited for our brave Indian *jawans*: "To take flight and give the Pakistanis a clear run all the way to Delhi or to stay and fight. It's no choice at all!"

But there is a choice in how this serial is being made. It could be treated like a documentary, which would, of course, be fine. But in all likelihood it will demonise the far side, in which case one wonders what fallout this satellite presentation will spark in the minds on the other side of Attari/Wagah.

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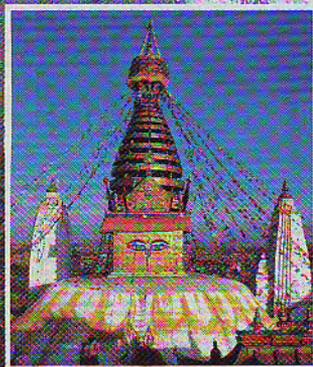


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# Not the same Surat

Four years after the "plague", this Indian city is cleaner. But is it healthier?

text and pictures by Jyoti Thottam

This is a new-leaf story. Well, almost. Of how a dirty city that bred a mysterious plague three years ago, went on to become (according to one survey) India's second cleanest city. Surat, in the western state of Gujarat, is no longer the friendliest of places for garbage or rats, nor should it enthuse those on the lookout for muckraking stories. After the mystery epidemic that spread panic in 1994, the city has cleaned up its act. But in the process, it is learning a few lessons on the difficulty of sustaining cleanliness.

By September-end 1994, Surat had seen the worst of the 'plague' (see box on following page). A few dozen people had died, a few hundred had been hospitalised, and a few hundred thousand had fled. Panic spread beyond Surat and beyond India. Airlines cut flights, those that did take off were fumigated on arrival, and tourists shunned India. Surat's workers sought refuge in their native villages in Gujarat and neighbouring

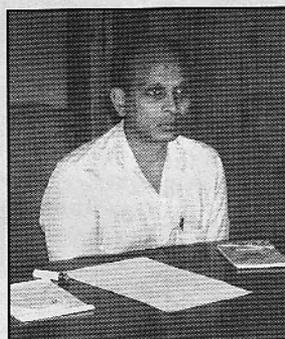
Maharashtra, deserting the textile factories and diamond houses that provide the city its wealth. However, during their absence, the municipal corporation got to work. Under an ambitious Action Plan, city workers cleared thousands of metric tons of garbage and sprayed more than 60 metric tons of insecticide. As people trickled back to the city over the next few weeks, they found Surat a changed place. Or, as put in Hindi, *Surat ka surat badal gaya* - Surat's appearance has changed.

Once the initial caution subsided, however, the same lame municipal system remained and the dirt returned. An interim administrator instituted a cleanliness campaign, but no substantial change was noted. The only change that came about was political, but then it proved to be a blessing. After the February 1995 state elections in

which the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power, it named a new municipal commissioner - Suryadevara Ramachandra Rao, whose previous record belied the kind of dramatic changes he would bring about in Surat.

## Into the wastebasket

Rao, or 'Rao Saheb' as he is better known in Surat now, was appointed Commissioner in May 1995. He says that when he arrived Surat had its neck on the chopping block, "The monsoon was fast approaching, and the city was as dirty as ever." His response was swift: a massive, institutionalised effort to clear the city of garbage. Rao and his team were



able to more than double the amount of solid waste collected, from a daily haul of 400 metric tons before May 1995 to 850 metric tons in 1996.

Although not revolutionary, Rao's changes are effective. Like the increase in the number of municipal sweepers from 3085 in 1995 to 4397 in 1996. And the sweepers, under the eye of more supervisors (and paved footpaths which render their task less difficult) are doing a better job. The roads have been widened too, and are now swept daily. Rao has also added 25 tractors and 445 bins for garbage collection.

It doesn't stop there. A system of assessing fines is now in place to curb improper waste disposal by individuals, households, factories and others. In 15 months (from September 1995 to December 1996), the municipal corporation extracted fines of more than INR 3.9 million from 27,556 people. The effective penalty system



High rises and posh temples on the right side of the tracks, Surat, and Rao Saheb (above).

has done wonders in making Suratis give up old habits. For instance, under threat of a 50-rupee fine, fruit vendors now keep wastebaskets under their carts.

The response to all that has been happening, from both inside and outside Surat, has been encouraging. The Indian National Trust for Arts and Culture, a non-profit group based in Bangalore, surveyed 80 cities of the country and chose Surat as the second cleanest city after Chandigarh. In an exhaustive study of the 'plague' and its aftermath, Ghanshyam Shah, former director of the Centre for Social Studies in Surat, concludes that the city is significantly cleaner, even in the slum areas.

Most Suratis also confirm the difference. "Places which once could not be cleaned in the night, now for the whole night, people from the sanitation department are there," says Satish Tamakuwala, owner of a dry goods shop in the central Chowk area of the old part of the city, where a labyrinth of narrow alleys connects hundreds of tiny storefronts and homes. In the evenings, this area is choked with shoppers. However, considering the volume of foot traffic, the relative absence of trash is remarkable.

The changes extend to the outskirts as well. "The sweeper comes every day in the morning and in the evening," says Sashikala Sonunimai, who works in a medical practitioner's office and lives in Udhna, an industrial pocket, one among the several localities incorporated into Surat in the late 1980s. The modest concrete house where Sashikala lives with her sister's family sits in a colony near the Udhna railway station, the first stop on the way from Surat to Bombay. "Before the plague, it was really dirty here," she says. "Now it's really good, there's no fear that the plague might strike."

### What plague?

The belief that clean streets will somehow prevent the recurrence of plague (if indeed it was one in the first place) is widespread, but it may be rather misplaced. Plague bacteria is usually transmitted from rats to humans via fleas, so while the clearing up of garbage does reduce the risk of infection,

## Was it or wasn't it plague?

**DURING THE CRITICAL** epidemiological moment - when patients were streaming in to be examined, tested, and treated - none of the data in the patient charts was correlated or analysed. The doctors could not tell whether or not cases were clustered geographically, nor did they know how many suspected cases tested positive for plague at any given time. "If you want to prove that this is an epidemic, then you have to have this data," says Dr Ketan Jhaveri, the resident in charge at the New Civil Hospital during the outbreak.

Since then, scientists have had to struggle to re-create what happened. A Gujarat state committee, a central government committee, the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, private laboratories, and the World Health Organisation have analysed samples collected during the outbreak. The results have been inconclusive, mainly because of the difficulty in isolating the plague bacteria from old and sometimes contaminated tissue samples.

Although its findings were not much different from the others, WHO was the first official body to question whether the plague bacteria was present in Surat at all. Its December 1994 report burst open a Pandora's box of doubts and theories, and holstered the position of some Indian doctors who suspected that the symptoms in Surat fit the pattern of melioidosis or tularemia. Either of these, as well as malaria or tuberculosis, could have been present among the thousands of patients treated, but without testing all of them, it is impossible to tell for sure.

Later, in 1995, WHO reported that the Surat plague was different from other known strains of the *yersinia pestis* bacteria. This unleashed speculation that the microbe was a genetically engineered weapon of biological warfare and fuelled the current rumour that Pakistani intelligence agents had planted it (apparently with the cooperation of the local rat population and the river Tapti). In the absence of better epidemiological information, speculation can run wild.

it doesn't wholly prevent it. Laxminagar (picture, right) and Ramnagar, where the earliest cases and most of the deaths were reported, were neither the dirtiest, nor the poorest, nor the most crowded neighbourhoods in Surat. So why were these places so much more affected?

Geography may have been the deciding factor. The land in that part of Surat, on the southern bank of the river Tapti, is bowl-shaped. In 1994, the river overflowed its banks, carrying with it garbage and sewage directly to the bottom of the bowl, where the unlucky residents of Laxminagar and Ramnagar make their home. Dinesh Prajapati, a diamond worker living in the Ved Road area, recalls how he built a raft from empty water containers and paddled around the lake of filth, among car-

casses of pigs, dogs and cows. "After three days, the water receded," he says. "The water was gone." But the filth stayed.

Today, this lack of drainage and access to sewer lines is the real challenge, much more difficult than sweeping the streets and collecting garbage. Since Rao took office, access to municipal sewerage has increased by a bare 2 percent, from 50 to 52. To provide sewer and water services to its population for the next seven years, Surat will need INR 11,000 million. In comparison, the city spent only INR 62 million on sanitation services in 1996-97.

For those living outside the flood-prone areas, the lack of municipal drainage doesn't seem to be a significant problem. Now that the city looks clean, most Suratis point with pride to their new sense of civic responsi-

bility. They have a point there. Rao's decision to widen the roads could not have come off without public support. About 45,000 shops and a few thousand dwellings were destroyed, mostly with the owners' consent. Thus, Surat effectively added more than 78,500 square metres of area and 45 km of road space, easing some of its severe congestion. While this may have made the city more habitable, an immediate, and perhaps only-to-be-expected, fallout has been that many now find it irrelevant to trace the origin of the panic four years ago.

### Now for consolidation

However, complacency is the last thing Suratis can afford, given the precarious nature of the city's success. Bad news may just be lurking around the corner. As an IAS officer, Rao serves at the will of the Gujarat state government, and expects to leave office by this spring. Political infighting in the state capital, Gandhinagar, has already prompted the commissioner to request a transfer nine times.

And Rao's successor may find the going tough. Unlike Rao, he, or she, is likely to face a resource crunch. When Rao took over, Surat municipality had hundreds of millions of

rupees in both its revenue and capital accounts. "Before Rao came, the municipal corporation was claiming to be very rich only because whatever they were planning they were not able to spend," says I.J. Desai, a lawyer and accountant, and the President of Surat Citizens' Council, a local community organisation.

Before May 1995, the corporation spent about INR 300 million per year on capital projects; in 1996, it spent INR 1650 million, even as it went about looking for further large-scale capital projects from the World Bank and USAID. On the revenue side, Rao pumped in money by collecting delinquent property taxes and levying fines. But these are not perennial sources. For any future expansion of municipal services, Surat may well have to raise taxes, an unpopular option in a city where they've remained stable for 17 years.

Finally, and rather ironically, the enthusiasm for cleanliness may well be sullyng the environment. All that garbage from the streets has to go somewhere, and so far, the only options are crude landfills. One resident of Laxminagar held up a glass of water and angrily insisted that the garbage has contaminated the bore wells they rely on. In Bhesan, a village just south of the city limits, residents blamed an outbreak of gastroenteritis last October on municipal seepage and, in retaliation, beat up a city engineer to within an inch of his life. The gap between those who benefit most from Surat's new image, the middle-class professionals living in the central areas, and those still standing in line at the municipal taps is wide.

All said and done, Surat has shown that it is possible for a dirty, overcrowded city to come clean. But without adequate municipal services and the long-range investment necessary to sustain them, a clean city does not necessarily mean a healthy one.  $\Delta$

*J. Thottam is a freelance writer.*

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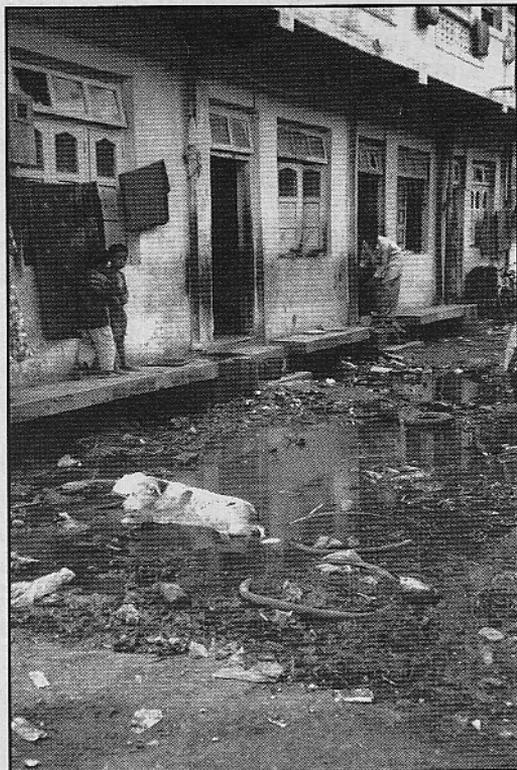
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# V O I

*THE QUEST FOR PARADISE* often ends abruptly when tourists end up with cowdung on their clothes, writes David Nicholson-Lord, author of *The Greening of the Cities* (Routledge), in *The Nation*.

What makes people want to travel? The short answer centers on the concept of escape. According to Jost Krippendorf, the Swiss academic who is one of the leading authorities on modern tourism, people travel because "they no longer feel happy where they are - where they work, where they live. They feel the monotony of the daily routine, the cold rationality of factories, offices, apartment blocks and transport, shrinking human contact...the loss of nature and naturalness." MacCannell argues that mass tourism is a product of the "most depersonalised" epoch in history.

Well, maybe. It's true that people with gardens, or those who live in small towns, take fewer holidays than apartment-block residents or city dwellers. It's probably also true that what we casually refer to as the "pressures of daily life" - work, family, commuting - are more intense, in some respects, than ever before.

Yet people have always felt a desire for something more than their life routinely offers them - something, well, different. It's partly because humans are naturally inquisitive and exploratory but also, and more significant, because we need the unknown, what historians of religion call "otherness," to lend our lives significance. So we conceive of ideal worlds - Paradise, the Golden Age, Heaven, Atlantis, Shangri-La - and dream, sometimes, of attaining them.

Modern tourism routinely, and often shamelessly, exploits such myths, as the most casual glance through just about any brochure will attest. It is ably assisted by the travel-writing business, which, while purporting to be independent, is actually part of the marketing operation, complete with writers who depend for their livelihoods on the tour or resort operators. Millions of people are thus launched yearly on a quest for paradise, or a voyage of self-discovery, into the midst of millions of others going about their daily business. Visions of reality collide, often resoundingly, which helps

to explain why tourists have been shot in Egypt and pelted with cow dung and rotten fish in Goa and why many natives of Hawaii - one of the archetypal tropical island "paradises" - want a boycott of tourism, describing it as "the plague" suffered by a "historically oppressed people."

*A NEW GLOBAL MENTALITY* is required, says Edward Said delivering the Netaji Subhas Bose centenary oration at the Netaji Research Bureau, Calcutta.

It does seem to me ostrich-like to suggest that people in Europe and the US should maintain our so-called Western identity by holding all the others at bay, increasing the rifts between peoples in order to prolong our dominance. That is, in effect, what [Samuel P.] Huntington is arguing, and one can easily understand why it is that his essay [Clash of Civilisations] was published in *Foreign Affairs*, and why so many policymakers have drifted towards it as allowing the US to extend the mindset of the Cold War into a different time. Much more productive and useful is to try to promote the emergence of a new global mentality that sees the dangers we face from the standpoint of the whole human race.

These dangers include the pauperisation of most of the globe's population; the emergence of virulent local, national, ethnic and religious sentiment, as in Bosnia, Rwanda, Lebanon, Chechnya; the decline of literacy, and the onset of a new illiteracy based on electronic modes of communication, television and the global information superhighway; the fragmentation and threatened disappearance of the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment.

Our most precious asset in the face of such a dire transformation of tradition and of history is the emergence of a sense of integrative community, understanding, sympathy, and hope which is the direct opposite of what in his essay Huntington has provoked. If I may quote some lines by the great Martiniquian poet Aimé Césaire...

"but the work of man is only just beginning/

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and it remains to man to conquer all/the violence entrenched in the recesses of his passion/And no race possesses the monopoly of beauty,/of intelligence, of force, and there/is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory."

**PAST TENSE, PRESENT REPENTANCE.** *H.Y. Sharada Prasad in The Asian Age on the culture of apology that has all of a sudden gripped everyone, starting with Sonia Gandhi's apologies for the Congress party's past misdeeds.*

At the end of the Twentieth Century there was a Great Flood. It was the Flood of Contrition. Everybody began apologising to everybody else for every wrong that had been done before.

God apologised for having created the sun and the moon and the stars and the world and day and night and birds and beasts and fishes. Then He apologised to Adam and Eve. Eve apologised to Adam for having de-ribbed him. The Serpent apologised to both for introducing them to temptation. Adam apologised to Eve for having made her the mother of a murderer...Elsewhere, in Greece, Oedipus apologised to his mother Jocasta for not getting lost at hirth but turning up years later to wed and bed her. The Sphinx apologised to Oedipus for putting him questions which were too easy. Helen apologised for possessing a face which launched a thousand ships... In Syracuse, Archimedes apologised to his fellow-citizens for streaking across the streets and shouting that he had found what none of them had complained of having lost.

In our own land...Prince Rama apologised to King Janaka for unnecessarily breaking his bow while necessarily marrying his daughter...Hanuman apologised to Ravana for carrying out deforestation...Kunti apologised to Draupadi for breaking the norm of gender equality and imposing five husbands on her. Draupadi apologised to Dusshasana for not letting him know that her sari would be endless.

...Mountbatten apologised for not preventing Partition (and for not mastering the correct spell-

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ing of 'Jawaharlal'...). Jinnah apologised for propagating the two-nation theory and Yahya Khan for converting it into a three-nation theory. Mahatma Gandhi apologised to Godse for coming in the way of his bullets.

...And historians apologised to school students that this flood of apologies had not changed history and they had to continue to mug up names and dates. Like "what will be, will be", what has been, is. That, they pointed out, is what is called a historical fact.

**INTOLERANT ISLAM IS NOT ISLAM,** *but mere insular arrogance writes Rehana Hakim in her editorial in Newline, the magazine from Karachi.*

...virtually every political leader who has occupied the seat of power has invariably talked of the inherent dangers to Islam and presented himself as a soldier and saviour of Islam. From General Zia-ul-Haq down to his protege Nawaz Sharif to even the extremely Westernised liberal, Z.A. Bhutto, all have exploited Islam to justify their acts of omission and commission. Leaders such as these, who have used Islam as a billboard to sell themselves, have caused grievous harm to both democracy and Islam.

The danger to Islam also comes from another source: the various religious groups who see themselves as the *thekedars* (protectors) of religion and flaunt their brand of Islam as being the only real Islam. They have sowed the seeds of hatred, of dissension, and fanned the flames of sectarianism which have claimed several thousand innocent lives.

Does Islam, or for that matter any religion, sanction the gunning down of men, women and children? Even places of worship like mosques and imambarahs have not been spared. This is barbarism, not Islam. Surely Islam does not preach intolerance of the other person's beliefs. Is a Sunni a better human being than a Shia or vice versa, or is a Muslim morally superior to a Christian or a Hindu? This is arrogance, not Islam.

# S

# Where is the "SAARC process" in academia?

Looking only at India-Nepal scholarship as example, a Kathmandu historian finds little reason to be optimistic about the production of quality scholarship among SAARC countries about each other.

by Pratyoush Onta

## Official SAARC process: Track One

One of the key components of the official SAARC Process is the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA). Twelve areas of cooperation have been agreed upon under the IPA, each looked after by a technical committee. One area designated is "Education, Culture and Sports".

The technical committee which looks after education, culture and sports has prioritised several themes in the field of education and listed activities such as "expert group meetings" on various subjects including higher education. In its own words, the committee is "also engaged in the improvement and expansion of the SAARC chairs, fellowships and scholarship schemes", which are described as having a "tremendous potential to facilitate greater interaction among the intelligentsia in the region."

Needless to say, this "potential" remains far from realised. As much has been admitted in government circles. It was back in December 1995 at the Commemorative Session of the Council of Ministers held in New Delhi to celebrate the 10th anniversary of SAARC that the then Foreign Minister of Nepal, Prakash C. Lohani, said in his statement: "The SAARC chairs, SAARC fellowships and SAARC scholarships schemes need to be rescued from the limbo they have descended into... We need to expand education links."

Even before the founding of SAARC

in late 1985, various academic exercises had been held regarding the potential benefits that would accrue to the entire region after the realisation of the regional association. Many position papers were commissioned from academics of the various countries as part of the exercise leading to the foundation of SAARC. Several surveys focusing on different aspects of the regional economy and developments that could be achieved through regional cooperation were published as monographs in the early 1980s.

During those same years, many articles entitled "Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Perspective from Country X" were published in various journals. Since its founding, the SAARC organisation's initiatives in academia have produced further surveys of the same nature. While these surveys may have added a bit to our understanding of the region, their overall superficiality has meant that despite exhortations on the part of the concerned officials, or the proclaimed IPA of SAARC, the official initiative has done little to facilitate serious scholarship by members of the academia of the region.

## Non-Official SAARC process: Tracks Two and Three

Even as the official SAARC organisation continues to languish amidst the pomp generated by its formal activities, various commentators hasten to highlight the achievements recorded

through what has been called the 'non-official SAARC process' - the meeting of activists, journalists, filmmakers, physicians, scholars and various other professionals in cross-South Asian forums.

The non-official SAARC process obviously has a role to play. It includes so-called "track two" initiatives which seek to influence governmental policies in the region, which more often than not are manned by retired government officials or individuals close to official thinking, as also "track three", the realm of social activists who prefer to provide alternatives to government-led thinking. All these twin-track meetings must perforce have allowed non-governmental professionals to discuss issues of importance with individual countries and the region in general.

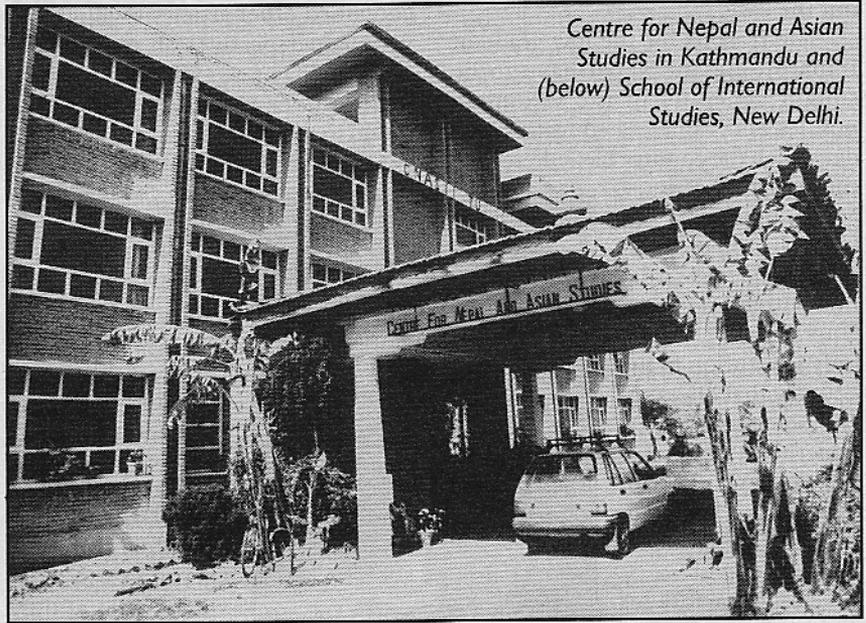
But how has this non-official process touched the field of academia? What is the nature of the scholarly exchange that exists? The May/June 1997 issue of *Himal* notes: "Part of the reason why SAARC was not more effective in its first decade is that it was not challenged enough by academia and media." The article further stated that good scholars had stayed away from SAARC studies mainly because "they saw the organisation as a non-starter," hence "leaving the field open for mediocrity to flourish". Once good scholars supersede the nationalist intellectual ghettos in which they have allowed

themselves to be incarcerated for the past half a century, said the article, South Asian regional scholarship would flourish.

To be sure, a small number of mostly English-fluent academics have met in different parts of the region under the auspices of institutions and with funds which are mostly provided by Western donor agencies. These meetings have allowed academics - some of whom have done very little by way of participation in national academic exercises within their own countries - to gain professional and personal friendships as part of the building up of new regional networks, to sometimes challenge stereotyped views of each other's countries, and to circulate otherwise obscure writings amongst each other. Despite these achievements, these non-official initiatives have not produced any foundational works that are recognisably different from the official productions of the SAARC-variety.

As a researcher who received formal training in South Asian history, and now based in Kathmandu, this writer is far less optimistic about the so-called non-official SAARC process when it comes to academia. The intention is not to undermine the need for good South Asian scholarship on the region but to emphasise that more than just the breaking out of "nationalist intellectual ghettos" needs to happen before good regional scholarship can flourish.

To begin with, we have not taken adequate stock of the obstacles that prevent an optimistic future and this should be our first exercise. Without expecting much, we have to analyse the substantive orientations of previous scholarly research done in any one South Asian country on a neighbouring country. We then have to discuss how these orientations aid or do not aid the flowering of a good regional scholarship. For without strong homebases for broadly defined social science research activity in each of the SAARC countries, no region-wide South Asian scholarship can flourish. These homebases in each of the re-



Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies in Kathmandu and (below) School of International Studies, New Delhi.

CHITIZ ARUN SHRESTHA

gional countries should not only be active generators of research and publications but should also be evaluating scholarship on the individual countries and the region as a whole. Writings on individual countries and the region as a whole may, of course, also be written outside the region and these too should be evaluated.

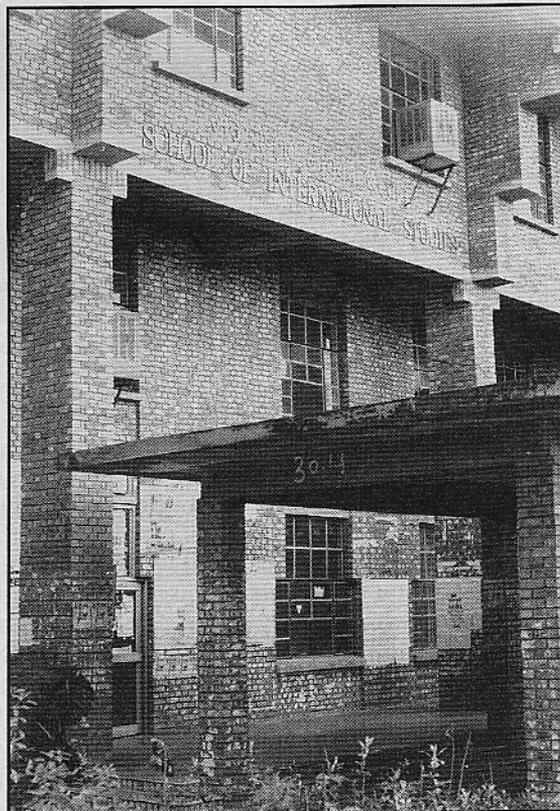
In effect, this means having com-

petent research institutions within each SAARC country to focus on each of the regional countries before a region-wide scholarship can be built. In other words, we need a good Nepali research institution or group of active Nepali scholars doing significant research on India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, etc, and vice versa respectively, and so on.

Since the kind of region-wide analysis of scholarship mentioned above is beyond the scope of this writer's expertise, this analysis will limit itself to the case of India and Nepal alone. It will only discuss institutional orientations and common topical foci found in Nepali scholarship on India and Indian scholarship on Nepal.

### Studying India in Nepal

Comparatively speaking, India can 'afford' ignorance about Nepal, whereas, because of its huge impact on the country, Nepal has imperatives enough to closely study its southern giant. This would suggest that the political and academic leadership in Nepal would have identified Indian Studies as a high-priority item within academia and that considerably more scholarship on India from Nepal exists rather than the other way around. But this is



not the case.

The reasons for the low grade of India Studies in Nepal have to be sought generally in the visionless politics and valueless education under which the country has suffered for the past half century. More specifically, the blame lies on the massively chaotic situation within Tribhuvan University (TU), the only institution in the country that offers social science courses, and the stunted domains of research in these subjects within it and in Nepal in general.

Despite platitudes on the sacrosanct nature of India-Nepal relations from 'time immemorial' that have been a fixture of Nepali political rhetoric, this writer knows of no serious governmental effort to establish, within its own bureaucracy, a research cell of scholars doing work on various aspects of Indian polity. A beginning was made with the establishment of the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies in TU in the early 1970s, which did provide an opportunity for Nepali scholars to begin talking about a programme in area studies.

By the end of the decade, however, the Institute had been downgraded to the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), and it was not until the mid-1980s that it actually began work on the subject under the directorship of Khadga Bikram Shah, a brother-in-law of the then all-powerful King Birendra. Shah had gathered almost all of the top political scientists of Nepal in CNAS by 1984-85, and his efforts resulted in two major publications, the *Strategic Studies Series* started in 1984 and the *CNAS Year Review* in 1986.

CNAS scholars not only began carrying out country-wise studies but also participated in the academic exercises related to the founding of the official SAARC. In this connection, a special issue of the *Strategic Studies Series* was published in Spring 1985 and subsequent issues of this journal

contained other articles highlighting various perspectives on regional co-operation. The *CNAS Year Review* contained survey articles similar to those found in the annual country-wise survey editions of the American journal, *Asian Survey*. Starting from 1986, various Nepali scholars wrote country reviews for SAARC countries and two or three additional countries outside of the region.

The 'India desk' inside CNAS was looked after by political scientist Govinda Malla, whose own annual review articles on India unfortunately were not the kind

that could be called informed analyses. Based largely on Indian newspaper and magazine reports, these reports did not engage with scholarship from India and elsewhere. They were superficial surveys written in a mode devoid of any serious disciplinary perspective.

As director, Shah did try to re-invigorate studies on India among researchers during the 1989 Indo-Nepal trade and transit impasse. But differences between scholars who took up ultra-nationalist positions and those who were seen to be 'soft' on India grew so large that the director abandoned the initiative. With Shah's own subsequent departure from CNAS, the *CNAS Year Review* and the *Strategic Studies Series* vanished from the scene. The beginning that had been made on India studies in Nepal died a premature death. This loss meant that to this day discerning politicians and policy-makers are not able to contend with India in important matters from an informed 'Nepali' position.

Today, Nepali efforts to understand India and Indian society through rigorous research and schol-

arly work is largely non-existent. Studies on India within TU are limited to isolated scholarly efforts whose themes have included Indo-Nepal relations, transborder migration and new dimensions of regional security. Some scholars outside TU have, in the course of researching Nepal's hydro-power possibilities, highlighted Indian interests in specific hydro-power development trajectories in Nepal. In the meantime, new works in a number of disciplines representing international scholarship on India remain largely unread by Nepali academics.

### Studying Nepal in India

At the moment, there are three cities in India where social science research on Nepal is conducted: New Delhi, Jaipur and Banaras. In the first city, at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Nepal has received some attention from researchers affiliated predominantly with the South Asian Studies Division of its School of International Studies (SIS).

The precursor to SIS was the Indian School of International Studies in New Delhi, where some of the most insightful works related to Nepal was done by the first generation of scholars of post-Independence India. Anirudha Gupta's *Politics in Nepal* (1964) and Kanchanmoy Mojumdar's fine work on the diplomatic history of India and

Nepal (1962) were first completed as dissertations there. Subsequently, about 40 MPhil and PhD dissertations have been completed from JNU on subjects related to Nepal, mostly from within SIS.

International relations and diplomatic history (India-Nepal, Nepal-China), and research on the politics of Nepal since the late-Rana era through the perspectives of political science and political history have dominated the themes selected for study by Indian scholars. It is worth noting that given JNU's prominence in



One-time CNAS director, Khadga Bikram Shah.



Prof Anirudha Gupta

various other social science disciplines, the number of studies on Nepal completed in programmes other than those of SIS is negligible. While SIS-generated research has generally supported Indian political interests in Nepal, hardly anything has been done to examine Nepal from other social science disciplinary perspectives.

In Jaipur, Nepal has been studied by researchers affiliated with the South Asia Studies Centre of the University of Rajasthan. Articles on Nepal by various faculty members of the Centre and others have occasionally appeared in its journal, *South Asian Studies*. And from Banaras Hindu University's Centre for the Study of Nepal (CSN), established in 1976, several papers on Nepal have been published as part of an Occasional Paper Series. An irregular journal, the *Indian Journal of Nepalese Studies* has also been appearing since 1987 from CSN. Since 1983, about 25 PhDs have been completed by researchers associated with the Centre.

The research work that has emerged from Jaipur and Banaras on Nepal is no different in its topical foci from that produced at JNU's SIS. The predominantly political science orientation, the overall use of only Indian and Nepali newspapers published in the English language as sources, and the use of only a few key Nepali personalities as regular informants mean that most Indian scholarship on Nepal tends to be confined to a narrow band within what is possible in social science research. The linkages between this scholarship and Indian political interests in Nepal are obvious, and Indian scholars have been seen to be far less free when it comes to establishing positions that are independent of South Block.

These facts have several implications for the argument being made here. Firstly, due to their narrow interests, Indian scholars on Nepal have very little sense of the substantial amount of social science writings (especially anthropology) that is available on Nepal. Secondly, they exhibit no knowledge of writings available in the languages of Nepal. These and relevant Nepali journals are not available even in the best libraries in Delhi.

Thirdly, Indian scholars who have specialised in South Asian history tend to show embarrassing levels of understanding of Nepali history even within otherwise fine pieces of work. Fourthly, since there are very few institutional incentives for Indians to study Nepal in innovative ways, competent young researchers are advised to "move on" to other areas if they wish to have a viable career.

Within this scenario, Indian scholarship on Nepal reproduces its own 1960s-70s models of Nepal hut at a competence level that does not match the work of the first generation of Indian scholars like Gupta or Mojumdar. Even a quick reading of works like *Nepal in Transition* (1997), edited by M.D. Dharamdasani, director of Banaras Hindu University's CSN, should prove this point. At a time when Indian scholarship in history, cultural studies, economics and sociology is drawing worldwide attention for its quality, it is depressing to read most Indian works on Nepal.

#### **English alone won't do**

Going back to scholarly exchanges at the regional level, there is one other issue to be considered: the language of research. We need to be able to use more than just English as our contact language if good regional scholarship is to flourish. English as a language of discovery has serious limitations that at least one recent major study of non-official dialogues in South Asia failed to recognise.

Having access only to English language media or scholarship on any part of South Asia is inadequate for getting an authentic sense about those places. The self-colonisation that is perpetuated by the prestige value accorded to publications in English as opposed to publications in so-called "vernaculars" is a sad fact of "post-colonial" South Asia.

Also, publication in English raises questions of who is doing the analysis and who is being addressed and why, within any given South Asian country. The answer to these questions are, mostly though not exclusively, the elites. It has to be added that this kind of scholarship, oriented to regional elites and their Euro-American counterparts, is not

even *ab initio* serious about intra-South Asia dialogues.

As English writings are manifestly not oriented toward the hulk of population in one's own country or other South Asian countries, we might ask what about scholarship for "the people"? South Asian academic initiatives, if serious about proclaimed goals, would reasonably include massive translation projects across South Asian languages. This means we need an army of capable translators who can breach the scholarly worlds constructed in various South Asian languages and who are institutionally supported to do this work.

If official or non-official SAARC initiatives in the academia are to become more than just junketeering, all the countries need to begin their work at their respective in-country research universities or centres. And if the necessary financial and creative resources were to be invested to create the possibilities for doing the kind of research suggested in this analysis now, SAARC-level academic exchanges, one can hope, can begin to assume significant meanings only by the second decade of the 21st century. But without such investments in-country, there is very little reason to be optimistic about the SAARC process in academia in any track - one, two, or three.

*P. Onta is an editor of Studies in Nepali History and Society.*

#### **Editors' Note:**

*In analysing the inter-country scholarship in South Asia, Pratyoush Onta homes in on the academic weaknesses in the Indo-Nepal sphere. It is clear that a similar exercise needs to be carried out with regard to scholarship in each country of South Asia about every other regional country. Given India's size and importance, however, a logical beginning to the exercise would be to study the state of scholarship in each of the South Asian countries about India, and vice versa. Over the course of 1998, Himal will proceed to carry out this exercise through these columns.*



**Your Only  
Chance to  
SAVE our  
INDIA**

Your only chance to save India, says a Gandhian agency in an English advertisement in an English newspaper, is to vote. Unfortunately (yet again, for this watchdog of cultural correctness), the imagery is wrong. When you vote in South Asia and slip the paper into the slot of the ballot box, you do so reverentially, using all fingers including the thumb, like so. When you want to throw away a distasteful, smelly, sticky, icky stuff, you use minimum finger contact, confining yourself to the thumb and index fingers. Well, Mr Gandhian, you do not ask people to vote with *this* image.

I will not believe this, that bomb blasts do not keep away tourists. Sri Lanka's tourism minister Sharmasiri Senanayake said recently that the number of tourists visiting his country had gone up despite the bombings the country has suffered over the past few years. The tourists, he claimed, were unfazed by the blasts at the World Trade Centre in October 1996 and the recent attack on the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, "because they see it as a global phenomenon". That hardly seems likely, but then the AFP news report goes on to leak some information. Apparently, there were too many five-star hotel rooms in downtown, and the WTC bombing put 450 rooms out of the market. "The over capacity problems has been taken care of," gloated one hotel manager, happy that hotel rates are back to USD 80 per night or higher, and there is full occupancy. The way to successful tourism, then, is to bomb yourself silly! The things people can come up with!

Among South Asian academics, one person who creates new terminology by the minute is political scientist Imtiaz Ahmed of Dhaka University, whose particular crusade is to create a post-nationalist South Asia (his words). The prof was at it again, I

hear, at a recent conference on refugees held at a development gulag established outside Dhaka at a place called Rajendrapur. The firebrand academic, in the course of a paper on "Beyond Policing Refugees", deploys the following neologisms: He speaks of the "refugeeised history of the 1947 partition"; elsewhere, he asks that refugees be given a better deal by "nurturing innovative structure of *non-governmentality*". He also calls for "*de-governmentalising governmental power*", that is, empowering civil society. Ah, daktarsaab, how far can we take these neologismification before we quittify?

The Bangla papers have still not given up their habit of reaching out for ritualistic balance, that is, ensuring micro-millimetric precision in the sizing of pictures of Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party activities. The caption for the accompany-



ing pictures in the *Independent* reads, "(Left) A procession by Awami League against today's hartal and (Right) a pro-hartal torch procession by the BNP in the city yesterday." When will the day dawn when the Bangla polity allows editors to decide what is news and what is not, rather than take cover under this kind of equation?

Karma Ura, is a Bhutanese planning official, researcher and writer who is very concerned about cultural loss. He is that rare author of books and novels on Bhutanese subjects in English, and also writes in the *Kuensel*. Last month, he wrote a very detailed account about the mythology and history surrounding a bridge in Wangduephodrang in central-west

Bhutan, first constructed in 1684. There should be more people like him in the smaller countries of South Asia. I liked the way he ended his article, "The knowledge, memory and skills associated with this once famous bridge are also gradually sinking under the sand of time. Let us recollect it once more, in the hope that its architecture and design will be restored and that art, beauty and function will once again come together in any creation of men."

Incredible what Peter Konig, Resident Coordinator of the Swiss aid agency Helvetas, has gone and done in Bhutan. He has actually written a letter to *Kuensel* (which, to its credit, has printed it) challenging a minister's view that "No government in the world employs family members who have committed treason against the state!" Konig responds, "As a Swiss I know at least one country in the world where there is no guilt by association and most probably there are more." Great going, in a closed country, and great going by *Kuensel*.

I have just learnt something from Dhaka's *Weekend Star* magazine photo department. If you have a picture that is out of

focus and lacks contrast, then be bold and print it big with an elaborate subtitle: "The Tarjali fishermen, at their work even in the dense fog that envelops the south in winter". No reader complaints.

*The Kathmandu Post* has seen a series of letters castigating a particular columnist for daring to snigger at women who do not refuse alcohol. A gutsy and progressive reaction, from far and wide, decrying the middle-class hypocrisy of it all when men bemoan the state of the world because women take a sip. The best was a letter from Moscow via the Internet, by someone who complained that "Hypocrisy has been the very basis of our existence, it runs in our blood, it is there in the air." The

correspondent was a certain Action Uprety. With a name like that, much is expected of her.

"Derogatory expressions against individuals, institutions or groups, as well as anything that can promote immorality or obscenity, be avoided," is what the Pakistani government would have included in a proposed code of ethics for the press. The draft is presently being "negotiated" with the Pakistan Council of Newspaper Editors. The penalties proposed for breach reach all the way up to a hundred thousand rupees. Well, you know what Chhetria Patrakar thinks of journalist codes that are imposed rather than internalised.

R.K. Laxman is great. I'll repeat, R.K. Laxman is fabulous. The latest evidence



of his greatness, as far as I am concerned, is his quick rendition of (what remains of) the Gandhi family on the campaign trail recently in a *Times of India* cartoon. Priyanka, Sonia and Rahul, are all there, deftly caricatured. Shows how a lot can be done with a few strokes.

The Indian Railways has decided to set up a Customer Care Institute for the Northern Railway. The CCI's brief would be to train the "frontline staff" to provide "service with a smile". I quite like the idea, having recently travelled from Gorakhpur to Banaras on the Dadar Express, and from Banaras to Calcutta on the Doon Express. I completed the entire sojourn without observing a single smile displayed by the railway staff. Both lines fall within the Northern Railway, I think, so I'm glad. Those who know India, that great country which we all love so much, know that the smile is most absent in and around the Bovine Belt. I would not insist that the engineer upfront or the backroom accountants show me any teeth. Just the man at the counter, the ticketbabu and other frontline chappies.

Then there are the news stories which I just cannot understand, because the information just is not there. In this

one, reported in the *Evening Daily Star* of Karachi, there is a "film artist" named Salomi Rana in the city who apparently married a Mahmud Sipra some nine months ago. She then came to know about his "dubious activities" (not explained) and the relationship unravelled. Then came the day when Mahmud Sipra's friends engaged themselves in "snatching her car and stealing valuable gods from her house". Before you had time to consider the nature of these abducted deities, you are told that "Haq Mehr was written as Rs 2.5 million out of which Rs 50,000 were paid by Mahmud Sipra on the spot. Besides, she said, Sipra bought her a car, paid her Rs 50,000 a month as subsistence

allowance, as agreed, and lodged her in a rented bungalow though he had promised to buy her a ten marla house." Oh-oh. And then, "About six weeks ago Mahmud Sipra reportedly left Karachi on some business trip and later was arrested and jailed in London from where he called her." Well, at least he called her.

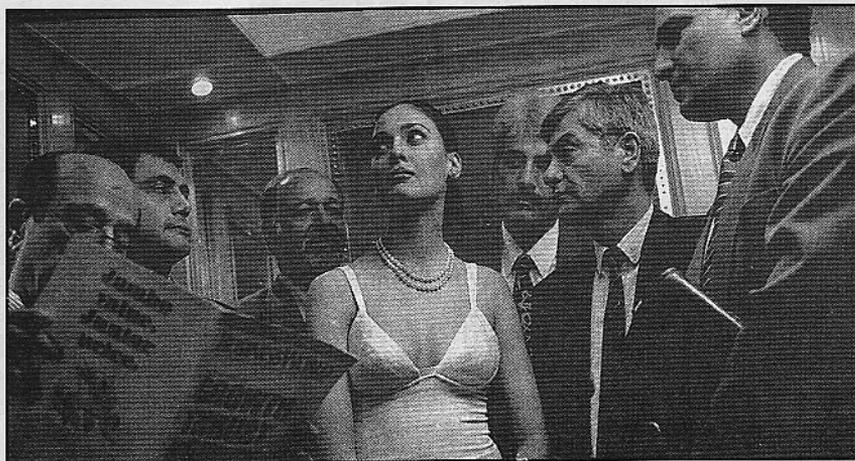
Gitanjali Kapila <gk53@columbia.edu> is a graduate film student at Columbia Univeristy, New York, currently casting for her thesis film, "Sculpture I". The story line is: "Inexperienced and out of a job, Martha gets work as a model in a Fine Arts Academy where she meets Fazal, an eager student from Pakistan who promises to shape a perfect sculpture of her. After many weeks of labor, however, the professor condemns Fazal's work as hopeless and he is forced to return home a

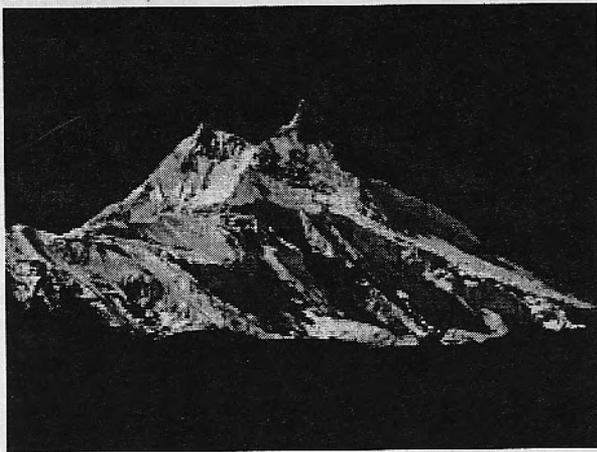
dismal failure. Although Fazal cannot give Martha the perfect work of art he promised, the courage he exhibits in his attempt gives her something much greater: the courage to shape her own life." Ms Kapila is looking for older male Indian or Pakistani actors ("non-actors okay") who are native speakers of Hindi/Urdu/Punjabi. "Portly and bald preferred." Sounds like something for me, unless someone beats me to it.

Chandrika Kumaratunga, I am glad to say, has lost the case of criminal defamation she filed against journalist, Bandula Padmakumara, whose paper *Lakbima* reported back in February 1992 that the President had attended a late night party of one Asitha Perera. On 5 February 1998, High Court Judge Shiranee Tilakawardane, in a 28-page judgement, acquitted the editor saying, inter alia, that "...neither would the fact that she was present at a 'party' of Asitha Perera, who was admittedly and according to his own evidence a friend of Her Excellency, in any way said to be an imputation that would lower the esteem with which Her Excellency the President is held in by the ordinary citizen." Justice done! Bravo!

Some would say that this ad, a part of a promotional media blitz by the Amrita Bazaar Patrika Group, was a smart one, showing the *Business World* reader engrossed while the less worldly in the elevator eye the lady in underclothes and pearls. So I thought, until I saw the headline in the mag: "Growth Thrust". Awwwww...

- Chhetria Patrakar





## Mystery !

## Well, after all, what is this "Mystery" ?

Of course, it's the mystery of the hidden treasure that exists around the heart of Solu region, like the famous Mt. Everest and the great but yet undiscovered Manaslu. In addition to trekking and climbing, there are cultural treasures to explore, like monasteries, festivals, and various ethnic groups, all preserving traditional ways of life.

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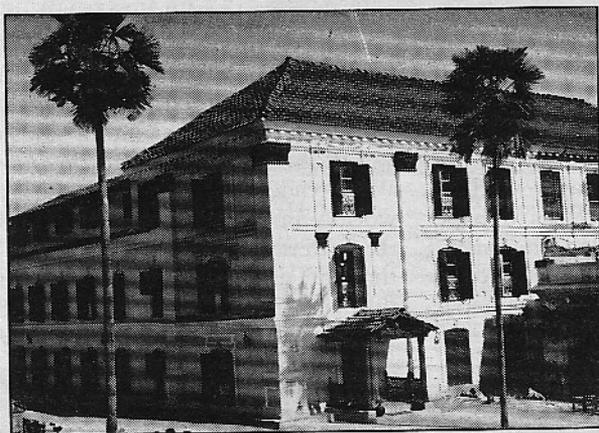
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# Agha Shahid Ali Calligraphy of coils

IF, AS EDWARD Said says in *Representations of the Intellectual*, "...for most exiles the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather, given today's world, in living with the many reminders that you are in exile, that your home is not in fact so far away, and that constant but tantalising and unfulfilled touch with the old place," then perhaps Agha Shahid Ali exemplifies that condition very well. A Kashmiri poet who now lives in the US teaching creative writing at the University of Massachusetts, Shahid has become a well-known figure in the Anglo-Indian literary scene. Besides his collections of poetry (*Bone Sculpture*, *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems*, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* and *A Nostalgist's Map of America*), he is also a translator of Faiz Ahmed Faiz (*The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*).

Agha Shahid Ali's latest book of poetry, *The Country Without a Post Office*, was released in early 1997. (Two selections from this book, "The Blessed Word: A Prologue" and "The Last Saffron" were printed in the November/December 1996 issue of *Himal*.) The title refers to the fact that for about seven months in 1990, no mail was delivered within Kashmir owing to political turmoil. From his house, a friend of Shahid's father could see the mountains of undelivered mail stacked in the open at the main post office. One day, he strolled over to one of those large piles and casually picked up a letter. It was addressed to him from Shahid's father. This incident became the motif of the book.



Here, in a conversation with Rehan Ansari and Rajinderpal S. Pal, Shahid provides insights into his work by commenting on lines from his poetry.

*"Someone wants me to live! A language will die with me."*

This is from the central section of *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, which deals with the death of a friend of mine from AIDS. He was an undergraduate at Penn State when I was a graduate student, and we were very good friends. The last time I had seen him was 1979, he had graduated and left. Out of the blue, in 1985, I got a call from him in Tucson. I don't know whether he discovered my number or I had written a note to him, I don't remember the details. He told me that he and his lover were moving from Boston to California and they would

be driving through Tucson and would like to come and see me, which they did.

Six months later he called me and said, "Shahid I have to tell you something". I said "don't". I knew he had called to tell me he had AIDS. It had quite an effect on me that someone who had become a part of the ghostly patterns of the past suddenly came back into my life and died more vividly. And of course died of this horrible disease. I'm rambling.

This section of the book had the title poem and then a string of poems of different forms and manners. When I was putting that section together, the death of this friend combined these poems that had nothing to do with him. I had a whole set of independent and relatively lyrical poems out

and I was creating a loose narrative, not exactly linear, of this drive leaving Pennsylvania combined with my friend's death and the whole idea of memory. I removed the titles of these poems and numbered them, and then wrote some intervening poems that gave them an overarching kind of feel.

That brings me back to the [above] lines. I had once read in the newspaper about the death of an 80-year-old gentleman, the only surviving person who spoke a language called Oubykh (a Turkic language). That [fact] stayed with me a long time. Agha is a Turkish name and my ancestor from my father's side came across the mountains to Kashmir as a trader nine generations ago. I saw a connection between the newspaper story and my ancestry... The mythic terrain of the book is not the actual

historian's terrain. The superstitious mountains of Arizona are not the Karakoram Range or the Hindu Kush mountains but there are so many similarities in mythic structures across the world. This one voice comes into the poem and says, "I'm the last speaker of this language", and I've placed him in the US Southwest. This cry to be remembered and the language to be remembered, seen in terms of my friend's death, acquired other dimensions.

Edward Said talks about a contrapuntal rhetoric, which means you read something with several things happening simultaneously. It's not just the death of a friend, a simple elegy, but the death of tribes, the death of landscapes and the death of a language. All these things happen simultaneously to create a density.

...And, of course, a universe dies with every person's death.

*"The earth is a calligraphy of coils"*

In the third section of *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, I wanted to enlarge the symbol and motif of the desert by having the story of Laila and Majnoon, one of the great love legends of the world. It goes back to pre-Islamic Arabia. Majnoon's madness is celebrated because it is ecstatic and his longing for this woman Laila is a model of commitment.

Also I did that section because critics, interviewers and newspaper writers always want to put you into a slot: you are an Indian writing in English, therefore, you should write about India, Kashmir, Pakistan or whatever. The point is you are a universe, you are the product of immense historical forces. There is the Muslim in me, there is the Hindu in me, there is the Western in me. It is there because I have grown up in three cultures and various permutations of those cultures.

In one way Arabic culture, Persian culture and Urdu culture are available to me. So I put that section there, dealing with Laila and Majnoon, to enhance the idea of the desert and give it more texture. Within that tradition is the whole tradition of miniature painting. I saw a painting of Majnoon's father in the wilderness,

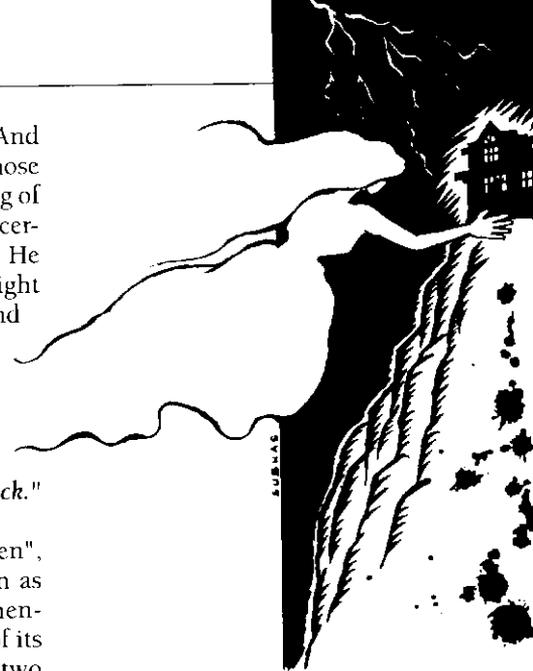
where he is consoling his son. And then I've seen other miniatures. Those images, combined with the reading of the memoirs of Jahangir, recall certain shapes and intricate designs. He talks about seeing, in a jungle, a fight between a spider and a cobra, and the spider kills the cobra by sitting on the head of the cobra and digging its legs in. Thus the calligraphy of coils.

*"Generations of snowmen on my back."*

I approached the poem "Snowmen", from which these lines are taken as an immediate sensuous apprehension. It was later that I thought of its feminist implications. There are two things hidden in that poem. One is a poem by Wallace Stevens called "The Snowmen". If you read it you won't see the connection but it is there for me. The other is a scene that has haunted me for a long time from *Wuthering Heights*. The narrator is staying at Heathcliff's house because there has been a terrible storm and the ghost of Katherine knocks on the window. She says, "I'm cold. Let me in". He opens the window and the glass breaks somehow. He takes the hand of the ghost and rubs it against the glass and there is blood. It's an amazing scene. Talk about magical realism. People think about that novel and they want neat answers. [Bronte's] whole enterprise is that there are no neat answers. But to provide you with a neat answer: I'm thinking about my ancestry and the lost women in this ancestry who we never hear about. I know everything about my father, his father, his father's father and so on for nine generations. But I know nothing before my grandmother. So I'm trying to find these lost women. These are difficult questions, there are no neat answers. You can have a feminist construct when you read that poem.

*"Once again my hands are empty/I am waiting alone at Purana Qila"*

The emptiness of hands can refer, of course, to the empty hands of a lover, so you have the love idea. An empty hand is also a hand that has no money. At the end of the poem the narrator



has nothing. The poem moves through a series of losses. He [the narrator] runs into an old friend at a bus station and he has no money for the bus, and there is a policeman who says, "Where is your ticket? You are being illegal".

There is an incident from my life behind this story. In New Delhi there were a lot of inspections going on because many people were getting on and off buses without paying. One day I was on the bus and a friend of mine said, "Shahid don't buy a ticket I'll buy your ticket". When I stepped off the bus this inspector demanded to see the ticket. We checked with my friend. He had not bought my ticket yet.

They took me to a police van nearby. I was very upset because I have never cheated in this regard. I've cheated in other regards but never this. That is also somewhere [in this poem]. You know all these things affect you. But that's neither here nor there because in the end you want the poem to survive on its own merits on the page. At the end of the poem the narrator has lost his friend again, he is without money and the empty hands are a symbol of sheer helplessness. The ultimate irony is that the haggard women with their children are giving him money. They are pitying him.

*"Each ray of sunshine is seven minutes old/so when I look at the sky I see the Past?"*

I was in New York City and the boyfriend of a friend of mine, a Physics student from Belgium, mentioned the fact that each ray of sunshine is seven minutes old. He also said that being a poet is a bit like being a parasite, you're always listening and gathering things. It was such a fascinating concept. I said: "Do you mean I'm always looking into the past?" That led me to this poem, "Snow on the Desert".

It has many things going on in it: the Arizona landscape, the departure of my sister by air, and the sight of the morning. It having snowed in Tucson the night of the departure, all the desert covered in snow was very eerie and strange and beautiful. There is a kind of ecological concern in that poem: the death of oceans, the death of tribes, as well as other concerns: the departure of my sister, the death of the singer Begum Akhtar. Long ago in Delhi, I heard Begum Akhtar very often. In one particular case there was a power failure. The lights went out and there was absolute silence. The microphone was also dead. It was an outdoor concert and for a minute or two the voice was coming from very far away, an echo. And in that echo I heard, with such clarity, something amazing that she used to do with her voice. Just haunting.

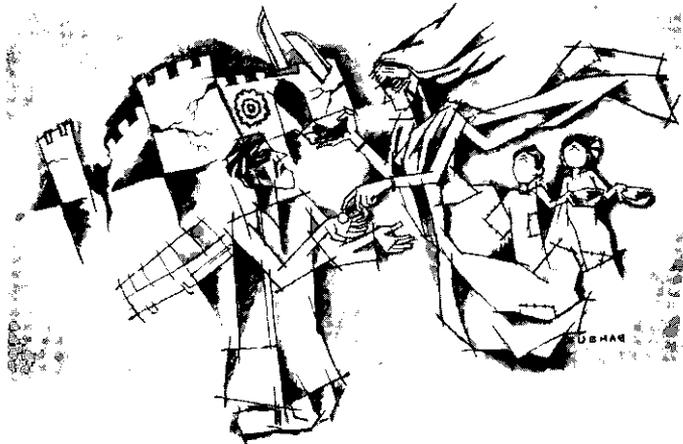
When I saw the snow I was driving in the fog and then, suddenly, I was in this blinding sunlight. After I dropped off [my sister at the airport] I came right back and was again in that fog. It was a fog that was very neatly dividing the city. That's why the line, "the sliding doors of the fog". That moment was so unique. [In writing a poem] there is always the question of metaphor and simile, so what could I compare [this moment] to? I thought that it could only be compared to another [incomparable] moment. Two moments juxtaposed to show that neither can be compared to the other or anything else. But that juxtaposition creates a kind of translation, a kind of a crossover. The moment of Begum Akhtar's had stayed with me for over 10 years, and it was so many years later that I found the

right moment to introduce it into a poem.

"A city being brought to memory by the rain"

Rain has had a profound impact on me, as I'm sure it has had on many people. My mother is from Lucknow. Kashmir, as one of my poems says, has four clearly defined seasons. They truly have a three months' winter, a three-month spring, summer and autumn. On the first of September you can really sense a nip in the air. You can start to see the elements of change, that autumn is coming.

I had heard a lot of classical ragas that revolve around the monsoons.



When I would hear these ragas and my mother would talk about the monsoons, and the romance of it, I had no way of knowing what that was about. That the rain [could be] such a positive feature, that people long for the rain to cool the atmosphere, and that that's the season lovers can't bear separation. Also this incredible music, these ragas that deal with the monsoons.

We have rain in Kashmir, which sometimes leads to floods, but it does not have quite the same feeling as rain in Delhi has. When I went to Delhi for the first time in summer, in July, and I saw these rains, I [saw] a very romantic season and could see why you would want to be in the arms of your lover. Then when I went to Arizona there was this flood. I arrived and there was rain for two weeks. It was unusual in the desert and they called it monsoons. There were some deaths that occurred during that time.

When I was putting this book together, I had this image of three women. I had this painting someone had given me which had these three women of the desert holding chili peppers. The idea of three women, three sisters, seems so central to various myths. Strangely enough I haven't found it in Hindu myth. You have it in Greek, in Scandinavian myth, you have it in Chekhov and Shakespeare and so on.

The concept of the trinity occurs in so many cultures. Rushdie's *Shame* has it, but he surely got it from Western myth. He Pakistanised or Indianised it. The three sisters, when asked "Who's my father?" by the child they have raised, assume the shape of the three monkeys: see no evil, speak no evil, and hear no evil. Wonderfully funny stuff. At a personal level the rain brings so much memory back to me, especially of some very important love relationships I have had. The rain is also very important culturally, mythically, anthropologically, ecologically. It is the rain that brings a city back to memory, and makes it memorable, and these three women are the preservers of memory.

The lines above are taken, in that order, from the following poems:

1. "In Search of Evanescence" (*A Nostalgist's Map of America*, W.W. Norton Company, New York, 1991)
2. "From Another Desert" ANMA
3. "Snowmen" (*The Half-Inch Himalayas*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1987)
4. "I Dream It's Afternoon When I Return to Delhi" THIII
5. "Snow on the Desert" ANMA
6. "Desert Landscape" ANMAA

R. Ansari is a scholar with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, working on a project on Partition and Memory in Lahore, and Rajinder S. Paul works for a literary magazine published in Calgary, Canada.



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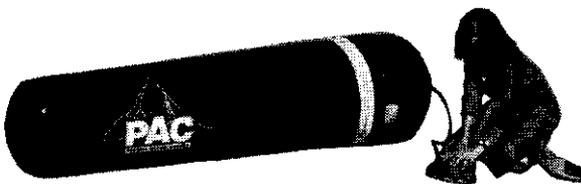
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# Reading the riot act

The how and why of mob violence in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Although the end of the Cold War is largely celebrated, there are those in the Third World that seem to miss it. Among them, it is perhaps the parasites and the mafias - euphemistically called the ruling elites - who miss it the most. For, while it lasted, the global balance of power (and terror) was the focus of the whole world's attention. Its end, however, brought into sharp focus the fact that several Third World states had systematically converted themselves into killing fields through engineered crowd violence and well-planned ethnic, sectarian, tribal and linguistic persecutions - facts that could no longer be hidden.

The complex issues relating to South Asian ethnic tragedies and schemings have rarely received proper study. This void has been filled, to a great extent, by this remarkable study by Stanley J. Tambiah. Researching a sensitive subject which demands intellectual involvement and detachment from parochial affiliations is not easy, but *Leveling Crowds* doesn't disappoint.

## Roots and riots

To begin with, unlike many who began writing on ethnicity because a market for it developed in the post-Cold War era, Tambiah did not jump onto the bandwagon because the market suddenly opened up. Author of books such as *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* and *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka*, the writer has lived with the subject since the formative years of his career as a scholar. As he points out:

*My exposure to ethnic conflict began when as a person of Sri Lankan origin and with experience of life in that country, the riots of 1983 there touched and involved me personally so directly and intensely that as an insider as well as an anthropologist,*

*I felt entitled and indeed compelled to write my version and to make evaluations and proposals, because the people and events I was 'representing' were not differently 'the other' but intimately my own.*

In June 1956, as a 27-year-old social scientist recently returned from graduate studies in the United States,



**Leveling Crowds:  
Ethnonationalist  
Conflicts and  
Collective Violence  
in South Asia**  
by Stanley J. Tambiah  
Vistaar Publications,  
New Delhi, 1996  
395 pp, INR 450

reviewed by Syed Sikander Mehdi

Tambiah took a team of 33 students (26 Sinhalese and seven Tamils) to conduct a survey of some newly settled colonies in Gal Oya Valley. The team was caught in the Sinhalese-Tamil riots of 1956 and young Tambiah witnessed the beginning of a series of clashes between the two communities culminating in the explosion that was 1983. Soon after returning from Gal Oya, Tambiah wrote a report on the incident, which is included in the book under review. This itself is a remarkable piece, projecting his understanding of the dynamics of the "then still very nascent and controllable" ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

## On the victim's behalf

Unlike many South Asian scholars working in South Asia or abroad, whose reason and vision remain narrow and myopic, Tambiah is not swayed by petty parochialisms. *Leveling Crowds* clearly suggests that he is on the side of the victim, whether

Tamil or Sinhalese; Muslim, Hindu or Sikh; Mohajir, Pathan, Sindhi or Bihari.

The author has the ability to view issues from a 'South Asian' rather than (in his case) a 'Sri Lankan' perspective. He laments the failure of the various faiths and their followers to humanise South Asian societies and prevent the crowds from becoming vultures. In fact, throughout his study, Tambiah refers to the part played by religious revivals and politicised religions in stoking ethnic conflicts and collective violence. He forcefully condemns the use and abuse of religion to perpetuate the culture of violence and the penchant to shed blood on the pavements of Colombo, Bombay, Delhi, Karachi and Lahore in the name of religion and ethnicity.

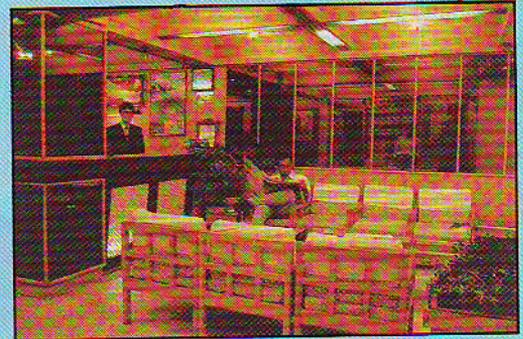
Developed in the background of a brilliant discourse on the ubiquity of ethnic conflict, politicisation of ethnicity, crisis of nation-state and rise of ethnicity, and with the help of a summing up on Le Bon's theorising of the crowd (in *Psychologie des foules*) and Emile Durkheim's *Les Formes elementaires de la vie religieuse: Le Systeme totemique en Australie*, Tambiah's study focuses primarily on the phenomenon of civilian riots. Several case studies are presented: the 1915 Sinhala Buddhist-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka; two post-independence ethnic riots in Sri Lanka; Sikh identity, separation and ethnic conflict; ethnic conflict in Pakistan; and India's Hindu nationalism, the Ayodhya campaign, and the Babri Masjid.

These studies discuss in detail the background events fuelling mob fury and provide vivid description of how crowds get unruly and then murderous. They also probe into the motives of the many actors involved in the seemingly abrupt eruption of mob violence and attempt a comparative discussion of the organisation and engineering of collective violence in different South Asian states.

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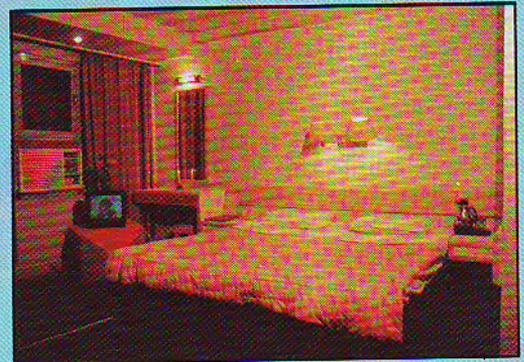
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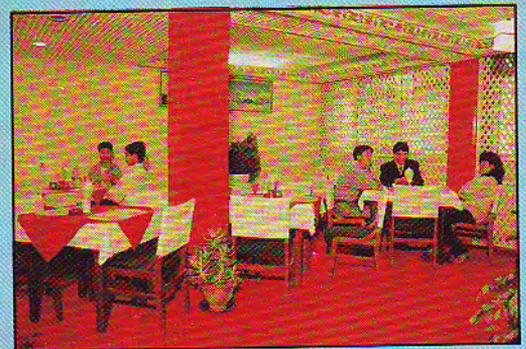
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### Politics of violence

On the basis of these studies, the author concludes that violence as a mode of conducting politics has become established, even institutionalised, in the Subcontinent. Writes Tambiah:

*One might even go so far as to say that ethnonationalist conflicts combined with collective violence are not just isolated volcanic eruptions but are close to becoming systematised social formations. The evidence for the ritualised and routinised forms of conduct that comprise a repertoire of collective violence supports this assertion. In South Asia (and in many other places as well), violence is an integral part of the political process.*

Tracing the origins and causes of the riots in Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan that are part of his case study, the author finds that the pattern is the same. A particular community or group is whipped into anger and violent action by the rumour method - rumours are systematically spread about rape, murder, attacks on worship houses and about the imminent arrival of a violent crowd. In most cases, the government, local politicians and society leaders do not try to ascertain facts nor do they counter the rumours.

Instead, observes the author, parts of the state system itself - prominent legislators, members of security forces and civil servants - are directly or indirectly involved in triggering riots. On the whole, riots are preventable, writes Tambiah, taking place as they do over petty matters, the reactions to which are allowed to snowball out of control.

Only someone with little understanding of the dynamics of crowd behaviour would conclude that mob violence is spontaneous. In most cases, it is well thought out, planned and skilfully engineered to achieve the desired goals. A variety of actors can be active in manipulating situations and in masterminding the crowd into going berserk. As identified by Tambiah, these include local politicians, the so-called religious and tribal

leaders, state agencies and land sharks seeking to displace people from prime real estate, petty businessmen interested in dislodging rivals, local and national administrations, and even the security forces.

The police, para-military forces and local leaders play an altogether insignificant role in containing crowd violence. The cops almost everywhere remain a mere witness to the mayhem and themselves often indulge in loot and plunder. And though the military and para-military forces are, in acute cases, called in to restore law and order, they are generally summoned when it is too late.

### Demographic reduction

The case studies included in the book also vividly describe the excesses committed by majoritarian states upon the minorities. These expose the intolerance of the majority and indi-



cate the growing temptations for the political leadership to buttress their vote banks by taking recourse to fundamentalist slogans and rabble-rousing.

The author maintains that there is an obvious link between democratic politics and ethnonationalist conflicts in the region. He refers to the "sinister calculation behind purposively staged pogroms and ethnic cleansing". Referring to the 1984 riots in Delhi and the post-Babri Masjid one in Bombay, he observes that "the majority of targeted victims were male adults and youths, whose deaths or injury most definitely resulted in the main income earners and heads of the households of the victimised community being eliminated... The demographic reduction of the most produc-

tive age cohorts of the ethnic enemy is an intentional strategy."

Tambiah's work is a remarkable piece of scholarship, although naturally in a book of this scope, not without its flaws. In his preface, the writer admits that the study "took a long time to complete" as the "flow of pertinent contemporary political events made closure difficult". His own "academic and administrative commitments" also forced him to put the work aside "from time to time". This is perhaps why there are missing threads, and why the chapters are not often well integrated. The chapter on the 1915 Sinhala Buddhist-Muslim riots in Ceylon is well researched, well documented and exhaustive (45 pages). The next chapter on the two post-independence ethnic riots in Sri Lanka, however, is not as comprehensive (18 pages) as the one on the Sikh identity, separation and ethnic conflict, or the one about the ethnic conflict in Pakistan.

Finally, the need remains to investigate the role of the military, as well as the para-military forces and intelligence agencies, in South Asia in manipulating tense situations, mobilising and organising rioting crowds and in keeping people divided along linguistic, regional, tribal, sectarian and ethnic lines. The subject clearly demands a separate scholarly study and possibly couldn't have been a vital part of the present work. Nevertheless, Tambiah could have said more on the subject.

*Leveling Crowds* is necessary reading on South Asian ethnicity and mob violence. Its major scholarly contribution is its lucid presentation of a theme which has for long begged proper scientific attention. Projecting a South Asian perspective, it gives voice to the voiceless - the threatened and targeted communities. And, most important, without losing its scholarly touch and objectivity, and with an enviable intellectual approach, Tambiah presents a high standard of normative discourse on an issue that calls for humanistic understanding.

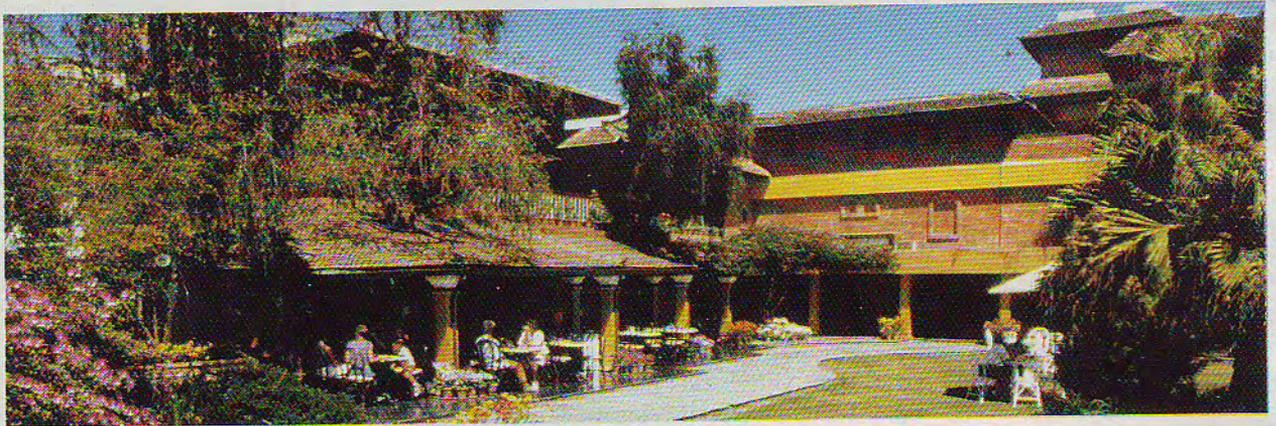
S.S. Mehdi is Professor of International Relations at the University of Karachi.

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# An iconographic pilgrimage

**T**he *Nepalese Caitya* is an impressive volume in the high tradition of Bechert and Gomprich's *The World of Buddhism* (1984). Only that, here, the focus is much narrower, aiming - as the subtitle specifies - at the study of "1500 years of Buddhist votive architecture in the Kathmandu Valley".

When presenting books of this nature, one of the first tasks of the reviewer is to ascertain whether the publication is aimed at the scholarly community or at the public at large. In this case, the target seems to be mainly the former, but could also include that segment of the latter that goes by the name of "learned readership". Scholars with a particular interest in Newar Buddhism and a still more specific interest in the iconography of the Buddhist temples in the Kathmandu Valley, will surely refer to this study for years to come.

The writer is an architect with impressive credentials, and one who knows his Asia quite well. He started off as a Buddhist monk in Burma in 1962, studied architecture in Germany, wrote a thesis on Japanese castle towns, and has worked in Nepal and India as a conservation architect. His endeavour is well complemented by hundreds of exquisite drawings by Bijay Basukala, not to mention the numerous photographs (whose source is unfortunately not mentioned).

The two dedicated and gifted scholars - the writer and the artist - have combined their talents to produce a masterly presentation of caityas (also chaityas),

from the smallest niche to the widest mandala of the Kathmandu Valley. The author himself renders an extraordinarily meticulous treatment to each element of his study.



**The Nepalese  
Caitya**  
by Niels Gutschow  
Lumbini  
International  
Research Institute,  
1997 (Unpriced)  
328 pp

*reviewed by George Sioris*

Obviously, Gutschow does not aim merely at an authentic but dry classification of monuments; the "cultural context" of the caityas is also deemed important for the comprehension of iconographic and related issues. In this instance, one would do well to pay attention to the short but substantial foreword by another Newar Buddhism specialist, David Gellner, as well as to the chapters on caityas, rituals and the need for funerary monuments.

This reviewer would especially underline and endorse Gellner's remark that much of this book "... has been inspired by [Sylvain] Levi's notion that in the Kathmandu Valley the coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism among the Newars allows us to understand something of the way these two religions coexisted in the late first millennium in North India." The motif of coexistence and tolerance is one of the most striking facets of many periods of Asian religious history.

Although the area of survey is the Kathmandu Valley, it is inevitable that

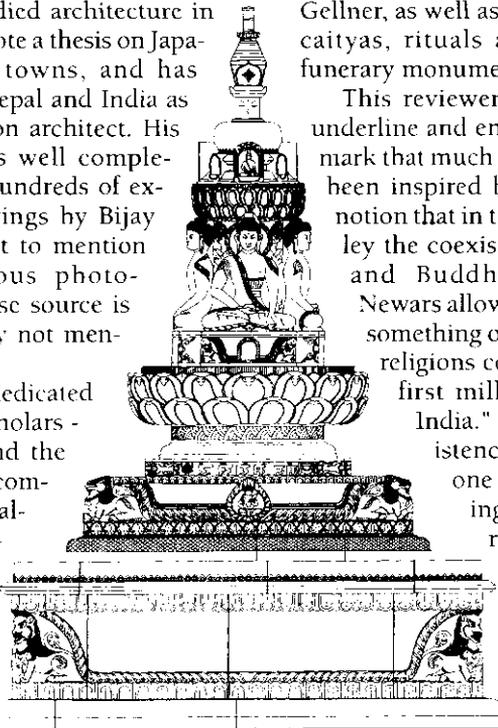
the Tibetan caitya types have also got to be included, even peripherally, in such a monograph. Thus the author briefly attends to them in the final pages, which is appropriate as it establishes the unity of the Himalayan world.

Occasionally, one detects some confusion on the part of Gutschow as to whether he is addressing the "scholarly" or simply the "learned" readership. The "Kot Massacre", for example, may be known to the scholar and many Nepalis as a moment of great bloodletting in the early Rana period, but not to others. Conversely, the basic explanation of what a *Bodhisatva* is would appear superfluous to the scholar, and perhaps even to the 'learned' reader.

Moreover, although there is a comprehensive index, the main text is inevitably full of terms, some of which may elude even scholars. As no author has an easy solution to offer in similar cases, the reader should be conscious at the outset that his/her reading will require an additional effort and that it will not be light.

This reviewer happened to be associated with Nepal for many years and has visited several of the sites described in this book. He had also been fortunate in meeting some of the Newar specialists included in the bibliography. Retaining a vivid memory of the unique atmosphere of Pashupatinath, by the Bagmati, where Life and Death mix so quietly, almost harmoniously, and having gone through the descriptions, drawings and photos in Gutschow's volume, the reviewer is overtaken by a sincere desire to return to the beautiful Kathmandu Valley, carrying along this book as a precious guide to a unique iconographic pilgrimage.

*G. Sioris, presently the Greek ambassador to Japan, is President of the Asiatic Society.*



# Adominably yours,

Just when you were telling yourself how glad you were to subscribe to a magazine that did not cover the Erotic Escapades of Bill and Monica...taraaaa...Surprise! (Important Note To Parents: this column is rated PG15.)

Bill Clinton must have been a South Asian marsh crocodile in his previous incarnation. How else do you explain his capacity to mix up right and wrong? Marsh crocodiles, being pragmatic reptiles which believe in karma, deliberately keep the lines blurred between good and evil. They have to; it is part of their survival strategy. They cannot say: "That is a really cute water fowl taking a drink in over yonder

get away with using a flying monkey with a flaming tail to firebomb a Lankan city, and then drive his wife to self-immolation, and that's OK too. Today's arsonists and bride burners perhaps take their cue from these role models. No other religion gives its followers so much leeway to deviate from the straight and narrow.

Anyway, to get back to Zippergate, we don't know if Billy Boy has been reading up on Hinduism but he seems to have developed similarly elastic morals. This has allowed him to perfect the art of lubricating his business with pleasure. Slick Willy can therefore make love and war simultaneously, while at the same time

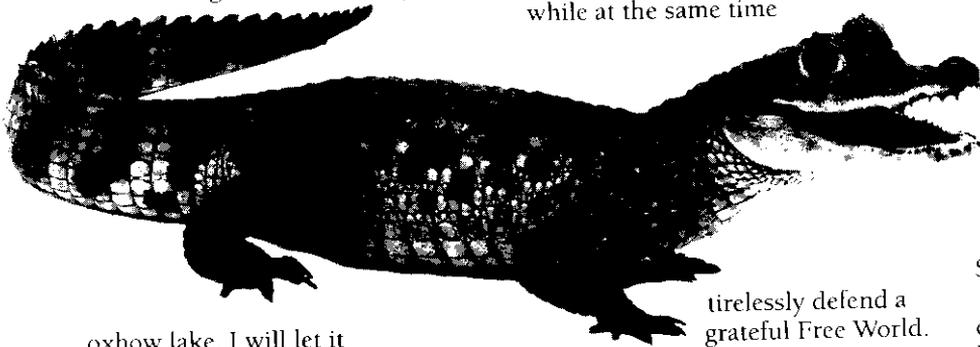
is that his first reaction is to hire a couple of hundred new interns. Snark snark.

But, seriously, primatologists have observed the same behaviour in mountain gorillas who literally claw their way to become Alpha Males and then, to maintain their stature, have to exhibit extreme sexual promiscuity. It's not just fun and games for Numero Uno; he has to sweat for it. Now, we don't know whether Saddam also keeps interns in his palaces, but you can be sure if they are there they're not getting billiard lessons from the Great Leader. It can be told: Saddam was more worried UN inspectors would find his summer volunteers than his weapons of mass destruction.

I wish we in South Asia had macho leaders like Saddam and Bill: leaders who can keep the Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo waiting in the lobby while they button up in the Oval Office, and in the next instant contemplate a Tomahawk attack on Saddam's hilliard room.

Despite all that, Billy Goat definitely has the right fundas. Our leaders have neither the fundas nor the balls. Our leaders don't dare cheat on their wives, so they cheat their people instead. And they will go to any lengths to loot, even stealing food meant for cows and buffaloes in Bihar. In fact, it may be a good idea if our leaders started fooling around more, sowed their wild oats, and then just maybe, their interest in kickbacks would suffer a setback.

That may be easy enough for me to say, but difficult to implement. Sita Ram Kesri. Why is it that I can't imagine him ever keeping the Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo waiting in the lobby? Or, some among us who have so many wives that they have no need for interns.



oxhow lake, I will let it continue on its winter migratory route from Siberia and dine instead on this tasteless bottom-feeding mollusc." If they were truly moral, marsh crocodiles would be an endangered species.

Vedic scriptures promote this ambiguity (All Is Nothing and Nothing Is All) and lay down the primordial law that the powerful can get away with whatever the hell they please. Dharma, therefore, is judged not in terms of ethics and righteousness, but on whether or not one carries out one's caste duties. This leaves large grey areas, that legitimise everything from fornication to genocide.

Military offensives, which if they were carried out today would land the Pandava Brothers in a war crimes tribunal of the International Court of Justice in the Hague, are OK. A Gangetic spiritual leader can

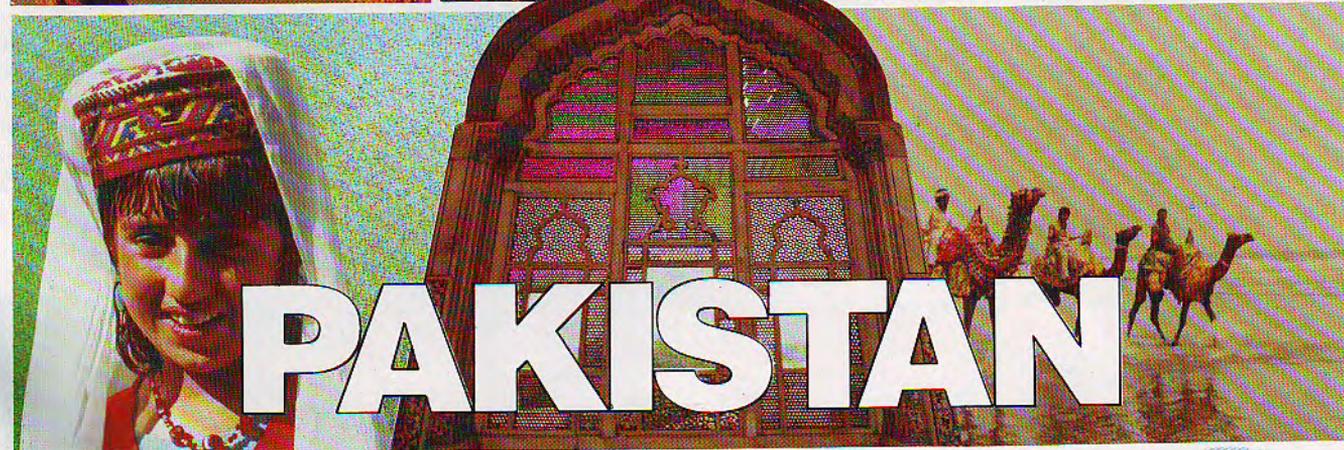
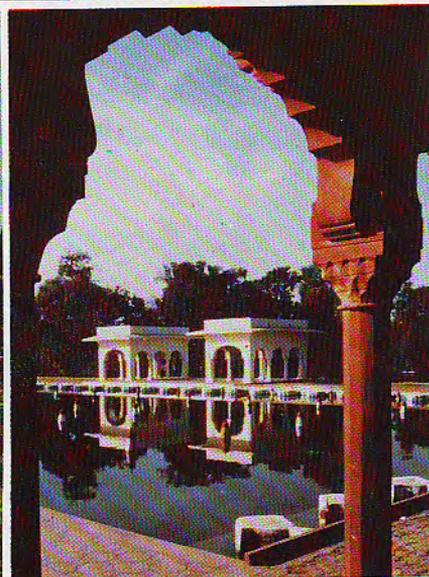
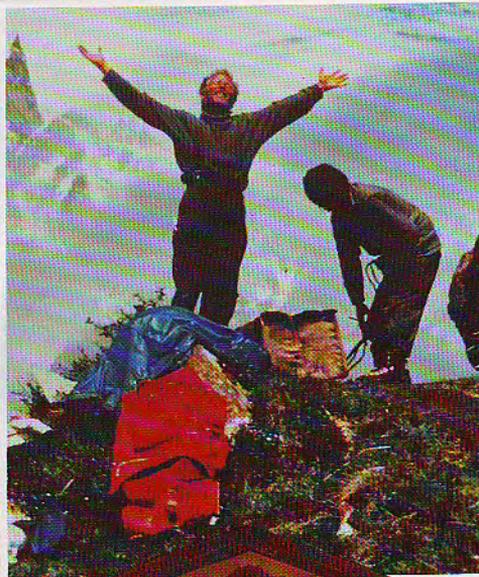
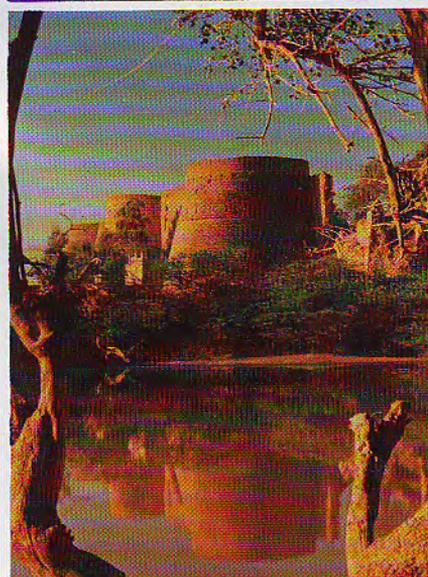
tirelessly defend a grateful Free World. America doesn't care

who Bill unsheathes his sabre for, as long as he is also rattling it.

But one has to marvel at how the Mightiest Hominoid in the Universe gets himself so deftly out of tight corners. He smoked pot, but says he didn't inhale. He dodged the draft, but said he was pursuing a law degree. He did it with Gennifer, but says he didn't come. Monica gave him a job, but he didn't have sex. I may have mentioned this to you before, but men (especially military men and male political leaders) follow an evolutionary inclination towards territoriality, status-consciousness, and retaliating against anyone who belittles their power or virility. When that happens, Saddam tells weapons inspectors to bugger off. What is so different in the case of the commander-in-chief of the United States



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