

Sept-Oct 2005

# HIMAL

SOUTH ASIAN

**GEO TV, AFGHAN ELECTIONS  
NAXALS, NEPALI VORTEX,  
TSUNAMI, THREE ROADS,  
INDIAN MNCS, BANGLADESH  
INJURIES, OLD TIBET,  
GILANI AND GEELANI,  
RETURN TO MALDIVES**



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# THE MEANING OF TERROR

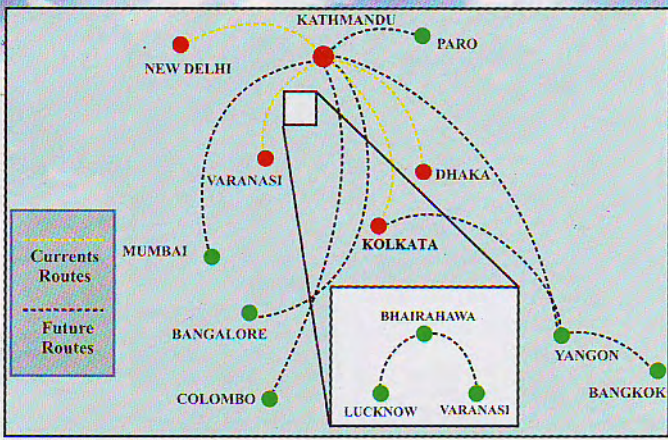
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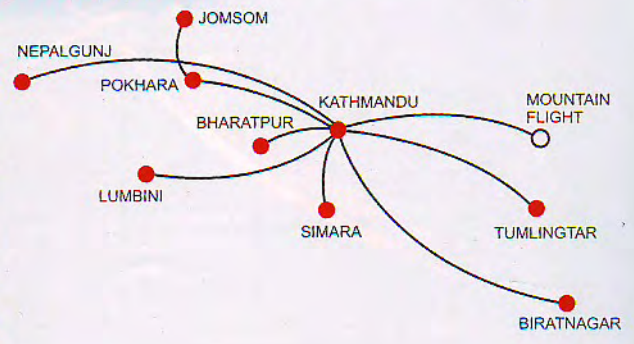


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This map of Southasia may seem upside down to some, but that is because we are programmed to think of north as top of page. This rotation is an attempt by the editors of Himal (the only Southasian magazine) to reconceptualise 'regionalism' in a way that the focus is on the people rather than the nation-states. This requires nothing less than turning our minds the right-side-up.

(download from [www.himalmag.com/images/map\\_poster.jpg](http://www.himalmag.com/images/map_poster.jpg))

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TO EDITORIAL NOTE ON PAGE 12

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# Welcome to Sept - Oct

**T**he 'meaning of terror', the cover theme of this issue, is directed against those who would pander to violence, against an attitude which condones terrorist acts against innocents by rebels just as it justifies murder of left radicals by the state apparatus. The extremes are all there in two incidents in the violent society that Nepal has become. When an army platoon murdered 18 unarmed Maobaadi activists and sympathisers at point blank range in the highland village of Doramba, that sure was terrorism, whether you add the qualifier 'state' before it or not. When the Maobaadi placed an improvised explosive device in a dry riverbed in Chitwan, and pressed the switch as a public bus crammed to capacity passed over it, murdering 38 passengers, that was terrorism (*see picture*).

In between the two extremisms, and with states always killing more than insurgents, lies the path of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, non-violence and peaceful resistance. It needs to be said, unabashedly, that social movements bring true solace to the people who you claim to be fighting for. They also require more courage over a longer period than the relatively easy recourse to the gun, almost no duping youngsters with false romance. Dilip Simeon presents forceful arguments in the cover essay against the short-cut of violence.

Besides dealing with the issue of terror in some of the other pieces as well, Himal has packaged separate bundles of articles for readers in this Sept-Oct 2005 issue. The inside pages of Indian national newspapers – not the front pages – point to a surge and spread of Naxalite activities in the Subcontinental heartland, and it was important to connect with the trend. Two articles, by a Delhi University scholar and a Calcutta analyst, study the merger of a Naxalite unit of the Jharkhand plateau and one with presence in Telangana into the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Where will the Naxalites go? Can they achieve their political aims with the present strategy? Will the Indian State and states ever learn?

A series of articles concerns roads and routes which were once open, before 1947 and 1962, and need to be unbolted. Just as the Iranian Gas Pipeline cover of our previous Jul-Aug issue looked to a brave new world in the Southasian West, in this issue we suggest that the Stilwell Road would brighten the face of the Southasian East by promoting travel and

commerce. In the Southasian North, how about letting the blood brothers and sisters of Baltistan and Kargil visit each other by opening up that road by pulling down that stone wall along the LoC? And while we are at it, why not push the opening up of Nathula in Sikkim all the way to Lhasa? Do we wait till that Southasian city (Lhasa) is linked by rail to the Chinese mainland in 2007 before we wake up the need for soft borders? The pushy Col. Younghusband had seen the feasibility of the Siliguri-Lhasa corridor in 1904, and that was some time ago.

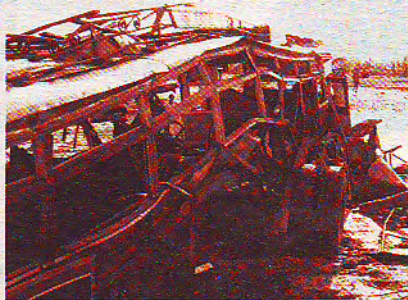
The appalling treatment of two Kashmiris by the state apparatus are dealt with separately, in a review of a book by journalist Iftekhar Gilani who was unjustly jailed and tortured, and a profile and interview of Delhi University lecturer S A R Geelani who was falsely accused of being a terrorist. Against the backdrop of these horrifying stories of repression

is the uplifting one of Dhaka journalist-as-humanist, Matiur Rahman, who reaches 1 million plus readers every day with his paper *Prothom Alo*. Yet another article on Bangladesh documents how the alarming findings of a study on child injury is influencing the discourse on public health. And then there is Waheed Rahman, who leaves a

high-rise United Nations job in New York to return to the sea-level atoll of Maldives to be part of its democratic future. Speaking of which, we provide a unique window on the upcoming elections in Afghanistan, with a report by Aunohita Mojumdar. Over in Karachi, Sonya Fatah tells us all about GEO.

Two articles analyse the dissimilar responses of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka (including the LTTE-run northeast) to the tsunami. Globalisation has brought about immense changes in its wake – independent articles analyse the manner in which it is shaping social trends, examine the rise of the Indian multinationals, as well as critique the disproportionate and questionable role of international financial institutions. Then we have Hiroshima vs the Southasian Bomb to remind of the horrors that the Indian and Pakistani politico-military establishments are inviting on behalf of all of us 1.4 billion. And, to end it all, on the last page, we present the cup.

In this issue, we have striven to bring you Southasia in its depth and diversity, but we hope not in its frivolity. If you enjoy these pages, tell others about Himal. We need all the help we can get. ▲





India-Nepal

# Shattering of trust - I

**T**ies between Kathmandu and New Delhi have not been this low in a long, long time. The intimate contact between people on the two sides of the open border has not always been reflected in the way the two governments and power elites interact. Indeed, differences and misunderstandings have characterised the relationship in the past, often instigated by the arrogance of the regional superpower and an equal and opposite feeling of incapacity among Kathmandu's politicians and bureaucrats. This time around, however, the misunderstanding is bordering on antagonism, and a fundamental shift seems to be underway in the relationship.

The 1 February royal coup came as a bolt out of the blue for the Indian establishment. Despite his reported assurances to Indian diplomats, among others, that he had no intention of assuming absolute control, the monarch went ahead and did just that with his takeover that fateful Tuesday morning. South Block's 'twin pillar' policy on Nepal, of supporting constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy, suddenly seemed to be without basis. New Delhi's seniormost diplomats let it be known that if a choice was to be made between the people and the king, India would go with the former. India had clearly decided that its interest in a stable Nepal was better served by backing a disorderly multiparty system than a controversial monarchy. This, fortunately, coincides with the popular will in Nepal.

Soon after 1 February, India took on the role of 'coordinating' the response of the US and UK towards the Kathmandu regime. The three countries together make up the main suppliers to the Royal Nepal Army in its battle with the Maobaadi insurgents, and it would have been nothing less than galling for the royal regime to see the role given New Delhi. Confronted by South Block's stance, the king has tried to influence Indian policy by appealing to India's erstwhile royals who still populate the upper echelons of Indian politics, but it has not gone beyond a little bit of an ear from Indian Foreign Minister K Natwar Singh, himself of princely lineage. The king's hopes of using the Hindutva lobby in his favour as a 'Hindu king' seems similarly not to have borne fruit. In fact, and ironically, the best hope for King Gyanendra comes from the Indian police and intelligence agencies, who dislike the Maobaadi so intensely that they would like the resumption of arms supplies that were suspended after the coup. For now



**The Nepal-India open border at Krishnanagar, Kapilvastu district**

however, India's Manmohan Singh continues to listen to the foreign office on Nepal policy rather than to his National Security Advisor.

Meanwhile, incidents and accidents continue to mark the steadily deteriorating relationship. It did not help Prime Minister Singh that in Jakarta on 23 April, King Gyanendra blurted before a television camera what is said to have been a gentleman's understanding on resumption of arms assistance in return for promised democratisation. Back in Kathmandu, bilateral ties saw a further dip when the Nepali Foreign Ministry called the Indian ambassador in for a reprimand. Kathmandu tried to openly play the 'China card' to balance off India's contrariness, but Beijing proved reluctant. Even while the Indian Army chief J J Singh was trying to argue for resuming arms supplies to its 'brother army' in Nepal, the latter decided to alert the world to the problems with its India-supplied 'Insas' combat rifles. While there have been reports of the gun malfunctioning in pitched battle, it appeared inopportune ridiculing your largest supplier of arms and ammunition.

While all this was going on, the Indian government



seemed to be re-conceptualising its own approach towards the Maoists. Seeing the inability of the RNA to effectively take on the rebels even after seven months of direct rule by the king as 'Supreme Commander-in-Chief', as well as taking into account the royal palace's continuing hostility towards the mainstream political parties, New Delhi made as if not to notice while Maobaadi leaders move about in India and hold confabs with representatives of Nepal's political parties. Even though the Maobaadi continue to spout anti-India rhetoric on occasion, New Delhi seems to harbour hopes that its sheer willpower can force the rebels to sit for talks with whoever is ready in Kathmandu when the time comes.

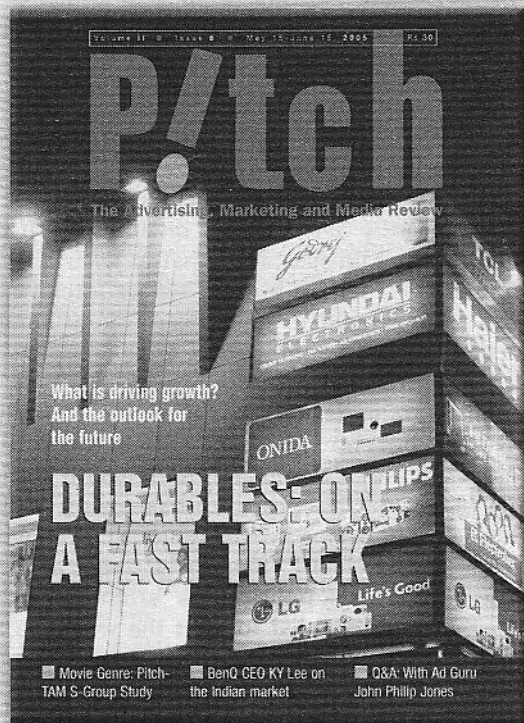
### Remembering the blockade

It is not that differences have not been a constant between Nepal and India, and there have been several low points in history before this. The last time a king took over in Nepal, with Tribhuvan's son and Gyanendra's father Mahendra dismissing the elected government of B P Koirala in 1960, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru told the Indian Parliament that the royal step was a 'setback to democracy'. The wily Mahendra king reacted by seeking to construct a notion of Nepali nationalism based on a good dose of anti-Indianism. In the context of the Sino-India war of 1962, Mahendra

played his 'China card' and India came on line.

The Indo-Nepal relationship hit the bottom in 1989, when New Delhi acted the regional bully and used Kathmandu's import of Chinese weaponry to slap an economic blockade on Nepal. Such was the international fallout of this action against a landlocked LDC that New Delhi has surely not contemplated such adventures since. The difference between then and now, perhaps, is that India's Nepal's policy has coincided with the interests of the Nepali people. From what we know, this policy hangs on a knife's edge with enough 'forces' in India willing to forget about democracy in Nepal and simply support the king, or support the king in order to crush the Maobaadi. The first option would be unprincipled and the second impractical. India must stay the course.

There is no saying how this huge trust deficit between the Southasian giant and the currently unstable northern neighbour will be resolved. With King Gyanendra's well-known proclivity to himself 'stay the course' even in the face of accelerating defeat, it is likely that the Nepal-India relationship will have to wait out the current power struggle within Nepal between the autocratic monarchy and the forces for total, untrammelled democracy. Following a hopefully positive outcome, the relationship can then be expected to settle down, back to its slightly unstable keel.



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# Shattering of trust – II

The assassination of Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, the highest ranking leader to have been killed since President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993, has sparked off hectic political activity in the island nation. Considered the single most serious blow to the Ceasefire Agreement signed three years back between the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the killing comes a month after the two sides formalised an understanding on a joint tsunami recovery mechanism. While the government was quick to accuse the LTTE of being behind the assassination, the Tamil rebels, for their part, denied any involvement in the attack. However, their track record of not claiming responsibility for killings they have engineered coupled with their fierce opposition to Kadirgamar, a Tamil who opposed their politics, makes the denial less credible.

The incident is but one in a series of ceasefire violations that have been taking place over some time. Kadirgamar's assassination, however, had the potential to snowball into an explosive issue taking the country back to war. While the responsible approach of mainstream political actors coupled with the anti-war sentiment of the majority has managed to stave off the possibility of war for now, the role of the international community in bringing the LTTE back to the table is crucial if the peace process is to continue. The most important task at hand is to resume dialogue between the conflicting parties, ensure strict compliance with the ceasefire agreement in its spirit and letter, and put an absolute end to the use of violence.

## Chessboard of violations

The high-profile assassination brought the ceasefire agreement itself under the scanner. The agreement has been followed more in breach rather than practice for some time now. Tamil political opponents of the LTTE, journalists, military personnel and LTTE cadre are being killed virtually on a daily basis. Recently, a police superintendent, Charles Wijaywardena, was abducted and hacked to death when he went unarmed to talk to a crowd of people in Jaffna angry at the accidental shooting of a barber by a soldier. The LTTE cadre is suspected to be behind the killing.

What Kadirgamar's killing reveals is the

autonomy of the forces resorting to violence. Some time back, Kausalyan, a leader of the LTTE, was ambushed and slain in the east amidst several camps of the Sri Lankan Army. In the northeast, international observers, who have been living with the people in significant numbers, especially after the tsunami, are appalled at the degree of human rights violations they witness on the part of the Tamil Tigers. These abuses include killings of political party activists, disappearances and child recruitment. Mothers are assaulted when they try to stop their children getting forcibly recruited. Most of these violations are not being reported because the people are afraid to speak up.

For some, the Kadirgamar killing was the final move in this chessboard of ceasefire violations. Analysts believed that the timing of the assassination, when there was a strong possibility of elections being held later this year, could only have helped the stridently anti-LTTE outfits like the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and weakened those who advocate a negotiated solution. A diplomat expressing puzzlement over the spate of killings said that if the LTTE wished to gain international legitimacy and were sincere about the peace process, such actions were clearly counter-productive. The intention, it seems, was to provoke a reluctant nation back to war.

The ceasefire violations have created terror in the minds of people, and weakened the peace process immensely by eroding the credibility of the negotiating partners. The pre-requisite for any political give and take is trust between the two sides. In the midst of sudden, deliberate and hideous killings, it is this trust that lies shattered.

## A war averted

In six weeks, Sri Lanka moved from a resurgence of optimism regarding the peace process when the agreement on tsunami recovery was signed on 24 June this year to what seemed like an almost certain collapse of the ceasefire. In the immediate wake of the assassination, there was intense political pressure on the government to either retaliate or stop cooperating with the Tigers. But such a retaliatory measure would have only served to strengthen forces that seek escalation of the conflict. What was needed



in fact was a concerted effort by all parties involved to create a sustainable environment for dialogue.

As the tension heightened, the Norwegian facilitators of the peace process unexpectedly announced that the LTTE had agreed to President Kumaratunga's request for talks to strengthen the Ceasefire Agreement. Since they left the negotiating table in April 2003, the LTTE has refused to negotiate with the government until several of their conditions were met, including a response to their proposal for an Interim Self Governing Authority.

The credit for preventing a headlong plunge into the abyss of war and the possible resumption of the negotiations should go to Kumaratunga. Despite weeping at the death of her close colleague, the man she had considered elevating to be her prime minister, she urged the international community to bring to the negotiating table the very forces she believed had assassinated him, and who had earlier attempted to assassinate her too, blinding her in one eye. The president had to contend with those nationalists who angrily poured scorn on her for seeking once again to appease the killers instead of taking punitive action against them. The responsible conduct of Kumaratunga's political rival, Ranil Wickremesinghe, further helped consolidate this call for negotiations. A lesser opposition leader would have clearly seen this as an opportunity to undermine the government by making false claims about how to deal with LTTE. But the moral support that Wickremesinghe's opposition has given to the sensitive decisions of the president, be it the joint tsunami recovery mechanism with the LTTE or inviting them back to the table, in the aftermath of Kadirgamar's assassination, can be considered nothing less than statesmanlike.

However, it is the people who, for refusing to get swayed by jingoism and war hysteria, deserve credit for averting a definite return to war. While shocked and distressed at the assassination, they did not convert to a mob demanding vengeance. Even the most hardline nationalists who despise the LTTE and the idea of 'appeasing' them do not urge a return to war. They may not quite know how to engage with the LTTE but after 20 years of bloodshed, they do know that war is not quite the way to engage them.

While the Norwegian facilitators did become more active in seeking to bring the two sides together after Kadirgamar's assassination, analysts believe that they have to be more assertive and even-handed in their appearance. Kadirgamar himself was a critic of the Norwegian facilitative effort. In one of his last public pronouncements, he had proposed that the facilitators should either plead their cause with greater conviction or step aside and permit some other country or group of countries to take their place. It appears that the Norwegian team has taken his advice more seriously only after his passing.

The LTTE may have agreed on talks because they are aware of the international disenchantment with their track record of political killings, child recruitment and repeated threats of war. The Tigers' belief that they were no longer a pariah organisation must have received a tremendous blow when the British government banned the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), an arm of the LTTE a fortnight ago. The LTTE would be concerned that after the assassination of Kadirgamar, other international actors and aid donors, too, will begin to ostracise them. Whatever be the reason, the re-entry of the LTTE, particularly Dr Balasingham, is an opportunity for a paradigm shift on the lines of the breakthroughs that took place in the early months after the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement.

## Talk

While the announcement of talks between the two sides was a welcome step, regrettably there has been little movement on the path of negotiations after the announcement was made. Killings in the northeast continue on a daily basis and politicians in the south have little reason to be confident about their own security. There have been two additional problems that have also emerged in the way of these negotiations -- one is the selection of a venue for talks and the other, the announcement by the Supreme Court that presidential elections must be held this year.

The decision of the Supreme Court that presidential elections must be held this year, rather than next year, have also added doubts about the sustainability of peace negotiations with a lame-duck chief executive. Any decision taken now could be irrelevant with the election of a new head of state. However, the fact that successive governments have not officially revoked agreements with regard to the peace process entered to by earlier governments should assure all sides that agreements of today will be respected in the future.

The government and LTTE must start talking immediately, if only because continuous ceasefire violations have taken a heavy toll on the common citizen. Strengthening the ceasefire agreement would, at the outset, bring relief to ordinary people and stop human rights abuses. The talks must get the LTTE to make a firm commitment that they would not target politicians during elections this time around and abide by the Ceasefire Agreement. A free and fair election could set the tone for future negotiations. Talks are also expected to bring about a semblance of political stability, without which there cannot be a political solution to the protracted conflict. This stability is necessary for governments to make reasoned accommodations and convince people about the need for future compromises.





## The course of Naxalism

India's Maoists, while faced with considerable weaknesses of their own, have been able to continue the fight because of the abject failures of the Indian state.

by | Manoranjan Mohanty

After an experiment with a ceasefire and abrogated talks, the ban on the Communist Party of India-Maoists was re-imposed by the government of Andhra Pradesh on 17 August. This followed the killing two days earlier of provincial lawmaker C Narsi Reddy, a septuagenarian leader of the ruling Congress party, and eight others in Narayanpet in Mehboobnagar district. The attackers arrived on motorcycles and showered bullets at a public function, killing also the town's municipal commissioner and the Reddy's son, among others. The ban was said to have had the concurrence of the central government, even though its spokesman in Delhi described the matter of law and order as a 'state subject' under the Indian Constitution. Some might have welcomed this reference to the Constitution,

however opportunistically it might have been used. But the fact is that the Centre has been closely coordinating anti-Naxalite operations throughout the country, and Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil had assured all support to related measures taken by the Andhra Chief Minister YS Rajashekhar Reddy.

The Hyderabad government's ban order under the AP Public Security Act of 1992 listed seven mass organisations of workers, peasants, youth, students and writers associated with the Maoist party. They include the Radical Youth League (RYL), the Radical Students Union (RSU), the All India Revolutionary Students Federation (AIRSF), the Rythu Coolie Sangham (agricultural workers' organisation), the Singareni Karmika Sangham (a powerful trade union in the collieries), the Viplava Karmika Sangham



(another trade union), and the Revolutionary Writers Association popularly known by its Telugu acronym Virasam. More than the ban on the parent party, it is the outlawing of the mass programmes of these affiliate organisations which will have serious repercussions on the ground. These groups have widespread membership, with regular programmes and publications.

The poet P Vara Vara Rao and writer G Kalyan Rao, leaders of Virasam who together with legendary poet-singer Gaddar were the Maoist party emissaries to the peace negotiations, were arrested. They had quit their charge in April 2005, expressing futility of the role in view of the growing repression by the state. Meanwhile, interestingly, the women's organisation affiliated to the rebels was not banned. Similarly, the Jana Natya Mandali people's theatre group led by Gaddar was not included in the list, though the expectation is it might be entered subsequently.

### **New phase of confrontation**

The ban per se would not have been all that significant because the CPI-Maoist, like its former avatars, the People's War group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), was already functioning as an underground party. The leaders of CPI-Maoists and the CPI-ML Janashakthi who had come to Hyderabad for the peace talks in October 2004 had emerged from the forests and returned there after ten days of open presence, including four days of peace talks. The 15 August killing was exceptional, but not altogether unprecedented. Every time the police killed some important Maoist leader, the rebels have declared their intention to take revenge.

However, the current ban represents the start of a new phase in the confrontation between the Naxalite movement and the Indian state. The outlawing came after the chances of resumption of peace talks had effectively disappeared, and the police had intensified its operations to kill Maoist leaders and cadre, and to capture or harass sympathisers. The Maoists, too, had resumed retaliatory action of kidnappings and killings. Above all, the approaches by the mediators in the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) received little response in recent months. The civil society in Andhra Pradesh had pinned great hope on the CCC's initiative to organise a second round of talks so as to reverse the intensifying climate of violence.

The re-imposition of the ban indicated the determination of the Hyderabad government to withstand civil society pressures and to resume its armed operations to suppress the Naxalite movement. This decision condemned by most of the political parties including the allies of the Congress, the TRS (Telengana Rajya Samithi), Mazlis, the CPI and the CPI-M. Only the Telugu Desham Party and

the BJP supported it, maintaining that it had been mistaken on the part of the Congress government to have let the ban lapse in July 2004 in the first place.

The new phase in the confrontation was also indicated by the Union Home Ministry's initiative to coordinate the anti-Naxalite operations. A 30 July 2005 meeting of the chief ministers and the directors generals of police from the nine Naxalite-impacted states agreed to set up a task force to launch joint operations. A policy of "zero tolerance" towards the Maoists was announced. The Tamil Nadu government had already banned the Maoist Party on 12 July, and the Karnataka government had also earlier launched joint operations with the Andhra police. That action had led to the killing of many PWG leaders as well as Saketh Ranjan, editor of the RSU's journal.

Paradoxically, the resumption of the ban reflected an admission of failure by the Indian state to tackle the challenge of the Naxalite movement over the past 38 years. The capacity of the movement to survive and to spread having been made clear, the hope was that the authorities may at long last look to address the root causes of the rebellion. There had also been the hope that the new Congress-led government at the Centre and the new Congress government in Andhra, which came to power after people rejected Chandra Babu Naidu's repressive regime, would adopt a political approach to the Maoists rather than treat them merely as perpetrators of terrorist violence. But apparently nothing had changed, and here was the government, once again resorting to prohibition, combing operations in villages and forests, and encounter killings.

### **Nature of challenge**

The Common Minimum Programme (CMP) which the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) adopted in May 2004 when it came to power at the Centre supported by the left parties had an important perspective statement on the Naxalite challenge. The relevant paragraph was listed under the section on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, thus emphasising that this movement was essentially connected with the problems of the socially oppressed sections. It said: "*The UPA is concerned with the growth of extremist violence and other forms of terrorist activity in different states. This is not merely a law and order problem, but a deeper socio-economic issue which will be addressed more meaningfully than has been the case so far. Fake encounters will not be permitted.*"

This statement had raised hopes for a new approach to be taken by the UPA, especially in comparison to the earlier BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government with L K Advani as Home Minister, and Chandra Babu Naidu as chief minister in Andhra. Indeed, the reference in the CMP to the deeper socio-economic issues was on



target, for the Maoist movement revolves around the issues of agrarian transformation, especially the problems of the landless and the small peasants.

It was the peasant resistance to landlords in Naxalbari in West Bengal in May 1967 under the land-to-the-tiller slogan that provided a name to the Maoist phenomenon in Indian politics – Naxalism. The movement underwent much churning in the succeeding decades, organisationally and politically, but the focus on agrarian revolution has remained at the core. The very fact that land reform as a state objective has disappeared from Indian policy-making in the age of economic liberalisation has kept the Naxalite agenda alive. The state's anti-poverty programmes such as the NDA's Food-for-Work or the UPA's recently established Employment Guarantee Programme hardly meet the basic demand for land rights in rural India. The rise of backward castes to power in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere, even though it may have democratised certain aspects of the polity, has had the paradoxical effect of freezing land relations.

The Naxalite movement is mostly active in the tribal areas spreading from Bihar to Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, and also covering parts of Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. This spread is linked only to the inaccessible hilly terrain of these regions, but a conscious decision by the Naxalites to take up the issues affecting the tribal people, who are among the most exploited in society. India's development process has led to commercialisation of forest resources, reducing the traditional access to forest produce. Alienation of tribal land to non-tribals has been a steady trend despite legal strictures. Mining-based industries and the construction of large dams have caused extensive displacement of the tribals, besides destroying their natural environment. A central Naxalite agenda is for tribal self-determination, asserting the rights of the tribals over local resources.

The government programmes of tribal development have ended up creating a new elite in the tribal areas even as increased poverty leads to massive out-migration. The recent bill for safeguarding land rights, introduced by the UPA, has been a case of too little, too late. The extension of the Panchayati Raj programme to tribal areas, giving greater power to the tribal village assembly is a modest measure in the right direction, but unless structural measures are undertaken to restore rights over land and forest, the Panchayati Raj structures will continue to be manipulated by local elites.

The Andhra government's decision to have a special tribal battalion of some 1,200 men, a 'Girijan Greyhound' to fight the naxalites is indicative of the approach guiding the present policy.

During the 1980s, the Naxalites linked

themselves with the nationality struggles in the Indian Northeast, Jammu and Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu and elsewhere. This strategic decision had a significant impact on both, the agrarian movement as well as the autonomy movements. Each was a complex struggle involving class and nationality, as well as caste and gender. The decision therefore involved making choices on supporting autonomy movements led by the bourgeoisie, such as in case of Telugu Desham in [Karnataka], the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam, the Akali Dal in Punjab and the DMK in Tamil Nadu.

The formation of the smaller states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal was a welcome step in terms of providing people with more say in their affairs, but the new states were created keeping the overall power structure intact. As a result, the nationality struggles in these areas continue as integral parts of the agrarian and the broader democratic struggle. Interestingly, the government understood this linking of the Naxalites with other movements only in terms of a network among militants for training, supply of weapons and coordination against state operations.

During the 1990s, Indian politics and economy saw major upheavals linked to globalisation on the one hand, and communal politics on the other. The Gujarat riots of 2002 were symbolic of the magnitude of the latter trend. The processes of privatisation of public enterprises and retrenchment of workers have continued unabated in the recent years. While the ruling parties, the BJP and the Congress, were fully committed to the agenda of globalisation, the CPI and CPI-M tried to keep the critique alive on behalf of workers, the lower middle classes and the rural poor who suffered tremendously and largely silently under the process of economic reforms. But the main resistance to globalisation was put forth by the Naxalites, which has considered the stress on anti-imperialism paramount at a time of growing collaboration between the government of India and the US government.

Overall, therefore, the Naxalite challenge rests upon the issues of agrarian transformation, tribal people's rights, the nationality movement and resisting imperialism and globalisation. All this adds up to what they characterise as the people's democratic revolution to change the very character of the Indian state. Because of the issues they pursue, the Naxalites have a social base which sustains them despite a variety of repressive measures pursued by the state. In fact, over the past decade the movement has spread to new areas such as southern districts of Orissa and West Bengal as well as parts of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

If the Naxalite movement is seen as a coming together of many streams, then they can be said to



have a presence in all parts of the country. Of them the two major streams are the CPI-ML (Liberation) which participates in electoral politics and the CPI-Maoist which pursues armed struggle. The former has a strong base in Bihar and it has had seven to ten Members in the Legislative Assembly. It has an all-India organisation with state units and an active trade union and a women's organisation. Its powerful student wing, AISA has often won the leadership at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

The CPI-Maoist, which emerged with the merger of the PWG and MCC in October 2004, had earlier taken into its fold the Party Unity of Bihar region. Liberation condemns the PWG as left adventurists pursuing squad actions which invite further state repression. The Maoists dismiss the followers of the Liberation line as revisionists taking the same path as the CPI-M, which has held on to power in West Bengal since 1977. These two formations are so mutually antagonistic that they rarely come together to fight any issue. Between them are placed a number of other Naxalite groups such as Janashakti which has worked together with the Maoist party in the peace talks in Andhra, the CPI-ML (New Democracy) which has been active in Jharkhand and Assam and lately in Punjab and Orissa on tribal and workers' issues, and the CPI-ML (Provisional Committee) which is ostensibly trying to bring the various groups together.

The pre-organisational character of the Naxalite movement that was evident in the 1970s, the subject of this writer's work *Revolutionary Violence* (1977), remains to some extent. For this reason, the movement as a whole remains mainly as an ideological force in Indian politics, whose appeal remains rooted in the concrete condition of the people. Meanwhile, the two main formations have emerged as organised parties, whose leaders are subjected to attack by state agencies and they suffer substantial losses. Overall, the question remains as to why the spiral of violence and counter-violence by the Naxalites and the state agencies never seem to end in the heartland of India.

## **Violence and peace in democracy**

The oft-repeated plea that there is no place for violence in a democracy indicates a desirable norm for seeking peaceful constitutional response to fulfil a people's aspirations. But when the coercive power of the state is used to defend the interest of the rich and the powerful or to eliminate resistance to injustice, the same can sound like a hollow claim. Social violence has grown in India with landlords' armies in Bihar, factional murders in Andhra's Rayalseema, and upper caste atrocities on dalits all over – to mention but a few examples.

Democracy is indeed meant for bringing about

peaceful change through people's representatives. But the fact is that existing power centres in society do not allow that to easily happen. Groups fighting for democratic rights have been pointing this out for over three decades now. The state response to the Naxalite movement was to capture and kill activists them by staging 'false encounters'. Human rights groups which go under the acronyms APCLC, PUDR and PUCL, have investigated many such incidents in Andhra, Bihar and elsewhere. They have demanded that rule of law be applied to all such cases, and all persons suspected should be tried according to law rather than be eliminated. When the state itself violates the constitutional obligations with impunity, then the violation of law and civic norms becomes widespread.

When the talks between the Maoists and the Hyderabad government took place in October 2004 following a three-year initiative and protracted negotiations by the CCC (led by S R Sankaran, a respected former civil servant who had himself been kidnapped by the PWG some years ago), two things were clear. One was the acknowledgement by the state that the Naxalite movement was not just a law and order problem, but had socio-economic roots that could be discussed on the road to reducing violence. Second, it was brought home to the Maoists to recognise that the realm of the present Indian state did provide some space for socio-economic change despite its class character, and that if the space indeed opened up, the need for resort to armed struggle may be reviewed.

It was on the basis of this understanding that there was a ceasefire in Andhra for more than six months, when the common people were spared the dual pressures of violence from the Naxalites as well as the police. The historic talks that took place between the rebels and the government proved that dialogue was an essential element of democracy through which each side was called upon to recognise underlying truths. In these peace talks Indian democratic opinion saw prospects of mutual appreciation of each other's positions in the spirit of "truth and reconciliation". As in case of the Naga peace talks, or those between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, in this case too the hope was to proceed with the dialogue with the hope of suspending armed action by the two sides. But there were elements among the political circles and the police, both locally and nationally, which considered the policy too 'soft', which would only strengthen the Naxalites. In other words, the UPA government's statement as contained in the Common Minimum Programme was not the only perspective guiding state policy.

During the peace talks and press conferences, the Maoists were confronted with many issues raised by democratic rights groups in the recent years.



Could the Maoists be said to be respecting the norms of revolutionary violence when the common people were subjected to killings and torture by them, or when public property was destroyed? How did they explain individual annihilations by their squads, and did this reflect the Maoist norm of 'mass line'?

On the issue of armed struggle, the Naxalite movement remains sharply divided. The CPI-Maoists have a People's Guerilla Liberation Army mostly armed with weapons seized from the police, some of which are sophisticated weaponry such as the AK-47 rifles. Their small formations confront the police and paramilitary forces such as the Central Reserve Police Force and Indo-Tibetan Border force, taking advantage support of the villagers as well as the jungle terrain. How effective their armed resistance can be against the armed strength of the Indian state remains the major question.

Did the Maoists also reflect upper caste attitude and behaviour in their political practice? How far are they concerned with the rights of dalits and other backward classes? In the 1990s, after the upper castes opposed reservation for backward classes, the Maoists spearheaded the campaign for dalit and 'other backward caste' rights in many parts of India. But the caste issue is still not fully integrated with the class understanding of politics. Similarly, feminists have pointed out the prevalence of patriarchal values and behaviour in the Maoist parties. Moreover, the rebel women's organisations have not been on the forefront of the variety of women's struggles in contemporary India. One can legitimately raise the question whether the Naxalites have dialectically integrated class, caste and gender any better than the rest of the Indian communists, whose record on this matter remains poor.

Human rights activists have also challenged the Maoists, asking whether they practice democracy and civil liberties within their movement, which should after all be the embryo of their 'ideal society'. Factionalism and splits have famously characterised the Naxalite movement, which is why there are over two dozen groups in existence at any given time. And so the natural question, are the comrades guilty of sectarian politics when they should be developing a united front? There was a time the intolerance of divergent opinion within the party was so stark that it led to killings – a tendency that seems to have subsided in recent years. The communist groups seem to resort all too easily to the mechanical understanding of revisionism and dogmatism. The revolutionary tradition of inner-party democracy – the minority accepting the decision of the majority while the majority respects the point of view of the minority – seems a fragile heritage.

The common people whose cause the Naxalites claim to represent confront day-to-day livelihood issues – of making a living out of agriculture and

forestry, of finding water for their fields, access to affordable credit, market for their produce, and ways and means to access education and health. Such ground-level issues do not seem to figure prominently in the Maoists' formulation of political strategy. Many of these activities which concretely help the poor are dismissed with terms such as 'reformism', 'welfare work' or even 'ngo action'. The idea that cultural and educational work form an integral part of revolutionary strategy, together with political and military tasks, seems to have been relegated to the background. In the recent years, the Naxalite leadership has indeed tried to respond to these issues, but not entirely satisfactorily.

The issue of revolutionary creativity – the ability to assess the emerging national, local and global environment and adjusting to the evolving while pursuing one's ideological goals – thus remains a challenge for the Naxalite movement in India. It is important not only to learn from the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions, but also from the experience of the Philippines, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela and Nepal.

Meanwhile, the Naxalite movement continues to spread despite suffering losses in terms of fighters as well as – from time to time – operational areas. They do represent a powerful challenge to the existing political economy in its phase of capitalist globalisation. To cope with this challenge the democratic forces of India must pressure all states authorities which are confronting Naxalites to return to political dialogue, and to stop treating the rebellion as a law and order problem. In Andhra Pradesh, the ground created by the peace talks of 2004 has now collapsed, and the state government and Centre both now demand that the Maoists lay down arms before resuming talks.

Indeed, the policy makers, be it in Delhi or Hyderabad, are now guided by a unified understanding of global terrorism. They are excitedly formulating a strategy of counter-terrorism US software, Israeli hardware and some Indian brands added. This strategy cannot see the difference between the CPI-Maoist operating in Andhra and Bihar, from the CPN-Maoist currently fighting the autocratic monarchy in Nepal. No doubt, they are revolutionary communists in solidarity with one another, but they are fighting different battles in their own countries. After all, these are Maoists who believed the great helmsman when he said that the people of each country must formulate their own strategy derived from their unique local conditions. Leaders of the Indian state must try and comprehend the nature of the Maoist challenge and address the socio-economic issues at its heart, so that another spiral of intensified violence in India can be avoided and prospects of peace and democracy enhanced. †



# Whither the Naxal comrades?

**The Naxalites of India are engaged in an expansion spree but the party is hardly audible beyond its core areas. It is not to be found in the rural plains and cities.**

by | Tilak Dasgupta

On 21 September 2004, addressing the chief ministers of extremism-affected states in Hyderabad, India's Home Minister Shivraj Patil conceded that Left extremism led by Naxalites was expanding rapidly in the country. 125 districts in 12 of India's 28 states were affected, he said, though in varying degrees, and another 24 districts were being 'targeted'. An Intelligence Bureau report placed at that same meeting warned that a merger was in the offing between the two largest Maoist groups, People's War Group (CPI-ML) active in Andhra Pradesh, and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) energetic in the Bihar-Jharkhand region. The union, said the Bureau, would give a fillip to Naxalism which had already shown signs of revival in recent years.

As became clear later, the People's War group and the MCC had merged on the very same day that the chief ministers were gathered in Hyderabad to consider the collective threat of left extremism to the Indian state and establishment. A press statement signed jointly by the erstwhile general secretaries of the two outfits read, "On September 21, 2004, amidst the thick forests in some part of India, the formation of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) was declared at a public meeting before an assembly of people's guerrilla fighters, party activists and activists of mass organisation." The Indian revolution to overthrow the Indian state would be carried out through protracted people's war, said the statement, with "the armed struggle for seizure of power remaining as its central and principal task". The countryside would remain the centre of gravity of the party's work, "while urban work will be complementary to it."

The urgent task before the CPI-Maoist, said the statement, was to develop the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) under its command to a full-fledged Peoples Liberation Army and to develop the existing 'guerrilla zones' into base areas. The party

pledged to build movements related to various issues confronting different sections of the Indian people and to mobilise the masses against the growing imperialist onslaught in India. The new party extended its support to the "struggle of the nationalities for self-determination including their right of secession" as well as to the Maoist struggle in Nepal. It promised to isolate the more dangerous Hindu fascist forces, while exposing all other fundamentalist forces.

Whether by coincidence or design, the union which led to the formation of the CPI-Maoist came at a time when the Naxalites of India have been on an expansion spree. According to one researcher, their spread is at the rate of two districts every week. While this may be an exaggeration, there is no denying that the Maoist influence and striking power have increased manifold in India over the last few years. Both the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government as well as the main opposition, Bharatiya Janata Party consider Naxalism as a major internal security threat. While Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee rates left extremism as the greatest menace, the leader of the opposition in Parliament and

BJP President Lal Krishna Advani lists illegal immigration, terrorism and Naxalism as the three biggest dangers.

It is noteworthy, however, that while the United States government includes the CPI-Maoist on its "terror list", the major political parties of India distinguish Maoism and terrorism. The Naxalites are treated as a separate category because they do enjoy popular backing in their core areas, they use violence mostly against selected state targets, and have a definite programme of political and socio-economic transformation. Most importantly, they are not seen as indiscriminately targeting innocent civilians in armed attacks and explosions.



Charu



## Naxalbari to Dandakaranya

Any discerning observer of the Indian communist movement will note that the CPI-M strategic model for revolution not only borrows heavily from the Chinese revolutionary model but also basically upholds and preserves the path advocated by the old Naxalites of the Communist Party of India - Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML), headed by late Charu Majumdar. The labels 'Naxalite' and 'Maoist' are interchangeable in the Indian context. The former owes its origin to the fact that the first armed peasant upsurge led by the Maoist faction of the Communist party of India-Marxist began in the Naxalbari region of West Bengal bordering the eastern Nepal terai. The year was 1967, and it was subsequently, in 1969, that the majority of the Maoist rebels formed the CPI-ML.

The first attempt of that Maoist party to usher in an armed revolution in India, however, was defeated by the time the top CPI-ML ideologue and founder general secretary Majumdar died while in custody in July 1972. The defeat led to splits in the party and many factions of various sizes bearing the same name CPI-ML continue to survive to this day. There have also been other groups, such as the MCC, which had always remained distinct from CPI-ML. The 1970s and 80s were witness to bitter polemics which divided these groups, but at the same time there were efforts to rebuild the Maoist movement as a whole. Out of this churning, the Liberation group in Bihar and the PWG in Andhra Pradesh emerged as the two most important tendencies in the Naxalite movement. The Liberation group, headed by Vinod Mishra, eventually discarded the old CPI-ML model of armed revolution and instead focused on building democratic movements and fighting elections. However, the PWG continued to march along the Naxalbari path, which involved building liberated areas and intensifying the armed struggle through people's army organised in the countryside.

Even before its merger with MCC, both the Indian media and the government recognised the PWG as the Maoist group with the widest mass base and the strongest military. With the MCC's support base in Bihar and Jharkhand, the unified CPI-Maoist has naturally evolved as a force to be reckoned with. Compared to the Naxalite movement of yesteryears, the present Maoist-led armed struggle operates at a higher plane. Looking back, the struggle zones of the 1960s and early 1970s were somewhat modest. The armed actions were usually directed against local bullies by squads armed with traditional weapons. In most cases, the fighters were isolated from the local people, which made it relatively easy for the police to crush the activism.

In contrast, the present CPI-Maoist armed struggle is not only spread over much larger areas but has also managed to survive over two decades, braving

sustained counter-insurgency operations. Despite some ups and downs, the insurgency has over the last few years expanded into new areas of Orissa, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. The strongest guerrilla zone, however, remains the Dandakaranya forest region in central India that covers eleven districts spread across the four states of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. The PWG claims its influence in the region extends to twelve million people, mostly of tribal origin. The second-most important guerrilla zone of the CPI-Maoist incorporates the hills and forests of Jharkhand, extending north into neighbouring Bihar. There are reasons to believe that the Maoists are planning to build a corridor to link their guerrilla zones with those of Nepal's Maobaadi.

To their credit, the constituents of the CPI (Maoist) have managed to avert major splits during the last two decades and in fact the majority of the Naxalite groups and individuals who believe in the path of armed struggle have now actually come under one banner. The personality cult prevalent in the old movement has been replaced by a low-key style of collective leadership. In terms of military might too,



the old Naxalites were no match for the contemporary Maoists. The tiny irregular squads armed with primitive weapons have given way to much larger PLGA formations equipped with sophisticated firearms. The PWG or the MCC, even before their merger, had gradually stepped up their scale of guerrilla attacks to target well-fortified police stations and camps as well as sizeable armed police patrols. The PWG, for instance, in a daring guerrilla operation in February 2004 overran the Koraput district headquarters in Orissa and looted a huge quantity of weaponry from the district armoury, police stations and even the district jail. Experts consider the Koraput action as a watershed in the growth of the military capability of the Naxalites.

While the armed actions by the rebels make it easily into the news and newscasts, what is less visible is the economic and political work being carried out deep within the guerrilla zones. The CPI-Maoist claims that in large parts of Dandakaranya and Jharkhand guerrilla zones, village-level people's



committees have sprung up as an embryonic form of alternative political structure. In Dandakaranya in particular, it is claimed that cooperatives, credit societies, paddy banks, medical clinics, schools, mutual aid teams and libraries are functioning under the party's guidance. Also, the property of landlords is being redistributed, usurious money-lending has been banned, and village development committees formed to undertake irrigation and local road-building projects. Efforts are also on to diversify and improve agricultural production, plant fruit trees, rear fish and improved varieties of cattle. The party also claims that it has mobilised lakhs of people in the guerrilla zones in various mass organisations and village defence groups, and that participation by tribal women in these activities is notable.

### **The supply line**

The gains achieved by the erstwhile PWG and MCC and their successor organisation the CPI-Maoist is clear for all to see, as are their successes in comparison to the earlier Naxalite movement. Nevertheless, the prevailing impression of the people outside the guerrilla zones regarding the Maoists remains that of an armed band indulging in surprise attacks on the government forces rather than that of a political entity. At one time, the Maoist mass-based organisations used to hold huge rallies of the rural poor in the towns of Andhra, Dandakaranya, Jharkhand and Bihar. These public campaigns have almost disappeared, except briefly in Andhra last year, since the state governments began officially banning or unofficially disrupting such mobilisations. The party's efforts to gain a foothold in the trade union movement or to build anti-imperialist and anti-repression fronts on the national plane have also come a cropper. In Andhra, repression from the state authorities has set back the PWG's once vibrant agricultural labour struggle and powerful student and cultural movements. In Bihar and Jharkhand too, most of the Maoists' large rural poor associations are unable to function openly. If one were to look beyond the Maoist core areas to India at large, however, it is clear that the Indian working class and employees as well as the farmers in the plains of rural India have mostly failed to respond to the Maoist variety of politics.

It is indeed ironic that the Maoists have been unable to mobilise at a time when industrial workers, middle class employees and peasantry all over seek the path of resistance to the ill effects of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation. Even though it seems more widespread than the earlier Naxalite movement, the Maoists of today seem to be in no position to launch a powerful country-wide political struggle on these issues. Neither have they been capable of waging an effective campaign against the rapid proliferation of *Hindutva* ideology in the country.

It is important to seek the causes of this failure of mobilisation and inability to keep alive the open mass organisations by defying the official ban. The failure seems all the more perplexing because the revival of the Naxalite movement came about when the new generation leadership rejected Majumdar's policy of doing away with mass organisations and did manage to set up massive agricultural poor peasant associations in Andhra, Jharkhand and Bihar. The student and youth associations formed by them also served as breeding ground for fresh cadres needed for renewing the revolutionary struggles. With these mass organizations run by the Maoists having now become inactive, the supply line of intellectually developed new cadres remains virtually sealed.

The overall picture that emerges of the CPI-Maoist is that of a comparatively strong military outfit enjoying considerable popular support in its strongholds in south, central and eastern India. However, the party's political message is hardly audible beyond these core areas, and the Indian state has been fairly successful in preventing its entry into the national political arena. The modern-day Naxalites have facilitated the implementation of the government's game plan by ignoring the need for the step-by-step building of nationwide political movements.

It is not that the Maoists are unaware of this challenge. Last year, the PWG eagerly accepted the offer for peace talks made by the Andhra Pradesh state government, if only to secure an opportunity to openly articulate its views and mobilise the people. For the purpose, it agreed to hold back weapons as long as the police did the same. The ceasefire continued for some time, but the talks eventually collapsed with the government insisting that the rebel cadres should not carry arms when they organise meetings in the villages. Looking back over last year's ceasefire, the People's War was indeed able to organise numerous village meetings and three large rallies at Warangal, Hyderabad and Guntur in July, September and October 2004. It was able to demonstrate its popular support in its areas of influence. It also held a number of press conferences and raised the issues of land redistribution, tribal rights on forest, equal property rights for women, the increasing debt burden on the farmers and retrenchment of workers. These constituted some of the specific demands the insurgents placed before the Andhra government.

But the honeymoon between the Maoists and the Andhra Pradesh authorities was shortlived and armed confrontation between the police and the CPI-Maoist has now resumed. On 16 August, the party and its affiliated mass organisations were once again banned by the Congress government in the state after one of the Congress legislators was assassinated a



day earlier. The CPI-Maoist is now back in its jungle hideout and the chances of its resurfacing in the near future are slim. Simultaneously, the open activities of the Maoists have come almost to a close.

### Looking ahead

Where will the CPI-Maoist go from here? From the party literature and published interviews of the erstwhile general secretaries of the CPI-ML, PWG and MCC, it is evident that the leadership is conscious "that the impact of revolutionary struggles against imperialist intervention in the country cannot much be seen". The party also admits that given the way the "RSS gang" is instigating communalism and provoking riots in India today, "our response in giving an effective answer to them has been far less than what the situation requires". It also acknowledges that revisionism (read parliamentary communist parties) "has a countrywide domination over the trade unions, a wide influence in the urban areas and even amongst the peasantry in some parts of the country". So, while there is at least an attempt to recognise the challenges as they exist before the CPI-Maoist, there seems to be a reluctance to seek the reasons behind these shortcomings and their link to the party's political-military line. Consequently, the Maoists, while identifying their deficiencies

have not been able to make the required correction.

Looking deeper, it seems that the crucial Maoist decision to shift their key force to remote forest regions of central India in order to build their 'people's army' and establish red base areas have left them with sparse strength to enlist popular support in either the rural plains or the cities where the larger population lives. That aside, the Maoist's call for an armed revolution to gain land, democracy and independence apparently has scant appeal beyond the Maoist's core constituency of landless labourers and poorest sections of the peasants in most backward areas. But then these concepts remain sacrosanct for the Indian Maoists and any talk of revising them is regarded as blasphemous.

Against such a backdrop, while they may have responded to the call of the times by merging into the CPI-Maoist, it appears improbable that India's Naxalites will take a fresh look at their fundamental line. Nor is it likely that they will agree to scale down armed activity against the state in order to get a chance of mobilising people in the plains and towns. However, nothing short of this kind of popular mobilisation is needed if the CPI-Maoist wishes to emerge from its self-imposed exile as a national level force capable of influencing the country's politics and economics in a decisive manner.



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# Hyper-nationalism in 'The Age of Terror'

f 9/11 triggered the US-led global 'war on terror', 13/12 marked a significant date in the political progression of the Indian state. The attack on the Parliament Building in New Delhi in December 2001 was followed by a diplomatic and military offensive by the Indian government against what it termed "Pakistan supported terrorism". Domestically, the Delhi Police nabbed four people suspected to be involved in planning the attack. Among those arrested was S A R Geelani.

A Kashmiri lecturer at a Delhi University college, Geelani was accused of conspiring in the attack on Parliament and was booked under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). The case against him hinged on what has now been proven to be no evidence at all – a two-minute phone conversation with his younger brother in Kashmir a day after the attack. The police claimed Geelani told his brother that what had happened in Delhi was necessary. Careful transcription of the conversation by leading activists later revealed that there was no reference to the Parliament attack in the conversation, and words attributed to Geelani did

not exist in the recording. Geelani was also charged with knowing two of the other co-accused. With all three hailing from the same district in Kashmir and residing in the same area in Delhi, it was not surprising that they knew each other socially – something that Geelani never denied.

Despite the weakness of the government's case, Geelani was awarded the death sentence by a special POTA court a year later. A propaganda and misinformation exercise was conducted by the authorities, ably assisted by sections of the media, to defame Geelani. In response, lawyers, activists, academics, writers, journalists and students started a campaign to support the beleaguered lecturer. The All India Committee for the Defence of S A R Geelani was headed by eminent scholar Rajni Kothari and included author Arundhati Roy, Geelani's lawyer Nandita Haksar and other well-known public figures.

The POTA court's judgement was turned down by the Delhi High Court (HC), which acquitted Geelani. But his troubles were far from over. In February this year, Geelani was shot outside his lawyer's house and was lucky to survive. He is convinced that it was the

Special Cell of Delhi Police, responsible for his arrest, which tried to get him killed. Meanwhile, the government appealed to the Supreme Court (SC), which on 4 August 2005, upheld the acquittal of Geelani. But in their judgement, the justices added, oddly enough, the words that there remained "a needle of suspicion" against him. The Delhi Police has now decided to file a review petition in the SC against his acquittal. The sordid, poignant and tragic tale of Geelani continues.

S A R Geelani is, perhaps, Southasia's most visible example of the state labeling those who dissent from the 'establishment' discourse as terrorist. Prior to his recent tribulations, Geelani had always been outspoken about human rights violations and the suppression of popular aspirations by the Indian state in Kashmir. This is what seems to have made him vulnerable to action by a police seeking short-cuts, and a quick and definitive end to the investigations on the Parliament attack. The Geelani case also provides a glimpse into the power of the term 'terrorist' and the dangers inherent in its use.

S A R Geelani spoke to Prashant Jha about being branded a terrorist, his experience with the Indian state, the politics of violence, the meaning of terror, and the Kashmir quagmire.

**About his personal and political background, and whether his ethnic identity and views on Kashmir made it easier to label him a 'terrorist'.**

I am from Baramulla in Jammu and Kashmir and studied in Lucknow and Delhi. The campaign against me definitely stemmed from who I am – a Kashmiri Muslim teaching Arabic at Zakir Hussain College, often wrongly assumed to be a Muslim college. The fact that I had been consistently speaking up against atrocities by Indian security forces in Kashmir made me an even easier target. The authorities, in the aftermath of the Parliament attack, were looking for someone to pin the blame on. I fitted

in perfectly with the stereotype of the 'Islamic terrorist'.

**Based on his experience, on how the state treats those it deems terrorists and anti-nationals.**

The manner in which I was arrested is revealing in itself. 14 December 2001 was the last Friday of Ramadan and I was on a public bus on my way to offer prayers when some police officers in plain clothes intercepted the bus. They asked me to come with them and shoved me into a car parked outside. I was not given the reason for my arrest and was slapped and abused. Despite repeated requests, they did not let me pray. They took me to a private place and asked me to sign a confession admitting guilt for the Parliament attack. I refused and was tortured brutally. I was stripped, beaten up and hanged upside down for hours at a stretch. The police then



picked up my family and threatened to rape my wife and kill all of us, including my three-year-old son. Later, in Tihar Jail, I was in solitary confinement in a dark, dingy cell. Days would pass before I saw the sun or was in contact with another human being. Earlier this year, I was shot and had six bullets pumped into me. I have no doubt it is the Delhi Police that engineered the shooting and wanted me killed.

#### **On what gave him the courage to carry on.**

Apart from the fact that I am innocent and was framed, I realised that the plot was to malign the Kashmir movement. I decided to bear with the physical and mental pain and keep fighting, because the crime would have been attributed not only to me but also to Kashmiris.

#### **There would also be heightened suspicion against Indian Muslims.**

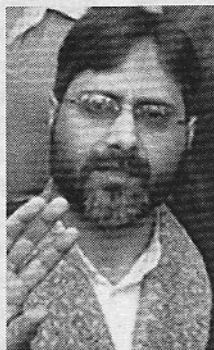
I did not want to give the state a chance to defame the Kashmiri people and their movement, or target Indian Muslims.

#### **His reaction to the Supreme Court's reference to a 'needle of suspicion' against him.**

Both the Supreme Court and High Court have said that there is no evidence against me. The SC judgement in fact contradicts itself. If there is no evidence, what is the basis for the so-called suspicion? I considered it a politically motivated reference to save those police officers who had falsely implicated me. Justice is not merely freeing the innocent but punishing the guilty. The judgement lacks justice as it let free those who had fabricated an utterly false case against me.

#### **On whether there is a tendency to toe the establishment's line when 'terrorism' is invoked.**

Absolutely. An air of hyper-nationalism is created when the term terror is used. I experienced silence and complicity everywhere – in Delhi's Safdarjung hospital where a doctor produced a medical certificate stating that I was fine, without checking me at all and despite clear marks of torture on my body; in the lower court when the judge on the first day of the proceedings told a co-accused, who was weeping, that she should have thought of the consequences when she hatched the conspiracy – in effect delivering the judgement before a single argument had been presented; in the media which uncritically played up and reported false stories fed to them by the police. If those reports were to be believed, I had al-Qaeda links, had confessed to the crime, and had bought a posh flat in South Delhi immediately before the attack. Even after I was acquitted by the High Court, I was called a terrorist and my car was stoned in the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus.



#### **On the obliteration, post 9/11, of the distinction between 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter'.**

That distinction will always remain, regardless of what the powerful states want. Terrorism is when innocent people are targeted – either by the state or private parties. But if a person takes up the gun in self-defence or to achieve his rights when there has been suppression, that is not terrorism. What is important to understand is why people take up the gun. In India, movements in Kashmir and the Northeast are deemed to be terrorism but all that the Kashmiris are asking for is the right to self-determination, a promise made to them at the United Nations. The struggle against colonial occupation, as is the case in Kashmir, cannot be called terrorism. To look at the duplicity of states, turn to Iraq. When the US kills, they are liberators and when an Iraqi resists, he is a terrorist.

#### **On whether the politics of violence brings in its own set of problems, including deaths of innocents, and denial of negotiated solutions.**

It is the violence of the state and its attempts to suppress democratic voices that leads to problems. Of course, violence should ideally be shunned. But one has to ask why people adopt violent means. When a person takes up the gun, he knows he has to fight against a trained military. He also knows that the act of picking the gun has probably reduced his life span. The problem is that states pay no heed to aspirations when peacefully expressed. If you want people to shun arms, the state has to first shun its own violence and pay attention to demands when democratically expressed.

#### **On what needs to be done in Kashmir.**

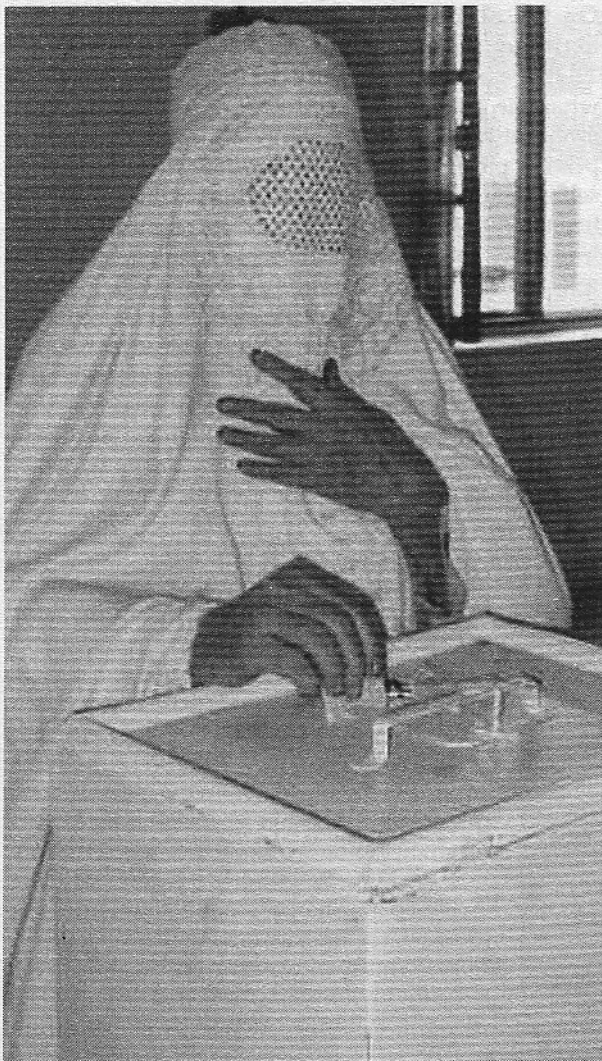
The aspirations of the people of Kashmir must be taken into account. India and Pakistan have a stake in the Kashmir issue because both sides occupy portions of the land. But this land belongs to the people of Kashmir. They are the principal party. The Kashmir issue needs to be resolved respecting the sentiments of the Kashmiri people. The money both countries are wasting on defence and in places like Siachen is precious and should be diverted for development.

#### **On the root cause of political violence in India.**

It is the complete decay of democratic institutions in this country, from top to bottom, which is leading to violence. At a distance, Indian democracy may look rosy and wonderful but if you come in close contact with institutions and structures in India, it is a disaster. The state is unwilling to consider even democratic demands for land reform and fair wages. The weakening of democratic institutions and the shrinking of democratic space is what has led to people taking up arms. ▲



by | Aunohita Mojudar



# Afghans go for Parliament

**Even though there is fear of electoral violence, even though parties are disallowed, even though this is an election organised to fit an international timetable, there is hope that the general elections of 18 September will give Afghans the politics of representation and deliver them from the gun.**

On 18 September, more than 12 million people are expected to participate in Afghanistan's first experiment in parliamentary democracy, when they vote for the Wolesi Jirga (lower house of Parliament) and 34 provincial councils. The term 'experiment' is appropriate, as the complete decimation of structures of a modern nation state during the 25 years of unrelenting war makes the holding of elections challenging, difficult as well as novel. The polling process will also be an exercise in bringing together innumerable variables that have been changing the face of Afghanistan in the past four years.

The elections are being held under the framework of the Bonn Agreement, signed in the wake of the US military victory in Afghanistan in 2001. The Bonn process had laid down a timetable for the recovery and reconstruction of the country. The roadmap included convening of an emergency *loya jirga* (grand council) for establishment of the transitional government, holding a constitutional *loya jirga* to adopt a new constitution, to be followed by elections for a fully representational government. Scheduled for June 2004, the elections were to be held for the office of president, seats in the Wolesi Jirga, the provincial councils, and the district councils finally leading to the establishment of the Meshrano Jirga or upper house through indirect election and nominations. However, given the enormity of the task and the fragile security situation, only the Presidential elections were held in October 2004, and polls for other institutions postponed for later.

While the announcement of the present round of elections has been welcomed by the international community, many political leaders as well as aware citizens point to the lack of adequate preparation and controversial electoral procedures. This has made some cautious and others cynical about the 'experiment' of elections coming up in a few days' time.

## A society in transition

Afghanistan is in a period of transition, with remarkable change underway in society. For some Afghan women, the transformation has been enormous. Many are back in the workforce while quite a few are contesting elections, fighting for their rights, and working for the development of their society. Yet, the majority still faces the same restrictions and constraints of old. Over three million children are back in school and over three million refugees have returned to the country. Urban centers see new businesses and enterprises coming up every day and the country now has an independent and growing media. At the same time, there are people with destroyed homes facing relentless poverty,



drought and floods. Clear signs of Afghanistan's bitter history are visible everywhere. War widows beg on the streets; children without limbs drag themselves from car to car; young girls are sold to pay off debts incurred in a drug run; poppy growers, with their fields destroyed, have no means of employment; old men pull carts, piled high with lumber; young fighters, their guns taken away, are now at a loss never having known any other way of life. There is also rage and hatred, against other ethnic groups, against the foreign aid worker who earns more in a day than most will see in a month.

The socio-economic indicators present a dismal picture. The country ranks 173<sup>rd</sup> on the Human Development Index, far below neighbouring countries – Pakistan (142), Tajikistan (116), Uzbekistan (107), Iran (101) and Turkmenistan (86). The literacy rate is 28.7 percent and nearly one out of two Afghans will not survive to the age of 40. The infant mortality rate is 115 (per thousand) and that of children under five years, 172. The maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births is 1,600.

Yet, talk to ordinary Afghans and their spirit is indomitable. Unlike the victim syndrome in many post-conflict areas, Afghans blame themselves for their own fate, hoping that time will give them a chance to make a better life and country. It is these citizens who will exercise their right to franchise in less than a month wishing for a peaceful, democratic state at long last.

### **The security dilemma**

For the international community charged with conducting the polls, the elections are a major step in the road to transfer of power and giving rights back to the people. However, there are critics who believe the process should have been delayed until the country was better prepared for it. They are apprehensive that the elections may end up legitimising the illegal centers of power that exist all over the provinces and enshrining the bad precedents, such as the absence of voter lists and adequate means of vetting candidates. But the biggest worry is the lack of a relatively secure atmosphere needed for free and fair polling. As an independent observer of the electoral process observes, "It is important to do it right the first time around." Cutting corners and making compromises harm the credibility of elections, and it will be difficult to change the norm, he says. Skeptics argue that the rush to complete the polls is merely to arrive at a benchmark international powers have set for themselves, rather than based on an assessment of the needs arising from the changing situation on the ground.

Nearly four years after the fall of the Taliban, the installation of the transitional government of Hamid Karzai and the deployment of international presence in the country (troops, UN agencies and innumerable

ngos), the institutions of the Afghan state are yet to take firm root. Rebuilding a country, especially one where violence continues to dominate, has been an arduous process. Unfortunately, the emphasis placed by the international community on numbers and deadlines has often been to the detriment of actual capacity-building and greater community participation. This gives the state apparatus an inordinate power despite its obvious weakness.

An example is the ongoing fight against militancy. The international military intervention, in the wake of 9/11, was led by the US Coalition forces in 2001 and the US remains in charge of the command and control of a multinational force operating against the "enemies of Afghanistan". However this ambiguously defined target has resulted in neglect of the equally important tasks of peacekeeping in secured areas, of ensuring protection against existing warlords who were equally brutal even if not identified as 'Taliban', and of ensuring security that would provide the space for implementing laws and ensuring justice. As a result, even previously secure areas have faced a security vacuum which was taken advantage by a regrouped Taliban and other armed groups and criminal elements. While the figures are contested, the country has seen as many as 1000 deaths in the last six months alone. Even though the Coalition Forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) publicly claim that the security situation has improved, this is doubtful. More independent international observers have noted that the violence now is the worst they have seen since 2001.

Col Jim Yonts, spokesman of the Coalition Forces Command, says, "Security has improved as a result of cooperation and coordination between the Afghan security forces, Coalition forces, local leadership and the Afghan people." Maintaining that 60 percent of the weapons' cache and explosive discoveries are now taking place through Afghans, Yonts adds the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army forces have increased in number and capacity. There is no significant terrorist presence or threat in areas where ISAF is operating, claims its spokesperson Major Andy Elmes.

Others are not as sanguine as the two American men. Spokesperson for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA), Adrian Edwards, says the security situation this year has been a matter of concern. The UN Security Council has expressed concern over the increased attacks by the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other groups. Secretary General Kofi Annan's special representative on Afghanistan told the Council recently that extremists were targeting pro-government and international forces, raising concerns for the forthcoming elections. Even the new American ambassador to Afghanistan, who arrived here from a posting in Iraq, expressed



the international community's concerns on security at his maiden press conference in August. Ronald Neumann was quoted as saying "there is certainly more violence and there are violent elements trying to come back." The ambassador also said, "I think this is a situation that will probably be difficult for some time. But there is a strong international presence and there is a strong American presence, which is quite adequate to deal with the violence."

Survival in this country remains a tenuous negotiation for citizens, especially outside the urban areas. Though the UN mandated process of DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the standing armies of the provincial leaders) is nearly complete, there are questions about its efficacy. After a quarter century of war, there is no real way to measure the amount of weapons in Afghanistan and this means that officials have to rely on the declarations made by the commanders. Meanwhile, the process of disarming 'illegal' armed groups has just begun. At the time of nominations for the elections, the candidature of 255 candidates was challenged on the grounds that they still possessed arms. They were threatened with disqualification unless they turned in a specified amount of weapons. At the time of the final announcement however, only 17 were barred. According to the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), "many who were provisionally excluded were let back on the candidate list with 'undertakings' of future compliance".

The commanders of the disarmed groups have not been marginalized either. An example is Abdul Rasheed Dostum, the strongman of the North. Dostum was appointed chief of staff to the commander of the armed forces, i.e. President Hamid Karzai, earlier this year. Though his duties in that position remain unclear, the appointment came as a betrayal to many people who had believed in President Karzai's promise to weed out warlords. Dostum, by all accounts, ran one of the most brutal regimes in the northern areas.

A June 2005 report on verification of political rights, carried out jointly by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and the UNAMA, says "the widespread fears, feelings of mistrust and acts of self-censorship", that the team found, were based on past patterns of behavior rather than current threats or violations. Nonetheless, these attitudes "could, however, have a significant impact in the coming months as the electoral competition intensifies."

Responding to comments that elections ought to have been postponed due to the fragile security situation, Adrian Edwards of UNAMA says that the debate between whether there should be rule of law first or elections first could go on and it would never

have been possible to have a perfect election. He argues that that this is as right a time as any other to hold elections to take people out of an environment of conflict.

### **Voting without voter lists**

A report on the parliamentary polls prepared by a leading think tank, the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), states that the new Parliament will be "one important means for the people to have an active voice in government". However, it cautions that while the elections are a golden opportunity, "they also pose a serious threat to the prospects for democracy if they fail". A deeply flawed elections would betray the trust of the voting public, says the report. The AREU also points out that the parliamentary/provincial elections are far more susceptible to fraud, vote buying and intimidation than the presidential polls held in 2004. In these elections, AREU says, the margin of victory may be quite small, and a few votes stolen here and there may dramatically alter the delegation that each province sends to Parliament.

There are enough reasons why that is a real danger. Apart from direct intimidation and violence, the hurry to hold elections has also led to the adoption of short cuts which would not stand scrutiny elsewhere. For example, there has not been enough time to either carry out a census or register voters according to their area of residence. There are therefore no voter lists which polling staff could use to cross-check the eligibility of voters lining up to vote. This is the reason why the Joint Electoral Management Board (JEMB) says it is printing 40 million ballots, nearly double the estimated number of voters. The JEMB is the independent electoral authority comprising of nine Afghan election commissioners appointed by President Hamid Karzai and four international electoral experts designated by UNAMA. At an estimated electorate of 12 million voting twice (for provincial and presidential elections) the ballots needed should have been a little over 24 million. However since no one knows how many people will choose to turn up at which polling station, there have to be enough ballots in each one just in case.

The bulwark against fraud is supposed to be the 'indelible' ink which will be used to mark the fingers of the voters, a method in use (and misuse) all over Southasia. This assumes that security in each and every polling station cannot be breached and that there will be no stuffing of ballot boxes, a guarantee that is difficult to ensure even in the more developed democracies of the region.

The lack of census data, the ICG points out, has also meant that there is no accurate estimate in the allocation of seats to each province. Therefore, the

numbers that have been arrived at remain highly disputed. The electoral laws formulated for the parliamentary polls are also controversial. Though a large number of parties as well as sections of the international community counseled for the proportional representation system, the government proceeded with adopting the single non transferable vote (SNTV) system. Though this might seem like a more simple system to adopt, given the nascent nature of Afghanistan's democracy, it is actually far more complicated since each constituency is a multi-seat constituency. The system does not bode well for political parties either. Any party seeking to secure votes for its multiple candidates from that constituency will have to calculate exactly how many voters it should encourage to vote for each candidate, a difficult science in the best possible circumstances and impossibility here.

### **The parties**

The reason for the adoption of such an awkward system is said to be the antipathy of President Hamid Karzai towards political parties. Nearly four years into power, Karzai himself has neither joined nor launched a political party. While supporters of the president like to claim that he is trying to remain above the fray, critics allege Karzai wants to keep the political parties weakened since he himself has no political base of his own. Under the current system, political parties have no right to use a common symbol for their party candidates thus preventing them from effectively building up a cross-country support base.

One person who certainly thinks the electoral system has been designed to Karzai's advantage is the 'leader of the opposition' Younis Qanooni. Leader of the newly formed New Afghanistan party (Afghanistan e Nawin) and a former member of the Hezb e Jamiat Islami Afghanistan, Qanooni was a cabinet minister in the interim and transitional governments. He feels that "the government implemented the SNTV system forcibly because it does not have a base". A leader of the former Northern Alliance who challenged Karzai in the presidential elections, Qanooni says the JEMB is not independent and that the current system provides ample opportunities for fraud and cheating during the polls.

On the other hand, Qanooni fully supports holding the elections, claiming that it is the only mechanism against a government that "is the biggest threat to the country today." Stressing the importance of Parliament, he says the upcoming legislation must seek to introduce fundamental reforms for the benefit of people. "Policies will need to be updated, the Constitution changed, the cabinet reconstituted and foreign aid will have to become more transparent.

The balance of power will have to shift from the presidency to the parliament."

It is this relationship between the presidency and the legislature that has been a matter of concern in some quarters. Under the Constitution, both houses of parliament will have the authority to pass, amend and review all laws. If the president disagrees he can ask them to reconsider, but the final binding authority rests with the Wolesi Jirga or lower house. The Wolesi Jirga can also approve or reject government proposals to obtain or grant loans, make decisions on the annual budget and state funded development programmes, set up commissions to investigate actions of the government and approve or reject individuals appointed by the president to government positions.

In the absence of a cohesive system of political parties, usually the source of organized support and opposition to the government, the search for a balance of power vis-à-vis the Afghan presidency is likely to be fairly chaotic. In the absence of a political party from which he can derive his authority, Karzai will have to not just persuade every political grouping in Parliament, but also every individual member to see things his way. This would considerably erode the authority of the government and may force him to compromise on key political issues against his better judgement.

A key issue on which Qanooni disagrees with the Karzai government is what he says are the latter's efforts to bring Taliban leaders into the fold. This, he believes, is leading to increasing instability and insecurity in the country. "How can we bring the ideology of the Taliban and the government together? The Taliban believe the country is under occupation, they believe the current government is un-Islamic, they don't believe in women's rights, education. How can they be in government?" Qanooni claims that the only reason for the overtures to the Taliban was Karzai's attempt to marginalise the former mujahideen leaders, who he sees as competition.

Though Qanooni does not mention the Northern Alliance, claiming his constituency cuts across all ethnic communities and power groups, it is clear that in the last two years, Karzai has effectively marginalised most of the leaders of the Northern Alliance, even while making overtures to other warlords and some of the more radical mujahideen leaders. The Panjshiris, who take their name from their military stronghold, the Panjshir valley in the Shomali belt north of Kabul, were the major anti-Taliban force at the time of the US operations against the Taliban. Though this strength allowed them to occupy key ministries in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion, most of them were later removed, leaving only the well-known public face of

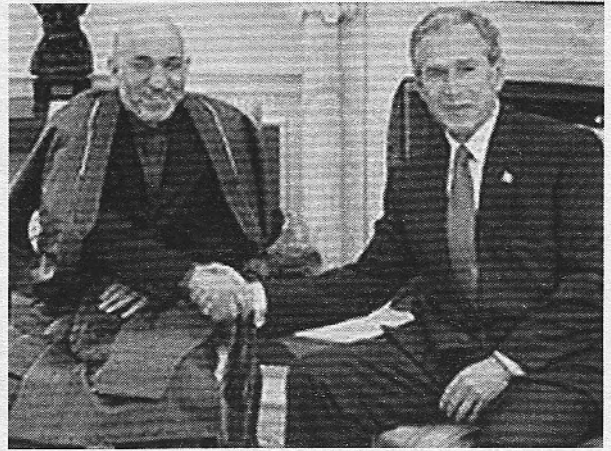


Afghanistan, the suave Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah.

The head of the Republican Party of Afghanistan, Sebgatullah Sanjar, also emphasises the importance of holding the upcoming elections. He says, "The main challenge to Afghan politics today is the absence of political organizations." Sanjar, who supported Karzai in the presidential elections last year, carries the advantage of being a relatively unknown figure. Unlike most factional leaders, he has no apparent history of being directly involved in violence. Sanjar argues that even with all its flaws, Parliament will still provide the only public forum for political debate and to build an alternative leadership. He too believes that the proportional representational electoral system would have been more beneficial even while acknowledging that in several parts of the country his party candidates are unable to openly acknowledge their affiliation, so great is the mistrust of people towards political parties of all shades.

Also in the fray are a number of other political parties, most of them registered recently under a new law on parties, which are led by former leaders, both communist and their arch enemy the mujahideen. Abu Sayyaf, one of the radical Islamist leaders, who at one point was in the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, heads the Ittehad e Islami. Afghan Millad, a Pashtun-dominated party considered close to Karzai is also contesting the elections. Former communist leader and defence minister Shahnawaz Tanai heads the Movement of Peace party. Gulbuddin Hekmatayar's Hizb e Islami saw a split recently, and a faction headed by Humayun Aria has been recognized as a registered political party.

The electoral campaign, such as it is, is nothing like the frenzied political activity that defines parliamentary politics in Southasia. Travelling and holding meetings remains a difficult task in the absence of security. The JEMB, in an attempt to provide somewhat of a level playing field, has provided all candidates with the opportunity to broadcast and telecast their messages on electronic media free of charge. Parliamentary candidates are allowed either 10 minutes time on radio or 5 minutes on TV and provincial council candidates are allowed 4 minutes on radio or 2 minutes on TV. They are also allowed to buy a total of four pages of space in a newspaper or magazine. Though candidates are allowed to hold meetings with the prior permission of the local police, large-scale political rallies are considered too dangerous. While in urban areas, most candidates either campaign through small meetings or loudspeaker fitted vehicles, the preferred methods of canvassing in the villages are by holding meetings with community leaders, addressing the communities at prayer meetings or hosting meals.



**George wants the elections badly**

An independent woman candidate from Paktia province, Sharifa Zurmati Wardak initially received death threats while campaigning and drew back. However after some community leaders pledged their support, she once again picked up the courage to go out into her electoral district. During her last visit to the constituency however, she was advised to flee the border area where she was staying as she had become a well-known face through her posters. That which in any other country during elections would have been an advantage, had turned into a source of threat for Sharifa.

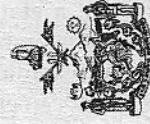
For Sharifa as for most other candidates contesting in this nascent parliamentary process, the issues on the stump are very basic: bringing peace to the country and working for development. While she and candidates like Sanjar play up the need for new leaders who are not tainted by bloody wars, older political leaders like Qanooni are campaigning on the slogan that the government has failed to deliver either peace or development. The situation here does not allow for more complex political platforms or detailed manifestos.

However, the cynicism that greets elections in the rest of Southasia is already visible among some here. Jawed, an educated urban voter has scant interest in the polls, believing it is far too early for legitimate candidates to come to the fray. "Right now there is no one worth voting for. Why are there holding elections? It will restore the same greedy warlords and reinforce their grip on power," Jawed asks.

But it is Safia, a housewife and mother, who is able to see through the clutter of history and identify the issue at the heart of the matter. Thinking back over all the years she has spent in Kabul, trying to make sure her children survived the war to live in an Afghanistan that had a present and future, she says that for her, it isn't so much an issue of who wins or loses or who comes to power. It is about something else. "Democracy," says Safia, "we should start getting used to it, shouldn't we?" ▲

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*Himalayan*



# Dreaming democracy in Maldives

**A manifesto for the future as the atoll prepares for its first elections.**

by | **Waheed Hassan**

Maldives can be a democratic state with Islam as its spiritual foundation, a state which promotes the moral and creative development of the people. It can be an example to all Islamic states which aspire to create open societies. It can emerge as a modern state which safeguards the individual rights of its people and promotes their aspirations for higher levels achievement. Maldives can be that modern liberal state, riding the crest of technological progress, engaging with its neighbours in the frontline of social and economic development, and an example to the rest of the world with its dynamism and youthful energy.

We need to build a society with living conditions that are comfortable and healthy for everyone, where children are educated well and fully protected, where people respect each other and enjoy community living, where the elderly receive proper care and respect, and where the spiritual needs of individuals and communities are fully met. We must have the confidence to let cultural and creative possibilities flourish.

Power when unchecked can easily become abusive. The fundamental freedoms and human rights of the people have been denied for too long. We must restore the dignity of the person, and create a new social order based on individual freedom and mutual respect. This will result in a culture of respect for diversity as well as for individual differences while safeguarding the sovereignty of the state. None have the right to impose their version of the truth on others. To be human is to be free to think and to express thought. The very reason a government exists is to safeguard the rights of its people, including their right to participate in governance. While democratic governments are led by the majority, the process of governance cannot do without parties in political parties and civil society

at large. As we embark on a new course of multiparty democracy in the Maldives, it is important to underscore the role of the opposition, which must function as an effective check on the ruling party. Indeed, the opposition must become the conscience of the people and articulate ways of improving the status of the population, in arenas as diverse as health, education, environment, commerce and the provision of justice.

The Maldivian economy should be the main arena for expressing people's creativity and productivity. Individual enterprise will become the engine of future prosperity, with the state ensuring that the overall economic policies are conducive to growth. Economic growth must come with equity, and all Maldivians must have access to basic services for health, education, housing and protection. For the future, we must seek out possibilities for our people to live in Maldives and work in the global economy. Meanwhile, tourism and fisheries will continue as the backbone of the economy for the foreseeable future, and they should not be disrupted even as we explore new opportunities in the global marketplace. As the two largest industries, they must be developed to



enhance employment and people's income. We must find ways to reinvest the returns from these sectors within Maldives itself.

The education policy should be an instrument for economic growth and national development. We must revamp our education system to help develop a highly educated citizenry capable of leading and managing growth and development in an increasingly global environment. We must attract the small but highly educated Maldivian diaspora to return, and invest their talent and resources in their homeland. The country must be made a safe place

for our men and women, and all forms of discrimination related to gender, origin or education should be eliminated. Indeed, it is time that we learned to treat our women with respect. Similarly, those with Western education and others trained in the Islamic tradition must see value in each other's backgrounds.

"Health for all" means availability of preventive and curative care in every community of the atoll. A healthy environment that minimises respiratory and viral infections is necessary to reduce morbidity. Childhood mortality is low in Maldives but physical and mental growth is hampered due to poor nutrition. Basic hospital care is a right of every citizen, despite the relative isolation of some islands. Young people must be supported to safeguard their mental and physical health, and there must be nationwide campaigns against substance use, drug trafficking. There must be rehabilitation for drug users.

Most Maldivian communities do not have access to clean drinking water and sanitation, and public policy must fulfill this lack, as well as that of electricity. While it is true that availability of public utilities is linked to population concentration, we must be conscious of ecological sustainability when we go about establishing population centers. Indeed, the development model of Male – with associated devastation of groundwater, vegetation and shoreline – should not be the only one available to the rest of the islands. The sea level rise projected in the coming years will adversely affect our islands, and so natural defences such as healthy reefs and shoreline vegetation must be preserved even while we seek technological reinforcements and counter-measures are adopted.

The administration of justice in Maldives has been extremely politicised. During the last 20, years there have been several calls for the separation of judiciary from the executive branch of the government. Some have used Islam as an excuse to prevent such reform, forgetting that the very essence of Islam is justice and freedom. The head of state in a modern Islamic state should not be the administrator of justice; instead he should be the guarantor of an independent and capable judicial system. We must strengthen the capacities and independence of our judges, affiliated staff, at the same time strengthening the legal profession even as we improve the legal and constitutional provisions that govern us all.

There is an unacceptably high degree of criminality in the country, much of it linked to the drug culture. Male and Addu Atoll in particular have become increasingly unsafe places to live because of rising criminality. Community policing, neighborhood-watch and closer relationship between the communities and the police can substantially reduce the crime rate. There is no doubt that the police are well equipped, but they have to be

trained to use more people-friendly ways of dealing with problems. The police of the Maldives must channel its energy towards reducing criminality and protecting the public rather than protecting the ruling elite.

As we embark on a new chapter of constitutional and political change, the people will inevitably have to play a more active role, and everyone has something to learn. We must grow out of our propensity for the blame game. A minimum level of trust and good faith is necessary for the government and the opposition to function effectively. Like it or not, our fates are interlinked with the future of peace in Maldives. In the end, much will depend on how the newly active political parties can work with each other. It is my hope that those in government and those in opposition can find common ground to work together, based on mutual respect and goodwill. Let us pray that we will have the wisdom and the courage to be mutually compassionate, to be able to put the people's interest ahead of personal interests. There has been too much injustice and too much hurt till now, and we must understand that a collision course will benefit no one. Only a path of healing, reconciliation and selflessness can lead to peace and prosperity.



## Roundtable Conference on Southasian Publishing

May 2006, Kathmandu

Himal is hosting a Roundtable Conference on Southasian Publishing in Kathmandu in April 2006. The two and a half-day event will be attended by senior Southasian English language publishers, educators, social scientists, policy makers, journalists and representatives of international and regional organisations with an interest in what Southasians read.

The event is being organised with the understanding that Southasia's reading culture and publishing industry have not expanded in consonance with the dramatic rise in English language literacy in the region nor with the rapid consumerisation of the market. The conference will take place over two and a half days and will discuss themes as diverse as the changing priorities of large publishing houses, the paradox of expanding markets and declining print runs, Southasian markets for Southasian writing in English, country profiles of publishers and publics, the cross-border availability of titles, and the organisational economics of large and small publishers.

For more information, write to: [editorial@himalmag.com](mailto:editorial@himalmag.com)



# Nepali vortex

by | **Kanak Mani Dixit**

*Kahin aphi mai bhumarima  
Aphi paryau ki...*

"Have you got pulled into a vortex of your own making?" asks the opening lines of a song by the music maestro Amber Gurung. The words fit the present-day context of Nepal perfectly, where a king very new to the throne, with the arrogance that is the hallmark of the impenetrable, is engaged in the relentless pursuit of dismantling his dynasty. But does he even know it?

The citizens at large did not want it this way. In professionally conducted public opinion surveys, they had stated their preference for a constitutional monarchy. But the stock of the Shah dynasty took a beating when King Gyanendra started appointing prime ministers by himself in October 2002. The public's regard for the king plummeted when on 1 February, in a military-backed coup, he ripped apart the 1990 Constitution and became 'chairman' of the government, a position it does not sanction. The king had in essence become prime minister, but you would not know it – he maintains the bearing of an aloof monarch even as the economy slumps, public services break down, and development grinds to a halt.

Faith in tantric practice, animal sacrifice, a willingness to have army brigadier generals tie his shoelaces in public (or provide Scotch on their knees), all point to a royal attitude that is pre-feudal and beyond the reach of logic. Extremely engaging in conversation, but unwilling to take the sage advice of those who have spent a lifetime in statecraft in comparison to his own four years, King Gyanendra has exasperated personages as diverse as key ambassadors in Kathmandu, the UN Human

Rights Commissioner Louise Arbour, former US Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, and the Special Envoy of UN Secretary General, Lakhdar Brahimi. Not to mention Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

King Gyanendra's regime has become an international pariah, though the country as a whole will hopefully survive that fate. His global isolation is so complete that he has had to cancel his scheduled departure this week for New York to attend the UN General Assembly and World Summit. The reason: the unwillingness of world leaders to give the king the time of day, let alone appointments and photo-ops. The isolation within the country is also nearly complete, with even

businessmen who sang hosannahs to the royal takeover preparing to abandon the sinking royal yacht. There is no trust in this regime among the beleaguered Nepali public, and little hope that it will deliver the desperate peace. Meanwhile, the regime has painted itself into a corner so tight that King Gyanendra could not even bring himself to issue a cautious welcome to the unilateral ceasefire announced by the

Maobaadi on 3 September. That would have been the way of a democratic leader.

## Royal honorific

For someone who has dismissed prime ministers for being '*asakshyani*' (incapable), over seven months King Gyanendra showed that he neither knows how to lead a nation nor run a government



administration. The political leaders, public targets of royal scorn, now shine in comparison. The ship of state today is adrift and the rudder shaft broken, but the incumbent on the Serpent Throne seems willing to man the helm just the same. Nepal is today a skeletal frame of the already emaciated form that the king grabbed seven months ago. If anything more was required to weaken the state after the Maobaadi were done with it, then King Gyanendra has managed it.

Speaking of statecraft, the king's choice of colleagues in his cabinet (including an ex-convict) is so ludicrous it does not even deserve reference. The recent appointment of a royalist opportunist to the post of chief secretary of government over the head of capable claimants splatters no one but the chairman himself. Meanwhile, the gentleman the palace is grooming to be commander-in-chief of the army is given to writing right-wing polemic in Kathmandu's English dailies under the nom-de-plume 'Ajay P Nath'. The writings of Mr. 'Nath' fairly drip with loathing for the political parties and human rights activists, among others, and have the thoughtful among the army officers reeling in silent despair as to what the future holds for their force.

How far the royal stock has fallen among the public in just a few months can be observed in the Nepali language mass media's abandonment of the royal honorific and associated verbs and nouns. Cartoons in the dailies and magazines lampoon the king, even as stand-up comedians ridicule him in public as they would a politician. When the king, on a barn-storming trip across western Nepal, ordered that all regional headquarters of government offices be moved to a particular place within so many days, civil servants willing to be quoted by name challenged the royal command. In the end it is one man who has brought the Nepali monarchy to such a pass, for wanting more power than the constitutional provisions and propriety allowed. As a result, he is about to lose it all.

This writer made the point some years ago that, contrary to the claim of erstwhile Panchayat era propaganda and assorted royalists, "Nepal is robust enough a country to carry on without a king." Kingship was not necessary as the much-ballyhooed 'glue' for a diverse nation. On the other hand, it would have been "monumental folly" to get rid of an institution that provided Nepali citizens with historical continuity like in no other Southasian country, which could serve the public in the cultural, development and tourism arena. That was written at a time when there was still the hope that the kingship would evolve constitutionally, in letter and in spirit. But the incumbent king has showed himself temperamentally unwilling to be constitutional, ceremonial or rubber stamp, which is what he would

have to be if citizens were to allow him to hold the crown.

And therein lies the rub. The king has made a blunder and yet he carries on. The political parties have been late in rising to the occasion to save the hallowed middle ground, unable to come to the rescue of democracy seven long months after the royal takeover. As a result, the political ground has shifted, and the discourse is now neatly divided into three strands and three terms. *Prajatantra* is the handed-down term for democracy, which King Gyanendra prefers because he can define it to his purpose. *Loktantra* is the word for democracy rapidly gaining currency, meaning a true people's democracy with or without a king. And lastly, *ganatantra*, a republic in which kingship is banished forever. *Ganatantra* is all the rage in the Kathmandu streets today, and the pathway is said to be through a constituent assembly. This is also the demand of the Maobaadi, except they say so with gun in hand.

This is the rock and a hard place between which the people of Nepal find themselves today. The king's personality indicates that he would be a meddlesome canker even if shorn of all power in his position. On the other hand, the Maobaadi giving the siren call from the jungle are battle-hardened believers in armed revolution, which the people are not. An earthshaking people's movement required to force King Gyanendra to backtrack and for the political parties to take the initiative in reviving the third parliament and in building rapprochement with the rebels has not happened. The initiative has therefore gone to the Maobaadi, who announced their unilateral ceasefire on 3 September. A skeptical but hopeful people await evidence that the rebel leadership has come to its senses. "Do not trust them, but do test them," seems to be the public's attitude. With King Gyanendra haughtily looking the other way, there should be no surprise that the political parties are talking to the Maobaadi. Whether this tentative encounter will make good will depend very much on whether the rebels can convince the parties through action on the ground that they are now, at long last, for peace and open politics. If they can manage that, this king will be on the outside, looking in.

While we wait, the surface is calm in Kathmandu. The countryside is in shambles and the state superstructure is rotten within. King Gyanendra's scofflaw monarchy, crown and all, pushes the country towards the abyss of anarchy. He got it wrong, and now the initiative is largely gone from his hands. Meanwhile, the tallest spire of the Narayanhiti Royal Palace in downtown Kathmandu suddenly sports a powerful strobe light – or beacon perhaps – that goes blip-blip in the darkness.



# Between despair and hope: **interrogating** **'terrorism'**

by | Dilip Simeon

*"The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world." - Hannah Arendt*

The words 'terror' (meaning intense fear and dread), and 'terrorism' (the systematic employment of violence and intimidation to coerce a government or community into acceding to specific political demands) are steeped in controversy. From the time of the French Revolution, 'terrorism' has been used to describe a range of violent political activism, including certain forms of Russian populism; Italian, Serbian and Irish nationalism; anarchism; and the actions of the Ku Klux Klan. Nowadays, 'terror' is

what the 'civilised world', led by the United States, is combating. It is identified with Islamist fundamentalism, the Taliban, suicide bombers, Palestinian resistance and Maoist revolutionaries. Even though terrorism is quite clearly a form of political violence, mainstream journalism today does not associate it with aerial bombardment (although Hitler's use of the Luftwaffe against the Spanish town of Guernica in 1936 was considered an act of terror), armed actions by the American and Israeli defence and special forces against their real or perceived enemies, kidnapping, collective punishments, and encounter killings by the apparatus of various Southasian states.



Madhu Sarin







In India, 'terrorism' is also not generally used to describe the activities of the Bajrang Dal, VHP, RSS, the Ranvir Sena or the Shiv Sena, even though some of their activities would qualify them as terrorists within the dictionary meaning of the word. Yes, the usage of 'terror' is heavily politicised.

Stark examples of these differentiated standards of judgement confront us when we consider the boundaries that religion shares with the world of terror. Contemporary common sense does not associate Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity or Hinduism with terror and terrorism. However, Sinhalese Buddhist monks have been known to participate in anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka. The Zionist Stern Gang and Irgun indulged in 'communal killings' of Palestinian villagers to enforce the evacuation of territory. Irish nationalists and loyalists alike (Catholics and Protestants) used terror for decades as an integral part of their politics. And it is the Hindu Tamil Tigers who began the latest use of suicide bombers – Rajiv Gandhi was killed by one in 1991. Let us not fool ourselves. Every major religious tradition has produced theological justifications for murder and mass killing in the name of sacred causes. And it is clear that terror is and has been employed by states and anti-state activists alike.

Historically, national liberation movements and democratic movements have often taken for granted that violent means would be necessary for the attainment of their ends. The French Revolution of 1789 was the first major instance of the marriage of terror with modern democracy. "There is nothing which so much resembles virtue as a great crime", said Robespierre's comrade, St Just, one of the architects of the Reign of Terror in 1794. Mid-nineteenth century Italian nationalism was an inspiration for military style patriotism in the early twentieth century, such as the Serbian, Irish and Indian. Russian populism, which later emerged as the Left Socialist Revolutionary tendency, used terrorist methods in varying degrees, as did Anarchists and Bolsheviks. Trotsky wrote a lengthy pamphlet, *Terrorism and Communism*, justifying such acts as hostage-taking as a means of ensuring good behaviour by 'class enemies'.

Terrorism is the quintessentially ambivalent political deed, the place where good and evil are mixed to the point where its proponents need to invoke God, or a secular metaphysic such as History or Revolutionary Destiny, as justification. Apparently transcendental dogma can transform great crimes into virtuous deeds. In a situation where terror has become normalised (virtually the entire

span of the past century), it is to be expected that rational debate aimed at understanding political crises become next to impossible. For example, in the post-9/11 world, anyone putting forward a historical analysis of the emergence of Islamist fundamentalism against a background of Western imperialist policies in West Asia, Arabia, Palestine, Iran and Afghanistan, would draw suspicion in establishment circles as an apologist for terrorists – even if he or she vehemently denies such sentiments. Someone who adduces the reparations imposed upon Germany in 1918 as a factor contributing to the rise of Nazism is not necessarily a sympathiser of Hitler. In considering the history of Zionism, we would have to remember that Christian anti-Semitism provided fertile ground for Nazi ideology and the genocide of European Jews, which in turn fuelled the demand for a Jewish homeland. Such an analysis would not imply an approval of Israeli expansionism and oppression of Palestinians.

It is the historian's job to suggest explanations of major events by weighing context with cause, structure popular moods and ideological developments. In today's world, however, history is rapidly being replaced by propaganda. Speaking about terrorism in 1998, the late Eqbal Ahmad described the official approach to it as one that eschews causation and avoids definition, because such concepts involve "analysis, comprehension and adherence to some norms of consistency". He cited a query about



Badshah Khan

the causes of Palestinian terrorism, addressed by the Yugoslavian foreign minister to US Secretary of State George Shultz, twenty years ago. Shultz "went a bit red in the face. He pounded the table and told the visiting foreign minister, there is no connection with any cause. Period." (*The New York Times*, 18 December 1985). Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee told the United Nations General Assembly that all talk of 'root causes' served only to justify terrorism. However, his RSS soulmates routinely talk of 'root causes' when they need to defend the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992. Terrorism has a 'root cause' when we identify with it, but becomes a monstrous violation of human rights when we don't. Such ethical contortions are as common in the ranks of left-wing intellectuals as they are among religious fundamentalists and the ultra-right.

### The decline of conversation

The dynamic nature of social reality implies the need for constant theoretical reflection. Without this, the radical imagination loses itself in the dominant discourses of capitalism, nationalism and identity.



This is what is happening today, even within the so-called extreme left. Unfortunately this trend is buttressed by the habit of denigrating critical thought to a level inferior to so-called 'activism'. A further complication is that nationalist ideology and capitalist media have perverted the concept of truth. In the first case, God or Truth (sometimes named History) is always with Us. In the second case, truth is substituted by credibility. This is demonstrated by the phenomenon of advertising. The truth-content of a message is of no importance, what matters is whether it is credible or incredible. This is why the concept of 'image' dominates modern political vocabulary, despite the obvious distinction between 'image' and 'reality'. The war of images goes on in the political realm as well, and affects the question of terror. As they say, one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. We owe it to ourselves and the coming generations to pierce the imagery and arrive at a well-considered understanding of terror and political violence.

The dogmatism surrounding political theory in India has reduced radical politics to a moribund condition. The Leninist concept of "the outside" and the Stalinist convention that "the party is always right" imply an authoritarian notion of truth. The comrades' habit of claiming possession of Absolute Truth (Party Line = *Param Satya*) is similar to the religious belief in divine revelation (*ilhaam*). Such approaches to knowledge are shared by organisations as far apart as the Vatican (with its notion of papal infallibility), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Taliban (and its variants), and various Leninist groups and parties. This attitude is an important causative factor for the fractious nature of Southasian leftism. An absolutist mentality finds ambivalence intolerable. Faced with historical complexity, it finds refuge in black and white ideas about the social universe. The resulting theoretical vacuum has left questions such as the value of democracy and the nature of violence to be treated as 'tactical' matters rather than as aspects of social relations. The political ideologies dominant in our time attach a pragmatic or positive value to violence and to the Nation. The word 'foreign' is too easily used as a term of abuse. Many radical political currents treat democracy as something to be used rather than preserved. Where it is yet to be achieved, its protagonists preach but do not practice democracy within the movement – they believe authoritarian methods can achieve democratic goals.

Such issues need to be addressed. Unfortunately, it has become a habit among radical activists and intellectuals to attribute base motives to those who criticise established doctrine. Polemic is what passes for debate and discussion in the Indian socialist tradition. (*polemos* in Greek means strife). Our mode of debate is often coloured by personal remarks,

sarcasm and pointless rhetoric. Indeed, there will be moments when nasty verbal contests become unavoidable, but the replacement of all political conversation by polemic is symptomatic of an authoritarian attitude to ideas. Polemic reinforces factionalism, causes useless distraction and is a waste of time. It also signifies mental laziness. Instead of a careful and rigorous consideration and/or refutation of critical ideas, we prefer to dismiss them with contempt. Firm adherence to dogma may be psychologically comfortable, but it can only ensure political marginalisation.

The word 'terror' is used to distinguish between forms of violence. In commonplace conversation, it conveys the meaning of something other than war, mass resistance, police action, and so on. Closer attention will reveal that political terror is a manifestation of militarism in the domain of civil society – whether expressed by left or right-wing terrorists. Actually the very norms by which we define Left and Right need re-definition. Right-wing neo-liberals often talk of the need for far-reaching economic and political reform, whereas leftists seem to be taking a conservative position. Multinational corporations advocate a capitalist version of internationalism, whereas leftists appear to have become nationalists, paying lip-service to international working-class solidarity. Rightists fabricate history one way, leftists do it another way. Nobody can say whether the terms 'left' and 'right' carry any definitional meaning for ethnic identity movements – support for or opposition to Lankan Tamil, Kurdish, Baloch, Kashmiri, Naga or Tibetan self-determination depends upon political convenience or pure whim rather than consistent principle. When it comes to positions regarding war, militarism, nuclearism, violence, patriarchy, democratic freedoms, human rights or ecological degradation, it is difficult to discern a systematic difference between left and right. The Communist Party of China has become (effectively) the Capitalist Party of China. It supported Yahya Khan in 1971, and even launched a war against Vietnam in 1979. As Orwell once said, there is no enormity that we condemn in the conduct of our enemies that we would not commit ourselves. Is there a way out of this labyrinth? There is, but only if we embark once more upon fearless critique.

Left-wing terrorists, including certain left-nationalists and communists, display a self-conscious attempt to convert social democratic protest and struggle into a form of warfare ('social democracy' is used here in its broadest and pristine meaning, as the original name of the socialist movement). The capitulation of Europe's major social democratic parties to war hysteria and patriotism in August 1914 was arguably the greatest political disaster in the history of international socialism. It



is a complex and tragic tale, but the nature of twentieth century communism was unalterably coloured by warfare and the warrior cult. In fact, the century gone by has been the bloodiest period in the life of humanity. One result has been the appearance of Bonapartism, the domination of the communist movement by men of military stature – warlords like Stalin and Mao. Another was the erosion of any respect for human life – mass slaughter came to be accepted as the natural price to pay for ‘victory’.

This mixture of socialism, nationalism and militarism has produced many political hybrids. Subhas Chandra Bose was one of them. In India today, it is not a good idea to criticise Subhas, a popular icon for many leftists, even though he allied himself with Hitler’s imperial war aims and bemoaned the defeat of the Axis. Although it takes off from a conservative standpoint, fascism, too, is one of these hybrids – and religion-based communalism is Southasia’s brand of fascism. In summary definition, communal politics are projects for the militarisation of civil society. The ultra-left programme of ‘people’s war’ feeds upon the same mentality. The utilitarian morality expressed by the phrase “the end justifies the means” has cast its effect on Left and Right alike. Quite apart from the matter of political ethics, it is remarkable that the Maoist world-view finds ‘people’s war’ as relevant in India as it does in Nepal, despite the obvious differences in the constitutions of the two countries.

Among some comrades, it would appear that strategies are decided upon first, and doctrinal justifications invented later. It is also significant that, on the whole, the ultra-left and the ultra-right avoid confrontation with one another. Thus, in its declaration of October 2004, the newly formed Communist Party of India (Maoist) stated that armed struggle would “remain the highest and main form of struggle and the army the main form of organisation of this revolution”. The main purpose of mass organisations would be “to serve the war”. The declaration makes a passing reference to “Hindu fascist forces”, but makes it clear that it would keep “the edge of the people’s struggles directed against the new Congress rulers in Delhi along with the CPI/CPM and their imperialist chieftains”. On 15 August, the CPI-Maoist (allegedly) carried out an armed action in Andhra Pradesh, gunning down an MLA, his son, driver, some local Congress activists and a municipal employee. The ideology that can cast such ordinary people for the role of “class enemies”, deserving extra-judicial execution, reflects a mentality closer to fascism rather than socialism. These ‘revolutionaries’ have not even publicly challenged the mass murderers responsible for pogroms in India during 1984 (Delhi) and 2002 (Gujarat), let alone call them to account. Yet they constantly direct scornful polemic at all kinds of

moderate democratic politics. Apparently radical rhetoric establishes one’s commitment to the public good; and proposing violent solutions provides proof of one’s admirable character.

A callous disregard for human life is apparent among ‘revolutionary’ groups in Southasia. In August 2004, 13 people were killed (including nine children) and 20 injured due to a bomb planted by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) at an Independence Day function in upper Assam. In June 2005, 40 or more bus passengers, mostly peasants and working people, were killed in an ambush set off by Maoists in the Chitwan district of Nepal. The ULFA call themselves Marxists, as do the Nepali comrades. Marxist revolutionaries perceive themselves as guardians of human rights, democracy and justice. We need to ask them – what is the ground for your claim to represent the poor? Who gave you the authority to be judge and executioner and kill people without even the pretence of a consensual procedure to decide guilt and award punishment? Why do you complain about extra-judicial killings by the state when you have no qualms about carrying out such killings yourselves? Is there any human rights body that the victims of your cruelty (or your bloody ‘mistakes’) could approach for justice? Why do you talk about the “murder of democracy” (this is how the Indian Maoist party described the ban imposed upon it after their ‘action’ on August 15) when you have no respect for the lives of children and poor people, let alone for democratic values and norms?

With honourable exceptions, human rights activists remain silent or defensive about atrocities committed by proponents of revolution and self-determination. This strengthens the impression among the general public that ‘preferred’ victims qualify as human beings, but if they happen to belong to the wrong caste or religion or profession, or simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time, their lives are dispensable. Sensitive observers the world over have rightly protested the atrocious principle of ‘collateral damage’ invoked by the Pentagon when its soldiers and pilots kill people they say were not targeted. It is equally infuriating when successive US presidents talk about ‘American lives’ as if Arabs and Rwandans and Vietnamese belonged to an insect species. But is it not apparent that revolutionaries of various kinds function with their own version of ‘collateral damage’? And what of situations where civilians are deliberately targeted? World War II abolished the distinction between combatants and civilians. We, who dreamt of a better life for humanity, have descended to the point where the deliberate slaughter of bystanders and bus passengers by ‘our’ side barely causes us to raise an eyebrow. Even to point to this selective and self-righteous morality causes intense irritation among

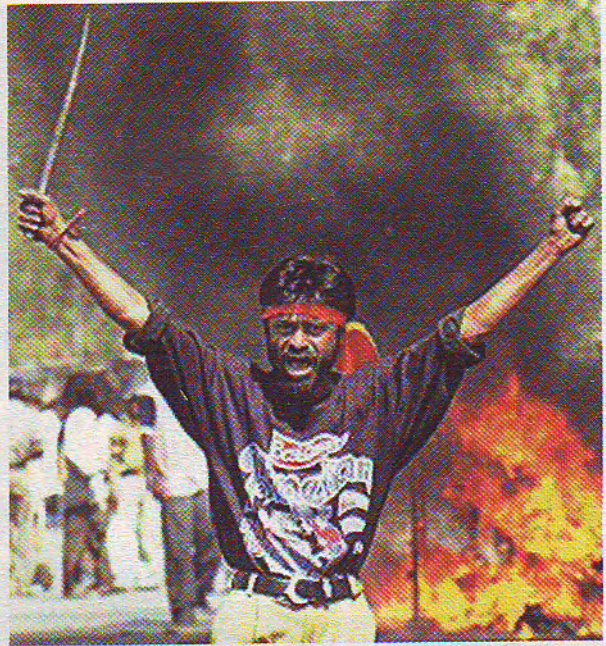


the ranks of the politically correct. For socialists to 'normalise' the commission of mass murder, is nothing short of an ethical-political catastrophe. And it lends a poignantly different meaning to Marx's warning that the choice before humanity is either socialism or barbarism.

### Autumn of the Patriarchs

After the overthrow of the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings and the rise of democratic politics, the process of governing became impossible without some degree of popular legitimation. That is why even empires and dictators talk of freedom and the will of the peoples. But these developments, associated with modern capitalism, cannot occlude the fact that the state is the institutionalised crystal of centuries of warfare. At its core are the armies that (in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe), countered universal adult suffrage with universal male conscription; and the ideals of equality, reason and compassion with hierarchy, faith and the glory of war. We may judge for ourselves which set of values conquered the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Great War of 1914-18 ended with the overthrow of four medieval autocracies. But alongside the establishment of Weimar democracy, the defeated German army of 1918 set in motion a political process that culminated in the conquest of the state by Nazism. It is the greatest historical irony that it was democracy that enabled ex-corporal Hitler to become Reich Chancellor, and that his actions led not only to the overthrow of democracy but to the complete destruction of the German Army. Fifty-five million people paid the ultimate price. Hitler's regime was the historical acme of state terrorism – those who use these words frequently ought to study it – and the most glaring feature of the political mobilisation that preceded it was the binary dynamic of fear and revenge.

Contrary to their self-understanding, the political paramilitaries and revolutionary warriors of all kinds are the loyal opposition of capitalist modernity. They share its fascination and structural use of revenge, martyrdom, heroism and patriarchal codes of honour, that invariably imply misogyny. Hence they are the last refuge of patriarchy. Each of their 'heroic' actions strengthen the state, as each side counters war with more war, terror with counter-terror, revolutionary militarism with statist militarism. The link between state violence and the violence of left-right radicalism has become seamless – each feeds upon the other. This process is unfolding before our eyes. With 9/11 and, indeed, with every act of murderous resistance, hard won democratic rights are further eroded, and the state gathers legitimacy to impose draconian laws. With the growth of a universal climate of fear, the bonds between governments and the ordinary public are strengthened, rather than dissipated. This takes



place, not on the basis of class interests, but on account of the dreadful fear of the murder of innocent people. What happens then is an unending spiral of violence, driven by the lust for revenge and very difficult to control. As Hannah Arendt said, all this bloodshed will indeed change the world, probably for the worse.

It is impossible to achieve democracy by authoritarian means. A new dispensation may be realised, by such methods, but it will carry with it the whiff of tyranny. Those who survive such a revolution will be a brutalised and damaged people. Undoubtedly the Nepali establishment, an outdated remnant of arrangements made between Nepali feudal potentates and the British during the heyday of imperialism, has managed to survive by maintaining the sheer poverty and educational backwardness of the population. Their decision to impose customs duty on educational books is only the latest example of their investment in ignorance. The government has also been assisted by cynical neighbours. The monarchy is not a 'pillar of stability', as its Indian well-wishers like to portray it, but the reverse. The Nepali state's brutal aversion to democratic governance perpetuates instability. But the sad state of affairs has been worsened by the ruthless and destructive policies of the revolutionaries (including the recruitment of children and disruption of education); and the bankruptcy of the moderate democratic opposition, who found it impossible, especially during the troubled decade of the 1990s, to construct a responsible united front. Constant factional fighting and egotism are also symptoms of authoritarianism.

The politics and practice of revolutionary terror are detrimental to socialist ideals. They represent and





reproduce desperation, cynicism, organisational autocracy and doctrinal dogma. As such, they generate fear and paranoia in the ranks of the revolutionary cadre themselves, as well as among the very people they seek to liberate. Most persons drawn towards terrorist politics are undoubtedly sincere in their vision and aspiration for a humane socio-economic order. But how easy it is to commit atrocities for the sake of kindness! To interpret our primeval lust for revenge as a source of 'modernisation', and 'progress'! Nearly 30 years ago, in 1976, this writer had the privilege of participating in a conversation (along with some close friends), with the great Marxist historian and peace activist E P Thompson. It was the year of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi, a development that had forced us to think seriously about the value of democratic rights. He made the acute observation that the use of the prefix 'bourgeois' before 'democracy' was the most self-defeating practice of communists the world over. Democracy, said Thompson, was a hard-won institutional gain of the international labour movement and in the Indian case, of the struggle for independence. Rather than dismiss it as 'bourgeois', we ought to work for its preservation and extension

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*This article includes material extracted from the writer's earlier publications including a lecture in Patna delivered in 2000, entitled The End of History or the Beginning of Transformation?; the seminar paper, The Brains of the Living: A Discussion on Political Violence (Patna, April 2003); and the articles The Enemy System (Hindustan Times, December 6, 2002); The Threads of Conscience (Biblio, March-April 2002); and Out of the Shadow (Communalism Combat, February 2003).*

into social life – that was what was meant by social democracy.

Many of us in India have realised the truth of this approach as we have traversed the difficult and painful quarter-century from the 1980's till today – a period that has seen the rampage of communalism and the politics of mass murder. It is significant that the Indian Left took a very long time to recognise the fascist nature of communalism. Even today, the relative weakness of our democracy is reflected in the fact that no party dares place a resolution in Parliament condoling the death of thousands of victims of communal violence. Nonetheless, despite its terrible flaws, certain democratic norms, institutions and practices remain alive in the Indian polity. Groups that support the politics of secession or armed revolution still manage to openly propagate their ideas. Would it be possible, say, for a Tibetan version of the Hurriyat Conference to function in China, before or after Mao's death? Or for Baloch or Sindhi secessionists to advocate separation from Pakistan, and conduct meetings with a visiting Indian dignitary? How much democratic freedom of expression and organisation could political opponents expect under a People's War regime?

An urgent political issue confronts those of us who identify with the civil liberties movement of the 1970's. The revolutionary movement of that time aimed at the violent overthrow of the constitutional polity, and the Indian ruling elite took refuge behind the rule of law. A quarter of a century later, significant sections of the radical left and its well-wishers became staunch defenders of the democratic rights and liberties enshrined in the Constitution,



while the Indian establishment repeatedly showed its discomfort with constitutional proprieties. In fact, the most massive violations of law (witness the carnages of 1984 and 2002), have been practiced by establishment parties and politicians. This should make leftists think about their attitude to democracy – is it merely a tactic, or do democratic norms and institutions deserve a deeper philosophical commitment?

### Satyagraha

The left could begin to rejuvenate itself if it gave up its revelatory approach to truth, its dogmatic approach to knowledge, its metaphysical attitude to politics, and its addiction to the warrior cult – society's oldest and most powerful preserve of authoritarianism. The comrades should examine their conscience and consider the social consequences of children being denied an education and made accustomed to bloodshed and cruelty, and of armed groups and individuals functioning with the same kind of impunity that the army and police display. A mature course of action would be to agitate non-violently for a programme of political and social democracy and demilitarisation, and engage in constructive work to better the lot of the people. This would gain them wider credibility and respect than they will ever get via armed struggle. It will also gain them the gratitude of people whose lives are too full of violence and uncertainty. A close friend took a photograph of a slogan on the wall of a building in the village of Ghandruk in central Nepal after an armed clash between the army and the Maoists: *"Maobaadi + Shahi Sena suniyojit daman banda gara."* Addressing both the the Maoists and 'royal army', the graffiti asks them to desist from bloodshed and 'deliberate suppression'. Whatever the support base of the Nepali comrades, there are also those who are tired and fearful of the bloodletting. Whatever the romance of extremism may once have been, freedom from fear has become a major political aspiration. Terror is no longer a means to an end – it has become an end in itself, autonomous of social and political control. It is no longer merely a symptom but the disease par excellence of capitalist modernity. Socialists should remember that respect for life and liberation from fear must be the foremost ideal and goal of socialism. Or else they will make themselves instruments of the system they claim to be combating.

The recruitment of women cadre and soldiers by paramilitaries is hailed by some comrades as a symbol of female 'empowerment'. Actually, this should be characterised as yet another manifestation of the oppression of women by entrenched patriarchy. Would it not seem ridiculous to view child-soldiers as liberated children? Warfare empowers neither men nor women, it imprisons all of humanity in an endless spiral. Since 1914, we have never had peace



– more than 200 million people were violently done to death in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and it is clear that 'modern civilisation' is structurally dependent upon war. That it is now recruiting women and children in the name of 'empowerment' is a travesty. The struggle for the complete equality of the sexes continues to be opposed bitterly by patriarchal structures and politicians. (The fate of India's Women's Reservation Bill is proof of this fact). Subjugation by fear is a common experience for women from all classes across the globe. Feminism is hence (implicitly) a struggle against militarism and terror.

The abolition of state terror and its twin brother requires the collaboration of all groups and movements working to end the grip of caste oppression, patriarchy, racism and the exploitation of labour. Wide-ranging campaigns are necessary against all forms of oppressive institutions, including militarist ones, in order to defang the enemy-producing killing-machine that the 'West' has become. But ambivalence about brutality as a means of resistance must cease. Millions of Europeans and Americans are opposed to war. The imperial system can only be encouraged to implode, as did the USSR. It cannot be destroyed by military means without exacting a merciless price that no revolutionary could wish on the common people. Terrorist attacks will only increase fear and feed conservative ideologies, which is the aim of the rulers.



Is it possible to combine a radical programme with non-violence? Indeed it is. Undermining the British Empire was the most radical programme in Southasia in the first half of the last century. In a time that identifies Pathans with religious fundamentalism, we may yet learn something from the work of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan of the North West Frontier Province, aka Badshah Khan and the Frontier Gandhi, and the Khudai Khidmatgar ('servants of god') movement of the 1930's, whose commitment to non-violence was based on Pukhtunwali culture and Islam. The Khudai Khidmatgar's alliance with the national movement as a whole, its popular constructive projects and openness to non-Pathans and non-Muslims alarmed the colonial rulers, who subsidised the clergy to denounce its members (popularly known as the Red Shirts), as Bolsheviks and enemies of Islam. Confronting massacres, torture and repression, the Khudai Khidmatgar emerged as one of the staunchest Gandhian movements in the history of Southasian nationalism.

The Frontier Gandhi instructed his followers: "abstain from violence and do not defame your nation, because the world will say how could such a barbarous nation observe patience". Even as the 'civilising' Englishmen behaved like mad dogs, the 'volatile' Pathans were teaching their rulers a lesson


in restraint. A Turkish scholar who visited the Frontier in the 1930s suggested that the Pathans had developed a new interpretation of force. In her words, "non-violence is the only form of force which can have a lasting effect on the life of society... And this, coming from strong and fearless men, is worthy of study". Badshah Khan was the last of those Gandhian stalwarts who could walk across four international boundaries in post-1947 Southasia and be treated by the citizens of each country as one of their own. His life work exemplified the compassionate spirit that stayed alive during the bleakest period of the twentieth century, proof that the self-assertion of the oppressed need not always be strident and narrow-minded. That he was an Indian national leader even after he became a Pakistani citizen ought to give chauvinists of all colours some food for thought. Not for nothing was it written of him, that "people brought him food and sat him down in the shade of trees".

Let us also spare a thought for Chander Singh Garhwali, a platoon commander in the Garhwal Rifles, Hindu soldiers facing a Muslim crowd in Peshawar in 1930. He was court-martialled for refusing to order firing on his fellow-countrymen. Somewhere, somehow, Chander Singh and his troops too had been affected by the spirit of ahimsa. Decades before, so had the ordinary Russian soldiers who refused to shoot women demonstrators on International Women's Day in St Petersburg in 1917, thus heralding the overthrow of Tsarism and the advent of the Russian Revolution. Would it not be truly radical for the revolutionaries to prevail over the soldiers and policemen via their conscience rather than through fear? Did not Gandhi speak profoundly when he said that what is obtained by fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts? The radicalism of satyagraha consists in this, that it (potentially) abolishes the distinction between method and goal. 'Overcoming' ceases to be a military concept and social democracy transcends its hysterical tension over ends and means.

Today, when Southasia is engulfed in civil strife and civil war, it is time to consider again whether the pursuit of truth and non-violent resistance are not the only radical social procedures left for the survival of the biosphere. The movement must be the germ of its goal. Social-democracy's associative principles and active ethos must prefigure those of the society it wishes to create. Ahimsa is not a tactic but the ethos of respect for life. That which claims to be new must stand on its own feet.

*Speak the truth  
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# Fixing difference

**How, in the end, all Asians in one British school end up as 'Waheed'.**

by | **Moyukh Chatterjee**

All memories are like infatuations, placed in the past but remembered in the future. I too remember, in order to try to understand the present, the summer of 1994 in Birmingham. I was in sixth grade at George Dixon Juniors and Infants, a neighbourhood government school, a five-minute hike from 45 Ridgeway Road, which was home. Not keen to lead a solitary student life, my father had brought his family over to live with him while he completed his M Phil at Birmingham University. For that one year, I tasted Britain's magic potion of multiculturalism, the ideology of fixing difference – the same potion that is now under severe scrutiny. The London bombings and the questions they raise create the opportunity for Britons to ask themselves the question – “How does it feel to *not* be British in Britain?”

My school was a microcosm of the street on which I lived, a multitude of colours packed into a single class: hefty Sikh boys with anglicised Punjabi names like Gurdy; the rude rich white boy Sam; the athletic and irreverent black boys like Dwain, twice my height but impressed with my high scores in English; and a tomboyish Indian girl who played the violin and stood first in class. Yet there was only one *Paki* – not even a stable word but a sound, a phoneme so deeply coded it can't be inscribed. To understand the slangish twang and the racist sneer with which it's spat out, one must hear it.

It was the short boy with a perpetual cold, Waheed, who represented what I dreaded most in my new school – the position of being the eternal outsider. I never understood what made him a *Paki* – his relative poverty I shared, his grades weren't the lowest in class, he wasn't the shortest in class, and even his vocabulary was respectably rich in the choicest abuses. It was most peculiar that even though half my class was Asian, the Indians seemed most racist. The changes brought about in me by this so-called 'multicultural atmosphere' horrified me. As I was absorbed into the rhythm of my school (after getting beaten up a few times and learning the crucial expletives in circulation then) I picked up the street accent and a mean streak that seemed to be the *natural* instinct in all my classmates.

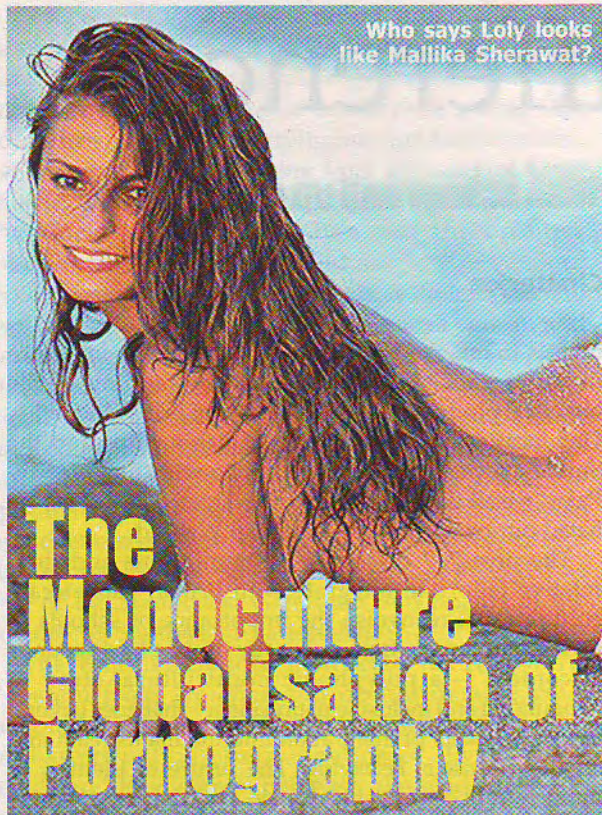
But this cycle of violence and racism did not end with my tentative absorption into the class et cetera. The tremulous compromise I brokered with my own sense of identity, which had transformed from 'difference' to 'mimicry', was unsettled with the arrival of another Indian student who represented to me all that I had left behind and unlearned in the past year. The viciousness with which *we* attacked her – the Asians leading from the front –

reveals to me, the inability of my teachers to impart to us immigrant youngsters an understanding of the historical production of the diversity of British identities. Our location in this universe of fish-n-chips and the Sunday paper would not reconcile with the 'bloody-Pakis' we all were. And when we targeted any of us, we hated our own selves. We were all Waheed.

The post-7/7 discourse on immigrants and their relative failure to integrate with British mainstream culture must recognise the importance of schools in giving immigrants from culturally diverse backgrounds a 'context' – a polyphonic multicultural story of nationhood and inclusive nationalism – that goes beyond surface markers of integration into the mainstream and creates a *sense of belonging*. The future of identity in multicultural contexts like Britain's needn't be restricted to broad political decisions on models of integration or initiating legislation against hate speech only, because it is the smaller everyday aspects of racism that are the most difficult to root out. We must ask ourselves: what is the experience of being Pakistani in Bradford or Birmingham? The second and third generation immigrants are probably already asking themselves this question. The more important issue, however, is whether the debate will feed on the current Islamophobia and restrict itself to Pakistanis or whether it will transcend the sensational and the immediate to ask fundamental questions about the relationship between immigrants and native 'Britons' in specific contexts.

I have deliberately omitted from this discussion the role of external factors such as foreign policy, and avoided a critique of religious conservatism and interpretation within immigrant population to let my memories of Birmingham decide the course of my argument. However, it cannot be stressed enough that the ramifications of the current debate and the terms of its discourse – whether conducted as veiled xenophobia or within an enlightened mode that emphasises the pleasures of multiculturalism – will surely touch the lives of all immigrants, regardless of geography and ethnicity. In this regard, the debate has the power to shape the experience of multiculturalism for everyone in Britain. So instead of bemoaning the failure of multiculturalism in making British citizens out of non-British communities, maybe there was never enough of it in circulation in the schools, on the streets and in the playground – because it exiled its own children, like Waheed. For what reasons, I have yet to find out.





by | **Jayanta Bandyopadhyay**

**T**he process of globalisation that has been sweeping the world during the last two decades has many facets, both obvious and otherwise. Professional politicians and the mainstream media have projected this process as an 'inevitable' step forward in human history, and one without alternative. A deeper look at the goings-on will, however, make it clear that what is being sold as 'globalisation' in countries like India is in fact a very truncated version of the advancements and changes that are possible elsewhere in the world. Whether willingly or hesitantly, many in Southasia accept all the social and cultural trends that the market and media dump on us as part of this 'inevitable' step 'forward'. As the assumption has spread that this form of globalisation offers humanity its only choice to shape its future, a monoculture has swelled across the developing world, with active support from the market system. As an extension of the colonial and feudal mindsets of the Indian middle and upper-middle classes, this monoculture is accepted and glorified as a package deal of development and modernisation.

This 'modernisation' is identified with quick middle-level prosperity – made possible by economic liberalisation – through opportunities such as Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). It includes accepting new urban consumption patterns, such as

the idea that eating junk food is proof of modern living. A stroll through India's versions of Silicon Valley, Bangalore's Brigade Road or Hyderabad's Banjara Hills, will bring one close to the new consumption trends of this BPO-based culture. Interestingly, in essence this new monoculture is not that different from the trends of the last several centuries. After all, the new chrome-and-glass style continues to cater to the age-old sari-gold-cosmetics fetish of the middle-class woman. Meanwhile, thanks to the power of advertising, men get engrossed in their technological fetish for the newly marketed models of foreign vehicles. The Southasian male's interest in these automobiles very much resembles the interests of zamindars under the East India Company – more than 200 years ago – in the latest gizmo from Europe. The affluence of the zamindars, too, was based on BPOs. The East India Company headquarters in London outsourced the tax collecting responsibilities in parts of India to the zamindars; the history of colonisation in Southasia would also expose many other such outsourcing processes.

The prosperity of the few that BPO-based development allows is a mixed blessing at best, for it comes at a cost to both the individual and the society at large. At the individual level, it is long hours of hard work that provide upwardly-mobile youths with a salary far larger than the prevailing rates outside the BPO system. At the social level, the monoculture of globalisation transforms middle-class young adults into an insulated minority of consumers whose movements get conditioned by the media and market. These young men and women are largely cutoff from the 'other India', which is not sustained by Business Process Outsourcing and where the functional law of the land may not be the same as what is written in the law books. While this is a contemporary process of immense significance, social study and analysis of it have unfortunately remained neglected, both in Southasia and the larger developing world.

### **Entertainment supermarket**

Probably by design, many significant aspects of the industrialised world are missing from how the mass-market media represents the new global culture to the developing world. Indeed, one must remember Rajni Kothari's caveat in *Growing Amnesia* that "liberalisation should not be confused with liberty or liberation". In the West, the basic values that shape civil society are found in the governance at sub-national and local levels. The judicial system does retain a great deal of independence and is not generally perceived by the common people to be linked to political interests and governmental processes. The citizens are deeply sensitive about the sanctity of democratic governance and freedom of expression. In a majority of cases, corruption gets both detected and punished. The emerging monoculture of globalisation



in Southasia marches to the dictates of material consumption; these spirits of creative enquiry, empathy for representational politics, and fearlessness against corruption are conspicuous by their absence. These values too should have transferred, had the process of globalisation been truly empowering. Instead, the world of celluloid and media have taken over almost the entire space for the growth of mass culture.

When one comes right down to it, globalisation as it is being peddled in our region seems to be fixated on the production, marketing and consumption of a variety of entertainment related products. Now, in the supermarket of electronic entertainment, there is something on offer around-the-clock: sports, cartoons, looks into your future from astro-palmists, wrestling by Occidental hunks, provocative fashion shows by Western European 'beauties', and much, much more. Even when one wants to idle away some time by flicking on the television, the entertainment supermarket will not leave you alone. It always has something to sell, and the choice is deliriously wide.

At a far end of this variety is content supposedly meant for adult entertainment – either implicit or explicit porn products. In the era of globalisation, the global entertainment market has found an enormous potential in pornography; bared flesh remains the single most lucrative sector of Internet commerce. Meanwhile, our media is busily projecting the consumption of porn products as an essential indicator of a developed culture. As culture commentator Nikhat Kazmi writes in *The Times of India*, it is "easy to understand why India is having a porn revolution now. It is just catching up with the world in its obsession with all things triple X. New porn videos, new porn MMS clips and new porn Internet films of Indian celebs should not be a cause for alarm. Because even as India is doing it now, the rest of the world has been there, done that years ago."

Thanks to such open support from the media, the market share of porn products has grown by leaps and bounds over the past few years. With the evaporation of the stigma on being a consumer of sleaze, the production and sale of this group of products is growing exponentially. Technology has helped tremendously by increasing access to such products. Thanks to MMS, it is now available even on the screen of one's mobile phone. The more open segments of the media, like newspapers, are then used to publish below-the-radar announcements for porn products – by reporting sensational 'news items' on the 'involvement' of well-known actors (or their look-alikes) in the making of porn films and products. We are then expected to accept trends allowing open media references to porn products as another 'inevitable' aspect of globalisation.

Until recently, the porn industry which used the most modern means of media had largely been based

in the industrialised countries. Says one report, "In the US, porn is a legalised industry where the backstreet sex shops and dirty old men in macs have been replaced by hi-tech studios which churn out almost 11,000 titles every year." In tune with this rapidly spreading monoculture of globalisation in India, the organisational framework for the production, marketing and consumption of a variety of porn products has changed. Today, we have gone from small scale production to the present stage of high-technology-based manufacture aimed at the global market.

It is said that the size of the online porn industry is at least USD 57 billion. As reported in *The Times of India*, 12 percent of all websites are pornographic in nature. The largest number of India's Internet porn consumers is 12-17 years old – which makes sense, for one can begin to access such material as soon as one knows how to operate a computer mouse. According to gender, 20 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women who use a computer at work are said to be viewing pornography on the Net.

### **Inevitability of it all**

The attraction of Indian males (and doubtless some females) towards voyeuristic escapades is established whenever a hard-core porn film featuring a Mexican woman named Loly (who resembles the Indian cine star Mallika Sherawat) makes waves through MMS in India. There is always a dramatic increase in the service load when a particular MMS clip involving celebrity look-alikes are placed on the Net. While of course Western-sourced pornography has always been available in Southasia, it is the volume of trade and the broader class spectrum catered to today that is remarkable.

The porn industry is more or less a product of the overall industrial economy, and modern information technology has provided cheap and effective avenues for its marketing and distribution. Whether we like it or not, the size of the porn economy in India is growing and we are becoming increasingly supine in front of the porno society, even tiny tots are not immune from the solicitations. There are versions of computer games where players can enter into alleyways to pick up girls and have 'interactive' sex with them by tapping at the keyboard.

The way things are going, India is bound not just to remain a consumer of Western-produced pornography – it is also well on its way to being a major producer. Before long, porn products from India will be competing in the international market for a greater market share. With all the prurience attached to glamour on the screen, the lure of money will attract youth – even those who are not celebrity lookalikes – to aspire to porn stardom. In a country (and region) where trafficking in women continues to take place on a massive scale, the next step is to use video and



technology to widen one's pornographic reach and market. In the globalised economy, such trends will get sanctified as 'business is business'. As with all the cultural invasions of the past half-century – as can be seen by the docility with which we have accepted the arrival of hard porn on our computer screens via the Internet – this evolution and localisation of pornography will also be accepted as 'inevitable'.

Society's dangerous acceptance of whatever the market dumps on it as being simply 'part of the modernisation process' reflects our own deplorable cultural standards. The cultures of human societies have never evolved along such 'inevitable' pre-determined paths in the past; the power of the media today, however, does create the situation for such 'inevitability'. Though the history of pornography in Southasia is not recorded, it surely was not widely prevalent – and let us not confuse pornography with the *Kamasutra*. In centuries of our literary history, there is no reference to pornographic writing having been available to the larger public.

The decline in the understanding of relationships in the modern era has gradually degraded the role of 'sex'. Over time, the vital natural urge has been denied its due importance in open discourse, which has left the young adult Indian of today lacking a mature understanding of sexuality as an essential ingredient of human life. In most educated and middle-class families of India, the ceremony of marriage is taken as a 'certificate' for having sex with one's married partner. In these arranged nuptials – which happen by the millions every month – the relationship of love is ignored and allowed to grow only as the conjugal life progresses, if at all. The importance of relationships is thus marginalised, and sex is accepted as being exclusively dependent on marriage. It is this restrictive and secretive social approach to sex that makes good customers of young people for pornography – and which could in the wrong circumstances lead to heinous forms of depravity. This is seen in criminal distortions such as rape, whose dramatically rising incidence throughout the country can be linked to circumstances in which on-screen lasciviousness is coupled with repression in real life – circumstances that have become an all too regular occurrence.

### **A mature openness**

Which brings us face-to-face with the challenge of what to do! The cultural lethargy with which Southasia as a whole has welcomed globalisation is ironic, given the confident heritage to which we are heirs. We need to make room for our own innovative contributions to the shaping of globalisation – and we need to be able to make it acceptable to others. Indeed, many observers are feeling that whether it is in Europe or Japan or China or the Arab countries, in

black Africa or the Latin world, or in our own region of Southasia, the gifts of the 'inevitable' globalisation – as sold with the help of mass media's growing grip on the public mind – are becoming unsustainable. In spite of the awesome reach of modern communications technology, a decline of this process is already visible. In the face of that deterioration, however, the fear is that worried media conglomerates will trigger off even more aggressive marketing of entertainment – including porn products – as cultural sedatives.

At a time when no-holds-barred pornography is already available to the public across the class spectrum, it is time for us to stop this headlong rush into the market of sex and to make a controlled descent. In its most unprocessed form, you can see pornography's classless reach in the discreetly curtained Internet cubicles in small towns all over Southasia, where young men get a taste of the raw porn of their choice. We have not even begun to recognise the chasm that such individuals are forced to bridge in their young lives, and this is repeated tens of millions of times across the Subcontinent every day.

Some could say that the easy availability of pornography through the videotape, television screen and computer is like a splash of cold water, forcing society to emerge from its lethargy and confront our sexuality. This could be the experience that forces us to revert to a mature openness with regard to sexuality, romance and relationships, which have been trivialized by centuries of what may be called 'Southasian middle-class morality'. Indeed, this is a distinct possibility: human societies are forward-looking by instinct and culture does not evolve through a technological process. Just as the BPO-sponsored affluence of the mechanised life is increasingly failing to satisfy the creative urge of the young people, society as a whole will seek a response to the arrival of explicit pornography in our midst.

This rapid spread of pornography through new media is not something of which we need necessarily to be afraid. Continuation of our own cultural lethargy, which makes this expansion so easy, is what should be seen as the real problem. Advice to the young to be 'good boys' and 'good girls' will not provide the solution. The race for the collective human imagination between the market-based media and creativity-based cultural transformation is becoming more and more intense everyday. This is due primarily to the fact that social and economic advancement cannot be separated from cultural leadership and creativity. When we start to look around with self-confidence, the emptiness of the emerging monoculture of globalisation in the developing world – being filled by cricket today and porn products tomorrow – can indeed be replaced by a new social culture of a globalised world. ■



Dr Aamer Liaqat,  
host of *Aalim Online*



by / Sonya Fatah

**A Karachi-based satellite channel which uplinks from Dubai has taken the Pakistani market by storm. Given the sense and sensibility that drives this independent broadcaster, could the rest of Southasia be the next market?**

# The geography of GEO

**E**arly morning on 30 January 2005, long before dawn but after the daily newspapers had gone to press, the building that houses the Jang Group of Newspapers in Karachi was attacked by 30 armed gunmen on motorbikes. The building's gatekeepers were beaten up and the first two floors were ransacked. Eyewitnesses later reported that a police van stationed at the street corner was filled with armed policemen who did not stir. Later that morning, a religious group claimed responsibility for the act and explained its motive.

The previous evening, the Pakistani channel GEO TV had aired a discussion on the ultra-sensitive topic of incest on its *Agony Aunt* programme, *Uljhan Suljhan*. Considering the subject, the channel had moved the programme out of primetime and its host, Hina Khwaja Biyat, had brought in a 'technical' panel comprised of a doctor, a psychologist, a medical researcher and a sociologist. A victim's letter was read on the air. In it, she wrote that her brother had sexually abused her for six years. Thrice, she had tried to commit suicide but failed. What should she do? The panelists pitched in with their advice, and as the program came to a close, the doctor identified a mutual dependency situation. The incest, the doctor feared, would continue. To prevent further

complications in a sensitive situation, she strongly recommended the use of contraception. In one sweep, the programme had dared to discuss two taboos – incest and contraception – on a popular television channel, in a society where social issues tend to be dictated and defined by hard-line, self-proclaimed theologians. Or, they are simply not discussed. By 2:30 am, GEO's offices had been stormed.

When GEO began its transmission in August 2002 as an Urdu television channel, it was not the first independent broadcast to challenge the monopoly of the government's Pakistan Television (PTV). Indus Vision and ARY Digital were both launched in 2001, after General Pervez Musharraf's government declared it open season for private channels. By now, more than 13 independent channels have flooded the market – all of them reaching the Pakistani viewership through cable and satellite networks and accessing less than half of the population that state television reaches. 39 more licenses are soon to be issued, several of them for regional language channels. Moreover, Indian broadcasts are back on cable after having been banned shortly after the Kargil war, providing serious competition to GEO's generally average entertainment programs. Meanwhile, draconian press laws continue to



infringe upon media's freedom, impacting the credibility of television news. The rising tide of fundamentalism in the country and the growing political role of Islamists mean even greater media suppression.

And yet, amidst the competition and adversity, GEO's ratings have never stopped in their skyward climb, reflecting the channel's popularity both at home and among the North American and UK immigrant communities. What's the buzz about?

GEO's mission and vision aside, several factors have influenced its success. The channel started broadcasting when fast-moving local events were shifting the public's interest away from foreign television stations. The private Indian channels, which had been the Pakistani public's choice of entertainment, had been banned, even though recorded copies of popular shows like *Kyonki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* were readily available in music stores. (Even today, Indian news channels like NDTV and Doordharshan are not aired in Pakistan.) It was around this time that Pakistani advertisers began to look at television as a viable medium. For its part, GEO played smart by seeking to reach the mass market by being a decidedly Urdu channel; its star offering was a smartly produced news-on-the-hour format that provided local, national and international news quickly and relatively uncensored. It did not take long for cable and satellite viewers to migrate from the staid state-owned PTV to GEO.

Even with its success, GEO's spread remains stifled by access issues. Only 35 percent of Pakistan is covered by cable and satellite, and the independent television channels are not allowed terrestrial (land-based) broadcasting. According to a Gallup Media report, the 'penetration' of the private channels in cities is estimated at 28 million, or 72 percent of the urban television audience. Outside of the cities, satellite television's reach is barely 27 percent, essentially allowing for a rural PTV monopoly. "Because GEO, INDUS, AAJ and others can only access about 30 percent of the population, they do not have the same target audience as PTV," says Adnan Rehmat, director of Internews, a non-profit outfit that supports open media. But GEO does not seem particularly concerned at the moment, concentrating instead on building its base and credibility while hoping for the day when the larger market will beckon. It is focused for now on the purchasing power of its urban audience, hoping to cash in on the countryside another day. In the meantime, GEO's executives know that they have built an unrivalled reputation for delivering the latest

news with smart presentation before anyone else. "I think the government misjudged the power of the cable revolution," says one GEO executive. "Satellite is not a revolution, but cable is."

Any random sampling will show that GEO's strength lies in its news more than anything else. "I watch GEO everyday. Whenever anything happens, their reporters are on the scene right away," says Narayan Lal, 40, a driver by profession in Karachi. Rehmat, the media analyst, agrees: "There is no comparison between GEO and its competitors. A large part of GEO is news- and information-based, and they have an edge because they get news faster

using the great infrastructure of *Jang* and *The News*". GEO benefits from being housed in the same office block as these popular English and Urdu sister dailies. The *Jang* is the most widely read newspaper in Pakistan.

GEO's current 24-hour broadcast is a mixture of news, entertainment and infotainment. *Uljhan Suljhan*, the program that offended some conservatives in the country, is part of the infotainment segment. Even while the news programmes give the channel its cloud and credibility, GEO says the infotainment broadcasts are its main income generators. GEO's success is

evident from its revenue charts, where the takings have gone from a mere PKR 20 million by the final quarter of 2002 to PKR 936 million in 2004. By comparison, ARY Digital's 2004 earnings were PKR 456 million, and Indus Television's were PKR 115 million.

### Thinking in Urdu

The Jang Group is a media empire spanning three generations started by Mir Khalil-ur-Rahman (fondly known as MKR) with the Urdu daily *Jang* in Delhi in the early 1940s. At GEO's helm sits Mir Ibrahim Rahman, the grandson of the magnate. Mir was busy as a Goldman Sachs investment banker in New York before he returned to Karachi in 2001 to assist in the planning and launching of GEO. While the dream of a television channel was born during his grandfather's time, it was Mir's father, Shakil-ur-Rahman, who pursued it relentlessly with the Pakistani government. Mir swears that there is minimal linkage between GEO and the Group's publications, but even he admits in New York tech-speak that there is "a kind of perception synergy".

Jang's offices are housed in a dull, unimpressive grey building on the city's financial thoroughfare, Chundrigar Road. The entrance is on a side road crammed with motorbikes, double-parked cars, and street vendors. Two slim elevators make their ways slowly up and down the building. But GEO TV's



GEO's logo is stylised Arabic script reading 'let live' in Urdu



# GEO in India?

Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman of GEO has said that his vision for his channel is not restricted to Pakistan, and that "Southasia is GEO's canvas". The tantalising goal, of course, is to reach the vast Indian viewership and take a bite out of that humongous advertising pie. There should not be insurmountable hurdles for an independent Pakistani channel to beam down on India, just as the reverse is the case. In the past, one major problem with reaching an Indian audience has been that Pakistani channels have been limited to the government's PTV. Additionally, cable operators in India have been reluctant to present Pakistani channels on their menus – a legacy of the heightened tensions of the recent past, including the Kargil War of 1999. However, if Pakistani television developed good entertainment programmes, such as ones based on the much-appreciated docudramas of the past, the development of a cross-border market would be a certainty. For one thing, the Urdu language would carry across the India as well.

In fact, GEO has made some such gestures by bringing Indian celebrities onto its sets in Dubai. Says Adnan Rehmat of Internews, "GEO has funded serials that have Indian actors in them, and they've shown Indian movie and music shows as well." Indian stars are regularly interviewed on the talk show *Take One*, hosted by Fakhr-e-Alam, the actor, singer and now television anchor. Saif Ali Khan, Manisha Koria and Nana Patekar are some of the Bombay celebrities that have also made appearances. While these Indian stars are presented due to their strong following in Pakistan, the day may not be far off when GEO or another Pakistani channel makes the breakthrough into India itself with good entertainment.

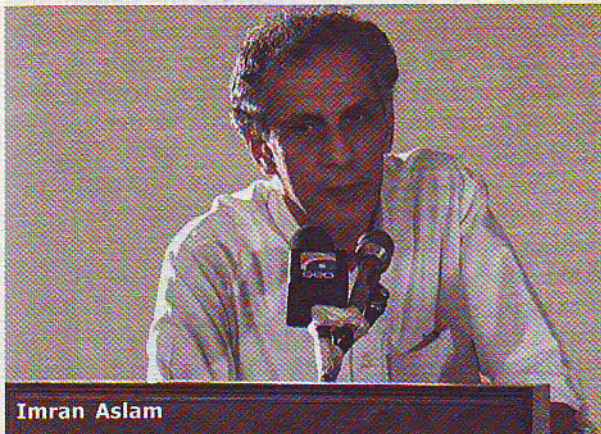
"We haven't entered the Indian market yet," says Aslam, who admits that India is in the cards. "We're waiting for the right time." Indeed, the channel is yet to launch officially in India, though those with dish antennae can already access the network's programming from anywhere under its satellite footprint. Some Pakistani media-watchers believe that GEO could give the Indian satellite channels a run for their money if it spruced up its entertainment programming.

two-floor head offices which are reached by two slim elevators are posh. State-of-the-art equipment is everywhere, with latest computer programmes. But the office layout is super-egalitarian: gone are the lavish offices that were guaranteed to senior execs – Mir and Aslam's offices are compact, surrounded by clear glass walls. Access is easy.

Launching the television operation wasn't easy, due to the original decision to start big. GEO had to raise the financial capital for equipment, technology, personnel and training – and they went all the way. Mir hints that the capital came from a mix of resources – "personal, family and third-party". Then, three years ago they brought in BBC specialists to train a pool of 200 soon-to-be reporters, producers and technical staff; the programme lasted four

months and cost USD 1.5 million. "I personally interviewed 6,000 people," laughs Imran Aslam, GEO's president, who has played a key role in devising the channel's programming strategy. "It was the largest manhunt and womanhunt in the country. We were looking for real balance. At the end of the training, we had a picnic for the graduates out by the beach. We'd hired buses from Avari Towers," recalls Aslam, referring to a fancy Karachi hotel near the city's elite neighborhoods of Defense and Clifton. "When we returned to Avari in the evening, there were hardly four people left. Everyone else had been dropped off along the way. That's when we knew we were on board." What GEO wanted was diversity of reporters and producers – people who could tell the country's many untold stories from a non-elitist point-of-view. Having dropped off the majority of the handpicked team before the bus neared the city's elite enclaves, Aslam felt optimistic that they had accomplished that goal.

Fair representation has been key to GEO's success and it was ultra-important to GEO's mission as it got started. All along, it was to be an Urdu-language channel. Remembers Mir, "Even when we hired people, one question we asked was, 'Do you think in Urdu?'" He adds, "At one period, we became almost fascist about our local ideology and didn't hire anyone from Clifton or Defense for one and a half years." GEO's head office is filled with people of all persuasions, he says. "We have liberals, we have conservatives, we have socialists, we have old people



Imran Aslam



and young people, people from north Karachi and south Karachi. The list goes on."

That diversity is meant to achieve 'balance', as far as possible, in order to reflect the national society, and to provide news, entertainment and infotainment that are relevant to the broad-based Pakistani viewership. But even when all the equipment was purchased and the training was completed, the real hurdle was transmitting newscasts without government intervention. GEO followed ARY Digital's route and setup studio headquarters in Dubai. Seven of its anchors are stationed there, along with a staff of 40 people. Operating out of Dubai's Media City, GEO manages to avoid the complicated and messy business of the Pakistani government's telecast regulations.

"Except for business and sports, all of our anchors are sitting in Dubai," explains Aslam, who was intimately involved with planning GEO long before it went on air. The lanky, wiry, chain-smoking former editor of Jang's English daily, *The News*, is well known in Pakistan for his special brand of theatrical political satire that targets everyone, including the General. Aslam says that Dubai has some obvious advantages. Studio facilities are better, and there is spiffier technology and a sharper technical staff. But the drawback is that all live transmissions have to be aired via Dubai. This means that rather than broadcasting live images, GEO's news has to substitute a still photograph of the concerned reporter and an audio recording. The only other option is to get specific permission from the government each time – permission that the government is not always willing to give.

It helps that Dubai's Media City is the allegedly pro-Western Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum's pet project, says Mir. Back home, the field has been opened up, but remains under the wary gaze of eagle-eyed authorities in Islamabad.

### **PEMBRA and the public**

GEO and other channels are taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the Dubai satellite uplink, but it is not by choice. Even without uplinking from national territory – which is not allowed – there are enough challenges created by the state for any information media, including television. Take, for instance, the October 2002 Freedom of Information Act, which provided journalists with the largely unfettered freedom to report outside the sphere of national security matters. By 31 August the following year, three draconian press laws had been passed to undermine the Act. One of these is a loosely worded defamation law, which is deliberately fuzzy on what

the government thinks qualifies as 'defamation'. In some places, the definition refers to material that would offend "friendly countries", while elsewhere there is reference to "decency" and other similarly hazy notions. "That's the standard position in Pakistan – be vague," notes Internews' Adnan Rehmat dryly.

Lately, a public brouhaha has arisen regarding proposed amendments to the defamation law. Punishment would be made more severe; fines would increase; and authorities could more easily invoke the law and slap journalists with penalties. The changes have been approved by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMBRA) – established in January 2002 to license privately owned radio and television channels – and are soon to be promulgated into law. "The implications of all this is severe for electronic media," warns Rehmat. "It means seizure of equipment at any point."

The government has recently banned several publications, accusing them of inciting hate. Perhaps because of the hubbub this would create, none of the broadcast channels have been either closed down or severely threatened, but the channels do receive strings of official objections to content. The bigger danger, of course, is the culture of self-censorship that the government's attitude has developed. Television channels require heavy investment, and this builds timidity due to fear of repercussions. "We all have it," admits Mir, referring to self-



censorship.

But GEO does try to fight its own demons, and does it quite successfully. Take, for example, *Hum Sab Umeed Say Hain*, a humour programme that caricatures political personalities, social bigwigs and other influential people. That show has not shied away from tackling a Who's Who of Pakistan's present setup. Even an imitation of Gen. Pervez Musharraf made an appearance on a live telecast, wagging his finger and assuring the nation how much *taraqi* (progress) Pakistan has made. Recently, GEO asked its viewers, 'Is Pakistan ready for this kind of political satire?' The response, hardly cross-spectrum but still indicative, was a 92 percent vote in the affirmative.

GEO is also known for innovative programmes that maintain viewer interest week after week, even without the standard tearjerker melodrama format. Take the 13-episode reality show called *George ka Pakistan*, which followed a burly Englishman navigating his way through the country with the objective of obtaining authentic Pakistan credibility. In the final episode, it was Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz who welcomed George into the "Pakistani





George and the prime minister in the last episode of 'George ka Pakistan'

brotherhood", but not before the audience overwhelmingly voted positively for him.

But there is also much concern relating to the Islamist influence across parts of Pakistan. When it came to airing the discussion programme on incest on 29 January, both Mir and Aslam say forthrightly that they did everything possible to publicise the importance of the topic as a burning social issue. "By the way," adds Mir, "a recent World Health Organization report states that 12 percent of Pakistani children are abused." The decision was taken to air the programme – albeit outside the regular primetime slot at 9:30 pm – after enough letters had come in from around the country identifying incest as a significant issue. Despite the attack that followed, GEO's managers claim they are not deterred. It was not the first time they had aired shows on socially sensitive – and even volatile – subjects, including homosexuality. They plan to take it all in stride.

Given such an editorial outlook, one may wonder why there have not been more physical attacks on the channel from ultra-conservative elements. One reason may be the unique philosophy that GEO developed to address the needs of the Islamist segment of its viewership. The mullahs have a point

of view, says GEO, and that means giving the clerics a fair share of on-air time. And indeed, the mullahs do come. A show on GEO that is watched regularly is *Aalim Online* (the term translates as 'scholars'), whose host, Aamer Liaquat, a member of the National Assembly and a renowned national debater, facilitates discussions on Quranic scriptures between a Sunni and a Shia scholar. This is a unique programme making full use of the possibilities offered by an electronic mass media to reach across sectarian divides, particularly in a country where Sunni-Shia differences have led a surfeit of violence over the years. Parsi, Christian, and Hindu priests have also been on the show.

Much of GEO's success can be attributed to its somewhat paradoxical vision. Like any commercial media enterprise, it caters to audience demand; yet somehow, it also manages to challenge, and sometimes rattle, its audience as well. The channel's engineers like Aslam have always encouraged critical thinking, and in some ways – despite the hard talk of its military government – Pakistan's broadcast media does not seem any less open than the so-called free media in the United States.

Every now and then, having aired a sensitive discussion or reported controversial news, GEO anticipates a coded phone call or a veiled threat. The movers and shakers at GEO, however, seem more than willing to ride out the storm. A general view in media circles here is that there is freedom of speech under the present dispensation in Islamabad, and there is enough flexibility in society to bring important issues to the fore, including onto the television screen. The real larger question is whether there is freedom *after* speech. GEO's prime visionary, Mir says the channel owes a great deal to Gen. Musharraf, who he deems a man of progressive bent. That is not to say, certainly, that there aren't remaining challenges. "In my grandfather's days, *Jang* printed blank columns to make their point against state censorship. The Generals would be sitting inside our offices. All that has changed. It's like chalk and cheese between then and now."



5th KaraFilm Festival  
 December 1st - 11th, 2005  
[www.karafilmfest.com](http://www.karafilmfest.com)



**Documentaries have more or less gone digital, and while there are enormous opportunities to serve humanity, humanity had better watch out.**

**A Certain Liberation**  
by Yasmine Kabir, FSA '05

# Get real with digital documentary

by | **Fareeha Zaman**

**F**or over 25 years now there has been a frantic murmur that ripples through the crowd the moment the fate of film and cinema is mentioned. An announcement, an assertion, a warning that the Great Digital Revolution is coming. It is coming, they say, as if referring to a threatening storm on the horizon and urging the crew to batten the hatches and take shelter below. And so the world of cinema marches on, as we wait in the near-darkness of its flickering glow for something dramatic to happen, straining our ears for signs of the coming deluge and hearing only the gentle click of celluloid streaming from one reel to another on sturdy old projectors. Or – could that be the distinctive hiss of a running VCR? Is that low hum the sound of a video camera being operated, perhaps part of a closed circuit television system discreetly displayed at a public venue near you? The almost inaudible whirr of a DVD spinning in its player, being shown in the theater via an electronic projector?

Wake up, comrades, because the storm is upon us, and the evidence will be on display at this year's Film South Asia documentary festival in Kathmandu, whose theme presciently centres on the digital

revolution. Well, it is not upon us so much as within and amongst us, a revolution that may not have lived up to the emphatic warnings in the sense that it is not blowing into town with bells and whistles, nor accompanied by thunder and lightning. That particular era in the evolving status of digital cinema – a time when the world was overcome with a single-minded wonder of the medium, a time of self-conscious video art that usually featured video itself as the main attraction – has actually already come and gone. The true revolution has not.

Even in those early stages filmmakers and budding artists were able to move beyond basic video fascination relatively quickly, making 'home videos' and other records of daily life that showed an appreciation for the ramifications of digital film technology in terms of its convenience and affordability, and setting the stage for current conditions. For, over time, the use of digital equipment became so ubiquitous that it no longer even seemed necessary to reference or acknowledge the medium while working with it, and that is when a major shift occurred, albeit a subtle one.

The qualities of digital that had instigated the first



wave of change in the cinematic world and somewhat rightly earned it a reputation as the technology of the people, a leveller in the art of filmmaking and the non-filmmaker's relationship with the camera, led it into a state of complete integration into our society. We recognise the presence of video-cameras, are aware of the digital editing process, and identify special effects or animation created artificially by computers, but remain largely untroubled by them. Our familiarity with the wonder that was digital film technology has caused it to become an unconsciously accepted presence in the world - even outside filmmaking - and that, really, is radical, and has in turn allowed artists to use the medium with much more freedom, savvy, and flexibility.

Today, the revolution in digital is not the mere presence of the technology and all its trappings, but the fact that this presence is comfortably accepted, even ignored; that something so mechanical can be considered an organic part of modern day life. On a wider level, this technology has become a part of our subconscious map of the world, an understated component of modern architecture and an extension of human limbs and senses.

### Intimate portraits

During that old misdirected wait to be overtaken by an army of digital technology in the 20 some odd years after its initial explosion, it has executed this silent but deadly invasion. Staring off in the other direction, anticipating and imagining the lives of the proverbial children of the revolution, we have been reborn as just that. In response to this change, Film South Asia (FSA), the biennial Kathmandu film festival that screens documentary films connected to the region of Southasia, has named the theme for the year "Revolution in Digital - Go Documentary!" In many ways this was an especially appropriate year for the pairing, as FSA (organised by the non-profit Himal Association, with some help from the magazine you hold in your hand) is going through a few changes of its own, and may be in a prime position to appreciate the process of a slow revolution.

One of the most dramatic changes, appropriately enough, is fact that the festival is internally witnessing an ever-increasing number of entries shot and submitted on digital media of some kind. DV CAM, DVC PRO, Mini DV, DVD, and a variety of others that all add up to the same thing; a film culture permanently imbibed with digital technology. Other changes include the venue upgrade from the smaller theatre of the Russian Cultural Center to the much larger holding capacity of the commercial duplex, Kumari Cinema, and the extension of the festival by two days with the addition of a supplementary section to take place after the main competition. Entitled 'The Barrel of the Gun', the purpose of this



Jaal (The Catch) by Hridayanath Gharekhan, FSA '05

section is to reflect and address tumultuous times in Southasia through the screening of a small selection of films, both features and documentaries, that deal with conflict, resolution, and rehabilitation in a variety of areas around the world where the people are (or have been) targeted by the gun, whether on the hands of rebels or the state.

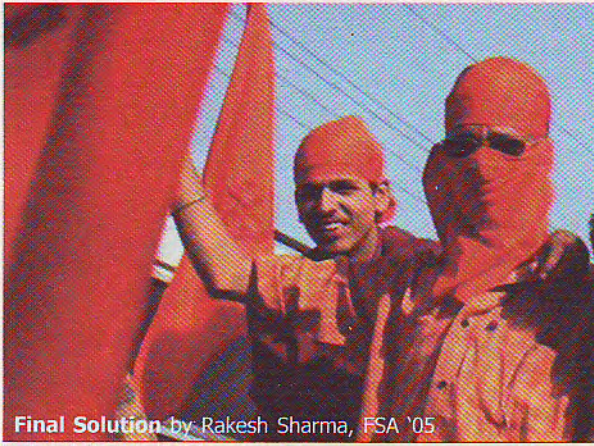
The theme of this year's festival, FSA '05, also seems an apt one considering the ways in which the digital medium is and has been particularly well-suited to the documentary form. As alluded to earlier, the two have had a longstanding relationship stemming from some of the earliest days of video. Some of the continued preference for digital on the part of documentary filmmakers is based on characteristics of the medium that were apparent since its inception.

Its legendary affordability made more frequent filming possible, really catering to the need for many documentary filmmakers to shoot large quantities of footage in order to capture spontaneous moments that were the life of their unscripted work, as opposed to costly film which often forced those who employed it to carefully plan and limit their shooting schedules. The relative portability and unfussy handling assists in allowing filmmakers to shoot unplanned because



Bhal Khabar (Good News) by Altaf Mazid, FSA '05





the equipment can be set in motion quickly and they are able to focus on their subjects without being distracted by the gear. Digital editing is likewise a quicker, cheaper option than celluloid splicing, and it allows relatively simple special effects such as video loops, speed changes and colour correction to be easily added without drawing too much attention to itself and distracting from the subject matter. These things have always been true and have become ever more so as advancements in the form of smaller, lighter cameras and more advanced and user-friendly editing programmes are developed, and filmmakers adopt them with a greater sense of refinement, with one eye on the bigger picture.

Part of the documentary's alliance with digital technology, however, lies in the implications of the more recent incarnation of the digital revolution. As a result of our relative comfort, as a society, with digital media, it seems filmmakers can now turn their cameras on human subjects with less worries of intrusion or exploitation. In Dhaka independent filmmaker Yasmine Kabir's 'A Certain Liberation', one of the films that will be screened by FSA this year, the central character profiled in the movie, a woman who has lost her entire family in the Liberation War and now independently wanders her town in a kind of functioning madness, appears to interact with the camera with surprising ease. In the small rural town in which the film is shot, many of her townsmen seem quite comfortable during interviews or as the camera follows them going about their daily business. When speaking to the camera, the subject seems to disregard it as a piece of machinery used for recording, and instead speaks directly to the woman behind it. In doing so she allows the audience to witness some of her most frank confessions and passionate emotional outbursts, and her lack of self-consciousness regarding the media allows filmmaker Kabir to paint a truly intimate portrait.

As a greater portion of the world gradually joins those who are already intimately familiar with digital, as it experiences being filmed or itself films

with a video camera, and as it discovers the voyeuristically gruesome pleasures of reality television, even more people will be able to interact with its technology without alarm or even extended acknowledgement. In an age where the rapid spread of technology has made constant surveillance and its subsequent broadcast to millions of viewers a well-accepted form of popular entertainment, the concept of being 'on camera' no longer triggers instant self-consciousness, as obvious from television programmes where common folk are asked to respond to the roving camera. This is leading to more natural results and therefore adding value to documentary cinema.

## Hyperawareness

Interestingly, the revolution seems to spawn filmmakers who use the more natural attitude towards the presence of digital technology to turn not just their fellow human beings into successful documentary subjects, but themselves as well. Even those who are making films about others, groups or environments foreign to them, or for the purpose of trying to raise awareness regarding various social issues seem to note their own presence or their personal experiences while filming. Not for them the traditional approach – still employed quite successfully by some – in which the documentary-maker remains scrupulously outside the frame. Even when tackling a decidedly external issue, they still recognise that they, too, are experiencing the depicted events for the first time, and connect these feelings to the larger framework of the film.

In Biju Toppo's 'Kora Rajee', the filmmaker seeks to call attention to the long-suffering Adivasi tea plantation labourers of Jharkand working in India's Northeast. Simultaneously, the camera captures Toppo uncovering his own ancestral and familial relationships with the community. In 'My Brother, My Enemy', co-directors Masood Khan from Pakistan and Kamaljeet Negi from India explore the wider







**Cosmopolis: Two Tales of a City**  
by Paromita Vohra, FSA '05

issue of tense Indian-Pakistani political relations by visiting one another's countries for the first time and experiencing what it is like to be surrounded by the so-called enemy, thus examining the global via the personal. Perhaps filmmakers like these believe in the idea that simply by sharing the environment with the person or location that they are shooting, they have had a valid intellectual participation with the subject and even altered it, and so want to include that in their film in the name of depth and honesty.

This particular trend in documentary filmmaking also arises from an increased comfort with the technology, this time on the part of the filmmaker rather than on the part of the intended subject. If filmmakers see the camera in their hands not as a foreign object or mere recording device, but as an extension of their eyes, the machine becomes inextricably associated with their own consciousness. The technology is the external method of capturing their inner vision, thus they come to see the camera, however inanimate, as absorbing the workings of their mind. When filmmakers become this aware of their thoughts shaping the otherwise neutral process of video-recording, it is natural that they choose to include this content in the finished product, as on some level that content is there already.

This view of digital technology also makes its use open to a greater number of people outside of the 'filmmaking' industry, as the camera can be perceived as a personal rather than solely professional tool. The introduction of such people to the world of documentary film may be part of what is helping to break down old conventions such as the filmmaker's necessary absence from the action.

The assimilation of digital machinery into modern life affects filmmaking, especially documentary filmmaking, not only through changes in the technology itself, but also through the creative products that come of the fusion between the evolving technology and the subtler phenomenon of an evolving attitude towards it. Something we have been

seeing again and again in this year's submissions to FSA are films that have reached a peak in terms of the medium sublimating into the subject matter. This is something that would have been impossible before the modern digital revolution, as filmmakers and audiences with no internalised relationship with the technology could not make or watch, respectively, a digital film without being struck by the fact that it was indeed a digital film. Now we are so hyperaware of digital that we are beyond awareness. It has become a feature of our subconscious, so constant or mundane that the brain deems it unnecessary to specifically alert us to its presence.

### Big Brother, really

Other submissions to FSA '05 this time around (this is the fifth edition of the festival, which began in 1997), even more fascinatingly from the standpoint of the revolution, use digital technology in an obvious or even self-conscious way, but blend its presence so artfully into their work that it no longer feels like an intrusion. Furthermore, they manipulate the technology with such deft and wizened familiarity that, rather than give the work an aesthetic of mechanised distraction, their use of digital technology adds real warmth or emotional poignancy. This is also a result of digital acceptance, as audiences are willing to look past a technique or special effect that they may subconsciously realise was added during post-production with the aid of a computer programme, focussing instead on the overall effect.

One film from the festival line-up that successfully utilises digital technology in the spirit of the revolution is Ali Kazimi's 'Continuous Journey'. The film charts the disastrous voyage of the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese steamliner chartered in 1914



**Sunset Bollywood** by Komal Tolani, FSA '05





**Snapshots from a Family Album**  
by Avijit Mukul Kishore, FSA '05

carrying 392 Indian immigrant hopefuls (mostly Sikhs) to Vancouver, only to be turned away by the exclusionary policies of the British Columbia authorities. Kazimi's greatest challenge, one that faces many who tackle the subject of a little-known historical event, was the lack of filmic evidence, or footage.

In order to give the tale the dynamic visual substance required of a film, Kazimi relied heavily on still photography and even shots of old written documents, employing digital technology and simple animation to bring them to life, and quite effectively at that. Although unable even to match the faces of the passengers from the few old photographs that he had found to their names, he was able to humanise them for the audience by animating parts of the photograph to have different people move independently of one another, thus creating a three dimensional space where there was none, by zooming in on particular faces during tense or emotional parts of the narrative, or by placing artificial backgrounds such as grey skies with moving clouds behind them. Rather than stand out as fancy video tricks or the cold work of machinery, these technological techniques actually do just the opposite, injecting some humanity back into dead photographs and other historical records.

The best example of a purposeful use of the digital medium, however, is Avinash Deshpande's "The Great Indian School Show", in which the filmmaker subtly uses digital technology to highlight society's takeover by it, a microcosmic embodiment of the phenomenon that is taking place on a global scale. Deshpande quietly profiles what seems like a typical Indian school, whose facade of normalcy is shattered when the audience learns that the

administration employs 186 surveillance cameras to keep a constant watch on the students. Here is where we see the darker side of the revolution, where the time for warnings returns. For the audience is able to make some terrifying realisations through Deshpande's careful rendering of just how omnipresent digital technology is and can be in our everyday lives.

It appears that we are so comfortable with the construction of digital architecture, so skilled at adapting to its presence, that no situation is too extreme. The children and teachers of the school seem to now be at ease with the environment that they are in, with constant surveillance and no privacy. They even speak to the camera in order to address their ever-watchful principal, who is shown many times standing proudly in front of his massive wall of television monitors, providing one of the most realistic visualisations of Orwell's infamous Big Brother.

In the final scene of the film, we even see a young boy bobbing up and down in front of one of the cameras to make it move with him, playfully teasing it with an expression of innocent curiosity as if it were for all the world a stray puppy or fellow schoolmate. Furthermore, the thin line between filming for art and filming for surveillance becomes painfully apparent during moments in the film when it is briefly uncertain if the filmmaker is using footage shot from his own cameras or culled from one of those of the school's vast network. The truth is that we cannot grow so comfortable with digital technology that we simply ignore it, cannot stop watching the march of its progress, because as much as it has brought to documentary film and to the cinematic world, it does not stop watching us.



**Teardrops of Karnaphuli** by Tanvir Mokammel, FSA '05



# Neo-liberalism and dictatorship

by | **Asim Sajjad Akhtar**

**S**ixty years after the emergence of aid as a strategic tool, its geo-political importance is undiminished. While there has been a renewal of more overt forms of capital accumulation in the post-9/11 dispensation, aid continues to stand out as the primary means of asserting imperialist control over entire regions of the world. Fully 50 years on from the historic Bandung Conference, some third world leaders may still be waxing lyrical about the unity of the oppressed peoples of the world but many of these leaders, major beneficiaries of strategic aid, are actually reinforcing neo-colonial dependency.

General Pervez Musharraf is one such example. While the general was in Bandung in April attending the African-Asian Unity Conference, a meeting of the Pakistan Development Forum (PDF) was being held in Islamabad. The PDF is an annual ritual where bilateral and multilateral donors meet with the country's economic managers to 'consult' on economic policy and to outline the parameters of future cooperation. For two years after the Musharraf coup in October 1999, there was no PDF or any other such gathering, a gentle hint that the general was in disfavour with the international financial elite. The situation changed after 9/11.

In April 2002, the PDF was held in Paris. Amidst the gala surroundings, the then finance minister (now prime minister) Shaukat Aziz committed to the donors that "democracy will not impede our economic reform process". The 'reform' process Aziz referred to was a typically orthodox set of neo-liberal policies based on further reducing the state's already meagre welfare responsibilities, selling off state assets, unbridled liberalisation of trade and financial markets, and initiating obsolete mega development projects. In Paris, the donors in turn welcomed Gen Musharraf's expected assumption of the presidency in the interest of 'continuity

of reforms'. Only a few weeks after this consensus, Gen Musharraf 'managed' a successful presidential referendum for himself, securing 99 percent of all votes cast.

## IFI mandate

Fast forward to the October 2002 general elections, which gave a token civilian face to the Musharraf regime, thereby addressing nominal demands of the international community that the general be seen to conform to some democratic norms. Although an ostensibly elected government was to come into power in October, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank both had already signed multi-year, multi-billion dollar assistance packages with the government months earlier in June. While concerns have been expressed about the limited sovereignty of developing states vis-a-vis international financial institutions (IFI), seldom is the interference as blatant as in the case of Pakistan of late. The pliant civilian government we have today is as much a product of the IFI mandate as that of the people of Pakistan.

The 2003 and 2004 PDF meets reinforced the neo-liberal 'reform process' and further committed large aid injections to the government. Throughout this time, the donors have congratulated the regime for its numerous 'good governance' practices and for achieving an unprecedented level of macroeconomic stability. But they have been silent on the dismal and worsening situation of working-class Pakistanis. Unemployment continues to soar, and nearly 45 percent citizens are living under the poverty line. Meanwhile the 'good governance' brigade conveniently overlooks the single most important governance problem in Pakistan – an army engaged in politics.

The donor community continues to laud the general's 'devolution of power' initiative. The 2005 PDF, held in April, pledged to wholeheartedly continue support for the local governments that



were instituted in 2001. In fact, donor portfolios have been totally overhauled in recent years to accommodate huge funding packages for this not-so-unique 'decentralisation' exercise. Gen Musharraf, like his predecessors Ayub Khan and Zia-ul Haq, has utilised a co-opted coterie of elected local councilors to create a mirage of legitimacy for military rule. There is little doubt that government agencies have perfected the art of political engineering, which was also used to 'good' effect in the second round of local government elections in August this year.

**Economic sovereignty**

There was a time when imperialist expansion could be disguised as a heroic struggle against communism. The discourse of anti-terrorism that came to replace its outdated anti-communist predecessor has already lost a great deal of credibility in the eyes of people across the world. So the neo-liberal agenda is propagated through the institutions of global governance that seek to introduce 'good governance' to the 'under developed', with the help of highly

democratic governments such as those of Gen Musharraf.

For PDF 2005 in Islamabad, Pakistan's economic managers put together a proposal for USD 42 billion. This, coming from a government which claims to be well on the path to economic sovereignty, was but ironical. But it is unlikely that the ordinary Pakistani will be duped. If nothing else, the neo-liberal counter-revolution of the past two decades has produced an understanding that goes against the attempts of generals and donors alike to frame neo-liberalism as 'poverty reduction' and 'pro-poor growth'.

While the rumblings in Pakistan await metamorphosis into a coherent political challenge to dictatorship and neo-colonialism, we can expect more elaborate gatherings like the PDF, complete with back-slapping and self-congratulatory awards. The fact is that Pakistan is today on the path of unprecedented polarization. The neo-liberal fabrications will ultimately be exposed, as has already happened in parts of Latin America, even if it is a long haul.

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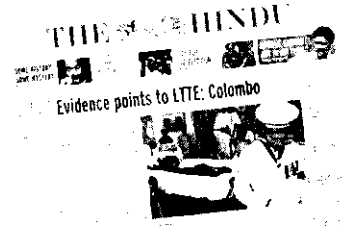


**Without doubt**, the Nepali dailies and magazines have some of the best cartoons of Southasia. This is probably the function of the country being large enough to sustain vibrant media and yet small enough to ensure that national level politics touches the people at large, with no more than perhaps two degrees of separation. Starting gingerly at first after King Gyanendra's military-aided

putsch on 1 February, the cartoonists of Nepal have become increasingly daring, and since the last two months there has been no holds barred, with some showing the dead horse of a 'constitutional monarchy' and another showing a historical king with a dagger behind his back. But the best cartoon lampooning King Gyanendra in terms of knife-edge subtlety is by Rajesh KC, which takes some explaining and backgrounding for the uninitiated. Okay, soon after he became the Nepali monarch, King Gyanendra started giving a series of interviews and speeches in which he indicated that he proposed to be a more proactive monarch than his dead elder brother Birendra. On 8 February, in a speech to citizens in Nepalganj in Western Nepal, he said "*Abaka dinharuma raja dekhinay tara nasuninay ... jasto abasta chhaina.*" (In the days to come the king will no longer only be seen, he will also be heard.) Let us leave aside for the moment whoever gave the king such an idea of a constitutional monarchy, but there the matter rested. After the coup of seven months ago, the king's son-in-law Raj Bahadur Singh decided to start a cell-phone company to compete with the government-owned Nepal Telecom, and for this he used his 'royal prerogatives' to get a sizeable share of something known as Spice Mobile, without having spent a penny. In order to, it is said, support the upcoming royal cell-phone company, the regime of King Gyanendra gave all kinds of disruptions to Nepal Telecom's service, firstly banning mobile service as soon as the royal coup happened, then limiting post-paid service supposedly as a anti-Maoist security measure, denying pre-paid service, and denying roaming facility. By end August, the mobile phones were practically useless, and one had to be lucky to get a call through. On 31 August, the daily cartoonist for the Kantipur daily, Rajesh KC, did a cartoon which is carried alongside. The ex-Nepal Southasian reader should now be able to understand the cartoon with the background given. The person at the Nepal Telecom counter is saying, "Duichaar din bho, kebho kebho, yo mero mobile phunlai! ... Dekhinay tara nasuninay!" (What's happened to my mobile phone these days?! It can be seen but not heard!) To Chhetria

Patrakar, this is the best that a political cartoon can be. Subtle, contextual, daring, and going right to the heart of the royal matter!

■ ■  
**Laxman Kardirgamar** died close to midnight on 12 August, when most newspapers across Southasia had already wrapped up and editors were probably packing up. By the time the wire services would have provided the story, they would probably have been home and asleep. Which explains why the coverage of the assassination in the dailies of Southasia the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> was almost non-existent. But one can be less kind to the editors for letting the story drop thereafter, as most newspapers had forgotten about Kardirgamar by the 14<sup>th</sup>. One of the few to stand up and take notice of the Lankan tragedy was The Hindu, from across the strait.



■ ■  
 If the written signature doth make the man, then the reader may want to check out the signatures of Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka 'Prachanda') Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and of Ganapathy, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). These were included in a press release sent out on 1 February via email, which rails again the ruling royal regime in Kathmandu as well as the "reactionary expansionist ruling classes" of India. Interestingly, the two gentlemen are almost plaintive when they state, "They [aforementioned royal regime and Indian reactionary expansionary ruling classes] are propagating continuously about the 'grave danger' posed by the long Red Corridor of armed struggle stretching from the Base Areas in Nepal up to the guerrilla zones of Andhra Pradesh or the so-called Compact Revolutionary Zone." What, comrades? Are you trying to downplay the significance of the Red Corridor? Are you trying to say that the Compact Revolutionary Zone is a figment of the imagination? Awww... Whatever, the "undersigned" comrades have pledged "to fight unitedly till the entire conspiracies hatched by the imperialists and reactionaries are crushed and the people's cause of Socialism and Communism are established in Nepal, India and all over the world."

■ ■  
**Hey Mati Bhai**, over in Dhaka! Congratulations on the Magsaysay Award for doing good journalism in Dhaka, I especially like it that this is

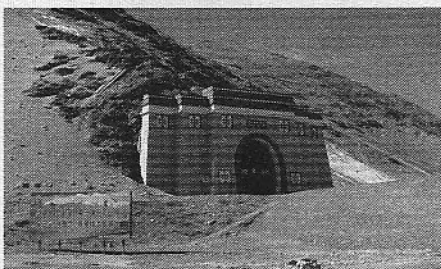


acknowledgement of the power of the 'language media' in Southasian. Let the English-speaking elite classes all over understand that there is quality, depth, commitment, wisdom and sensitivity in them vernaculars! Matiur Ramhan of Prothom Alo, you have now joined the select rank of Southasian personages to receive the Magsaysay. Here is an incomplete list of the people you join with your Magsaysay:

- |                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Kiran Bedi              | Ela Bhatt            |
| Vinoba Bhawe            | Zafrullah Chowdhury  |
| Mahashweta Devi         | The Dalai Lama       |
| Abdul Sattar Edhi       | Angela Gomes         |
| Asma Jehangir           | L C Jain             |
| Vergheese Kurien        | Bharat Dutt Koirala  |
| James Michael Lyngdoh   | Sandeep Pandey       |
| Satyajit Ray            | Laxminarayan Ramdas  |
| Ibn Abdur Rehman        | Mahesh Chandra Regmi |
| Aruna Roy               | M S Subbulakshmi     |
| M S Swaminathan         | Richard William Timm |
| Boogli George Vergheese | Tarzie Vittachi      |
| Muhammad Yunus          |                      |

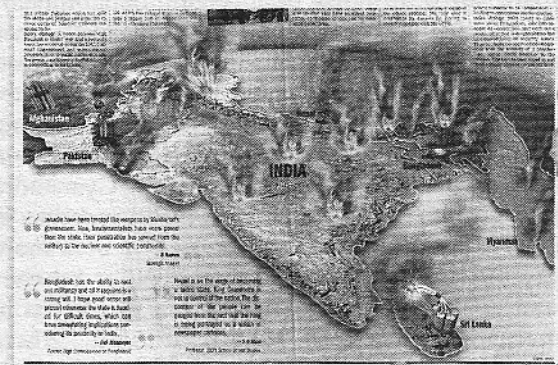
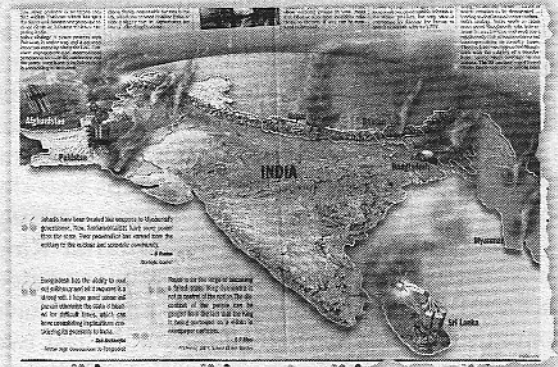


**Forgive** if this sounds a bit peevish, but the 21 August issue of The Times of India titled 'Nasty Neighbourhood' deserves a response. The full-pager by Indrani Bagchi is supposed to be a '360 degree' scan of the region to describe how unsafe the neighbourhood is beyond India, "Blasts in Bangladesh, Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Tiger threat in Lanka, Jehadi camps in Pakistan... India finds itself surrounded by failed or failing states." Oh, really. Hmmm. So what if we take this full-spread map of that the paper uses to describe this terrible neighbourhood with dynamite sticks and palls of smoke rising from Thimphu, Karachi, Colombo, Dhaka, Kathmandu, etc. And just let us use the same computer generation to add some more palls, over in the Northeast, there in Telangana, there in Chattisgarh, there in Gujarat, there in Jharkhand/Bihar, there in J & K. There, now that looks like a more realistic picture of the region.



So much happens in Tibet and there is so little interest in our press, which tends to forget that the TAR is also in Southasia, and not East or Central Asia. A 1,118 km railway line is coming all the way from Golmud in Qinghai all the way to Lhasa, one of the major infrastructural projects of our region, and one which will change the face of Tibet in every way imaginable, and also have an impact on the Subcontinent. But we know nothing about it. Here is a picture of the new railway bridge

being constructed across the Kyichu (Lhasa) river to bring the trains into central Lhasa. A billboard with slogan in Chinese script in the midst of the construction says, "Fight the plateau and resist the



lack of oxygen. The flag of electrification shakes the Kunlun mountains. Safeguard security and create national excellence. Prestige is displayed on the Qinghai-Tibet Line – China Railways Electrification Bureau Group.'



A two-day meeting of SAARC information ministers concluded in Kathmandu on 30 August, doing next to nothing. Oh yes, they have decided to set up a regional media development fund, with a seed money of USD 1 lakh, which is meant to support both government and private media. Ahem. India is to take the lead on that one. And then, they will broadcast a weekly radio news program 'SAARC News' and monthly TV news programme 'SAARC Roundup'. Sri Lanka has agreed to organise a SAARC Film Festival covering feature films, telefilms and documentaries. The fifth SAARC quiz will be broadcast through a tele-conferencing medium. The meeting also requested Pakistan to complete the video documentary on "SAARC in the New Millennium" by the second week of October. The ministers agreed to meet next in India in 2006. Well that is only four months away. All right, all right, they did seem to have achieved quite a lot, the ministers. But forgive me for the tone of cynicism that has permeated this section, but you see I have watched the SAARC Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) programmes on tv.



# The point is to change it

A profile and interview of Matiur Rahman, journalist of Dhaka.

by | Zafar Sobhan

**M**atiur Rahman, the crusading editor of the number one newspaper in Bangladesh and recipient of this year's Ramon Magsaysay Award Journalism for, among other things, his tireless efforts on behalf of the victims of acid attacks, is a throwback to the old school. He looks and sounds like a Bengali intellectual from central casting – sharp intelligent eyes behind gold-rimmed specs, carefully parted hair, impeccable kurta-pajama, and a softspoken and disarming manner that belies the

steely hardness beneath the surface.

One can see him sipping his *chai* as he peruses the newspaper and indulges in the long and leisurely political and philosophical *addas* so beloved by his countrymen and women. But it would be a mistake to write Mati Bhai (as he is known) off as a mere armchair intellectual – his entire life has been devoted to fulfilling the Marxist dictum that it is not enough to describe the world in various ways, the point is to change it.

## Interview

Matiur Rahman was interviewed in *Prothom Alo's* conference room, whose walls are overflowing with his personal art collection.



**Zafar Sobhan:** How did you first get involved in journalism?

**Matiur Rahman:** I used to write and help produce pamphlets and booklets for the party and was involved in outreach to the artistic and literary community in the Sixties, so it was a natural step for me to end up with the party's weekly newspaper.

**ZS:** Then you could just as easily have ended up as a writer or painter.

**MR:** Don't think I didn't want to! I paint, I write poems, and I have had some work published. In fact, I wanted to be many things. As a child I could never make up my mind. But in the end one ends up doing what one is best suited for. But I maintain good relations with the artists and the writers. There are some very good painters in this country and I am very lucky to be friends with some of them for over thirty years. They have given me some of their pictures.

**ZS:** How did you make the switch from party man to newspaperman?

**MR:** As a secretariat member of the CPB and as an editor, I had the chance to travel to many of the socialist countries. I was in Moscow in 1987 and was very much inspired by Gorbachev and *perestroika*. It was the time when many of us in the party were questioning some of its internal contradictions – the absence of democracy, independence and freedom of speech, as well as the inability to and to dissent. The failures of

communism and the restrictions and contradictions made it a very frustrating time, and when in 1991 the party split into two, I decided to withdraw from the committees and membership.

**ZS:** How do you compare editing *Ekota* and being a mainstream journalist today?

**MR:** I am much happier now, no question about it. I do not have to deal with internal contradictions any more. I have also discovered that I can be much more effective here. You see, people want neutral news. It is for the evenhandedness and independence that people read *Prothom Alo*. The thing is that for a newspaper to be successful, even if you don't want to be objective, you have to be. The people won't buy your newspaper otherwise. We have demonstrated that the path to financial success is neutrality, and of course, once you have financial success you can be even more independent as you are no longer relying on the owner or publisher.

**ZS:** So you are convinced you can do more as editor of a mass market daily?

**MR:** Yes, definitely. My goals remain the same. Support the people. Help bring them out of repression. But the methodology is different now. I have one and a half million readers. I think that a newspaper can be stronger than a political party. Every day I get to speak to one and a half million people. That is more than any politician can claim.

**ZS:** What do you see as the role of the media in today's Bangladesh?

**MR:** It is a great responsibility. Civil society in



Bangladesh was once very active. But due to the divisions that have emerged in civil society since democracy in 1991 it has become factionalised and lost vitality. In this atmosphere, the role of the newspapers becomes crucial. It is we who have to step in and raise issues that should have been raised by civil society on a bipartisan basis.

**ZS: Is this why you get involved in causes such as the campaign against acid attacks?**

**MR:** Yes. It is a terrible thing in our country. The issue is really tied to repression of women.

Mostly, the victims are young women who refuse to marry a man, or something like that. In 2000, we were reporting on so many acid attack incidents and I felt we had to do more. So started holding seminars and established a fund for the victims, which today totals 86 lakh taka. The fund provides legal help to the victims, and supports their medical

treatment and rehabilitation. We organise meetings and try to raise awareness, and helping the victims to get accepted back in their communities. This is very difficult work. There is still so much that needs to be done.

**ZS: What is the significance of a Bangla language paper when English is gaining so much importance?**

**MR:** This is an important point, but even today

almost the entire country speaks Bangla. The English language papers are important too, they are read in influential circles, including by decision-makers and donors. But if you want to reach the people, you must write in Bangla, even today. You could say that we help to empower and inform people in a way that the English dailies cannot. We bring everyday people into the national debates. One more thing, I am also concerned with promoting Bangla as part of our heritage, our culture. Which is why *Prothom Alo* sponsors an essay-writing competition for school children. It has been very successful.



The Magasaysay award

**ZS: Has working in Bangla lowered your profile nationally or internationally?**

**MR:** If it has, I don't mind! It is a price I am willing to pay. But I don't notice this, really. When I travel outside Bangladesh I find that *Prothom Alo* and what we are

doing and what we have written is discussed in other countries.

**ZS: What do you do with your free time?**

**MR:** There is not much time for much else in this job, but I like to read and watch films when I can. I am still very fond of looking at art. Cricket, too. I always try to make time to watch when Bangladesh is playing.

Mati Bhai joined the Bangladesh Communist Party in 1962 at the age of 18 and was its active and integral member for the next 30 years. He started as the acting editor of the weekly party newspaper *Ekota* (Unity) in 1970, two years after having finished his Masters degree in Statistics from Dhaka University, and was promoted to full editor three years later – a position he held until his withdrawal from the party and active politics in 1991.

Mati Bhai's skill at the helm of *Ekota* had not been lost on the publishers and owners in the Bangladeshi, and in less than a year he had been offered the editorship of a new publication, *Bhorer Kagoj*, that instantly cemented his reputation. Limits on his editorial independence saw him quitting in 1998, but within three months he was able to put together an ownership group and start up *Prothom Alo*, which is today the best-selling and most influential paper in the country, with a readership of a million and a half and growing.

The irony that he has been able to accomplish so much for the people after leaving the party where he devoted the bulk of his adulthood is not lost on Mati Bhai. With his trademark patient smile, he

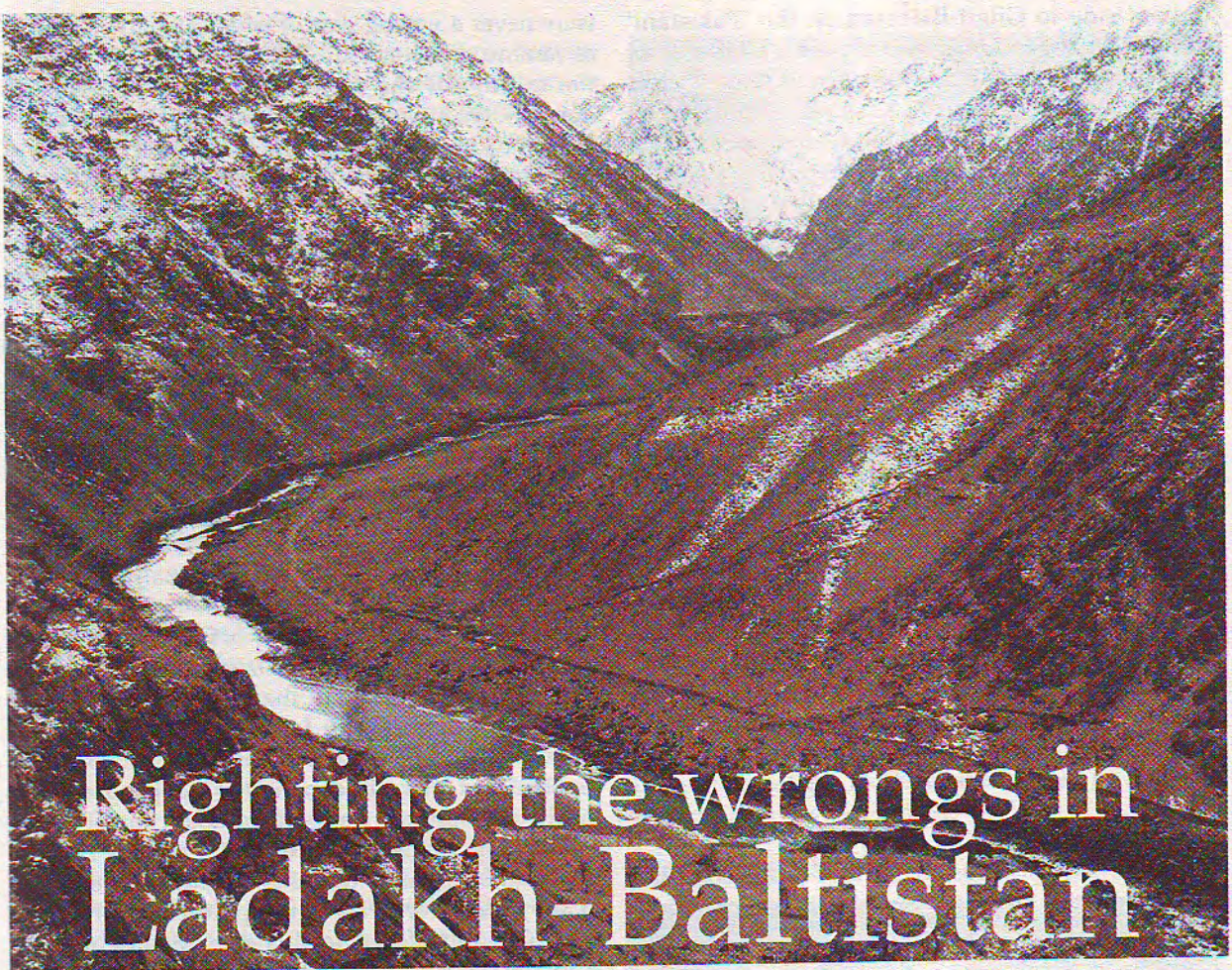
acknowledges that it has been as editor of *Bhorer Kagoj* (Dawn's Paper) and now of *Prothom Alo* (First Light) that he seems to have made more of a difference.

At age 60, Mati Bhai isn't slowing down any. *Prothom Alo* is known not just for the professionalism and accuracy of its reports, but also for the social causes it highlights and supports, from the campaign against acid attacks that caught the attention of the Magasaysay award committee to drug addiction and HIV awareness.

In Mati Bhai's mind, it is not enough to provide truthful and objective reporting (even though this alone is no mean feat in such a politically polarised country). Most would consider their duty done to shine a light on injustice and inequality as he does every day, few would feel that it is their additional duty to actually go the extra mile to do something about it.

Perhaps the most fitting honour for Mati Bhai is the hostility of both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition that he has earned over the years. Dhaka's ruling classes of whatever shade have little time for the independent and the non-partisan, and the fact that both criticise him in equal measure means that he must be doing something right. ▲





# Righting the wrongs in Ladakh-Baltistan

by | Ismail Khan

**The opening of a road could change the political and cultural landscape of one mountainous corner of Southasia that has suffered more than it should on account of others.**

In July, this writer was part of a four-member delegation from Gilgit-Baltistan (the 'Northern Areas') that travelled 1,500 km to reach Srinagar to attend the first 'intra-Kashmir dialogue' of its kind to have happened in 57 years. Courtesy of the Jammu & Kashmir Government, the participants got a visa extension and permission to visit Kargil, another 203 km from Srinagar. It thus took four days and 1700 km of road travel to reach Kargil from Baltistan. The direct route would have taken no more than four hours, but that route remains closed since 1948, prey to the larger animosity of India-Pakistan which has everything to do with the Kashmiris and nothing to do with the people of Gilgit-Baltistan or Kargil-Leh. The distance from Skardu, capital of Baltistan, to Kargil town is all

of 173 km. There is a stone wall built over the pre-existing road where it meets the Line of Control, a barrier which has kept 7000 families apart now for nearly six decades now. This barrier has held this culturally rich and resource-laden mountain region hostage for much too long. It is time to open the Skardu-Kargil road and to let an innocent peoples enjoy their birthright of visiting each other, to begin with. Everything else will flow from this one humanitarian act of correcting a historical wrong. The peace dividend will include renewed tourism, an energised economy far beyond these steep valleys, and a confidence built on the fact that a people and landscape have been united once again, whatever may be the designation of the frontier on the ground.

Buried under the rubble of the Kashmir conflict lies a treasure strove of the Southasian mountain complex. The high Himalaya-Karakoram is to be found not in 'Kashmir proper' but in the cross-frontier fastness stretch from Kargil-Leh on the

**The picture shows the jeepable road connecting Skardu with Kargil, which is blocked by a stone wall between Gangani village on the Baltistan side of the LoC and Kharol Hundormo on the other side**

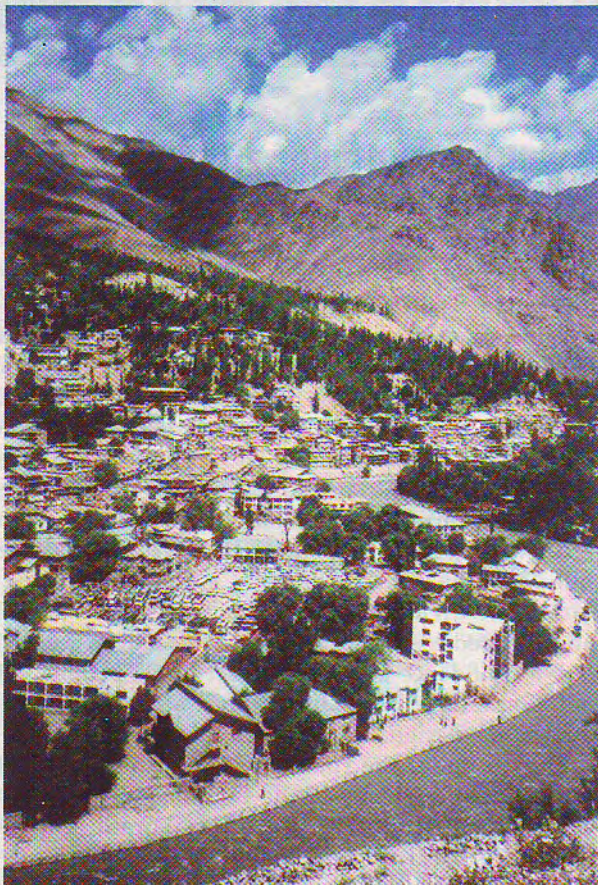


'Indian' side to Gilgit-Baltistan on the 'Pakistani' side. These rugged highlands cover a vast area of 145,565 sq km of the 222, 230 sq km of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu & Kashmir. Populated by Buddhist and Muslim populations speaking a mixture of tongues, this sparsely populated region is woven by common geography, history and cultural values.

But the 1947 Partition created the LoC as an impenetrable division and the people on the two sides have suffered in silence since as larger geo-strategic considerations in New Delhi and Islamabad made mere pawns out of them. Today, as the two states gingerly proceed with their détente process, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and Leh-Kargil are holding their breath and hoping that it will also touch their own lives. More than anything, they are waiting to see if the road between Kargil and Skardu, and also one between Khaplu and Leh, will be flung open to allow them to once again be with their own kind. If the road between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad in 'Kashmir proper', in the very centre of the conflict, could be unbolted, ask the normally laid back and 'passive' people of Gilgit-Baltistan and Leh-Kargil, why not us? The Srinagar-Muzaffarabad link provides all the precedent that is needed.

### Hijacked history

Historically, Gilgit-Baltistan and Leh-Kargil (Ladakh)



Kargil town

were never a willing part of what came to be known as Jammu and Kashmir. For nearly 900 years, from the middle of the 10th century, Ladakh was an independent kingdom, its ruling dynasties descended from the kings of old Tibet. Perhaps due its political stability, the region evolved as a reliable trade route between India, the Orient and Central Asia, with the high passes and open valleys traversed by caravans carrying textiles, spices, raw silk, carpets, dyes, narcotics and what not. Notwithstanding rugged terrain and apparent remoteness, merchants, explorers, spies and soldiers traversed the region. Attracted by its economic importance, the Dogra rajas from the southern hills decided to extend their hegemony over the region, and they had subjugated all the major valleys by 1846. The Dogras subdivided the region into two *wizarats* (districts), placing Hunza Nagar, Ashkoman and some tribal areas under the Gilgit Wizarat, while Ladakh and Baltistan came under the Ladakh Wizarat.

Worried about the possibility of foreign interference, the British acquired Gilgit Wizarat in 1935 on lease for a 60 year period from the Maharaja of Kashmir. Sensing an opportunity for self-rule as the British withdrew in 1947, the people of Gilgit and Baltistan revolted. But after a brief period of independence, the local rulers invited Pakistan to take control of the region. The Pakistan Government did so, but the hopes among people that they would become a part of the federation with equal political rights have remained unfulfilled to this day. Meanwhile, the cross-border people have seen a redefinition of their traditional space. India lost to China 37,555 sq km of Ladakh's Aksaichin region during the 1962 border war. Meanwhile, Pakistan is said to have ceded to China a 5180 sq km area in the Shamshal area of Gilgit.

The fact is that neither Ladakh nor the Gilgit-Baltistan are 'Kashmiri'. The locals do not eat, dress or speak like the Kashmiri, and have much more in common with each other in every way in terms of culture and sensibility than with Srinagar valley or Azad Kashmir. The people of Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan have been dragged unwillingly into the Kashmir conflict, the major continuous flashpoint of Southasia, simply because a confluence of geography and history brought them under the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

After Partition, as part of what became the state of J & K, Ladakh has representation in India's Parliament and in the State Assembly in Srinagar. Meanwhile, Gilgit-Baltistan were given the ambiguous title 'Northern Areas', and brought under the direct control of Islamabad. Administered directly through the Ministry of Kashmir & Northern Areas, the people of the region do not have an empowered representative body to call their own, locally or in Islamabad. The million plus population living in the



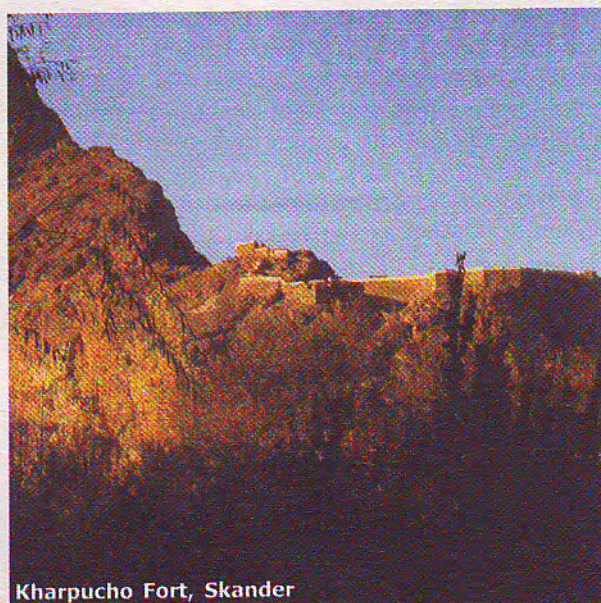
72,500 sq km area of Gilgit-Baltistan remain abandoned – subtext to a possible final resolution on Kashmir. After Partition, both Ladakh and the Northern Areas have struggled for attention from New Delhi and Islamabad, respectively. But the mountain-dwelling people were no match to the urbane and aware Kashmiris. While representation has made a difference as far as the people of Ladakh are concerned, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan do not even have that.

## Roads and glaciers

Before 1947, the road to Gilgit-Baltistan was through Srinagar. In 1966, Pakistan's Army Corps of Engineers began work on the 840 km Karakoram Highway from near Islamabad to a height of 4800 m on the Khunjerab Pass and the Chinese border. The all-weather road connection between Islamabad and Gilgit was eventually completed in 1978 with liberal assistance from China. Later, the link was extended to Skardu – the capital of Baltistan. Today, under an agreement, bonafide residents of the Northern Areas have visa-free unlimited access to the Sinkiang Province of China. The KKH has brought with it trade, economic, social and – above all – political awareness.

The people on both sides of the LoC have borne the brunt of wars between Pakistan and India, in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999 Kargil. Ironically, the fight over the Siachen Glacier and the Kargil heights has proved a kind of blessing for the local inhabitants. The needs of the military have pushed infrastructural and socio-economic development, and the roads, airports, school, and hospitals built to serve the soldiers have served the purpose of locals as well. The high military stakes have led to improvements in communications, education, health and other social services for the poor and alienated mountain communities. It is also true that most likely neither New Delhi nor Islamabad would have bothered with these remote outposts if they had not been entangled in Siachen and Kargil. However, the locals are quick to point out, the advantages of peace far outweigh the modest benefits achieved by hanging on to the coat-tails of the military.

Conservationists and mountaineers have been lobbying for the entire Siachen area to be declared a trans-boundary peace park, and this is music to the ears of the people of Skardu and Kargil (see *Himal December 98*, article by Harish Kapadia). The idea is to conserve the outstanding natural heritage and highly prized glacial ecosystem, and promote low impact eco-tourism which will help improve the lives of the local communities. The peace park will also provide a fine exit strategy for the two armies, whose soldiers have been dying among the snowcapped peaks from altitude sickness and frost bite. Islamabad is presently playing down the down the park proposal as it



Kharpucho Fort, Skander

believes that the price of holding on to Siachen is higher for India. Nevertheless, the melting of the ice in bilateral relations leaves the hope that a Siachen Peace Park may be considered seriously before long. If the voice of the local people were to be heard, it would happen even earlier.

## Cross-border tourism

Radio Pakistan Skardu is a popular means of information and entertainment for thousands of Balti- and Shina-speaking families stranded in Kargil and Ladakh. Similarly Ladakhi poets, musicians and artist are popular in Gilgit-Baltistan. All that India and Pakistan have to do to unify the spirit of the divided people is to remove the stone wall built across the road where it intersects the LoC in the Kharmang valley. This act of demolition would revive the 192 km all-weather road between Skardu and Kargil along the Indus river valley. This would be the beginning of the peace dividend, and before long, the ubiquitous 'cross-border terrorism' would be replaced by 'cross-border tourism'.

Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan command a spectacular mountain presence. Sandwiched between four awesome mountain ranges – the Himalaya, Karakoram, Hindukush and Pamir – the region contains the highest number of above-7000 m peaks in the world. The countries that converge here are China, Pakistan, India and Tajikistan. The Indus flows from Ladakh through the Northern Areas before moving south to the Punjab plains. In the headwaters are the world's largest glaciers outside the two poles, including the Siachen.

Baltistan's enchanting meadows, plateaus, lakes, rivers, passes, valleys, glaciers and mountains hold tremendous promise for adventure tourism, including climbing, trekking and white-water rafting. The reopened road would merge Baltistan's enchantment



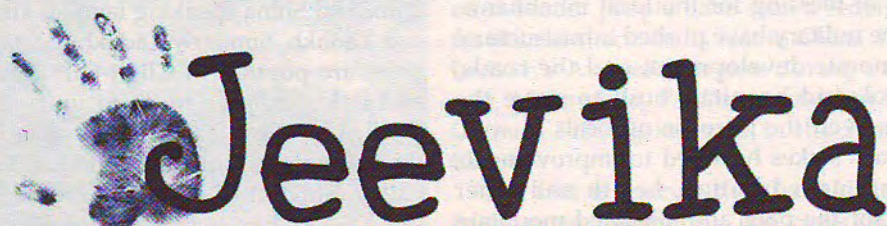
with the cultural heritage of Ladkahn, the Tibetan Buddhist mecca which already attracts more than 40,000 Western tourists a year. The road would also provide pilgrims direct access to various shrines and religious relics in this region precious to Buddhist, Muslims and Hindus. The great saint Sayed Ali Hamadani, who brought Islam to Kashmir and is popularly known as Shah-e-Hamadan, is buried in Katlan near the Tajikistan border.

The Skardu-Kargil road would actually link the two most peaceful areas on both sides of the LoC. Other than the disaster that was the Kargil conflict, Gilgit-Baltistan and Leh-Kargil have been spared the violence that has plagued Srinagar valley and other areas of the erstwhile J & K. The much-hyped Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service, which seeks to reconcile the most troubled parts of Kashmir, has rekindled hopes of the forgotten communities that perhaps they too could look forward to an open road and a bus service. In fact, India and Pakistan have agreed on principle to open the Kargil-Skardu road, but there has been no on-ground progress. There is growing resentment, which plumbs the depths of neglect over the last six decades, that the few morsels of peace dividend have all gone to the Srinagar valley and Muzaffarabad.

During his recent June 2005 visit to Kargil and Siachen, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated

New Delhi's intention to reach a formal agreement with Islamabad on the road to Skardu. Gen Pervez Musharraf in his meeting with the BJP's LK Advani in May 2005 also seemed to understand the need and rationale. More than anyone else, it is the people here who hope the two countries will capitalise on what Gen Musharraf had called the "fleeting moment" of history that will not recur.

While unbolting the Kargil-Skardu route may provide tremendous opportunities for trade and tourism, and help cement détente in Southasia, in essence it is a level humanitarian issue. Take the case of Habiba Khatoon of Kargil. She had been married for four years, with two children, when India was partitioned. Her husband was stranded in Kharmang on the other side, near Skardu. After years, realising that he might never be able to make it back, her husband proposed a divorce but Habiba did not allow it. Instead, she had a window built in her house opening towards the road to Skardu. For decades, she spent her daylight hours waiting for the day her husband would come up the road. Her hopes unfulfilled, Habiba passed away last year. She might be gone, but there are many more wives, husbands and siblings awaiting reunification. They wait for New Delhi and Islamabad to see the light, and not to hold them hostage to the dictates of the Kashmir dispute.



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### Details of selected films

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Assam/India, 2005, dir - Altaf Mazid  
Looking for good news in 1960s Assam

**The Boy Who Plays on the Buddhas of Bamian (96')**

Afghanistan, 2003, dir - Phil Grabsky  
Everyday travails of an Afghan kid

**A Certain Liberation (38')**

Bangladesh, 2003, dir - Yasmine Kabir  
Ghost of the Bangladesh war

**City of Photos (60')**

India, 2005, dir - Nishtha Jain  
Neighbourhood photo studios that we knew

**Continuous Journey (87')**

Canada/India, 2004, dir - Ali Kazimi  
Entering Canada in 1914

**Cosmopolis: Two Tales of a City (14')**

Bombay/India, 2004, dir - Paromita Vohra  
Nai-vegetarian in Bombay

**The Curse of Talakad (48')**

Karnataka/India, 2005, dir - Sashi Swamirishthna  
No sons for a royal Mysore dynasty

**Days and Nights in an Indian Jail (63')**

Delhi/India, 2003, dir - Sunandan Wallia & Yugesh Wallia  
Life inside Tihar jail

**The Day My God Died (53')**

Nepal/India, 2003, dir - Andrew Levine  
Nepali sex workers in Bombay

**The Die is Caste (83')**

Bihar/India, 2004, dir - Ranjan Kamath  
Lower vs upper caste in Bihar

**Dirty Laundry (42')**

South Africa, 2005, dir - Sanjeev Chatterjee  
Identity, South Africans of South Asian origin

**Final Solution (149')**

Gujarat/India, 2004, dir - Rakesh Sharma  
The extremism that was in Gujarat

**Ganges: Rivers to Heaven (77')**

Uttar Pradesh/India, 2003, dir - Gayle Ferraro  
They come to die here

**Girl Song (29')**

Bengal/India, 2003, dir - Vasudha Joshi  
Jazz nights in Calcutta

**The Great India School Show (53')**

Maharashtra/India, 2005, dir - Avinash Dechpande  
The young ones under CCTV gaze

**The Happiest People in the World (94')**

Bangladesh, 2004, dir - Shaheen Dill-Riaz  
High spirits amid hardships in the delta

**Home of the Brave - Land of the Free (52')**

Afghanistan, 2003, dir - John Sullivan  
Following the grunts in Afghanistan

**I For India (70')**

India/UK, 2005, dir - Sandhya Suri  
Four decades as an immigrant in UK

**In the Shadow of the Pagodas - the Other Burma (74')**

Switzerland/Myanmar, 2004, dir - Irene Marcy  
Overview of the Burma crisis

**Jaal (The Catch) (67')**

Gujarat/India, 2005, dir - Hridayanath Gharekhan  
Fishing in Indo-Pak waters

**Journeys (37')**

Bombay/India, 2003, dir - Vinayan Koodli  
Riding Bombay's commuter trains

**Kaalam (27')**

Kerala/India, 2004, dir - Ramachandran K.  
A lifelong dedication to percussion

**Kitte Mil Ve Mahi: Where the Twain Shall Meet (72')**

India, 2005, dir - Ajay Bhardwaj  
The musical tradition of the Sikh dandi

**Kora Rajee Land of the Diggers (51')**

Jharkhand/India, 2005, dir - Biju Toppo  
Jharkhand's work in Assam tea gardens

**Lanka: The Other Side of War and Peace (75')**

Sri Lanka, 2005, dir - Ifat Fatima  
From LTTE to JVP

**The Legend of Fat Mama (23')**

Bengal/India, 2005, dir - Rafeeq Ellias  
Among the Chinese in Calcutta

**The Life and Times of a Lady from Awadh: Hima (135')**

Awadh, 2003/2005, dir - Shiroun Pasha  
Remembering the Awadh that was home

**Looking for Amitabh (5')**

India, 2005, dir - Moonakshi Shedde  
The superstar and the visually challenged

**Manufactured Poverty - Director's Cut (12')**

Manipur/India, 2005, dir - Weicelaus Mendes & Simran Issar  
Big business pushes out women entrepreneurs

**A Million Steps (22')**

India, 2003, dir - Pankaj Butalia  
Secret agent pindhis during the Great Game

**My Brother My Enemy (42')**

India/Pakistan, 2005, dir - Masood Khan & Kamajeet Negi  
Watching Indo-Pak cricket series

**My Village is Theatre, My Name is Habib (73')**

India, 2005, dir - Sanjay Maharishi & Sudhanva Deshpande  
A life dedicated to the stage

**In the Name of Honour (19')**

Pakistan, 2003, dir - Hamad Ghaznavi  
How proud, the honour killing

**The New Boys (100')**

Uttaranchal/India, 2003, dir - David MacDougall  
12-year-olds join Doon School

**The Other Woman (82')**

Sri Lanka, 2004, dir - Anoma Rajakaruna  
A Sinhalese discovers the Tamil

**Search for Freedom (54')**

Pakistan, 2003, dir - Munizae Jahangir  
Women of Afghanistan speak out

**She Write (54')**

India, 2005, dir - Anjali Monteiro & K. P. Jayasankar  
Women look for space

**Snapshots from a Family Album (63')**

Bombay/India, 2004, dir - Avijit Mukul Kishore  
Candid portrait of a couple

**Still, the Children are Here (88')**

Meghalaya/India, 2004, dir - Dmaz Stafford  
Existentialist angst of the Garo

**Sundar Nagri: The City Beautiful (78')**

Delhi/India, 2003, dir - Rahul Roy  
Being laid off in global India

**Sunset Bollywood (54')**

Bombay/India, 2005, dir - Komal Tolani  
Life off the stadium lane

**Team Nepal (37')**

Nepal/India, 2004/2005, dir - Ginish Giri  
To India on a football journey

**Teardrops of Karnaphuli (60')**

Bangladesh, 2005, dir - Tanvir Mokammel  
Bangladesh's hill people



# Into the Tibet of old

In 1904, Viceroy Lord Curzon gave an aggressive British colonel and a less adventurous brigadier-general command of an expedition to Tibet. Colonel Francis Younghusband and Brigadier-General James Macdonald led the expedition. With a battalion of 'native' soldiers and some late model machine guns in tow, they pioneered a route through the Chumbi Valley starting from the Duars plains near Siliguri, up through the Himalayan valleys northwest of Bhutan into eastern Tibet, the town of Gyantse, and finally to Lhasa. The expedition's mission was to procure a trade agreement from the recalcitrant Tibetan authorities and to secure the appointment of a British resident in Lhasa. Although not sanctioned by the government in London, the expedition was in essence an invasion of Tibet.

The month of September 2005 marks the 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary of what came to be known as the 'Younghusband Expedition'. Coincidentally, this is also the month when India and China have decided to reopen Nathu La for cross-border commerce. Nathu La is the pass in Sikkim up the road from Gangtok

which leads to Chumbi Valley on the other side. (The expedition itself used the nearby Jelep La, up from the Darjeeling town of Kalimpong.)

John Claude White, a civil engineer, colonial administrator and pioneer photographer, was part of the 1904 adventure. Using a large format, glass plate camera, his record of the expedition serves today as a unique reminder of the old Tibet, its culture and landscapes, as well as a record of a particularly audacious colonial escapade.

Incidentally 18 September also marks the launch at New Delhi's India International Centre of *In the Shadows of the Himalayas*, containing a selection of White's photographic record. The book was conceived by Kurt Meyer, a Swiss architect based in San Francisco who discovered White's photography while living in Kathmandu.

In these pages, Himal presents a selection of John Claude White's Tibet photographs from the book, which also includes old-world pictures of Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim.

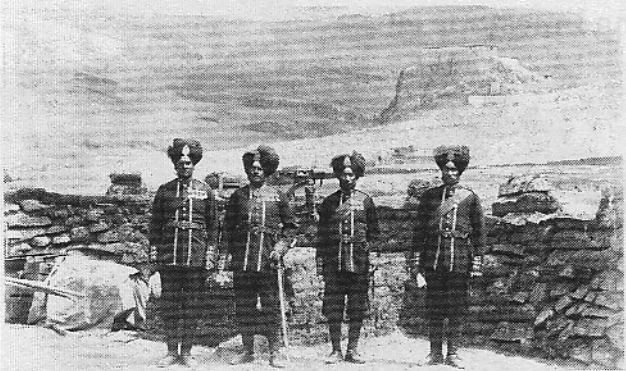
Printed here with permission of Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad.

## The British invasion forces somewhere in Tibet, 1904



'Native' soldiers, forming just a portion of the British invasion forces, pose for John Claude White's glass-plate camera.

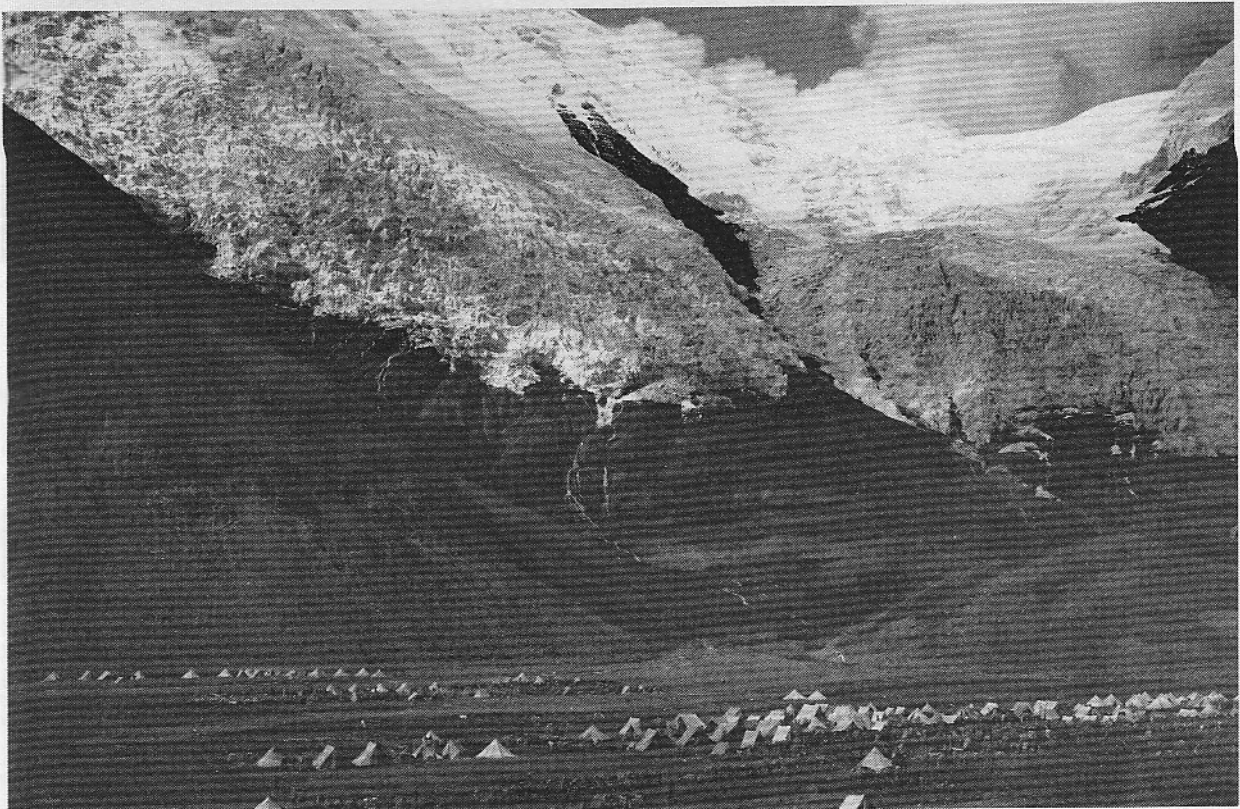




## Members of the 2nd Battalion Norfolk Regiment

A machine gun contingent stands in front of a Maxim. The gun was used in the first battle of the invasion, in Guru, against Tibetan warriors armed with only swords, spears and matchlock rifles. The British, as a gesture of 'good faith', asked the Tibetans to extinguish the fuses of their guns (which made them inoperable) and then proceeded to fire on them with machine guns.

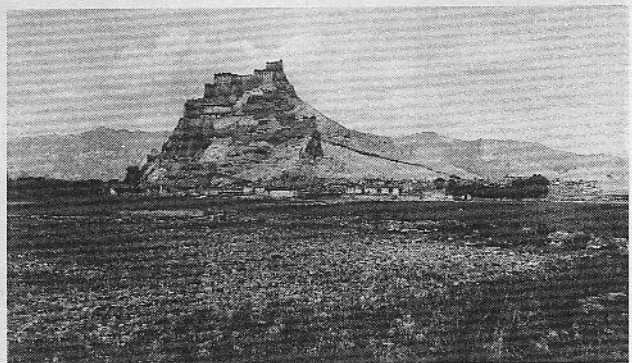
## The British tented camp at Karo la, below the Nishi Kang Sang glacier



Like the glacier itself, the expeditionary force camped here was an imposing sight to many, consisting of, among its other companies, a British Field Hospital, two and a half sections of a 'native' Field Hospital, about 3,000 mules and 250 yaks acting as transport, and two coolie corps.

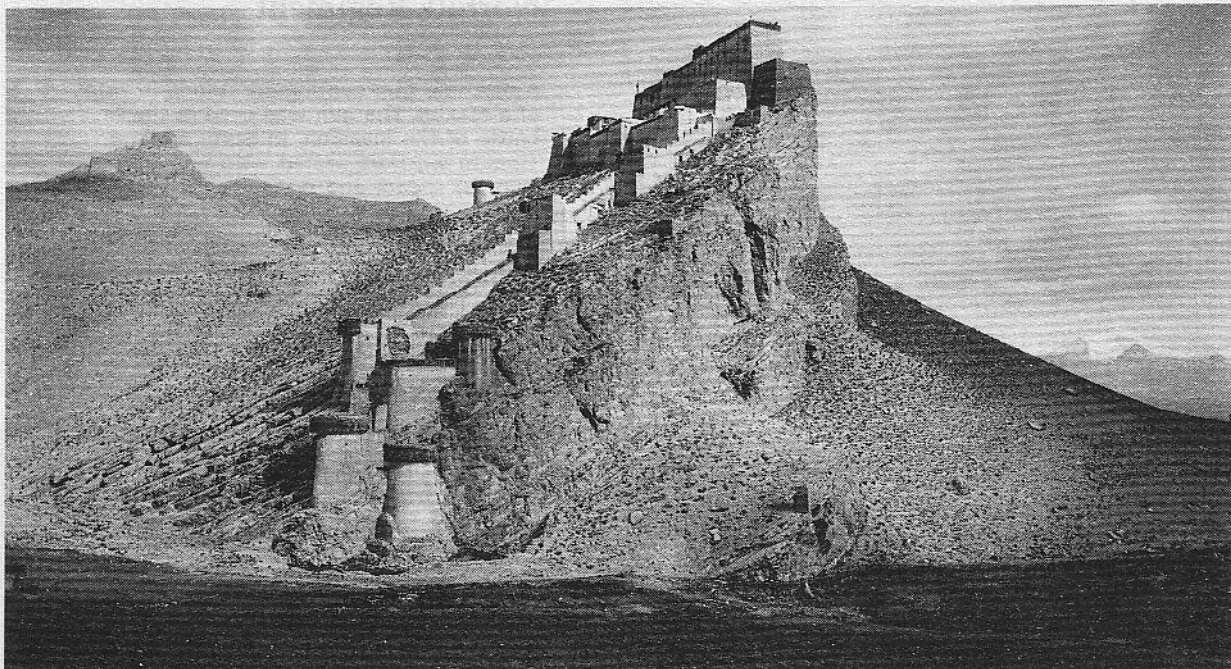
## Gyantse Dzong - location of the one major battle of the invasion

While the fort, or dzong, at Gyantse housed only a few monks, thousands resided in the monastery, one of Tibet's most significant. The Tibetans attacked the British mission post here, and were devastated by the British might: over 250 Tibetans died and the British took over the Dzong.





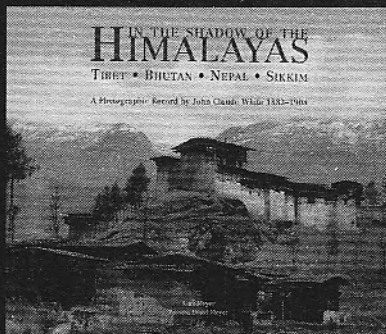
## Khampa Dzong, built on an overhanging limestone cliff



Khampa Dzong was a commanding fortress built on a major Himalayan trade route linking India and Tibet, as well as on the route to the Tashilhunpo monastery, home of the Panchen Lama, second in importance to the Dalai Lama. Here in 1903, prior to the invasion, Younghusband held his final attempt for meaningful negotiations with the Tibetans.

## The gateway to Lhasa

The entrance into Lhasa passes through the chorten in the middle of the picture, Pargo Kalin. The British were prohibited from entering Buddhist sites in Lhasa, an order with which Colonel Younghusband and his men complied. White, however, extended a warm personal invitation to visit the temples and monasteries because "we [Lhasa's rulers] have heard from our Buddhist Lamas in Sikkim that you [White] treat them well".



**In the Shadow of the Himalayas**  
Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim:  
A Photographic Record by  
John Claude White, 1883-1908  
Kurt and Pamela Meyer  
Mapin Publishing  
Ahmedabad 2005  
192 pages  
ISBN: 81-88204-25-0 (Mapin)  
ISBN: 1-890206-61-X (Grantha)  
US\$65.00



# Nathula: Trading in uncertainty

by | A C Sinha

The increased bonhomie between India and China in recent years has opened up the possibility of building newer avenues of cooperation between the two countries. There are reports that after a gap of four decades, the Nathula route (located on the Tibet border with Sikkim) will be opened for trade between India and China in late September, which could give a boost to transnational economic ties in the region. However, an assessment of the ground situation reveals that the implementation of the proposal has not proceeded apace with public pronouncements.

Prior to 1962, Nathula (*la* = pass) was open as a trade route between India and China. Initially an offshoot of the ancient Silk Road, the pass was brought into use by the British in 1904 as part of an attempt to connect Calcutta to Lhasa. The short border war between India and China in 1962, however, led to the closure of the pass and subsequent limitations on trade between the two nations.

Until very recently, relations between India and China had been friction-laden. The signing of the "Memorandum on expanding border trade" on 23 June 2003, however, marked a change in the way the two states dealt with each other. Traders from both China and Sikkim supported their governments' decision to establish a trade mart at Nathula by September 2005. The trade center was to have banking services, warehouses, customs offices, and other facilities essential for cross border trade. The proposal also included a plan to link the

pass to the commercial metropolis of Siliguri, a major center in India's commercial network, via a four-lane road.

Despite the recent easing of relations between New Delhi and Beijing and the ensuing agreement to reopen the trade route, there are no visible results in Nathula. There is hardly any activity on the snow bound ridge currently under the charge of armed forces from the two states. There are no settlements, no markets, no banking facilities, no customs offices, no civil police, nor any form of commercial activity. Even the narrow roads, built for armed vehicles, have been closed to tourists because of landslides.

Although Indian strategists have pointed out the economic benefits of reopening the pass, to both India and China, the complexities lie in politics. Since China has made the figurative first move, acknowledging that Sikkim is part of India, the pressure remains on the Indian government to show a change. For India, the opening is more symbolic than practical. In early August 2005, the Indian government announced the need to postpone the creation of the crossborder market, citing national security concerns as a key issue. Nonetheless, the Indian government has said, the route will be opened on 30th September.

There is also an additional complexity vis-à-vis the tribal communities in the region. The land around the proposed trade mart is within the zone of Bhotia territory, where an order of a former Namgyal ruler forbids outsiders (i.e. those not of the tribe) from



Official Chinese map showing Sikkim merged in to India, with Indian foreign secretary Shyam Sharan's marker pen encircling the area in question at a press conference



buying land and settling as permanent residents. Thus, a sizeable section of the Sikkimese people will not be able to take advantage of this mercantile opportunity. Naturally, the Bhotia interpret Delhi's reluctance to open the pass as unwillingness to help Sikkim's economy. The Sikkim state government has also had difficulty finding a way out of this impasse.

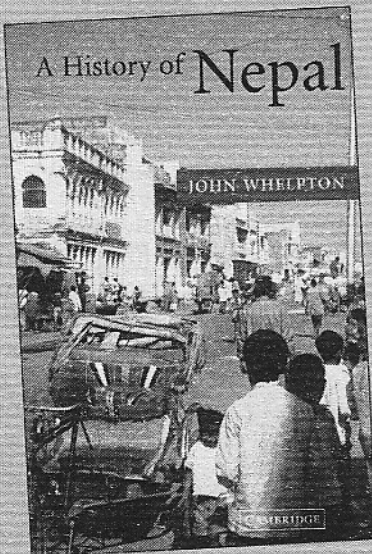
Interestingly enough, while strategists outside Sikkim see the opening of Nathula as an opportunity to bring a massive boost to regional trade, the Sikkimese establishment simply expects a continuation, albeit on a larger scale, of the traditional trade of fresh fruits, vegetables, and wool via coolies and mules. Historically, it is the Bhotia who have been the main operators and traders on this and other Himalayan passes. With the Bhotia benefiting from the trade of local products, it is expected that they would have more goodwill towards the state government.

Despite the Indian government's dilly-dallying in opening Nathula, the Gangtok government of Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling clearly means business. It has established the 'Nathula Trade Co-ordination Committee' presided by the state chief secretary, that also includes key bureaucrats, representatives of the army, the Border Roads Organisation, the Bharat Sanchar Nigam (telecommunications), and officials from a wide

variety of departments, from roads to health. After a preliminary study, it was proposed to shift the site of the mart from earlier suggested Tsomgo in upper Sikkim down to Sherathang, an army base. The Indian army has reportedly agreed to surrender Sherathang once an alternative site is provided for it. While the Government of Sikkim is willing to provide access to the Chinese traders up to Rinchengang, north of Gangtok on the way to Nathula, the Chinese have sought access right up to Rangpo on the West Bengal-Sikkim border. Furthermore, the Chamling government is keen to open a Lhasa-Gangtok bus service via Nathula.

In regional terms, opening the trade route to Kakarbhitta in Nepal, Paro in Bhutan, and Rangpur and Rajshahi in Bangladesh would create much needed new opportunities for transnational trade, thereby strengthening the economy of the region as a whole. However, since no infrastructure has been erected in Nathula nor its approach, the likelihood of extensive trade in an assortment of commodities, involving a variety of stakeholders, does not appear possible in the existing situation. Achieving this vision requires a progressive leadership willing to rise above the prevailing pettiness and distrust that has marked the politics of Sikkim. Only then will it become possible to create and maintain transnational trade. ▲

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## A History of Nepal

By: John Whelpton

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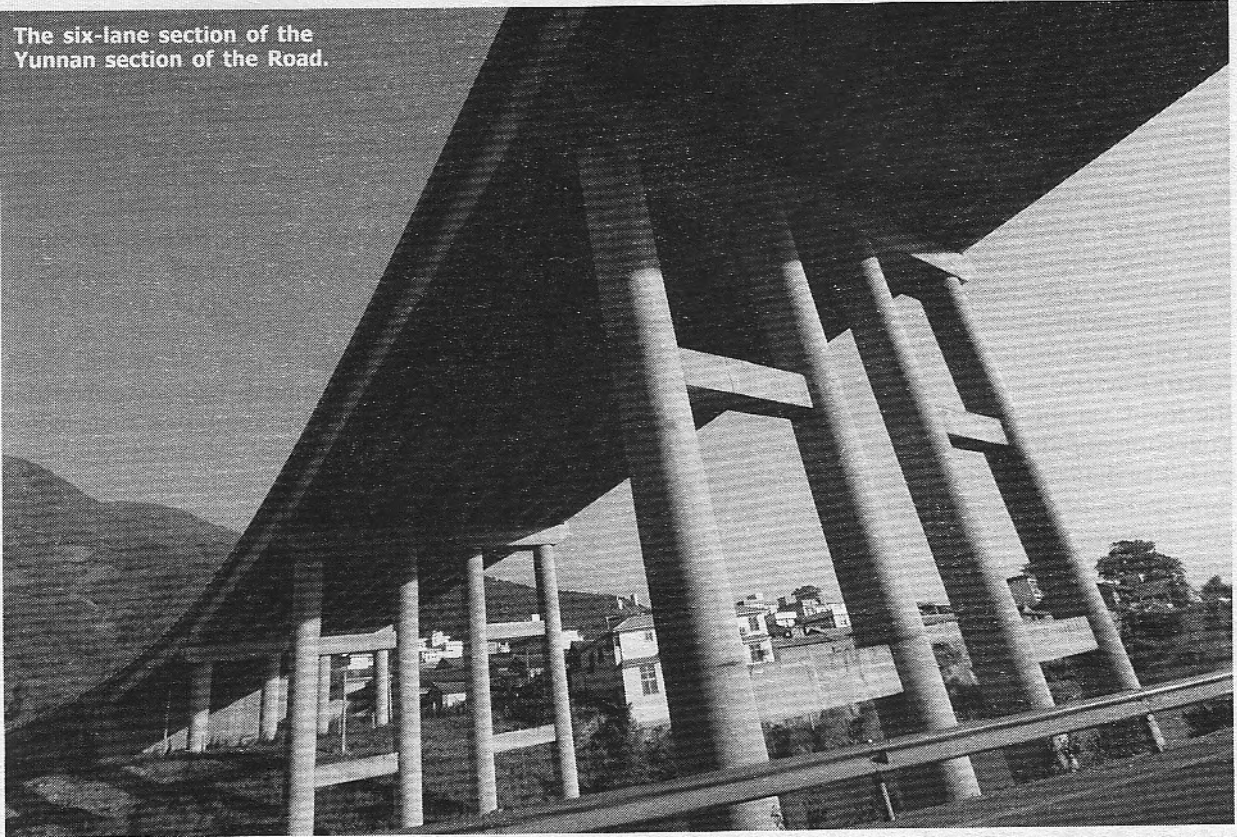
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The six-lane section of the Yunnan section of the Road.



## THE STILWELL ROAD: STRAIGHT AHEAD?

Here's a land route that would not only open up the possibilities for India's Northeast to trade and interact with its eastern neighbours, but as an overland link would also work to cement relationships between Southasia, East Asia and Southeast Asia.

by | **Carin I Fischer**

**H**acked out of the jungle 60 years ago as part of the Allied push to end Japanese military domination in Asia, the Stilwell Road, if reborn, may soon instigate a sea-change in the Asian economic balance. Further, there's little reason to believe that the reverberations of such a shift would be confined to the eastern hemisphere. While recent years have seen increasingly fervent discussions of the rising – and rival – individual might of India and China, the current momentum to reopen the link between the two countries promises a whole new consideration: the prospect of further aligning the two economies, which jointly comprise 40 per cent of the global population.

While most of the men who built the Stilwell Road are now dead, the Road itself remains: disused in

many places, crumbling in others, and in a few areas impassable during heavy rains. Built by Asian labour and American machines and travelled by trucks constructed in Detroit factories, the Road was once a testament to America's emergence as an economic superpower. At that time, India, Burma and China were seen as little more than conduits and destinations for goods made elsewhere. Today that dynamic has changed.

Perhaps more so now than during that era, the Stilwell Road is not one road, but many roads. Passing through South, Southeast and East Asia through fractious, politicised regions, it is a very real, physical route through difficult terrain. In November 2004 and April 2005, a series of overland surveys found that, contrary to public perception, the road is



very much motorable. Except for a stretch of about 80 km in Burma that remains impassable without a bridge during the rainy season, the work needed for a revival of the road is not nearly as extensive as the public has been led to believe. Some of that work is already underway or complete; the Chinese portion is essentially done. China is also currently providing funds and working extensively with Burma – including the creation of a new shortcut that dramatically cuts the Burmese portion in half.

In the wartime atmosphere when the Stilwell Road was first laid, the task was physically daunting but remarkably free of political complexities. Reopening the Road, on the other hand, will involve several governments and their bureaucracies. It is even possible that the most important forces pushing through the opening will not necessarily be national governments, but the agitations of trade, modernity and human connection.

### **Wartime update**

While the Stilwell Road itself was put down in the early 1940s, the mountainous course that it follows had long been an integral part of the so-called ancient Southern Silk Route. Based on new evidence, historians now say that trade along this track between China, Burma and India could have been going on in full swing as early as the second century BC. Traders bartered jade, silk, silver, tea and lacquerware, while Buddhist and Hindu missionaries trekked the route as a threshold to East Asia.

The shortest land route between northeastern India and southwestern China, the Stilwell Road connects the rail spur at Ledo in Assam to the provincial capital of Kunming in Yunnan, over a distance of 1,736 km. US Army General Joseph Stilwell, who was the regional commander of US troops as well as Chiang Kai-shek's chief of staff, was defeated by the Japanese in Burma in the spring of 1942. After retreating, Stilwell prepared for a counterattack and ordered into existence the supply link that would bear his name. Fifteen thousand soldiers and countless local workers laboured for two years, carving a muddy track and parallel fuel pipeline through the heavily forested mountains. The feat was an engineering marvel, a labour nightmare – and, elsewhere as the war took its own route, an unnecessarily massive effort. Completed in 1945, the Japanese surrender of eight months later brought the wartime need for the Road to an end.

Known as the Burma Road in China, the Ledo Road in Burma, and the Stilwell Road in India, the course was composed of around 57 km in India, 1,040 km in Burma, and 639 km in China. The Indian part of the Road has been closed since 1961, mainly for security reasons, and some stretches have fallen into disrepair. Similarly, about 80 km of the Road in Burma is barely passable during the rainy season. China, on

the other hand, has built a six-lane highway from Kunming that ends abruptly at the Burmese border. It is largely stubborn determination on the part of the Chinese that has given the reopening plan its current momentum. While the old Stilwell Road is still used by local border-crossing traders, significantly greater has been the illegal trafficking between India, China, Burma, and Southeast Asia. A reopening would convert much of the contraband transport to legitimate trade.

### **Three countries**

The current movement towards reopening the Road was formally initiated in August of 1999, when China, India and Burma – as well as Bangladesh – met in China's southern province of Yunnan and officially approved an agreement known as the Kunming Initiative. On a broad level, the Initiative decided to improve communications between India's northeast and south-western China. While general talk involved the possibilities of developing rail, water, and air links, specific emphasis was placed on revitalising the old Southern Silk Route. Chinese and Indian officials eagerly pushed for the infrastructure project to get underway, however, a former Indian ambassador to China urged the Kunming delegates to be patient – to wait while New Delhi wrestled with its own issues and doubts. That patience may now be paying off.

Back in 1991, while facing imminent bankruptcy, India ushered in a series of belated financial reforms and the first place it turned to was the burgeoning market that was Southeast Asia. That year, India not only took steps towards ASEAN partnership, policymakers also put in place a Look East policy that positioned the Northeast at the forefront of its strategy. Despite this, it has only been over the past year that New Delhi is finally placing serious focus on the region as an eastern gateway. The largest component of such a strategy would be the reopening of the Stilwell Road, while there is an effort underway to reestablish international trade through Sikkim (*see accompanying article pp*). Undoubtedly, some of this flurry has to do with a push for closer economic interaction with Southeast Asia. Much of it also has to do with the giant, hurried steps currently being taken by both China and India towards one another.

That pace is partly to make up for lost time. Security concerns have long played the most critical role in formulating India's regional foreign policy – particularly the perceived 'vulnerability' along its Himalayan frontier, which is a legacy of the 1962 war with China. Trade, for the time being, took a back seat. In the meantime, traditional trade routes crucial to the local economies dried up, while new land routes were rarely discussed. The Northeast has faced a debilitating paradox as local crossborder trade has been outlawed due to security concerns,



while trade between the secluded region and the rest of India has failed to develop. The inter-community and secessionist violence that continues to rack the poor, agrarian region has only made New Delhi's policymakers more skittish about opening it up to international traffic and attention.

Even as New Delhi has waffled on the matter, the northeastern states are overwhelmingly in favour of reopening the Stilwell Road. Leading that charge has been Pradyut Bordoloi, Assam's Minister of Environment and Forests, in whose constituency the Road begins. In 2002, Bordoloi participated in the Dhaka meet of the Kunming Initiative – an unusually forthright action for a minister; in so doing, Bordoloi essentially bypassed New Delhi, taking his concerns directly to the international delegates. Bordoloi is joined by key politicians, as well as numerous local businessmen, academics, tour operators, security experts, travel writers, filmmakers, and – most importantly – the tribal communities that live along the Road, whose cultural and familial ties transcend political frontiers. Northeastern academics, top-level state and national politicians, as well as large corporate interests have all expressed the view that reconstruction of the Road is the ideal vehicle for advancing vital economic ties between the Northeast, ASEAN partner countries and China.

Since the 1999 signing of the Kunming Initiative, the Stilwell project has received intermittent jolts of energy. In October of 2000, India declared its section of the Road a national highway (No 153). After China, Bangladesh and Burma had officially endorsed the agreement in 1999, the head of the Indian delegation followed suit at the 2002 Dhaka meet. The Northeast Council, a committee that focuses on economic development of the region, also gave its formal support to the project in November of that year. This year, however, has seen a unique flurry of action – kicked off on January 20 when a high-level Indian team visited the Nampong-Pangsaw Pass, the border point between Burma and Arunachal Pradesh along the Stilwell Road. There, national officials publicly stressed the need for creating basic infrastructure to promote crossborder trade and promising all possible help from New Delhi. A month after that official site visit, Congress President Sonia Gandhi stated in a speech in Arunachal Pradesh that the reopening of traditional trade routes with neighbouring Burma (as well as with Tibet and Bhutan) would give a much-needed boost to the economy of the state and the region.

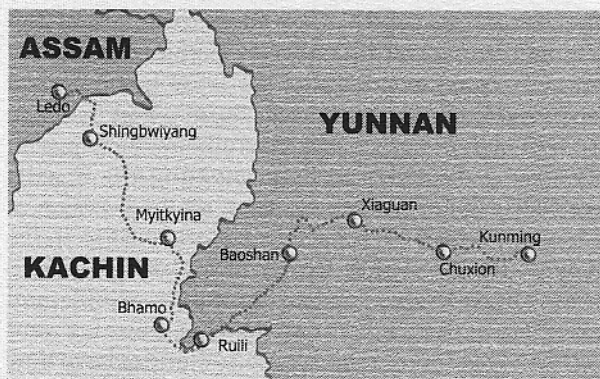
India's movement on the Stilwell project follows a thaw in its dealings with China. While tense Sino-Indian relations long placed such talks off limits, the successful settlement of the long-running dispute over Sikkim and ongoing efforts regarding the border at Arunachal Pradesh have soothed political sensitivities. In February of 2005, during a visit to

the Assamese capital Guwahati, officials of the Yunnan Provincial Chamber of Commerce (YPCC) strongly recommended that the Road be opened to help traders in the Northeast, Burma, and Yunnan. To that end, the YPCC has taken the matter up with Chinese authorities to help expedite the Road's reconstruction. Two months later, on the occasion of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's historic visit to India, it was disclosed that China had already started renovations to the Road in Burma, in a unilateral effort to connect Yunnan to that country and ultimately to India. The Chinese authorities have now completed initial surveys and a detailed renovation plan is near release.

To demonstrate its support for the reopening of the transnational link, China has transformed its portion of the Road into a modern superhighway. The major artery-in-waiting not only leads directly to Kunming, but also to the neighbouring province of Guangdong. That powerhouse province's GDP not only grew a staggering 14.5 per cent last year, it is also expected to top USD 250 billion by 2006. In the other direction, the new highway ends abruptly at the Burmese border. Despite China's mining and logging interests in Burma, there is only one reason to build a massive thoroughfare to the middle of nowhere: the future possibilities towards India. In a sense, China's entire relationship with Burma has long been built on such a long-term view. While India used to be Burma's largest supporter, during the 1970s and 1980s that relationship was neglected; Burma inevitably realigned with China, its other monumentally powerful neighbour. Now China is everywhere in Burma and Chinese earth-movers are currently hard at work reshaping and upgrading the Ledo Road – the obvious extension of the six-lane







mammoth that ends at the border.

Burma, indeed, has remained the project's physical lynchpin, as well as its most temperamental obstacle. The formidable problems plaguing Rangoon's military junta – including the ones that it has brought on itself – have included ethnic resisting Rangoon's strongarm tactics, as well as concerns over human rights violations; both of these are centred directly in the area through which the Road passes. Such issues have weighed heavily on the minds of Burma's leadership and, despite tentative past agreements, as of 2004 Rangoon had again definitively rejected any possibility of reopening the Road to international traffic.

On June 15 of this year a news item from Rangoon suddenly reported that Burma would reopen its section of the Stilwell Road by 2006. This followed discussions between the Burmese Ministry of Commerce and the India-Burma Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, held the previous month. Several joint projects are currently underway between New Delhi and Rangoon, including the planning of a major gas pipeline from Burma to India via Bangladesh, as well as linking ports between the two countries on the two sides of the Bay of Bengal. While all of this international bridge-building is undoubtedly a welcome change from the resounding condemnation that the junta typically receives, the country's pariah status has nevertheless taken a significant toll. Burma is desperately in need of foreign currency and is now actively propagating regional tourism as a key resource.

In recent years, China has become poised to emerge as the single most crucial component to India's export growth. According to recent reports, in 2004-05 China became India's second-largest trade partner, as well as the second-largest destination for India's exports – both trailing only the US. Only two years earlier, Chinese products were merely the sixth largest among Indian imports. Total trade between the two countries has gone from a few hundred million dollars in the late 1990s to USD 13.6 billion in 2004. With efficient overland routes such as the Stilwell Road inactive, Sino-Indian

trade has continued to be shunted by sea all the way around the Southeast Asian peninsula.

A continuation of such stasis would only impede current economic forecasts. With China's rapidly growing GDP, the demand for imports of raw materials, components and parts is expected to continue to rise in the near future. With China's GDP set to grow between 7.7 and 8.7 per cent between 2004 and 2008, this means USD 20 billion in bilateral trade between China and India by 2008. From this perspective, India – and its northeastern states – must move immediately to foster closer and more broad-based economic ties with China. Despite the recent increases, current trade between the two countries still makes up only eight per cent of India's total exports and only one per cent of China's. At an August 2005 economic conference in India, Chinese officials characterised those figures as miniscule compared to the size of the two countries and pushed to start talks on a Sino-Indian free trade agreement. Given the enormous expense currently necessary to shuttle goods between the two countries via the 6,000 km sea route, an efficient land link would be the only option for such an agreement to result in the desired economic stimulus.

### **The Northeast-Yunnan link**

Given the proximity between Yunnan province and India's Northeast, a reopened Stilwell Road would be almost as important as a region-to-region relationship as a transnational one. Despite the recent boom in trade between the two, none of India's current exports to China are sourced from the resource-rich Northeast. Up until now, shipping costs have simply been too high. China has, however, expressed significant interest in importing rice, tea, neem, and a variety of other agricultural products sourced from the northeastern region. This would be a crucial development for the area, albeit a happily problematic one: as the Northeast has never had a significant market for its agro-products, producers have never placed much emphasis on capacity-building.

Currently, Indian imports from Yunnan include chemicals, items used by the pharmaceutical industry, mineral products and silk yarn. From India, Yunnan imports oil seeds and mills, marine products, pharmaceuticals and fine chemicals, iron and steel, textiles, and raw silk. The Yunnan Provincial Government is now anxious to import a variety of additional agricultural products grown in the Northeast. Yunnan's interest in perishable items over a relatively short distance would require a road (or rail) link between the two countries.

If more direct transit existed between the Northeast and ASEAN countries, tourists on the heavily trafficked Southeast Asia circuit would be significantly more inclined come this way. A recent



report states that if the tourism potential of the Northeast were fully developed, within 20 years the region could receive as many tourists as Singapore and Bangkok. Such high expectations are based on tapping into the Chinese tourism market which is expected to boom. Currently the entire northeast with its beautiful mountain landscape, its rainforests and diverse cultures, is being exploited only by a small number of tour operators specialising in 'adventure' tourism.

Perhaps more than many others, the tribal and other marginalised groups in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in particular would benefit greatly from both a transnational thoroughfare, as well as any growth in tourism and associated infrastructure. Many of these groups have had close historic ties that have been cut due to border and travel restrictions. The Kachins of Burma, for instance, are ethnically and culturally nearly identical to both the Singphos in Upper Assam and the Jingpaws in southwestern China. Members of the three groups have little if any sanctioned contact, however, as a result of current travel restrictions along the Road. In addition to a long-awaited removal of those obstacles, tourism is seen as the one activity that would trickle down to all segments of society, in particular benefiting local communities.

Increased tourism from a reopened Stilwell Road would be of great benefit to the northeastern regions of Burma. All throughout Kachin state, new tourism infrastructure is now visible, including the appearance of numerous roadside restaurants. A tiger reserve has been established near Tanai. Despite its location, current trade negotiations look to use Burma less as a partner than as a conduit. While significant finances already flow between the country and China, the present value of formal Burmese imports from India is about INR 22 billion per year. According to a study by the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, however, the potential for additional trade with Burma, and especially with bordering states in the Northeast, is considerable. Informal Indo-Burmese trade is estimated to be 44 times the amount of formal trade and includes electronics, Chinese textiles, pirated media and narcotics. Burma is interested in increasing its pharmaceutical imports from India, as well as encouraging more active trade in vehicle parts, cotton yarn, branded foods, petroleum products and construction materials. Although some of these items would be able to be imported more cheaply because of reduced shipping costs, Burma's main benefits from a new international trade route would be through transit fees and tourism-related activities.

### **For the Northeast**

While linking the northeast with Kachin state and Yunnan would of course be welcome, reopening the Road would allow the Northeast to emerge as a major

transit centre for both the SAARC and ASEAN regions. Along with a significant increase in transnational trade, such a development could also provide a resounding answer to one of India's longest lingering dilemmas: the largely ignored employment problem in the country's cloistered Northeast. It is a problem that began with the British, when colonial mapmakers created security barriers at the edge of the hills and severed ancient routes of trade and cultural exchange. With the loss of nearby trade partners to both its north and east, the Northeast became completely dependent on mainland India for trade options through the 37 km-wide Siliguri corridor in West Bengal. While both colonial and independent India have utilised the Northeast as an important resource garden, the long, circuitous routes that the indigenous products have to take to exit the region have made them prohibitively expensive for any market.

Due in large part to its geopolitical placement, the Northeast is widely acknowledged as India's economic laggard. With roughly 40 million people – 30 per cent of them from tribal communities – the Northeast makes up less than four per cent of India's population. The economic deprivation that has masked the northeast, whose overwhelmingly rural populace (90 per cent) earns nearly half that of the rest of India.

That inertia has fed the lingering separatist violence that the rest of the Subcontinent associates with this region. With arms, illegal drugs, and ideology already coming from across India's borders, many have voiced concern over the years that reopening sanctioned international border crossings would only enhance those negative effects. But others, more circumspect observers maintain that the reopening of trade routes such as the Stilwell Road would boost the economy as well as help still at long last the many rebellions in the Northeast. The former Director General of the Indian Border Security Force, E.N. Rammohan posited in a 2005 essay that, "Roads are the first enemies of insurgents. Denied of a hinterland, he has no place to retreat. Today this is the first step to be taken by the Government of India."

Current restrictions and the absence of legitimate customs points have also been a reason for the voluminous entry of smuggled goods from China and Burma into India. According to customs and security experts, the reopening of the Road and the regular movement of endorsed traffic would significantly reduce contraband movement through the area. Since the demand for these goods is already high, many would greatly benefit from legitimising that trade through the collection of customs fees, excise taxes and tolls along the Road. While there are valid concerns that local produces may take a beating on the arrival of cheaply produced foreign products, there is good reason to believe that local



manufacturers are already being hurt by the current inflow of illegal goods. Either way, the market already exists; at the moment, however, that market is being exploited without regulation, or payment of customs fees.

### Regional networking

There are other countries in the Stilwell equation besides Burma, India and China. Since participating as an original signatory to the 1999 Kunming Initiative and re-pledging itself to the process in 2002 when the meet was held in its capital, Bangladesh has been largely invisible in the Stilwell project. Many observers urge Dhaka to jump on the "Sino-India bandwagon", warning that a westward extension of the trade route to Calcutta would otherwise bypass the country through Siliguri. Notwithstanding perennial tensions between Dhaka and New Delhi, those critics maintain that fostering stronger ties with China is not only in Bangladesh's best interest, but that the opportunity has rarely been closer at hand as presented by Stilwell.

Thailand, on the other side of Burma, is particularly keen to increase trade relations with the Northeast and has expressed interest in seeing the Stilwell Road reopen. The country recently announced its intention to expand trade ties with

the area, with a special focus on tea, fruit and food processing sectors; it is also actively looking into joint eco-tourism ventures in Assam.

The economic viability of increased trade between India, China, Burma and other Southeast Asian countries largely depends on the reopening of the most direct land routes connecting the countries. According to the Indian multinational Hindustan Lever, which actively trades with most ASEAN countries, the costs of container shipping of many products via sea routes from any part of India, in particular the Northeast, are prohibitively high.

If, as a result of reopening the Road, the Northeast were to become a major regional distribution centre, transit times and transportation costs between the partners could be reduced on average by an estimated 30 per cent. From the border point at Pansau in Arunachal Pradesh, exports from India shipped via the Road could reach Kunming in two days, Rangoon in less than three days, Bangkok in four days, and Singapore within six days. All this may sound fantastic and unreachable at the moment, but they are within the realm of possibility. The Stilwell route could lead to a snowballing of market linkage between India, China and Southeast Asia. Free trade agreements are already in place between India, Thailand and Singapore. Additional accords are due by 2016 with the rest of ASEAN countries, while similar discussions are starting with China. With all of this high-level trade talk, there should be little wonder that momentum has picked up towards creating an economically feasible way with which to move those goods and products that will need moving.

### Down the road

Whether on the six-lane superhighway from Kunming to the Burmese border, the sometimes barely discernable track within Burma, or the bustling two-lane stretch in Assam, at the moment, travelling the Stilwell Road is an admittedly lively adventure. While that hair-raising excitement will have to be toned down to allow for a regular commercial flow, but make no mistake: emerging with the Road's new tarmac is a key to the continued transformation of Asia as a whole – linking Southasia, East Asia and Southeast Asia all at once. Although it was wartime Americans who brought the Road's original earthmoving machines, the effort to build the Road, the fighting that secured it, and the communities that have incorporated it have always been multinational. While it would be foolish to underestimate the geopolitical obstacles facing the push to reopen Stilwell, the simple fact is that the Road will inevitably come into greater use as India, Burma and China continue to become more economically powerful, independent, and intertwined. And with them, the rest of Asia.

## The Exchange of Ideas and Culture between South Asia and Central Europe

South Asia Initiative of Harvard University  
October 28 & 29, 2005

Was there a space in Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for Indian colonial subjects and Europeans alike to engage in forms of cultural and intellectual exchange that transcended the limits of British imperialism? Or did varieties of imperialism in Central Europe constrain the possibilities for intercultural encounter, despite the absence of formal colonial bonds? More generally put, how can the varied encounters between Central Europe and South Asia best be located on the spectrum stretching from power and domination to communication and dialogue? To ask these questions is to participate in a long tradition of postcolonial scholarship, but also to have reached a critical moment within that tradition. A transnational perspective, one not limited by the construct of the nation-state or the fixed axis of center and periphery, allows us to shed light on the relationship between South Asia and Europe in a way that has not yet been done. In coming to a better understanding of European imperialism and the complex forms of intellectual and cultural interconnection that it occasioned, this conference is of utmost timeliness.

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# IN THE

# OF FEAR

They asked for no answers, made no threats  
 Gentlefolk, they went away  
 Now the rustle of leaves speaks of fear  
 — Ashok Vajpey, in *They are here*

by | **C K Lal**

In whatever way it is defined, violence, politics, and civilian casualties constitute an integral part of every act of terrorism. To understand terrorism, it is essential to understand the historic processes that create conditions for the calculated use of violence by fanatical groups to deliver political messages and gain mileage. Mutiny, insurgencies, wars and uprisings have been with us in Southasia since the Aryan invasion and before, but terrorism is a distinctly post-colonial pathology. It needs to be treated, not fought.

The Supreme Court of Bangladesh has taken a bold constitutional step to correct past mistakes. It has declared everything about the coup of 1975 and subsequent martial law pronouncements as illegal. This precedence will be useful in future when courts of Pakistan and Nepal become confident enough to pass judgements on the decisions of Gen Pervez Musharraf and King Gyanendra. But even in the limited context of Bangladesh, the landmark ruling will be a stern reminder to ambitious military generals and their foreign sponsors that, sooner or later, everyone has to stand trial in the court of history.

Who knows whether the Americans had a role to play in the dark deed of 15 August 1975, but there is no denying the impact the carnage of Bangbandhu Mujib and his family had on Bangladeshi politics and society. The culture of vengeance took root in the fertile soil of a newly independent nation, religion as a tool of populism found willing takers, and international players discovered that the cost of meddling in a squabbling nation was surprisingly low.

Thirty years after the putsch, serial bomb blasts on 17 August proved that the tree of terrorism planted in the blood-soaked soil has grown so big that its shadow now covers the breadth of the country. Casualty figures from the series of explosions – two dead and 100 injured – belie the fact that this was a

carefully coordinated operation in which 63 of the 64 districts of Bangladesh were affected. With ruthless efficiency, 200 explosions hit the country within half an hour, frightening locals and forcing foreigners to flee. The Western media has already begun to portray Bangladesh as the next Indonesia – hotbed of Islamist extremism harbouring Osama wannabes in every mosque.

## Beyond Ben Gurion

Media pundits often forget that terrorism is a religion in itself with its own paraphernalia of holy books (most of it authored by British and American counter-insurgency experts), hoary prophets (Ben Gurion and bin Laden) and high-sounding principles (end justifies means; terror is the tool of the weak, etc). Use of adjectives such as 'Christian', as in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, or 'Islamic' as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Indonesia, blurs the main issue. Terrorism is a historic phenomenon that cannot be tackled militarily with simplistic slogans.

In his address to the nation shortly after the 9/11 attacks, amidst inflammatory catchphrases he used the terms 'terror', 'terrorism', and 'terrorist' all of 32 times. But he did not bother to define the terminology. But back in the saddle for the second term, he now wants to be remembered as statesman rather than warmonger, so his administration is replacing the belligerent battle-cry "global war on terror" with a 'principled' commitment to "global struggle

against violent extremism." Fiddling with phraseology doesn't mean much; it is intentions that matter. However, the words set rolling by the Potomac may very well change the way the Southasian intelligentsia looks at its own little wars in nooks and crannies of our region.

India, that is, Bharat has once again outlawed the Naxalites. Fear-mongering is the latest sport in Hyderabad and New Delhi where armchair analysts pontificate endlessly about the dangers of Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties of South Asia (CCOMPOSA) and the supposedly developing corridor of Maoist insurgency from Nepal to Sri Lanka searing through Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra, Karnataka and Kerala. The idea of



Did you say Ben ?



an east-west corridor controlled by extremists appears even more farfetched, and so whoever spouts it is naturally worthy of peer respect in the seminar circuit. No security analyst worth his palmtop can stand the seductive charm of an al-Qaeda, ISI, Naxal and Bangla Bhai link running through the Hindi heartland and networked with militants of Assam, Manipur and Kashmir. For the sensation-addicted mass media, these is the stuff that banner headlines are made of.



### Maobaadi and madrassas

To give credit where it's due, the Maobaadi of Nepal are much more international than their Subcontinental cousins. The CPN-M is one of the founders of Revolutionary International Movement (RIM), is credited for creating CCOMPOSA, and is even indirectly responsible for bringing various factions of Indian Naxalites under the banner of Communist Party of India-Maoists. But despite their audacious attacks on military targets, even the Maobaadi have begun to lose their lustre. So far, their every action has had an equal and opposite reaction of strengthening the hands of the King Gyanendra's royal palace as it engages in subjugating the people. Even the unilateral ceasefire that they declared in the first week of September appears to be a concession to the palace rather than an olive branch thrown in the direction of political parties and civil society.

Meanwhile, King Gyanendra let slip while speaking to some villagers in west Nepal that he wants to split the insurgents. But the divide-and-rule policy has its own perils. If smaller groups of extremists were easier to handle, Gen Musharraf would be sitting pretty letting his force do the bidding of American sleuths engaged in hunting the mythical Taliban and al-Qaeda guerrillas. He has de-recognised madrassa diplomas instead. Macaulay's children in Southasia have a paranoiac disdain for religious education. The English-speaking elite in our metropolitan cities – the general sahab is just an over-achiever specimen of the same – do not realise that without Sanskrit Pathshalas that are run with temple funds in India and Nepal, and Madrassas funded through *zakat* almost everywhere, some of the poorest of the poor will not only remain illiterate but malnourished too. These seminaries provide free board to the needy (though admittedly most of pathshala beneficiaries tend to be poor Brahmin boys) in addition to imparting the rudimentary 3R's.

Had Islamabad diverted some of its nuke and missile money to social purpose –for example, compulsory free schooling and midday meals for the children of the poor – the madrassas would have

been forced to compete with formal schools. Stability of Pakistan is inversely proportional to the prosperity of its professionals – the better the air-conditioning in the cars that cruise about Clifton in Karachi, the more the likelihood of an uprising in rural Sindh. The bigger the bungalows amidst Islamabad's other-worldly green, the more violent the protests in Punjab. But these are matters that a military (or royal) ruler can never understand.

Sri Lanka isn't getting any better either since the military engineered a split in LTTE and began to back the splinter group to the hilt. On 12 August, the foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar fell to a sniper bullet. But while blaming the usual suspect – the LTTE – the government has done precious little to check Sinhalese chauvinism of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) parties. The peace process in Sri Lanka is unlikely to succeed without some sort of settlement with Tamils, but the Sinhalese majority still awaits a leader courageous enough to make an unpopular deal. Chandrika Kumaratunga tries, but not hard enough. Strong centres are too strong to let devolution happen.

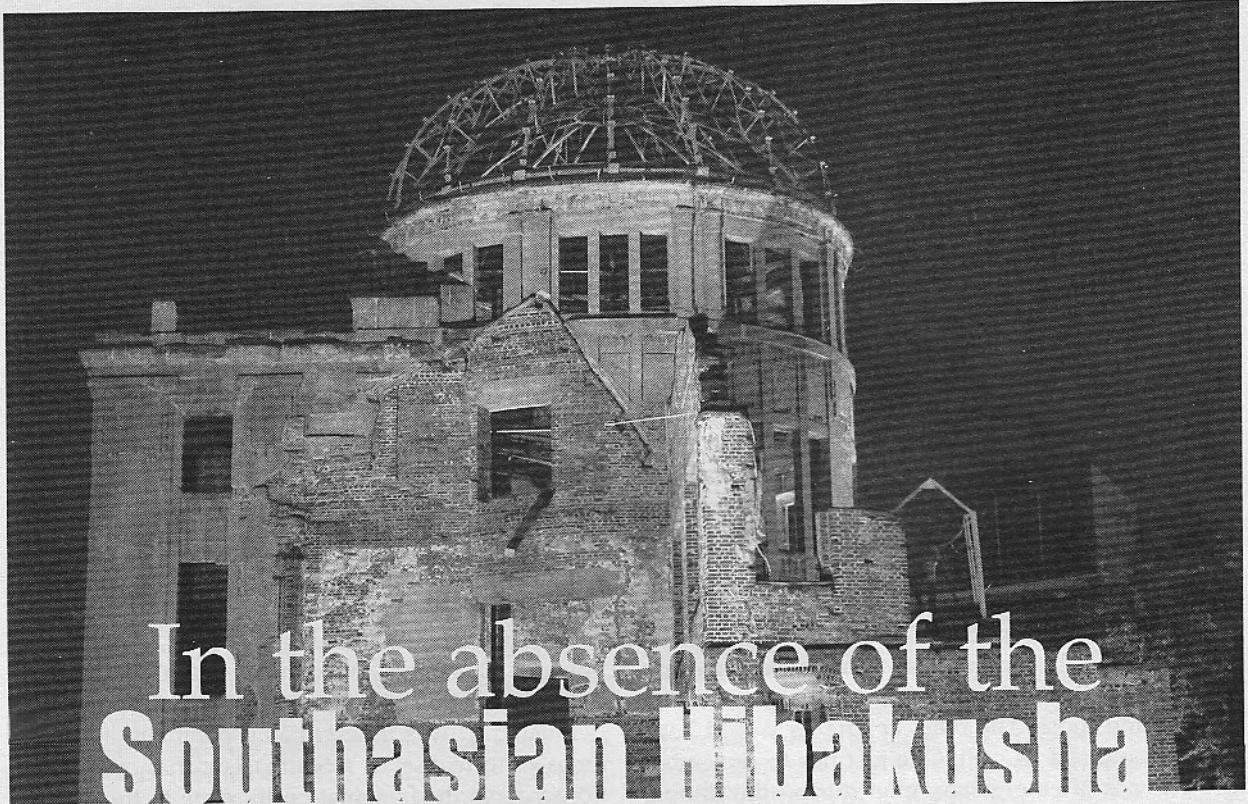
### The earthen lamp

Post-9/11, peace has come to be defined in terms of war: wars are declared to win peace. The world has somehow forgotten the frail man in a dhoti who was Mountbatten's one-man army in Bengal during the Partition carnage of 1947. M K Gandhi countered the terror tactics of fanatics with nothing but his conviction that violence begets violence and it is only peace that can create peace.

Gandhi had yet another prescription that very few remember anymore. Devolution of power to the lowest units of government will render the use of terror tactics meaningless – the value of rocket-launchers in 'dirty wars' would plummet if the prize at the end of it were limited to control over an impoverished village somewhere in Telangana

The suicide bomber – the ultimate terror machine – is not the product of hope but the escape of the desperate from the injustice of history. That desperation cannot be addressed by sovereignty or independence of the post-colonial state, or even the delivery of development. Nothing less than sustained and sincere efforts to build a just structure can address the grievances that breed terrorism. Even a "global struggle against violent extremism" is war by another name, being waged upon the world by the most powerful country in human history. Fear incites violence, even when the fear is caused by mere shadows. To build peace, we must learn to overcome our fears and rediscover hope. ▲





# In the absence of the Southasian Hibakusha

by | **Pranav Budhathoki**

The Japanese tenacity in the fight against nuclear proliferation was the result of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki sixty years ago. In the early morning of 6 August 1945, Japanese radar mistakenly identified the American B-29 bomber carrying 'Little Boy' as coming on a routine high-altitude reconnaissance mission. Fifteen minutes later, Hiroshima was annihilated, and 80,000 lives had been vapourised.

The *Hibakusha* are the victims of the fireball and the raging wind of that day, living testimony to an act of terror when one country used the nuclear bomb against a people. Those who were very young are still with us today. Yoshitaka Sakai was 10 when the atom bomb fell on his city, slaughtering his family of 13. "I picked maggots using chopsticks from my mother's decaying back whilst trying to save her. I helplessly stood by my brother's side as he died begging for water," he said. "The Motoyasu River was clogged with floating corpses. People with popped out eyes, exploded bellies and peeled skin were everywhere. Those who died were the fortunate ones."

On 6 August 2005, as I stood alongside 60,000 silent participants at Hiroshima's Peace Memorial park to commemorate the horrific day, it was Southasia that was on my mind. India and Pakistan are proceeding with their nuclear armament programmes.

In both countries, the tests of Chagai and Pokhran are seen as nationalist enterprises and proof of strategic virility and technological prowess. We have no *Hibakusha* to remind us that what the two governments are doing by developing nuclear weapons as well as the delivery weapons (Agni, Ghauri) is putting our future in the shredder.

India and Pakistan, together with Israel, are the three states that refuse to sign the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). And it is New Delhi that is squarely responsible for instigating the nuclear race in the Subcontinent. While the Jadugoda tribals in Jharkhand endure radioactive poison from unprotected uranium mining, Indian strategic analysts preen when President George W. Bush declares of India, as he did on July 18, "a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology". Said Bush, he would "work to achieve full civil nuclear energy cooperation with India" and "seek agreement from Congress to adjust US laws and policies".

Meanwhile, Islamabad's generals no longer get hauled over the coals for their nuclear aspirations. If anything, they receive nods and winks of approval. The British government is contemplating nuclear co-operation with Pakistan, irrespective of the fact that the world's supreme nuclear suspect Abdul Qadeer Khan was caught in January 2003 doling out weapons secrets to Iran, Libya and North Korea for a price.



The global anti-proliferation campaign may not be able to stop Southasia's headlong rush towards nuclear weaponisation, but do we not owe it to ourselves to do so? If we do not have our own *Hibakusha*, at least we have our own imagination, our own poverty, our own hopes for a prosperous future. Simply put, we are not able to comprehend the scale of dying in a nuclear conflagration. The lumbering bomber Enola Gay took six hours to fly from the Tinian airbase in the West Pacific before dropping its payload over Japan. Whereas, at the push of a button, India's Prithvi missile would take within three to five minutes to reach almost anywhere in Pakistan, and Pakistan's Ghauri missile would require about five minutes to reach Delhi. Neither country has the know-how to recall a nuclear missile fired in error.

Hiroshima had an estimated 250,000 residents when it was bombed. What would one nuclear explosion, on ground or on air, do to the ten million plus living in and around Bombay, Delhi, Karachi, and Lahore? The casualties – in the immediate aftermath and long term – would easily come to a million and more. The relief apparatus would have been vapourised as well. One just has to remember the absence of emergency relief during the Bhopal gas disaster, whose victims perhaps come closest to being India's and Southasia's *Hibakusha*.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto once said that he was willing to feed his fellow-citizens grass, but Pakistan would have nuclear weapons. India used the name of the Prince of Peace to signal in code that Pokhran had succeeded – "The Buddha has smiled". Such lack of caring and flippancy on the way to our collective morgue. But Southasia's anti-nuclear campaign has not even begun. Without a tangible face to put to the intangible impression of nuclear annihilation and ensuing suffering, our disorientated pressure groups have not been able to spark the terrible imagination.

The fixation on Kashmir has even diverted the activists. If there is going to be a nuclear Armageddon in the near future, it will probably have Kashmir as the cause. But what are the chances that Srinagar will be nuked? In the event of war between India and Pakistan, the man with the hand on the nuclear trigger will want to cause maximum damage; he will send the nuclear tipped missiles to Bombay, Delhi, Karachi, Lahore.

In Hiroshima in August this year, a helicopter hovered 600 meters above the nuclear hypocentre, at the exact spot in midair where the atomic bomb was detonated. It was indescribably poignant, and even more so to realise, as a Southasian, that our leaders do not have the imagination to relate to the tragedy of 6 August 1945. Even today, they would rather that their citizens eat grass.

## GLOBAL CITIES - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

Liverpool Hope University, UK  
29th-30th June 2006

Call for Papers Deadline: 2006-02-28

This conference is intended to encourage interdisciplinary exchange on the representation, cultures, histories, experience, planning, and articulation of global cities. By interrogating the vocabularies that have arisen in several disciplines which might include in addition to the term 'global city', 'global village', 'megacities', 'cosmopolis', imperial metropolis', 'world cities', 'sprawl', 'postmetropolis', etc., the conference will bring together debates over images, narratives, economics, planning and, above all, experience, of the 'global' city. Papers are sought from any relevant discipline in the humanities, social sciences, architecture, urban planning, and beyond. We will be actively pursuing various publishing outputs related to the conference.

Abstracts of 200 words for 20-minute papers by 28th February 2006. Further information from Dr. Lawrence Phillips, phillil@hope.ac.uk.

**Dr Lawrence Phillips,**  
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## Religious Revivalism and Political Extremism in Pakistan and Bangladesh at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London

December 16, 2005

The Politics of South Asia Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association (PSA), in conjunction with the British Association for South Asian Studies (BASAS) and the South Asia Programme of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), seeks paper proposals for a workshop entitled "Religious Revivalism and Political Extremism in Pakistan and Bangladesh." Building upon the success of the annual BASAS workshop held at the University of Bristol on November 13, 2004, the organizers seek papers that draw light on the apparent revival of extremist religious movements in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The workshop seeks to understand the extent and magnitude of such a revival and aims to draw some conclusions about its potential impact on inter-ethnic relations in Pakistan and Bangladesh and on strategic relations in the region in general.

Since the organizers are keen to examine the problem of religious revivalism from a multidisciplinary perspective, other paper topics are certainly welcome. However, preference will be given to papers that explicitly analyze the phenomenon of religious revivalism and political extremism in Pakistan and Bangladesh from a comparative perspective. Travel costs will be paid for the paper givers.

Please submit a one-page abstract of individual papers no later than **Friday, October 7, 2005 to: L.saez@iiss.ac.uk.**

**Contact:** Lawrence Saez, Asia Research Centre, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK  
[www.iiss.org](http://www.iiss.org)



# Guerrillas and terrorists

by | Anil Athale

Many insurgencies in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century served as a tool for the 'weaker' communist bloc to try and change the global power balance. Open confrontation carried the risk of escalation and the communist powers were at a disadvantage in the field of technologies of conventional weapons. The insurgents relied on guerrilla tactics that precluded the use of heavy weapons and hence were able to dictate the terms of engagement. Guerrilla war is thus a low cost, low risk, option for a weaker party to change the political map despite adverse power balance.

What was new in the theories of Mao and Che was the degree of emphasis on politics. Mao brought down politics from the level of policy and made it relevant to the individual soldier by relating it to tactics and morale. This showed shrewd understanding of the circumstances under which a guerrilla operates. The emphasis on indoctrination and ideology was a direct result of Mao's understanding of insurgency as a protracted war, where the human element is of crucial importance. In classical concept, destruction of armed power leads to collapse of the enemy's morale which leads to eventual victory, but in the Maoist conception of revolutionary war it is the loss of morale that leads to the defeat of enemy's armed forces.

Insurgency in Asia can only be understood against the backdrop of the current stage of political development. There may be economically advanced states, but they may be under-developed politically. In a politically developed country, government is effective. Elsewhere, there is violence and instability. Political institutions in a developed country mediate between competing groups and individuals and maintain peace. These institutions are characterised by adaptability, autonomy, subordination, complexity and coherence in disunity.


Large parts of Asia are predominantly agricultural civilisations in the process of industrialisation, which brings in its wake Western values. This change can often generate alienation and loss of norms due to the conflict between the indigenous and new value systems. Historically, this has been accompanied by violence. Racial, linguistic and religious differences also become factors in the resistance to modernisation which turns violence. The spread of education, information and literacy generate additional pressures due to heightened awareness leading to heightened expectations

There is the mistaken notion that 'everything is

fair in love and war', but by that token even an acid attack due to unreciprocated love can be justified – it is not. Similarly, since ancient times there have been rules of the game in time of war. There are norms and ethics, written or unwritten, on the conduct of conflict which have been more or less universally observed. As far as the state is concerned, the political acts of modern-day governments, including the use of force, have to take place within the democratic framework.

As far as terrorism is concerned, it is a global issue and needs a global solution. In the 1980s, when the world faced a rash of aircraft hijackings, a world consensus was built around the agreement that no country would give shelter to hijackers. As a result of this measure, hijackings have been more or less controlled. Similarly, the world today needs to clearly define terrorist acts – as distinct from actions of guerrilla fighters or militants. Once a terrorist act is clearly defined, the United Nations must enforce a universal adherence to mandatory and exemplary punishment to the supporting organisations, instigators, helpers and propagators of this method of resistance.

Identification of terrorism as a heinous crime would entail recognition of guerrilla war as a separate issue, to be dealt along the lines of the Geneva conventions dealing with wars. Thus, acts by insurgents against armed forces and the police would necessarily have to be placed in a separate category. While the world does recognise this form of warfare, all acts against civilians and non-combatants must perforce be classed 'terrorism'. All countries must agree to punish the perpetrators and put behind bars all members of such organisations, without exception.

In the past few years, counter-terror operations have lost much of their popular support because they have been dragged into the catch-all nature of the US-led "War on Terror". Instead, the operations should be treated as a counter-insurgency. The implication is that the force used must be appropriate and discriminate as opposed to maximum and indiscriminate. Additionally, the emphasis must be on isolating the terrorists from their support base and not destruction of the supporting people. The obvious objection to this from some quarters would be that it grants a licence for guerrilla war. Which is true. But mankind has lived with this form of warfare since ancient times. The world would definitely become a safer place if we are able to separate guerrilla war from terrorism. 



# Home and the world

## The rise of the Indian multinational

The center of gravity of world business is shifting, and India's MNCs are ready to carve out a good sized chunk of the pie.

by | **Indrajit Lahiri**

"It's IBM's nightmare," reported the American business magazine *Fortune*. In a conference room in Bangalore, consultants and engineers at the software company Wipro were redesigning the 'consumer experience' for a US retail chain to make it state-of-the-art. Reports the magazine, Wipro's general manager for retail solutions was leading a group asking all kinds of detailed questions, "Should sales clerks carry handheld transaction devices or stand at cash registers? Which merchandise should be tracked electronically? How much information needs to be in the database to ensure that discount promotions don't last longer than necessary?"

All this would be the stuff of bad dreams for 'Big Blue' because increasingly its US client companies are turning to Wipro and other software development companies in India for solutions. Indeed, lean and hungry IT companies like Wipro, TCS and Infosys are already invading IBM's turf. These companies are part of the wave of 'multinationalisation' that is sweeping the Indian corporate world.

Wipro's challenge to the mighty IBM is only the latest element of an unfolding saga, which is likely to redesign the global business landscape. In particular, the multinational corporations of China and India are swooping down on the playing field of the Western transnational corporations and in many cases running away with the ball. These Asian MNCs have drawn a great deal of attention of late, due to their direct impact on the market traditionally monopolized by Western MNCs. To trace how the large Chinese and Indian companies have arrived at this point, it is important to trace the evolution of the multinationals in Asia.

### Multinationals of Asia

Many Asian multinationals evolved from trading outfits with overseas ownership, one example being the Swire Group founded in Shanghai in 1866 as Butterfield & Swire and now the parent of such worldwide companies as the airline Cathay Pacific. There were also the manufacturing leaders such as Unilever, incorporated in London and Rotterdam, and with a large presence from the beginning in Asian

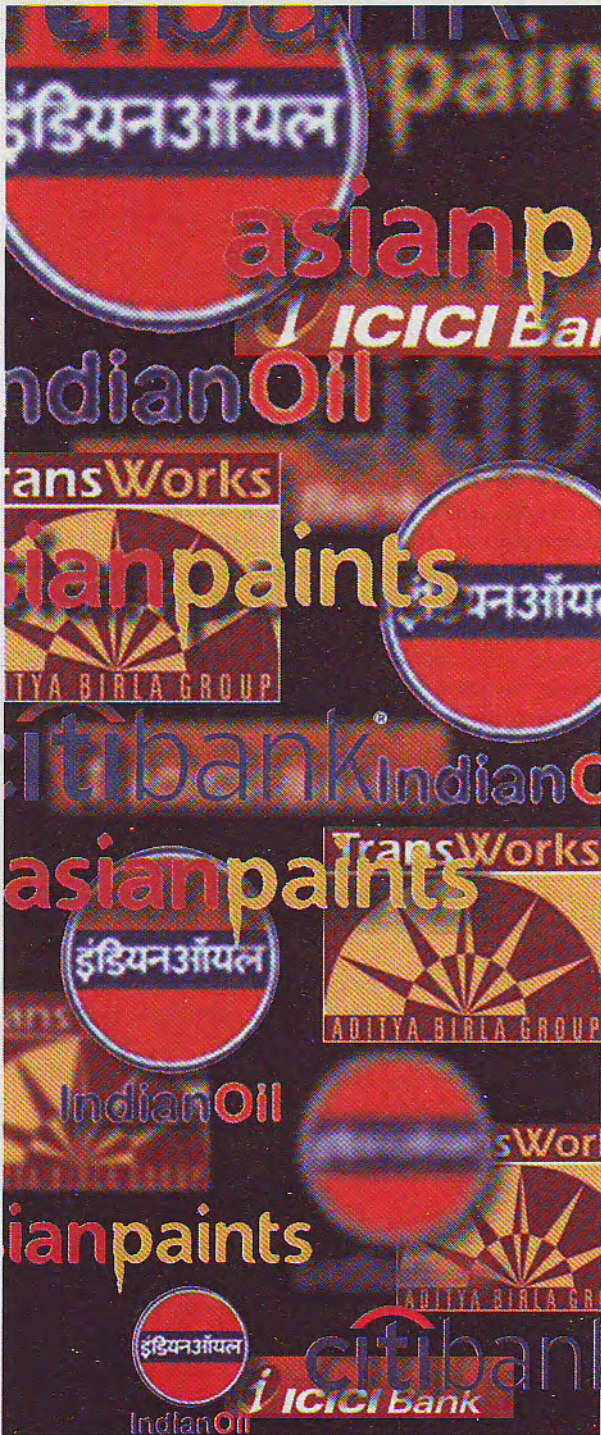


Image montage : Roshan Tamang



countries. The common thread running through these companies was clearly an entrepreneurial flair, and a healthy appetite for risk.

It was in 1902 that Citibank (then called the First National City Bank) set up its first branches in Calcutta, Hong Kong, Manila, and elsewhere. As business grew, these multinationals, by virtue of their greater access to capital, depth of management experience and global presence, came to dominate the Asian market. World War II and a greater American presence in Asia also acted as a boost to Western companies. Coca-Cola, to use one example, rode in on the rucksacks of US infantrymen into retail outlets across East, Southeast and South Asia.

Missing in this picture of companies doing business beyond their national boundaries were the indigenous companies of Asia. In many cases, newly established Asian or Southasian companies were too busy navigating the regulatory and competitive landscape in their respective countries to have the wherewithal to look outward at regional and overseas markets. In India, restrictive regulation linked to licensed manufacturing capacity and restricted access to foreign exchange acted as barriers for companies which, at any rate, were struggling to meet domestic demand. Also missing was a global mind-set on the part of management, and self-confidence in the ability to produce and sell Indian products and services in the developed economies. Furthermore, the less said about the quality perception of Indian manufactures back then, the better.

For many decades, Indian overseas exports consisted of non-manufactured goods with little value addition – agro-commodities, steel, heavy machinery, handicrafts and spices. You had a peculiar situation of a country able to put a satellite in space and carry out nuclear tests – in 1974, and then in 1998 – but unable to sell consumer products or services in the world market. But there were company stewards who were dreaming big, and over the 1970s and 1980s, even in the midst of the license raj and protected market, they were building a base of talent, knowledge and physical infrastructure that would create the foundations for liftoff. The trigger came with the rapid liberalisation of the Indian economy after 1991, and soon there was exponential growth and visibility on the global stage. There has been no looking back.

### **Paints and pharmaceuticals**

To chart the great advance that has been made by Indian MNCs, one can consider the case of two Indian companies that have made it – Asian Paints and Ranbaxy. The former was founded in Mumbai in 1942 by four Indian entrepreneurs at a time when the Indian paints market was dominated by Western companies such as British Paints, Jenson &

Nicholson and ICI. From its startup, Asian Paints focused on rigorous quality control systems, opening up rural markets, and utilising information technology, acting as one of the early Indian companies to use mainframes for data processing. It was also a leading and early employer of professional managers.

These initiatives paid off, and the company achieved market leadership in India in 1967. In 1978, it took its first steps overseas, setting up a greenfield (meaning starting up rather than acquiring an existing business) venture in Fiji. Operations were soon expanded elsewhere in the South Pacific, in Tonga, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Asian Paints (Nepal) started production in 1985. In 1998, following the advice of a reputed consulting firm, the international operations of the company were integrated into a “strategic business unit”. The organisation as a whole took on an extremely ambitious goal – to elevate itself to the exclusive club of the world’s top five companies in the decorative paints segment by 2007.

Several new greenfield projects were set up, notably in Bangladesh and Oman. In 2002, after two acquisitions in quick succession, the company extended its reach to Egypt, parts of the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. Today, Asian Paints comprises manufacturing operations in 22 countries, primarily in Asia, Australasia and the Caribbean, with a global turnover exceeding USD 500 million. It is already one of the top ten decorative paint companies in the world.

Ranbaxy Laboratories was founded in 1961 by Bhai Mohan Singh in order to produce pharmaceuticals, with the initial emphasis on the production and marketing of basic drugs. It went public in 1973, and in the 1980s it expanded domestic production significantly, simultaneously putting up modern research and development infrastructure. There was no looking back after one of its plants in India obtained approval from the US Food and Drug Administration, which allowed Ranbaxy entry into a prime world market. The company, which set up its first joint venture in Nigeria two and half decades ago, today has manufacturing operations in seven country and ‘ground presence’ in 44. In 2004, the company registered a growth in sales of 21 percent, with turnover

**The trigger came with the rapid liberalisation of the Indian economy after 1991, and soon there was exponential growth and visibility on the global stage. There has been no looking back.**



totaling USD 1.2 billion. The overseas market accounted for 78 percent of the sales, with the US accounting for 36 percent and Europe 16 percent. Recently, Ranbaxy enhanced its European presence by making an acquisition in France, which makes it the largest producer of generic drugs in that country.

Ranbaxy has embarked on a full-fledged global strategy based on innovation, alliance-building and 'globalisation'. The company began producing under intellectual property licenses held by global firms, conducted clinical trials for its drugs in foreign markets, and itself created new 'intellectual property'.

**Within Southasia today, it is mainly the Indian multinationals that have ridden the wave of liberalisation to seek out world markets, and there are obvious reasons why this has been so.**

It developed alliances for producing new drugs and for research. On the whole, the work done at home base over the years had allowed the marketing of Ranbaxy as a global major, and it has a global footprint encompassing countries as diverse as Nigeria, Egypt, Poland, South Africa, France, China, Malaysia, Thailand, France, besides the US and UK.

Asian Paints and Ranbaxy represent just the tip of the Indian iceberg that has in the last decade and half invaded the world marketplace. Some of the other major players include ICICI Bank, Indian Oil, the Aditya Birla Group, and the various companies of the Tata Group including Tata Tea (with its large acquisition of Tetley of UK). Not to mention the three giants of the Indian software industry : Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services and Wipro.

### **Lessons for aspirants**

The growth of these Indian MNCs throws up some significant lessons for all aspiring multinationals of Southasia:

*Access to capital:* because financing is now global, it is possible for companies with the right profile and capability to access a volume of capital that could only be dreamed of earlier. It is up to the executives who hope to go global whether and how to take advantage the highly liquid and 'risk-neutral' sources of finance that have now become available.

*Talent:* Capable executives are now willing to relocate globally, and particularly to India, where they see stability, income and career enhancement. Indeed, Indian companies have begun to attract the best talent from the international pool, one example being Dr. Brian Tempest, CEO of Ranbaxy. Top-line executives are joining Indian MNCs because they know the goals

are global, reaching far beyond India and Southasia.

*Alliances and Partnerships:* Overseas companies seeking to take advantage of the Indian workforce and market are willing to allow Indian companies an 'in' on their expertise and finance capacities. This seems to be the key to long-term alliances, and that is the path many Indian companies have taken in expanding their activities internationally. But it is easier said than done, because of the unfamiliar business terrain and diverse corporate cultures in different parts of the world. A deep understanding of the partner's country and culture helps, but in the end, it is all about an understanding of mutual goals and expectations which allow both partners to tide over inevitable turbulence.

### **Southasian MNCs**

Within Southasia today, it is mainly the Indian multinationals that have ridden the wave of liberalisation to seek out world markets, and there are obvious reasons why this has been so. Most importantly, the much larger domestic playing field in India allows Indian companies a range of experience and access to capital not readily available to companies in neighbouring countries. However, it is a fact that the capability to go international does exist all over the region. Two somewhat dissimilar examples are Sri Lanka's Dilmah's tea company with its highly rated marketing, and BRAC, which is evolving as a multi-dexterous company using its experience within Bangladesh to reach out with services beyond Southasia.

In their quest for global growth, the Indian MNCs are looking at market opportunities across many geographical areas including Southasia. The style and functioning of these and other Asian MNCs, including Chinese and Korean companies, would have an impact on the functioning of the host economies. In this highly networked world, along with increased competition, these MNCs would be bringing in various elements: specialised knowledge, technical expertise, management skills, and new products and processes. These elements, going into the economy, act as enablers for development of industrial activity. Also, local companies learn to develop 'business ecosystems' built to leverage the presence of these MNCs.

The center of gravity of global economic activity is shifting inexorably to Asia, and the continued evolution of multinationals of India will have significant implications for business, trade and societal development in this region and beyond. Will there be an evolution towards more companies from among India's neighbours becoming multinational, and will at some point there be a company with joint cross-national ownership which could be called a truly 'Southasian MNC'? Only time will tell.





## APPOINTMENTS TO DFID'S ADVISORY TEAM IN NEPAL

DFID is a major bilateral development agency in Nepal. Our commitment is to help reduce poverty. We give priority to support for economic opportunities and essential services to poor and disadvantaged communities, including those currently affected by conflict, and to social justice and governance reforms. We are committed to delivering assistance transparently and with full accountability locally.

The DFID Programme in Nepal is designed and supervised by a team of advisers including specialists in governance, health, economics, rural livelihoods/infrastructure, social development, and conflict studies. We want to further diversify our team to include Nepalese expertise covering Livelihoods and Human Development (to support our health and education work).

Applicants should be able to demonstrate they have the necessary professional and practical expertise in either livelihoods (Ref No L001) or human development (Ref No HD001), and have a successful record of achievement working as a professional in a national or international development agency. Applicants must be able to demonstrate strong competencies in relation to working with others; leading and managing; forward thinking; communicating and influencing; and analytical thinking and judgement. Finally, applicants must have a relevant post-graduate degree or equivalent and be fluent in both English and Nepali.

Located in the DFID office in Kathmandu, the posts are based in a fast paced multi-cultural environment that places a high premium on inclusive team working. You will have opportunities to work closely with all levels of Government and non-governmental agencies, and interact with Nepalis from all walks of life and from all over the country. Though based in Kathmandu, in-country and some international travel will be required. The post will be permanent.

There will be an attractive and competitive local salary and benefits package.

DFID is an Equal Opportunities employer. Applications are welcomed from all parts of the community and we actively encourage interest from women, Dalits, disadvantaged Janajatis and those with a disability. Selection is on merit. For an Application Form and Job description, please e-mail [brai@dfid.gov.uk](mailto:brai@dfid.gov.uk) or collect from DFID Main Gate, Jawalakhel, Telephone No (977-1) 5542979.

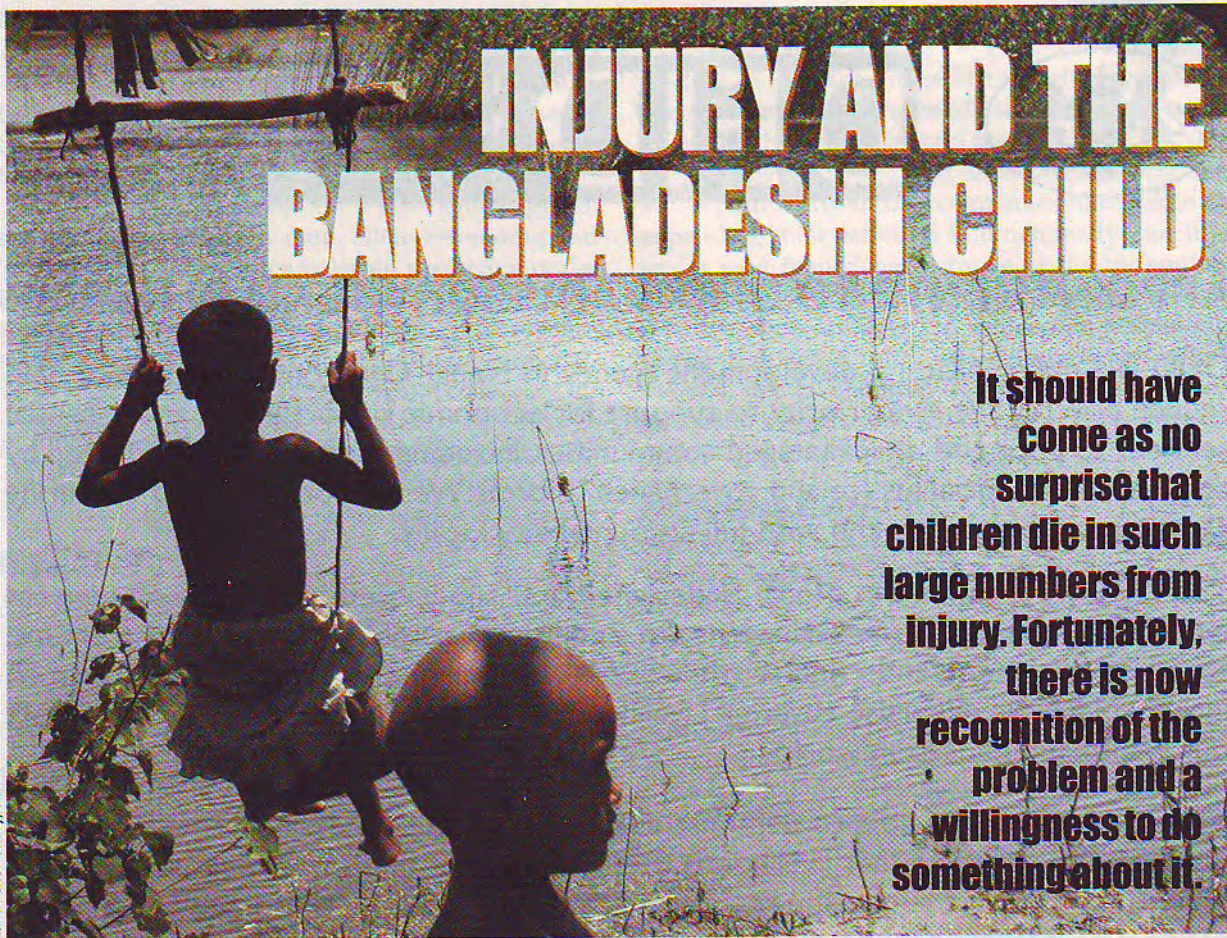
Completed applications should be addressed to Bidushi Rai, HR Section, DFID Nepal. The closing date for applications is Friday 21st October 2005.



# INJURY AND THE BANGLADESHI CHILD

**It should have come as no surprise that children die in such large numbers from injury. Fortunately, there is now recognition of the problem and a willingness to do something about it.**

Zafrin Chowdhury/Unicef



by | Prashant Jha

**W**hen Shaikat's mother went off to cook in the kitchen that afternoon, she was confident that her 19-month-old son was safe with his grandmother in the courtyard. Not realising that the child had been left under her care, the old lady, however, had been paying little attention. Shaikat wandered out of the house unnoticed. Twenty minutes later, when the family panicked and rushed out looking for him, they discovered Shaikat's body floating on the surface of a pond less than 30 metres away from the house.

Residents of a village in Sherpur district, four hours from Dhaka, the family was unfortunate – it had to cope with a senseless loss of a loved one and the hopes the infant represented. What makes Shaikat's death even more striking is the fact that he was hardly alone. He was but one among the 83 or so children in Bangladesh who would have died that day due to accident and injury. Drowning would have accounted for 46 of those deaths.

Bangladesh, says a health and injury study released earlier this year, is in the midst of a "previously unrecognised epidemic of child injury

deaths". The largest community-based injury survey ever conducted in the developing world, the Bangladesh Health and Injury Study (BHIS) covered 171,000 households and more than 800,000 people. The results are so startling that it is important not only to consider them, but also to try and understand why something this grave, which affects so many young and innocent lives, has not even been flagged as an issue of public health.

## Getting hurt

Injury, it turns out, is the leading cause of death among Bangladesh's children over one year of age, accounting for 38 percent of all deaths in the 1-17 age group. More than 30,000 children annually succumb to accidents and injury. More than a million suffer from non-fatal injuries, which translates into 2,600 children getting injured daily. Of those hurt annually, 13,000 are permanently disabled. The statistics have left many shocked, including Bangladesh's Health Minister, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, who said he was stunned to hear the BHIS findings.



The results are shocking due to both the enormity of the problem and the fact that injury has never been considered a serious issue in public discourse. While the belated recognition of injuries as a leading cause of death and disability among children marks a transition in child health concerns that is characteristic to many developing countries, it also reveals the loose linkage between communities and the national health system. Additionally, it raises disturbing questions about whether the 'donor-driven' nature of public health strategy and development discourse has diverted national attention from an area so instinctively important.

These life-threatening injuries may occur due to a diverse set of reasons at different stages of a child's life. While drowning is the single-largest killer in the early childhood years, road traffic accidents take the lead in later years when a child is more mobile. Other causes leading to death or disability include burns, falls, cuts, snake and animal bites, and poisoning, besides intentional injuries related to suicide attempts. The biggest tragedy, perhaps, is that most of these injuries, which kill and maim, are both predictable and preventable.

But prevention of injury becomes complex because the subject is intertwined in a maze of political, social, cultural and economic issues – from entrenched patriarchy that relegates child supervision as the sole responsibility of the mother to her economic compulsions and workload which make such supervision less feasible; from the influx of modernity which has brought with it accompanying new-world hazards such as traffic accidents and electrocution to a 'vaccine lobby' which would not like the focus of health interventions to shift away from diseases. Furthermore, there is the absence of safety norms which increases the likelihood of injuries, as well as lack of health infrastructure to immediately respond to accidents that happen. The dynamics of child injuries prevention is truly multi-faceted.

### The hidden mountain

If there is anything as astounding as the scale of child injuries in Bangladesh, it is the fact that the phenomenon had not been 'discovered' till now. With no numbers in hand, and hardly any injury prevention programme in place, the matter was not even a peripheral priority for the government, development agencies or ngos. Admits Dr Md Abdur

Rahman Khan, Director General of Health Services, "Injury was never recognised as a health issue and we always thought it was a law and order concern." Morten Giersing, representative of UNICEF in Bangladesh who pushed the BHIS study, puts it simply, "Injuries as an issue got overlooked."

Interestingly enough, it was not only the national level planners who neglected injuries. One would have expected district health offices and local communities, which see the problem up close, to be more concerned. Says a researcher for BHIS, "In our interactions, health officials would either deny the existence of injury deaths or would argue that little could be done to prevent it." The survey found that in the communities, there was "a lack of awareness regarding the level of risks for child injury". Most of those questioned blamed injury among children on external forces beyond their control.

What explains this glaring oversight of child injuries both as a public health priority and in popular perception? Some analysts point to the epidemiological transition underway in Bangladesh which has highlighted the role of injuries. "We have seen successful health and immunisation campaigns that have reduced mortality occurring due to infections and diseases. This has resulted in the relative increase in mortality due to injuries," says Dr A K M Fazlur Rahman, executive director of the Centre of Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB), who has pioneered injury studies in the country. A study in the delta region of Matlab by the ICDDR, a centre

involved with population and health research, confirms the point made by Dr Rahman. Despite little change in the absolute number of drowning cases, the proportion of deaths among children between 1 and 4 due to drowning increased from 9 percent in 1983 to 53 percent in 2003. This dramatic shift is attributed to the decline of deaths due to other reasons.

Says Giersing of Unicef, "As we conquer the mountain of vaccine-preventable diseases, we can see another mountain behind it, the mountain of injuries." While diseases and infections were indeed responsible for a large proportion of child deaths and deserved attention, the question the analogy raises is why was the mountain of injuries not noticed at all, either in the first place or while combating diseases and infections?

For one, there clearly existed a knowledge gap about the extent of injuries as a leading cause of child



**A broken family:** Shaikat's father holds a picture of his drowned child

Zafim Chowdhury/Unicef



deaths. This was because of the inadequate coverage of the rural communities by the national health system, as well as poor information transfer. While mortality data, collected at the household and community level during periodic census, provides a reasonably accurate picture of the number of child deaths, figures regarding the cause of death are obtained from the health information systems. Many kinds of childhood deaths, particularly those that are immediate such as drowning, are not reported at the nearby hospitals or health centres. Additionally, the practice of registering births and deaths has not yet taken firm root in villages, thus leaving a gap in the data.

Some put the blame on donor-driven policies, so critical in determining the health discourse of Bangladesh, which has led to the neglect of injuries on a nationwide level. This discourse, while focusing on the 'mountain' of diseases, did not take into account specific community problems such as drowning in a heavily populated deltaic country. The shifting of focus to the prevention and cure of disease may indeed have diluted traditional injury prevention practices by targeting and prioritising a different set of health problems, even if important in themselves. For instance, an old method to keep track of young children was to tie bells around their waist, clearly revealing that communities in the past were aware of the need to guard against a child going too far from the doorway towards dangerous water bodies in the neighbourhood. Such practices have now faded in the villages. Admits a senior Unicef official, "A process of de-learning might have taken place."

Dr M. Amjad Hossain, head of the orthopaedic and trauma department at the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH), has no doubt that the neglect of injuries as a public concern is closely linked to a political and development system that has become utterly dependent on donor governments and agencies. Dr Hossain sees the injuries brought to his trauma unit as the end result of this failure of Bangladeshi government and development sector. He says sardonically, "Child injury is a huge crisis but it seems we will wake up to reality only after international funding agencies tell us about the problem."

Dr Hossain should derive some satisfaction that his society is slowly but surely waking up to the challenge of accidents and injuries. Scholars, civil servants, activists in local communities, NGOs and, yes, international agencies are beginning to look at the arena which kills more Bangladeshi children than any other. The discovery of this lost and unseen 'mountain of injuries', for its part, has been a remarkable story in itself. Unicef's Giersing, who had earlier been involved in an injury study in Vietnam, was aware of the dangers and extent of injury related

childhood death and disability in the developing world. The key to understanding and action, however, was to gather data. For his part, Dr Fazlur Rahman had done a research on injuries in the district of Sherpur back in 1995 and believed that a national survey would throw up interesting figures. The ICCDR study in Matlab, meanwhile, had already indicated a trend towards injuries emerging as a leading cause of childhood deaths. With the development agencies on board, the government was responsive as well, and a collaborative effort finally led to the Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey. The hidden mountain had appeared back on the horizon.

### **Water, water...**

Bangladesh is blessed with water, and also with floods which bring fertility to the land even while devastating sections of the population. It should come as no surprise why drowning is the leading cause of death among children. Almost 17,000 children between 1-17 years of age die of drowning every year. A further break-up of data suggests that drowning is the single largest killer in the 1-4 and the 5-9 age brackets, with other causes taking the lead during adolescence.

What is surprising, however, is that most children do not drown during floods or in the rivers. Instead, they fall into neighbourhood ponds and ditches, which are filled with water as a result of the high water table in most parts of the country. Although incidents do increase during the rainy months, the presence of these 'harmless' water bodies makes drowning a perennial danger in rural Bangladesh. "Adults perceive knee level water to be safe, not realising that a child needs merely six inches of water to drown," notes Shams El Arifeen, a research epidemiologist at the ICCDR.

Besides the dangerous proximity to ponds and lakes, it is weak supervision that makes children vulnerable. "Most incidents of drowning happen during the day when mothers are busy cooking in the house. They may either leave the children alone or with slightly older siblings who themselves are not mature enough to be protective," says Arifeen. Even while others may lend a hand, it is the mother who is considered to have the ultimate responsibility for a child's protection. When she is busy, the child is inevitably exposed to danger.

General perceptions regarding drowning are also instructive. The injury study in Matlab reveals that for district health officials, drowning simply did not exist as a cause of death while among mothers, it ranked as the fourth leading cause of death in the village. Apart from accepting injuries with a sense of fatalism, the communities were also found to be superstitious. In order to prevent drowning, the villagers would, the Matlab study reports, "have the *kobiraj* (spiritual healer) bless the ponds and make



sacrifices to the goddess of water Gongima" This superstition is stretched to dangerous levels when parents of a drowned child are excluded from efforts to revive the child. Explaining popular perception, the mother of a child who nearly drowned said, "A child will die if the mother touches him/her even if there is a sign of life still left."

While the extent of drowning deaths itself presents a formidable challenge, activists and scholars agree that beliefs and perceptions related to the phenomenon must be tackled before anything else. This means conveying the message that drowning is not n:'natural' and in fact, preventable. "We already have health workers at the ward, union as well as the sub-division level who are in touch with families to facilitate the immunisation programme. This group is the key to making villagers aware of the risk of drowning and the need to be careful," says Dr Md Firoz Miah, civil surgeon of the Sherpur district. Dr Miah and others suggest that community discussions in the wake of a drowning death are crucial for awareness and prevention.

A successful prevention strategy would need to include several components. "To ensure supervision, the traditional practice of tying bells around the child's waist must be revived and encouraged. This would help parents to keep a track of their child," says Dr Fazlur Rahman, who also runs the only injury prevention and safe community programme in Bangladesh. It is also important to encourage shared responsibility between both parents and to tap into the extended family structure and community links in villages to look after young children. The burden of supervision must not be allowed to rest solely on the mother.

While some suggest fencing off ponds and ditches around homes to make them inaccessible for children, such a proposal may not be popular or practical where access to water is important. "There are other ways to reduce the risk. We can fill in the ditches during rainy months and also have door barriers to prevent the child's movement outside the home without supervision," says Zahurul Haq, a primary school teacher in Sadar subdivision in Sherpur.

While infants may wander into neighbourhood ponds, older children tend to drown in slightly distant water bodies. Despite the fact that children after the age of four or five can be taught to swim, drowning continues to be the leading killer in the 5-9 age group. Children who have managed to pick up swimming skills by then do not die but there are many others who cannot swim. In fact, it is reported that only 18-20 percent of five year old children can swim, a figure that increases to 50 percent by the time they reach the age of 10. BHIS

argues forcefully that swimming needs to be encouraged to prevent drowning deaths among older children.

### The ills of modernity

Lying on a bed in a Dhaka hospital, Shumi, a six-year old, presents a disturbing sight. Hit by a taxi while running across the road, the young girl has multiple fractures in her leg and around the hips. Shumi, however, is lucky. She is alive and will recover, unlike many other children her age involved in accidents. Road traffic accidents have emerged as the second leading cause of fatal injury among children between 1-17 in Bangladesh, with close to 3,400 dying annually. These accidents also curse 1,400 children with permanent disability every year.

A consequence of rapid urbanisation, extension of road networks in rural areas, poor enforcement of safety regulations, an absence of footpaths and lack of road safety awareness among children, road accidents have now gained recognition as a major health concern. Says Dr Md Siraj-ul-Islam, Director of the National Institute of Trauma and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR) in Dhaka: "Reckless driving, children playing on the road, shops constructed on the highway, rash road crossing – all these factors have come together to exacerbate the number of accidents. In all this, it is the pedestrians and the rural people, particularly children, who suffer the most."

Road accidents, while a major cause of death among children between 5 and 9, become the leading cause of fatal injury in the 9-14 age group. That is the age when the children emerge from their houses unsupervised. The gender composition of the victims is also revealing. With most girls staying inside homes after their early childhood, it is the boys who are most vulnerable. Considering that the society in



Prashant Jha

**Burns injure 170,000 children every year in Bangladesh**





Prashant Jha

### **Injury prevention: Community discussions could help spread awareness**

Bangladesh, like other developing countries, is still in the initial phases of vehicular ownership, traffic accidents can only be expected to increase in the days ahead.

The fact that expansion of the road network has not been accompanied by road-safety awareness is gradually being recognised as a major concern. "Target school curricula, teach children how to cross roads properly and make parents aware that vehicular traffic could be dangerous," suggests a district health activist. Additionally, enforcing traffic rules vigilantly, clearly demarcating pedestrian footpaths and strictly regulating driving license distribution could also contribute to making roads safer.

Burns are a major cause of non-fatal injury besides causing a limited number of deaths. BHIS reports that burns injure over 170,000 children each year, and make 3,400 permanently disabled. One child on average dies every day in Bangladesh from burns. Most of the serious and severe burns in infants and young children occur inside the house, with over half of these happening in the kitchen.

The rapid expansion of electrification in the country is producing an expected but unintended consequence in the form of electrocution deaths. Electric burns also now constitute 20 percent of all the child cases reported at the Burns and Plastic Surgery Unit in the DMCH. "These burns occur when children get exposed to non insulated wires, say while flying kites or climbing trees, and when they may be playing with electric switches located near ground level in homes," says A J M Salek, professor at the Burn Unit of the DMCH.

Besides these causes of death, falls and cuts, long considered trivial and inconsequential, have also emerged as numerically significant causes of serious non-fatal injuries. Falls, in fact, are among the

leading causes of permanent disability among children. Intentional injuries, primarily suicides, rather than accidents are reported to be among the leading causes of death in later adolescence. An overview of the diverse set of factors that have made Bangladeshi children increasingly vulnerable to death and disability clearly reveals the need to recognise the complexity of this rediscovered crisis of child injuries.

### **The injury battle**

If Bangladesh wants to reduce its child mortality, it will clearly have to combat injuries on a war-footing. The battle has to include four major inter-related components – awareness, prevention, response and rehabilitation.

When it comes to generating awareness and recognition of the injury calamity, it is important that the message not get lost in the maze of 'development communications'. After all, rural communities in Bangladesh are being targeted by a barrage of messages, from family planning to immunisation campaigns, and attention span is at a premium. As one communications expert warns, "Injury prevention must not become another buzzword. Instead, if we are talking about behaviour change, we must focus on inter-personal communication and talk to villagers in small groups."

The key to evolving prevention strategies is building an attitude and mindset of 'carefulness' among parents and guardians. Like all developing societies, Bangladesh's rural world is going through metamorphosis in which age-old traditions and values are being buffeted by new ideas and means. It is understandable when communities lose simple, traditional techniques such as the bell tied around the infant's waist. "We must inculcate a culture of safe behaviour coupled with simple but effective measures that will work, for instance, parents supervising young children, general understanding of traffic hazards among all age groups, and keeping children at a distance from fire," says Dr Fazlur Rahman of CIPRB.

Despite the best efforts, however, injuries are bound to keep occurring, though hopefully over time in lower numbers. What is also needed, therefore, is an effective response strategy to provide immediate remedy. "There is a golden window of 3-6 hours after an injury. If a patient can be given professional medical assistance during this period, prospects of recovery brighten," explains Dr Siraj-ul-Islam of NITOR. The Dhaka government is reported to be planning to build several trauma centers along the country's highways to provide immediate relief to victims of accidents as well as those in the adjoining rural areas. While the step is welcome, it is clear that an extensive health infrastructure, in close proximity to every village, will not materialise immediately. The



BHIS report, for its part, recommends that villagers, particularly older children, be trained in first aid treatment, which could provide immediate relief and response at least till the injured reach the hospital.

Can Bangladesh sensitively deal with and help rehabilitate the 13,000 children who become permanently disabled due to injuries every year? "No. Not with the present government apathy and social attitudes regarding disability," says an emphatic Dr Nafeesur Rahman, director of the National Forum of Organisations working with the Disabled (NFOWD). "Here, once you are disabled, you lose everything – social status, position in the family, economic opportunities and even your name. You begin to get referred to by the name of your injury - Shujon, who may be blind, would only be called *andha*," says Dr Rahman. With only four percent of the total number of disabled children attending primary school in Bangladesh, the challenges that the new 13,000 annual entrants to this 'club' face becomes clear. It is also crucial that the larger society jettison prejudiced notions of the disabled, and the government build inclusive institutions.

### Reviving the instinct

While awareness about the child injury crisis present in Bangladesh is spreading, there are clear obstacles on the way – from vested interests that have a stake in existing health priorities to senior medical professionals who are reluctant to do a course correction.

The discovery that it is not diseases and infections but injuries that are the leading cause of child deaths is not music to the ears of one sector – the vaccine industry. As an official confides, "They would like to sell more vaccine but from the perspective of the health system, any additional investment there would only yield diminishing returns as the cause of mortality is already shifting elsewhere." The vaccine lobby is extremely powerful globally, with the money as well as political network to determine health priorities at donor headquarters as well as in distant governments. It would try to retain focus on vaccine preventable disease and ensure status quo vis-à-vis present health priorities. There is also a level of resistance among leading medical practitioners in Dhaka to recognise injury as a major health concern. To be kind, one can say that this attitude stems from ignorance rather than a subliminal leaning towards an approach that would rather maintain the focus on infections and diseases and their treatment.

But there is hope – younger doctors in Dhaka hospitals seem overwhelmingly aware of the drastic nature of the data on injuries. This is because they are present in the trauma and emergency units, seeing for themselves the scale of injuries. The inclusion of injury in several of its key plans and programmes reflects the positive attitude of Bangladesh's Ministry

of Health. Meanwhile, Dr Fazlur Rahman's pioneering safe community programme in Sherpur, where drowning deaths have been reduced significantly, proves that injuries can to a large extent be prevented even in low-income communities. All these events, seemingly unconnected, show that there is progress at each level – from growing awareness to policy intervention to prevention – and all of this has happened in a relative short period of five years.

The 'unseen mountain' is now clearly visible, and with the large number of children dying or being disabled from injuries, it does not present a pretty picture. While the earlier mountain of diseases was vaccine preventable, the present one clearly requires a more complex and integrated approach – from making a traditional people recognise the a traditional problem with a new dimension, as well as devising strategies to prevent it. Indeed, the challenge in Bangladesh is to revive the society's instinctive urge to protect its young from injury such as drowning, an instinct that has been dulled or diverted with other health priorities taking precedence, and also by new injury-causing sources in the form of highway accidents or electrocution. As Bangladesh moves to reduce its volume of childhood injury deaths, other Southasian countries would do well to ask themselves whether they have a hidden mountain left to deal with.

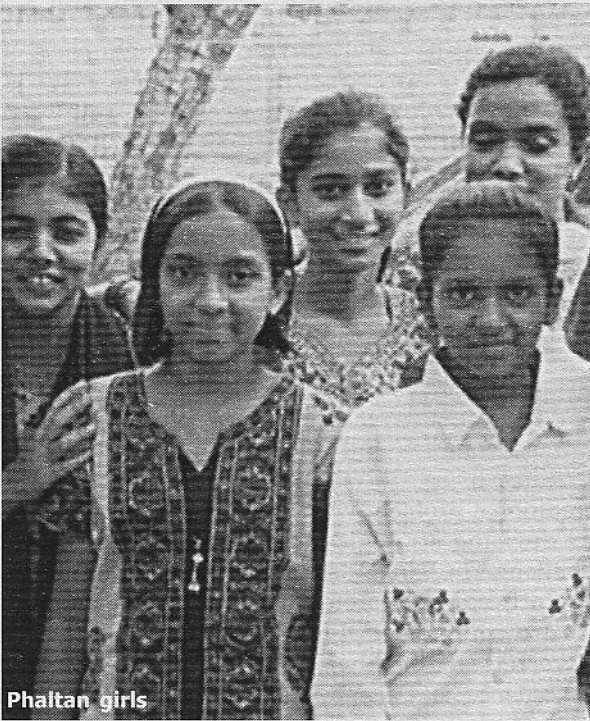
## India China Institute Fellows Program Announcement

The India China Institute (ICI), based at The New School, New York, announces its inaugural India China Fellows Program (ICFP). ICI seeks applicants who are highly accomplished, innovative and emerging Indian leaders with 5 to 15 years of professional experience in urbanization and globalization. Applicants from a wide range of backgrounds such as public administration, academics, media, civic action, art, architecture, urban planning and private entrepreneurship are encouraged to apply. In early 2006, the India China Institute will select five Fellows each from India and China, for a two-year fellowship award.

The selected fellows could continue their current profession during their fellowship period. They will be assisted in research proposal, travels and the three gatherings and compensated appropriately by honorarium.

For future Information, please write or email @  
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Phaltan girls

# Field sociology in Phaltan

by | Atul Mishra

“In rural Maharashtra, I would suggest Phaltan...” replied the incisive commentator and good friend Dilip D’Souza, in April this year, when I asked him about a possible place to work during my summer vacation from college. I had only heard of the place once before. Anxious and excited, I decided to pack my bags and go teach English at a Marathi medium school for a month in Phaltan. It turned out to be a fine lesson in field sociology.

Phaltan is a small town some 300 kilometres from Mumbai and 100 kilometres from Pune. A tableland in Satara district of Maharashtra in India, it wears a façade that is typical of many backwater towns. A theatre that plays B-grade Bollywood productions, Internet surfing parlours (popularly called cybercafes), a supermarket – all punctuate the grammar of this town that has more temples than any other place in western Maharashtra. The distant charm of Bombay and the lesser romance of Pune have ensured an ironic, but unavoidable, confluence of the definitely traditional with the apparently modern.

Phaltan was the seat of the Naik-Nimbalkar

royalty, the family of the wife of the Maratha warrior Shivaji. While the ‘idea’ of the Indian republic has clearly reached the corridors of the town administration, it is yet to make a mark in the minds of its residents. Descendants of the ‘royal family’ still control, if not govern, all aspects of life here. The sitting member of the state Legislative Assembly belongs to the royalty.

The ‘family’ owns and runs everything from educational institutions to luxury hotels, not to mention innumerable hectares of real estate. Of nearly 60,000 residents of the town, a handful of business families live it luxurious. For the rest, it is the typical story: unemployment, lack of opportunities, little upward mobility, minimal economic infrastructure, and the social mires of caste and, yes, religion.

A society in transition needs a catalyst to engineer that process. In the 1960s, Yashwantrao Chavan, Maharashtra’s first chief minister conceived that catalyst to be the Cooperative Movement. Cooperative sugar factories were assumed to be the key to empowering the rural populace of this region. But the movement today is seen as a colossal failure of state policy, one which only fed the political elites who came to be known as the Sugar Barons. The cooperative sugar factory that was set up in Phaltan initially provided jobs to a number of people. However, corruption, political feuds and faulty agricultural policies of the government resulted in the shut down of the factory. This factory produced its own sugar baron – one of the three brothers of the ‘royal family’. Sugar dreams turned sour, even bitter. And the town is still reeling from the social frustration that characterises the end of a utopian dream.

## Progressive education

In the midst of social and economic problems, there is also a transformation for the better occurring in Phaltan, primarily due to the efforts of some enterprising and committed individuals. Dr Maxine Berntsen, an American by birth became an Indian citizen and settled in Phaltan in 1966. Berntsen began by picking up kids from ‘untouchable’ families and ‘lower’ castes, and dropouts from under-privileged backgrounds and providing them with education. In 1986, she started a school, the Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan (KNB). From its initial years when Berntsen had to convince parents to educate their children to its current status as a vitally important institution, KNB has come a long way.

How is this school different from any other? “Experiments in teaching methods, a strictly secular environment, committed teachers and students, and no political backing. This is what attracts the parents,” says Dr Berntsen. Dr Manjiri Nimbkar, a physician by profession and teacher by choice, who joined KNB in 1994 and became its unpaid principal



in 1996 adds, "It's the new ideas that we incorporate in our teaching process that helps our students think beyond narrow horizons." And students are indeed thinking beyond the immediate. Wasim Maner, a former student of KNB, is now pursuing a career in professional documentary filmmaking. Given the extreme poverty he came from, this would normally have been considered an audacious choice for a youngster from Phaltan. Wasim is currently working on a documentary film related to a United Nations project.

Individual initiative and commitment have led to positive changes in other areas as well. The Nimbkar Rehabilitation Trust, set up by late Kamalabai Nimbkar (again an American who married an Indian and changed her name) started the first school for mentally retarded children in Phaltan. Bon Nimbkar, a colourful and visionary entrepreneur, was an agricultural pioneer and is currently working in animal husbandry. Roping in breeding experts from Australia, he first spotted the potential of helping the poor through breeding a fast-growing goat and a twining sheep. Bon also started a fishery and later a Fishermen's Association in the town. The Nimbkar Group employs around 350 people permanently and over 150 women for seasonal work. An impressive effort when there is little else for the residents of the town to rely on.

### The underbelly

Despite some positive changes, the dark Indian reality of caste discrimination, communalism and poverty continue to define life in Phaltan. Stench welcomes you to the 'Muslim colony' of Qureshi Nagar, whose Khatik community has registered little growth on any of the social indicators over the decades. Situated at a distance from the rest of the town, it is in this locality that the dynamics of the mass-elite relationship is most visible. While the 'community' leaders send their own children to English schools, they fear that widespread education will loosen their grip on the people. And with religious leaders themselves thriving in a situation of abnormality and discord between communities, they would rather have people of Qureshi Nagar continue their ghettoized existence.

As a ploy to deter Qureshi Nagar parents from sending children outside the ghetto to Marathi medium schools such as KNB, community leaders open Urdu medium schools. Marathi, the stereotype goes, is language of the Hindus while Urdu is the "Muslim" language. Two or three months hence, however, they wrap up the ghost school, ruining the child's education. Only one boy of the ghetto, Kalim Qureshi, passed out of standard 10 last year from KNB.

The Dalit Basti stands as the mute semi-urban corroboration that caste segregation is alive and well in Phaltan. It faces Qureshi Nagar across the road,

home to extreme poverty and rampant illiteracy. Nothing more need be said.

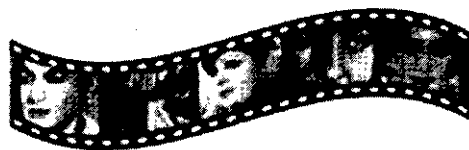
Yet, there are efforts underway to undo the wrongs of history and faith. Datta Ahivale is a journalist, Dalit activist and a teacher all rolled into one fine human being. He edits and publishes a Marathi weekly that raises Dalit issues and runs a school for Dalit kids, all this while surmounting tremendous economic and social hardship. Somnath Ghorpade is in charge of KNB's Outreach Programme that focuses on providing learning techniques to the government schools. "Is there any hope?" I once asked Ghorpade, while checking his report on a visit to a government school. (He was my student, learning basic English). With a smile, and a fair share of optimism, he replied enigmatically, "I am here only because someone else hoped I could be here." These activists believe that social change would remain incomplete if the marginalised are neglected.

The striking thing about Phaltan does not lie in its uniqueness- it is like any other town that occupies the Indian rural landscape, with the same problems, the same feudal mores and similar community practices. What is remarkable about Phaltan, however, is that it represents and reveals the power of individual initiative as well as the empowering role of education. The focus now has to shift towards making this change more inclusive.



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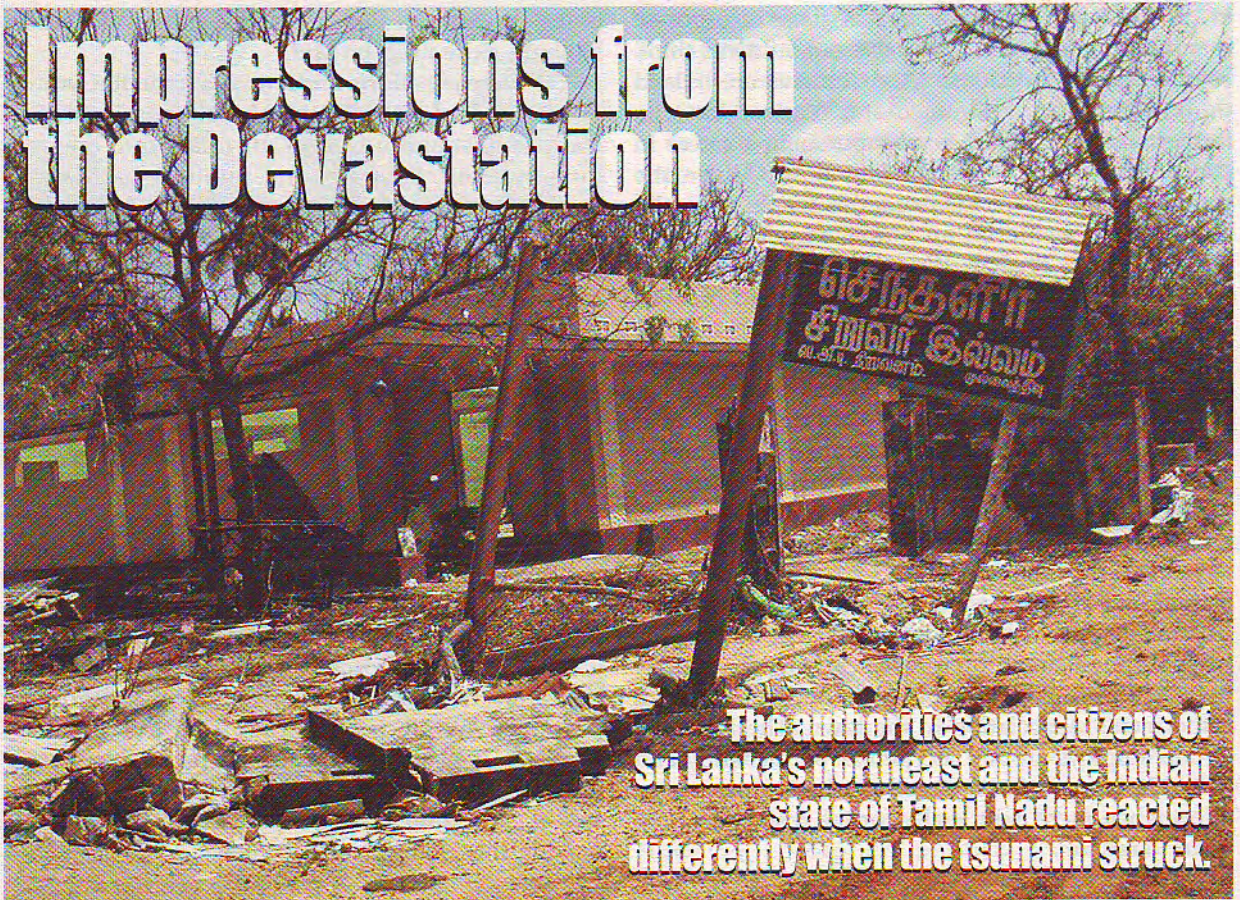
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# Impressions from the Devastation



The authorities and citizens of Sri Lanka's northeast and the Indian state of Tamil Nadu reacted differently when the tsunami struck.

by | **Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam**

**N**on-governmental organisations swarmed like locusts to Sri Lanka after the tsunami of 26 December. They would have dearly liked to do the same thing in India, but New Delhi declared itself perfectly able to deal with the disaster. For this ingratitude India was severely criticised by an international 'donor community'. There was also enough criticism to go around in Sri Lanka as well: how dare the Tamil Tigers claim they can coordinate and funnel all help through their own, indigenous NGO, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), instead of letting foreigners run loose in the countryside! This chatter subsided quickly enough, once it became clear that the TRO was virtually the only efficient ngo in Sri Lanka when it came to dealing with the tsunami aftermath. It got so bad, for a while, that one would have been forgiven for being cynical: what was worse? The tsunami or the floods of aid-givers who arrived afterwards?

How India and Sri Lanka dealt with the tsunami is a study in contrasts, as is the response of the citizens in the regions that were hit. Whereas the government in Sri Lanka was mired in donor administration and

coordination of NGOs, India decided to go about the task itself and kept a tight control on the assistance. The fisherfolk of the Tamil Nadu coast up and down the city of Madras were a picture of self-confidence in the aftermath of the tragedy, active in self-help and in challenging the government. On the other hand, across the Palk Straits in Mullaitivu in the LTTE-controlled northeast, the locals living in camps were but passive recipients of aid. There was a lethargy evident, and unwillingness to help with the reconstruction, which was perhaps the result of despair related to years upon years of war and destruction, followed by a tsunami of the kind of magnitude that it was.

## Northeast disaster

In Sri Lanka, 37,000 died and 300,000 were rendered homeless by the tsunami. The devastation was concentrated on the coast between Galle in the south and Trincomalee in the northeast, the latter taking a direct hit that claimed 17,400 lives. Mullaitivu is the little market-town along this coast fiercely contested during the war. It is now part of the LTTE-controlled



area, the Vanni. Having seen the place after the war, it seemed that more destruction was not possible. Where in the past there was rubble and ruin, now there was virtually nothing. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives here on 26 December, and 21,000 were displaced. The town was nothing more than dead branches, fallen trees, concrete slabs, a gutted post office, and the façade of a ruined church that had survived the earlier fighting. A children's home situated along the seashore had 98 of its 150 or so young residents swept away.

Most of the 23 transit camps had been established mainly in schools, and the one we visited was clean but spartan: eight families to a classroom with cement floor, palm-leaf roof and partition walls. There were no doors and little privacy. The TRO looked after the people together with the Red Cross, Unicef and other organisations. The people appeared well looked-after, but were still disoriented and apathetic weeks after the event. In economic terms, the tsunami has hit the fishing community hardest with nearly 14,000 boats lost in the northeast. The sums needed for reconstruction were estimated to be highest in the northeast – USD 774 million – compared to USD 387 million in the south.

Though the Colombo government had declared a national state of emergency by 27 December, help arrived tardily. Private organisations were on the spot much faster. It took until 24 June for the government to sign an agreement with the LTTE on the mechanism for distribution of assistance. However, this agreement has had to be suspended because it was challenged by one of the parties in Colombo's governing coalition, the JVP.

In northern areas under its control, the LTTE was able to establish help and recovery measures speedily. However, further down the east where it wrestles for control of territory with the government, things were more difficult. There was also a tug-of-war between the assisting agencies, quite apart from the hundreds of ngos that arrived in the wake of the disaster. There were mounting complaints that the bulk of government assistance went to the south, where the devastation was less marked. Even private help and donations from various organisations went to the south at first, not least because the international media had infested Galle and preferred to report from the comfort of the 5-star accommodation available there.

Meanwhile, tons of aid and supplies were stuck at Colombo harbour, because the government slapped customs and excise on goods that were allegedly 'not suitable' for disaster relief. The smaller ngos were unable to pay the high fees and so could not retrieve their relief supplies. The goods fell to the government



**Having seen the place after the war, it had seemed that more destruction was not possible.**

by default and were auctioned publicly. There seemed enough proof to confirm allegations that goods destined for the north and northeast were taxed unless they were handed over to the government to distribute at will.

The situation was complicated by the political situation, with a fragile ceasefire just holding up between the Tigers and the government. Things came to a head when the JVP, as the coalition partner of the Kumaratunga government in Colombo, refused to allow the LTTE to be charged with organising relief in the area under its control. The flow of relief goods to the Vanni was also hampered by officers at the lower levels of military and bureaucracy, who had a history of scoffing at the regulations on transport of goods and people even under the ceasefire agreement of 2002.

The TRO, which coordinates and funnels all relief to the northeast, was founded in 1985 by supporters in India and Malaysia. While sympathetic to the

LTTE, the organisation has acted as an independent support group for Tamils affected by the war, and now it is responding to the tsunami. The TRO was extremely efficient in organising the recovery of bodies and helping the people after the disaster. Many of the old and new ngos elsewhere, on the other hand, simply, as someone said, "stood on each other's toes and organised the chaos."

What does retard the TRO's efforts is the apathy among the people in the relief

camps, visible even months after the disaster. When it was discovered that traditional shelters of brick were much better than the tents being distributed by the Red Cross, which were hot and muggy inside, the TRO decided to promote the rapid construction of these prototypes. However, the problem was how to get the people enthused. It was impossible even to get helpers to carry the bricks required for the



construction. It is this apathy that is the greatest challenge to the TRO's efforts to go beyond the first stage of direct relief, to medium and long term issues of reconstruction and rebuilding livelihoods.

Meanwhile, the national authorities are trying to implement a pre-existing regulation for a Coastal Exclusion Zone (CEZ), prohibiting permanent structures within a 100 to 200 m from the shore. The fisherfolk reject the CEZ because it inhibits their access to the sea. Leader of the Opposition, Ranil Wickremasinghe, has supported their stand and recommended they take recourse to the law. Interestingly, the regulation is not supposed to apply to hotels and tourist establishments, because they are built of stone and presumably safer. As in Tamil Nadu (see accompanying article), the fisherfolk suspect that they are being targeted in order to benefit real estate sharks who have an eye on the seafront properties.


### **Comparison: Tamil Nadu**

For India with its one billion inhabitants and massive economy, the devastation that the tsunami visited on Tamil Nadu and the Andaman and Nicobar islands was relatively modest. Whereas the tsunami was a matter of national significance for Sri Lanka, it was a regional matter in India. The annual budget of India passed shortly after the tsunami did not show any impact of the tsunami. Even Tamil Nadu's economy has been considered 'reasonably sound' in spite of the disaster.

While aid from the state administration was slow in coming, both the central government and ngos acted speedily after the tsunami struck. This created some controversy between the state and central governments, enough that the Centre sent relief funds to the affected areas via loans disbursed directly through public banks or the municipalities. Not to be undone, in Madras, Chief Minister Jayalalitha promised generous credit schemes and grants to the affected families. India accepted help from foreign organisations and ngos only under stern conditions. In this sense, the Indian government acted with the

same level of confidence as the LTTE in the Vanni, and in contrast with the attitude of the government in Colombo.

The coast of Tamil Nadu is about 1,000 km long, and the Chief Minister's idea of building a protective concrete embankment all the way through was greeted with ridicule and promptly dropped. Experts said it would be much more sensible to plant mangroves along the coast, which had in fact saved some communities from the brunt of the tsunami. In a transit camp just outside Mahabalipuram, the fishermen were unanimous in saying, "Tell the government, we do not want alms. We want to work." While they and their families are not the poorest communities in Tamil Nadu, they are considered 'low caste', and actually regard themselves as outside the hierarchical caste system. They are well-organised, are politically aware, and know their rights: they demand loans to buy new boats, nets and engines. But most of all they demand the right to stay in their traditional homesteads. Hardly had the tsunami washed over them and they raised their heads again, they went and sued the government because it intended to drive them out of their rightful places.

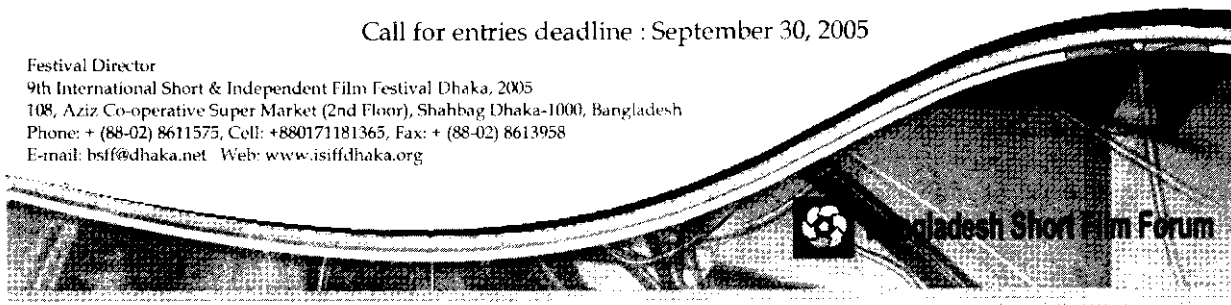
While Colombo asks for and relies on international donations for rehabilitation and reconstruction and sometimes complains that not enough of the promised aid is forthcoming, New Delhi and Madras have relied almost entirely on their own resources. While Sri Lanka thus puts its foreign policy in captivity in the wake of the tsunami, India preserves its autonomy. In the end, it was the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation of the northeast that was there when the people of the region needed them the most. On the other hand, the two decades of fighting seem to have sapped the strength and enthusiasm of the people themselves. And so when the waves came to devastate what little was remaining of their will-power and zeal, the people of the Sri Lankan northeast preferred to be passive recipients. In Tamil Nadu, by contrast, a people who had not seen the devastation of war, were able to organise, help each other, and challenge authority. 

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# Tamil Nadu's second tsunami

by | S Sumathi and V Sudarsen

**I**n the days after the 26 December tsunami swept up the Tamil Nadu coast, people united for the sheer common fortune of having survived. Shooing away the vultures, they came together to bury the dead in mass graves. No one bothered about the caste or religion of the bodies that lay on the beach. There was a groundswell movement by individuals and organisations carrying out rescue operations and fulfilling the most fundamental needs of the survivors.

On the first day, with the people scattered across different villages, the survivors were running about frantically seeking lost family members. The villagers opened their temples, marriage halls and theatres to the homeless, and had helped start communal kitchens by the next day.

By the second day, the survivors were able to concentrate their search for loved ones in the camps that had sprung up. Many student groups, ngos and others had moved into the ravaged areas, working to locate the missing, clearing the corpses, and providing much-needed medical support. Auto-rickshaws were commandeered to announce the names of stranded survivors. It took another couple of days for the communities and families to finally regroup. An approximate list of the dead was ready in a little over a week, the biggest problem being the

identification of bodies that had been washed away from their home communities. In the end, such cases did not find registration on any list.

The immediate emotional catastrophe behind them, half a year later, the people of the Tamil Nadu coast are now confronted with the challenge of rebuilding their lives and livelihoods – how to settle down, where to settle down, and how to get back to the sea and off the dole. They want to take back control of their lives and emerge from their dependence. They want to rebuild their houses by the beach. But all this is easier said than done.

## The women, the children

It was the women and children who were most affected by the tsunami. Women lost their lives while trying to rescuing their children. The entire coast is covered with a thick spread of thorny bushes, and so many who were trying to escape got their clothes tangled in them. Dresses were torn or pulled away by the waves, and many women never called for help out of a sense of shame.

After the disaster, it is the women who collect clothing, food, water packets and other relief materials, spending long hours in queues. The men, mostly, hang on to their masculine egos and only





come forward when it is time to collect cash compensations. The day-to-day activity of men has come to a standstill whereas women are more engaged in keeping the house going.

The few psychologists who have worked with the victims feel their contribution in counselling has been totally insignificant in comparison to the volume of emotional distress. Thousands of children have seen dead bodies lying about, many of them would have been friends. They have watched the removal of decayed corpses. For days on end, the children were not playing, and their sleep is disturbed. They tend to talk a lot about death. Many who saw their parents carried away were rendered mute for long periods. The very word 'tsunami' is enough to evoke fear.

### Coastal regulation

More than 75 per cent of the victims of the tsunami in Tamil Nadu were from the fishing communities that survive by the seashore. The challenge beyond the trauma of bereavement is providing permanent shelters and means of survival. The original shanties which were mostly by the beach are almost all gone, as are the boats and fishing gear. For these people, the beach was their world, where they worked, traded, socialised and played. Their worldview extended from the beach into the sea, rather than inland.

The Madras government has now taken a stand that all permanent shelters should be restricted to areas beyond 500m from the high water line. The basis for this diktat is the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ), an old, ineffective law which restricts construction within the 500m zone. The authorities are using the opportunity provided by the tsunami to implement the regulation to go after the poor fisherfolk, already devastated by the high waves of 26 December.

In considering the government's invocation of the CRZ as part of its tsunami-rehabilitation policy, it is

important to consider the situation of the coastal communities. Out of the 591 fishing villages along the Tamil Nadu coast, about 160 suffered severe damage. About 300 were moderately affected, while a hundred-odd villages suffered little or no loss. Interestingly, it is the villages which bore the brunt of the disaster that are now facing the wrath of the CRZ and the prospect of displacement from traditional areas, in effect confronting a second tsunami.

### Right to homestead

While the ngos and some corporate houses have been engaged in the rehabilitation works, it is the government which controls the process and, most importantly, the placement of the new settlements. All the fisherfolk *kuppams* (communities) within metropolitan Madras have been asked to shift to temporary shelters, before they are finally moved to their permanent settlements. Those from the southern reaches of the city have been asked to move to Thoraipakkam, which is about 20 km away, impracticably far from their traditional beaches and without unhindered access to the sea which they require. It all boils down to the right to homestead land and freedom to practice one's occupation.

There is one more suggestion emanating from the bureaucracy and some ngos. It is that these shoreline people give up their artisanal fishing and shift to newer occupations. The young, it is proposed, will be absorbed into the government as and when jobs become available. This flies in the face of the well-known fact that there has been little or no governmental recruitment in the past five years or so, with the authorities preferring to recruit on a contractual basis through private agencies.

Youths and adults alike, the victims of the tsunami are resisting the attempt by others to control their lives. Their ancestors have been living in the *kuppams* for hundreds of years, and they have a natural right over their household area and also to unhindered access to the sea. The fact is that oceanfront property has suddenly become attractive to the wealthy and powerful, but how crass to try and use a tsunami as an excuse for evacuation of the locals!

Driving along the coast north of Madras, there are numerous permanent structures built well within 500m of the shore. Anyone can see that these structures infringing upon the CRZ are not the homes of fishing families. It is doubtful that these buildings of concrete and glass will be asked to shift when the time comes, while the beachfront shanties may just be emptied to provide, in time, prime urban real estate for some of the city's rich and powerful. But it is not too late, and now that they have emerged from their shock and bereavement, it does not look as if the fisherfolk of Tamil Nadu will 'evacuate their beachfront quarters, come hell or high water. ▲



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# The Persuasive Indian

**Scepticism and rationalism brought India/Southasia till here, and will take us into the future, says the Nobel laureate.**

review by | **A S Paneerselvan**

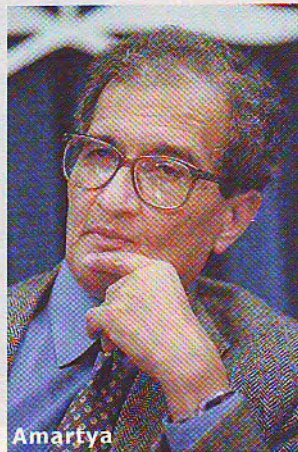
**W**hen Penguin released Amartya Sen's latest book *The Argumentative Indian* in early August, the book became a metaphor for both Sen, the man, as well as Sen, the Noble prize-winning economist. The book reflects on Indian culture, history, and identity. It gives us an opportunity to understand where Sen derives his notion of economics as a discipline which should be rooted in equality, fairness and entitlements. The 400-odd page of elegant prose that is accessible to the general reader paints India in particular, and Southasia in general, in broad strokes. While retaining an eye for the detail, never once does Sen miss the larger canvass. Unlike a single theme, Sen's anthology of essays brings out the heterodoxy of the mosaic called Subcontinent.

The first section, 'Voice and Heterodoxy', takes the reader on a moral and ethical tour of the beginnings of Southasian thought. Starting with an analysis of the Bhagvad Gita, the essential arguments between Krishna and Arjuna, Sen concludes that though Krishna's argument for action and duty captured the imagination of Isherwood and T S Eliot, it was Arjuna's profound doubt about pain and post-war desolation that has emerged of eternal value. The entire book operates on the one cardinal principle that a defeated argument that refuses to be obliterated remains alive. It is thus central for any system or society to remember Arjuna's consequential analysis and not to be just driven by Krishna's notion of

"doing one's duty".

There is another handsome technique Sen uses to demolish hegemonising ideology to embark upon a concrete empirical analysis. Refuting Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis, which has placed India firmly in the category of 'the Hindu civilisation', Sen argues that this reductionist approach downplays the fact that India has more Muslims than any other country in the world with the exception of Indonesia. The Muslim population in India is about 140

million- larger than the entire British and French populations put together. The chapter titled "India: Large and Small" is a fine exploration into the number based classification of majorities and minorities. For instance, he explains there can be at least five different ways to identify a majority group among Hindus: 1) the category of low-or middle-income people; 2) the class of non-owners of



Amartya

much capital; 3) the group of rural Indians; 4) the people who do not work in the organized industrial sector; and 5) Indians who are against religious persecution. Using these five examples, he successfully establishes the erroneous nature of the assumption of the centrality of religion-based categorization over other systems of classification. What gives this essay its edge is that Sen, by broad basing his arguments, not only challenges the assumption of the Western Huntington but also the local proponents of Hindutva. He patiently weaves warp by warp, weft by

**However, if one were to ask whether the book covers the entire gamut called India, the obvious answer is no. For instance, there is nothing about the non-Sanskrit past of the south and the literary and cultural references are primarily from the North and the East.**



weft, the multiple strands and plurality of voices that constitute India's past and the present. By drawing attention of the reader to every nuance, he warns us of the danger of simplification and reduction-ism.

The essays on Tagore and Satyajit Ray are a great primer into the works of these two masters of their respective arts. While writing about Tagore and Ray, Sen also brings out the creative tension in dealing with other cultures, problems of representations, and narrative logics of a work of art. Unlike Edward Said who sought identity in every work of art, Sen manages to establish the space for both identity as well as universality in the realms of narratives - be it novels or films. He successfully retrieves the sacred space of art's autonomy and the deepest conviction of not to be ghettoized into any singular identity even as it deals with cultural particularity and peculiarity. He brings out Tagore's valiant struggle against the corruptibility of nationalism.

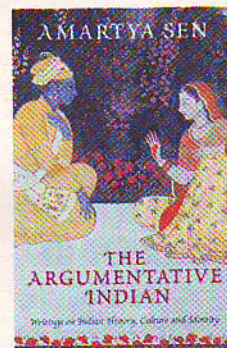
The central essay is Indian Traditions and The Western Imagination. Sen explains that the internal identities of Indians are drawn from different parts of India's diverse traditions. The observational leanings of Western approaches have had a major impact-both positive and negative - on how postcolonial India perceives itself. He refuses to indulge those who seek simple classifications and writes quite pithily: "What is India really like is a good question for a foreign tourist's handbook". He repeatedly brings forth the other positions, other contexts, and most importantly other concerns. He rightly explains the limitation of three dominant Western views and readings of India: curatorial, magisterial and exoticist, thereby hurting the rationalist part of India's tradition.

Part three of the book is a reflection of the contemporary Indian sub-continent. It deals extensively with issues of politics of deprivation. Sen not only looks at poverty from class and caste dimensions but also from the point of view of gender inequality. This is also the only section where there is an overt relationship between his economics and his politics. Positioning himself firmly in the left-centre economics, Sen brings out most of the major ills that are plaguing the sub-

continent. While holding the mirror closer to Indian sub-continent, he manages to do two things simultaneously: first identifying the problems of today and second, suggesting implementable ways to get out of the present state of misery. The only essay in this section, which Sen might have loved to completely rework, is India and the Bomb. The essay is based on his lecture at the Annual Pugwash Conference at Cambridge in 2000. Since then, there have been substantial developments in the opinion of the dominant powers over India's overt nuclearisation programme. The recent Indo-US agreement on the nuclear technology- which in real terms accepts India's nuclear weapon status and deals a body blow to the six decades old disarmament debate- is an issue that deserves a much more closer scrutiny by razor-sharp mind of the likes of Sen, and one hopes he takes it up shortly to explain the precariousness of this giant nuclear alliance.

After taking the reader through an uncomfortable excursion in economic erudition, Sen moves to a fascinating tale "India through its calendars". In this rather enchanting piece, he brings out India's multicultural history through the profusion of well-designed and well-developed calendars that exist, each with a long history. He also establishes the notion of continuity by drawing attention to the fact that Ujjain remaining India's principle meridian from fifth century CE onwards to till date.

Sen seeks to draw out India's rich tradition of argumentation, skepticism, rationality and heterogeneity in this important work. However, if one were to ask whether the book covers the entire gamut called India, the obvious answer is no. For instance, there is nothing about the non-Sanskrit past of the south and the literary and cultural references are primarily from the North and the East. But, these are not acts of omission but an honest recognition of the vastness of the sub-continent and its infinitesimal plurality. Amartya Sen succeeds in drawing the readers into his universe by not projecting his work as "The reading of The Indian Sub-Continent" but as "A reading of the sub-continent" and opening up the space for each of us to add to this massive multitude of voices.



**The Argumentative Indian**  
Amartya Sen  
Penguin Books

UK, 2 June 2005  
ISBN 0713996870  
£25



A fine memoir of a wronged man  
who refuses to go for the jugular.

# Whodunit? All of them



by | Ravi Nair and Rineeta Naik

**T**he story of Iftikhar Gilani's days in prison reads like a textbook case of all that is wrong with the criminal justice system in this part of the world. It is also the story of paranoia, prejudice and apathy, all of which found full play in a system that boasts of a functioning and "independent" judiciary and a "vibrant" media trained to examine and analyse the facts of each case. Years from now, retired Intelligence Bureau officials, much-feted retired bureaucrats, and perhaps even honourably retired justices in the know, will reflect on Iftikhar Gilani's case in their memoirs, and as is the wont of many such eminent retirees, will point to what went wrong, and how it could have, indeed, should have, been set right. 'Retrospect' is a comforting, eminently huggable word – it will soothe those occasional pangs of conscience.

For nearly seven months – the time it might take to write half a book, or see your daughter through her final exams and graduation, or launch a successful advertising campaign – Gilani underwent torture and humiliation in Tihar Jail and assaults on his reputation through the shameful conduct of the media. The simple act of downloading a published document, widely available in the public

domain, led to a nightmare that began with armed men and brusque officials taking over his house in the middle of the night. Not only did they ransack Gilani's house and tamper with the data in question, they fed false information to a press, which, barring a few exceptions, lapped it up.

India's Intelligence Bureau (IB), which is accountable to nobody, was clearly in charge here. The IB officials, using the Income Tax department as a cover for a raid, wanted the police to register a case of espionage under the Official Secrets Act, accusing Gilani of acting as an agent of the Pakistani secret service and passing on information about the deployment of security forces in Jammu & Kashmir. They overruled the objections of the police officers present, who expressed reservations about the allegations, and compelled them to proceed with Gilani's arrest.

The result was that Gilani was sent to Tihar Jail in west Delhi where he was given the standard treatment, with the tacit approval of jail officials – beatings and humiliation by hardened inmates. This had been preceded by an orientation session at the police station where a knowledgeable police official had



described his favourite 'interrogation' methods to a dazed Gilani. His reference was to "third degree", which has almost become a household term in some circles, liberally used even in polite company. Gilani was spared the worst of these methods, thanks to interventions by some friends in the media. As he points out in his book, thousands of others caught in the web of India's criminal justice system are not so fortunate. They are subjected to some of the most inhuman forms of torture, and the matter of guilt or innocence is moot.

Other outrages however continued against Gilani, and it is to the eternal shame of the politicians, bureaucrats, the police and the criminally irresponsible officials of the IB that they all condoned, and in some cases, even approved the steps that led to Gilani spending seven months in jail. These included an initial false opinion on the nature of the downloaded document provided by the Directorate General of Military Operations (DGMO), and news 'leaks' about Gilani's 'crimes' to unscrupulous, unprofessional media persons. All this influenced judges, jail officials and even inmates at Tihar, to Gilani's detriment.

There followed an relentless cycle of court appearances, rejection of bail applications, and false hopes of release. Finally, however, the case collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, as New Delhi journalist Siddharth Varadarajan points out in his excellent foreword. The Directorate General of Military Intelligence (DGMI) rejected the earlier assessment of the document by the DGMO, and when the court was about to be informed of this revised opinion, the government withdrew the case and Gilani was freed. He was released without so much as an apology, let alone an offer of compensation or promise to bring those responsible to account.

### **Rights and acquiescence**

Gilani's description of the tribulations of his co-inmates in Tihar is marked by sensitivity, as he brings out the poignancy of many a situation. This is more than can be said about much of India's mainstream media. Indeed, the author is much too kind to his fraternity, viewing the foibles of some of his fellow

scribes with the same semi-detached eye that sized up his own prospects while at Tihar. However, he is sharp-eyed enough to acknowledge the gross inaccuracies in reporting by the media in general – inaccuracies that often have grave, far-reaching consequences for the subject of the media's attention. How many statements and press releases by the police, army, or another security branch of government, are verified before being published as the truth; and how many 'encounters' are reported as such simply because the police said so?

Indeed, how many mainstream newspapers and television channels have a policy of double-checking statements and claims from the security forces? Somewhere along the way, the term 'allegedly' went out of fashion. And when will the media begin to pay attention to the torture taking place at thousands of police stations and jails across India every single day, and the travesty of justice that takes place in the courts of the land?

Gilani's reactions to the arbitrary actions by the officials raiding his home points to a specific reality, that few citizens of the largest democracy in the world are actually aware of their rights when confronted by any coercive authority. He signed the search 'authorisation' and other documents presented to him without reading them. When he did realise that this was much more than a simple search by the income tax authorities, Gilani did not demand to consult a lawyer. He did not even ask to see a lawyer when he was told that he would be held at the police station for the night. It was much, much later that he realised that the entire roughshod operation was illegal. He never thought to ask why IB officers and others of indeterminate status were part of an Income Tax Department team, and why they remained even after nothing incriminating was found by way of concealment of income or money.

The instinctive reaction of citizens everywhere, elsewhere in Southasia as in India, when confronted by a policeman's knock is complete and unqualified acquiescence. Few understand that they have enforceable rights against arbitrary actions by the state, and so they never demand warrants

**Few citizens of the largest democracy in the world are actually aware of their rights when confronted by any coercive authority.**



and authorisations. The awe of authority is so great that few ever think of resistance. All of which points to the urgent need for human rights education, which should be spread not only among lawyers and university students; rights awareness must begin in schools. While schoolchildren are made to cram enough about their moral and civic duties, they are not informed about the rights of citizens. The result –well-educated, well-informed people like Gilani are at a loss when confronted by illegal search and seizure.

### **Courts of despair**

And so on to forgiveness. Gilani has been able to transcend his rage and anguish to write a dispassionate personal record. He comes across as a gentle, dignified man, not given to outbursts. This lack of rancour, and the author positioning himself as an objective observer, makes the book an efficient record of facts and experiences and provides the space to document the stories of others in similar situations. But the complete absence of indignation rankles. Surely, at the end of it all, the book's conclusion required a strident demand for justice. Surely, it is possible to express outrage without being shrill, to demand accountability for its own sake, out of a sense of fair play, and not necessarily out of a desire for revenge.

Is this zen-like detachment a reflection of Gilani's temperament? Perhaps. Or perhaps, after long, hopeless days in jail and surreal encounters with the lower judiciary, he has stopped harbouring any hope of those responsible for his plight being brought to justice. It may thus be that the lack of obvious bitterness is a result of despair for the country and system.

One awaits the memoirs of Sangita Dhingra Sehgal. It is only then perhaps we will get some explanations as to why she, as Chief Metropolitan Magistrate before whom Gilani was hustled in June 2002, did not record his statement. And why she did not consider using her official telephone line to connect to the Internet to verify for herself if the allegedly secret information downloaded by Iftikhar was in the public domain or not.

The judiciary, touted as the only standing pillar of an otherwise insensitive state, revealed its hollowness

in the Gilani case. Let us keep in mind that very few criminal cases ever reach the elevated strata of the High Courts or the Supreme Court of India. Most such cases involve poor, uneducated people who rarely, if ever, have the capacity to see their cases through the full range of available judicial remedy mechanisms. Thus, it is at the level of the trial courts that their fates are decided, often for keeps. Prison officials and police often 'forget' about undertrials awaiting court decisions, those arrested for petty offences languish in prisons for years because the bail amount was set too high, and others have no means to hire capable lawyers who might point out a thing or two in their clients' favour in front of hard-to-please judicial officers like Sehgal.

Life goes on, meanwhile, for the protagonists. The two IB officials who took control of Gilani's life and turned it upside down on that fateful Sunday are said to have been given plum UN peacekeeping assignments in Kosovo. Nobody in the National Democratic Alliance government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, took moral responsibility for this gross miscarriage of justice that took place during its days in power. Most significantly, no one among the television or print media asked the then Home Minister a crucial question: Mr. Minister, your ministry's action has caused great hardship to an innocent man, do you intend to resign? The question would have been legitimate.

Members of the present United Progressive Alliance government in New Delhi were in the opposition when the forgiving Gilani lived his nightmare. In fact, many of them had come to his moral support and aided his family through the dark days. Even they have not stepped forward to offer justice to Gilani by going after the guilty.

Put this behind you, some well-wishers urged Gilani at the end of his ordeal. While he has come out with his book, it unfortunately appears that Gilani has decided to take the counsel to heart. Had he taken legal recourse in addition to writing this valuable memoir, he would be representing many, many Indians to whom injustice is done by their government, police and courts.

**The complete absence of indignation rankles. Surely, at the end of it all, the book's conclusion required a strident demand for justice.**



# Looking back in BEWILDERMENT

review by | C K Lal

The perplexity of Ram Sharan Mahat is palpable. He did everything according to the book of the Washington Consensus, and religiously followed every prescription of IMF-World Bank. The results weren't too unimpressive either. And yet the Maobaadi unleashed a violent revolution. Monarchists accused the democratic experiment of being an unmitigated disaster. Most of the direct beneficiaries of the free-market fundamentalism pursued by post-1990 governments lost no time in becoming their biggest critics as they saw the tide turning (so they thought) in favour of King Gyanendra. What went wrong? The question is indeed worthy of a tome that Mahat has tried to come up with.

Mahat is an important player in Nepali politics. His omissions cannot be attributed to ignorance. He has intentionally downplayed the idea and ideals of socialism in his book, which is ironic since his political party, the Nepali Congress, has won every election on the platform of democratic socialism and continues to publicly swear. Almost all the voters who elected Mahat to the Central Committee of Nepali Congress on 1 September 2005 in Kathmandu are fired by the ideals of egalitarianism, not the economic Darwinism advocated by the neoliberals that populate Kathmandu's cocktail circuit.

In democratic politics, Mahat began at the top. Upon his return from a UNDP job in the wake of the successful People's Movement of 1990, he fought and lost in the first parliamentary elections. Premier Girija Prasad Koirala appointed him to the powerful post of vice-chairman of National Planning Commission (NPC), an agency that should have played a leading role in the implementation of the party manifesto. But Mahat was still enamoured by the idea that socialism had 'failed'. Under him, the NPC became the focal point of the LPG (liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) agenda served under the rubric of 'economic reforms'. The rest is history, of promises not kept and aspirations belied.

Surprisingly, the author does not seem to realise that the road not taken created the disillusionment leading to the division and downfall of his party. While the rise of the Maoist insurgency cannot be directly attributed to the distortions in the economic policies of the Nepali Congress, there is no denying the fact that a sizeable section of the population began to feel neglected by a government that seemed to be promoting the private sector at the cost of everything else. On second thought, the omissions in the book may not be so surprising after

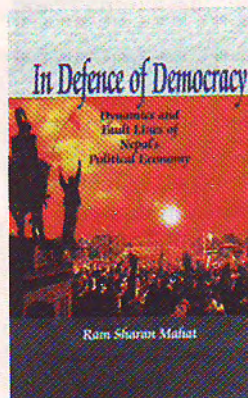
all. Mahat still harbours the illusion that the elected government had assumed office in 1991 "with an agenda for reforms". With that kind of understanding, it did not take him long to get into the good books of powerful diplomats and aid agency chiefs.



Known as a "donors' man" in the bureaucratic circuit, Mahat rose to be finance and then foreign minister. Within the party, he was the party president Girija Prasad Koirala's point man in dealing with professionals. Everywhere, he espoused free-market fundamentalism with the gusto of a convert. His book is a bewildered look at those eventful years when he hectored the hoi polloi on the virtues of privatisation, fell on all fours to get the one billion dollar Arun III hydropower project moving (it got cancelled by the World Bank, sowing bitterness in Mahat), and then saw his party disintegrating in front of his own eyes. Apparently something didn't work the way it was supposed to.

## Polarised society

To understand the causes of failure, it is necessary to conduct a critical and reflective assessment of one's beliefs, aims and methods. What the author has done instead is package statistics in presentable prose, and tried to make the case that nothing was wrong in the way he stewarded the political economy of the country. With that kind of assumption, it is very difficult to come up with a convincing defence. And so, *In Defence of Democracy* reads like the report of an expensive consultant hired to produce an apologia for his clients. These pages are bristling with tables, charts, graphs, facts and figures but lack a coherent point of view beyond the usual platitudes about democracy and development.



**In Defence of Democracy: Dynamics and Fault Lines of Nepal's Political Economy**  
 Ram Sharan Mahat, PhD  
 Adroit Publishers  
 New Delhi, 2005

Pages: xxiv + 437  
 ISBN: 81-87392-67-3  
 Price: INR 675



In the first four chapters, the author takes a cursory look at the evolution of the political economy of Nepal. The result of the labours of the author as a leisurely scholar on a Hubert Humphrey fellowship in the United States, this section is a rough compilation of available information. The rest of the book does not follow from this beginning, and there is little attempt to interpret or link the events of post-unification policies of the Shah-Rana rulers of Nepal with later developments. Should a reader wish to begin the book from Part Two, her understanding is unlikely to be affected by missing what went ahead.

The second part of the book deals with "democracy and development". Here, the author rushes with the breathlessness of a youngster euphoric about his report card. Replete with colour plates, extensive quotes from official documents, and black-and-white photographs of development projects, this part is the meat in the sandwich, placed between the introductory first and concluding third parts that are there more to add volume than understanding.

This middle section is celebratory. Mahat gives himself a pat on the back for the goals achieved in the face of daunting challenges and stifling constraints. Contrary to the defamatory allegations of monarchists about the period when the political parties stewarded the country, the network of roads had doubled nationally between 1990 and 2002, when King Gyanendra took the first steps towards royal takeover which culminated in the putsch of February 2005. During those dozen years of democracy, unlike the claim of scornful critics of the political parties and their rule, there was development enough. Access to electricity quadrupled, the literacy rate went up from 40 to 54 percent, and access to improved drinking water nearly doubled. Life expectancy went up from 53 to 59. And all this achievement during a period when the government was battling a restive monarchy in Kathmandu. By the sixth year, ruthless Maoism had already begun to exact its toll in the countryside.

The report card is indeed something to be proud of, and one hopes that the author had spent more time in analysing the nuances of this victory of democracy, at a time when superannuated royalists are crawling out of the woodwork in Kathmandu for a last hurrah under King Gyanendra's umbrella. Most recently, even the Asian Development Bank has agreed that the proportion of absolute poor earning less than a dollar a day got nearly halved in the decade of democracy. Above everything else, this is one measure of economic development that should give most satisfaction to the leader of a political party. But the fact is that disparities increased manifold during this period as well, much to the shame of the socialist Nepali Congress and the communist CPN-UML. The middle section of *Defence of Democracy* provides important reading material to try and understand the democratic interregnum amidst Kathmandu's polarised political climate. It is a climate where donors and diplomats for a long time joined the Kathmandu valley elite classes in castigating and

pummelling the hapless political leaders for their dozen years of alleged mismanagement of state. Well, it does turn out that they were wrong.

## **Assertion of democracy**

The concluding section of the book is the weakest. The author seems to lack an understanding of processes that link the political economy with social, cultural and foreign policy issues. The arguments seem opinionated. The chapter on the legacy of exclusion and neglect glosses over the role that the government needs to play in mainstreaming the marginalised. This entire section reads like a compilation of the op-ed pieces which the author regularly contributes to Kathmandu's dailies. Mahat is nothing if not forthright when he brings up what he calls the "Arun III debacle", when the one billion dollar project was scuttled for a variety of reason. But Mahat sees only an international environmental conspiracy out to rob a poor country of its just rewards. One can go on and on, and that perhaps is the strength of this section – the topics are invariably provocative and the author is determined to show that he has an opinion and an answer to everything.

Published from India, the book is produced with the care that a work of this kind deserves. In a country where copyeditors are an unknown breed, someone has done a good job of polishing the work of the former finance and foreign minister to suit the taste of discerning readers of English, including members of the expatriate community who would be the first beneficiaries of this book (also because of the cover price that has been set).

As an observant reader commented, *In Defence of Democracy* is a self-defeating title. Democracy is valued more for what it is than what it does, or more often, doesn't. That's the quality of democracy which makes its enemies mad: they can't attack something that is strong enough to be left undefended. In addition, author Mahat would know, perhaps, that the real achievements of democracy are beyond quantification: the dalit who entered the temple, the janjati ethnic person who began to boast of his 5000 years of history, the madhesi from the plains who finally got to see their dhoti-clad representatives straddling the corridors of the Singha Darbar secretariat, and the women who secured reserved representation in village and district levels.

Even though they are not in the forefront of the ongoing movement for democracy, the dalit, janajati, madhesi and the women of Nepal are the ones whose appetite has been whetted by democracy; they would want more and will fight for their rights in the days to come. They are the real defenders of democracy, even if this fact may have missed King Gyanendra. Meanwhile, authors like Mahat will chronicle their travails and seek to appropriate the achievements. That's the advantage of having the ability to compile thick tomes in the language of the farangi. But perhaps this reviewer complains too much. Someone has to do the paperwork, better it is a person of Ram Sharan Mahat's accomplishments. ✽





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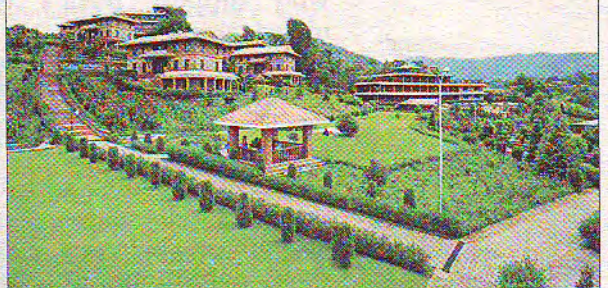
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# The Orientalisation of Islam

by | **Yoginder Sikand**

America's 'war on terror', a euphemism for a war against an ever increasing number of Muslim countries and groups, is premised on the notion of a distinction between the 'good' Muslim and the 'bad' Muslim. The former are Muslims who support Bush's imperialist misadventures; the latter those who refuse to toe the American line. The 'war on terror' is, at the same time, also constructed as a struggle for discursive hegemony between rival definitions of Islam – one version identified with the 'good' Muslims and their American backers. Consequently, the 'war on terror' comes to be framed, as this fascinating book tells us, in essentially cultural, as opposed to political, terms. It is as if the war is all about Islam, or, as the 'good' Muslims would have it, about the 'false' version of Islam championed by their unpleasant Muslim rivals. This, Mamdani dismisses as crude Orientalism, based on the facile assumption that Muslims exist in a historical vacuum and that all of their actions can be explained simply by a reading of certain Islamic texts.

Western neo-conservative and pro-Zionist ideologues insist that the 'war on terror' is a justified response to 'Islamic terror'. Mamdani pleads for a nuanced understanding of contemporary American neo-conservative discourse about Islam, pointing out the subtle differences between ideologues. While some like Samuel Huntington see Islam in monolithic terms, as inherently opposed to the West, there are others who distinguish between those Muslim groups that are not overtly hostile to the hegemonic project of the West, and the 'fundamentalist' others that are so. This, in turn, has crucial implications for America's policies vis-à-vis the 'Muslim world'. The former position calls for an unrelenting war against



Mamdani

Islam and Muslims, while the latter, building on the difference it constructs between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, appeals for a strategy of building close alliances between the West and 'good' Muslims in a war against 'bad' Muslims.

The author presents an incisive critique of what he calls this 'culture talk', seeing in it a convenient means to absolve Western powers of not only their role in abetting Islamist militancy in

**Radical Islamists are less interested in the intricacies of Islamic law and philosophy than in ridding their countries of West-dominated control.**



many countries but also their own direct involvement in terrorism in large parts of the developing world. He insists that contemporary Islamist militancy must be seen as a political phenomenon, and not something that is linked to Islam as such.

At the same time, Mamdani also dismisses the oft-heard argument that, in contrast to the 'non-West' where politics is always allegedly culturally driven, political decisions in the West are supposedly directed by purely rational and 'civilised' imperatives. The enormous clout of fundamentalist Christianity in America today, with the President claiming to receive revelations directly from God, is evidence enough to debunk this claim of civilisational and political superiority.

For Mamdani, terrorism is not a non-Western or a Muslim monopoly, with various Western powers having consistently used it as a political tool to advance what they regard as their own strategic interests. Marshalling evidence, he shows how America, for decades during the Cold War, used both state terrorism as well as local terror groups to wage war against nationalist and leftist regimes in a vast number of countries. These proxy wars caused the deaths of millions of people and led to untold destruction, in the face of which al-Qaeda's attacks fade into insignificance.

It is this specific political context of modern times, rather than revival of medieval orthodoxy, which reveals the roots of militant Islamism. The links between radical Islamism and imperialism are most clearly reflected in America's funding and training of Muslim militants in the course of the Afghan war as well as Israel's initial support to the Islamist Hamas as a counter to Palestinian nationalists. In fact, Mamdani suggests, the emergence of contemporary Islamist 'terrorism' can be understood only by recognising its close links with Western imperialist interests which used the Islamists as a principal means to challenge the Soviet Union during the Cold War. America's policy of patronising Islamist militants has now boomeranged on itself with the former now on the offensive for a host of reasons. The factors which have

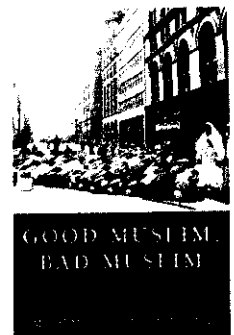
provided the fodder for discontent include the United States' continued support for Israel in the context of Palestinian aspirations, the brutal invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia, and America's backing of a host of repressive pro-Western regimes in Muslim countries.

### **The Muslim non-West**

The book convincingly argues that militancy in some Muslim communities, including the issue of radical Islamism, is a political rather than a religious phenomenon. It is a reaction to Western imperialism and its local agents. Radical Islamists are less interested in the intricacies of Islamic law and philosophy than in ridding their countries of West-dominated control. America's 'war on terror', for its part, is also all about politics, the argument about it being waged in order to 'defend' 'civilisation' being a flimsy fig leaf to cover up the hegemon's designs for global control.

While Mamdani's narration of a long list of US imperialist misadventures across the globe, to which Islamist militancy is, in a sense, a response, and his critique of American neo-conservative discourses about Islam is valuable, in the end he is able to present only one side of a complex story. The book keeps off analysing and critiquing Islamist discourses about non-Muslims and their religions, which, critics would argue, is a mirror image of the Western imperialist notion of the 'Muslim world' or the non-West. As both Bush and Osama would see it, if one is not with them, one is necessarily against them.

With the political roots of 'terror' and 'war on terror' clear, solving the mounting global crisis, says Mamdani, also calls for a political response. What is needed is a global movement for peace as well as a concerted effort to bring America to its senses, forcing it to respect local nationalisms and desist from behaving like the global bully that it has become. But are such pious desires, as here of Mamdani, enough to tame the imperialist beast? The reader is left with the sense that while Mamdani excels in analysis, the solutions he has to offer somewhat fail to enthuse.

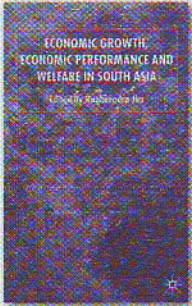


**Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: Islam, the USA and the Global War on Terror**

**Mahmood Mamdani**  
**Permanent Black New Delhi, 2005**  
**Pp: 304**  
**ISBN: 81-7824-111-0**  
**INR 295**



**Economic Growth, Economic Performance and Welfare in South Asia**, edited by Raghendra Jha. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005. Price not given.

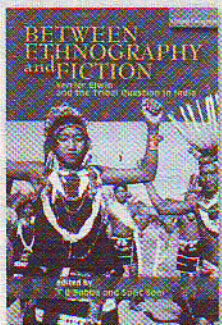


This volume presents frontline research by leading academics and public policy experts on the prospects for rapid economic development in Southasia. It reviews the recent macroeconomic performance of Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and examines three emergent challenges for the Indian economy: devising a policy response to climate change; attaining the Millennium Development Goals set by the UN; and restructuring state level finances.

**Asian Medicine and Globalization**, edited by Joshep S Alter. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2005. Price: USD 45

There is a critical tension in the ways regional medical systems are conceptualized as "nationalistic" or inherently transnational. Although all medical systems function in specific cultural contexts, almost all of them claim universal applicability. This volume is concerned with questions and problems created by the friction between nationalism and transnationalism ic:in times of globalisation. Offering a range of perspectives, the contributors address questions such as: How do states concern themselves with the modernisation of 'traditional' medicine? How does the global hegemony of science enable the nationalist articulation of alternative medicine? How do global discourses of science and 'new age' spirituality facilitate the transnationalisation of 'Asian' medicine? As more and more Asian medical practices cross boundaries into Western culture through the popularity of yoga and herbalism, among others, and as Western medicine finds its way East, all such issues become inextricably interrelated. These essays consider the larger implications of transmissions between cultures.

**Between Ethnography and Fiction: Verrier Elvin and the Tribal Question on India**, edited by T B Subba and Sujit Som. Orient Longman, New Delhi. Price: INR 550



This collection of essays examines anthropological studies of Northeast India, studies the history of the region, and attempts to establish the connection between the present and prehistoric past. It also examines the colonial context and its effect on policy and present perceptions. The book brings together writings of 16 scholars of various disciplines to re-examine the works of Verrier Elvin in the

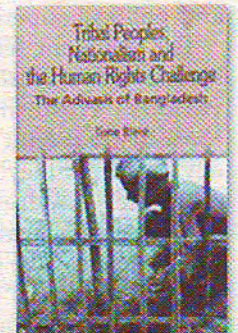
field of tribal literature, tribe and non-tribe relationship, tribal development policies, missionaries and conversion, myths and legends, and arts and crafts.

**A Concise Encyclopaedia of North Indian Peasant life, A Compilation from the Writings of William Crooke, J.R. Reid and G.A. Grierson**, edited by Shahid Amin. Manohar, New Delhi, 2005. Price: INR 2500

Weaving an intricate tapestry of crops, seasons, products, beliefs, ceremonies, folk adages, while showcasing the multiple dimensions of rural life, this work reveals the unlikely but enduring threads that bind and sustain the peasant world. The Concise Encyclopaedia aims at a better understanding of both peasant life and culture, and the ways of colonial ethnography.

**Tribal peoples, nationalism and the human rights challenge. The Adivasis of Bangladesh**, by Tone Bleie, Chr. Michelesen Institute, CMI, Bergen, Norway. University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2005.

The book unravels how the Adivasis have not been given their due recognition in spite of their history as Bengal's earliest inhabitants and their prominent role in mass rebellions leading up the nationalist movement. Instead, human rights violations and escalating livelihood crises characterise the lives of Adivasis in north-western Bangladesh. The book documents the loss of agricultural and forested land through circumvention of protective land laws in the post-colonial period. This has resulted in erosion of indigenous knowledge systems, forced migration and escalating poverty. The inability of Adivasis to take part directly in the international indigenous movement is explained in the light of cultural homogenous nationalisms and internal institutional fragmentation as a result of ethnic and religious divisions.



**Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and Politics on the Disputed Borders of Ladakh, India** by Ravina Aggarwal. Durham, Duke University Press, 2005. Price: USD \$23.95

Aggarwal brings the insights of performance studies and the growing field of the anthropology of international borders to bear on her extensive fieldwork in Ladakh. She examines how social and religious boundaries are created on the Ladakhi frontier, how they are influenced by directives of the nation-state, and how they are shaped into political struggles for regional control that are legitimised through discourses of religious purity, patriotism and development. She demonstrates in lively detail the ways that these struggles are enacted in particular cultural performances such as national holidays, festivals, rites of passage ceremonies, films and archery games. By placing cultural performances and political movements in Ladakh at center stage, Aggarwal rewrites the standard plot of the nation and border along the Line of Control. (See also article by M Ismail Khan, pp. 61)





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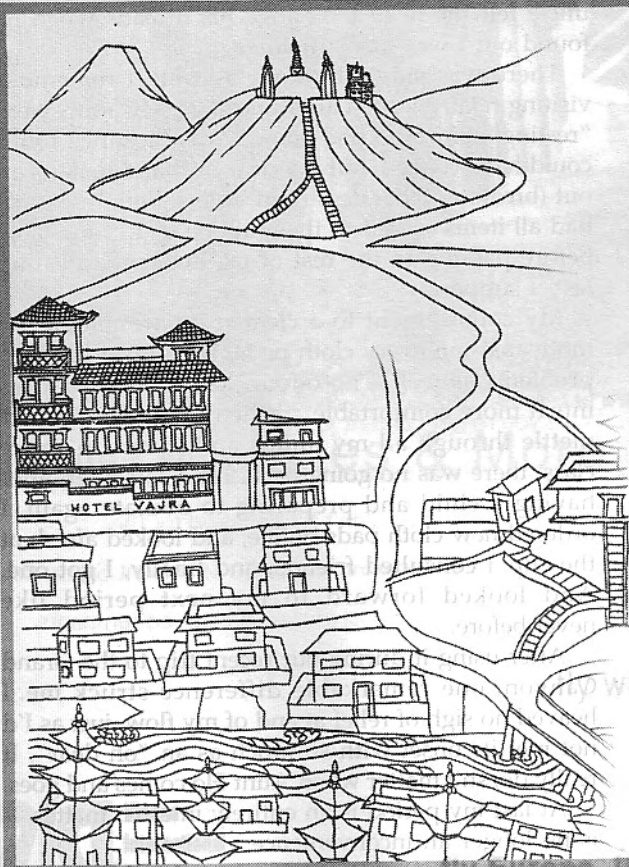
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Ketaki Sheth  
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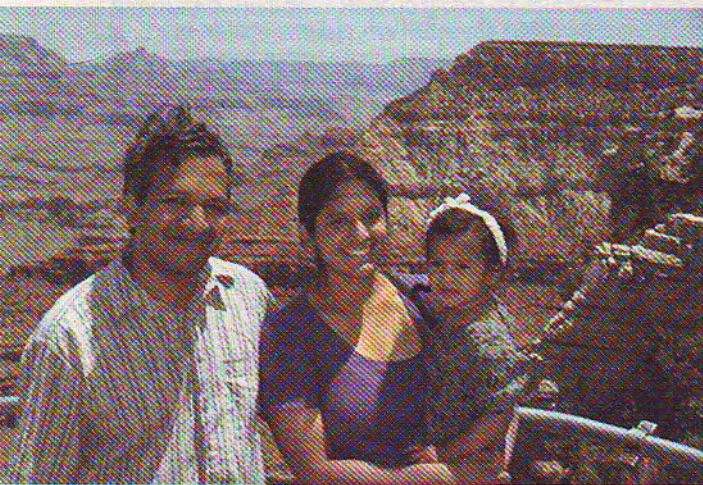


# THE CUP AND ME

by | **L S Aravinda**

When I read about Gita's menses in *Love, Stars, and All That*, I felt many a page was yet to be written on this rarely told yet widely experienced love-hate relationship. Would I ever attain the peace of Anne Frank, who cherished her monthly cycle as her own sweet secret? For twenty years I wondered, and now I know.

Growing up in Indiana in the 1970s, I believed our family would soon be moving back to India. In fact, we never even visited the country till I was 13. It was only then, while braving the heat one fine November in Tenali, that I learned to dress like a "mature" girl, wearing a half-sari that fell in a V behind my knees. Catching trains at all hours, we visited every branch of the family. But the one thing I could never find when I needed it the most was a trash can. So when I woke up one day in yet another family member's home to find I got my period, I asked where I should dispose of my napkins.



What a shock to learn then that their plan was instead to dispose of me. Confined to a corner room, I could go out to the bathroom only by the side door. The rest of the house was forbidden territory. Meals would be brought to me. For three days, I cried and cried. My cousin played cards with me as long as we did not touch the same card at once. At the end of the ordeal, I had to wash my clothes. Not before, for my touch would have contaminated the water supply. I was a Brahmin, yes, yet untouchable all

the same. Had I known about Chokha Mela, who wrote in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that from this untouchability springs life itself, perhaps I'd have some hold against the abyss taunting my adolescent self-esteem.

But there was no one to tell me of such affirming things, not until another time, another place.

It was in a tribal village in Maharashtra that I first learned about the cup six years ago. Not from a villager mind you. It was the rest of us non-tribal visitors to the area who had to discuss our sanitary needs. No trash cans in sight, those using disposables carried them back to the city. Those of us using cloth washed and dried them out of sight on the rooftops. One young woman from Canada, however, used a rubber cup that she could simply empty, wash, and reinsert within a minute.

How many hours, how many gallons of water, and how much trouble could I have saved had I tried the cup then? Now when I tell others about the cup and they have qualms, I can only smile.

Thinking back, part of the reason why I could not quite shrug off that sense of "wrongness" those relatives of mine conveyed about menstruation was that it simply was a graceless ordeal, month after month. There were times in college I remember my insides churning and thighs aching so much that I barely made it to class. The smell, the leakage, the bulkiness, and discomfort left me accepting that maybe I *was* too dirty to go to temple. Even my bad uncle felt the need to change his threads when he found out I was menstruating.

There was subtle humour as well. I remember visiting relatives soon after marriage. My aunts were "resting". Since no one knew I was "resting" too, I could have cooked, but my dear husband took us all out (breaking other, less rigid, rules). Both my aunts had all items served to them at one end of the table before passing to the rest of us. Better than eating last, I suppose.

My commitment to a cleaner environment had motivated me to try cloth pads. They relieved other problems as well – no odour, less leakage, and so much more comfortable. When they proved their mettle through all my jumps and squats in dance class, there was no going back. Ten years later, after having a child and preparing to ovulate again, I ordered new cloth pads online, and looked afresh at the cup. I consulted friends, and finally, I got one. And looked forward to my next period like never before.

After using it during our recent trip to the Grand Canyon, one remarkable difference struck me. I heaved no sigh of relief at end of my flow, just as I'd not met its onset with so much as an "oh dear". It really doesn't matter when Aunt Flo comes and goes.

At last my period is an entirely internal matter. It is no longer an inconvenience. ▲



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