

May-June 2006

# HIMAL

SOUTHASIAN

STARTING JULY 2006,  
HIMAL SOUTHASIAN  
GOES MONTHLY!

# Finding Purvanchal

The Subcontinent's blighted heartland



**NEW NEPAL story!** p 7

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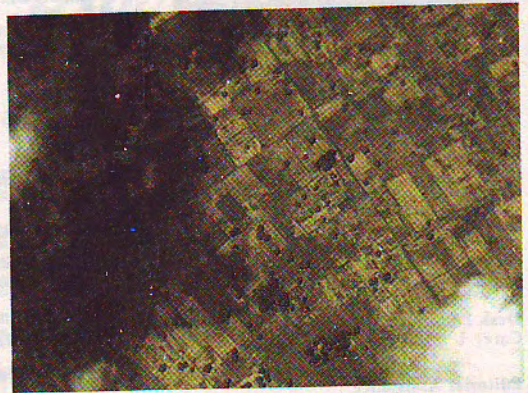
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## Shikha Trivedi's Purvanchal

This issue of Himal takes the reader on a tour of the heavily populated, economically challenged heartland of India. Purvanchal, which makes up the eastern half of Uttar Pradesh, stands mute testimony to an alarming trend: the growing class divide between the bullish states of the Indian southern and northwestern regions, and the northern bank of the Ganga plains. Writer **Shikha Trivedi**, who began as a print journalist and has lately been engaged in bringing out emotionally charged television footage from the Indian grassroots, has traveled many times to the area. She believes that Purvanchal and the adjoining state of Bihar together are blighted by an enormous volume of human misery. She believes it is important to bring this to the notice of the rest of India and Southasia.



A satellite image of Purvanchal fields adjacent to the city of Gorakhpur

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**\*Notice to librarians and archivists:** Due to an inadvertent error linked to Himal's republication in July 2005, the past two issues of the magazine were erroneously marked 'Vol 18' when both should have been 'Vol 19'. Our Jan-Feb 2005 issue should have been labelled 'Vol 19, No 1' and our Mar-Apr 2005 issue should have been 'Vol 19, No 2'. The error is regretted.

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Nepal

# Nepal's people phenomenon

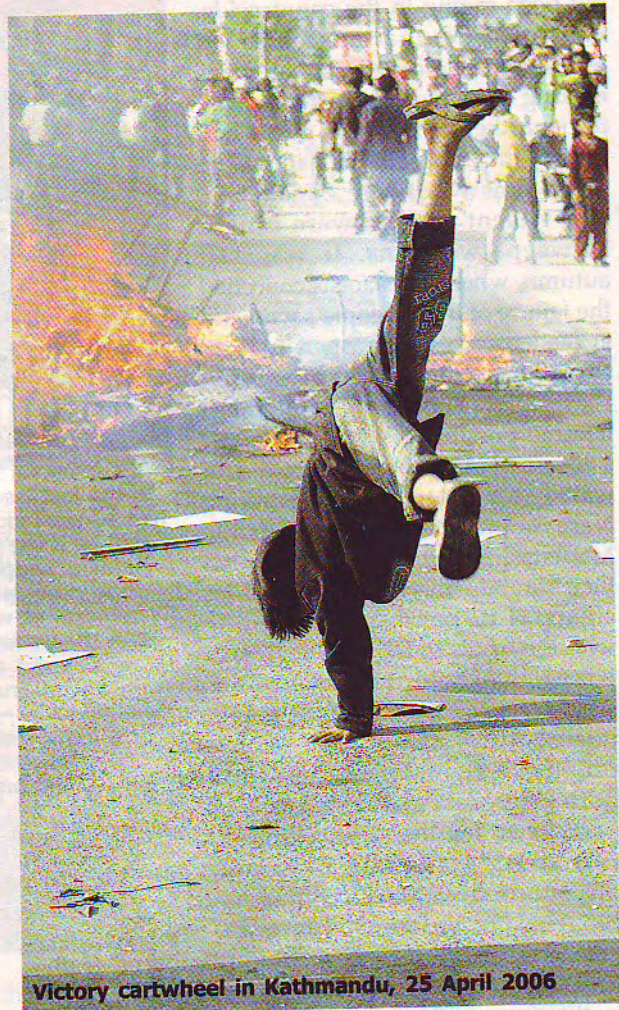
*Hum dekhenge ...  
Jab takth giraye jayenge  
Sab taaj uchale jayenge\**

**W**ell, the virtuous people of Nepal saw to it that the crown was dashed. Very late in the modern era, long after other countries of Southasia had experienced their uplifting, cathartic moments, Nepalis by their millions stood up against feudalism. People Power simultaneously pushed back a despotically inclined king, made space for pluralism, and created the conditions for peace. The mission now is to bring the Maoists in from the jungle while ensuring that the kingship is forever barred from mischief. Faiz Ahmed Faiz would have liked it here in Kathmandu this week, as would have Iqbal Bano, who sang that immortal people's anthem.

Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971; the rest of Southasia, its freedom in 1947 and 1948. For Nepal, the heady days of popular participation for a common future were encapsulated in the spring of 2006. As predicted in these pages in our earlier issue, a sputtering 'movement' suddenly converted into a People's Movement of colossal dimensions, fuelled by the scorn Gyanendra had continuously heaped upon the citizenry. Suddenly, the weakened, unarmed middle ground, represented by the political parties and civil society, gained the upper hand. Meanwhile, a hopefully chastened Maoist leadership saw a non-violent mass movement achieve where ten years of their war had failed.

A menacing autocrat who sought to rule on the basis of dynastic right, outright misrepresentation and military might, Gyanendra was incapable of acknowledging the political maturity of the people. Taking energy from an insular, self-serving Kathmandu Valley upper class, equally contemptuous of the political parties, he began appointing prime ministers at will in October 2002 and finally took over as head of government on 1 February 2005.

*\* We shall see ...  
When the crowns shall be toppled  
When the palaces will be demolished*



Victory cartwheel in Kathmandu, 25 April 2006

Kiran Pandey

Gyanendra's excuse for his army-assisted takeover was to fight the insurgency, but the intent was to maintain himself as a corrupt, all-powerful autocrat. His most unpardonable act was to militarise an innocent society, already devastated by years of insurgency. Fortunately, despite the worst of intentions, this man did not have the intellectual or organisational skills to run a police state.

## Another spring

The people of Nepal first achieved democracy during another spring, 15 years ago, through a more modest people's movement that delivered the 1990 Constitution. For 12 years till 2002, they experienced freedom and made the most of it. While the legacy of two centuries of oppression by Kathmandu's rulers was difficult to undo in a dozen years of democracy, what pluralism did for Nepal was electric. A voiceless people discovered the power of speech; they developed a confidence unprecedented in their history.

This empowerment of the masses is what the feudocrat in Gyanendra never understood, and he would have been overthrown immediately after 1 February had a violent insurgency not been raging in the countryside. For a decade, that misconceived rebellion – one of Maoist chieftains making their own grabs for power, through the barrel of the gun – had sapped the energy of the nation. The politicians who were engaged in non-violent politics were caught between two guns. It was last autumn, when the Maoists conceded the failure of their 'people's war' and agreed to come into open politics through a constituent assembly, that the People's Movement became possible.

On 22 November 2005, tired of waiting for dialogue with a sneering Narayanhiti palace, and with the Maoists having already signalled their climbdown, the political parties signed a 12-point understanding with the rebels to fight the regime in parallel. The political rallies suddenly began to attract the public, now that the parties were able to promise a fight for the return of both democracy and peace. The participation in the rallies climbed to 50,000, a lakh, two lakh. Meanwhile, Gyanendra continued to display conduct specifically designed to emphasise his scorn for the common masses. Even as he was receiving felicitations as a 'Hindu Emperor' from a dreadfully organised meeting of conservative Hindus in the town of Birgunj, the movement sparked and took off. The bottled-up anger against the aberrant king exploded in the heady People's Movement of 2006. It was a political tsunami of a force few could believe.

People in other parts of the Subcontinent have perhaps forgotten how it is to be one nation together fighting for a cause. The Nepali People's Movement was a Southasian, Asian and global

happening, where a people discovered the simple pleasure of fighting together for pluralism. And when Gyanendra sought to provide measly concessions – too little and too late – on Friday, 21 April, another people's tsunami crashed against the Narayanhiti gates. Gyanendra's resolve finally crumbled. Close to midnight on Monday, 24 April, he gave in to the popular will and restored the Third Parliament, asking the political parties to form a government.

## Coming of age

This 'people phenomenon' holds larger meanings than simply the shunting aside of an active monarch. It has united a country that has been historically, socially and geographically divided. Between eight to ten million citizens were engaged in the weeks-long agitation, coming in from the fields and terraces, trekking to the roadheads, demanding *loktantra*, the new term for total democracy.

Perhaps the greatest gift of the People's Movement of 2006, besides creating conditions for an end to the Maoist rebellion, is that it sets Nepali nationalism on more inclusive and solid foundations. To date, the nationalism of the modern era, together with its reliance on xenophobia and frivolous symbolism, was based on the midhill caste/ethnic identity, the Nepali language, a 'Hindu' monarchy, and a particular brand of hill Hinduism. Each of these elements had the consequence of excluding a large section of citizens, even whole communities.

Having been ushered in by citizens of all ethnicities, castes, languages, faiths, gender and regional origin, this new democracy is no longer a gift from Kathmandu's powerful clique to the country at large. The inclusive democracy, to be crafted on the basis of the People's Movement through the promised constituent assembly that will write a new Constitution, will at long last provide all of the people with 'ownership' of their country. The Nepal of the future will be a raucous, occasionally unruly, democracy. But the state will have the stability



**In the last issue of Himal, we had suggested: "...But the best will be if the Spring of 2006 yields a people's movement that vanquishes Chairman Gyanendra, at which point Nepal can then start on the long-delayed process of reconstruction and rehabilitation – and the revival of a democracy better than experienced between 1990 and 2002."**

**We would like our readers to know that this issue of Himal Southasian was edited with our editor in detention for defying the royal regime in Kathmandu. He was released on 25 April.**



required for nation-building.

Already, the people have gained confidence from their ability to fight a despot and to define their own future vis-à-vis a nervous international community. This assurance adds to the country's stature, and will henceforth provide it with self-assurance in the conduct of foreign relations, particularly in dealing with the overwhelming southern neighbour, India. This new confidence will translate into numerous other dividends, including more equitable development works, where the goals are set indigenously rather than by the ubiquitous 'donor' government or agency.

The path ahead will be necessarily bumpy, but

the goal is clear: making inclusive democracy happen, righting the historical wrongs against the majority population in this country of minorities. The task began with the defeat of Gyanendra's preposterous agenda. The kingship has been brought to its knees, which is where it will have to be kept, if it is kept at all.

Nepal needs to go back to being a country where the people smile; where villagers on the trail look at you in the eye and brightly inquire into your personal history, rather than fearfully looking away. Already, during the People's Movement, the twinkle had returned to the Nepali eye.

— Kanak Mani Dixit

**Sri Lanka**

# Heading towards a breakdown

A victory by the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led coalition of President Mahinda Rajapakse in the local government elections held at the end of March was expected. Political parties that have won national elections immediately preceding local polls invariably do well at the local level. But a landslide victory of the sort that the SLFP achieved was not foreseen, if only because its ally in the presidential elections, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), was contesting in opposition, and made no secret that they anticipated winning at least 50 seats.

In fact, the JVP won only one seat, while the ruling party secured over 200. Even the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), came in a poor second, garnering little more than 30 positions. The JVP's surprise poor performance is revealing of the moderate nature of the electorate. The public gave its votes to the ruling party, which has been making an effort to put the Norwegian-facilitated peace process back on track, with President Rajapakse taking the lead. The voters indicated their clear rejection of the JVP's fiery brand of xenophobic, revolutionary politics based on unidimensional economic and ethnic nationalism. In the pre-poll campaigning, the JVP leaders had vehemently opposed foreign involvement in Sri Lankan affairs, attacking the multilateral aid

agencies and calling on the government to halt all Norwegian involvement within a month.

## Talks mired

The electoral verdict should have made it more difficult for the Tamil Tigers to pull out of the second round of Geneva talks, originally scheduled for 19-21 April. But events on the ground have put this into doubt. There has been a steep rise in violence in the northeast, and the LTTE has expressed its discontent at the non-implementation of the agreements reached at the first round of Geneva talks, held 22-23 February. The rebel leadership believes that the government should be disarming all the paramilitary Tamil groups, in particular the breakaway group of former LTTE commander Karuna in the east, which has not yet happened.



Karuna

Within ten days of the signing of the Geneva agreement in February, two LTTE cadre were shot dead in rebel-controlled territory in the east. This was followed by several other killings, including the high-profile murder of a pro-LTTE political activist, V Vigneswaran, in the government-controlled town of Trincomalee. The government and its security forces failed to take effective action to identify or apprehend the culprits, however, and the LTTE believes that the government may have had a hand in the murders.

The LTTE's mine ambushes and other attacks have already taken a toll of over 30 security personnel in April alone. This has generated fierce resentment among both the Sri Lankan military and Sinhalese civilian population, even more so following a bomb blast in a crowded marketplace in Trincomalee. Meanwhile, the security forces themselves have turned a blind eye to sporadic acts of mob violence against Tamils in the east. Relations between the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities who inhabit these areas have plummeted, in keeping with the deterioration in relations between the government and the LTTE. While further talks in Geneva may stem the violence for a limited period, a permanent peace will require significantly more from all parties.

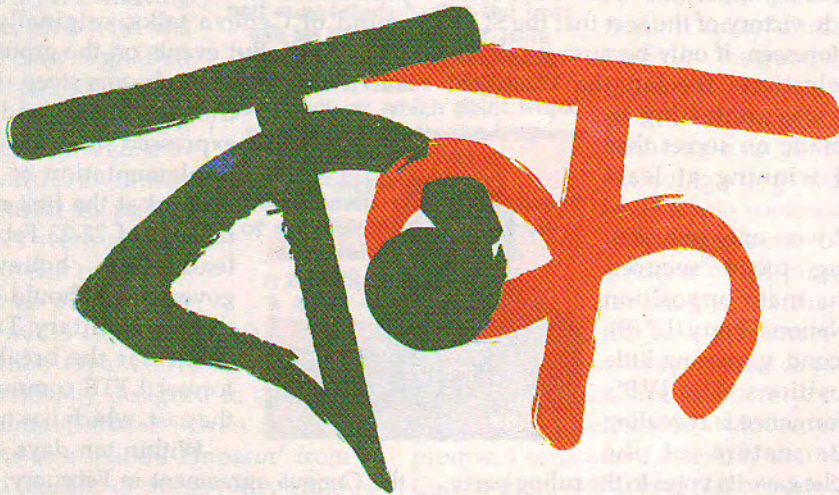
One part of the solution would be for President Rajapakse to commit himself fully to the peace process. Despite the president's pro-peace orientation, his government retains hardliners who regularly send mixed messages. Evidence of a single-minded commitment would send a message throughout Sri Lanka – including to the security forces – that peace and inter-ethnic confidence-building is the utmost national priority. The country enjoyed such a period of commitment in 2002, in the

early days of the peace process, when then-Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was able to issue orders to the security forces that were dutifully carried out. At that time, the manner in which both the roadblocks and the economic embargo on the northeast were removed demonstrated that, when the government leadership was of one mind, orders would be followed throughout the chain of command.

The other part of the solution involves the LTTE, whose demand is the disarming of the various Tamil armed groups, as agreed in Geneva in February. Given its own current renegeing on the Geneva agreement, the rebel leadership does need to remember that they have previously attacked disarmed paramilitaries, especially during the period of the former UNP government. Obviously, verbal guarantees will no longer suffice. Together with the government and the international monitors, there is a need to come up with a more workable solution vis-à-vis the LTTE demand, so that those who are disarmed do not suddenly become easy prey, as has happened in the past. With the question mark hanging over the peace talks themselves, however, this question may remain unanswered for some time.

– Jehan Perera

## India-Bangladesh



## Graphic Link

If Southasian inter-state camaraderie could be oiled with some good graphic design, then this effort, by some unnamed creative artist, must be recognised as a superior contribution. This design, a marriage of the regular Devnagari *ka* and the Bangla *ka*, was a logo designed to herald and mark the long-delayed official visit by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia to

New Delhi in the third week of March. This was the first trip made by Begum Zia to India during her current term in office, which began in 2001. Most observers say that nothing much came of the trip; other say not so. Either way, we are happy that at least the event produced a good Southasian graphic design.

# Time for the difficult issues

It has been three years since then-Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced his willingness to launch a fresh round of talks with Pakistan. A year ago, Pervez Musharraf and Manmohan Singh, enthused by the dialogue's progress, termed the peace process 'irreversible'. Indeed, there has been a drastic transformation in bilateral ties during this period, to the benefit of all Southasians. The truce has survived militant attacks, past hostility and fundamental policy differences between the two sides. To maintain the momentum, however, what is needed now is intensified negotiations and visible progress on contentious issues. We must move from absence of war towards peace.

There have been attempts at building peace between these estranged umbilical neighbours in the past. This current phase, however, is clearly different, with a confluence of factors pushing New Delhi and Islamabad to talk with one another. Popular sentiment, American pressure on both sides to negotiate, the realisation in Pakistan that a proxy war with India is neither strategically nor economically prudent, New Delhi's understanding that having peace at its borders is a prerequisite for attaining greater status – all have contributed to the current rapprochement.

Two rounds of composite dialogue over a range of issues – including security, trade, culture and terrorism – have resulted in a greater understanding on both sides of reciprocal positions. The Srinagar-Muzaffarabad, Rajasthan-Sindh, and the recently inaugurated Amritsar-Nankana road and rail links have revived ties between crossborder communities and facilitated people-to-people contact.

On the core issue of Kashmir, both sides have shown some flexibility. Five crossing points at the Line of Control were opened up in the wake of the Kashmir Earthquake of October 2005. Pakistan has given up demands to implement the UN resolutions, dating back to 1948, while India has acknowledged Kashmir as an issue up for discussion. Providing a further opening for progress on the issue is Manmohan Singh's contention that, while borders cannot be re-drawn, they can be made irrelevant.

Despite these credible achievements, however, the peace process seems to have reached a stalemate on



Manmohan flags off Amritsar-Nankana bus

several important fronts. There is a feeling in Pakistan, even among moderate and liberal elements, that New Delhi has not done enough, especially on Kashmir. South Block has also not responded to several of President Musharraf's proposals on Kashmir, including that of self-governance. Islamabad fears that India's preference for the status quo means that it is biding its time, hoping that the dispute will lose steam. For its part, India claims that Islamabad has not delivered on its promise to stop 'crossborder terrorism'.

The fact that there has been no recent high-profile summit or joint statement outlining areas of agreement has not helped matters either. The last meeting between President Musharraf and Prime Minister Singh – in New York in September 2005, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting – was frosty, with Pakistan demanding the demilitarisation of three districts in Jammu & Kashmir, which India flatly rejected. Little is known of the back-channel diplomacy between the special envoys – India's S K Lambah and Pakistan's Tariq Aziz – nor whether there has been any breakthrough on that front.

## Public review needed

It is against this backdrop of mixed achievement that a review of the peace process must be undertaken. Manmohan Singh's recent proposal of a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Pakistan is a welcome step. However, we believe it is crucial for New Delhi

to realise that till they address the Kashmir issue, neither peace nor friendship with either Pakistan or the Kashmiri people will be possible. The status quo is clearly not acceptable to other stakeholders. Instead, imperative moves include: a reduction of troops, a strict check on human-rights violations, more power allotted to Kashmiris, liberalising movement at the Line of Control, and a continuous engagement with Pakistan.

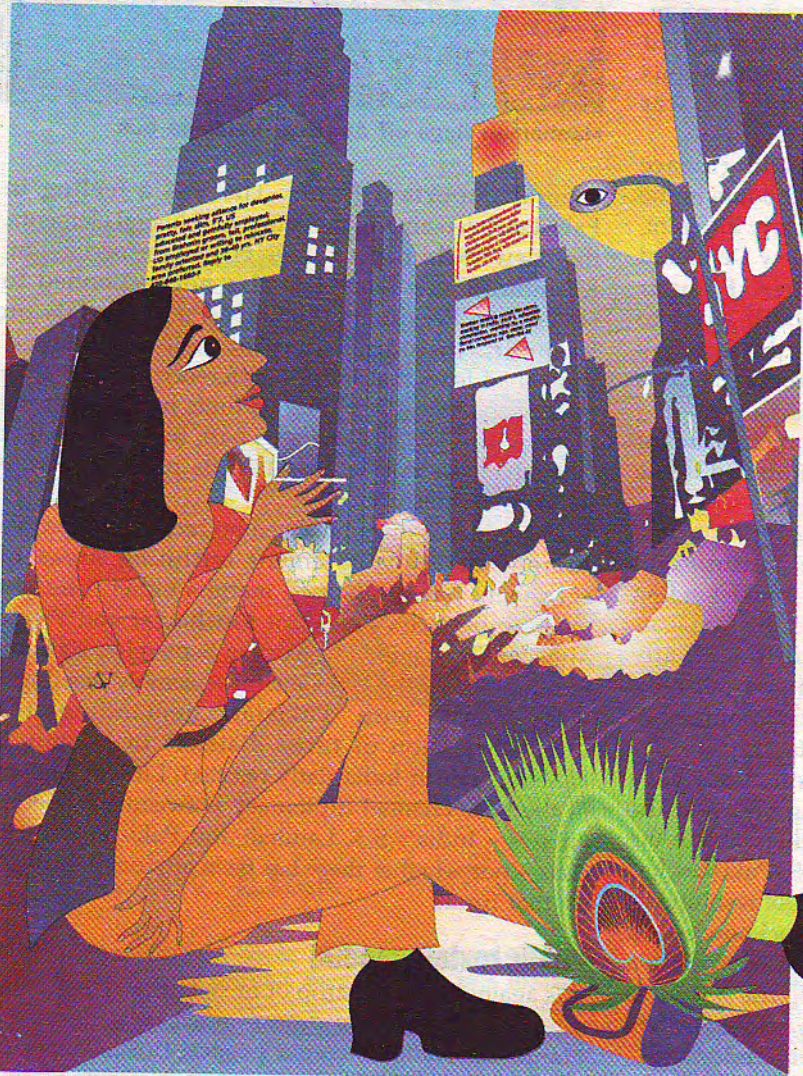
On the other hand, though sections of the military establishment in Pakistan admit that the politics of violence in Kashmir has outlived its utility, the crackdown on militant groups has been limited. And as long as militants continue to strike with support from across the border, there will be resistance in New Delhi to any concessions. Islamabad must also know that neither an independent Kashmir nor one that is a part of Pakistan is feasible.

Pragmatism dictates that both sides operate within this broad framework. Such a complex problem can

only be resolved through intensified diplomatic negotiations between the two neighbours, with the participation of Kashmiri representatives. Skirting the issue or holding sporadic talks can only be harmful for the prospects of peace in the region.

In addition, to combat the impression that the peace process might be losing steam, and to sustain the optimism among the people, it is important for Manmohan Singh and Pervez Musharraf to engage in some high-profile personal diplomacy. A long-overdue visit by the prime minister to Pakistan and an agreement on an issue like Siachen – the contours of which are reported to be ready – would indeed be an ideal boost for India-Pakistan ties at this juncture.

Given past experience, the fact that the peace process has lasted is a remarkable achievement in itself. For the sake of the people of the region, however, it is now time for India and Pakistan to build on that success through greater flexibility on the remaining stumbling blocks.



### 'Sita in the Metropolis'

This work of art by Venantius J Pinto is a reflection on the young modern Southasian – a Sita who arrives in the United States for higher study. The billboards are actually marriage ads. She has a cigarette that is not yet lit and perhaps never will be. Beneath all the innocuousness is a symbol: the tattoo of a bow and arrow, albeit upturned. Perhaps it is unwittingly a distant reminder of politics – Hindutva, or an abnegation that has a hold from afar. She could be a Nepali politician's daughter studying at one of the good American colleges, awaiting her turn to serve. In her mind, she encompasses Times Square – the 'Crossroads of the World', in Manhattan, New York.

*This is part of a regular series of Himal commentary on artwork by Venantius Pinto.*

# Blurry reflections

## Differing media accounts of Balochistan

**A study of recent discussions on Balochistan in the Indian and Pakistani press indicates a lingering crossborder neurosis about the other country's interference.**

by | **Subarno Chattarji**

For one month starting 15 January 2006, the Media Foundation and Panos South Asia monitored four daily newspapers from India and Pakistan – *Dainik Jagran*, *Amar Ujala*, *Daily Ibrat* and *Nawa-i-Waqt*. The first two are Hindi-language papers, while *Ibrat* is Sindhi and *Nawa-i-Waqt* is Urdu. This exercise, which followed several themes and issues common to readers on both sides of the border, was undertaken on the assumption that a difference in language implies different constituencies and (at times) differing political attitudes towards the same event. As violence has again erupted in Balochistan over the past year, the province's name has become a byword in Pakistan's media for Indian interference in Pakistani affairs, mirroring a paranoia in India about Pakistani meddling in Kashmir. While such strongly held convictions as were found during the survey reflect an undeniable difference in generally-held opinions on either side of the border, the disparities also raise the question of, to what extent, in the face of such polemic and bombast, this type of media culture will be able to contribute to a progressive, cooperative peace process.

### Pakistan perspectives

In a 15 January editorial, 'Indian interference in Balochistan', *Nawa-i-Waqt* quoted the former provincial governor and current rebel leader, Nawab Akbar Bugti, who declared that although India was not supporting the insurgents, the rebels would

accept India's offer of help. This declaration was then editorially condemned and refuted. "There is strong evidence of the Indian support to various sardars in Balochistan," its editors wrote. "There have been reports of money, arms and ammunition being transferred to various sardars through the Indian consulates based in Kandahar and Herat." Accusations such as this parallel the frequent (and often unsubstantiated) allegations in the Indian media, which allege that Pakistani consulates in Kathmandu or Dhaka are either terror-cell hubs or conduits for counterfeit Indian currency, aimed at financing terrorism in India or generally undermining the Indian economy. The editorial went on to remind Akbar

Bugti of the debt he owes Pakistan: "Nawab Akbar Bugti and other such sardars are in such high positions only because of Pakistan. Otherwise, in India princely states were abolished soon after 1947, all property of rajas and sardars was confiscated and they were forced to stand in the queue of ration depots." There is a perverse pride expressed here, both in the preservation of feudal structures and in the refusal to consider that those inequities might need to be addressed.

In mid-January, a Pakistani delegation including Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammad Khan traveled to New Delhi for the Composite Dialogue talks. On 19 January, during the delegation's visit to the eastern neighbour, *Nawa-i-Waqt* carried the following headlines on its front page, some of which were

अमर उजाला  
Amar Ujala

نوائے وقت  
Nawa-i-Waqt

روزنامی  
حیدرآباد  
Daily  
IBRAT

दैनिक जागरण  
Dainik Jagaran

statements made by the Pakistan foreign ministry spokesperson while in the Indian capital: 'India should stop interfering in Balochistan otherwise peace will be in danger. Balochistan is our internal problem' and 'India has been told to find a permanent and acceptable solution to the Kashmir issue'. Sandwiched between these two was another banner: 'Pakistan involved in explosions in Bangalore and Delhi', a contention that the body of the article subsequently refuted. That these charges and counter-charges were traded while the peace talks were taking place indicates the significant levels of distrust. On the same day, a back-page *Nawa-i-Waqt* article further highlighted this suspicion and paranoia. "Due to Indian interference in Pakistan's internal affairs," the piece noted, "Pakistan has asked federal ministers, members of parliament and government officers to seek NOC [No Objection Certificates] before accepting any invitation from the Indian High Commission for parties, private dinners from Indian diplomats, or any other invitation that requires traveling to India to participate in any conference or meeting."

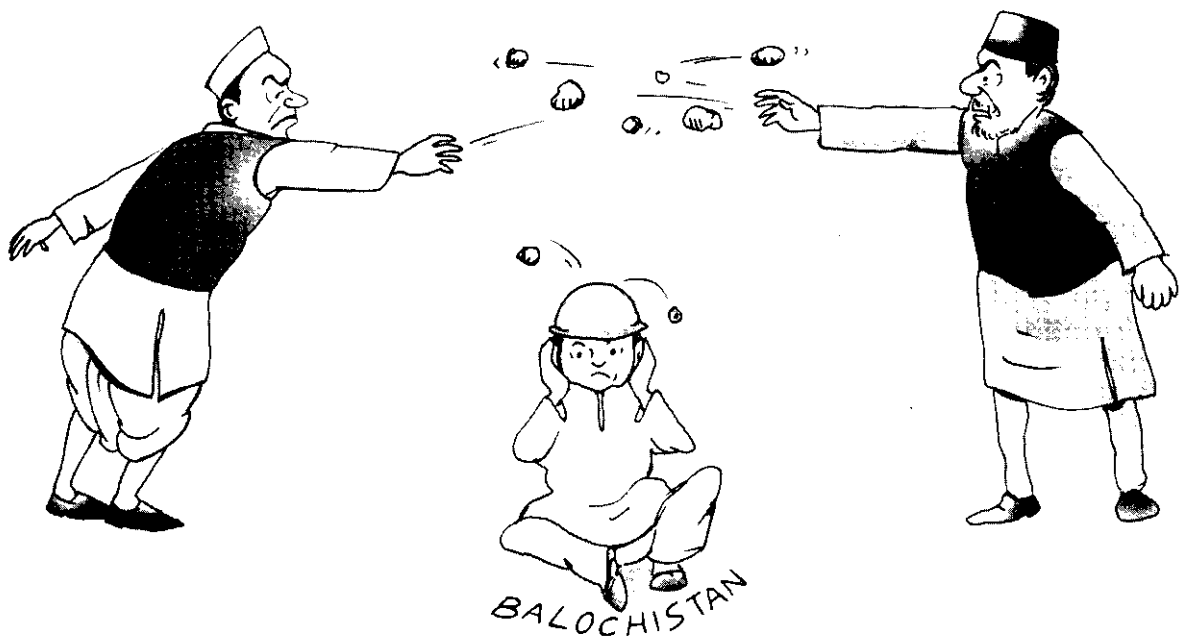
In a commentary from 22 January, 'India-Pakistan relations at a turning point', former Pakistani ambassador Afzal Mahmood stressed an asymmetry of trouble spots. "It is hard to digest the Indian concern towards Balochistan, as the two do not have a common border from which infiltration is feared, neither has Balochistan a problem vis-à-vis religious fundamentalism which might pose a danger to India," he wrote. "Therefore, this Indian concern is quite disturbing and it would be as surprising if Pakistan were to show concern for the Naxalite movement in AP, or a demand for freedom in Assam,

Nagaland or Mizoram." In comparing Balochistan to Nagaland and Mizoram, Mahmood implicitly accepts that there may be a problem in the former, but holds out the veiled threat of India's vulnerabilities and Pakistan's potential exploitation of them.

The concern over Indian interference in Balochistan was also addressed on the letters page, for instance in a missive carried by *Nawa-i-Waqt* on 29 January written by a Karachi reader. Titled 'Jaswant Singh's new ploy', the writer saw the former foreign and defence minister's peace mission to Pakistan as part of a larger plot: "The army operation in Balochistan and the ensuing chaos and India's statements on the situation are enough evidence to wake us up. Jaswant Singh's scheduled trip is part of the same conspiracy. It has just one purpose and that is to prove that India has a spiritual and religious link with Balochistan." While the reader admitted to Pakistani army operations in the province (unlike the other articles surveyed), he too saw the province's troubles as a means of extending Indian influence, leading ultimately to the dismemberment of Pakistan.

### No self-reflection

Chairman of the National Language Authority Fateh Mohammad Malik's 12 February commentary, 'India's nefarious activities and the Balochistan situation', further stressed Pakistan's fears of the *Akhand Bharat* ideology of 'greater India'. "Kashmir is India's 'atoot ang' [unbreakable limb] and Balochistan is the unresolved agenda of the Partition," Malik suggested. "This Indian logic is the result of the Western theory of calling an enemy a friend, and which has now been adopted by our



Rabin Sayami

leaders as well." Malik went on to catalogue aspects of India's interference, including: "Balochistan CM has disclosed that India has established 40 terrorist camps where the terrorists are given a monthly stipend of PKR 10,000 per month ... to give impetus to the freedom movement in Balochistan."

Malik also delved into history in an attempt to assert that Balochistan is an inalienable part of the country: "Whereas there were military interventions in Hyderabad, Junagarh and other estates, Balochistan opted for Pakistan through a clear democratic process." The irony is obvious, in that the inalienability predicated by such a democratic process is now under threat precisely because of the lack of democracy. Yet in his conclusion, Malik was surprisingly candid: "It is true that we are responsible for the present situation in Balochistan and India is just making use of the bad situation, like it did with East Pakistan. The greatest sin of our rulers has been that they have never tried to better the economic and political conditions in Balochistan, despite repeated promises from them since the creation of Pakistan. The present-day situation demands that we make the dreams of the Pakistan Movement a reality and do not just continue pleasing India for the sake of the American goodwill."

Articles such as this represent a direct mirroring of the ways in which the Indian media details Pakistani help for Kashmiri militants, as well as a paranoid sense of being surrounded by the enemy. Just as *Ujala* and *Jagran* portray the ubiquitous Pakistani terrorist within India, so too does *Nawa-i-Waqt* project a larger Indian plan to dissect Pakistan. It is significant that the historical frame for this fear is the Indian role in the creation of Bangladesh. While Bangladesh is the archetype of India's perceived desire to fragment Pakistan, there are no contexts that explain the motivation for the freedom movement in erstwhile East Pakistan. The creation of Bangladesh thus becomes an example of Indian perfidy and hegemony – and Pakistan's role is erased. Malik did rectify this lack of self-reflection and recognised a need for internal reform, lest India capitalise on the provincial discontent. Yet the failure to realise the "dreams of the Pakistan movement" was attributed not so much to faulty internal policies as to getting into the good graces of India and the US. Once again, it was easier to make a scapegoat of the neighbour than to analyse internal problems in depth.

The *Daily Ibrat* joined this chorus of accusations, although without the intensity of *Nawa-i-Waqt*. On 2 February it carried the headline, 'Proofs of Indian involvement in Balochistan have started to become visible: Zafarullah Jamali'. The article cited former Pakistan Prime Minister Jamali: "Improvement in relations with the neighbouring country, India, is welcome, but our neighbours have never been

faithful to us ... there has been evidence about the Indian involvement in Balochistan. However, no concrete evidence has been received, so we cannot say much in this regard ... Balochistan is not a political issue, but it is an economic one."

## Indian representations

With such rhetoric, *Ibrat* seemed to be echoing an earlier piece from the Indian paper *Amar Ujala*, 'General Musharraf on same path as dictator Saddam'. On 21 January, that article had cited Quetta senator Sanaullah Baloch: "According to Sanaullah, Balochistan is rich in gas, minerals and other natural resources. Pakistan has been exploiting it since 1952. But unfortunately, the people of Balochistan are obliged to live in the Stone Age." The senator pointed to the symbiotic relationship between politics and economics – as opposed to the divergence stressed by Zafarullah Jamali – stressing a type of economic and political colonisation.

In a 2 January editorial, 'India-Pakistan over Balochistan', *Amar Ujala* also took umbrage at Pakistan's reaction to India's comments on the Balochistan issue. "If there is the slightest of brawls in a Muslim-inhabited area in India," the editors fumed, "Pakistan gets enraged enough to threaten to raise the issue in international forums. But if India is to comment on the atrocities and oppression in Pakistan, then it is seen as interference on India's part. Balochistan is such a case." Such language indicates a clear attempt to erase India's recent communal history – including the 2002 Gujarat riots, which cannot be dismissed as "the slightest of brawls" – while maximising such oppressive instances from across the border. This type of historical amnesia and prickliness are inimical to any attempt at peace between the two countries.

The editorial went on to articulate its real anxieties about the ways in which Pakistan is perceived to meddle in Indian affairs with impunity. "Pakistan cannot expect India to be blind to its activities and consider legitimate whatever steps it may take in the region, while its secret agency, ISI, may have a free hand in India," the editors warned. "Pakistani seals were found on the grenades used in the terrorist attack on the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. Does Pakistan imagine that India's statement would have an adverse impact on the peace process and that its own actions would give a boost to peace? Actually, the root of the various problems of Southasia is ISI, the control of which is the need of the hour. Therefore, Pakistan should cleanse itself before adopting a venomous attitude towards India."

The *Ujala* editorial harks back to the old strategy of blaming outsiders for internal problems. At one time, it was the 'foreign hand' (read: CIA) that was to blame for all of India's ills; now it is Pakistan's ISI. Foreign policy is predicated here on a simplistic

tit-for-tat strategy. The *Ujala* editorial, however, goes further: 'various problems' is an all-encompassing phrase that includes not only terrorism and security issues (presumably the main cause of the editorial ire), but also any other problem faced by Southasian states. Thus, there is an implicit opposition created between a terror-sponsoring – and therefore irresponsible – Pakistan on the one hand, and their victims on the other. Whether or not India has designs on Balochistan is a moot point, but media intolerance on the Indian side of the border feeds paranoia and fear-mongering in the neighbouring state.

While Pakistani papers in this one-month period carried more articles on Indian interference in Balochistan than did Indian media – seven as opposed to two – there seemed to be a symmetry of suspicion. Furthermore, the Pakistani media relished pointing to the Indian hand in the troubled province, just as the Indian media took delight in painting the problem as indicative of Pakistan as a failed state – also a favourite notion of the mainstream English-language media. Of course, coverage of Balochistan still pales in comparison to that of Kashmir. *Nawa-i-Waqt*, for example, had four pieces on Balochistan, compared to 71 Kashmir-related articles. Nonetheless, Balochistan was significant in that it allowed the Pakistani media to turn the tables: to blame India for meddling and fomenting

disaffection in its internal affairs, in much the same way as the Indian media does with respect to Kashmir. The cycles of accusation and counter-accusation thus remained intact.

In general, this survey revealed a mirroring of suspicions and stereotypes. The exceptions to this straitjacketing of the 'other' as the perennial enemy were few and only seemed to bolster the rule. 'Language papers' – particularly the two Hindi ones surveyed from India, *Dainik Jagran* and *Amar Ujala* – have larger circulations than do their English-language counterparts. Given their statistical reach, they can notionally influence larger sections of the population about issues such as Balochistan, Kashmir, terrorism, Islam or the peace process. By and large, that influence would seem to negate hopes of mutual regard and peace between the two nations, as the old fears and anxieties continue to circulate. Indeed, for *Nawa-i-Waqt*, Balochistan provided additional ammunition with which to nail India. If regional media provides some reflection of national consensus and if it is to be a force multiplier for goodwill, some major paradigm shifts are necessary. Until such a time, perhaps the only spaces for moderation and dialogue lie in articles on cricket or Bollywood stars.

*This is an adaptation of an original article at [www.thehoot.org](http://www.thehoot.org), which is part of a series.*

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# Again, in Trincomalee

Recent killings in Trincomalee, town and district, could be a telling indication of Sri Lanka's current direction. And that puts fear in Tamil hearts.

by | D B S Jeyaraj



Trincomalee victim, 12 April

**T**rincomalee, called *Thrikanaamale* in Sinhala and *Thirukonamalai* in Tamil, is once again very much in the news. A cycle of violence in mid-April resulted in more than 35 deaths and 60 injuries. The seriousness of the situation saw Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressing concern to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse over the telephone, and evoked stark memories of the July 1983 anti-Tamil violence on the island. While the hostilities had ceased by the time of writing, the smouldering tension can once again erupt at the slightest provocation.

'Trinco', known for its geo-strategically important deepwater natural harbour, has in recent times become a communal powder keg. At the beginning of the 20th century, the coastal town had a Tamil majority of just under 80 percent, but their numbers decreased over the years. Today, Tamils make up about half of the population, with Sinhalas at 30 percent and Muslims making up 20 percent.

In the larger district, also called Trincomalee, the three communities can be found in nearly equal

proportions. With such a heterogeneous ethnic mix, both the town and the district could easily have been a showpiece of racial harmony. But the downhill slide of ethnic relations throughout Sri Lanka is also reflected in Trincomalee, where again and again the underlying tension results in bouts of violence, as happened last month.

It all started with an assassination, when on 7 April 51-year-old Vanniyasingham Vigneswaran was gunned down at the bank where he worked, located amidst a high-security zone in close proximity of the police and navy headquarters. Vigneswaran was a reputed Tamil political activist and regarded as an important supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It is widely believed that the killing was done by Tamil paramilitaries affiliated with the state.

The LTTE made much of the murder, and a series of condemnatory meetings were organised. On a different track, a Tiger front called the 'Tamil Upsurge Force' began targeting security forces with claymore mines. 11 navy personnel were

killed when their vehicle hit a landmine in Thambalagamam, while two policemen were killed in another attack in Kumburupiddy. As a matter of course the LTTE disclaimed responsibility, even though few believed them.

### Planned attack?

Trinco was a tinderbox waiting to ignite, and the moment came on 12 April. The town was bustling with commercial activity in preparation for the traditional April New Year, common to both Sinhala and Tamils. Around 3:40 that afternoon, an explosion occurred in the vegetable market, when a parcel bomb tied to a bicycle was triggered by a remote device. The 14 victims were Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim.

Reprisals began barely a half-hour later. The official line was that the victims were all Sinhala, and that the infuriated populace had risen in spontaneous violence. The truth was somewhat different: this was no instance of angry mobs going berserk, but a case of cold-blooded calculation. It appears that a plan had been formulated to attack Tamils beforehand, and that the explosion was like a green-light signal.

Gangs of young Sinhala-speaking men in civilian garb arrived in trucks and vans. Most of them had close-cropped haircuts and wore shorts and t-shirts. Some of them carried clubs, rods, knives and swords. A few threw bombs. Tamil houses and vehicles were singled-out for assault. Some Tamils were hacked to death and incinerated with gasoline. If these were crimes of passion, there were profit-oriented crimes, too. Tamil businesses were systematically ransacked and looted, while the spoils were carefully loaded into vehicles and taken away, leaving several of the shops on fire.

At the time, Trinco was teeming with security men from the army, navy and police, with additional men having been deployed for the New Year festivities. Despite their numbers, the security personnel did not attempt to prevent or restrain the mobs. Instead, most stood nearby, offering tacit encouragement. Some men in naval uniform were seen aiding and abetting the rioters. The marauders are now believed to be members of the armed forces, auxiliary home guards and criminal elements of Sinhala society.

For those with any memory, this was a repeat performance of the violence that took place in the country in July 1983, when massive premeditated attacks were launched against Tamils after a landmine blast killed 13 soldiers. Then as now, security personnel simply stood by or outright assisted the mobs. Then

as now, a palpable fear and terror hung over the Tamils.

### Like '83

Local authority elections had just been held on 30 March. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), with close links to the LTTE, had swept the polls in the Trinco urban council, as well as the Trinco Pradeshiya Sabha, or regional council. This was the result of bloc voting by Tamils concentrated in the town. The victory was greatly resented by some elements – an anger to which Vigneswaran's killing was originally attributed, for he had been in charge of poll propaganda for the TNA.

Now the rumour spreading like wildfire was that Sinhala 'heroes' were going to 'remedy' the situation, and an 'ethnic cleansing' campaign was going to be conducted in Trinco town. Tamil homes were to be destroyed and burnt. Tamils were to be attacked and driven away as refugees. Trinco was to be purged of Tamils overnight. As drunken gangs celebrated that night, the talk of ethnic

cleansing began to gather momentum.

It was obvious that neither the police nor the security forces were going to protect the Tamils or prevent any violence. Agitated Tamil politicians from the district contacted the Indian High Commission in Colombo, and New Delhi was alerted, setting in motion important high-level developments. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh tried to contact Mahinda Rajapakse. When the latter called back, PM Singh urged that, whatever the provocation, civilian lives needed to be protected at all times. He requested the president to take all steps to stabilise Trincomalee and protect the vulnerable Tamil civilians.

President Rajapakse acted quickly. He despatched police chief Chandra Fernando and Joint Operations command chief Daya Sandagiri to Trinco, along with Investment Promotion Minister Rohitha Bogollagama and North-Central Province Chief Minister Bertie Dissanayake. A curfew was declared, and slowly the situation was brought under control. Although security forces fired into the air to disperse mobs, no one was arrested and a major calamity was averted.

This limited Indian 'intervention' also recalled the July 1983 episode. At that point, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had called President J R Jayewardene with concern about Tamils victimised in the pogrom, even sending Foreign Minister P V Narasimha Rao to Colombo. Meanwhile, local newspapers also reported that Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva had gone to New Delhi during the critical period.



Vigneswaran

**The pattern of events has demonstrated that another 'July 1983' is quite possible, for the similarities are frighteningly striking.**

According to analysts, there were several reasons for India's prompt response on the Trincomalee violence, beyond the purely humanitarian. India has a vested interest in Trincomalee, with a 1987 India-Sri Lanka pact having awarded New Delhi special rights over the Trinco harbour. India has also leased the strategic Trinco oil tank farm, having allocated USD 30 million for its development. India is also committed to constructing a coal-fired power plant in the area.

With elections scheduled in the Tamil-majority Tamil Nadu state in May, New Delhi did not want violence against Trinco Tamils to become a passionate pre-election issue. With its overt show of interest in what was happening in Sri Lanka, India was also conveying a subtle message to both parties in Sri Lanka. To the Sinhalese, it was to confirm India's concern for the welfare of Tamil civilians. To the Tamils, the message is that in the end, it is India and not the LTTE that can ensure their protection.

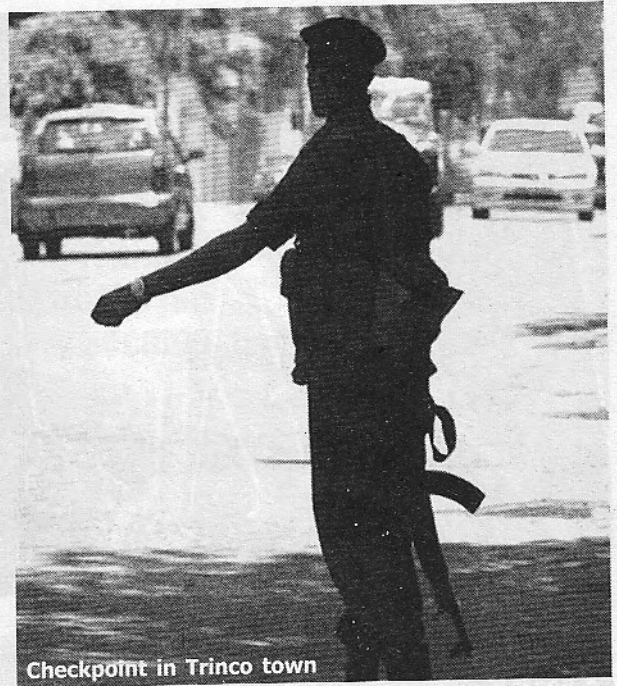
### Paradigm shift

There was a brief climb-down of violence, but it erupted two days later due to a landmine attack in the area, killing two air force personnel. The dead body of a Sinhala youth was also discovered around this time. Fearing reprisals from these incidents, many Tamils vacated their dwellings. There were sporadic attacks against them, and three died, including an Indian national. A Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva was torched.

Although a reliable estimate of the deaths and destruction has yet to be made, preliminary figures indicate that at least 36 people were killed. Of these, 16 were Sinhala-speaking security persons, who had been killed by LTTE-inspired mine and bomb attacks. Of the 20 civilian deaths, 11 were Tamils, seven Sinhalese and two Muslims. At least six Sinhala civilians had previously been killed in the vegetable-market explosion. More than 1500 people were displaced in the unrest with at least 60 injured, 32 seriously. The record of destruction also includes about 40 businesses looted, 31 of which were gutted. At least 15 vehicles were burnt and 60 more smashed.

At the time of writing, normalcy was yet to return to Trincomalee, both town and district. Very few businesses were open and people had not yet returned to work. Only a few vehicles ply the roads and Trinco town bears a deserted look. But there are still gangs moving freely about town, much to the concern of the Tamil population. To date, no one has been arrested for committing the violence in Trincomalee, let alone charged.

There seems to be a repetitive pattern at work in Trincomalee. The racial violence that visited Sri Lanka in 1977 and 1983 saw Trincomalee Tamils badly affected. The district has also been severely hit over the course of the long war. The reason why it



Checkpoint in Trinco town

faces extra rigour seems to be linked to its strategic importance as well, as the ethnic mix. The local Tamils have long suspected a design in the violence, and they fear that conspiracies are underfoot to depopulate the town of Tamils. The recent violence has strengthened suspicion of a 'cleansing' campaign in the cards. Indeed, the pattern of events has demonstrated that another 'July 1983' is quite possible, for the similarities are frighteningly striking.

Political commentators have long talked of an impending paradigm shift in Sri Lankan politics. The country was said to be moving away from the unitary state model, and towards a devolution amounting to federalism. The recent presidential elections, however, have reversed the trend, even if it was real. The new president, Mahinda Rajapakse, dismissed the very concept of devolution and argued for the retention and preservation of the unitary state. Aligning with Sinhala hardliner groups like the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya, Rajapakse won handsomely in the polls, with massive support in the Sinhala electorate.

It was said that the country had learned its lesson in the 1983 riots. There would no longer be a repetition of that dark period, it was argued. The Trincomalee violence, however, has shown otherwise: all of the ingredients for renewal of anti-Tamil aggression remain in place. If political will and authority are lacking in Colombo, a flare-up is inevitable, and last month's happenings in Trincomalee could be the harbinger of terrible times ahead. The sad lesson from the presidential election and the Trincomalee violence is that the so-called paradigm shift has not taken place after all. Sri Lanka may be going forward to the past. ▲



A Benaras weaver works his loom

## Between the grains: Purvanchal circumstances

by | Shikha Trivedi

The double-digit growth touted for the Indian economy is being accompanied by a growing gap between the urban middle class and the rural poor, the latter exemplified by the conditions in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, or Purvanchal. Here, impoverishment increases as power looms displace handloom workers, and harvesters make agricultural labourers redundant. The patchwork of tiny land parcels that makes up the Purvanchal landscape in satellite imagery itself is evidence of rural want, and the condition of the landless is somewhat worse. Against this backdrop of poverty, Maoists organise and the upper castes react. The state takes the side of the latter. A communal twist is forced on the people by the opportunist politician, pitting Muslim poor against Hindu poor. But Purvanchal, the most neglected, most populated region of India, will survive because of the resilience of its citizens and their spirit of tolerance. They will keep the designs of the exploiters and communalists at bay.

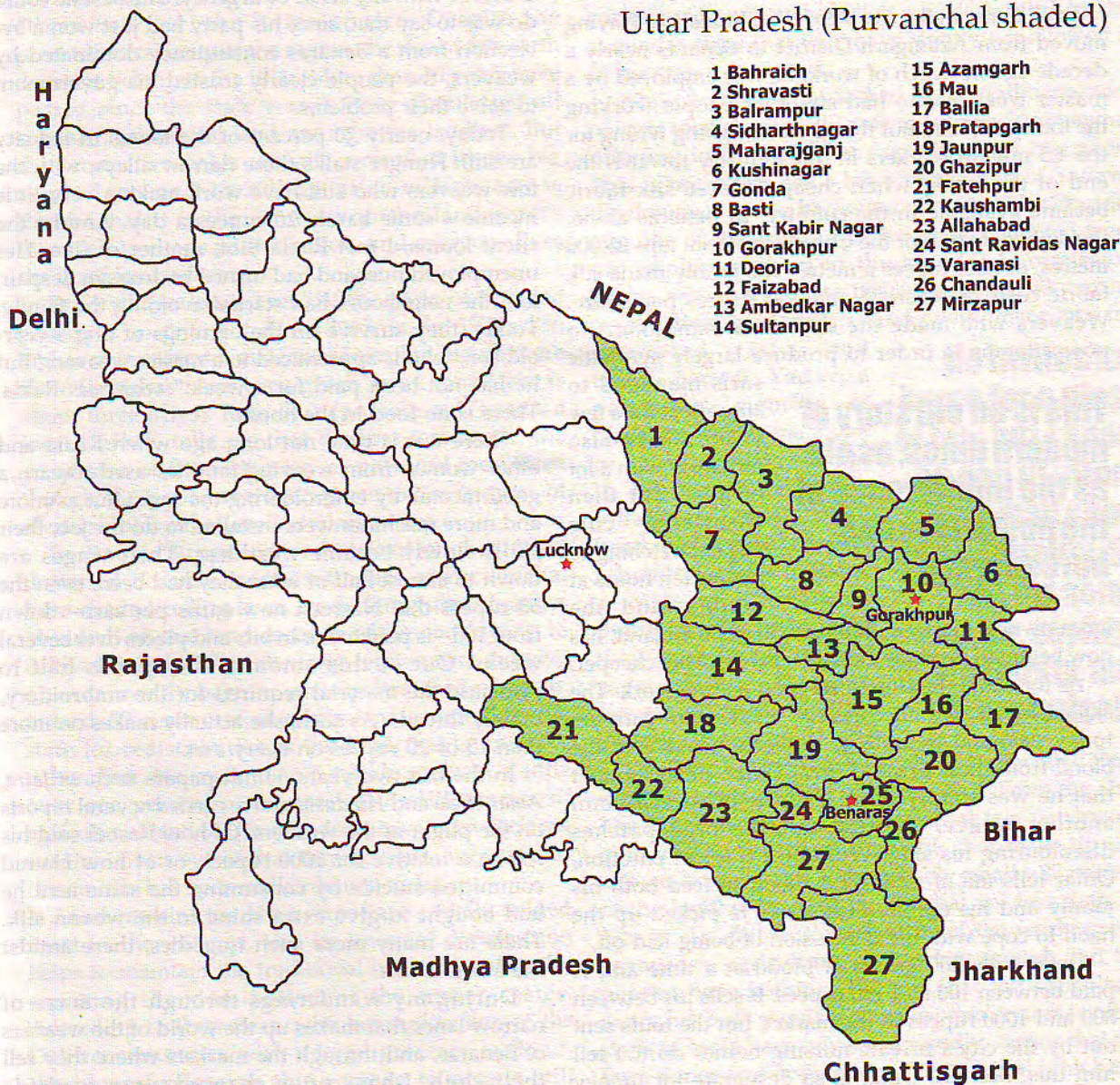
**B**enaras, the oldest city in the world it is said, is where my travels through Eastern Uttar Pradesh have always begun. The coolies who carry my luggage from the train station, the rickshaw-pullers who take me down the crowded, tumultuous lanes to the Ganga View Guest House on Assi Ghat, the hawkers who sell incense and flowers outside the Kashi Vishwanath temple, the weavers who produce yard upon yard of beautiful silk at Pili Kothi ... they come from Gorakhpur, Gazipur, Mau, Bhadoi, Deoria – poor Hindus and Muslims from all over Purvanchal, looking for life in a city where others come to die.

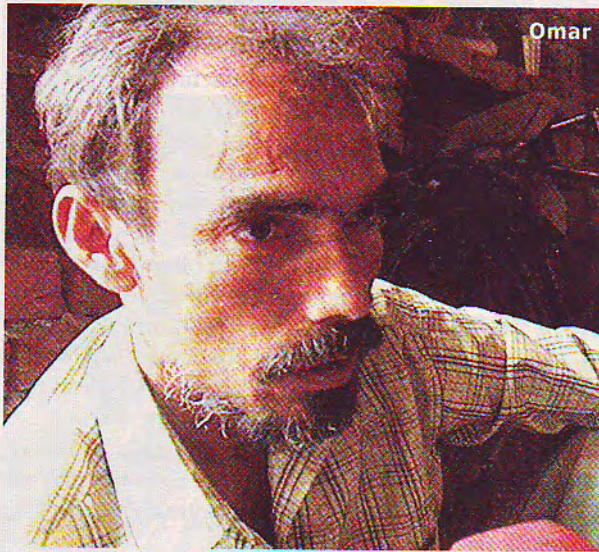
**Once, Razia and other women from weaving families used to earn a good income by embroidering saris. But as more and more machines were installed to do the job, their hands slowly became worthless.**

It is an incongruity that is mirrored everywhere in Benaras, reflecting the situation in all Purvanchal, where one finds stoicism amidst indescribable want. In some mohallahs here, the clang of temple bells and the call of the *aazan* are both often drowned by the sound of hundreds of looms, on which the famous banarsi silk and brocade saris are woven. The looms have been worked by generations of

Muslim families, and sold by Hindu traders. Today, the saris still fetch thousands of rupees in the market, but men like Omar Sayed are paying the price of weaving them with their blood.

Uttar Pradesh (Purvanchal shaded)





I met Omar in the city's Bajedian Mohallah. Having moved from Azamgarh District to Benaras nearly a decade ago in search of work, he was employed by a master weaver who had six other people working the looms for him. But things started going wrong for the 1.5 million workers in this industry towards the end of the 1990s, when cheap Chinese silk fabric became available in the country. In Benaras alone, the daily demand for the Chinese material tops 25,000 metres, at nine rupees a metre. The locally made silk fabric costs between 35 and 150 rupees per metre. Weavers who made the shift from handlooms to power looms in order to produce largely synthetic

**This is an old story of modern times, as old as the indifference of the politicians and bureaucracy.**

saris managed to stay afloat for a few years, which also did away with a lot of jobs. But then electricity cuts began stretching to almost ten hours at a time, and the loom-owners too were doomed. Surat, in Gujarat, has now begun to produce the same textiles, only cheaper.

As for Omar, he simply stopped getting work. The skilled hands that once created magic from yarn are today pale and trembling. "Poverty has drawn the blood from these fingers," says Omar. I had thought that he was simply using a figure of speech, until another weaver pointed out the blue patches discolouring his skin. Without a trace of emotion, Omar tells me of selling his blood to feed both his family and his opium addiction. He picked up the habit to cope with the depression of being laid off.

Omar sells 200 grams of blood at a time and is paid between 100 and 150 rupees. It sells for between 800 and 1000 rupees in the market, but the touts sent out by the city's private nursing homes do not tell him this. Besides, Omar is so desperate for money

that he is past caring, even though his neighbour Abdul Matin died a week ago after selling blood for the 20th time in less than two months. I make my way to Abdul's house, where his uncle recounts the story. "There was no work. His wife was pregnant and he needed the money for her delivery. He had become very weak. Then the day his child was born, he again sold blood and collapsed and died. He thought of doing this because there was no other way of making money."

The morning newspapers had stated that the minister of handlooms in the Samajwadi Party government, currently ruling Uttar Pradesh, was visiting Benaras. Seeking out Jagdish Singh Rana at a public meeting, I asked him what he was going to do about the weaving industry. Although admitting that there was a crisis, Rana appeared more keen on blaming previous governments than on addressing the issue with any sense of urgency. The best he could do was to say that, since his party had just won a by-election from a Benaras constituency dominated by weavers, the people clearly trusted his government to solve their problems.

Today, nearly 70 percent of the looms in the city are still. Hunger stalks these narrow alleys, with the few weavers who still have work making very little income – some barely 20 rupees a day. Amidst the silent looms, I met Razia Bibi, mother of five. Her unemployed husband had turned to drugs in despair, and the neighbours had started avoiding the family. Today, they survive on the earnings of one 8-year-old son, who is apprenticed to a master weaver. "But he has not been paid for a week," whispers Razia. There is no food in the house.

There was a time not long ago when Razia and other women from weaving families used to earn a good income by embroidering the saris. But as more and more machines were installed to do the job, their skills slowly became worthless. Their wages are down to almost half of what they had been; even the 50 rupees that Nasreen now earns per sari – down from 100 – is paid to her in bits and pieces over several weeks. Out of this amount, she spends half to purchase the material required for the embroidery, mainly threads. As such, she actually makes no more than 15 or 20 rupees on every sari.

In the last two years, Hindi papers such as *Jatra*, *Amar Ujala* and *Hindustan* have carried several reports on the plight of the weavers. Of how Rasool sold his son to a relative for 1000 rupees, or of how Hamid committed suicide by consuming the same acid he had bought to give extra shine to the woven silk. There are many more such tragedies, there amidst the silent looms.

During my wanderings through the maze of narrow lanes that makes up the world of the weavers of Benaras, and through the markets where they sell their cloth, I have often chanced upon roadside

renderings of one of the most popular couplets of the 15th century poet Kabir. The saint, himself a weaver, reminded all about the inevitability of death with the lines:

*Seeing the grinding stone turning, turning,  
Kabir began to weep.  
Between the two stones, not a single grain is saved!*

The couplet's rendering was often accompanied by a drawing of a woman rotating a grinding stone – throwing not grains, but people into its maw. The citizens of Purvanchal are perhaps comfortable with this inevitability – to be able to live the lives they do in remote villages and small towns, which both the state capital of Lucknow and national capital of Delhi have forgotten even exist.

## 250 bigha zamin

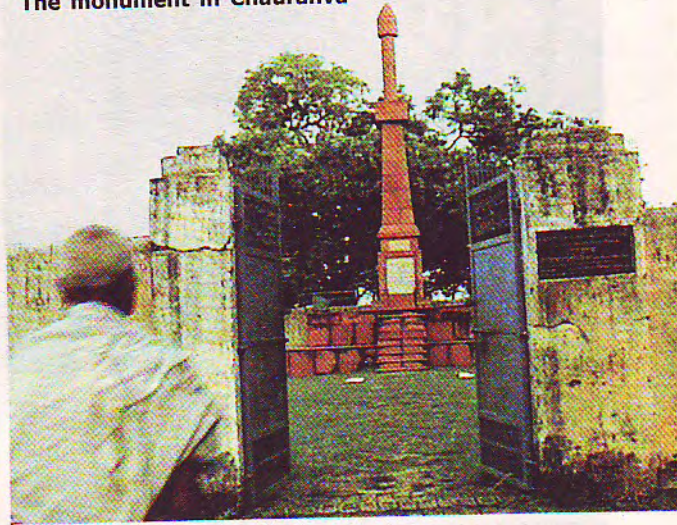
My first stop is the district of Chandauli. They call it *Dhaan ka Pihar*, the home of rice. Despite the production capacity of the region, the rice of this earth does not belong to the tiller. More than 30 years have passed since the state was to have distributed all surplus agricultural land amongst the landless. But the productive fields are still controlled by the big zamindars, and in village after village across Purvanchal it is the same story: the landowners managed to evade redistribution, and everyone lives the lie of land reform.

Bauri village, located amidst the green of ripening paddy, is no different. Here, back in the 1970s, 250 bighas of farmland was declared surplus, but no more than 15 bighas have been given away (one *bigha* is about three acres). Ram Bear (pronounced 'byar'), a local teacher, tells me that the rest remains in the possession of the *dabang log*, or powerful men, even though the poor have been given *pattas* (papers of ownership) by the local administration.

In Bauri, supposed redistribution has been thwarted because most zamindars of Purvanchal have evaded ceiling laws, by declaring their families 'divided' in the land records while continuing to cultivate jointly. What the large landowners did give up was mostly barren, useless stretches of earth. Indeed, 57 percent of all excess land acquired by the state for redistribution is the kind that is unfit for cultivation. No more than 5.4 lakh acres, or a little over one percent of the total 430 million acres of agricultural land of Uttar Pradesh, have been declared surplus. Even out of that tiny amount, only around one-fourth has been redistributed so far.

Land remains the most important socially valued asset in the villages, and its unequal distribution helps to maintain the traditional hierarchies, thereby ensuring the domination of the upper castes. According to Ram Bear, who belongs to one of the Dalit communities with a large presence in Bauri, the idea of releasing this acreage to people still

The monument in Chauranva

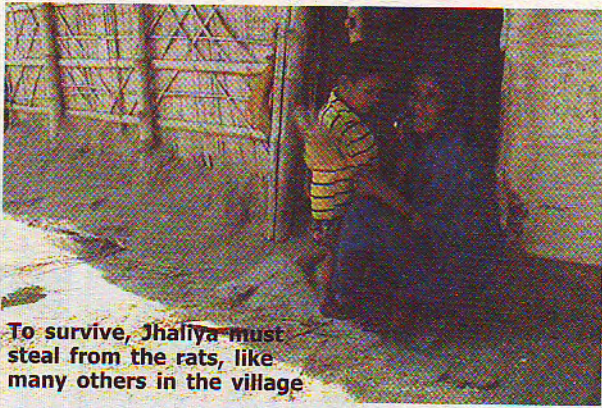


considered 'untouchable' is so distasteful to the zamindar clans that they have simply not allowed it to happen.

While Bauri remains locked in the traditional vice of caste relationships, the power balance is somewhat different in the neighbouring village of Naugaon. This is because it has a large population of Yadavs, the dominant 'other backward caste' in Uttar Pradesh and one of the groups that has most benefited from the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, which in the late 1980s sanctioned 33 percent 'reservation' in education and government jobs for oppressed castes and tribes. Naresh Yadav, a panchayat member of Naugaon, shows me a plot of land that now belongs to the Gram Sabha, or village assembly. It had been in the possession of a handful of Bhumihars, a caste of Purvanchal Brahmin cultivators, until they were forced out, he says. Now it is being farmed by members of his Yadav community.

But there is no getting away from the fact that there is just not enough land in Purvanchal. From the air – like Bihar to the east – Purvanchal is a patchwork quilt of land holdings. The fields that make up this collage, however, are indescribably small – 82 percent of the landholdings of Purvanchal are less than an acre in size. While three-fourths of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, no one has enough and the poorest have nothing. The fact that the agriculture sector has been stagnant, even as other sectors in other parts of India have advanced rapidly, means that the farm-dependent population of Purvanchal is hit hard,

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I ask for some  
water, saying I  
am thirsty, and  
leave quickly.**



To survive, Jhaliya must steal from the rats, like many others in the village

and the landless labourers immeasurably so. Lately, the first move by landowners intent on cost-cutting has been to replace the labourers with harvester machines and other farming equipment hired from Punjab. People who never received the official minimum wage of 58 rupees a day to begin with are now being paid even less.

I traveled to three villages in three separate districts of Purvanchal. In each, people are struggling to survive, and the search for food is getting increasingly desperate.

### Village Chauranva, Dist. Ballia

The first thing I see on entering Chauranva is a stone memorial in a small, neatly laid-out garden. It is a tribute to the freedom fighters of the village who fell to British bullets during the Independence Movement. Martyrdom earned these poor agricultural labourers a small place in history, but this is remembered by none but the people of Chauranva. But the place is also known for being the constituency of the former prime minister, Chandrashekhar, who was returned to Parliament from here over and over again. It was Chandrashekhar who made possible this memorial to the fallen of Chauranva.

As I turn to leave the memorial I meet the caretaker, who has come to light the evening lamp. He is Dinesh Bear, grandson to one of the heroes commemorated here. Dinesh is a tall man, and you would be forgiven for reading defeat and resignation in his eyes and bearing. He says little has changed for his family since the days of his grandfather, some 70 years ago.

"He was a labourer, and so am I. We have no land."

"How much do you earn for a day's work in the fields?"

"Two kilos of rice."

"Do you not receive cash for work?"

"No."

He looks down at his hands and continues. "My grandfather sacrificed his life for the nation, but for us things have only gotten worse."

Dinesh Bear walks two kilometres to the nearest market every day, where he sells half the rice he earns

for five rupees. The remaining kilo makes up his family's evening meal. He has seven mouths to feed. He invites me home for a glass of tea, but I know he can ill afford this small show of hospitality. So I ask for some water, saying I am thirsty, and leave quickly.

At my next stop, I meet a group of women who are paid a daily wage, but the minimum possible. Says Jagmati: "The zamindar gives us one rupee and a one-kg bag of rice for a day's work. Plus water to drink."

"How much did you use to earn earlier?"

"First it was 25 paise, then 50 paise and now one rupee."

"How much time did it take you to move from being paid 25 paise to one rupee?"

"Three to four years."

She continues: "We are so poor, we cannot afford to buy medicine or get our children married. The money we need, we borrow from the zamindar on whose land we work. When we demand higher wages, he says 'you repay the loans first'. How can we do that?"

The question was rhetorical, and of course I had no answers.

### Village Baidauli, Dist. Kushinagar

Kushinagar is where the Gautam Buddha breathed his last. It is one of the many sites on the northern banks of the Ganga plains that have been associated with the Sakyamuni for some two-and-a-half millennia, including Lumbini, Sarnath, Kausambi, Sravasti and Vaishali. It is ironic that the very region that the Buddha trod in his mission to rid the world of suffering is today converted into a premier cauldron of suffering – not only on a Southasian scale but a worldwide one.

The village is Baidauli in Kushinagar District. Jhaliya is sitting outside her hut with a modest stockpile spread out before her. In all, it makes up 25 kg of *dhaan*, unpolished rice, which was painstakingly gathered over three months of foraging in the fields. Each fistful of grain was dug up from the burrows of field rats, painfully separated – grain by grain – from the mud and sand. And all of this foraging was done at night, after working on the fields throughout the day.

Jhaliya is a Mushar, the poorest caste of Dalits in Purvanchal. Traditionally rat trappers, poverty has ensured that the community's association with this mammal continues. Because there is no employment outside of agriculture here – no industry, nor construction activity – when Jhaliya was offered two kg of rice for eight hours of backbreaking labour in the fields, she had no choice but to accept. In the winter months, even this kind of work is not available. To survive, Jhaliya must steal from the rats, like many others in the village. Pointing at the pile of drying grain in front of her, she says: "I will have



# Purvanchal, the Bhojpuri realm

With Uttar Pradesh comprising the world's most populated subnational area – indeed, by itself it would make up the fifth most populous country – Eastern UP, Purvanchal, is one of the most densely inhabited rural areas on earth. It is also one of the poorest: according to one estimate, more than 80 percent of landholdings in the region are less than one hectare in area, and one 1998 estimate suggested that *jhuggie* huts make up 95 percent of homes. A growing socio-economic split developed after Independence between the western and eastern halves of Uttar Pradesh. Western UP, together with Haryana and Punjab, benefited from advanced agriculture and urbanised rapidly, also taking advantage of its proximity to the capital region of Delhi. Meanwhile, the eastern half of the state remained mired in poverty, in tandem with the basket-state of Bihar to the east. Urbanisation levels in Western UP are more than double when compared to Eastern UP – 26 percent as against just 12.

Western and Eastern UP are quite similar in physical size, population and population density. These respective comparisons stand at 89,589 sq km and 87,294 sq km, 58.5 million and 65.3 million, and 843 versus 867 people per sq km.

Nonetheless, there gradually arose a distinction between Purvanchal and Harit Pradesh, its counterpart to the west. Both have long aspired to become separate states within the Indian union, with Purvanchal particularly distinguished by the widespread use of the Bhojpuri language. With an estimated 25 million speakers in India alone, many claim Bhojpuri to be independent from Hindi. Contiguous with Bihar, Nepal and Madhya Pradesh, the region officially comprises 28 districts. While these extend as far west as Kaushambi and Fatehpur (see map, page 21), the ethnic or cultural core

of Purvanchal is to be found clustered in the east and north, taking in the area from the Bihar and Nepal border regions to the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers at Allahabad. For its sheer numbers, Purvanchal's people exercise an overwhelming power in electing lawmakers, both to the state and national legislature. Indeed, there is a saying within Purvanchal: "*Satta uske anchal, jo jeete Poorvanchal*" (The one who wins Purvanchal assumes power in the state as a whole). And yet, as is clear in its current social and economic conditions, Purvanchal does not reap the benefit from its power vis-à-vis the ballot box.

With land under the command of upper-caste landowners, towards the end of the 19th century dire poverty forced the 'lower' caste people of the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh to migrate to distant regions, from the Southern Pacific to the West Indies. In 1991, the greatest concentrations and numbers of India's Scheduled Caste members lived in Uttar Pradesh – 29.3 million, or 21 percent – followed by West Bengal (16 million, 24 percent) and Bihar (12.5 million, 14 percent). UP's Scheduled Caste proportion was slightly higher in the east than in the west – 20.7 percent versus 18.6.

Historically, Eastern and Western Uttar Pradesh had different systems of landholding, and although land reforms have been put in place, Eastern UP still has a higher share of marginal landholdings. Under British rule, the zamindari system of tenancy in Eastern UP estranged cultivators from the land, as it further stratified rural society into layers of tenants, subtenants and rentier landlords. In Western UP, the *bhaichara* system allowed for peasant proprietorship and gave tenants a greater incentive to invest in land and improve productivity, as is reflected by changes in cropping patterns, increases in yield and capital accumulation.

Purvanchal Mukti Morcha (the Liberation Front for Purvanchal), headed by Raj Kumar Singh, first demanded a separate state of Purvanchal comprising 20 districts of Eastern UP in 1996. The leaders of Purvanchal have often claimed that the discriminatory policy of the Uttar Pradesh government in Lucknow responsible for the backwardness of the region, leading to the demand for a separate state. The Pragatisheel Bhojpur Samaj (Progressive Bhojpuri Society) has made frequent demands for an even larger 'Bhojpur', comprising 25 districts of Eastern UP as well as neighbouring Bihar, with Benaras as its capital. It also demands the inclusion of the Bhojpuri language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which would provide it with official recognition even as the government regards Bhojpuri as a dialect of Hindi.



to look for some work when this grain is finished. If I don't get work, we will have to starve."

Thus far, Jhaliya has been more fortunate than her neighbour, Inderpatiya, about whose death I had read in a local newspaper published from Gorakhpur. The report said she had died of starvation; the district authorities said it was tuberculosis. By the time I reached the home of the bereaved family, I saw Inderpatiya's mother Jyotiya had arrived to look after her four grandchildren. The oldest was 14. Jyotiya said that ever since Inderpatiya's husband had died three years ago, she had eaten less and less herself so as not to deprive the children. She insists that had her daughter eaten well, she would have been able to fight the disease.

How often did the family get to eat?

"Once in two or three days. They ate if someone gave them some food, because Inderpatiya was too weak to go out and work."

Jyotiya does not know what will happen to her grandchildren. She has received no official help so far, except the 200 rupees she was given for cremating her daughter. There is a sack of grain remaining in the house, nothing more. "How long will this last?" she asks. The poor of Purvanchal are reduced to counting grains of rice, literally.

As I leave the village, I see that a row of clay urns meant for storing grain has been placed very prominently at the fronts of the houses. They are large, visible and completely empty, and every family has at least one. What is the use of these empty vessels, I want to know. Quickly enough, an elder fills me in: "No one will marry their daughters to our boys if they know our level of poverty. They will think we can't provide for them. We are showing the containers prominently, knowing that no one will take a ladder and look inside. That would be ungracious of the prospective bride's party." I found this innovative thinking a bit like the government's food-for-work

**"The zamindar gives us one rupee and a one-kg bag of rice for a day's work. Plus water to drink."**

programme and employment-guarantee schemes, which exist on paper but are nowhere to be seen on the ground.

When the government does step in, it is with too little, too late. A news item in the Gorakhpur paper said that a man had died of hunger in the village of Bansgaon. This was not some remote

hamlet, but within 10 km from the town of Dudhi, where 'Below Poverty Line' ration cards are distributed. At the government shops, any cardholder can get 35 kg of foodgrain at the subsidised rate of 99 rupees per kilo, once a month. But the poorest of the poor are not even able to put together that amount, especially during the monsoon and winter months, when there is no work to be had. Villagers told me that, very often, they borrow even for buying this subsidised foodgrain. There is a court ruling that allows them to buy the rations in instalments, but no one follows the order.

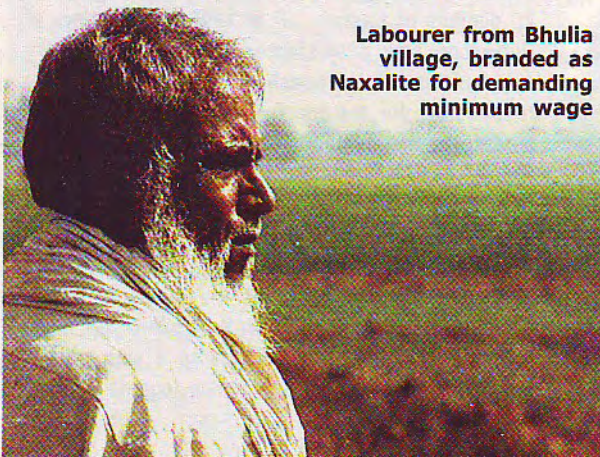
### **Village Chakiya, Dist. Naugarh**

The car stops. It cannot negotiate the potholes in the dirt road, rapidly filling up with water as the rain comes pouring down. There is no other way to get to the village of Chakiya, deep inside the forest of Naugarh District, so I start walking until I reach a cluster of huts. There is no one inside. The villagers are all busy collecting snails and plucking a certain type of grass, which they themselves are eating even as they are feeding it to their cattle.

I ask an old woman, Dhunia, why she does not cook the grass. "Who has oil here?" is her response. If the skies had not opened up over the past few days, there would not even be this grass to eat. "We are no different from the wild elephants who break and eat the branches, leaves and twigs of the tree – anything that can be consumed," says a villager standing nearby.

Here, too, no one has the money to buy the subsidised supplies provided by the district administration. It is people living above the poverty line who have access to the ration cards. None of the very poor people here earn more than four rupees a day, from collecting tendu leaves used in making beedis. "Why are you shocked?" the villager continues. "Wherever you go, you will find that only the rich and powerful people have Below Poverty Line cards. If we do manage to raise the money and go to the ration shop, we find that our quota has already been sold on the black market."

In the more deprived parts of Purvanchal, the grinding poverty, together with a level of exposure to political matters, finally has villagers raising their voices against corruption. They have begun demanding their rights using tried and tested democratic means, but the fight against injustice is



**Labourer from Bhulia village, branded as Naxalite for demanding minimum wage**

proving tough. This is why some have opted for violent methods; there are now districts where the Maoists are strong in numbers and influence, and waging war against the state.

It is the peasantry that suffers when the authorities decide to go after the Maoists. "The police are trying all the time to prove the innocent guilty. Yet if we do not fight, we will remain poor and hungry forever," said Javed Ahmed, a 60-year-old agricultural worker from Chupepur village. He had met us in a field away from the village, scared that the landlord would see him. Soon, other men and women joined in, and all complained of harassment. Said one, "When we ask for our wages, when we demand our rights, we are branded Naxalites and terrorised." Javed recalled how he was threatened when he asked his landlord for a raise of five rupees in his daily wage: "I was told that I will be tied to a tree and shot, or be sent to jail as a Naxalite." This is a fate many poor people in this region now consider worse than death – imprisonment on charges of being a 'Naxal' or a sympathiser of the party, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC).

### **Naxal encounter**

Across the Chandauli, Mirzapur and Sonbhadra districts of Purvanchal, the security forces have been waging a long and bloody battle against the MCC. Meanwhile, villagers maintain that any fight for justice is now being smashed by the landlord-police nexus using the Maoist threat as excuse.

In Bhulai village, when a group of landless Muslims, Kol adivasis and Dalit labourers tried to occupy and cultivate paddy on a patch of government wasteland, they were forcibly stopped by the upper-caste farmers – chased away, their huts razed and crops destroyed. The upper castes then started cultivating the land themselves, and nobody stopped them.

The villagers say the landlords and police are increasingly targeting the few boys from the depressed communities who happen to be educated. "This is because the feudal elements are scared of us," says Mahesh, a graduate who has been thrashed more than once for trying to organise the villagers around the minimum-wage demand. "The landlords don't like it and so they always single us out to the police, saying that 'these boys can create trouble, they are Naxals.'" Mahesh speaks in a dialect of Bhojपुरi, which is close to Bundelkhandi.

In Kanach village of Sonbhadra District, Mallu Baiga and 13 others were accused of setting fire to the house of one of the richest landlords in the area. The police declared them to be Maoists and dragged whomever they could find to jail. Eight of these men had previously worked as bonded labourers for the same zamindar, before being freed three years ago by local social workers. Mallu, who had evaded arrest



Hand-pump mechanic

thus far by hiding at a relative's house, explained the real reason behind the accusation: "My landlord was very angry that we had been rescued from his clutches. So he has taken revenge on us."

The villagers in these districts report that the harassment has increased sharply over the last year, following a November 2004 attack in which a Police Armed Constabulary van was blown up in Chandauli, killing 17 policemen. A special operations group (SOG) made up of armed policemen in plainclothes was formed by the Samajwadi Party government in Lucknow to hunt down the attackers. The SOG has unleashed a reign of terror in the area.

It is not that the state has not tried other measures as well. To counter the growing Naxalite problem, successive state governments have implemented a number of development schemes in the areas where the rebels have strong presence. For instance, 80 million rupees was allocated for 98 villages of Sonbhadra District. As expected, however, there was a rush by the rich and powerful of the area to monopolise these funds. Several police 'encounters' were arranged in which innocent villagers were passed off as Naxalites and arrested or killed.

With both the rebels and police training their guns on each other, the few human rights groups working in the region, including the National Forum of Forest Workers, say that more and more innocent men and women are becoming caught in the crossfire. When they are victimised, the locals hardly have any recourse to justice, says Tanvir Ahmed, a member of the Human Rights Law Network from Benaras, which is also active in this area. Reports Ahmed, "The people here are so poor they cannot keep a lawyer or move bail applications. They are Dalits, adivasis, Mushars, Nats, and they are languishing in jail."

Talking to the victims of political or caste violence, it became apparent to me everywhere I went in Purvanchal that no government to date has seriously addressed the needs of the people of this most backward region. Here, crores are being spent by the



"Panchlight" performance in Jokhera

government to fight the Maoists, and by the politicians to win elections. But there is no employment for the adivasis who have been displaced from their lands, the Dalits still have no access to safe drinking water, and most villages still do not have electricity or functioning schools.

Poverty in Eastern Uttar Pradesh continues despite the clout this region commands in terms of seats in Parliament – 33 out of Uttar Pradesh's 80 total in the Lok Sabha. Unfortunately, the powerful national leaders have all been from Western Uttar Pradesh, including the earlier chief minister Mayawati, current chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav, and central ministers like Ajit Singh. The best Purvanchal has to show for itself is Rajnath Singh, the new chief of the Bharatiya Janata Party, but he has never served a term in the executive.

### Shankuntala Devi

It was purely by chance that I met Shankuntala Devi, on a hot summer afternoon. Stopping near the town of Renukoot for a drink of water, I saw a group of women in saris, their heads covered, glass bangles catching the sun, repairing a hand-pump. The sight was extraordinary, and they barely looked up when I approached them.

"What is the problem?" I asked.

"There is something wrong with the washer," one of them replied. "To replace the whole thing will cost 1700 rupees. If the *sarpanch* gives us the money immediately, it can be done. Otherwise we will have to do a temporary job, so that people don't suffer. A wedding is being held here – at least they will get water. Later, when the Block District Officer releases the money, we will fix it properly."

This was Shankuntala Devi, their confident 30-something group leader, from whom I learned that 80 of the area's women had been trained as hand-pump mechanics. This was part of a project

initiated by UNICEF and implemented by Hindalco, a company that produces aluminium at its plant in Renukoot. The aim was to empower women in a region where the rigid feudal mindset had not allowed them even to go to school. Less than five percent of the women in the area are literate.

When Shankuntala Devi's husband died, she did not know how to make ends meet for herself and her four children. She heard about the hand-pump project from a man in her village who worked at Hindalco, and made up her mind to join. "We were hungry. I had to do something. My father-in-law tried to stop me, but I did not listen to him. I hid from him and went for training every day."

"Did you find it difficult to go out of your home in the beginning?"

"When the officers spoke to us for the first time, we were so scared! It took us several days to even give our names."

"This is hard work..."

"It was tough. But now that we have learned the technique, it's easier. And if we don't do it, how will we earn money?"

"Do you have fixed rates?"

"We earn during the four summer months and live off that money for the rest of the eight months. We charge 1000 rupees to repair a broken hand-pump, 348 rupees for overhauling it, and 116 rupees for minor problems."

"So, how much do you earn every summer?"

"Sometimes it pours money, sometimes it's enough only for two meals a day, sometimes not even that. But if we work hard we can earn up to 25,000 rupees. This is our only income."

"Do women hand-pump mechanics earn more than their husbands?"

"Yes, many of us!"

None of the 80 women hand-pump mechanics of the Renukoot area can read or write, but they understand better than anyone else the value of each drop of water. Today, they cycle from village to village, repairing and maintaining hand-pumps, defying the traditional roles laid down for them by men – in fact, doing what has been very much a 'man's' job.

These winds of change are also blowing in

Jokhera, a small village of Azamgarh District in another part of Purvanchal. Here, a local library, set up in 1993 by a police officer who wanted people to develop the habit of reading, is now organising theatre workshops with the help of the National School of Drama from the national capital. The singular aim is to break down caste barriers in the village and to give young girls a sense of their lives' possibilities.

Although it is a Sunday, the library, set amidst yellow mustard fields, is

**Maulana Iqbal sees the relentless exclusion of young Muslims from the Indian mainstream as a larger culprit than poverty.**

buzzing with activity. Rehearsals have commenced for a new play based on the great Hindi novelist Phaneshwar Nath Renu's short story "Panchlight". The play is a comment on how the caste system divides society: a village in darkness gets a panchlight (a Petromax lantern) and, though everyone is excited, no one knows how to use it. Eventually it is a Dalit, treated as an untouchable all of his young life, who is able to light the panchlight.

Sunita, the oldest member of the drama troupe and a Dalit herself, says that while enacting the story in rehearsals, boys and girls of different castes have been able to reach out to one other. "At first, the Bhumihars would not talk to us, and they even ate their meals separately," she recalls. "But slowly, as we sang, danced and acted together, the barriers began to crumble. I can't say when or how it happened. But one day we went to put up the play in a neighbouring village, and were invited for tea to the house of a relative of one of the actors, Anita, who is a Bhumihar. When the girl's aunt realised I was from a lower caste she served me tea in a clay tumbler, so that it could be broken after use. All the others were given steel tumblers. Anita refused to have tea till I was given a glass like the rest."

These were girls who had never stepped out of their village, had never been exposed to theatre, cinema, books – but they were just as restless to explore the world beyond their village and familial confines. It was not proving easy for everyone, however. Some of the girls who stood outside the library, looking in on the rehearsals, tell me that initially they, too, had taken part in the play, but their parents had forbidden them from continuing. One of them explains, "This is the fallout of an inter-caste marriage that took place here last year. It was for the first time. The villagers told our families that no one would marry us if we continued to spend time with so many different boys. We just could not reason with our parents."

"Will you fight their decision?"

"We don't want to go against their wishes. But at least we realise how closed our minds were. If not today, then tomorrow we will surely be our own person."

The hand-pump mechanics and these budding village actors of Purvanchal provide us with hope: that it is possible to kindle initiative and excitement, even as dreadful discrimination remains and prejudice runs deep. These are shafts of light in a dark landscape. These are small efforts that, although they do not seek to transform all of society, have touched a few lives and have given them the strength of one day conquering the brave new world of Purvanchal.

**"Wherever you go, you will find that only the rich and powerful people have Below Poverty Line cards."**

## The flooded madrasa

Eastern Uttar Pradesh is watered by the tributaries of the Ganga – rivers that uproot the poorest people from their homes, even as they water the land and nurture civilisation. During the rains, starting from the Kosi in eastern Bihar, and moving westwards through the plains of the Kamla, Budi Gandak and Ghagra, the rivers become

unrecognisable from the meandering watercourses of the dry months. Once, the people knew where their rivers came from, where they emptied, which stretches were safe, which were dangerous. Today, these same rivers have become angry strangers. People do not recognise them, nor do the rivers understand the new and ever-growing boundaries of human habitation.

This is an old story of modern times, as old as the indifference of the politicians and bureaucracy. Supposedly to end this annual devastation, official forces built embankments large and small, and they added more embankments as band-aid attempts to placate the population. But this was and remains unscientific, for the rivers that originate in the Himalaya carry a heavy sediment load. These rivers have now been locked into their flow within the embankments, which has in turn raised their beds. These riverbeds are never excavated and, over the years, the rising level of the water table within the embankments has led to increasing breaches.

Everywhere, the floodwaters have left a trail of destruction and disease. Long gone are the engineers, bureaucrats and politicians who pushed these infrastructural improvisations into the lives of the people of Purvanchal. I came across several battles being waged between villages located in the *doab* (land surrounded by rivers), as each tried to save itself from drowning. One group would be breaking rail lines and roads so that the excess water could flow out of their homes, while another other group would be trying to stop them, because that water would



Encephalitis victim, Gorakhpur hospital



**B R Ambedkar and Ravidas**

immediately flood their villages. Both sides would use whatever weapon they could find – stones, sticks and guns.

Meanwhile, the water that finds itself outside the embankments cannot locate an outlet. Unable to join the river's flow, it collects in elongated lakes over the months, a watery breeding-ground for mosquitoes spreading disease. Every year, hundreds of children die in Gorakhpur and Deoria districts alone, from encephalitis spread by mosquitoes. There is never any contingency plan to deal with this epidemic, although everyone knows it happens with annual regularity. In 2005, the media did not pay attention until the death toll crossed the mark of 1000 child deaths – the 'score' required for the editors and television producers to concentrate on the neglected regions of Purvanchal and Bihar.

Last year's rains came and went in Jagdishpur Katra, leaving its madrasa in ruin. More than 500 children of this large, Muslim-dominated village in Gonda District had studied the Koran here, and had taken lessons in Urdu and Hindi. The villagers, all poor farmers, are not able to repair the building, and the authorities will not help. This is one of the 10,000 madrasas in the state that the government does not

**"The people here are so poor they cannot keep a lawyer or move bail applications. They are Dalits, adivasis, Mushars, Nats, and they are languishing in jail."**

recognise. Mohammed Khalil, a teacher who is holding classes in an empty field outside the village, says that they have tried hard to get the school registered, but failed. Many of the parents are convinced that this is the result of deep prejudice. Says one: "The officials make us run from pillar to post. It is because we are Muslims that nobody listens to us."

This sense of discrimination is further reinforced by the pathetic condition of the government primary school located three km away. The school has more than 1000 students, with a faculty of all of two teachers. Uttar Pradesh has the lowest literacy rate among Muslims in the country, with only 35 percent having received any education, just eight percent having completed middle school, and a dismal 2.9 percent having finished high school. The worst off Muslims are those who inhabit the districts of Bhabhara and Gonda, bordering Nepal. "The poverty and illiteracy is at such a level that the question of educating children does not arise," says Mohammed Khalil. "As soon as a boy becomes five, he is sent to Bombay to be a restaurant boy."

Maulana Iqbal, who heads Furkaniya, one of the largest and oldest madrasas in these border districts, sees the relentless exclusion of young Muslims from the Indian mainstream as a larger culprit than poverty. "Even those children who have received good educations and are highly qualified have realised that, as Muslims, getting jobs is very difficult," he says. "Very often, if they pass the written exam they are failed in the interview, and if they somehow get through, other reasons are given for disqualification."

This exclusion, says local politician Fazlul Bari, is one reason Muslim boys get involved in smuggling activities across the UP-Nepal border. "The big operators, also including Hindus, live in towns on both sides of the border," he explains. "But most of the carriers who smuggle the goods are youths from our community. They are poor and illiterate, and this is the only source of income. They have no prospects."

Both literally and figuratively, the region bordering Nepal has remained firmly in the margins, before and since Independence. During British rule, tens of thousands of people from here were sent across the oceans to provide indentured labour for sugarcane and other plantations in the West Indies, South Pacific, Mauritius and elsewhere. Large-scale migration at a similar scale continues to this day, with young men heading off to Bombay and Calcutta by the thousands every year.

## Gorakhpur

The largest town in Purvanchal is Gorakhpur, set amidst an agricultural backwater largely untouched by the Green Revolution that has boosted the regions to the west – Haryana, Punjab and the western half of Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, Gorakhpur has been excluded from the economic advance that other cities of India's west and south have experienced as part of the national economic boom. This lack of economic activity is seen in the downtown Golghar locality, which retains the flavour of an oversized agricultural town centre. The biggest economic activity in Gorakhpur, besides agricultural trading, is the pilgrimage based on the Gorakhnath Math complex, around which the town was built. Gorakhpur also serves as a transit point for travelers and goods entering the central region of Nepal through the border point of Bhairahawa.

Unemployment in Gorakhpur has soared with the shutting down of a nearby Fertilizer Corporation of India factory and the collapse of the sugar industry on which the countryside had largely depended. Every day the number of frustrated, jobless youth is swelling, and they are both Hindu and Muslim. Crime is the easy way out. Many of these angry Hindu youths have found an anchor in Gorakhpur's sitting Member of Parliament, Yogi Adityanath. To others, he is a sworn enemy. In his 30s, the yogi is successor to the former Hindu Mahasabha President Mahant Avaidyanath. The mahant was also head of the powerful Gorakhnath Math of the Nath *sampradaya*, or sect.

Although this ancient sect has traditionally opposed the caste system and idol worship, its modern-day followers have joined forces with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Ram Mandir movement, which gained strength in the 1980s. Even though many conservative leaders themselves look askance at this unusual sect leader in their ranks, Adityanath is an energetic voice of the Hindutva brigade, and he is leading a growing band of the unemployed Hindu men of Purvanchal. Descending from his pulpit, Adityanath is building his political base by raising popular demands that resonate with this demographic category; this he has done under different banners, ranging from 'Ram Prakostha' for pavement dwellers to the 'Bansford Hindu Manch' for woodcutters. All of these fronts together make up the Hindu Yuva Vahini, Yogi Adityanath's army of religious crusaders who are increasingly targeting the Muslims from Gorakhpur, Deoria, Sidharthnagar and Bharach.

At one end of this stretch of instability is Ayodhya; on the other, lies the serpentine Nepali border. It



Dalit children in Naugarh District

is said that there has been a sudden rise in the number of madrasas on the other side of the open international frontier, in Nepali districts such as Kapilbastu and Rupandehi. According to Adityanath's propaganda, these madrasas are serving as training camps for Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI, to hit at India's soft underbelly. What Adityanath forgets is that the demographic nature of Purvanchal also carries across the open border, and there is a large concentration of Muslims in the Tarai plains of Nepal. Traditionally, Nepali Muslims have been a quiet minority in what has been proclaimed as a traditionally 'Hindu kingdom'. Since the advent of democracy in 1990, there has been an assertion of identity among all of Nepal's disfranchised communities, including Nepali Muslims. This would better explain the increase in Islamic religious centres and schools than as the nefarious designs of a foreign intelligence agency.

The Gorakhnath yogi's use of propaganda against the Muslim community is helping to create a powder keg of communalism in Purvanchal – and this is a region that did not witness significant violence even after the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya. Today, however, religion is being used by the criminal-politician nexus in both communities to fight not just electoral battles, but also to further their business interests. These can include anything from gun running to drug smuggling, kidnapping, extortion and land grabbing. There is religion everywhere in Purvanchal, as well as its manipulation.

**The same faith that has sustained the people of this region since the times of the Buddha, Mahavir, the Sufi saints, and Kabir and Valmiki, is today being divided in the name of religion.**

In Kushinagar, on my way back to Benaras, I pass a playground and am told it is actually an airstrip that was built by the Dalit chief minister, Mayawati. The strip was constructed to fly in pilgrim tourists to where the Sakyamuni breathed his last, but was abandoned as soon as Mayawati was ousted from power. On the outskirts of Benaras, I come across a white, newly built temple,



Purvanchal peasants await progress

dedicated to the 15th century poet saint Ravidas – worshipped by Sikh Dalits as their guru, and today attracting as many politicians as pilgrims. Sunder Dass Shastri, the head priest, explains why: “When the political parties see the increasing crowd, they want to associate with us. They want all of Ravidas’ followers to be part of their vote bank.”

It was after the demolition of the Babri Masjid that the secular and left parties rediscovered the secular credentials of the poet Kabir, whom both Hindus and Muslims claim as one of their own. Acharya Vivek Das, of the Kabir Math in Benaras, feels that they are losing ground to fundamentalists of both faiths. But the attempts to use religion for political gain is more insidious than this. Mahant Vir Bhadra Mishra of Tulsi Ghat – the Benaras locale where the 16th century poet Goswami Tulsidas is said to have written his epic Ram Charit Manas – maintains that some politicians are attempting to divide even the Hindus

by pitting the Ram Charit Manas against the Ramayan of Valmiki.

An over-populated economic backwater, Purvanchal has remained underdeveloped before and since Independence, serving as nothing more than a vote bank for politicians that have made this region their launching pad to state-level and national political platforms. Purvanchal’s economic backwardness translates into daily impoverishment, the want and hunger of millions of its residents. Today, the people of Purvanchal are excluded from the progress that has touched other parts of India, which they are able to experience only during travel as menial migrant labourers to those regions. The feelings of caste- and class discrimination, of regional neglect, already create a potent force for violent rebellion. In the last few years there has been the addition of communal differentiation, which is adding an element of belligerence to the region’s politics.

Purvanchal and neighbouring Bihar jointly form the cauldron that produced many of the great saints and sages of Southasia. The same faith that has sustained the people of this region since the times of the Buddha, Mahavir, the Sufi saints, and Kabir and Valmiki, is today being divided in the name of religion. This can only add to the miseries of the people, who have deep ties to the land and would not wish to be anywhere else. Amidst the turmoil and destitution of Purvanchal, there remains that faith. It is said that the Buddha was born repeatedly in Benaras in his previous lives – as a dice player, an ascetic, an acrobat, a snakebite doctor, a rich Brahmin. And like him, they too never wish to be of any other place. All they wish is that Purvanchal be governed a little better, so as to be able to taste a bit of the progress and prosperity that citizens in other areas are experiencing. ▲



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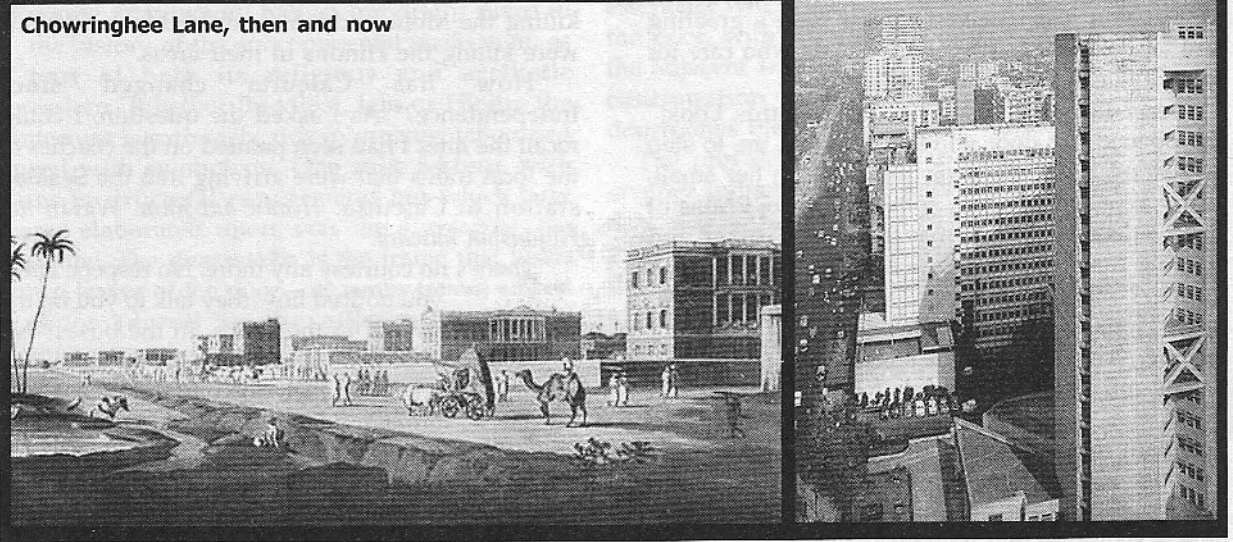
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# 54, Chowringhee Lane

by | Rinku Dutta

Chowringhee Lane, then and now



In the fork of a branch on the neem tree, a crow's nest: an artless, untidy tangle of twigs, with stray strands dangling in the air; a pair of birds hopping in and out, arranging the twigs with their beaks. So that is what a crow's nest looks like! Must tell G. He had enquired about the nesting habits of the common crow when I had described to him the weaverbird's meticulously crafted, pendulous homes I had seen in a eucalyptus tree in Lalitpur, in Nepal.

It was the crow's nest that had first drawn my attention to the old neem tree, and beside the tree, the house – the house with a quaint fence at 54 Chowringhee Lane, Calcutta.

Stepping out of the medical facility where my brother's MRI was being done, I had looked up, spying first the crow's nest in the tree and then the house. A blue sweater was hanging over the wooden fence at the door-front. A couple of red-oxide-painted steps led up to the door. There were flowerpots on either side, against the ochre-coloured wall: a money plant, some crotons with variegated leaves, a sansviera with tall spikes, a few mums. The afternoon light, filtering through the sickle-shaped, saw-toothed neem leaves, was making delicate filigrees on the red steps.

It was the teal blue, two-and-a-half foot tall, swing-out fence fixed at the front of the door that was most unusual – the first of its kind I had seen here in Calcutta: a number of vertical spikes of wooden shafts, spaced by a couple of inches and nailed together by one diagonal and two horizontal bars. Betty Keyes, the 73-year-old Anglo-Indian lady who lives there and who I would soon get to know, told me that they had the fence made when her husband – Frank Keyes, ex-District Commissioner of the Lalbazar Police Department in Calcutta – had kept a ferocious Doberman named Kimmy.

So it was that I walked up to inspect the open fence that had once kept Kimmy from attacking strangers like me, arriving unannounced at Betty's door. But Kimmy is dead, buried in St. Paul Cathedral's graveyard right across the street. Frank is dead, too, buried in his family graveyard in Lower Circular Road. I did not ask Betty where her only son, who died while still a baby, was buried. When she opened her door to answer the postwoman's knock and saw me sitting on her red steps, I told her that my brother was sick and he was having an MRI done. Betty responded with disarming directness, "I'm sick too – sick of living."

A couple of minutes earlier, as I had sat on her steps watching a couple of cats grooming themselves under the neem tree, a sari-clad woman with a brown bag swinging from her arm had walked up to the house. She knocked on the door, shouting, "Me, postwoman!" When Betty had opened the door, the postwoman had handed her a white envelope. From where I was sitting on the steps below, I could clearly read: *To Betty Keyes. 54 Chowringhee Lane, Kolkata.* From the stiffness of the envelope, I could make out that it was a card.

"But you just received a New Year's greeting card!" I exclaimed. "There are people who care for you! How can you be tired of living?"

"Yes, I do have people who send me cards. Look!" She opened her door wide and invited me to step in. I stood at the doorway and took in her small, neatly kept living space, softened by depictions of Jesus, a decorated Christmas tree in one corner, and greeting cards strung across a wall. "But who do I live for?" She asked me. "My three cats?" I looked at the two playing under the tree. "That's Whitey, he's Tiger, and Taamu must be somewhere..."

In the showcase, along with porcelain dolls (one of a pensive girl: her face cradled in her palms, her elbows resting on her knees) and a bronze sculpture of a high-heeled shoe ("my mother's; I kept it"), I spied a black-and-white photograph of an attractive young face framed in curls – Betty, in her teens. Now, with a toothless smile and short, grey hair pinned away from her face, wearing a pink t-shirt and faded sweatpants, she still paints her toenails – silver, I noticed. I also noted the feathers on one of the shelves: long, brown ones, some striped white – kite feathers, of *cheels*, hawks ("my father's, he used to collect them"). Two fluffy toys reclined on one of the four cushioned chairs in the room – a well-worn brown teddy, a grey koala. A printed, yellow curtain at the high window kept out the light. Inside, beyond the tall shelf partitioning the hall-like room, a small, two-chaired dining table sat against one wall. A curtained door led into a bedroom or a toilet. That was all that comprised Betty's home.

## Ups and downs

"There used to be many Anglo-Indians living in this area, before the Birlas bought this building," Betty told me. "One by one they all went away. I'm the only one left."

"Did you see Aparna Sen's film *36 Chowringhee Lane*?"

"Yes, and she fed the cake to the dogs in Victoria ... very moving. You think of me as her?"

"You reminded me," I responded. "That aged teacher's role was so beautifully played by Jennifer

Kapoor. At the end, the way she quoted King Lear, 'Pray do not mock me – I am a very foolish, fond old man...' Yes, Aparna Sen paid a touching tribute to the Anglo-Indian community in Calcutta. Have you always been in India?"

"I was born here," Betty said. "My father was in the railways. I got married to Frank in 1946, the year of the Great Calcutta Killings."

"You mean the Bengal riots?"

"Yes. We were then living on Park Street. There were killings on Wellesley Road. The Hindus were killing the Mohameddans and the Mohameddans were killing the Hindus in their areas."

"How has Calcutta changed since Independence?" As I asked the question, I could recall the lines I had seen painted on the coaches of the local trains that were arriving into the Sealdah station in Calcutta: *Hindu hai hum. Watan hai Hindustan humara.*

"There's no courtesy any more. No respect. Have you noticed how they talk to you on the streets, in the shops, in the buses? No regard for others, even for the aged. The other day I fell down in the market and broke my hand. I can't see in my right eye – the doctor damaged my cornea while operating on the cataract. I can barely manage with the vision that is left in my left eye. I can't cook. So I have to get someone to buy me some food and some for my cats – I spend 30 rupees every day to feed them fish fries. So you see why I'm tired of living?"

"But you seem to have had a good life..."

"Yes, as head supervisor of the Trunk Exchange, and with Frank as DC Lalbazar, we had a good life. Frank was Irish and was very jovial. He was in the police. So he could help many people, you see. Everybody loved him. But our baby died. And India happened. Things changed. We had many ups and downs."

That reminded me of something that had happened earlier that very day. "I was going up the elevator with my 8-year-old nephew today morning," I began, "and I quizzed him, 'What is red and round and goes up and down?' He didn't have the right answer. I said: 'a tomato in an elevator!' He smiled, and then turned and quizzed me: 'Whose life has the most ups and downs?' I didn't have an answer. 'A lift man's!'"

That made Betty laugh and show me her toothless gums, where a few last teeth were holding their ground. "It's late," she said. "I need to feed my cats. Will you be sitting here? Can you watch my house? They fry fish just across the street. I'm coming. Okay?"

And she shuffled away, leaving her open house in my custody. ▲

**"Our baby died.  
And India  
happened. Things  
changed. We had  
many ups and  
downs."**

# Dvarasakha: the temple doorframe

by | **Vaijayanti Khare**

**T**emple architecture has an important place in the history of the subcontinental civilisation, as part of both its religious and aesthetic expressions. Whether Buddhist, Jain or Hindu, the architecture is extremely rich in ornamentation and infused with symbolism. One such feature, with origins in structural requirements but which later became elaborated upon, was the *dvarasakha*, the doorframe. The *dvarasakha* is the frame that holds the two leaves of the door – its jambs (*sakha*) embed the door (*dvara*) in the adjacent wall. The accompanying threshold and area above the lintel are also considered parts of the *dvarasakha*.

Ornamented doorframes are an integral feature of temple architecture, in all styles. The immense variety among the ubiquitous *dvarasakha* is bewildering, and it may well be impossible to find two identical frames anywhere. What lies beneath this apparent variety? Was it the result of some tradition, a response to prescriptions of the holy Silpa texts, or was there some underlying symbolic significance?

## Spiritual amalgam

The frame at Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh (c 5 AD, *see photo*), taken as the earliest sample, shows the

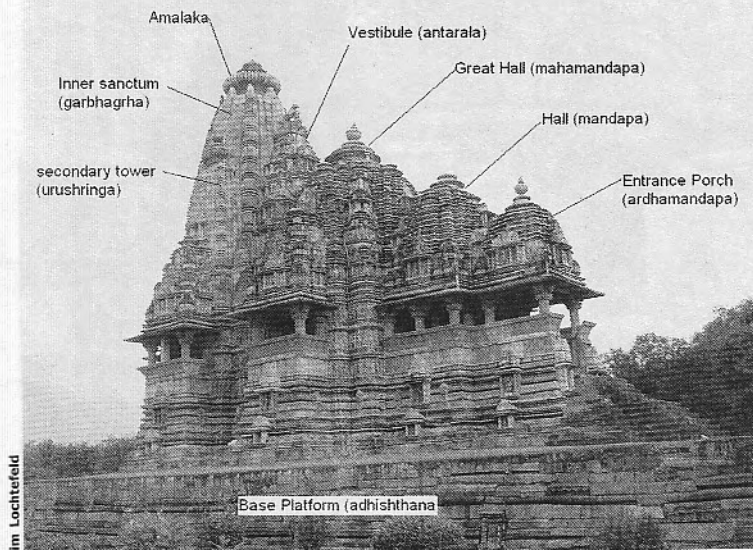
essentials: two vertical supports to hold the leaves of the door, with a horizontal lintel that extends into the adjacent walls. This extended lintel is clearly a continuation of timber frames, and gave the doorframes their characteristic 'T' shape.

The prevalent 'vernacular' housing style added another influence to the doorframe: a porch at the door was faithfully translated from wood and thatch into stone. One of the best-rendered porch types was flat-roofed, with curved, S-shaped sides. Cave no 19 at Ajanta in Maharashtra (*see photo*) is perhaps the best-preserved specimen of this kind. When the *antarala* and *mandapa* (the transitional area into the inner sanctuary and the columned porch area, respectively) were added to the temple structure, such a porch became redundant. It was not forgotten, however, but rather 'compressed' onto the doorframe. The Basesvar Mahadev temple at Kangra (in Himachal Pradesh) and Sisiresvar temple at Bhubanesvar (in Orissa) depict this 'compressed porch' (*see photos*).

The third peculiar influence on the evolution of the *dvarasakha* was that of the tradition of the *torana*, or entryway arch. A free-standing *torana* outside the Mukteshvar temple in Orissa is one of the best-preserved examples of this tradition (*see photo*). The

wooden village gates of the Vedic settlements are the precursors of the earliest *torana* designs: a pair of high posts, crossed near the tops by one to three bars. An auspicious note was added to festive occasions by hanging a garland or festoon over the entrances to villages or homes, a practice that continues today.

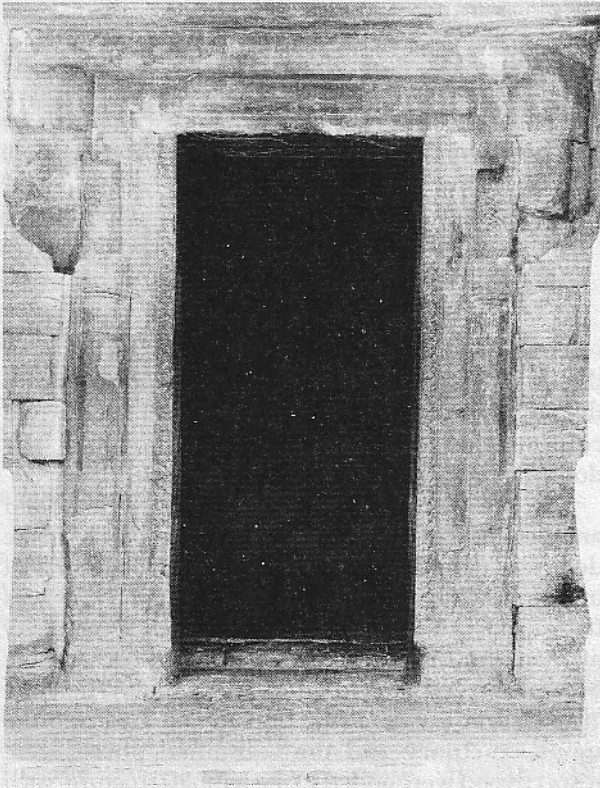
And so it came to be that the mature *dvarasakha* was a complex representation of the porch, the *torana*, the *gopuram* and more often a combination of these features. Thus did the simple become the complex. The seemingly complicated *dvarasakha* at the Sas Bahu temples or the Osian and Jagat structures in Rajasthan, however, are but simple doorframes with ornate treatments of the space around the frames.



Jim Lochterfeld

**A North Indian Nagara temple**

(continued)



**Temple 17, Sanchi**



**Basesvar Mahadev, Kangra c late 9 AD**



**Torana at Muktesvar Temple, Bhubanesvar**

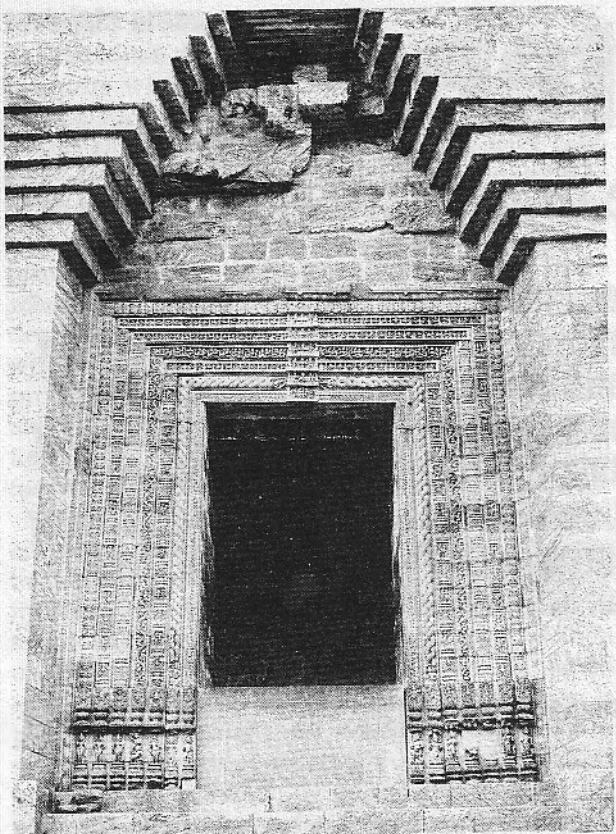
(continued from p 35)

But why the multiple sakhas? The bas-reliefs that are taken as indicative of the Vedic settlements show no such presence, and even today, simple village dwellings do not sport sakhas. Even the early translations onto the cave temple entrances bear ample evidence of this absence. Simple bamboo structures were eventually replaced by mud-cement, dry masonry or stone constructions, materials that necessitated thick walls. The answer to the emergence of frames, then, could lie in the thickness of the walls of such structures. An abrupt cut in a wall has a much more jarring effect on the eye than does a gradual cut inwards, which makes the doorway welcoming rather than intimidating, not to mention more aesthetic.

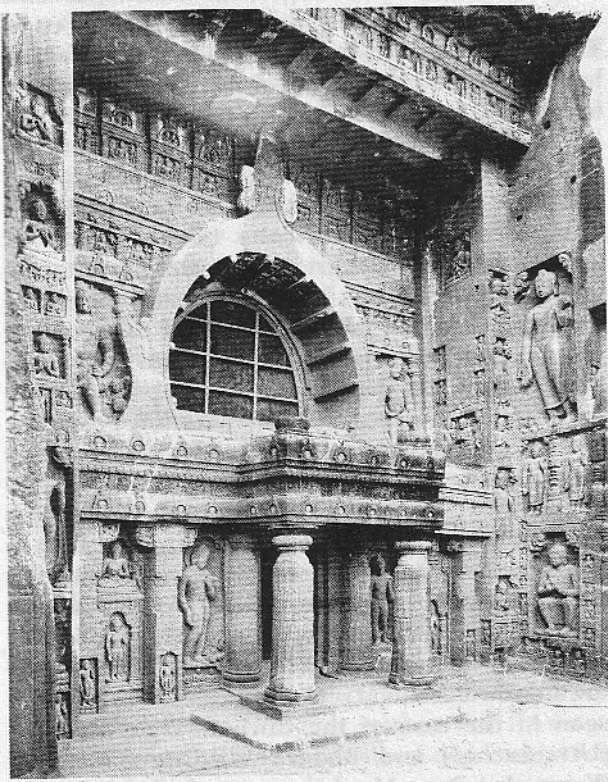
When temple structures were made from quarried stone, the rolling, lateral rhythms of the cave wall were taken over by vertical and horizontal bands of stone. The imagery of the doorway was split into numerous units. The dvarasakhas ranged from single sakha to nine sakha depictions. The doorway of the Sun temple at Konarak in Orissa is an excellent piece of the *Navasakha* depiction (see photo).

A third plausible theory could lie in the 'intel-theatre'. It seems that at some stage in the evolution of the doorframe, the space above the lintel was the theatre and stage. This would have subsequently decided the thickness of the horizontal top and, in turn, necessitated the multiple frames – though more for the visual aspect than for their load-bearing characteristics.

Since time immemorial, artists have impregnated ordinary elements from nature with spiritual significance. In the dvarasakha, the search for that significance becomes imperative.



Konarak Sun Temple 13th Century



Porch at Cave No 19 Ajanta



Sisireshvar Temple Bhubanesvar

Dvarasakha photographs courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi

# Oustee:

## Victimisation of the ecological refugee

**Among the most disadvantaged communities of India are the forest-dwelling villagers, and yet they are asked to pay the highest price when the state decides to take a stand for the sake of biodiversity and removes resident peoples from protected areas. Displacement should be undertaken only as part of a consultative process involving scientists, social activists and local government, and should be minimised whenever possible. Above all, the relocation process, when it is adopted, must show absolute concern for humanitarian values.**

by | Ghazala Shahabuddin

**T**here are more than 580 national parks and sanctuaries in India. They have been set up with the primary aim of conserving biodiversity, and the rules prohibit human habitation as well as the exploitation of natural resources. However, surveys indicate that there are people living within many of these protected areas (referred to as PAs) who are economically dependent on the natural resources available inside these regions.

Over the decades, there has been a widespread trend towards relocating villages from protected areas, with the forest managers blaming the inhabitants for 'biomass extraction' and otherwise posing a threat to biodiversity conservation. Such displacements have been strongly opposed by local communities as being both unnecessary and inequitable. Over the years,

there has grown a controversy of considerable proportions, with social activists siding with the communities and pitted against biologists who tend to speak for the forest managers. The conflict has come to a head after the sudden decline of the Royal Bengal Tiger population in India due to poaching, which had the forest departments of many states pushing for 'people-free zones'. In this, the forestry officials have been egged on by influential wildlifers.

Social activists have been typically opposed to the relocation of villages from wildlife sanctuaries, as the process has historically been a cause of impoverishment and grievous social harm to the 'oustees'. Numerous studies have shown that displacement invariably endangers the livelihood of forest-dependent people, often leading to destitution. Such impoverishment has been comprehensively documented in the case of Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh, from where 24 villages were removed starting in 1998. In another instance, a recently framed village relocation plan in the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve of Maharashtra is likely to take the Gond tribal inhabitants away from their traditional forest resources without development of substitutes. It is true that concerns over forced relocation have recently generated some attentiveness towards the livelihood security of oustees, as has been seen in the case of the Corbett Tiger Reserve (Uttaranchal) and Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary (Karnataka). By and large, however, the humanitarian challenge remains unaddressed in PAs throughout the Indian landscape.



Jagdish Krishnaswamy

**Relationships between residents and park management are marked by distrust**

## Inviolable areas

The relocation drive is spearheaded by biologists and foresters who believe that wildlife conservation cannot succeed without large 'inviolable' areas of forests from which all human residents have been evacuated. They justify their stance by pointing to drastically declining populations of large mammals – the result, they say, of growing competition between human needs and those of wild fauna. These scientists and technocrats point to habitat degradation due to overexploitation of the forests, which no doubt is rampant even inside the high-profile tiger reserves. The biologists, meanwhile, maintain that the community-run forests, such as in Joint Forest Management areas, have not been ideal for conserving the entire spectrum of flora and fauna.

Yet the justification for village relocation by emphasising the ecological benefits has not been backed by quantitative studies of biodiversity indicators or of endangered species. Apart from anecdotal accounts, there is usually little information on the relative ecological impact of various human activities within the PAs from where relocation is planned. Forest managers are therefore unable to prioritise the kinds of activities that can be sustained within, or that need to be relocated to outside the protected areas. The confusion is exacerbated by the fact that few PAs in India have scientific management plans that clarify the conservation objectives based on ecological studies. Given the prevalence of such an unscientific regime, it seems unconscionable to evict forest inhabitants because of a *presumption* of ecological damage caused by them. In many cases, for instance, a closer look has revealed that the extent of damage caused by extraction and poaching by outsiders in PAs is several times greater than that caused by local residents.

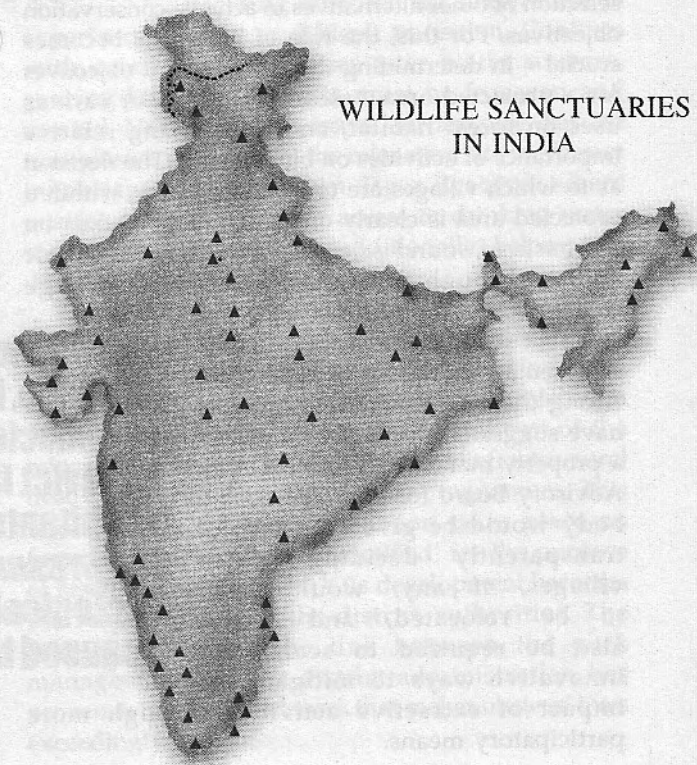
There is another important humanitarian reason for reconsidering the Indian policy on relocation of people from protected areas. To a great extent, resident peoples have been kept in limbo for years, deprived of both a present and a future. Numerous villages located inside planned national parks and sanctuaries have been denied infrastructural support because PA legislation prohibits developmental activities such as the construction of roads, clinics, schools and even wells. Livestock-grazing, collection of fuelwood, and agricultural activities are usually restricted soon after the notification of protected areas, but the inhabitants are rarely provided with alternatives. Meanwhile, the relocation plans for these villages, usually faulty and inadequate, stay in files for years due to local opposition or simply mismanagement. Villagers within the PAs are therefore forced to live in a state of deprivation for years, with little access to basic amenities and in continuous conflict with the forest authorities. This state of uncertainty is part and parcel of the lives of

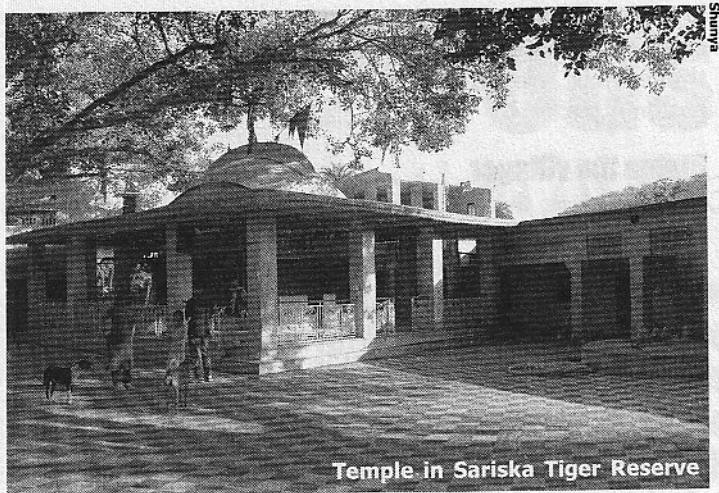
large numbers of people still living inside conservation areas all over India, and particularly those that are proposed to be upgraded to national parks.

## Blame the villager

In considering the question of relocation in relation to ecology and human rights, we must not forget the larger politics of protected-area management. Uprooting resident villages is a favoured management tool in most PAs, while the forest authorities habitually ignore the other sources of pressure on the habitat. Officials commonly come down heavily on the local subsistence-level inhabitants while overlooking the damage caused by hydroelectric plants in the conservation areas, commercial tourism, mining and quarrying. A particularly egregious instance of misplaced priorities is to be found in the case of the Narayan Sarovar Sanctuary in coastal Gujarat, where 90 percent of the PA (originally 765 sq km in area) was denotified by the state government in 1993 to make way for mining, although residents were not ousted from the area.

In another instance, the right of private companies to mine marble at the periphery of the Sariska Tiger Reserve was defended by the Rajasthan State Forest Department, which pleaded in court that the exact boundaries of the reserve were still unclear. The deleterious effects of unrestricted commercial tourism on tiger behaviour, mostly by city-based operators, have already been well documented in places such as the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan.





Temple in Sariska Tiger Reserve

Conservationists make the valid point that in the rush to relocate communities, the authorities rarely look at how people and wildlife can coexist. For example, there is no serious attempt to funnel tourism profits to local communities to compensate for their loss of livelihood from bans on grazing and collecting forest produce. In the meantime, decades after the official notification of protected areas, oustees have yet to receive even the legally mandated settlements in the majority of Indian PAs.

The Tiger Task Force, set up by the government of India to suggest solutions vis-à-vis controversial conservation issues, recommends minimising displacement. It suggests using the relocation of villages as a last resort when it comes to reducing extractive pressures on PAs, emphasising the selection of other alternatives to achieve conservation objectives. For this, the role of biologists becomes crucial – in determining the management objectives for a protected area, assessing impacts of various uses on forest habitat, and quantifying relative importance of activities on biodiversity. The decision as to which villages are to be shifted from within a protected area is clearly one that must be taken on the basis of sound scientific and socio-economic study, through consultation between village representatives, environmental and social scientists, local NGO representatives and forest authorities. Along these lines, conservationists have suggested the establishment of a properly mandated Protected Area Advisory Board for each PA. Such a body would be given the task of transparently deciding which villages, if any, would need to be relocated, and would also be required to search for innovative ways to mitigate the impact of extractive activities through more participatory means.

## Ousteers' burden

If one challenge is to protect the forest communities from being unfairly evicted from their traditional spaces, the other deals with the rights and livelihoods of those who have been displaced – the unfortunately-named oustees. It is a sad commentary on the priorities of the Indian government that, despite wanton displacement over the years, there is so little legal backing available to fight for oustees' rights, including the right to just and equitable rehabilitation. The only law relating to displacement remains the Land Acquisition Act, based on a 19th century colonial law that does not allow dissent on the part of the oustees. The National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy, which attempts to set right many injustices to proposed oustees of development projects, is yet to be finalised or converted to a law, even after two decades of discussion. The Settlement of Rights provision in the Wildlife Protection Act, which is sometimes invoked during the relocation process from PAs, is so vague that it is prone to be misused. Beyond the matter of existing laws, there is no binding mechanism that places the onus for an effective rehabilitation on either the Forest Department or the District Administration, and the whole matter of resettlement is often left to the individual commitment of local forest officers and/or district officers to carry out a just resettlement programme.

Indeed, the process of rehabilitation of oustees tends to be faulty from start to finish. The government departments' views of rehabilitation are limited to monetary compensation and land allotments. There is almost no sensitivity towards the matters of skill development and social adjustment among the oustees, nor towards the quality of land that is allotted or infrastructure that must accompany relocation. All of this stems from the attitude of the forestry establishment and others towards the oustees, most of whom belong to the marginal Scheduled Caste or tribal communities.

Simply handing out money and plots of land does not guarantee security of livelihoods, nor does it equip the uprooted oustees with skills to help them cope in an alien physical, economic and social environment. In fact, a dedicated relocation effort must perforce engage with oustees on deciding their new mode of living, energy substitutes and educational/skill development that will allow them to make a satisfactory transition. The absence of such a planned relocation has impoverished numerous oustee communities, with the result that many uprooted families 'illegally' seek to return to their original homesteads. In the case of the Kuno Wildlife

**Given the lack of science, it seems unconscionable to evict forest inhabitants because of a presumption of ecological damage caused by them.**



Sanctuary, despite a relatively progressive package, many of the oustees have made their ways back to the reserve. There, the traditional sustenance system, balanced between grazing and agriculture, has also broken down. Successive years of drought exacerbated the situation and, in 2004, the oustees faced a starvation crisis.

Studies also indicate that the existing financial packages for rehabilitation of oustee communities need to be made much more realistic. According to the Beneficiary-Oriented Tribal Development Scheme, INR one lakh has been pegged as the upper limit for expenditure per household for relocation, including personal costs and community works (but excluding cost of land). Given the wide diversity in needs of different communities in different geographic contexts, this ceiling seems both low and needlessly limiting. The Tiger Task Force has recommended that at least INR 2.5 lakh be set aside per household, apart from land costs. It is noteworthy that the relocation from the Bhadra Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, where the process is said to have been relatively successful, cost over four lakh per household, excluding the land. Since relocation must include at least three years' income compensation, and allowances for fuel and fodder requirements (among other needs), this higher figure seems much more realistic.

Yet another lacuna in the rehabilitation packages is the lack of income compensation to tide the oustees over during the transition period, as they try to carve out a new life in an alien environment. When a semi-nomadic grazing community (such as that of the Gujjars in Sariska or Maldharis in the Gir Protected Area) attempts to shift to an agriculture-based living, it is likely to take at least a few years for a family to learn and adjust to the new livelihood. During this period, it is critical that their incomes are compensated; otherwise, oustees are prone to destitution. The inability to provide income security in transition appears to be a systemic problem of most relocation projects implemented in the country.

It is obvious (except to the relocation authorities) that beginning agricultural livelihoods in new areas requires expensive inputs in the form of seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, apart from irrigation works, for which no provisions are generally made in the relocation plans. The only allotment made for agricultural livelihood is usually under the heading of 'land development'. Sometimes crop compensation allotments are also made, but these are usually paltry (in Sariska, it stood at INR 6000 per family overall) and are supposed to be disbursed only in the case of crop failure. In semi-arid zones, provisions for irrigation facilities are a must if

the oustees are seriously expected to develop agricultural livelihoods.

### **Prior right**

The problems in relocation plans for protected areas throughout India have their genesis in the planning stage itself. After all, a just and equitable transfer of communities can happen only if the programme takes popular aspirations, needs and constraints into consideration and rationally evaluates the requirements before relocation. In most cases, there is no logical assessment of the needs of the villagers who are to be shifted. Part of the reason for this is that oustees are hardly ever consulted before the plans are drawn up. If the principles of 'prior informed consent' or 'voluntary displacement' are to be adhered to, the target population must be provided with full information about the new site before their consent is solicited. This almost never happens. Thus,

the most basic and obvious needs of oustees tend to be ignored with impunity, such as the substitute for fuelwood, what is to be the fodder for livestock, and what are the alternatives to incomes in relation to non-timber forest produce.

Apart from socio-economic and anthropological studies of the communities to be relocated, social and ecological assessments of the new site are also required. For example, the local social dynamics at new sites in terms of caste play a significant role in deciding whether the settlers are to

experience an easy or difficult transition. Conflicts with existing communities over water sources, grazing lands and forests must be foreseen and averted. Neglect of such issues, for instance, has led to explosive situations at the relocation site for former inhabitants of the Sariska Tiger Reserve, where oustees are competing for access to drinking water with prior residents, who, additionally, belong to a different caste.

The lack of involvement of the district administration with the relocation process is another identifiable weak link. Dovetailing existing rural development policies and schemes with the relocation project would surely reduce the overall cost of the relocation package, since many of the infrastructural needs could be met through these programmes. This is important, for most relocation takes place on forestland that has been 'denotified' for the purpose of resettlement, after which its development becomes the responsibility of the district authorities. The inability to make the link between the park management and the district administration has proven to be a key bottleneck that makes oustees' lives exceedingly difficult.

**The only law relating to displacement remains the Land Acquisition Act, based on a 19th century colonial law that does not allow dissent on the part of the oustees.**

## Implementation hurdles

As relocation plans are carried out, the required roads, wells and health posts are almost never built before the people – the victims – are moved. Such is the lackadaisical attitude towards the displaced that even the formal allotment of plots and infrastructural development are often found uncompleted decades after the actual shifting has taken place. It should be obvious that connecting roads, schools, health posts and panchayat buildings must be in place before the relocation has begun, and that land allotments and the assignment of *pattas* should have happened prior to the physical relocation.

Because the translocated population does not participate – and with poor management of the relocation exercise almost a given – even relatively generous allotments for community works or fuelwood and pasture development rarely result in satisfactory completion. For instance, in the Kuno case, as much as INR 8000 was allocated per household for fuelwood plantations, a similar amount for pasture development, and INR 9000 per household for community works. A study showed that none of these goals were realised on the ground, whereas the involvement of village panchayats or *gram sabhas* from the initial stages might have led to efficient implementation of pasture and watershed management programmes.

It is problematic that the relocation exercise is generally left to the Forest Department, whereas it should involve both local non-governmental groups and development agencies with expertise in rehabilitation, apart from local government entities. Indeed, there are well-established NGOs in and around most protected areas, which can work jointly with the Forest Department and district administrations in effectively rehabilitating the oustees.

## Exclusionary paradigm

A socially just relocation can take place only in the context of a coherent and rational PA management strategy. It is unfair to promote the biological diversity agenda with sole reliance on relocation of forest communities, when action on other 'extractive pressures' on conservation areas are not planned or are tardily addressed. Neither should something as drastic as relocation of a human population be started in the absence of attempts to reduce local extractive pressures. A number of improvements are required in PA management across India for increasing the probability of effective rehabilitation, where undertaken.

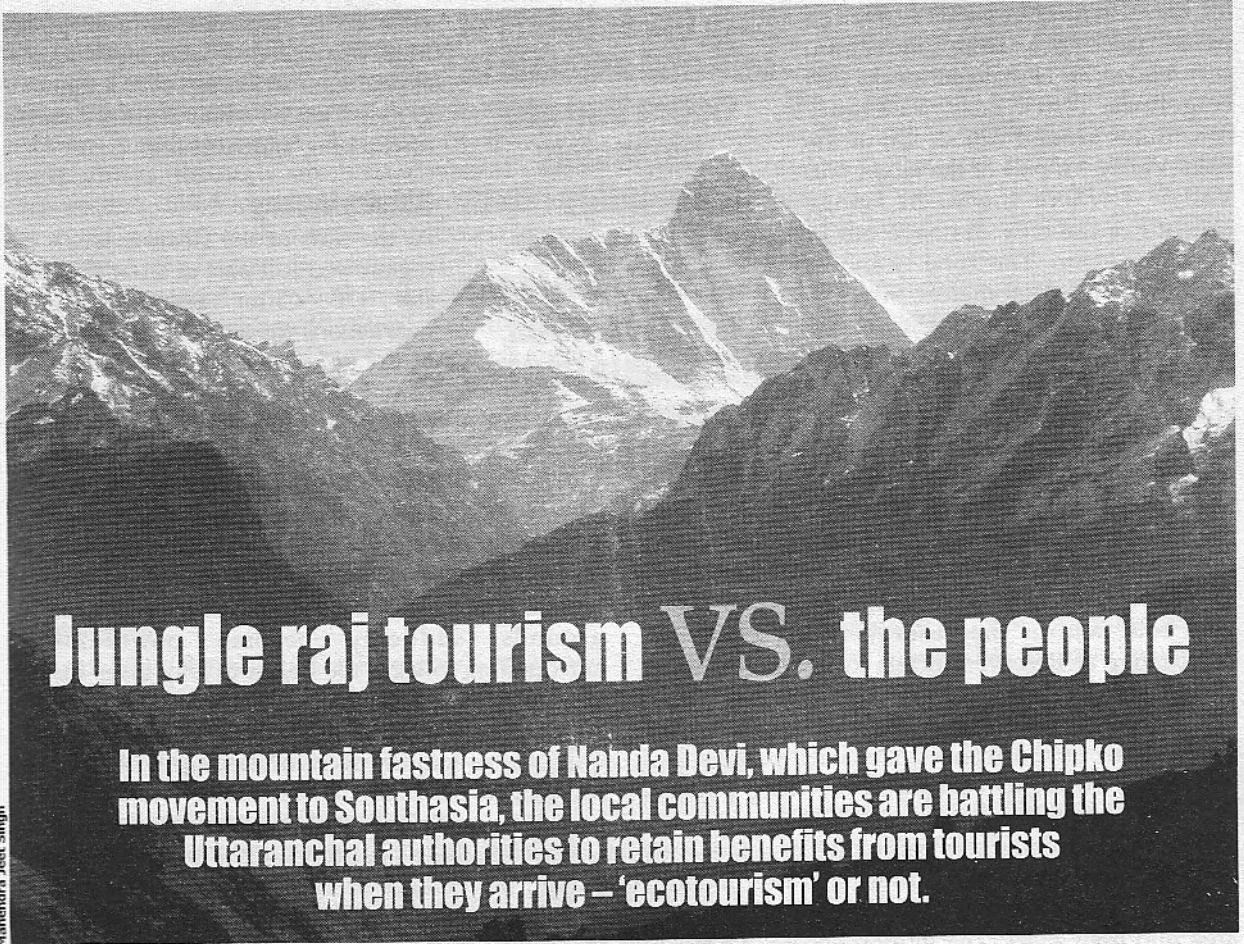
Before jumping onto the relocation agenda, for example, have the authorities tried to minimise the impact of the forest-dwelling communities on the ecology and biological diversity? Has thought been given to creating livelihood alternatives for villages

that currently depend on firewood and other biomass from the forest? This can happen through non-consumptive use of the protected area – the best example of which is eco-tourism, in which the income must be diverted to local communities rather than to tour operators in faraway cities (*See accompanying story "Jungle raj tourism vs. the people"*). The authorities must also develop systems for controlled extraction of fuelwood, fodder and other forest products through licensing systems.

Improving the relationship between the human population within a protected area and the forest authorities might create a live-and-let-live situation that reduces the need for translocation. For example, compensation for injuries and crop-raiding by wild animals, and controlled access to forest resources via a transparent permit system would help to develop a positive attitude among the population. Currently, the relationship between that populace and park management is marked by distrust and conflict, where local residents are unlikely to submit to the types of controls required for conservation or to help protect animals against poachers.

Relocation is, then, not simply an 'either-or' question. It has to be evaluated in the context of the larger nature-conservation models that have been adopted since Independence. There is a clear need for the forest authorities and wildlife managers of India to move away from the hitherto exclusionary paradigm, towards more participatory, science-based models. This vexed issue also requires sensitivity from all sections for a clearer and consensual resolution. While scientists and forest managers need to understand the socio-economic and cultural needs of resident peoples, so are social scientists required to understand the ecological demands of endangered species. Surely there will be instances when moving people out of a forest tract is the only way to save an endangered habitat or species, but such decisions need to be taken via scientific and democratic processes. Most often, this is not the case. For too long, the shortcut that authorities have taken has been simply to penalise the forest communities because it is the easiest thing to do – the traditionally disadvantaged forest dwellers do not have the voice to create a political reaction.

Relocation must be the method of last, rather than first, resort. When there is no way around it, the transfer of population must happen scientifically and with full respect to humanitarian principles. This requires the coordinated thinking of social scientists, biologists and forest managers on such critical questions as how and where to relocate existing villages. Conservationists owe this to the thousands of people who are likely to be displaced from protected areas during the coming few years, as well as to those who remain in limbo from the failed relocation efforts of the past. ▲



## Jungle raj tourism VS. the people

**In the mountain fastness of Nanda Devi, which gave the Chipko movement to Southasia, the local communities are battling the Uttaranchal authorities to retain benefits from tourists when they arrive – ‘ecotourism’ or not.**

Mahendra Jeet Singh

by | **Carey L Biron**

**I**t is oddly tempting to describe the area known as the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve as ‘tucked away’ up in India’s newest mountain state of Uttaranchal. In reality, the region towers and sprawls for all to see, so long as one is up at the level of the vultures and eagles. For better or worse, getting to such soaring heights has been a necessary first step for seeing the area over recent decades; since the early 1980s, the Indian government has largely outlawed actual tramping through these hills, in the interests of conservation. ‘Reserve’ may ideally refer to a reservation in favour of natural ecosystems, but it has also meant that the communities in the foothills of the Nanda Devi mountain complex (*see photo*) have been left in legal limbo, living their lives in a ‘buffer zone’ and legislated outside of these lands.

Since Uttaranchal was carved out of northwestern Uttar Pradesh in 2000, there has been a movement to re-introduce an exotic species into the backwoods and upper reaches of Nanda Devi – tourists. Although this thrust for the reintroduction of tourism

is coming from both state and grassroots levels, there the similarities end. While the Dehra Dun-based state authorities would like to spread the largesse or exploit it for remote beneficiaries – depending on how you read it – adamant local groups are actively seeking to maintain their hold over tourism. They would like to retain the decision-making power as well as tourism revenue among the communities who live here. Their success would keep control over Nanda Devi tourism with the residents of the Niti Valley, along the Dhauliganga and Girthiganga rivers, in the villages of Reni, Lata, Kailashpur, among others. While benefiting the locals, the initiative would also be a path-breaking example for communities in other areas, where tourism potential exists amidst economic marginality.

Nanda Devi is the second-highest peak in India, standing 7817 metres in the thin air between India and Tibet. After being expanded last year, the Reserve itself now covers more than 5860 sq km of gorges, peaks and rivers, but the most critical area

**“We won the Chipko fight but lost the battle.”**

for the current discussions is referred to as the 'core zone', a region surrounded by Himalayan peaks and ridgelines. This core sanctuary constitutes around 620 sq km of the Rishi Valley – a part of the larger Niti Valley – where the Rishi Ganga constitutes the only drainage out of the core region. The zone is almost entirely above 3500 metres, where a unique and remote microclimate has allowed for the flourishing of a host of Himalayan species, including the snow leopard, musk deer and hundreds of flora. Although it was traditionally used for grazing in the high alpine *bugiyal* by the local communities, the core zone was declared off-limits to all in 1982, when the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve was declared a national park. Permission to step foot within the reserve is presently the prerogative of Reserve officials in Joshimath, about 25 km away. That stricture has, however, been challenged on several notable occasions over the years, both by unlicensed trekking parties and groups of outraged villagers practicing pointed civil disobedience.

This rugged region was part of the local economy, mostly used for grazing during off-winter months, and there was a trading route that led through the area into high Tibet. The mountains also provided another source of income to the inhabitants, after the first climbing expedition arrived in 1934 to set foot in the 'inner sanctuary' with an eye on the Nanda Devi peak. Two years later, another group succeeded in making it to the peak's summit. Over the course of the following 46 years, 14 additional expeditions achieved the Nanda Devi summit, while trekkers and climbers began to explore other parts of the Rishi basin. The effect of unregulated tourism on the area's fragile ecosystem was compounded until 1982, when

**Both the activists in Lata and officials in Dehra Dun are ostensibly promulgating plans based on the relatively new ideas of eco tourism, sustainable tourism and community-based tourism.**

all activity was suddenly stopped. More than a decade later, an ecological expedition carried out over a tonne of garbage, left by a half-century's worth of climbing and trekking.

### Chipko legacy

At the time of the closure, when the region was still part of Uttar Pradesh, the UP Chief Secretary gave instructions for an official assessment of the ecosystem impact on the core zone by the local villages. This was never undertaken. While some outlying communities were not affected, villages like Lata and Reni were heavily impacted. Not only did

tourism-related monies dry up (estimated at roughly an annual INR 8000 per family – a large sum for the subsistence peasantry) and traditional grazing grounds suddenly become out-of-bound, surrounding villages too began to levy taxes for use of their grazing lands. With livestock reportedly reduced by more than half, these villages began to crumble, as families were broken up with menfolk moving to the plains cities. Those who remained behind became dependent on government handouts.

Beyond their position on the mountaineering circuit, the villages of Lata and Reni were already well-known socio-political hubs, distinguished in these hills as the physical and spiritual wellspring of Chipko, the women-centred movement that successfully chased the logging industry from the community's forests in the mid-1970s. Gaura Devi, the tribal Tolchha woman who mobilised the area's women, was born in Lata, and agitated on behalf of the forests surrounding Reni. "Ecology is permanent economy," the Chipko leader Sunderlal Bahuguna famously wrote, and it was towards this potent local resource that the people of the Niti Valley inevitably turned in the face of the lost land and economy. It was, after all, those very communal forests saved by Chipko – arguably the most famous environmental movement to emerge from Southasia – that, a half-decade later, were 'reserved' by the state. "We won the Chipko fight but lost the battle," sighed one villager in *Sangharshnama*, a compilation on the region's land fights. "Armed with strange laws ... the Forest Department came to loot us." In an October 2001 manifesto, the citizens rededicated themselves to their new transformative task, "drawing inspiration from Chipko's radiant history".

Chipko itself had weathered increasingly stringent criticism as the movement moved into the late 1980s, particularly for having paradoxically moved away from its local roots. Dhan Singh Rana, the former *pradhan* of Lata, explained recently how this happened: "While the locals' role was that of

Dhan Singh and his wife



performer, various scholars with diverse sources of scholarship took the role of rapporteurs and made their own interpretations." Dhan Singh is now one of the driving forces in the current movement to make tourism productive for the sake of the local community, through an 'experimental' local organisation called Mountain Shepherds, known in the local Garhwali as *Bhed Palak*. The lessons learned from Chipko's straying, he continued, "makes our case stronger to take the lead in issues concerning our lives and livelihood". Sunil Kainthola, an activist with the Dehra Dun-based forest rights organisation Janaadhar and a fellow Mountain Shepherds organiser, agrees that the new movement is in continuation of the Chipko spirit. "Though the rights over fuel and fodder is still a contentious issue in the state," he says, "the Forest Department is more keen on selling the landscape and wilderness of the area under the guise of 'community-based tourism'."

### Green wash

In April 2003, the Nanda Devi Reserve's core zone was opened for limited 'ecotourism'. Indeed, the story of Uttaranchal's push to reopen the Nanda Devi Reserve to tourism has not necessarily been one of overt attempts to bulldoze roads, level ridges or construct towering resorts. Both the activists in Lata and officials of the Forest Department in Dehra Dun are ostensibly promulgating plans based on the relatively new ideas of *ecotourism*, *sustainable* tourism and *community-based* tourism – ideas so new, if not radical, that they are still lumped into a category termed 'experimental' tourism. Each definition has technically in common a stated goal of tourism improving the welfare of local peoples and communities.

Ecotourism is a term that has been in use in the Himalayan region for more than a decade, with Bhutan and Nepal also practicing their own versions. Overall, the idea is to benefit locals even while conserving the environment – and culture – as a 'renewable' resource that needs to be preserved if tourism is to be 'sustainable'. There is no doubt that there is 'big money' in ecotourism. According to reports published by the US-based International Ecotourism Society (IES), between two-thirds and 90 percent of tourists from the US, UK, and Australia consider "active support of the environment" and "support of local communities" to be part of any tourism entrepreneur's responsibilities. The survey also suggested that up to 70 percent would pay as much as USD 150 more for a two-week stay at accommodation with a "responsible environmental attitude". IES further reports that the ecotourism

market has grown more than 34 percent during the past decade – three times faster than the tourism market as a whole.

While the seeming proliferation of pro-environment and pro-community tourism around India over the last decade may seem heartening, there is a vast gap between the rhetoric and the results. For instance, the website of the state-run Uttaranchal Forest Development Corporation (UFDC) blithely introduces its work programme as including: *Timber production, sale of forest products, eco-tourism*, in that order. (Repeated attempts to contact UFDC for this article failed.) While the flourishing of 'ecotourism' initiatives has led to widespread accusations of green-washing, the lack of a precise definition of the term may also have played a part. For example, there is no reference to local communities in the etymology. And where are the guidelines for dealing with communities – such as those of the Niti Valley – where economy, ecology and cultural heritage are so intricately entwined? Is the UFDC, or even Uttaranchal Tourism, equipped to consider such matters?

**The ecotourism market has grown more than 34 percent during the past decade – three times faster than the tourism market as a whole.**

In the early days of the ecotourism debate, a 1997 paper published by the Bangalore-based advocacy group Equitable Tourism Options (Equations) foresaw the problems of such ambiguity, noting the semantic pitfalls common to 'ecotourism' and one of its progenitors, 'sustainable development'. Reacting to the then-government's Draft Tourism Policy, the Equations researchers stated that, "Sustainable development remains a fashionable phrase that everyone pays homage to but no one cares to define." The authors pointed out that, with India's tourism policy following mainstream sustainable development thinking, it may be useful for "building a very broad consensus ... yet the debate at the operational level continues." Dhan Singh Rana, living at the 'operational level', suggests that he believes that the importance of any imminent tourism activity in the Nanda Devi area should be used firstly to repair the livelihoods and traditional cohesion of Niti Valley families.

Based on such hopes, locals worry that the Forest Department is currently overreaching, in terms of both its knowledge and prerogative, by acting as an inexperienced 'development agency' – collecting taxes (including from areas normally overseen by the Lata forest councils, or *van panchayats*) and redistributing funds to those communities that collaborate with them. More than anything else, however, is the lingering animosity on the parts of the villages towards the state for decades of ill-kept promises. Along with the 1982 designation and



Sajji Kumar

Chipko veterans in Reni

restriction of the forest lands of the core zone came official promises, most notably for compensation and alternative grazing grounds and employment schemes. Community members say that such promises have still not been kept. With the 2003 re-opening still barring the local communities from utilising the lands themselves, the locals have no desire to have the potential tourism industry be defined and overseen by anyone but themselves.

### Equity equations

According to the IES definition, as much as 95 percent of the revenue generated under a true 'ecotourism' project should remain within the 'host communities'. While this might sound like an idealised or even outrageous amount to the ears of Dehra Dun authorities – much less to those of private tour operators, who are mostly based in Delhi – approaching such a figure would be relatively straightforward if the tourism infrastructure were simply to be owned and operated by the local communities. Such models are exactly where groups like Mountain Shepherds are pinning their hopes.

### Is the UFDC, or even Uttarakhand Tourism, equipped to consider such matters?

sets out the objectives to give preference to "our unemployed youth and under-privileged families" and to provide for the "special needs of our senior citizens and disabled persons".

Dhan Singh Rana offers that he is most concerned by the "equity equations" of the upcoming tourism opportunities. Although he refers particularly to the desire to spread the benefits of any additional revenue throughout the region's population, there is also the crucial issue of pride. Despite the significant

In its 12 points, the 2001 manifesto adopted by the locals defines not only the intended structure of proposed tourism initiatives, but also

income from tourism prior to the 1982 ban, there are bitter memories of that experience. Says Dhan Singh, "Our role and status was on the last order of hierarchy in the mountaineering business. It was the outside travel agents, labour mates and western sahibs who usually called the shots, and all this happened in our own areas. Frankly, it was sometimes humiliating and compromising to self-respect."

An ecotourism programme in the nearby Valley of Flowers, also in Uttarakhand, is often portrayed as a success story. Sunil Kainthola begs to disagree, however, maintaining that the only income for the locals comes through sales of bottled water and packaged food. The inhabitants themselves, he says, "have been relegated to the role of sweepers". The Mountain Shepherds initiative seeks to learn from Uttarakhand's own experience with tourism, as well as the experience of others who have experimented with ecotourism.

Fulfilment of such bedrock goals as dealing with under-privileged community members, keeping families intact and bolstering individual self-respect is desirable from any vantage point. However, even such ambitions require an intrinsically localised approach, in terms of establishment as well as sustenance. And it is obvious that in both the planning and implementation phase, the grassroots push for ecotourism will butt heads with the priorities of state authorities. In 2004, Uttarakhand and the Corbett National Park were awarded a prestigious National Tourism Award for the development of a 'community-based tourism' project involving three park-area villages. The potential irony inherent to a 'community-based' project sponsored and run by the state, however, is not hard to see: the award was given directly to Uttarakhand Tourism, not to the villages of Kyari, Choti Haldwani or Bhakrakot.

On the other hand, when the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve won a runner-up spot in the highly regarded international ecotourism awards given out by *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine the same year, one Indian daily was moved to point out that, "While the villagers of the Nanda Devi region are pleased with their achievement, Uttarakhand Tourism's silence remains deafening." That silence is the gap between bottom-up and top-down approaches: even when dealing with new and potentially progressive policies, most officials are convinced that Indian forests remain the realm solely of the state – such policies may be enacted for the bottom, but they will come from the top.

### Back to the valley

Sunil Kainthola has described the inability of authorities to seriously contemplate community ownership as remnants of the lingering 'Jungle Raj' mentality. With all involved interests – public, private

and local – salivating for a chunk of the looming ecotourism pie, it is hardly surprising that entities like the UFDC are hesitant to loosen their control over the landscape resources. Unfortunately, much of the government's tourist-friendly talk regarding the importance of the *grassroots* and *community-based* programmes is undercut by the fact that the advisory committees constituted to develop tourism and ecotourism policies over the past decade have largely been made up of outside individuals. "As far as I know," says Kainthola, "there was never an honest attempt to involve communities in the planning process."

Some of the advisors have been benign, others well-meaning and still others suspect; some experts have been national, others international – but nearly all have been specifically external to the area under consideration. Such criticism is similar to that levelled regarding the past two decades of hiccapping progress made by India's Joint Forest Management programmes, the problematic national and state projects set up to develop degraded forestlands with increased community involvement. More immediately, however, it also bears a remarkable resemblance to the problems originally encountered by the Chipko movement itself: a process that is over-reliant on external 'experts' with origins in India's cities simply cannot adequately address local needs – good intentions and social-scientific acumen notwithstanding.

All of which is not necessarily to say that the state should not be allowed to set up some tourism infrastructure on its own. It is just that programmes that are not truly 'ecotouristic' should not be advertised as such. Dhan Singh Rana would prefer that the Forest Department focus on its own projects and "create their space on a competitive basis". It is when the villages of the Niti Valley have been forced to be dependent upon the state, after all, that problems have arisen.

Despite suspicions of the Forest Department's intentions – there are fears that it wants to maintain control over the land in order to auction or lease it to private interests later – Kainthola says that some kind of public-private partnership should not be ruled out. "For setting up a community-owned project, the need is to strengthen and empower the Panchayati Raj institutions to manage and take responsibility in the ecotourism management of their area," he says, referring to the local government initiatives already in place. "This could not be achieved all at once, so the government should allow experiments like Mountain Shepherds."

If a model were to be required for Nanda Devi

ecotourism that would genuinely support the host communities, the mountain communities of Uttaranchal are already a repository of experience on local community involvement and action. These states' mountain districts are unique for their roughly 6000 Van Panchayats, which since the 1920s have overseen more than 400,000 hectares of community forestland. Community members also have a long history of battling the Forest Department in the exploitation of forest products, and hence are well prepared to take on the authorities when it comes to tourism management.

When it comes to the specifics of tourism management, Mountain Shepherds is studying the possibility of utilising the area's Bhotiya homes as pre-made tourist infrastructure, so that trekkers spend money in the mountain homes rather than stay in tents provided by trekking companies. Mountain Shepherds is currently involved in training 40 unemployed youths from the Niti villages as guides. After a probationary period, they will be offered a percentage ownership in the initiative itself. Within two years, the organisers envision that around 40 percent of the project will be owned by such grassroots tourism professionals, with the rest of the money maintained in a trust aimed at funding the objectives of the 2001 declaration. The trust would be run in collaboration with the Gram Panchayats and other village institutions.

While proponents admit to several potential pitfalls in attempting to set up an entire 'tourism industry' based

on the ecological- and community-friendly model, they are resolute to learn from both past and surrounding experiences. Explains Kainthola: "Let's take the case of bottled water. Do only tourists need safe drinking water? Is bottled water the only solution, or is it the market behind it? We are not aiming at changing the entire face of mountain tourism, but we certainly intend to experiment on new ideas."

Ultimately, proponents of Nanda Devi ecotourism are hopeful that their model's success – economic and otherwise – will lead to greater political support. "We are trying to seize an opportunity," says Khila Bisht, a member of the Dehra Dun-based Alliance for Development, which includes both Mountain Shepherds and Janaadhar. "It is one of the few opportunities that the area provides that allows the community to work in its own area, on its own terms, with no detrimental impact on the environment – a natural progression of the work that the community has done for centuries."

**Even when dealing with new and potentially progressive policies, most officials are convinced that Indian forests remain the realm solely of the state.**

# Assam upfront

The diary of a 'Delhi reporter' who decides to visit Assam rather than simply write about the state from afar.

by | Akash Banerjee

*Assam is one of the poorer states of India. About 36 percent of its population of 27 million lives below the poverty line and per capita income (INR 13,925) is 40 percent below the national average. The state is marked by poor road infrastructure, tenuous communication, low agricultural productivity, and low levels of industrial activity... – Project Information Document, World Bank, 2005*

This is the kind of report that journalists regularly pull off the Internet and use in their articles. One can sit in Gurgaon and write a story on Guwahati without the botheration of traversing the country west to east. It is not necessary to go to Assam to write about Assam. But this has never been entirely adequate, because the numbers inevitably remain digits, and the stories remain nothing but a collection of visuals. Information, when it is printed or broadcast without firsthand reporting cannot generate depth of feeling. It fosters stereotypes.

This is especially true when it comes to coverage of the Indian Northeast. Violence in Manipur, student protests in Assam, the Nagas demanding autonomy – all of these are presented as if those who live in the seven-sister states have nothing better to do than agitate constantly – and harbour 'anti-India' sentiments.

It was only when this Delhi-based writer went out to Assam, to cover the state's assembly elections this April, that the numbers added up and the stories really hit. It was a humbling, learning experience. And over a fortnight spent in the state, I discovered

that Assam is intrinsically much closer to heartland India than any South Indian state will ever be. Despite its geographical alienation, as a 'northerner' I found Hindi to be widely understood and often spoken.

I also discovered that Assam is different from its northeastern sister states. That it does not grapple with identity or nationality-based issues. That it does not hate Hindi or 'anything Indian', and is not secessionist. And that Assam is a state crying out for basic infrastructural development.

**So, revelation No 1 for the Delhi reporter:** That the neglect of basic infrastructure, including roads, is so glaring, it is no wonder the Assam economy as a whole is so depressed. It is poor infrastructure – and not insurgency – that has Assam stuck in the morass of poverty and underdevelopment. Here is what the same World Bank report has to say on the condition of the roadways of the state: "Assam's road network is poorly developed and has suffered from years of neglect, under-funding, inadequate maintenance, and flood damages. Its current condition is an obstacle to achieve the objective of an Assam development strategy. Only 20 percent of the roads are paved, compared to the national average of 58 percent."

In central Guwahati, the state capital's arterial road is potholed and perpetually traffic-jammed. Further afield, in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, even potholed motorways are a luxury. Some do not seem to have been maintained since World War II. "Sometimes it takes five hours to cover a 20-km stretch of road. The jerks are so bad that the injured die on the way to hospital," says Assamiya writer Indra Goswami, who had a harrowing time when she toured the state to research for a novel. As I myself traveled the backwaters, I could see that it was not only a matter of roads. Village after village was surviving without basic amenities like water and electricity. Guwahati itself sees frequent power cuts.

With its infrastructural bottlenecks, Assam continues to see low levels of economic growth. There are therefore limited career options for Assam's youth. Explains noted journalist Sanjay Hazarika: "With more than 30 lakh students unemployed or unemployable, it gives insurgent groups like ULFA a ready recruiting ground." If only the state and Centre had dedicated themselves to



AUDF founder  
Mohd Baruddin  
Ajmal Al-Qasimi



development years ago, they would not now be forced to spend hundreds of crores every year on anti-insurgency operations.

**Revelation No 2 for the Delhi reporter:** Factional fighting drags Assam down, and there is a further process of political fracturing underway. For example, the election campaigning of this April witnessed the dangerous rise of parties such as the AUDF (Assam United Democratic Front), which focuses its energies on the Muslim minority vote. Considering the fact that this 'minority' today constitutes fully 30 percent of the state population and has always been the traditional Congress party vote bank, the worried Congress now has to play the 'Muslim appeasement card'. In a recent campaign visit, Congress President Sonia Gandhi felt the need to focus exclusively on the Muslim-dominated areas. In one rally at Naugaon, three hours from Guwahati, Gandhi quite unabashedly told the gathering that it was the Congress that had been and would always be with the Muslims.

But while everyone chases the Muslim vote, the Muslims are still treated as second-class citizens. Merely wearing a dhoti and baniyan vest can make a Muslim a 'Bangladeshi infiltrator'. Ismail Ali, a daily labourer living in the outskirts of Guwahati, was so tired of proving his 'Indianness' to the authorities time and again that he hit upon an ingenious idea. After casting his ballot, Ismail bandaged his finger where the indelible voter's ink had been applied – so that it would not be washed away and he would be able to brandish this proof of citizenship for at least a few weeks.

**Revelation No 3 for the Delhi reporter:** The central government has taken too much blame for Assam's developmental disaster, whereas the role of the state government is not given enough importance. With parties of long-standing such as the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) having started the politics of divide-the-people-and-rule, the arrival of new entrants such as the AUDF is bound to exacerbate the public by emphasising religion and ethnicity. All of this will deliver more mal-governance, further victimising the 27 million inhabitants.

The very mention of Assam stirs up two distinct images in one's mind: that of gun-toting ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) militants, and lush, green tea gardens. Both of these are quickly disappearing. With the ULFA in a virtual ceasefire with the Centre after years of fighting, the elections happily went off so smoothly that some correspondents with experience of more violent times were moved to complain of boredom.

The arrival (howsoever momentary) of peace from insurgency is the most significant development for Assam, and this single factor may be able, over time, to undo a lot of the fallout of the existing political



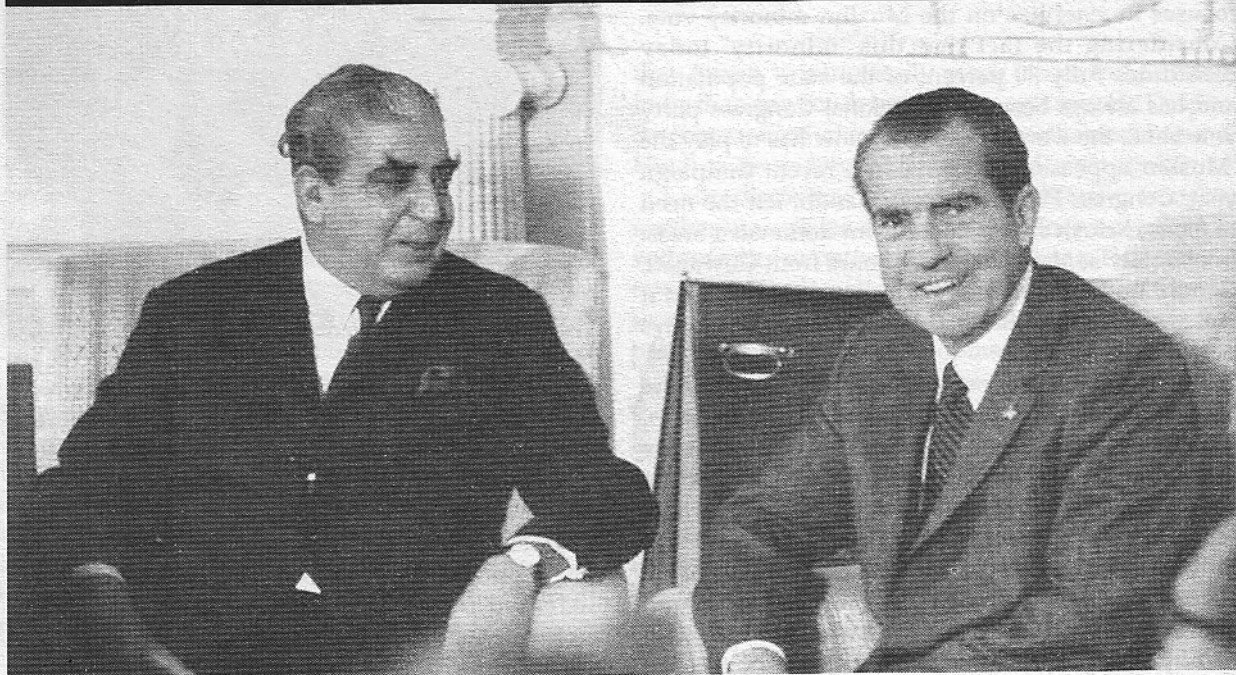
The 2006 elections went smoothly

instability. Many observers believe that the advent of stability will ipso facto lead to socio-economic advance and good governance. Meanwhile, the state never falls short of crises – the current one being the disaster of the state's tea.

Assam's 'tea belt' is struggling today with the falling price of the processed leaves, rising costs and increased international competition. Tea estates across the state have gone bankrupt and pulled down the shutters. Those that remain are desperately struggling to keep their heads above water. With competition pushing down margins, these tea estates do not even have the money to replace the tea plants – which after half a century, are at the fag end of their productive cycle. On a visit to one plantation, the anger against Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's Congress government was palpable. When this writer asked Gogoi about the condition of the estates, he said that his Congress government had announced a special revival package for the tea planters, and that their concerns were being looked after. The chief minister should be concerned: the tea belt decides which way 35 of the state's 126 assembly seats go.

**The final revelation for the Delhi reporter:** That Assam is no longer the land of tea and ULFA. Like every state, today's Assam has its own set of problems, but nothing that needs to be looked at through the 'unique' prism. Just spending some time in the land of 'Asom' made it amply clear that there are ready answers to many of the state's woes, but little political will to address them. Assam must override its infrastructural problems, prevent chauvinism from rearing its head again and again in state-level politics, and commit funding towards a long-term plan to revive the tea industry. Although the people are willing, for now the political spirit is weak. ▲

# Back in '71 US policy revisited



**Newly declassified US records show a more full and gruesome picture of what took place behind the scenes of the 1971 Southasian Crisis in Islamabad, New Delhi and Washington, DC. They also show a softer side of the involved leadership. But who takes responsibility for the violence that was perpetrated during that period?**

by | **Imtiaz Ahmed**

**S**ome 22 years back, this writer published a paper titled "The Superpowers Strategy in the Third World: The 1971 South Asian Crisis". Three key arguments were central to that paper. First, that there was a sharp difference between the US administration, on the one hand, and the country's Congress, press and people on the other, over the issue of Bangladesh, particularly regarding the genocidal killing of the Bengalis by the Pakistani military. Second, the 'China policy' of President Richard Nixon and then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger became a factor in the US policy towards Southasia. Finally, the US-USSR rivalry – or what is referred to as the First Cold War – informed

and influenced the US policy towards Southasia, including the liberation war of Bangladesh.

These arguments were laid down on the basis of secondary sources and some personal interactions with the policymakers of the 'interim government' of Bangladesh. In recent years, however, available information on the 1971 Southasian Crisis has suddenly proliferated, especially with the declassification of secret and confidential documents relating to the US government's policy towards the region during that period. Particularly significant in shedding new light on the era are the US State Department's 2005 *South Asia Crisis, 1971*, as well as *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume*

XI, and Roedad Khan's 1999 *The American Papers: Secret and Confidential India-Pakistan-Bangladesh Documents, 1965-1973*. Also important are some of the memoirs and reflections on the crisis published in the late 1980s and 1990s by the policymakers of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the US, including those by Muyeedul Hasan, K M Safiullah, A A K Niazi, Hamoodur Rahman, Archer Blood and Subrata Banerjee.

In light of the richness of material now available, there is a pressing need to revisit the US policy towards Southasia in 1971. One may also, in the process, return to the three arguments presented above. For the sake of economy, this review will base itself almost exclusively on the declassified documents published in 2005 as a US Department of State Publication (DOSP).

### Unilateral administration

The 'sharp difference' between the US administration and the US Congress, press and people during the Crisis can now be looked into more objectively and interpreted with some measure of confidence, particularly with reference to four issues. First, that of genocide. There are only two references to 'genocide' in the DOSP documents, one by East Pakistan Consul General Archer Blood and the other by US Ambassador to India Kenneth Keating. The terms otherwise used within the Nixon administration to refer to the indiscriminate-yet-calculated killing of unarmed Bengalis were 'bloodshed', 'bloodletting', 'blood-bath', 'atrocities' and the like.

In terms of proximity, both Blood and Keating were closer to the event – that is, in Dhaka and New Delhi, respectively – and therefore probably had a better sense of what had actually taken place. While one could play with the scholarly relationship between distance and diplomacy, it now seems quite clear that key policymakers were using more toned-down concepts, even wilfully blocking reports of genocide from reaching the president in the White House. Apart from having the immediate impact of not jeopardising the 'special relationship' between Richard Nixon and Pakistan President Yahya Khan, this type of rhetoric had a far-reaching consequence insofar as the violent acts were concerned. In fact, it allowed a substantial number of murderers and war criminals to escape the crisis free from obligation, harm or penalty – with implications having national and global relevance even today.

The second issue entails the break-up of Pakistan. There seems to have been less disagreement between the US administration and the Congress, press and people on the



Genocide Watch

### Where's the truth commission for Bangladesh?

issue of Pakistan's dismemberment. Even as early as 6 March 1971, before the military crackdown, the Senior Review Group (a National Security Council committee chaired by Henry Kissinger) came to the conclusion: "The judgement of all of us is that with the number of troops available to Yahya (a total of 20,000, with 12,000 combat troops) and a hostile East Pakistan population of 75 million, the result would be a blood-bath with no hope of West Pakistan re-establishing control over East Pakistan." More interestingly, Ambassador Keating, in a 12 April 1971 telegram, noted: "Pakistan is probably finished as a unified state; India is clearly the predominant actual and potential power in this area of the world; Bangla Desh with limited power and massive problems is emerging."

The view did not change in the following months. On 3 June, more than two months after the military crackdown, the Memorandum of Conversation (MoC) between Kissinger and Keating noted: "Kissinger continued that we have a difficult gradual process ahead of us while the situation ends up 'where you [Keating] want it.' We want to buy time for this to happen. We have no illusions that West Pakistan can hold East Pakistan and we have no interest in their doing so." The difference, as is now apparent, is on

**A substantial number of murderers and war criminals were allowed to escape free from obligation, harm or penalty.**

the 'timing' of dismemberment. Kissinger is often found pleading with American, and even Indian, officials for a 'three-' to 'six-month' delay – that is, until the delicate American negotiations with Beijing on the issue of Sino-American rapprochement (incidentally, with little help from Yahya Khan) were over.

The third issue deals with the 'special relationship' between Richard Nixon and Yahya Khan. This sounded mysterious in the beginning, and remained so for some time during the Crisis. On 28 April 1971, in a handwritten note to Kissinger, Nixon wrote: "To all hands. *Don't* squeeze Yahya at this time", underlining 'Don't' three times. Moreover, the MoC between Kissinger, Keating and National Security Council adviser Harold Saunders on 3 June noted: "In all honesty, Dr Kissinger pointed out, the President has a special feeling for President Yahya. One cannot make policy on that basis, but it is a fact of life."

Two bits of information now help demystify the 'relationship'. One is Nixon's late response to Yahya Khan's letter of 31 March, sent through Pakistani Ambassador Agha Hilaly and US Secretary of State William Rogers. In fact, Yahya Khan had to write a second letter to President Nixon on 17 April, the response to which came only on 7 May. Second, following Kissinger's debriefing of his discussion with Keating on 15 June, Nixon concluded by saying of Yahya Khan, "it just may be that the poor son of a bitch can't survive." Nixon's 'special feeling' for the Pakistani president appears to have remained in place only while the latter was helping him link up with the Chinese, and therefore could be dispensed with once that aim had been achieved.

The final issue is the nature of diplomacy. Nixon administration officials (including the president) repeatedly made reference to 'quiet diplomacy' – impressing upon not only the Indians but also the larger world that the administration was doing its best to bring Yahya Khan to his senses and was looking for a political resolution to the civil conflict in Pakistan. Two critical features, however, informed this diplomacy. First was the sliding of 'quiet diplomacy' into something that can be referred to as 'secret diplomacy'. The rationale for this, of course, was the rapprochement with Beijing via Islamabad. The second feature was the empowering of a small coterie in the name of 'quiet diplomacy', which at times included short-circuiting even the State Department.

The combined implications of these two features can hardly be



minimised. Indeed, it seemed to have included rewarding officials, like that found in a conversation recorded on 7 May 1971 between Kissinger and US Ambassador to Pakistan Joseph Farland: "Ambassador Farland voiced some mild complaints about living in Pakistan and expressed the hope that if the China meeting came off successfully, a new post could be offered. Mr Kissinger replied noncommittally that if this gets done, 'we will owe you a great debt of gratitude.'" Meanwhile, the activities of 'quiet diplomacy' could include supplying Pakistan arms already in the 'pipeline' or "authorized before March 25", as well as considering "a request for CIA provision of unmarked small arms [redacted] to provide to the 'freedom fighters' in East Pakistan". (The redacted section of this quote was censored by US authorities before this material was released under the Freedom of Information Act.)

Foreign policing of such nature and magnitude could result in its own dynamics, often violating the regulations of a democratic state. But more importantly, the Nixon administration had taken the reason of the state, in its quest to connect with China, to the point of instrumentalising rationality – something that the German political

**"Pakistan is probably finished as a unified state; India is clearly the predominant actual and potential power in this area of the world; Bangladesh with limited power and massive problems is emerging."**

economist Max Weber warned against in the beginning of the last century, for its tendency to reproduce alienation. Indeed, when it comes to the issue of genocide committed by the Pakistani military, the upper echelons of the Nixon government believed that it could be dispensed with or given a low profile, because stressing the issue could jeopardise the US goal vis-à-vis communist China. So bizarre is the outcome of such policy-making that, in the end, the democratic aspirations of an impoverished population could be sacrificed for the sake of opening up with a non-democratic but economically promising state. In the end, the government of Richard Nixon could not live up to the expectations of the democratically-minded people at home or abroad.

### **The Chinese orbit**

There is now a better understanding of the Nixon-Kissinger China policy, particularly with regard to how it affected the US government's actions in Pakistan. In fact, the administration seemed to be at times obsessed, at times overly impatient with its attempts to hook up with China. The MoC between Kissinger and Amb Farland on 7 May 1971 noted:

...Mr Kissinger explained to Ambassador Farland that for some time, we have been passing messages to the Chinese through the Pakistanis ... Mr Kissinger stated that he would talk to [World Bank chief Robert] McNamara on Monday, 10 May, and tell him that Yahya must be kept afloat for six more months; one problem will be that McNamara is emotionally against Yahya - as is the entire liberal community ... Mr Kissinger stated that he would tell McNamara that this is the only channel we have, and he must give Yahya at least three months. Ambassador Farland stated that six months should be the goal.

The transcript of an interesting telephone conversation between President Nixon ('P') and Kissinger on 23 May 1971 also highlights the overlap in the China and Pakistan policies, particularly when suggestions were made that India might resort to military action:

P: ... if they go in there with military action, by God we will cut off economic aid.

K: And that is the last thing we can afford now to have the Pakistan government overthrown, *given the other things we are doing* [emphasis added].

When it comes to the making of policy, an obsession or even lack of

**The issue of genocide will not go away until there is a national or international trial of the perpetrators, some of whom who are still alive.**

patience can hardly be considered a virtue. It now seems that the US administration was using Yahya Khan as much as the latter was using the 'goodwill' of the US president, although the objectives of both differed substantially. For Yahya Khan, the 'special relationship' with Nixon proved useful for crushing the political movement in East Pakistan. In fact, Pakistani policy-makers knew very well that they were the only

channel (bypassing even Amb Farland) for the US into China; they therefore rightly concluded that whatever they did in East Pakistan, the Nixon administration would be hard put to oppose it, either in open or in private. In the process, 26,000 (Pakistan's estimate) to 3 million (Bangladesh and India's estimate) people died, thousands of women were raped, and some 10 million ended up refugees in India, all within a period of nine months.

While frantically pursuing the goal of opening up with China, the Nixon administration had little illusions about that country vis-à-vis Southasia. There were two sides to this mindset. First was the fear of pro-Chinese radicals, or even China itself, gaining control of the movement in East Pakistan. As Farland noted in a telegram dispatch to the State Department on 8 April 1971: "If AL [Awami League] movement crumbles before it [is] able [to] consolidate position on ground, resistance movement likely to pass to more radical and left extremist groups such as Naxalites." Similarly, Central Intelligence Agency Deputy Director Robert Cushman pointed out to the Senior Review Group meeting on 9 April: "We think this is a very dangerous period. There is a possibility of Chinese Communist influence. Or that an extremist group, like the Naxalites in West Bengal, might take over."

Interestingly, in discussions with the US, the Indians also voiced fears of Chinese influence in East Pakistan. In a letter to President Nixon on 13 May 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi frankly stated: "Since the expressed will of the people is being stifled, extremist political elements will inevitably gain ground. With our own difficulties in West Bengal

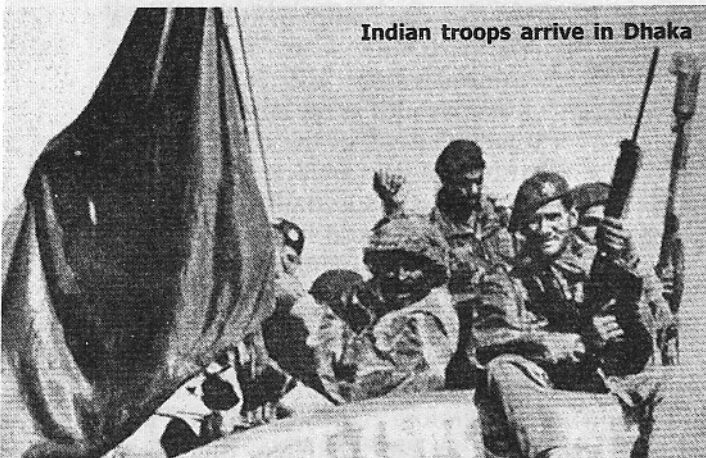
the dangers of a link-up between the extremists in the two Bengals are real."

The Indian ambassador to the United States, L K Jha, was more candid. He told Kissinger on 21 May: "There is the question of Chinese involvement eventually in East Pakistan which is 'ripe for this'."

Second, even while secretly trying to open up with China with support from Pakistan, Nixon was also fearful of Pakistan going over to China. In a

**"The President has a special feeling for President Yahya. One cannot make policy on that basis, but it is a fact of life."**

Indian troops arrive in Dhaka



Bhaskar Ramesh

back-channel message to Kissinger on 21 April 1971, Amb Farland noted: "To eliminate what leverage we have with GOP [Government of Pakistan] today is tantamount to moving it directly into the Chinese orbit. The implications, military and political, which would then apply for this whole region of the world, are monumental." But this was two weeks before Farland came to know about Nixon's secret policy of connecting with China through Islamabad. The fear of Pakistan falling into China's orbit surfaced again on 28 June, barely ten days before Kissinger's secret trip to China on 9-11 July. A memorandum from Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence Armistead Selden to Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird warned that a potential embargo could damage relations with Islamabad so badly that, "As a concomitant Pakistan might fall entirely within China's orbit." While the US may have worked out the global implications of a Sino-American rapprochement, it seems to have done less work regarding the regional implications.

Indeed, if Henry Kissinger, in his private meeting with Indira Gandhi on 7 July 1971, wanted to impress her on the need for drawing China into "the international community of nations" for "a more normal world order", the prime minister could not help fearing Nixon's opening up with China – especially, as came to be known a week later, with Pakistan's help. Moreover, the timing of the briefing on the new US policy towards China could not have been worse, for Indira Gandhi had just finished informing Kissinger how "afraid" she was "of mounting Chinese influence in East Pakistan". Not knowing the outcome of a Pakistan-facilitated Sino-American rapprochement, the prime minister hastily resolved to conclude an Indo-Soviet agreement on 9 August 1971 – although letting the Americans know, as Ambassador Jha informed Kissinger on the same day, that this was done as "a counter-weight to Pakistan's repeated claims to the effect that in a new war China would be on its side". Kissinger seems to have accepted the argument. In

his memorandum to President Nixon on 24 August, he mentions:

... the Indians seem to feel that the treaty puts both the Pakistanis and Chinese on notice that India does not stand alone. If Indo-Pak hostilities do break out, the Indians are probably hoping that the treaty will at least serve to limit Chinese intervention and perhaps even bring the Soviets in directly on their side ... However, the Indians do not seem at all prepared to write off the US. They have been at pains to make clear that the treaty is not directed at the US.

Without going into the merit of Kissinger's position on the Indo-Soviet treaty at the height of the Crisis, it can be safely concluded that India shifted from its erstwhile non-aligned position to a much closer relationship with the Soviet Union. The fear of Cold War politics was being replayed once again.

### Cold War III

In light of the declassified documents, the argument relating to a US-USSR rivalry (the 'First Cold War') contributing to the events in Southasia seems to be the least tenable, particularly in the early and middle parts of the Crisis. The memorandum from National Security Council staffers Samuel Hoskinson and Richard Kennedy to Henry Kissinger on 25 May 1971 makes this all the more clear:

*In the short run at least we share a strong interest with the Soviets in avoiding another Indo-Pak war. The Soviets have very little clout in Islamabad but they do have a so-called 'special relationship' with New Delhi. Is it possible and desirable to encourage the Soviets to play a peacemaking role? Or would some sort of consultation and joint, or at least parallel, action with the Soviets be more in our interests?* [Emphasis in the original.]

In fact, even after the signing of the Indo-Soviet Agreement on 9 August 1971, Kissinger continued to share this view and informed Nixon accordingly: "... the Soviets seem to have gambled that, by simultaneously strengthening India's position and making New Delhi more beholden to Soviet counsel, they can best restrain India and also deter Pakistan from taking steps likely to lead to war." Kissinger was also led to believe this by Amb Jha, as the latter informed him on the same day that "India was not going to be anybody's diplomatic satellite". Again, on 25 August, Jha made it known to Kissinger that "Madame Gandhi was not at all pro-Soviet", and that Kissinger "could be certain that she did not have her heart in it".

But then, following the outbreak of war between India and Pakistan in the first week of December 1971, the spectre of Cold War emerged to haunt the Nixon administration. On 6 December, in a telephone conversation with President Nixon, Kissinger

suggested flat-out, "All this talk about Russian restraint that we heard all summer was complete poppycock." Ten days later, in another conversation between the two, Nixon made a dramatic outburst against the Soviets by laying out a possible US counter-strategy: "Cut off the Middle East talks, pour arms into Israel, discontinue our talks on SALT, and the [UN] Economic Security Council can go [to] the public and tell them what the danger is ... And be very cold in our public statements toward them."

An hour later, however, Kissinger informed the president about India's unilateral ceasefire on the western front by simply saying, "We have made it." He then "credited the Soviet Union with exerting sufficient pressure on India to produce the desired result". Nixon had regained his composure by then, and responded, "If Soviets have cooperated on this I think we have got to play on an arm's-length deal." At the same time, however, he "reiterated that there was to be no economic assistance for India in the budget that was prepared". Nixon's less-flexible position towards India now leads to the fact that the Cold War, while being replayed towards the end of the Crisis, had complex layers, two of which bear further reflection.

First, rudiments of what later came to be known as the New or Second Cold War could be found as early as 1971 (see Noam Chomsky's 1982 *Towards a New Cold War* and Fred Halliday's 1984 *The Making of the Second Cold War*). The Soviet Union tried to balance the position of the United States in the region by way of supporting India, while the US attempted to beef up Pakistan against India and the Soviet Union through the benevolence of Iran, Jordan and, if possible, China. Not only did Nixon encourage Iran and Jordan to deliver military equipment and aircrafts to Pakistan, but he enjoyed hearing about the Sino-Soviet conflict at the United Nations during the last days of the Crisis. In fact, throughout the Crisis, Nixon had hoped that the Chinese would stand by the Pakistanis against the military intervention of India, and more so if it were done with the support of the Soviet Union. On 16 December 1971, when the victory of Indian troops against Pakistan became a reality, Nixon confided with Kissinger in an almost tragic tone over the Chinese role in the Crisis: "And also let it be known they have done nothing".

India too falls into the same Cold War logic, for having itself 'aligned' with the Soviet Union. In the same 16 December conversation, the president told

Kissinger: "I know the bigger game is the Russian game, but the Indians also have played us for squares here. They have done this once and when this is over they will come to us to forgive and forget. This we must not do." Indira Gandhi's letter to Nixon of a day earlier had a tone more of 'reaching out' to the president than anything close to 'forgive and forget': "... it is my earnest and sincere hope that with all the knowledge and deep understanding of human affairs you ... will at least let me know where precisely we have gone wrong." Nixon responded immediately the following day with a tone of compromise – without, however, forgetting his misgivings:

We recognize that India is a major Asian power and that we share the common values of genuinely democratic government. No act has been taken with a desire to damage the relationship between our two great countries. We would hope that the day may come when we can work together for the stability of Asia, and we deeply regret that the developments of the past few months in South Asia have thrust the day of stability farther into the future.

The tone of 'reaching out' inherent to Indira Gandhi's letter, however, raises the second complex layer of Cold War politics, which can be referred to as 'Cold War III'. This involves both India and Pakistan using the Cold War syndrome for their own interests. While New Delhi used the Soviet Union without Prime

Minister Gandhi having "her heart in it", Islamabad also thought of using the US for its civil conflicts and, later, against India – although it knew full well that comprehensive support from the US would be less forthcoming given its violent acts in East Pakistan. In the process, however, both India and Pakistan have come to internalise the Cold War syndrome – the implications of which have been no less devastating, indeed, as both countries geared up to become nuclear powers.

### Today's lessons

What, then, are the lessons from all this? First, the issue of genocide will not go away until there is a national or international trial of the perpetrators, some of whom who are still alive. The trial is needed not only to bring solace to the victims in Bangladesh but for Pakistan's own sake; after all, no society can re-energise itself morally, not to mention spiritually, if murderers are allowed to go free. There is enough evidence to pursue this in the Hamoodur Rahman



"...given the other things we are doing."

Commission Report of 1974, the secret report commissioned by the president of Pakistan in 1971 that found significant evidence of atrocities and other abuses of power by the Pakistani brass. The responsibility of the international community is clear, given that it continues to take matters of extreme violence, including genocide, very seriously. This applies specifically to the United States, given its participation in the Southasia Crisis of 1971.

Second, the sliding of 'quiet diplomacy' into 'secret diplomacy', particularly in the hands of a 'small coterie', has become more of a norm with successive US administrations, often with results contrary to that country's democratic ideals. Two relevant examples would be the Iran-Contra affair and – most recently – the fiasco over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It is imperative that structures be evolved in Washington, DC to overcome this tendency, lest the diplomatic manoeuvrings slide into something more totalitarian in nature. In some ways, the Watergate scandal and the fall of Richard Nixon were vindications of what secret diplomacy and a small coterie could result in if extended beyond the boundaries of democratic norms.

**The democratic aspirations of an impoverished population could be sacrificed for the sake of opening up with a non-democratic but economically promising state.**

Third, the 'special relationship' between Nixon and Yahya, which caused much of America's embarrassment and policy limitations, was directly related to the US policy necessity of having to open up with Beijing through just one channel, Islamabad. Nixon and Kissinger may have profited from the age-old wisdom of Kautilya, the third century BC Indian political thinker, of having to approach both friends and enemies alike through multilayered networks. For both Richard Nixon and the US, the cost of this 'special relationship' was immense. On 27 December 1971, a week after Yahya's 'resignation' and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's assumption as president and 'chief martial law administrator' of Pakistan, Nixon passed a handwritten note to Kissinger with the remark that Bhutto "must be strongly informed – RN [Richard Nixon] will be *very* opposed to trial of Yahya" (emphasis in the original). Nixon probably feared that any trial at that stage would expose the nitty-gritty of Yahya's help in the secret negotiations with China. In the process, however, Nixon spared a person who, from all accounts at the time, was responsible for the heinous crimes against the people of East Pakistan. America lost a significant portion of its global moral standing as a result, which it has yet to recover.

Finally, the declassified documents provide a complex picture of the US role in 1971 – and they actually provide some hope for both US-Bangladesh and US-India relations. It is now clear that the Nixon administration had a 'softer side' to the civil conflict in East Pakistan, and in large measure he was also supportive of an independent Bangladesh, although within a 'long-term' framework. Even Kissinger, although known for his dispassionateness, could not hide his 'softer' side when he queried on 31 March 1971, less than a week after the military crackdown: "Did they kill Professor Razak? He was one of my students."

In 1971, this writer was only a Class IX student but saw the mass killing and destruction and looting by the Pakistani soldiers, and later on also the readiness of the people to join the struggle and the stream of refugees into Agartala in India. Had we all known of this American 'softer side', we probably would have been more emboldened, and perhaps could have brought about the fall of the Pakistani military without the direct military intervention of India. But that is now a matter of history. Let the final lesson from the Southasia Crisis be a recognition by the powerful rulers in states near and far to develop a sensitivity for humanitarian values, and not to engage in traumatising millions in the name of grand strategies and policy-making.

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# Insurgencies of despair, uprisings of hope

Two truths  
Twin determinations  
Two sets of values  
An unproven person  
Has been created inside  
The existing individual

– Naresh Mehta in “Sansay ki Ek Raat”

**A**fghanistan continues to burn in the inferno of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Unlike the colonial forces of the earlier era, the army under US command likes to think that maintaining law and order is not a part of its brief in occupied territories. It seems to operate with a divine mission – Bush II prefers the term ‘crusade’ – to eliminate its designated enemies, with little or no concern for collateral damage. In the indiscriminate bombings by helicopter gunships high in the air, safe from the sniper bullets of insurgents on the ground, all kinds of people die. Among the victims are women, the elderly, the young and infirm. But for those who keep the score in Kabul, all the dead are counted as remnants of Taliban and Al-Qaeda extremists on the run. As if giving a label to the victim justifies the killing.

East of the Durand Line, the situation is hardly any better in Pakistan, where US forces routinely cross over in search of fugitives from the vengeful regime in Kabul. This happens despite the fact that General Pervez Musharraf has posted 70,000 troops in tribal areas, at the beck and call of Americans hunting Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters and sympathisers. The deadly attack by *fidayeen* suicide bombers in the Kashmir Valley continues, despite the fact that the 742-km Line of Control that divides the region between India and Pakistan is one of the most fiercely guarded ceasefire lines in the world. In Jaffna, the volatile peace still holds, but no one knows when it is going to snap in the absence of a lasting solution to the festering ethnic conflict.

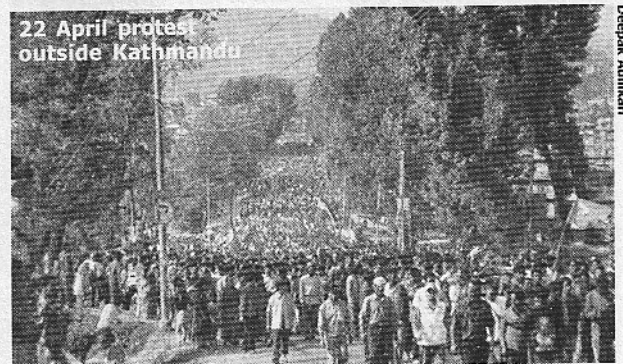
Elsewhere in Southasia, left extremism is spreading like a prairie fire. By consistently ignoring the seven parliamentary parties’ attempts at moderating the Maoists, the horse-and-buggy-age monarchy of Nepal has added fuel to the fire of rebellion. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) is now a formidable force in the region, with its guerrillas operating in 170 districts of 15 states across the country, which cover 40 percent of its geographical area and 35 percent of the Indian population. The Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia

(CCOMPOSA) may just be an exotic acronym for now, but with the possibilities of leftwing extremism rising up in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, the next wave of insurgency to shake up the Subcontinent will probably be in the realm of politics, rather than ethnicity, religion or culture.

## Insurgencies of despair

Islamist Jihadis and Hindutva obscurants have eyes in the backs of their heads. There is no doubt that the Shariat is a fine document, but any attempt to run a contemporary society on the basis of rules framed one-and-a-half millennia ago is absurd. Even more bizarre is the response of Hindutva militants who believe in fighting fire with fire, and wish to re-enact another all-consuming Mahabharata for their version of monopolistic truth. Proponents of militant Hinduism often ignore the most fundamental lesson of the Mahabharata epic: In any war fought to settle scores, it is the manifest destiny of everyone to die defeated.

Cultural insurgencies are rooted in the past, look towards history for inspiration, and have no vision for anything that has not been tried in myths and memories. Failure is thus an integral part of all revivalist ideologies. The Taliban wrote the script of their own downfall by gouging out the Buddhas from the rocks of Bamiyan. Even though American excesses in Afghanistan vastly exceeded the atrocities being inflicted by occupation forces in Iraq, there is no way that retro-extremists such as Omar and Osama will ever get the reluctant respect extended even to a confirmed dictator like Saddam Hussein. It is unlikely that the bombers of the Hanuman Temple in Benaras, Nishter Park in Karachi or the Jama Masjid in Delhi will ever be feted anywhere by the oppressed. They may have taken great personal risks,



hit headlines, received attractive compensations from their sponsors, extracted revenge or been promised happiness in the afterlife. But whenever and wherever these soldiers of the past die, they will die in extreme loneliness – unkempt, unwept and unsung.

Ethnic uprisings, as in Kashmir, Assam and Jaffna, are somewhat different from cultural revivalism in the sense that they aspire to transform ethnic identities into political entities. But most ethnic insurgencies too are doomed to fail, as they seek to take revenge from some, rather than ensuring justice for all. Pundits were a minority in Kashmir Valley, but to prosecute them on the flimsy grounds of guilt by association with a certain religion was so atrocious that it destroyed the independence movement of Kashmiris for good. Every time insurgents in the Indian Northeast abduct or kill an innocent, the sacrifice of their cadres goes to waste and their cause suffers a setback. Most ethnic uprisings fail to mature into independence movements because the very premise of ethnic exclusivity is antithetical to nation-building. And wherever countries are built upon the idea of purity, they are cursed to remain in a constant state of war. The most illustrative case in point is Israel; but Pakistan is not much different, and Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese hurled the Isle of Serendipity onto a similar rollercoaster.

Cultural insurgencies and ethnic revolts are doomed to collapse in the long run, but they burn fierce as long as they last. Issues related to self and identity are so fissile that if ignited, the resulting fire consumes all of an individual's rationality. For causes related to culture, people die, often rushing towards their death with a grit and determination that would have made some real differences in society had they lived. But hope is not the motive force of ethnic uprisings and cultural insurgencies; they are propelled instead by despair. Regardless of the name given to their cause – nationalism, patriotism, or religious duty – the 'martyrs' of despair die essentially of rage.

The Page Three intelligentsia of New Delhi loves to point out that the cultural insurgencies of Kashmir and the Northeast affect only three percent of their national population, whereas leftwing rebellion is much more widespread and entrenched. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh too has bought that line, and begun to portray the Naxalite revolt as the premier threat of this century. Perhaps the risk assessment is partially correct. Right-wingers tend to burn out or die out if monitored closely or consistently contained within a limited geographical area. The rebellions of the Left are altogether different. They are caused by the hope of an alternative future. Whereas cultural insurgents are willing to die, rebels of class-warfare would rather kill the enemy than sacrifice themselves for the cause. In communist ideologies, the 'cause' in any case is fluid and

subjected to the whims of the leaders at the vanguard of revolution.

## Uprisings of hope

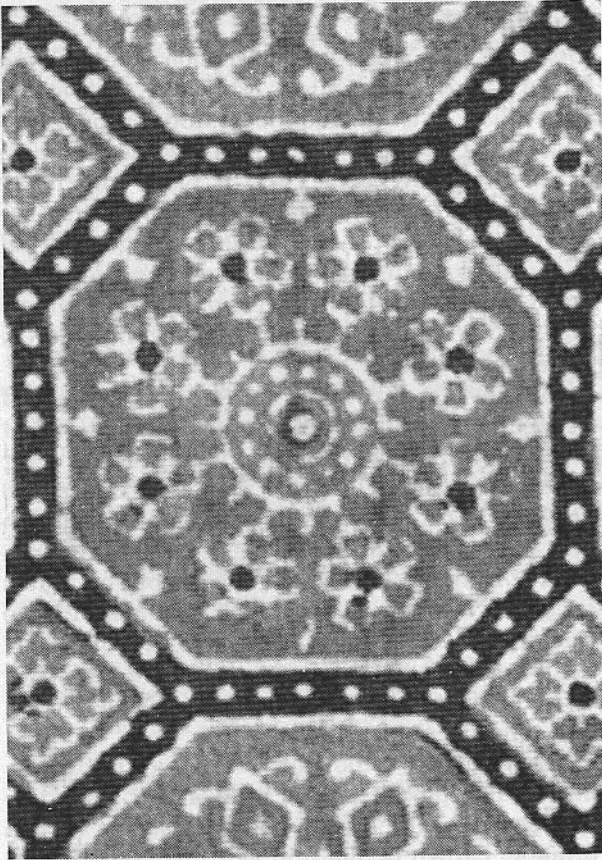
There is a very popular proverb in Nepali, which says that axioms are not false and stories are not factual. But most analyses of communist uprisings are based on stories rather than axioms. John Reed wrote about the Russian Revolution in the 1922 *Ten Days That Shook the World*, and its grand narrative has continued to influence even the critical accounts of all subsequent class wars. No narration of the Mao phenomenon escapes the myths manufactured by Edgar Snow in his 1936 *Red Star over China*. Did Lenin and Mao do what they did strictly according to the maxims of Karl Marx, or did they go by their own interpretations? An honest answer to this question is necessary. There is no reason for all leftwing revolutionaries everywhere to forever bear the crosses of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot.

Unlike the self-destructive trait of every cultural insurgency, leftwing rebellion begins with an alternative vision of a shared future. Once there is a plan, howsoever flawed, the space for negotiation remains. A communist revolutionary cannot succeed by dying; her cause survives only if she does. That is the reason leftwing insurgents concentrate on killing and do not embrace death as willingly as do the suicide foot-soldiers of identity politics.

Just as it used to be fashionable to be socialist in the 1970s and 1980s, these days it is chic to be ethnic and to sympathise with those who extol the slogan, "Say it with pride that we are Hindus". But the pride of being Hindu does not explain the widening gulf between the rich and poor. It does not stop subsidy-starved farmers from committing suicide. It does not say why a tractor buyer in Telangana has to pay higher interest rates than does an IT professional acquiring his second car in New Delhi.

The states of Southasia will have to deal simultaneously with both challenges – the insurgencies of despair and uprisings of hope – as they gear up to meet modernity. Adoption of Gandhian ideals would have lessened the stress in society and alleviated the need of violent uprisings. But that has already become a road not taken. Driving on the highways of capitalism is smooth, but the risks of fatal accidents are much greater at higher speeds.

Containment and control are the only tools to tackle rightwing regression; but to deal with leftwing resurgence, engagement is the more effective option. Should the understanding between parliamentary parties and Maoists succeed in Nepal, a template will hopefully emerge to design workable methods of mainstreaming leftwing insurgents. Meanwhile, the War on Terror is the wrong model to fight any insurgency in Southasia, be it of despair or of hope – a fact that has been proven beyond a shred of doubt.



## Sindh and Kutch, cloth and verse

**Emphasis on common elements of everyday life – a piece of cloth, a verse of poetry – allows pastoralists in Gujarat to express a memory and yearning for Sindh.**

by | Farhana Ibrahim

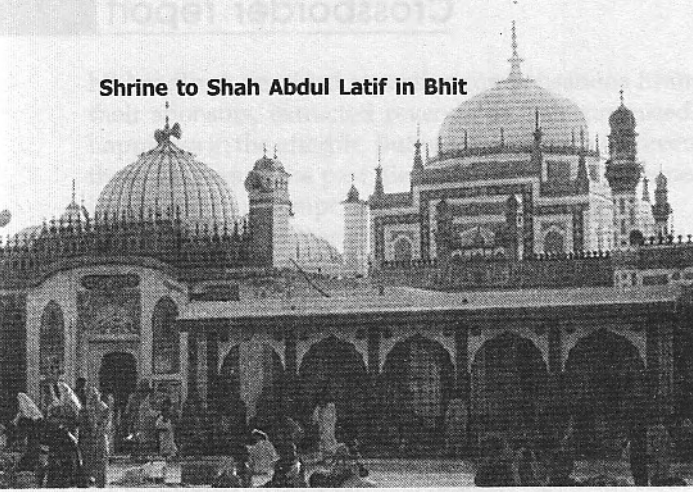
**A** couple of years ago, while living and researching in Bhuj, the capital of Kutch District in Gujarat state, I became interested in purchasing some recorded *qafis*. This haunting poetic genre is originally from Sindh, but remains popular among the Muslim pastoralists of northern Kutch, sung in the wide expanses of the Great Rann of Kutch. Although Sindh is a mere 140 kilometres away from Bhuj, I had found few overt traces of the Pakistani province. The *qafi*, however, remains a rich source of regional, crossborder history for both Kutch and Sindh.

It seemed, however, that transborder references were somewhat taboo in public, and none of the well-stocked music shops had what I was looking for. Finally, directed to a narrow lane of stalls tucked away behind the main market street, I found what I was looking for. Here were all kinds of smuggled and second-hand goods – leather, electronics, Islamic literature, cassettes of music and religious discourses,

cloth and a myriad other sundries. Amidst tall stacks of cheap copies of music cassettes from popular Indian films, I also found an equally large selection of music from across the frontier – popular Pakistani singers singing in Urdu and Sindhi, some of whom were even born in Kutch, the shop owners said with pride. This narrow row of shops, in the heart of Bhuj and yet somewhat hidden, was a transformed space. Here, Kutch was no longer insulated from its historical linkages – Sindh thrived here, most notably in its folk music. But it was hidden away; one would not stumble upon these stalls or their wares unbidden.

As with goods, I found it remarkable how little Sindh came up for discussion in Kutch. Certainly, political oratory in Gujarat regularly refers to Pakistan. But it is generalising and rhetorical, used to extract political mileage by advocates of right-wing Hindu nationalism – such as the representation of Islam, Pakistan and, by extension, Indian Muslims

## Shrine to Shah Abdul Latif in Bhit



in general, as isomorphic and therefore 'other'. Nowhere does one find reference to cultural traits that are shared in fact shared by Sindh and Kutch.

It is not difficult to understand why this is so. Classification and boundary-making, both real and epistemological, are at the heart of constructing identities. Modern territorial nation states are ideologically invested in imagining themselves to be territorially discrete and internally homogenous. After the separation of Pakistan in 1947, Kutch gained new significance as a strategic border territory; it lay on a newly defined boundary that needed to be naturalised and legitimised at all costs. In Kutch, and Gujarat more generally, this has been done through a relatively consistent 'othering' of Pakistan and Muslims within Gujarat, particularly pronounced after the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in the state. This has generated a peculiar ambivalence in Kutch about adjacent Sindh: they are immediate neighbours, they share historical and cultural ties, but they now lie across a problematic boundary.

The Jats are a semi-nomadic pastoral group that inhabited both sides of this border region before 1965. Prior to the present geopolitical reorganisation of 1947, mobile groups like the Jats were involved in trade linking Kutch and Sindh and going as far as Punjab and Afghanistan. The Jat pastoralists would wander back and forth in search of fodder, particularly in times of drought. The border is now blocked and the Sindh pastures are only a memory, and yet Sindh remains present in the lives of the Jats in other ways.

The narratives of the Jats provide an interesting contrast to the manner in which Sindh is presented in the nationalist narratives of Gujarat. In particular, cloth and poetry remain the condensed expressions of the cultural celebration of Sindh in the northern Kutch region of the Banni grasslands. Through cloth and poetry, the pastoral communities are able to express a

desire for Sindh that cannot quite be articulated in the political realm.

## All-purpose cloth

*Ajrakh* is a type of block-printed cotton cloth common in both Sindh and Kutch, especially among the pastoralists. It is a ubiquitous, multipurpose wrap that can be tied as a turban or *lungi*, or used as a blanket or shawl. The cloth is worn mostly by Muslims, and is exchanged within groups that are entirely male and usually Muslim. The geometrical and abstract traditional designs often mirror those found in Indo-Islamic architecture. Although widely produced within Kutch itself, *Ajrakh* from Sindh is more highly valued.

Journeying through the Rann, Jats would frequently assert that they could not sleep at night unless they had an *Ajrakh* sheet with which to cover themselves – and only *Ajrakh* would do. In her 1990 *Sindh Jo Ajrak*, the textile historian Noorjehan Bilgrami writes of similar habits across the border in Sindh: "A Sindhi feels ill at ease without his *Ajrak*; for him it is an all-purpose cloth." Jat men refer to *Ajrakh* as their "original" *garb*, even though today many of them have given up such turbans and waistcloths for modern wear, keeping the *Ajrakh* pieces for special occasions.

The name itself is thought to be derived from *azrak*, the term for 'blue' in Arabic and Persian, and indigo has remained the traditional dye used in *Ajrakh* printing. Grown in Sindh in vast quantities, indigo was a common dye for cotton cloth – used for clothing by all classes of Muslims – and was one of Sindh's chief exports during the 19th century. Today, blue, red and white are the three colours typically found in *Ajrakh* patterns. In Kutch, the *Khatri*s, a Muslim dyer community, specialise in *Ajrakh* printing. Ismail *Khatri*, a master printer and dyer, recounts how their ancestors were asked to come into Kutch from Sindh by the Maharao of Kutch during the 17th century.

The superior value ascribed to Sindhi *Ajrakh* by the Kutch Jats is an interesting comment on notions of cultural authenticity and value. It quickly becomes relatively easy to pick out unusual patterns and colours from across the border. Sindhi *Ajrakh* is produced on cloth that is first bleached a stark white, after which the chemically dyed colours appear much more vibrant than the hues on the Kutchi cloth, which are more muted and subtle. The quality of groundwater also makes a big difference to the final colour tones.

The village of Dhamadka is the only place in Kutch that produces vegetable-dyed *Ajrakh*, where Ismail



Khatri and his brothers produce their ancestral wares for national and international buyers. The 2001 earthquake nearly destroyed Dhamadka, forcing the surviving members of the Khatri family to relocate. The earthquake had changed the groundwater table in Dhamadka, with the water's increased iron content preventing the Ajrakh colours from attaining their fullest potential.

Most of the men in Banni wear Ajrakh waist- and shoulder-cloths that appear to be from across the border. One day in a small town in western Kutch, a man wearing a particularly outstanding and unusually coloured Ajrakh wrap responded abruptly when asked about its origin – “From here” he said, and walked away. Later, upon learning that my research assistant was a Khatri, the man quietly divulged that his wrap was from Pakistan.

The Sindhi Ajrakh, as a prized commodity among Muslims in Kutch, is illegally smuggled across the border. It is not only that the Sindhi Ajrakh is inherently superior, its value also seems linked to the social context of its production. It is valued over Ajrakh produced in Kutch precisely for the connections across the border. One Kutch resident who was interviewed insisted that no matter how hard one tried in Kutch, it was never possible to get the kind of Ajrakh that came from Sindh. “It is the whiteness of the star that is crucial,” he explained, referring to the image in the centre of most traditional Ajrakh patterns. “Anyone who knows their Ajrakh will be able to tell a genuine [meaning Sindhi] one by looking at the white star.”

### Infrapolitics

A largely illiterate population, the Jats continue to excel in the recitation of qafis, the classical poetry of Sindh. By far the most famous poet in the region is Shah Abdul Latif, of the Sindhi town of Bhit. The compositions of ‘Bhitai’ and others, still recited today, form an extensive body of oral-historical accounts of the region. Singing qafi and *sher* verses is considered central to the pastoralist ethos – a good way to pass time while grazing in the desert. The verses and their recitation also evoke the romantic image central to the ideal of the pastoral life as one of ease and independence. Well-known poets recite classical verse and compose new ones, keeping the traditional meter and verse style. Thus, traditionally composed narratives now recount the events related to the 2001 earthquake. These verses provide a wealth of information that make up somewhat for the absence of historical or ethnographic research in the region.

Perhaps the most popular poetry is derived from the story of Sasui-Punu, a tragic love story and

perhaps one of the more famous compositions by Shah Abdul Latif. In Sindh, Hindus and Muslims alike have identified with this poetic tale. Sasui's (also known as Sassi) ceaseless wandering in search of her lover was one of the metaphors of exile used in early Sindhi Hindu literature following Partition and their move to India: “Wandering aimlessly like Sasui, / criss-crossing mountains and streams, / we shred our shoes ...” wrote the Sindhi poet Parsuram Zia. More recently, Sasui has also been incorporated by ethnic nationalist forces as a regional Sindhi heroine in Pakistan.

Another popularly recited verse is related to Umar-Marai, a folktale from the Thar region of Sindh. In a short poem called “*Moti Mi*” (heavy rain), Marai is a young girl from Sindh, held captive by Umar. In some versions, she falls in love with her captor; in others, she is already in love with Umar and is abducted by an evil king, Hamir Sunra. In “*Moti Mi*”, she details the arrival of the rains in her hometown of Malir. “It has rained; the trees are in bloom and the fruit is ripe for picking; my friends are in the gardens waiting for me to pick the fruit with them; please let me go,” she pleads with her captor. This narrative is rich and evocative of the landscape of lower Sindh, and of the welcome arrival of the rains. The remembered landscape is one that richly belongs in Sindh.

Stories like these are narrated and sung in everyday contexts in Banni today. They address the proximity of Sindh in a manner quite different from the way in

which the official regional narratives have chosen to do. In an analysis of Bedouin poetry, Middle Eastern scholar Lila Abu-Lughod argues that a “discourse on sentiment” can also be a “discourse of defiance” when poetic narratives from the grassroots contradict the systems that are defined from the authorities.

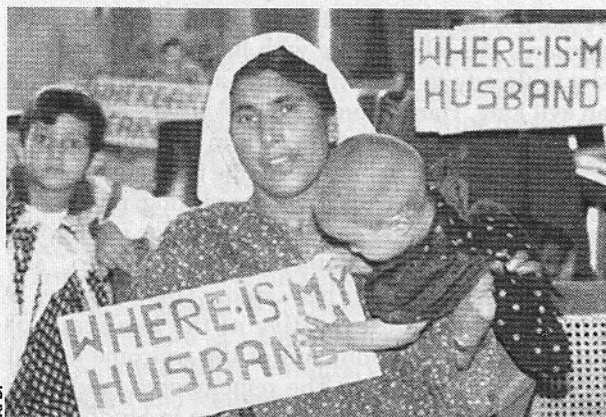
For those links with a transborder territory that cannot be freely expressed in the everyday political context, traditional recitations and attachment to cloth have become a way in which the ‘system’ can be critiqued. This is what is referred to as ‘infrapolitics’. Among the Jats of northern Kutch, the past is not a rupture, but instead flows into the present through specific tropes. Poetry and Ajrakh become ways to bring Sindh into their daily lives – integrated into the present in ways that are always and already there. This form of cultural flow, across a boundary line that is officially presented as discrete and impermeable, provides an interesting twist to the collective imagination of a region. The appreciation of qafi verses and Ajrakh on the Gujarat side of the border indicate that the Jats’ subjective experience of a region encompasses both Sindh and Kutch. The Jats embrace Sindh as intimately as it is rejected in the discourse of Gujarati nationalism.

Kutch was no longer insulated from its historical linkages – small verses here, most notably in its folk music.

# Kashmir's *Desaparecidos*

**Despite the appearance of an increasingly peaceful Kashmir, the state's citizens are still disappearing or being killed under suspicious circumstances in drastic numbers.**

by | **Mohamad Junaid**



**T**he subcontinental air has recently been thick with talk of the possibility of peace in Kashmir. Indian government officials say that violence has decreased and that 'infiltration levels' have come down. The security bunkers in Srinagar, which have stood like blots on the city's face for the last 15 years, have been given a facelift: before the new tourist season began, wooden cubicles replaced the old ones made of brick-and-sandbag. President Pervez Musharraf threw down his gauntlet of possible Kashmiri self-rule, and most of the Kashmir-based political parties – including the People's Democratic Party and the National Conference – are discussing his proposals. On the ground, however, things have yet to change significantly. In particular, Kashmir Valley continues to witness enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and custodial killings.

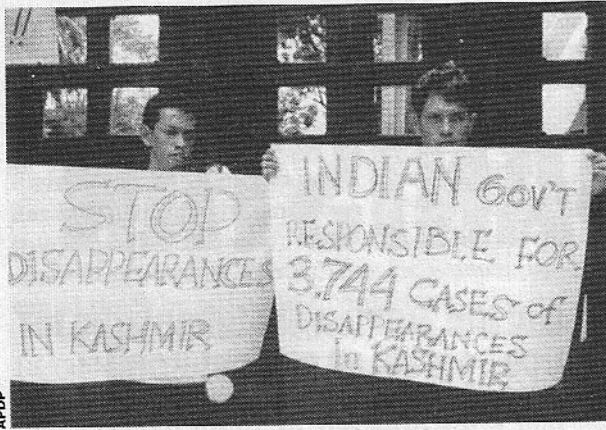
On 11 January 2006, Mushtaq Ahmad Ganie, in his mid-twenties, was arrested by the Rashtriya Rifles (RR) during a raid on an Anantnag District village. He died in custody and his body was handed over to police. Amidst widespread protests, an army spokesman claimed that he had died of cardiac arrest, though the suspicion was that Mushtaq was tortured. After Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad called for an official enquiry, Inspector General of Police K Rajendra Kumar told a Jammu-based daily the

following day that, "Ganie was an innocent civilian and it is also a fact that he died in the army's custody. However, two separate enquiries have been ordered to ascertain whether Ganie died an accidental death or was tortured to death." At press time, results from both probes were still awaited.

Three days later, on 14 January, two youths, Abdul Majid Parray and Fayaz Ahmed Bhat, were picked up from Baramulla District, again by RR troopers, and tortured. Parray succumbed, but Bhat lived to tell his horrific tale to the media. Again, there were protests. Bhat's relatives later disclosed to the media that the army had tried to rearrest him while he was recovering in a Srinagar hospital, apparently wanting him to change his statement. Army officers, meanwhile, claimed that they had simply wanted to move Bhat to an army hospital.

These incidents took place just a few days after the Congress-led state government boasted that custodial deaths had ceased under its rule, with one local newspaper headline trumpeting: "No Custodial Killings in First 50 Days." In yet another blow to the chief minister's assertions, on 17 January, three madrasa caretakers were killed by RR personnel in an 'encounter' in Pulwama District. The three *maulvis* – Wali Muhammad Khatana, Farooq Ahmad Dar and Muhammad Farooq – were killed while collecting hides of sacrificial sheep for their madrasa in southern Kashmir. Army officials claimed the three were militants, but the public was unconvinced. Residents near the madrasa claimed that the army had suspected the three of spreading fundamentalism. Their deaths provoked huge anti-government protests throughout the Valley, and relatives of the three refused to bury the victims until a probe was ordered into the killings.

The opposition National Conference expressed its 'concern' over the increasing number of custodial killings, and on 19 January Chief Minister Nabi Azad was compelled to warn the army to avoid custodial deaths. He also asked the local police to accompany army personnel in all search operations, which in the past have been a source of constant harassment



to the Kashmiris. The independent Public Commission on Human Rights reported that during the first four months of the Congress-led government – whose term started on 5 November – the number of custodial killings had already reached eight. During the previous three years of the People's Democratic Party-led government of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, 122 such cases were recorded.

### The number 8000

Reliable activist groups claim that about 8000 people have gone missing in Jammu & Kashmir over the last 16 years of insurgency. The official count is not reliable, particularly because it depends on the political party in power and a host of other factors. The earlier National Conference government put the figure at 3184 in July 2002. The PDP's Mufti Sayeed, however, told the state assembly in 2003 that 3741 persons had gone missing since 2000 alone, a figure that he repeated at a press conference in the presence of then-Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. Only a week later, he retracted that statement, saying that no more than 60 people had actually disappeared "following their arrest by security forces" in the previous 13 years. The flip-flop came as a rude shock to the Kashmiri public.

Zahir-ud-din is a journalist who has documented more than 4000 cases of forced disappearances in his book *Did They Vanish in Thin Air?* He says as many as 500 cases of disappearance have been proven by the state's High Court. The Srinagar-based Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), which began collecting information on enforced disappearances in 1994, say the actual number goes well beyond 8000.

On 29 March this year, Jammu & Kashmir Police named two Indian Army officers for engineering a fake surrender of 27 militants in November 2004 at the Army's headquarters at Nagrota. At that time, it was considered a major success by the establishment. The story, however, was soon exposed, leading to a year-long police enquiry, which has subsequently concluded that these 'militants' were in fact

unemployed youth from central Kashmir, who were lured by a surrendered militant-turned-Congress politician by offering them jobs in Delhi. He instead handed them over to the Army officers, who kept them in custody for more than six months before presenting them for the 'surrender'.

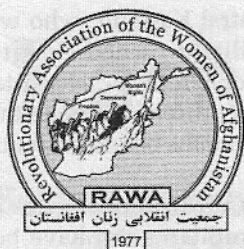
Although for most cases of disappearances the military has been blamed, militants too have been responsible for a significant number. In early 2003, a teenager named Fayez Ahmad Malik, from the town of Doda, was abducted and later killed. Militants of Hizbul Mujahideen claimed responsibility for the killing, accusing the young man of being an informant for the security forces.

While custodial deaths and disappearances represent the most severe misuse of state power, under the Congress-led government the incidence of arbitrary arrests, molestations and excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators continues to be significant. On 16 January, local media agencies reported the arrest of 11 civilians by RR soldiers during a search operation at the village of Kheru. The detentions triggered angry protests against the troops, but the prisoners were not immediately released. Instead, the locals were thrashed by the army men.

The lack of effective agencies to investigate acts of human rights violations has made it extremely difficult to pursue complaints of alleged custodial death and disappearance. Section 19 of the Protection of Human Rights Act (PHRA), which also provided for the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), restricts the Commission from investigating allegations of violations by the armed forces (see *Himal Nov-Dec 2005*, "The healing can begin here"). Meanwhile, it is also a fact that decades-old killings of prominent activists in the state remain to be investigated.

Not so long ago, the running joke in Kashmir – a dark one – was: *Beta soja, warna Mufti Saab 'Healing Touch' de denge* (Sleep son, or else Mufti Sayeed will give you his 'Healing Touch'). With new Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad taking over the reins of the government last fall, the joke has lost its sheen. As the political actors in and out of Jammu & Kashmir scramble for places on the official roundtables and counter-roundtables to discuss the state's situation, many of those who have lost friends and relatives are far from amused either with the joke or the peace process.

"What peace process? It means nothing for us," says Mugli, a widow whose only son disappeared after he was taken into custody 15 years ago. "If India and Pakistan are talking about Kashmir, they should talk about our miseries first ... My son was my only hope. From interrogation centres to jails and to shrines, I went everywhere and pleaded before everybody, before *Khuda*, but could not find him." ▲



# Degree of risk in AFGHANISTAN

**Demands by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan for 'Freedom, Democracy and Social Justice' remain as critical – and contentious – today as they were three decades ago.**

by | **Fatima Chowdhury**

In 1977, in the heady days before the Russia-backed coup, a group of Afghan women intellectuals set up the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). The new organisation was an attempt to address women's rights and social justice by engaging Afghan women in peaceful socio-political activities to promote secular, democratic values in the country. Despite its important social work, during its subsequent three decades RAWA's activism has been far from welcomed by the country's succeeding governments and conservative social leadership, due to its specific attempts to challenge the status quo.

The initial years saw RAWA's activities largely confined to demonstrations for women's rights and democracy. But after the Moscow-directed coup d'état of April 1978 and the eventual occupation in December 1979, RAWA joined the war of resistance, advocating democracy and secularism. It was during the Soviet years that the organisation began to spread its influence, sending activists to work among refugee women and children in Pakistan, establishing schools and helping to provide much-needed healthcare facilities. It confronted the Soviet occupation both politically and physically – demonstrating in public, while at the same time working to uncover crimes being committed. RAWA reports that during this time, many of its activists were arrested, tortured, and kept in some of Afghanistan's most notorious prisons for up to eight years at a time.

In 1992, the Soviet-installed puppet regime collapsed to herald a new and more brutal era under the Taliban. Due to rigid policies and growing atrocities, RAWA faced increasing social, economic and political challenges. In October 2001, the US 'war on terrorism' led to the fall of the Taliban but the

struggle against religious fundamentalism remained. The government of Hamid Karzai aligned itself with the Northern Alliance – seen by many as equally brutal as the Taliban – and former warlords began taking positions on the political dais. For a group that believes that one Afghan fundamentalist regime has replaced another, RAWA's calls remain poignant and pertinent: "Freedom and democracy cannot be donated; it is the duty of the people of a country to fight and achieve these values."

## Family network

Mariam Rawi (not her real name) remembers being enthralled by RAWA as a young girl, impressed with its independence and thrilling emphasis on women's rights. Unlike many of the group's other members, Mariam's parents respected her decision to get involved. At the age of 15, her father chose to send her to a RAWA school instead of more-traditional institutions. Now 31, Mariam says that her father wanted her not just to receive an education, but to develop a conscience – to "choose the right path and have a purpose in life by fighting for the

rights of the voiceless people, especially women." Now, Mariam is a member of the group's foreign affairs committee, travelling around the world to raise awareness about the plight of Afghan women. Despite her high-profile success within the organisation, however, to this day security remains a major issue for RAWA and its workers: Mariam declined either to be photographed or to use her real name for this article.

Partially due to such concerns, RAWA members behave like a family, sharing their problems and aspirations. Many who are involved in work on the same project live collectively in a single house. Although for safety's sake those who have families



Martyr Meena



are not allowed to invite their relatives, the collective house nonetheless provides a supportive environment. "There are many RAWA members who, on their very personal issues, such as marriage, choose to first consult with RAWA and then with their own family members," explains Mariam, who has lived with the organisation since she first became involved. In this way, RAWA is able to offer an element of stability, particularly for women, in what can at times be a chaotic environment.

Having started work with the group when she was 18 (able to distinguish, she says, between her country's friends and enemies), Mariam notes that she was well aware of the difficulties that her decision would entail. RAWA's legendary founder and eventual martyr, Meena Keshwar Kamal (commonly known by just her first name), provided a critical early inspiration, as have the stories and experiences that Mariam has subsequently encountered from women around the world. Some of her greatest motivation, however, is the ongoing preaching in her own country that "women are half of men and are weak creatures". While these fundamentalist traditions may be particularly rigid, the organisation has operated on the assumption that, with courage, its members can break a crucial path – "We must be the vanguards," she emphasises.

Confronted with such issues, Mariam feels that her time with RAWA has offered more than simply stability, but has also helped her to formulate her identity. She says she has become aware not just of her political, social and legal rights, but has also been allowed the opportunity to help others who have been deprived of those same rights. In Afghanistan – as in many other places in Southasia, but perhaps more so – speaking up for personal rights, confidently interacting with others, and even staying away from one's family can be considered revolutionary steps, challenging as they are to traditional teachings and beliefs. Perhaps most importantly, Mariam explains that the person she has become is a woman who can enjoy the same rights as that of her brother and other Afghan males.

### Incurring wrath

To believe that positive change is possible takes a certain amount of tenacious idealism grounded in a strong faith in the cause. RAWA sees one of its largest achievements as the fostering of a wider consciousness among Afghan men in support of women's rights and equality. On a more material level, over the years RAWA has provided women and children with education and health facilities in both Afghanistan and in Afghan-refugee areas in Pakistan, where a large part of its operations are concentrated. They have built a health centre in Quetta, as well as a number of schools in Quetta and Peshawar, aimed at Afghan refugees.

RAWA has provided shelter to women who have been raped, along with their female relations, fathers who have sold their daughters out of hunger, widows forced to beggary and prostitution in order to feed their children, and orphans with nowhere to go. To run its schools, literacy courses, hospitals, mobile health teams and income-generating projects, RAWA has increasingly relied on funding from international sources. Seeking financial support within Afghanistan has been difficult, partly due to the desperate economy and partly due to the organisation's contentious radicalism. RAWA has also, however, been donated free land for many of its projects, and many of its teachers work without salary.

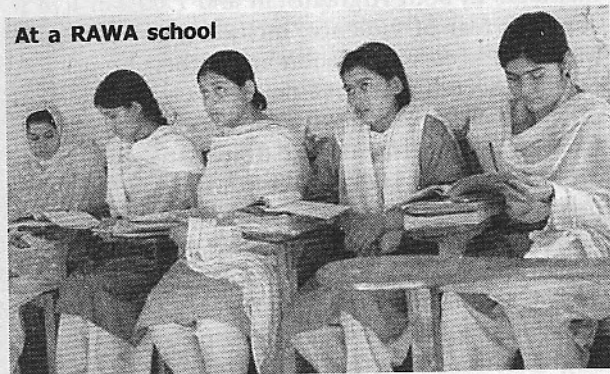
The worldwide network of supporters that has arisen is also noteworthy, with a large number of individuals and small-scale organisations having taken it upon themselves, particularly in recent years, to keep RAWA solvent. The organisation does not receive monetary aid from governments, international

**"We must be the vanguards," she emphasises.**

aid agencies or large NGOs, and it faces regular challenges due to its adamantly anti-fundamentalist stands. A few years back, some embassies promised the group some money, on the condition that RAWA remove the word 'revolutionary' from its name. The members refused.

Despite having incurred the wrath of the governments in both Kabul and Islamabad, RAWA continues to point out that it is not Western governments but ordinary people that have contributed to its global support. Even as RAWA has become something of a darling of certain progressive Western groups, critics worry that it is overly radical: unnecessarily and harmfully critical of other Afghan women's organisations working for many of the same causes while maintaining cordial relations with the fundamentalist forces. Although RAWA vehemently denies such accusations, emphasising the "great harmony" between the group and other women's rights and anti-fundamentalist organisations, it categorically states that it does not acknowledge the

At a RAWA school



women who have been appointed into the present government, due to their perceived weak positions against fundamentalism. Perhaps part of the problem lies in the fact that, having heralded the struggle for women's rights within Afghanistan for so many years, RAWA may now find it difficult to cooperate with some groups that it sees as being diplomatic in criticising the current state of affairs.

The reaction by the Afghan people themselves to RAWA's activities has ranged from admiration to condemnation, and at many times both simultaneously. Although the group's projects are generally supported in particular by local women, any community approval is equally confronted with contempt. Members are often labelled as prostitutes, infidels or Maoists. This last reference is one that has long dogged the group. It is a debate that probably stemmed from the fact that Meena's husband, Faiz Ahmad, was the leader of an Afghan Maoist group (the Afghanistan Liberation Organisation) and that the year RAWA was established was an era when Maoist groups were on the rise. RAWA supporters dismiss such tags as fear-mongering, and suggest that many people simply find it difficult to accept that a woman can be independent – including mentally – from her husband. RAWA itself counters, "If an irreconcilable fight against the Taliban and their Jihadi brethren reflects a 'Maoist' stand, then yes, RAWA is more Maoist than the Maoists!"

Nonetheless, members admit that such reactions do tend to have a large influence, with many otherwise sympathetic people subsequently choosing not to support RAWA and its cause. A RAWA-published magazine called *Payam-e-Zan* (Woman's Message) is generally unable to be sold in the bookshops. "In a number of places," Mariam recalls, "booksellers have been abused and warned by gunmen not to sell RAWA publications." On several occasions, the magazines have instead been collected from shops and burned, while the shopkeepers have been pressured to identify the RAWA members who transported the publications.

As has been the situation throughout the organisation's three-decade existence, RAWA members in both Afghanistan and Pakistan live in constant fear of violence, including death threats. Members keep information about their homes and contacts secret, and have no offices – although the official RAWA website does provide addresses in Quetta and California for donations, as well as other forms of indirect communication. Their demonstrations have been attacked several times in Islamabad, while even today most of their activities remain underground in Afghanistan, as they were during the Taliban regime. "Even now RAWA is regarded as an illegal group according to Afghanistan's law," says Mariam. "This creates

limitations to the extent of outreach RAWA can accomplish."

## Onward

RAWA has always been its founder's organisation, even in death. Meena was born in Kabul in 1956, where, as a young schoolgirl, she became deeply involved in social activism. Influenced by the mass movements of the time, she left university early to devote herself to the education and social upliftment of Afghan women, of which the 1977 founding of RAWA was seen as a necessary step. Her organising work during the Soviet occupation gained much recognition. In addition to her regional work, Meena traveled to several European countries to spread awareness of the plight of the Afghan people. In 1981, she was officially invited to represent the Afghan resistance movement at the French Socialist Party Congress, where the Soviet delegation walked out due to a cheering crowd hoisting a victory sign.

But Meena also garnered displeasure for her views and activities, from Russian and fundamentalist forces alike. On 4 February 1987, Meena was assassinated in Quetta along with two family members. While the loss of its leader was initially difficult, RAWA has remained strong since Meena's death. The end of the Soviet regime brought with it internal strife, more bloodshed, and the rise of the Taliban, which in turn brought a cruel brand of rigidity. The US-led war in Afghanistan in October 2001, bringing an end to the Taliban regime, was initially welcomed with significant hopes for a new beginning. But from the outset RAWA was highly critical of the intervention, emphasising the mounting civilian casualties and warning that the US-installed government was no less fundamentalist than the last.

Throughout these changes, RAWA's social work among refugee Afghan women in both Pakistan and Afghanistan has continued to provide healthcare, education and financial assistance, as well as much-needed support to victims of war and assorted atrocities. Today, their central mandate remains unchanged, as Afghanistan struggles to transition to a peaceful and stable nation state. RAWA continues to remind the world that outside of the capital, the situation for Afghan women remains grim.

Even in the face of such solemn issues, however, RAWA members like Mariam Rawi maintain a spirit of optimism: that change is not a possibility to be desired, but a reality to be shaped through deeds. "If we want to see change in our life and conditions, only having a desire for a better future can't change things," explains Mariam. "We must put our desire into action and take practical steps for the realisation of our dreams. And in societies like Afghanistan, women have to accept some degree of risk in the fight against tyranny and injustice."

# Touch and tell

by | Nandini Chandra

*A few people have a bed for the night. For a night the wind is kept from them. The snow meant for them falls on the roadway but it won't change the world. It won't improve relations among men. It will not shorten the age of exploitation.*

– Bertolt Brecht, "A Bed for the Night"

I recently went to Vrindavan with two women, a high-art photographer from New Zealand and a Mexican art critic. Their purpose was to photograph the widows of Vrindavan and I their guide, interpreter, girlfriend. The salon photographer (whose employee I was) was interested in the iconic image and wanted to fit in the widows as part of a larger project on Madonna/motherhood. Her photographing technique consisted of taking not very good pictures, in flat light, with very little depth of field, somewhat bleached, and then to manipulate the images into something exotic and pretty. The idea, she said, is to maintain the 'grittiness' of the subject's situation – even as she would attempt to mitigate the exploitative conditions in which the photograph was to be taken – and finally, if I understood her correctly, to not fetishise the subject.

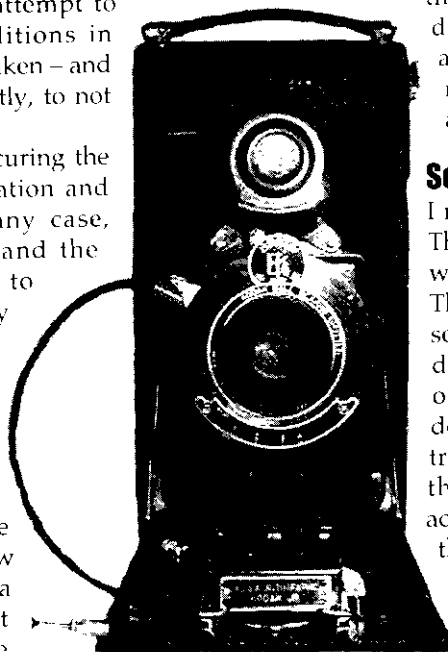
I did not understand how obscuring the details through digital manipulation and bleaching could do that. In any case, I admired her for her clarity and the well-thought-out programme to execute her plan. She was very clear about how she was going to photograph the widows: in an intimate space, in pure white, with the light shading off their faces. The mood and feeling of the moment would decide the posture they would take up. She had done her research and knew her ground intimately, with a target of 20 women. I was to enlist 25 as they scurried from the

various *bhajan* ashrams to different households to finish their chores. The idea was to offer them 300 rupees each in exchange for their time and body – the money an over-valuation of their otherwise diminished worth in the eyes of society, to let them know that they do count. In general, the widows get about three rupees in the morning and three in the evening for singing *kirtan* in the city's ashrams and temples. So this was like a bonus.

The art critic intended to photograph at least 100 widows as part of a project in which her husband was currently engaged. He is top of the international art charts. Collecting third-world human crap is his current project (he is buying truckloads of Indian shit to take back) and the photographs and the film are a way to support the main sculptures. His methodology involves shooting people from behind, like executing a tribe or a police identikit. According to him, it is naive to pretend that they are not "colonisers", coming down to the third-world with their bulging pockets to shoot the destitutes. The best way of going about, then, is to shoot the backside, making explicit the ruthlessness and ad hoc-ism of the entire process.

## Set

I managed to get 38 women enlisted. There was no attempt to pre-select the widows, according to look or status. They were chosen on a first come, first serve basis and I meticulously took down their names, age, the duration of their stay in Vrindavan, and other details that would surely be lost in translation. When I asked them about their sons, one woman reacted acerbically, "Well don't we all live in the same society, and we know what sons do to their mothers, so don't ask" – and that shut me up, thwarting any attempt at



bonding. It was business and I was a pimp in action.

The salon photographer wanted a house-front against which to press her subjects. We finally chose a house whose nameplate turned out to be a deterrent, since an upper-caste, 'respectable' household, we reasoned, may not want widows to infiltrate its sacred space. But since the light washing its front steps at eleven o'clock was so perfect, I thought I should test the stereotype of how an upper-caste male mind works. In addition, I also had to negotiate the amount they expected for renting out their veranda for a couple of hours. It seemed absurd to test people for hospitality and self-respect, but middle-class economism can rationalise almost anything. And under the benediction of global capital, one almost feels a compulsion that the money ought to reach all those people with which it had come in contact. Nevertheless, when I asked how much, I was glad to hear the doctor – the son of the family to whom we had been directed – announce haughtily that they were not materialists like that, and that any amount that we liked could be offered at the altar of the household deity.

Our rickshaw man, co-beneficiary in the project, drove the nails into the wall; the boys of the house got the ladder and helped him with it. The women aided with the white bedsheets that were to be used as curtains. They then graciously made their exit from the room, as the photographer wanted her space and the illusion of intimacy with her white Madonnas. What she did not want was the *vaishnav* marks on their foreheads to be visible. The women were to go in one by one, drape the pure white saris that we had purchased, and then sit down on a little stool kept behind the curtain. It was like a sanctum sanctorum, and they were indeed goddesses. The photographer was to spend at least five minutes or more so that it would not seem impersonal. But before they went in, they would be photographed by the art critic, and I was asked to explain that this was for office work. It wasn't as if we lied. After all, who could tell the difference between work and art, art and work? So outside the sanctum, they were lined up – facing a drain, no frills, just their soiled, everyday clothes, bags slung over their shoulders, faded shawls, some stooping, some with crutches, others erect despite the 70-odd years.

## Setter

Even as the stage was being set up, the women started streaming in. I asked them to sit quietly, already the *thikadar* in charge. When I started ticking them off in my notebook, I realised that half of the women present

were new, saying *yes ma'am* to the names I had already put down in my book. The ones who were confirmed suggested that I verify the place and age details and smoke out the impostors. We had upped the number of women to be photographed to 61, so I jotted down some more names; already, however, my muscles were tensing with the spectre of those who would be turned away. I had to personally escort the women, since a few gatecrashers were brought to my notice by my colleagues, the rickshaw men who had appointed themselves event managers and crowd regulators. The queue had turned serpentine and was threatening to block the road. Of course, every passer-by stopped to ask if they couldn't enlist their name too. Like in Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, the herd mentality just had to happen, one would have been curious if it did not: mendicants, married women, people with disabilities, busybodies, children – the storm of the miserables was only gathering.

**Under the benediction of global capital, one almost feels a compulsion that the money ought to reach all those people with which it had come in contact.**

On the other side of the road, in the widow market, I had been transformed into doctor, lifesaver, second assistant to the district magistrate, into a *yamraj*-like gatekeeper figure, one who could let them pass inside the walls of paradise. I had just come to know that, technically, paradise is a garden with a fence. Some of the women were showing me their tongues, others their broken limbs, others their leprous, dissolving skin. Most were trying to tell me that there did not live a widow sadder than them. The whole ditty of more-sorrowful-than-thou was beginning to catch fire like in a really dry forest. I tried to engage them, saying, "Look, there has been no attempt at discrimination. We haven't tried to impose any criteria, either of destitution, of poverty, of ill health or age." But the low-level fighting continued. Accusations were hurled – *you have a roof, you get two square meals* – and I was told to watch out as married women with *sindur* on their heads were slipping in.

All this while, I was surrounded by a circle of about 50 women, and the ten closest to me were poking me in my chest, hands, hair – never menacingly, just as an appeal. When the cacophony of pleadings and plaintiveness became unbearable, I began to lose it, saying, "I am sorry but I can't accommodate you. It is best for you to go home." I could not help it – the tone, the language, the ghost of the ruling class was lurking round the corner and it had me. Strangely, it brought them comfort and buttressed the wailings, because at least they were used to that language. A number of them, for instance, had asked me if this was the pension plan finally coming through, and despite denials, we had been imbued with the divinity of government reps. Some of them tried to dissuade the

others from climbing onto me, saying, "Give the poor girl some space, do not harass her, back off you two". One even confided *Bangalira bodo chotolok* ("The Bengalis are such lowlives"). When onlookers tried to rescue me, I resented it, because I needed the women as much as they needed me. The men came, officiously suggesting that I should write the names down and ask them to come in the evening, as if they did not understand Hindi. When I responded by shouting that I was not about to give them *dhoka* and let them down, the women rallied behind me, at last an honest person.

The wave of pleadings increased ten-fold. Even the woman who had been rationalising the entire process like a policymaker, saying things like, "Why don't you understand, they have a 'budget' after all, they can't please everyone", and then arguing with me about how she could not buy the logic of "overvaluation" – "Why should they give us money?" She refused to understand it and she convinced me. But even she joined in with the raucous crowd, pleading, *ma aamar naam ta ekbaar likhe ne ma* ("mother, write down my name just once"). I phased out then, dreaming about things beyond this pale, and there I was surrounded by 60 ragged women living on below-subsistence wages – not feeling threatened, but dreaming as they pleaded with me to register them. Half of them who were still trooping in had not realised what this was all about; they did not even know about the money, they just wanted their names written down. I was afraid that if I actually wrote down their names, there would be shattered glass, shards of broken hearts. I was party to this thing. We had generated this wailing, these hands beseeching, the supplication and the agony of rejection, and this thing was going to get irrevocably transformed and hung in the galleries of the First World in the Biennales. So I stuck to my dreaming.

From across the road I saw the women emerge out of the sanctum, their faces glowing, each clutching one of the 61 envelopes into which we had inserted 200 rupees each, down from the original 300. The money had been in currency notes of thousands and five hundreds. We had ridden to the derelict petrol pump on the Mathura highway to get it broken down. The friendly women with me had refused to trust the men at the petrol pump, handing them the notes only after having carefully counted what they offered. The stone had glinted then. Why had I bought into the photographer's justification that economic compensation was a better gesture?

Fortunately for the women who had the privilege of being photographed, it had paid off, and not

simply in terms of money. The photographer was all aglow, too. She told us there had been a lot of hugging, stroking, touching, crying and sharing, of feeling counted. Outside, the identikit photographer and I felt completely frazzled. *Oh, yeah*, we both wanted to say, but did not because we knew that she meant well.

## Unsettling

There were only five women who had gotten past the hawk eyes of the self-appointed managers. They were hauled up before me for judgement. I felt an almost irresistible urge to sign them in – you had to "give flowers to the rebels who failed", goes the old poem commemorated by the Italian-American anarchist Bartolomeo Vanzetti: the saboteurs had to be rewarded. Why had there not been a riot, as the rickshaw guys had predicted? Why had they not used a threatening note even once? Why had their rage not boiled up? Why had they been so deferential? Why hadn't even a single one of them spat at me, or roughly pushed me down? For three hours they had stood in the sun, hoping to be included.

When the set was dismantled, the camera lens covered and the procession about to leave, the women cornered me. *Just write my name down write my name down, my name, write it, lekh na ma, ma lekh na, lekh na ...* like a siren. I felt if I did not write the names, I would die. I was saying, "If it gives you peace then I will", so I kept madly jotting their names down, going through with the entire ritual of name, place, animal, thing, like the game we used to play in our childhood, a compensation secondary

to the economic. The little sons of the doctor were dragging me physically inside as more widows kept streaming in, pulling at my hand, shouting their names into my face as if their lives depended on it. I realised I could not write all the names down, just like the white colonisers could not pay all of them. But at least they had resolved to return with 30,000 dollars, to be able to satisfy everyone. Could I, brown patchwork skin, make a similar resolution to come back and write down all of their names? The census puts the figure at 5000. That was doable. But there would always be those who were left behind, those always trooping in when it was pack-up time, and the rejected, the maimed, the impostors – they could not be compensated, despite all the good intentions in the world.

Back in Delhi, when I was being paid my dues, I was told I had been given an extra tip, and the money was not in an envelope since I was not a widow. Only later I realised that the tip was my surplus from the five widows I had not taken down, unsure of whom not to select.

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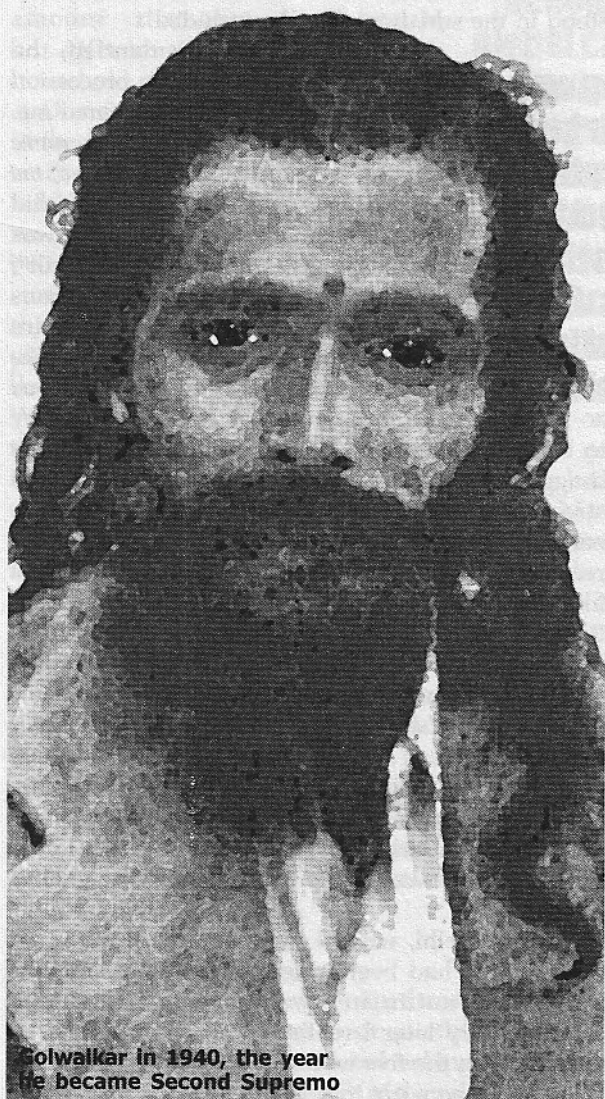
# Trapped in the Golwalkarian past

**As RSS followers in India celebrate M S Golwalkar's birth centenary this year, it is not clear whether they are celebrating the Second Supremo himself or a cleaned up version.**

by | **Subhash Gatade**

**'S**ocial change' is an ongoing, continuous process, uniquely affected by both progressive and regressive forces. The cumulative impact of these forces determines both the direction and intensity of subsequent changes. Such an understanding certainly colours any objective assessment of Independent India. After the most prominent names have found mention – ranging from the Nehrus and Patels, to the Ambedkars or Jayprakash Narayan – is it possible to avoid that of Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, the second *Sarsanghchalak* (Supremo) of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)?

Founded in 1925 by a Telugu Brahmin, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, over the next three-quarters of a century the RSS (translated as 'national volunteer corps') succeeded in expanding its influence into much of India's civil society and state organs. Its leadership, however, continues to call it a 'cultural' organisation. The central figure who helped to achieve this success was undeniably Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar – 'Golwalkar Guruji' to his followers, for his brief stint in the early 1930s as a zoology teacher at Benares Hindu University. Golwalkar led the fledgling RSS for 33 years, from 1940 until 1973, providing not only the theoretical foundation for the *Hindu rashtra* project, but expanding its influence through a plethora of affiliated organisations. These '*anushangik*' partners today range from the parliamentary Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to extra-parliamentary units such as the Bajrang Dal, which has a record of affiliation with many unsavoury incidents. A BJP-led coalition government did hold power at the Centre for an uninterrupted six years, a unique feat for any non-Congress government. But overall, the political



Golwalkar in 1940, the year he became Second Supremo

RSS

record of the wings of the RSS *parivar* as it gained national prominence was geared towards destruction of the social fabric. These encompass the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 and the subsequent communal conflagration, and a decade later the genocide of minorities in Gujarat in 2002.

Golwalkar was born on 19 February 1906, and 2006 is being celebrated across India to mark his centenary. The commemoration started near his birth town on 24 February, with a large gathering in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The festivities are scheduled to culminate in February 2007 with a large programme in Delhi. Organisers say that *samajik samrasta*, or 'social harmony', is the commemorative year's central theme, and 'Hindu rallies' are to be organised at the block level throughout the country. Says a RSS document, "Meetings of caste and religious leaders will also be held with the objective of promoting social harmony. Seminars, symposia, lectures, etcetera, will also be organised to propagate the ideas and vision of Shri Guruji."

The anniversary activities have opened up uncomfortable questions for Golwalkar's many detractors, in particular in comprehending the undeniable 'success' of his Hindutva project. How was it that such a worldview, which reached back to medieval supremacist Brahminism and glorified the Fascist experiments in Western Europe, was able to achieve such an advance in the latter decades of the 20th century?

### Hindu rashtra

According to his biographers, young Madhav was keen to follow a spiritual journey and initially studied under Swami Akhandanand at the Ramakrishna Mission in West Bengal. The Swami's sudden death in 1937, however, prompted Golwalkar to return home and rejoin his work as a *swayamsevak* (volunteer) with the RSS, an organisation preaching 'Hindu resurgence' founded by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. Although a latecomer to the organisation, Golwalkar quickly earned Hedgewar's confidence due to his quick mind, and the following year was appointed the group's *sarkaryavah* (general secretary). That same year, his long essay entitled "We or Our Nationhood Defined" was published in book form, a work that demonstrated Golwalkar's theoretical acumen.

Golwalkar emerged as one of a triumvirate of Hindu nationalists – together with Indian nationalists Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Keshav Baliram Hedgewar – which actively sought a Hindu rashtra based on 'Hindutva', a term coined by Savarkar in or around 1923. When Hedgewar breathed his last in 1940, he left a note asking his

followers to make Golwalkar the next Supremo, a post that he held until his passing in 1973.

The period when Golwalkar was anointed Supremo was marked by three worldwide currents: the ascendance of the forces of Nazism and Fascism; the surge in anti-colonial struggle; and the emergence of militant socialist movements in several countries, with help and support from Soviet Russia. Upon arrival in India, the anti-colonial movement and the rising communist movement mediated their paths through the existing socio-cultural movements that were challenging caste and gender hierarchy. This was also the first time in Southasia that new bonds of solidarity – cutting across caste, community and regional loyalties – were being forged in opposition to the British colonialists. Meanwhile, Golwalkar's project of Hindu unity took inspiration from the social engineering experiments undertaken by Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. In seeking refuge in the discredited Hitlerian scheme, he failed miserably in understanding the march of history. In the controversial *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, he wrote: "To keep up the purity of Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here.

Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by."

On the domestic front, this 'nation-building' project not only hinged on opposing Islam and Christianity, but also countering the parallel challenge posed by anti-Brahminical struggles. It was also a time when the cultural revolts led by activists like Babasaheb Ambedkar and Periyar Ramaswami

Naicker had already made significant headway. Meanwhile, Golwalkar had no qualms in keeping himself and the RSS aloof from the anti-colonial movement, and he opposed the demands for equality of Dalit and tribal communities. He derided the anti-imperialist struggle as one for 'territorial nationalism', as opposed to his fight for 'cultural nationalism'. It would be more than 30 years before a RSS leader, Nanaji Deshmukh, would raise the crucial question: Why did the RSS not take part in the liberation struggle?

With Partition and the bloody riots that followed, Golwalkar and the RSS were suddenly catapulted to the centre stage of Indian polity. Even while working to provide assistance to the Hindu refugees from Pakistan, the RSS took advantage of the communalised environment to strengthen its ranks. The RSS was blamed for the assassination of

**How was it that such a worldview was able to achieve such an advance in the latter decades of the 20th century?**

Mohandas Gandhi in 1948. Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel, in a letter to his Hindu Mahasabha colleague Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, wrote:

Our reports do confirm that, as a result of the activities of these two bodies particularly the former [the RSS], an atmosphere was created in the country in which such a ghastly tragedy [Gandhi's assassination] became possible ... The activities of the RSS constituted a clear threat to the existence of the government and the state. Our reports show that those activities, despite the ban, have not died down. Indeed, as time has marched on, the RSS circles are becoming more defiant and are indulging in their subversive activities in an increasing measure.

As the post-Partition riots subsided, and with the new approaches being followed by India's new leaders, Golwalkar and the RSS found themselves out on a limb. The Hindutva forces were stigmatised for their ignoble alleged participation in Gandhi's death, as well as for staying out of the anti-colonial struggle. As his organisation faced marginalisation, Golwalkar sought to devise new ways and means to sustain the project of building a Hindu rashtra.

Throughout those attempts at reviving the fortunes of the RSS, Golwalkar courted controversy. He created one final uproar towards the end of his life, in an interview to a Marathi daily, *Navakal*, when he extolled the virtues of *Chaturvarnya* (the division of the Hindus into four *Varnas*) and glorified *Manusmriti*, the ancient edicts that sanctify a structured hierarchy based on caste and gender. Similar views had gotten him into trouble decades earlier, as well. While leaders of the newly independent India were struggling to create a constitution premised on the inviolability of individual rights, Golwalkar was advocating *Manusmriti* as the country's sole constitution. The RSS mouthpiece, *The Organiser*, complained in November 1949: "... in our constitution there is no mention of the unique constitutional developments in ancient Bharat. Manu's laws were written long before Lycurgus of Sparta or Solon of Persia. To this day laws as enunciated in the Manusmriti excite the admiration of the world and elicit spontaneous obedience and conformity. But to our constitutional



Official Indian stamp released in 1997

**Even while he is being lionised for his 'contributions', his supporters are surreptitiously sanitising the man's image, presenting him with a more publicly acceptable face.**

surreptitiously sanitising the man's image, presenting him with a more humane, publicly acceptable face. Such attempts are particularly prominent in a new publication, as noted in a recent media account:

In a major ideological shift, RSS has for the first time officially disowned M S Golwalkar's book *We or Our Nationhood Defined* published in 1939 as "neither representing the views of the grown Guruji nor of the RSS ... The booklet *Shri Guruji and Indian Muslims*, authored by Delhi University lecturer Rakesh Sinha and published by RSS' Suruchi Prakashan ... argues that in his lifetime Golwalkar had revealed that the book carried not his own views but was an abridged version of G D Savarkar's *Rashtra Mimansa*."

Other elements of this sanitising project include: attempts by RSS members to show that Golwalkar was not even the author but merely the translator of the controversial book; the concocted 'proofs' that have been made public to show that the Hindutva lobby did indeed participate in the Independence movement; and the dedication of the year-long celebrations in Golwalkar's honour to the cause of 'social harmony'. Despite such attempts at revisionism, however, it is important to remember that Golwalkar's current followers do not have any second thoughts about his exclusivist vision – they are only concerned about how to present that vision less problematically. Despite this year's attempts to update the Second Supremo for a modern audience, the RSS appears to remain trapped in the past. ▲

pundits that means nothing."

When in the 1940s, under the stewardship of Jawaharlal Nehru and Dalit leader B R Ambedkar, attempts were made to give limited rights to Hindu women in property and inheritance, Golwalkar and his associates launched a movement opposing the historic Hindu Code Bill. Their contention was simple: such a step would be inimical to Hindu traditions and culture.

### Revisionist project

Despite the feverish preparations to celebrate the anniversary of their departed mentor, it is clear that some of Golwalkar's followers are uncomfortable with his legacy. Even while he is being lionised for his 'contributions', they are



# Jinnah's wrong war

The 'partitioned Independence' of the Subcontinent was, ultimately, the result of Mohammed Ali Jinnah mistaking the forest for the trees, even as he sought to protect the interest of his Muslim flock. The legacy of Partition can only be undone by a confederation, and it is time to think the unthinkable.

by | Malvika Maheshwari



**W**hy did the Partition of India take place? Was it the inevitable result of a Subcontinent divided by religion and facing a power vacuum at the end of the Raj? Or was it a chance occurrence, arising from a unique set of historical circumstances? Many believe that, in fact, nobody was particularly keen on Partition – yet it happened anyway. A confluence of complex socio-economic realities and political compulsions in the wake of an intense and troubled colonial encounter provided a setting for the simultaneous climax of Partition and Independence amidst the dying embers of the British Raj.

The dissolution of British imperial authority in 1947 was as remarkable an event of modern times as was the camel-in-the-tent entry of the empire into the Subcontinent in the first place. The epic that was Partition continues to be perhaps the most tragic and

controversial event of our times. Some commentators plead for an erasure of the memory of Partition, rather than to remind each generation of this crucial but painful outcome of the struggle for freedom. Literary evidence is adduced to illustrate the public's disillusionment with the leadership for having accepted the dismemberment of the country, and several related theses remain strong in popular literature and opinion. First, that Partition was demanded by the Muslim League and its leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and that the Indian National Congress resisted it until nearly the end. Second, that the constituent assembly election of 1946 proved that the Muslim masses endorsed the Pakistan proposal by voting for the Muslim League. Third, that the bitter experience of the Calcutta killings of August 1946, in the wake of Jinnah's call for Direct Action, changed the nature of the entire political movement.

It is understandable that the sensibilities of literary celebrities – concerned more with the human dimension of Partition than with the dilemma of those involved in the related negotiations – would inevitably differ from historical writings. Similarly, the emotive sensibilities of literary creations are bound to be more profoundly moving than are their prosaic historical counterparts. But if Jinnah was opposed to majority rule, and the myth of nationalism was exploded by the Pakistan resolution, then what were the alternative options that were available but not accepted?

The legacy of Partition still haunts the collective consciousness of the Subcontinent. It has bedevilled good-neighbourly relations between the two sovereign states of India and Pakistan in the endless questioning: Who, exactly, was responsible for this sordid political drama? The British, the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League – all have been blamed. Both Jinnah and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi have also shared the limelight for their political designs and attitudes, and, according to many, must share the responsibility for Partition. But the complex process of understanding why Jinnah chose to snap his bonds of nationalism and began to champion the cause of what he called 'Muslim India' raise several crucial questions. When did this journey from nationalism to communalism begin? When did Jinnah wear the mantle of aggressive communalism, and why? Why this metamorphosis from the liberal Jinnah to the 'anti-Hindu' Jinnah? What kind of transformation took place in the Indian political scenario to bring the relations between Hindus and Muslims to a point of no return?

### **The separatist**

It was partly due to the influence of English liberalism and partly the political beliefs of stalwarts like Indian political leaders Dadabhai Naoroji and S N Bannerjee that drew Jinnah to politics. Although he had been attending the Indian National Congress (INC) meetings for some years, it was only in 1906 that Jinnah took a prominent part in deliberations in its annual session. He was subsequently elected to the British Indian government's Imperial Legislative Council from the Bombay Muslim Constituency in 1909. His interest in Muslim mass welfare became apparent from the qualified support he gave to then-INC leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale's Elementary Education Bill in 1912. The following year, he joined the All-India Muslim League, which that year had changed its creed to declare as its objective, "the attainment of self-government suitable to India". Jinnah was elected president of the League in 1916.

Dual membership in the Congress and League enabled Jinnah to work more effectively for Hindu-Muslim unity. He has been acknowledged as the real architect of the 1916 Hindu-Muslim constitutional agreement known as the Lucknow Pact, where he persuaded the Congress to accept the Muslim right to separate electorate. This dual membership ended in 1920, however, when Congress adopted a new article that decided to resort to non-violence and non-cooperation towards the attainment of self-rule. Jinnah, after all, was convinced that Gandhian methodology in the end would do greater harm than good to India, particular for its Muslims – as in fact it did. Indeed, Gandhi and Jinnah symbolised each other's antithesis in both belief and way of life.

Neither Jinnah nor the League counted for very much in Muslim politics in the first half of the 1920s. The Khilafat and non-cooperation movements had captured the imagination of the masses. Disillusioned by the narrow communal approach of Hindu

leadership to the constitutional question, Jinnah assessed that it was time to part ways. And so it proved to be. His "disillusionment and disappointment" at the 1928 Calcutta Convention led him to the conviction that Muslims had no chance of fair and equitable treatment in a united India. A few months later, Jinnah formulated his Fourteen Points, in which he lucidly summed up the Muslim demands. This represented neither despair nor a challenge;

nevertheless, it is the first inkling we have of Jinnah's ultimate decision that if Hindus and Muslims could not be united, he would at least unite the Muslims – if necessary, against the Hindus. The historic Government of India Act 1935, which promised an Indian federation, was on its way to the statute book at the time, and it had conceded to some material Muslim demands. The Act opened opportunities for Muslims, but only if the communities could stand united on a common platform.

Although the demand for the creation of 'Pakistan' did not emerge at the national level until March 1940, the Sind Provincial Muslim League conference in October 1938 did adopt a significant resolution. That decision stated: "This conference considers it absolutely essential in the interests of an abiding peace of the vast Indian Subcontinent and in the interest of unhampered cultural development, to economic and social betterment, and political self-determination of the two-nations as Hindus and Muslims to recommend to the All India Muslim League ... to devise a scheme of constitution under which Muslims may attain full independence."

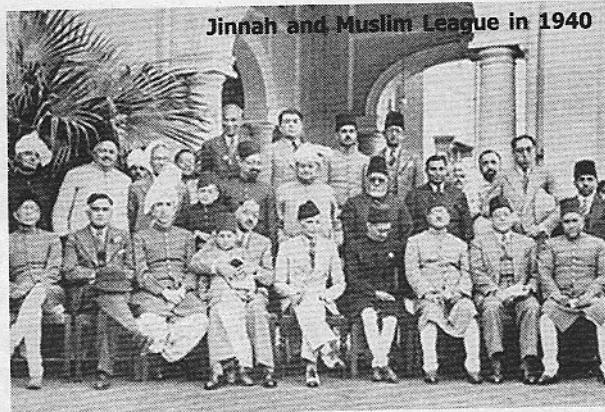
Jinnah was unmistakably moving towards separatism at this time, which he believed to be the only solution to the Muslims' problems. Henceforth,

**Jinnah did not regard Muslims as a 'minority', but as a 'nation' entitled to a separate homeland.**

he would work only towards this goal. The adoption of the Lahore Resolution at the League's annual session in March 1940 was the starting point of the Pakistan Movement. Did the Muslims truly want separation? If they did not, the solution was simple: Jinnah could have gone to the Congress leaders and told them that all that Muslims asked for was separate electorates, special weightage and similar safeguards. He was certain that Congress would grant him any special concession he demanded – even though there was the danger that the Congress leaders would go back on such promises in the future, after they had secured control over the governmental and parliamentary machinery. In that case, however, Muslims would have had to accept the position of a 'minority' and expect to be treated as such. Jinnah did not regard Muslims as a 'minority', but as a 'nation' entitled to a separate homeland, and he said that no new constitution scheme could be evolved or implemented without the consent and approval of the Indian Muslim League. In short, the exquisite structure of Hindu-Muslim unity, of which Jinnah had been the chief architect at the Lucknow Pact of 1916, was demolished by his own hand in 1939 and 1940.

Historian Ayesha Jalal insists that Jinnah's nationalist character remained unchanged, although he often altered his garb to deceive his opponents. Those opponents were not merely the British and the Congress, but also his 'followers' in the Muslim League. What did Jinnah want? Jalal says he wanted an India united by a strong centre. But he also wanted an effective Muslim voice at that centre, and for this he felt it necessary that there be one organisation that would speak for all Muslims – arguing that since they would be a minority voice, they should at least be a united minority voice. Local Muslims in each province could thus come up with their own arrangements, but Jinnah urged that they speak to the centre through one common front. Naturally, this common front would be the Muslim League, under his leadership.

Jinnah had to find a way to unite the Muslim-majority provinces behind a plan that would also protect the Muslims in areas where they were a minority. To this end, he took up the 'two nation' idea. The Lahore Resolution of 1940, later popularly known as the 'Pakistan resolution', made no mention of partition or 'Pakistan'. Instead, it asked that the Muslim-majority provinces be grouped into "Independent States in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign". The boundaries of the independent states were to be those of the existing provinces. Nothing was



Moving Here Archive

said about the nature or role of the centre. At first glance this may appear to be a setback for Jinnah's assumed aim of a strong centre, but the plan can also be seen as a victory of sorts. As he was not then in a position to impose onto the provincial leaders his own concept of a strong centre, the best he could do at the time was to keep them from creating a weak federal structure of their liking. And this he did.

### Struggle for supremacy

The Partition of India and Pakistan can now be analysed from a distance provided by time. What were the actual consequences and effects of the ideas, theories and implementation of the Partition proposal? What can be said of the Two Nation theory? It is open to discussion now (as it was questioned then) whether Hindus and Muslims are separate entities with different cultures, social practices and mores. It can be argued that people of different faiths living in the same region have more in common with each other than with their co-religionists in other regions. But if we concede to the idea that Hindus and Muslims are two separate 'nations', can this be a basis for choosing a mode of government? The answer is a definite no: it is impossible to have two parallel governments in one state. The solution is to have a government that is blind to this separateness. To have reserved seats or separate electorates for Muslims, or a partial separation coupled with a

'mutual hostages' theory is not a cure. All of these approaches only set the stage for battle. As experienced earlier, the only complete solution along such lines would involve a mass transfer of population – and we have already seen the carnage resulting from the relatively limited transfers of 1947.

What, then, of the fears of Hindu domination at the centre? With the rise of the BJP in India, at least this worry may appear to have had some basis. Yet this has also been something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. While the Hindutva movement does feed off

**It can be argued that people of different faiths living in the same region have more in common with each other than with their co-religionists in other regions.**

pre-existing prejudices and works hard to continue spreading them, the 'betrayal' of Partition has been a potent weapon in its armoury. The Muslim League itself suffered early and severe setbacks because Muslims did not vote as a bloc. It should have been realised that the case would be similar with Hindus. Further, democratic rule is not merely a matter of who receives the most votes. Small parties often hold the balance of power between larger rivals, as has been the case with recent coalition governments in both India and Pakistan. While Jinnah was perhaps kept from seeing this due to the overwhelming success of the Congress among the non-Muslim voters and the lack of any serious rival to its power, he must at the same time have been aware of the factionalism within the Congress itself.

Whether Hindu-Muslim conflicts should be seen as part of a struggle for supremacy between two 'nations' is another matter. Because of its implicit assumptions about different communities with conflicting, irreconcilable aims, the question of how to protect 'Muslim interests' must itself be seen as an attempt at creating and escalating such conflicts. If Jinnah did not achieve the Hindu-Muslim unity he wanted, it was not merely because he fought forces that were stronger than himself. It was also not because he made a crucial error or two in tactics or strategy. Instead, in the opinion of this writer, he simply fought the wrong war. By seeking to protect 'Muslim interests' at the centre through some special arrangement, he had already conceded that these interests were essentially different from those of non-Muslims.

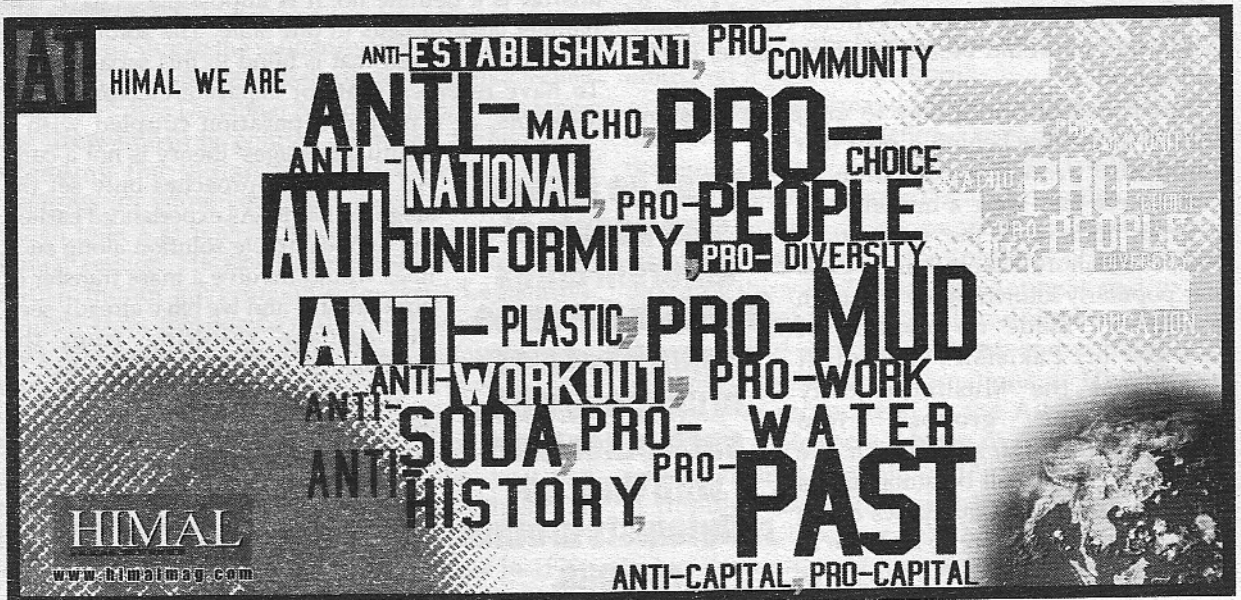
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**The preceding discussion assumes that Jinnah did indeed have one unswerving, coherent underlying plan. There is a possibility that he did not.**

Jinnah did indeed have one unswerving, coherent underlying plan. There is a possibility that he did not. It is certainly true that some of his followers were chasing the most fleeting and irrational of hopes. Perhaps their leader was no different. Or perhaps this man, acknowledged by his contemporaries to be a master lawyer, became so caught up in the game of negotiation and making sure that the 'opponent' did not win that he failed to recognise what it was that he himself was fighting for.

How cruelly ironic that Independence, claimed to have been achieved through Gandhian non-violent and peaceful means, in fact resulted in one the most barbaric of communal holocausts of the 20th century, accompanied by one of the largest migrations the world has seen. The artificiality of the Partition based on religion was glaringly proven a quarter-century later with the creation of Bangladesh. 'Partitioned independence' proved disastrous, and not only for the contemporary population. Trouble lingers as a potent legacy of these decisions: three wars and constant tension between India and Pakistan, the sway of communalism and fundamentalism, the menace of terrorism, the dangerous rise of communal fascism – all are rooted in one ill-fated Partition.

Undoing that process remains an important dream and shared need of Southasia. Such a reconciliation cannot come about through the *Akhand Bharat* of Hindutva dreams, however, based on the subjugation of 'minorities' by 'majorities'. Rather, it must be through some form of confederation of India-Pakistan-Bangladesh, on the basis of independence and equality, as well as shared culture and heritage. ▲



# Importance of the critical and intellectual approach

## Interview: Tariq Ramadan

Named as a "spiritual leader" in Time magazine's 'Next Wave' of 'global innovators', **Tariq Ramadan** is currently a Visiting Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford. Previously, he taught Islamic Studies and Philosophy at Freiburg University in Switzerland. A prominent critic of the 'war on terror' policy, Ramadan is one of the most influential Muslim voices in western society – a profile that has regularly gotten him into trouble. Political commentators accuse him of being anti-Semitic and of varying his message according to his audience. In 2004, he was forced to resign as professor of Religion, Conflict and Peace-building at the University of Notre Dame, when the US government suddenly revoked his visa. Since then, Ramadan has been banned from traveling to the US under a Patriot Act provision that bars entry to those who endorse or support terrorism. Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Egypt have acted similarly, for his proposals to suspend Sharia Law, corporal punishment, beheadings and stonings in the



Islamic world. On the suspicion of his ties with terrorist groups, he was banned from entering France between 1995 and 1996.

Ramadan's grandfather was Hasan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic-revival movement that began in Egypt and opposed the dominance of secular and Western ideas. When the organisation was outlawed in Egypt in 1954, his parents and their six children fled to Switzerland. As he grew up, he became determined to figure out how simultaneously to be both a Muslim and a Westerner. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, scholars and others have increasingly discussed what is referred to as a 'clash of civilisations'. On the contrary, Ramadan emphasises the possibilities of reconciling Islamic and Western values.

Tariq Ramadan spoke to **Subindra Bogati** in London on the issues of Muslim integration, the recent controversy over cartoons depicting Islamic subjects, and Southasian migrants in the UK.

**You have been accused of preaching violence covertly.**  
I am helping young Muslims to remain Muslims. The fact is that I am a Muslim and I am proud to be a Muslim, which is not acceptable to some people. For them, to remain Muslim is too much. They want Muslims without Islam. But I am saying, No, we can be both Muslims and at the same time Europeans, Americans, Canadians or whatever. For them, this is a problem. There is nothing about radicalisation. It is just a question of identity and self-consciousness, and some people don't want Muslims to feel like that.

**For them, to remain Muslim is too much. They want Muslims without Islam.**

**What do you say to those who use religion to justify their terror?**

I am not only saying it is not Islamic, I am saying it is *against* Islam. So they are acting against my belief and my principle.

**How do we distinguish between a 'good' Muslim and a 'bad' Muslim?**

This is a mystic way of looking at Muslims. You say 'good' Muslims are like us and 'bad' Muslims are not like us or the others: the 'motherhood' Muslims or radical Muslims. I think this

is misleading. The Islamic universe is as complex as the Christian, Buddhist or Hindu universe, where you have shrines, readings, interpretations, histories and memories. We also have Sufis, the mystical groups, the literalists, the traditionalists, the reformists, rationalists, and we have political readings. From here, it is quite difficult and impossible to say 'good' or 'bad'. I am always saying this to my fellow citizens in Europe: The moment you respect me is when you accept that my universal references are as complex as your own.

**It is common to quote Islamic historian Bernard Lewis's thesis that Muslim anger is a product of their failure to keep up with the West and modernity.**

It is not completely wrong that the Muslim world in particular is facing economic, scientific and technological crises today, when compared to the West. But I do not think it is because of Islam. There are parameters we need to keep in mind. Power struggles, colonisation, economic colonisation – all of these are the dimensions we have to take into account while assessing this situation. Throughout history, Islam was not the hindrance to development. It became so when you are not self-confident and you perceive

that you are dominated by the 'other', the 'West'. You use Islam as the protection instead of using your mind, your critical approach and your creativity. Yes, what we call the 'Muslim world', we are going through crisis. We really need to use our resources to reverse our way of thinking. This is what we call *ijtihad*, making a decision by independent interpretation. This is what I am trying to do.

**Has a shadow been cast over the prospects of Muslim integration in Europe after the London and Madrid bombings, the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, and riots in France?**

I think the problem is not about integration. The problem is the gap between the ideals of the society and its current policies. For example, when you listen to the official British discourse, they talk about *multiculturalism, living together, pluralistic society, respecting each other, equal opportunities, equal citizenship* – this sounds fine, but the reality is otherwise. 'Equal opportunity' is not true; 'equal access to job opportunities' is not true; 'no racism' is not true. There is a big gap between what you want and what your ideals are, and what kind of things you accept on a daily basis. It is not the integration process, but you are not consistent with your principles. This is why the systems and models are failing. It doesn't matter whether it is a French or British model – it is the interest that matters. Tell me your ideals and show me your practices.

**The involvement of the UK-born and -bred Pakistanis in the London bombings shows that Southasians have not yet been able to integrate completely here. What could be the reasons for this?**

Their cultural and religious integration is done. But because of the flawed social and urban policies, social problems remain. My understanding from the beginning was to say 'don't blame the others'. It is as if these kids are the sons of two parents: one parent is the Muslim society, and one is the British society. When one of your kids is going astray, you don't blame only one parent – both of them are equally responsible. We have to say to the Muslim community: What kind of education are you providing? What are you doing on the ground to let your kids understand that British culture is their culture? You are in a process of appeasing or helping them to make them feel they are at home. Here we must be critical towards the Islamic education we provide in our society. It is sometimes oriented towards isolation or self-segregation.

Meanwhile, what is British society saying about Muslims? A real educational agenda is needed – you have to let them feel they are at home. When you go to the history curriculum, the only thing that it says is about 'us', white British people. You are forgetting about the memories of these people coming from Southasia. You don't give value to their pasts, yet you are telling them you are part of their society, which is not true. To be a part of our

**We must be critical towards the Islamic education we provide in our society. It is sometimes oriented towards isolation or self-segregation.**

society means that officially we consider you as our part of society and officially we teach our kids that you are here. So our societies have changed. You have schools in this country where 98 percent of kids are coming from the same background, same religion, same suburbs, and still you are saying that this is a multicultural society. Once again, the British government has a great deal of responsibility. The two parents should come together and work together in order to change the situation.

**What is hindering social integration between British and migrant communities?**

I think there is a great deal of fear, and you have political forces using this fear in order to set an agenda – I call this as an 'ideology of fear'. To build something from this situation, they use an 'us-versus-them' theory – the 'clash of civilisations', fears, that we are all victims. So we perceive ourselves as the victims of the expansionist's agenda. On the other side, Muslims feel that they are the targets of a new Islamophobia. So we are in a world of victims, unable to live together. We are driven by emotions, which is really frightening. The riots in the French suburbs show that it has nothing to do with culture or religion.

**How have you viewed the Danish cartoons and Muslim anger?**

You have governments and people instrumentalising it on the Islamic side. On the other side, you have conservatives using this event saying, 'We told you Muslims are not for freedom of speech.' So on both sides freedom of speech is at risk, and Islam is insulted. We respect the freedom of speech, but what you are asking is not about freedom of speech. We are not asking to remove the right to speech, but we are asking you to be reasonable in the way you use the right to speech. I think this is natural and normal. On the other side, the Muslims should take a critical and intellectual approach, rather than just reacting emotionally.

**In India, there are often riots between Muslims and Hindu. How can this be minimised?**

It will be a difficult proposition, as there are radicals on both sides. For some Hindus, the only way of being who they are is to be against the Muslims. On the other side, radical Muslims are thinking exactly the same way. In between, there is a great majority of Indians willing to live together. They seem to be silent and passive because of the fact that the vocal people are more extremist. But the passivity is not neutrality. You have to understand that you have to take a stand, which is to actively come together. Hindus and Muslims at local levels should come together and be able to say: "Look, we have so much in common. We have common values, common agendas. What we want is for our kids to live together." I have met so many people in India who are able to do that, but they remain silent. I really think that what we need today is local-level movement. We need a national movement of local initiatives.

**We need a national movement of local initiatives.**

# 'Progressive Islam' IN PAKISTAN

Today, Pakistan needs a liberalised Islamic theory, at a time when Sufi shrines have been reduced to places of pilgrimage.

by | **Yoginder Sikand**

Home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, Pakistan describes itself as an 'Islamic republic'. Yet both radical Islamist and traditionalist *ulama* groups alike bemoan the fact that Pakistan is hardly an Islamic state – at least insofar as they define the term, as one ruled in strict accordance with shariah law as developed by medieval-period Muslim jurists. For their part, liberal and secular groups, along with the country's minority communities, complain that Pakistan is hardly the model Muslim state that its ideological founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah is said to have envisaged: one in which different communities could live together harmoniously, where the state would have no truck with religion at all. As many Pakistanis themselves would admit, Pakistan has failed miserably to live up to the promises of its founders. Widespread poverty and illiteracy, rampant corruption, mounting inequalities, the formidable power of the feudal lobby, enormous regional imbalances, slavish subservience to American dictates, the feebleness of democratic institutions, the might of the military, the clout of the mullahs and Islamist groups – all these have combined to create a heavy anchor on Pakistan's development.

In this context, and given the fact that Pakistani nationalist discourse is so heavily imbued with an Islamic stamp, it is important to explore the possibilities of an alternate, progressive understanding of Islam in contemporary Pakistan. As an Indian citizen just returned from a month-long visit to the western neighbour, having met a wide cross-section of Pakistanis, this writer found people asking questions that they dared not ask in the past: Is Islam compatible with democracy and human rights? Is it possible to evolve an understanding of Islam that is not tied to the prescriptions of the medieval *ulema*? Can an oppositional Islam be evolved that critiques the 'military-mullah-market

nexus' and is vigorously anti-imperialist? How can Islam be interpreted as to accept the truth-claims of other religions and the rights of non-Muslims as equal citizens? Finally, and most boldly, some citizens are now asking whether the so-called 'two-nation theory', on which the official ideology of the Pakistani state is based, has relevance today.

Contrary to visions propagated by sections of the Indian media, the average Pakistani Muslim certainly is not a bearded, Kalashnikov-wielding, vehemently anti-Hindu or anti-Indian monster. What first strikes the Indian visitor to Pakistan is the similarity between North Indians and Pakistanis in looks, dress and behaviour. People in any village in Pakistani Punjab and Sindh could pass for the average North Indian over the border, whether Hindu or Muslim. Overt signs of conventional 'Muslim-ness' are rare in personal deportment – in contrast to India, for example, where Muslims, being in the minority, are naturally more protective and, therefore, demonstrative of their religious identity. For the average Pakistani Muslim, Islam is an integral part of his or her cultural identity, but it is not something that dominates every act or thought. This perhaps explains why religious parties have consistently won relatively few seats in Pakistani elections, with the political discourse instead dominated largely by economic, personal, caste, *biraderi* ('brotherhood') and regional issues.

Unlike what the international media would have the public believe, the vast majority of Pakistani Muslims are not ideologically programmed 'fundamentalists'. This understanding opens up the prospect of progressive visions or versions of Islam that could challenge the claims of radical right-wing Islamist groups, which indeed appear to enjoy little popular support. While this has not yet taken place in Pakistan's public domain on any large scale, such perspectives are routinely articulated in private conversations.



**Bulleh Shah**

## Cognitive elitism

Both Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan's most populous provinces, have had a long tradition of dissenting Sufi saints and poets. These figures could be defined as revolutionaries in their own rights, crusading against religious and political elites while simultaneously calling for a generous acceptance of adherents of other religions. Bulleh Shah, the love-intoxicated *majzub* ('unbalanced person') of the ancient Sindhi town of Kasur, boldly berated the Muslim mullahs, Hindu pandits and rulers of his times – even publicly announcing that he was neither a 'Muslim' nor a 'Hindu'. Baba Farid, whose tomb at Pak Pattan is a major pilgrimage centre, composed mystical verses that had such a wide appeal that some of them were incorporated into the Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. The Qadri Sufi Miyan Mir of Lahore was such a widely revered saint that Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, invited him to lay the foundation stone of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit, Sindh's most acclaimed Sufi poet, continues to be held in high regard by both Hindus and Muslims in the province for his message of universal love and for his denunciations of oppression.

Numerous such examples exist of Sufis who continue to be held in great reverence by millions of ordinary Pakistanis. Their teachings provide a rich resource for developing indigenously rooted Islamic theologies of liberation and inter-community dialogue. At the same time, such a movement could effectively challenge the shrill rhetoric of radical Islamist groups, who bandy about empty slogans calling for the 'Islamic revolution', but whose actual agenda, many Pakistanis insist, is to perpetuate the stranglehold of the military, the mullahs, and the feudal lords and their American patrons.

"One of the greatest errors of the Left in Pakistan," says friend Hasan, a Lahore-based activist who describes himself as a 'leftist Muslim', "is that we blindly followed Western Marxism. Many of us openly condemned religion, and this earned us widespread public disapproval. The Saudis, egged on by the Americans, pumped vast sums of money into Pakistan to publish literature and patronise the madrasas and mullahs, who branded all Leftists as atheists and anti-Islam."

By blindly imitating the West, Hasan feels that modern Pakistanis have failed to explore its own traditions for possible counters to the country's entrenched social problems. "Our own popular Sufi traditions contain enough such resources," he suggests. "Had we used them in our campaigns, we would not have given our opponents an

excuse to brand us as anti-religion. Progressive politics in Pakistan would have had more popular appeal, rather than being seen as a Western import, had we developed an appropriate contextual Islamic theology based on local Sufi vocabulary and idioms." Hasan blames what he calls the *cognitive elitism* of the Pakistani Left for ignoring the revolutionary potential of popular Sufi discourses: "They have no real contact with the masses and so can't speak in their language."

Despite their powerful history of social critique, however, Hasan does not place much hope in the current custodians of the Sufi shrines either, noting that such shrines have been reduced to centres of pilgrimage and personal mediation rather than centres of instruction. "Popular Sufism has been thoroughly ritualised, shorn of its progressive potential," he says. "In fact, many shrine custodians have become powerful landlords and maintain strong political connections, and so have developed a vested interest in preserving the system as it is."

## Dearth of discourse

There are other reasons for the failure to develop an effective Islamic theology of liberation and interfaith dialogue based on Pakistan's rich Sufi culture. The society lacks a tradition of serious research on Islam through the various social-science disciplines, a symptom of the severely weakened state of education in Pakistan. Bookshops in cities like Lahore, Gujranwala and Hyderabad have few titles on Pakistan's Sufis. Of those books that are stocked, almost all are simple hagiographies of Sufi saints. Few seek to relate their teachings to issues of contemporary concern, such as human rights, economic and social inequalities, democracy, gender justice and the problems of minorities and inter-community relations. Interestingly, in the few bookshops that sell English-language publications, most titles relating to social issues or Sufism and Islam are foreign publications, published in India or in the West and written by foreign (including Indian) writers.

In addition to the Quran, the Hadith, and biographies of the Prophet and pious Muslim elders, Urdu titles on Islam in most bookshops generally reflect traditional approaches, rooted in medieval jurisprudence, focusing mainly on the nitty-gritty of Muslim law and inter-sectarian polemic. Islamic publishing in Pakistan is still dominated by madrasa productions and by Islamist ideologues. Next to nothing appears on bookshelves on the themes of 'progressive Islam', 'Islamic liberation theology', or even on contemporary issues argued from a progressive perspective

**Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit, Sindh's most acclaimed Sufi poet, continues to be held in high regard by both Hindus and Muslims in the province for his message of universal love and for his denunciations of oppression.**



within a broadly defined Islamic paradigm.

Riaz, a teacher of Islamic studies in Lahore, had an interesting explanation to offer. He says the middle class, which could have been expected to champion liberal or progressive perspectives on a range of social issues, remains miniscule in Pakistan, which partially accounts for the "pathetic" state of faith-based intellectual discourse in the country. This is why public Islamic discourse remains the preserve of the ulema and Islamists. Few middle-class families send their children to train as Islamic specialists, preferring instead better paying career options. Hence, Riaz notes, public religious discourse in Pakistan "remains stuck in its traditional groove, unable to respond positively and realistically to issues of contemporary social concern ... with few middle-class progressives bothering to intervene".

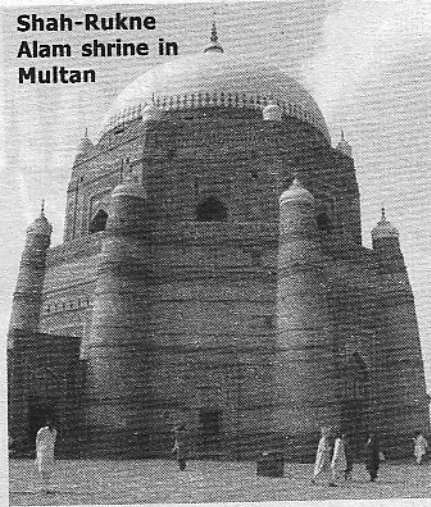
Making matters worse, Riaz continues, is the cynical misuse of religion by the state to pursue the interests of the national ruling elites. "Brainwashing" modern Pakistani students into believing that Hindus and Muslims cannot get along together, he says, "is calculated to perpetuate rivalry between India and Pakistan and to bless this in the name of Islam, which in turn helps ruling elites perpetuate themselves by claiming to represent Islam and Pakistani nationalism." Riaz notes that a hypocrisy found in Pakistani textbooks is mirrored in the patronage of radical Islamist groups that "spew anti-Indian and anti-Hindu rhetoric but remain silent on the horrendous exploitation of the poor, the working class, the peasantry, women and minorities within Pakistan itself."

### **Mired in the past**

The continued dominance of traditionalist discourses and approaches to Islam in Pakistan's public realm is also linked to the extensive madrasa system. In a country that devotes less than two percent of its budget to education, where poverty and inequalities are immense and continuing to mount, the free schooling provided by madrasas is the only educational opportunity for millions of poor families. There can subsequently be little wonder at the rapid rise in the number of madrasas in Pakistan in recent decades.

Rashid, now a social activist based in Hyderabad, Sindh, attended a madrasa as a young man. He explains that Pakistani madrasas have been slow to change due to the perception that demands for reform originate in the United States. Calls for

**Shah-Rukne Alam shrine in Multan**



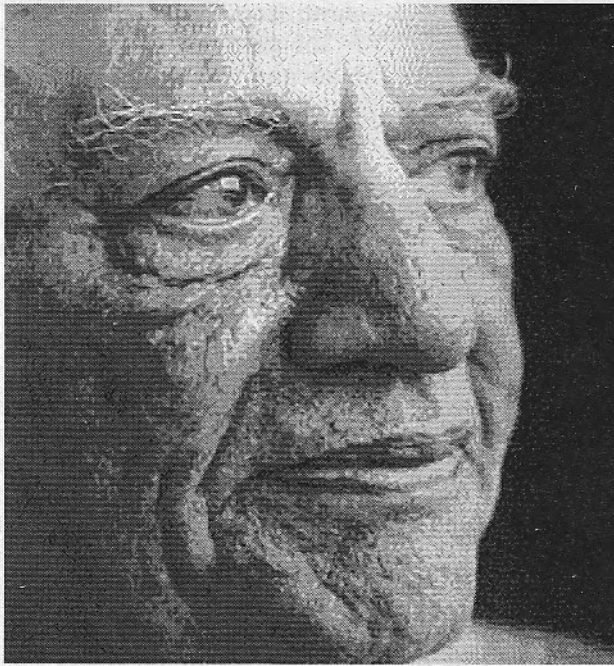
reform from the Pakistani state are subsequently interpreted as an attempt to curb the influence of ulema groups that are vocally anti-American. Rashid adds that this reaction also reflects the fear on the part of many ulema that reforms could threaten their places as spokesmen of Islam.

The fact that hardly any Pakistani madrasa teaches modern social science leads to a dangerous rigidity, Rashid explains. The ulema are unable to respond creatively or positively to a host of issues of modern concern, and can only draw from

the solutions proffered in the ancient texts. The same holds true, he suggests, of the departments of Islamic Studies in Pakistan's universities. "They are more like glorified madrasas. There are simply no Pakistani counterparts of the Indian Muslim scholars like Asghar Ali Engineer or Wahiduddin Khan, who offer innovative approaches to issues such as women's rights, capitalism, democracy and inter-faith dialogue ... the feudal lords, the military, the mullahs and the Americans will simply not let them survive".

Along similar lines, Azmat, a sociology student in Lahore who dabbles in Sufi poetry, points out that neither the ulema nor the Islamists are discussing issues, like land reforms, that have a direct impact on the poor. Says Azmat, "Maududi, founder of the Islamist Jamaat-I-Islami, denounced land reform as anti-Islamic, claiming that private property is sacrosanct in Islam." Whereas in reality, "Islam calls for equality – not just in the mosque, as the mullahs want us to believe, but in society as well." The same general hypocrisy, Azmat notes, can also be found among the mullah-led parties in NWFP and Balochistan, which have come to power by emphasising Islam but have done little for the poor. "Our only hope," Azmat concludes, "is to develop an alternate Islamic paradigm that is grounded in the perspective from below. One that seriously addresses the plight of the poor and the marginalised, challenges local and global oppressors, and embraces people of other faiths as equals."

What Azmat suggests about Islam in Pakistan would seem to hold true for Hinduism in India, or any religion anywhere else, for that matter. "That's why we need to go back to the Sufis," he nods in agreement. "Because when religion gets ritualised, it inevitably works as a tool of oppression." Indeed, what is needed in Pakistan today is to move beyond the trap of this ritualised religion, monopolised by self-proclaimed spokesmen, and rediscover visions of Islam that empower people. ▲



# MAASHUQ and RAQEEB

The politics, love and life of Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

by | Irfan Ahmad

Over the past three centuries, Urdu has produced an immensely diverse set of poets. There is the simple yet appealing lover-next-door in Mir, the brilliant philosopher and thinker in Ghalib, excellent wordsmiths in Dagh and Josh, a revivalist and messenger in Iqbal, and a freedom fighter in Hasrat. The role of the critical rationalist and revolutionary was filled by Faiz.

It is the poet's task to find, invent and create a special language that alone will be capable of expressing his personality and sentiments. Born in 1911 in Punjab, Faiz Ahmed Faiz was to become such a master. It is crucial to recognise the importance of his work in the evolution of contemporary Urdu poetry – both what he had inherited from tradition, and what he added to it, through the analysis of his period's socio-political conditions.

Of course, all great poets would have been influenced by their contemporary political contexts. In giving voice to the reality around them, however, poets tend to use indirect expression, through metaphors and symbols. In this process, dominant literary traditions have often been brushed aside. Faiz drew his inspiration less from classical models of perfection and more from the varied and vital nature of human beings, their attitudes and behaviour; he also explored new avenues of intellectual thought. His poetic collection is subsequently infused with a kind of rebellion against established convention and decadent societal practices.

In the last years of the 19th century, a

new style and attitude arose as a reaction against formalism and traditionalism. 'Progressivism' created a desire of rationality, originality and curiosity in literature and initiated much of modern political activity. This had a profound impact on Faiz. He conceived the universe as something more mysterious, meaningful and rational, and very unlike a machine. In his poetry, readers can discern a transfer from the universe conceived as a machine, to the society conceived as a well-knit organisation.

With a few exceptions, Faiz's works are replete with themes of social realism. He lived through a time when forces of capitalism were radically changing the internal structure of the Subcontinent. With deep empathy for his surroundings, Faiz talked not about the philosophy of life, but about life's problems. As a freethinking man searching for a solution to the suffering and exploitation of humanity, he turned to socialism. This brought him closer to the day-to-day struggles of India's workers. *The grief of one's love can no longer be separated from the grief of the suffering humanity, he wrote.*

**With deep empathy for his surroundings, Faiz talked not about the philosophy of life, but about life's problems.**

### **New classicism**

The increasing political participation of the working classes and the peasantry – a process that the British quickly dubbed a 'communist threat' to India – significantly influenced the perspective of the Indian intelligentsia, including Urdu intellectuals. Many of those who wrote in Urdu (and other Indian languages) became aware of a new type of reality: massive oppression, and the

denial of humanity. His own personal outrage moved Faiz to become increasingly politically active within Pakistan's Progressive Writers' Association. He recalls:

Those were the days when smiles on the faces of children were suddenly extinguished. Ruined farmers moved to the cities to labour, abandoning their fields and farms. Daughters of very respectable families were forced into prostitution.

In Faiz's poetic style can be found traces of both Ghalib and Iqbal. He is a lover, a socialist, a revolutionary, a critic. However, what gave Faiz an edge over his contemporaries was that he never compromised with his cherished beliefs and principles, nor allowed changes to creep into his poetic diction. Instead, Faiz demonstrated how a poet could transcend the circumscribing restrictions of convention. Even as he infused those conventions with socio-political thought, he brilliantly retained their universal structures. Throughout his canon, his imagery is classical but pregnant with contemporary meaning. In his poetry, *Aashiq*, a lover, becomes a patriot or a revolutionary; *Maashuq* (beloved) is the country and people; *Raqeeb* (rival) symbolises imperialism, capitalism, tyranny and exploitation; *Haq* (truth) becomes socialism; *Visal* (union), a revolution or social change; and *Junoon* (sublime madness) is the zeal for social justice.

Faiz's critical rationalism is particularly poignant in the way that he described the 'freedom' of the Subcontinent, for instance in "Subhay-e-Azadi" (The Morning of Freedom), written in 1947 on the eve of Partition:

*This stained light, this night-bitten dawn –  
This is not the dawn we yearned for ...  
The earthen lamp shakes its head in despair.  
The night is as oppressive as ever.  
The time for the liberation of heart and mind  
Has not come as yet.  
Continue your arduous journey.  
Press on, the destination is still far away.*

Despite India's impending 'freedom', Faiz was clearly disenchanted with the country's institutional chaos. According to him, the real freedom was that of thought and expression; as long as that was not achieved, freedom held no meaning.

### Lover's protest

After Independence, Faiz continued to pursue his intellectual discourse, which found an effective outlet through the *Pakistan Times*. He also became increasingly engaged in political activities as vice president of the Trade Union Congress and as

secretary of the Pakistan Peace Committee. In 1951, Faiz was arrested on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the government, a major setback to the Progressive Writers' Movement. Jail did not shatter his spirit though, as attested to by his own account of the detention:

Being imprisoned itself is a basic experience which is similar to falling in love. First, all your sensations become sharpened ... all the glow of sunrise, the shadows of the evening, the blue of the sky, the soft touch of the breeze regain their impact on your curiosity. Secondly, the intimacies and the distances of the outside world become negated. And thirdly, the leisure of separation from the object of your love provides an opportunity to attend to the sensual ornamentation of The Muse.

Faiz's imprisonment actually proved fortuitous for Urdu poetry. Over the course of his time in prison, he came up with *Dast-e-Saba* and *Zindan Nama*, two of his best poetic collections.

*Matters not if one niche lacks its candle;  
when the entire place besides is ablaze with light.* These lines embody some of the poet's most moving and paradigmatic sentiments: in spite of oppression and tyranny, the struggle for peace and freedom continues. Such ideas became more apparent in Faiz's poetry while he was in prison, and continued after he was released with both indirect and direct writings against what he viewed as Pakistan's oppressive

regime. Being away from the day-to-day struggles of the working class and peasants while in prison, Faiz addressed his nation by combining traditional romantic imagery with the harsh material realities of oppressed societies. Even while he often addressed his beloved, he was actually questioning the state and bureaucracy. *Today I ventured into my world of sorrow*, he wrote. *Today I remembered you the most.*

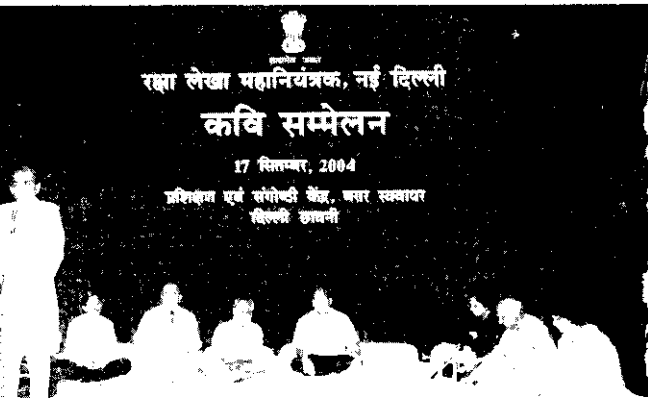
This is how Faiz attempts to reconcile his politics and his art. He protests, but his protest is in the language of a lover. Although such an approach provided a new synthesis, some feel that Faiz's protests became muted due to their diffused nature, as well as the fact that they were directed not at a particular object, but at tyranny in general. Nonetheless, because of his creativity and lucid language, Faiz became the prophet of a new insight and trend in Urdu literature. No other Urdu poet dissected the illusions and conflicts that Faiz explored with the same poetic flair for language, expression, imagery and symbols. His canon has amounted to a new literary program, taste and truth.

**The real freedom  
was that of  
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# The return to NATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Reports of Hindi's demise are greatly exaggerated, but the growing world of Hindi literature is taking energy from several directions.

by | Tyler Walker Williams



Kavi Sammelan, Delhi 2004

In Priya, one of New Delhi's bustling shopping malls and a symbol of the new consumerist culture in India, billboards written in Hindi (but printed in English script) call out to shoppers *Piyo thanda, jiyo thanda* (drink cool, live cool) and *Yeh dil mange more* (this heart asks for more). For North India's middle and upper classes, Hindi has become 'cool' again, establishing itself as the lingua franca of both the marketplace and the mass media. The majority of news and entertainment television channels are now broadcast in Hindi, and the number of FM radio stations in Hindi has doubled in the past five years. But has this return of Hindi to the metro media translated into an increasing interest in Hindi literature?

A survey of those both inside and outside the Hindi literary world reveals that the Hindi of the marketplace and the Hindi of the book have little, if any, connection. "I don't think I've ever read a Hindi book," says Aditya, a college student in Delhi. "Middle-class people like me speak Hindi, but we would never read a book in Hindi." Dharmendra Sushant, an editor at the Hindi publishing house Vani Prakashan, explains: "There is a gap between the marketplace and Hindi literature. The Hindi that is used in the marketplace is actually for English speakers – it is for their consumption." This 'bazaar Hindi' tends to be a parody of vernacular Hindi, a

satire of the native Hindi speaker and his literature. This irony reflects the paradoxical status of Hindi as a national language that has never actually been accepted as such by either India's rulers or its common people.

Estimated to be spoken by over 500 million people, Hindi is the world's fourth most widely-spoken language, and is by far the most used language within India. Despite having been made the national language of India by a constitutional provision in 1950, however, Hindi has never managed to gain legitimacy as either the language of the government or of the people. Instead, it has been repeatedly rejected by the speakers of other regional languages and sidelined by English, the language of status in post-colonial India. In fact, in contrast to its aspirations of national prestige, Hindi is largely perceived as a subaltern language, the dialect of the rural, uneducated *Hindiwalla*.

In terms of literature, books in Hindi seem completely absent from the mainstream marketplace, which is dominated by English paperbacks and glossy hardcovers. Even in Delhi, considered to be the capital of the Hindi literary world, it is hard to find bookstores selling works of Hindi fiction. The leaders of the Hindi literary establishment themselves are well aware of Hindi's marginalised position, having, with obvious irony, named the annual festival of Hindi as the *Hindi Pakhwada* (Hindi's Funeral).

Contrary to the festival's title, Hindi literature itself has been experiencing an undeniable growth spurt. Indeed, decades after some predicted that it would be eclipsed by English, Hindi literature is currently flourishing, growing daily in terms of both readers and writers. Its readers are not the same as those urbanites for whom Hindi is suddenly 'cool', however. Nor are they even necessarily the ones that can be seen perusing through India's larger bookstores. The question remains, then: Where, and who, is this expanding Hindi-reading public?

## Sahriday aficionados

The answer lies partly in the fact that Hindi publishers have not created the type of market for

their wares that English publishers have managed to create in India – fanfare-filled book launches, page-3 literati, the ‘must-read’ syndrome, the cult of the bestseller list – a fact that Hindi publishers are proud of. The Hindi literary world has its own kind of publishing industry, its own kind of heroes and stars, and its own kind of readership. Rather than trying to adopt the financially successful English publishing model, Hindi has stuck to its traditions and created its own model of success. Thus, the world of Hindi literature is a mix of hundred-year-old traditions and new technologies, old classics and experimental forms.

Hindi publishers speak of a constantly growing market of diehard readers spread out across cities, towns and villages all over India. Whereas the readers of English literature tend to be confined to metros and smaller cities, Hindi readers can be found in all corners of the country, including some of its least-developed areas. “It is a seemingly paradoxical thing that in places like Bihar, which have the least development, we sell the highest number of books,” says Vani Prakashan’s Sushant. “The average Hindi reader wants to read serious literature ... Hindi readers also tend to be very politically well-informed and opinionated.” Another quality of Hindi readers should also be mentioned: their extreme enthusiasm. The average Hindi reader tends to be a serious and emotional aficionado of the literature – any Hindi *sahridaya* (connoisseur) can recite to you lines of their favourite works and authors by heart, and can usually tell you the tales and histories that accompany both the authors and their works.

Interestingly, it is often through this very medium – oral transmission – that Hindi continues to spread and flourish. While English literature, in particular the novel, is dominated by prose forms, poetry remains the heart of Hindi literature. And although poetry is not easy to sell in the book market, it is ideal for spreading by word of mouth. (It is for this reason that the Hindi writers of the Freedom Movement of the 1870s to 1940s chose poetry as the medium through which to spread their nationalist and anti-colonial messages.) Thus poetry readings, in the traditional forms of the *mushaira* and the *kavi sammelan*, continue to be one of the primary channels for dissemination of Hindi literature. These readings tend to proceed in much the same manner as they did hundreds of years ago. After proper summoning and coaxing by the host and audience, poets recite by heart their lines of verse,



Prem Chand

emphasising and repeating certain lines in response to the audience’s cheers of encouragement.

As during the Freedom Movement, poetry continues to be the medium through which political ideas are voiced and spread among the Hindi-speaking working classes. Revolutionary and protest songs handed down since the turn of the last century are still heard at protests and political meetings today. Over the last forty years, the Naxalite movement in particular has used poetry with great success in its efforts to mobilise workers and sections of the landless

poor. In Hindi, a substantial body of Naxalite poetry has emerged in the Khari Boli and Bhojpuri dialects, representing the creative energies of common farmers, workers, students and political activists.

The Hindi publishing industry is aware of these traditions, and sees no need to change them. When asked why they have not been able to create the same kind of consumerist market for their publications as their English counterparts, Hindi publishers respond that they prefer to concentrate more on the particular demands of their long-time and hardcore readers. Jayprakash of Prakashan Sansthan dismisses the recent consumerist trend in English publishing: “It’s nothing like that in Hindi. There was always a good market for Hindi books, and there is a good market now. In fact, our market is expanding. Our books go all over the country.” Rather than selling primarily through bookshops as is the tendency with English volumes, Hindi publishers rely heavily on sales to libraries and universities, at book fairs, and to individuals. “We are constantly getting letters from readers all over the country and outside of the country asking for particular titles,” says Sushant. “We do our best to make sure that these books reach the readers wherever they are. We release as many paperback editions as possible, and try to keep the price down. But there are problems, like the cost of shipping, which can be as much as the cost of the book ... In this way, Hindi publishing is unorganised.”

### Outdated syllabi

Because of this lack of organisation and the continuing importance of oral transmission, it is nearly impossible for any writer in Hindi to survive on the earnings of the writing alone. Prem Chand and Nirala, two of the greatest Hindi writers of the modern era, are also seen as archetypes of the typical Hindi writer: both died in poverty after living lives of periodic destitution, during which they put every last bit of their money and effort into their

“The average Hindi reader wants to read serious literature ... Hindi readers also tend to be very politically well-informed and opinionated.”

writing. Many aspiring Hindi authors, however, continue to pursue writing as a part-time pursuit. A survey of today's popular Hindi writers reveals that most are government servants, academics or private-business owners, who write during their spare time.

Hindi's most prominent authors, like Shrilal Shukla (whose *Rag Darbari* is regarded as a classic of Hindi literature), Ashok Vajpayee and Vinod Kumar Shukla were fulltime government servants when they penned their masterpieces. Award-winning poets and essayists like Anamika, Purushottam Agarwal and Manager Pandey write while teaching at university. Many aspiring authors are forced to use their own money to see their titles into print. Amidst all this, the increasing market for Hindi literature has also led to an increase in Hindi authors, with everyone from office babus to tea-sellers trying their hand at both poetry and prose.

Despite this thriving, living literature and its corresponding rich tradition of literary criticism, Hindi literature as an academic discipline has yet to develop strength. The study of Hindi remains mired in outdated syllabi and antiquated methods, which together have turned off generations of potential Hindi readers. At the primary- and secondary-school levels, Hindi is a casualty of the antiquated learn-by-rote system and of perfunctory, uninspired teaching. "We study Hindi in school because we're forced to, and most people drop it as soon as they can," says Padmini, a college student from Jamshedpur. "Even though I liked Hindi literature, the teachers didn't care about what they were teaching and made it completely boring."

At the university level, lack of funding and, more importantly, lack of respect has led to stagnating Hindi departments. As a result, there is little research work being done. Professors everywhere cancel classes so that they can pursue more lucrative work, like competitive-exam coaching. Students too tend to abandon any serious study of the literature, simply using their degrees as stepping-stones to more 'serious' careers. "When you tell people that you're in a university like JNU, they're very impressed and ask 'In which department?'" says Vivek Shukla, an MPhil Hindi student at Jawaharlal Nehru University. "But when you tell them you're in the Hindi Department, they lose interest and ask you why you didn't choose a more sensible field."

### **Native consciousness**

What may prove to be the redeeming feature of the sagging Hindi academic world is interest from outside of India, including from the Hindi-literature readership. Recognising the political importance of the Hindi-speaking populace and the richness of its literary tradition, universities in both the West and much of the rest of the developed world are increasingly providing funding and support for the study of Hindi language and literature. This interest has led to the development of ties between Indian

and foreign universities, as well as the recruitment of Hindi professors as temporary or permanent faculty in universities abroad.

Perhaps more importantly, the native Hindi-speaking readership abroad has also begun putting pressure on Hindi academics and litterateurs to increase the size and scope of their attempt. With the increasing migration of Hindi-speaking Indians to foreign countries over the past 30 years, a large and dispersed Hindi diaspora has developed; these are not only consumers, but also producers of Hindi literature. Publishers report that they send a large number of copies of their publications to countries like Australia, the UK, Canada and the US. Hindi aficionados and writers in those countries have also begun publishing their own Hindi literary magazines, as well as sending longer works back to India for publication. "In several countries, lots of people have begun writing," says JNU Hindi professor Chamman Lal. "Some have become big names in the Hindi literary world." Although the diasporic writing scene is still in flux, Lal says, "it is certainly much bigger than it was a few years ago."

This interaction between the Hindi-speaking diaspora and their host populations is proving to be an important force in shaping modern Hindi literature. Thirty years ago, Nirmal Verma challenged the notion that Hindi literature could only be about 'Indian' themes when he published his stories and travelogues of Europe (*See Himjal Jan-Feb 2006, "The atmabodh of Nirmal Verma"*). Now, there exists a whole genre of Hindi literature detailing the experiences of Indians abroad, like the writings of Krishna Bihari and the short stories published regularly in the Hindi journal *Wagarth*. For some Hindi critics and publishers, globalisation and migration abroad – phenomena typically seen as threats to regional languages like Hindi – have actually given a new strength to the literature. "It is an interesting development that with the spread of English across the world and the movement of peoples due to globalisation, the advantage is actually *not* with those who speak English, but with those who speak languages *other than* English," says Sushant of Vani Prakashan. "This is because those who come from other languages can bring something new to the dialogue. There is something of the place and the language that is in one's blood."

Sushant's optimism and excitement about the future of Hindi literature seems to be shared by many critics, writers and publishers, who see Hindi readership expanding across India and beyond its borders. At the same time, they also see this movement as a kind of return to a native consciousness. While not completely separate, this nonetheless remains distinct from and alternative to the colonial consciousness symbolised by English literature. Says Sushant: "Hindi is spreading in all four directions. And yet, people are returning to their roots. It is a question of identity."

# Salty Oriya: The price of a plot

by | Chandradas Choudhury

The 19th century Oriya novelist Fakir Mohan Senapati was, at least in his fiction, a most oblique writer – he hardly said or meant anything in a straightforward way. Much of his work is ironical and satirical, and of course irony and satire work through indirection, by way of the meaningful glance rather than the plainspoken word. Irony can often be applied too thickly, too predictably, and then it becomes as unsubtle as the more homespun narrative mode it disdains. Thankfully, this is not the case with Senapati: he always worked with a light and delicate hand.

At one point in Senapati's newly translated novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (Six Acres and a Third), the narrator, in one of many instances in which he directly addresses the reader, notes that "unpleasant truths are better left unspoken; in other words, we are forced to forget half the truth and tell you the other half." This might serve as a loose definition of satire, which tells the truth by denying the truth. When Senapati describes the greedy ways of his hero, the venal zamindar Ramachandra Mangaraj, defending him all the while by saying that he is really a "kind and pious man" who is slandered by his subjects, Mangaraj is exposed more effectively than a simple and uninflected chronicle of his evils could have managed. The narrator is, in effect, repaying Mangaraj with the same duplicity that Mangaraj himself practices on those around him – he has a friendly hand on Mangaraj's shoulder, even while simultaneously winking at the reader, confident that "for intelligent people, hints usually suffice". This jaunty line of attack is Senapati's way of pointing to unpleasant truths in a way that also gives the reader pleasure.

*Chha Mana Atha Ghunta* was written in 1902; at this point, the novel in India was about four decades old. The novel form was a legacy of colonial rule, and most of its initial practitioners belonged to the new class of Indians who had, after the implementation of Lord Thomas Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education*, received an education in English and gained exposure to Western art forms. (In 1864, the young Bankimchandra Chatterjee, as a district



***Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (Six Acres and a Third)**  
by Fakir Mohan Senapati  
Penguin Modern Classics, 2006  
INR 250

magistrate in Khulna in Bengal, wrote his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, in English.)

Senapati, like Bankimchandra and many other early Indian novelists, had some connection with the business of government, and therefore to British rule. He was born Braja Mohan Senapati, but when a mysterious illness threatened to take his life when still a child, his grandmother took him to a *dargah* and promised to offer him as a *fakir* if he lived. The boy recovered, but the grandmother was loath to give him up, and instead he was renamed Fakir Mohan and made a mendicant for eight days every Mohurram. Later, Senapati worked as a schoolteacher and a *dewan*, or administrator, on feudatory estates. Set in a feudal setting and concerning a land dispute, *Six Acres and a Third* obviously has its roots in the author's own experiences. While the work is

recognisably a novel, it is less a copy of the classic Victorian novel than one that has been 'Indianised'. Its plot is not linear, its methods of characterisation are fruitfully eccentric, and its storyteller's tone seems to fuse the form of traditional novelistic narrative with older Indian narrative traditions.

The plot revolves around Ramachandra Mangaraj's attempt to appropriate a village peasant's verdant smallholding, six-and-a-third acres in area. Senapati's is a moral tale: Mangaraj's devious stratagems are successful, but soon his deeds return to haunt him, and he falls spectacularly from grace, losing every piece of his wealth. This plot outline makes the novel sound unsophisticated, but its richness comes from the subtlety of Senapati's prose and also the fact that he was a happily digressive writer. In *Six Acres and a Third*, the reader will find long sections on the place of the temple and the pond in village life, extended character portraits such as the one of Mangaraj's shrewish maid Champa, and meditations upon human nature and Indian history. The narrative works simultaneously on multiple levels. "What do these six acres and a third represent?" the narrator asks towards the end of the book. It is mostly a rhetorical question, for we already know how much such a plot of land can represent. Senapati prods and pokes at the injustices of the

zamindari system, as well as the depredations of British colonialism, the suffocating hierarchies and prejudices of caste, and, more generally, at man's capacity for inhumanity to other men.

But the truth is – and this is what is most charming about Senapati – the author was really an incorrigible ironist. If his novel persuades us about anything, it is about the ubiquity of human vanity and frailty. The tone of narrative is that of the village gossip – sly, garrulous, conspiratorial, and full of hints, winks and insinuations. At one point, while describing the representations of some mythological scenes in Mangaraj's courtyard, the narrator remarks, "Somewhere in Rajasthan, on seeing the image of a nude woman, Tod Sahib came to the conclusion that all women in ancient India went about naked." ("Tod Sahib" referred to Colonel James Tod, the author of a widely-read book called *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, often mined by Indian novelists for historical material.) On another occasion, we are told about the village priest, a greatly respected man who runs the shrine of the village goddess, Budhi Mangala. "The priest was very highly regarded in the village, particularly by the women," the narrator notes. "The goddess frequently appeared to him in his dreams and talked to him about everything." That 'about everything' – as if the goddess personally reports to the priest – is a damning phrase.

### **Cranes and kingfishers**

One strand of thought in *Six Acres and a Third* that is particularly striking from our 21st century point of view is Senapati's response to the British – their reshaping of Indian civilisation, the adoption of new systems of government and jurisprudence, the discourse of Western rationalism and scientific progress, and the missionary zeal of Christianity. Senapati's reading of these matters is quite complex. On the one hand, he makes fun of the assumptions of racial superiority held by the British. "Today, in the 19th century, the sciences enjoy great prestige, for they form the basis of all progress," he declares. "See, the British are white-skinned, whereas Oriyas are dark in complexion. This is because the former have

studied the sciences, whereas the latter have no knowledge of these." And so, once the Oriyas learn science, they too will become white-skinned, and then the British will have neither an intellectual nor racial basis for lording over them.

But elsewhere the author chastises his own countrymen for the weakness of their opposition to the outsiders. "Historians say it took Clive less time to get the Bengal Subedari from the emperor of Delhi" the author remarks, "than it takes one to buy and sell a donkey." He also worries about the manner in which the new class of English-educated Indians had uncritically adopted Western assumptions: "Ask a new babu his grandfather's father's name," he sniffs, "and he will hem and haw, but the names of the ancestors of England's Charles the Third will readily roll off his tongue."

Senapati's prose is strongly metaphorical. Indeed, his metaphors are often striking not just for their vividness and specificity – water lilies fold themselves up and hide during the day "like young Hindu daughters-in-law", while cows chew their cud "like *baishnavas*, moving their mouths as if they were repeating the divine name". But his narrative is also notable for the ways in which small details suddenly take on grand meanings. At one point, speaking of the birds found near the village pond, the narrator notes how the cranes churn the mud "like lowly farmhands" looking for fish all day long, while kingfishers appear suddenly, conduct swift raids, and gorge themselves on the stolen pickings. "Oh, stupid Hindu cranes," he cries, "look at these English kingfishers..."

The great virtue of this new translation (carried out jointly by Rabi Shankar Mishra, Satya P Mohanty, Jatindra K Nayak and Paul St-Pierre) is that it recaptures the music of Senapati's wonderfully salty and colloquial Oriya in a limber and mellifluous English. Nayak has already translated sections of Senapati's autobiography, and perhaps the entire book will be widely available in an English translation soon. In the meantime, we have this piquant, clever and gossipy book to savour.

# Kalimpong dreaming

by | **Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta**

**K**iran Desai's second novel is set in the Darjeeling hills. It opens in Cho Oyu, a beautiful, crumbling house in Kalimpong, from where a retired judge, his grand-daughter and his beloved dog can see Kanchenjunga, "a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown

high by the storms at its summit." As the girl reads an old *National Geographic*, the old man plays chess against himself; and, in the old kitchen, an ancient cook boils water in the kettle, pours milk into an enamel basin for the dog, warms the leftover chocolate pudding for the judge's teatime – all the



while dreaming of his own son, Biju, who is now an illegal immigrant in distant New York, scurrying from job to job. Outside, around them all, the mist twists and turns.

What a sweet opening for a novel. The scene is almost cinematic, like Kulu-Manali, as the novel says, or Kashmir in 'pre-terrorist' days, "before gunmen came bounding out and a new kind of film had to be made".

Yet it is the mid-1980s here in the mountains, and the region is filled with the unease of the impending insurgency. And so, here come the boys creeping along the grass, clad, guerrilla-fashion, in leather jackets and bandanas. They are here for the judge's guns, left over from his ICS days.

The guns are not the only baggage that the judge has left over from his youth. He also has troubled memories, of many humiliations endured, and some passed on to others. Memories of "undignified love, Indian love, stinking, unaesthetic love" that have tried to follow him across the oceans – and which he flung back into the very ocean that "traveled around a globe".

Everyone has their memories of loss that excavate other memories, other losses. The girl, Sai, has indistinct recollections of her parents: she is, after all, the "orphan child of India's failing romance with the Soviets". In America, Biju has memories not only of the "old songs, best songs", but also of the "old war, best war" – "desis against Pakis" – that made him feel as if he was "entering a warm, amniotic bath" until it grew cold; because of course it wasn't a real war, but an itch that was "never scratched". And the great, crumbling house itself, Cho Oyu, has its memories, not only of happier days, but of the bandy-legged and bent-faced porters upon whose struggling labour its boulders were fitted, one on the other.

And Gyan, Sai's young lover, has his memories – not only of Gorkhaland dreams, but of an overnight bus to Calcutta and a job interview conducted in darkness, when he had heard the insincere promise of the interviewer and had known that he would never be hired.

Desai's prose is delicate and nuanced as it tells of the sweetest of emotions. The onset of love between the young girl and boy, their terms of endearment: *momo*, *kishmish*, *kaju*. The dance of the beautiful dog as she chases her tail, running happily about the garden. The light-hearted comment of the girl to the dog: "Silly girl." The judge's affectionate follow up

to this: "Little pearl," he said to the dog when Sai had left, in case Mutt's feelings had been bruised.

All life is portrayed here in careful detail: the old and thick forests, the bamboo thickets, the stone walls of the house, the dog who eats sitting at the table. Even a tick-removal scene is brought vividly to life: "The cook and Sai were sitting with Mutt on the steps leading to the garden, picking the ticks off her, and this was always an hour of contentment for them. The large khaki-bag ones were easy to dispatch, but the tiny brown ticks were hard to kill; they flattened against the depressions in the rock, so when you hit them with a stone, they didn't die but in a flash were up and running. Sai chased them up and down..."

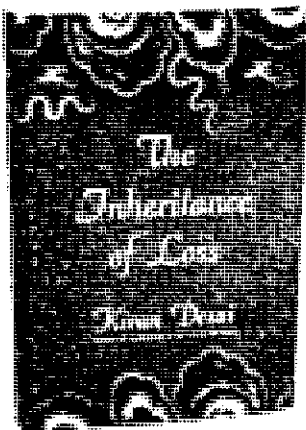
It is difficult to dislike any of the characters, even the hard-hearted judge whose grumpy exterior hides the deepest of wounds, and who is befuddled by the complexities of the newly-independent nation: "India was too messy for justice." It is hard not to love dear, bright, young Sai, enveloped in her hopes and the Himalayan mists; it is hard not to feel the ache of Biju's loneliness as he bicycles along bravely in the North American cold.

All the characters in the narrative have suffered various kinds of loss – of pride, roots, identity and more. Their wounds remain, turning ceaselessly in their minds; creating new lacerations, each demanding to be assuaged but finding no comfort. Hardly anything happens, and yet everything happens. Love formed and broken, relationships tested and betrayed. In this novel of so many kinds of absences, there is yet another tragic loss at the end. Other things are found in its place –

including the possibility of a kind of redemption.

As for Sai, she reflects early in the novel on the meaning of love: "Could fulfilment ever be felt as deeply as loss? Romantically she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desire and fulfilment, in the lack, not the contentment. Love was the ache, the anticipation, the retreat, everything around it but the emotion itself." By the end of the novel, however, she has come to a new understanding of truth.

Pankaj Mishra, in a review in the *New York Times*, called this "the best kind of post-9/11 novel". Although set in the 1980s in a remote corner of the Himalaya, the novel urges us to examine our deepest assumptions about today's world and its borders; about inequality, injustice and violence; and about the need for compassion.



**The Inheritance  
of Loss**  
by Kiran Desai  
Viking/Penguin,  
324 pages  
INR 495

# Wake up, Mrs Bangladesh

by | Rubana Ahmed

There's an acute lack of philosophy in this land.  
Basics haunt us, secure us, insecure us, and rule our  
cramped identities.

Our fears have gotten bigger than us.  
Breakfast at 8, lunch at 2, a cuppa at 5, dinner at 9:

It's as if food's running out on us.

We never skip meals and simply eat because we have  
to keep the routine alive.

The routine of routinely complaining about weights  
and looks

The routine of routinely blaming Atkins and our  
thyroids,

The routine of 'Dhuro' has done us all a great disfavor.

A dog or a cat in a car, a quick trip to the nearest video  
store,

A bite at a Korean restaurant nearby,

Kids leaving for school after High School,

All fall under: Routine.

Last night, Hanufa bua's brother who's a loyal caddy  
At the golf club has been arrested ...

At 3:00 in the morning, they woke him up, tied his  
hands,

Shoved a gun into his pocket

And took a picture.

Under Routine, this is the perfect arms case.

A photograph will prove it too.

Remember:

*Amra kotipoye amlar stri.* The old poem on the wives  
of the bureaucrats?

With diamond studded lives,

Children graduating,

Working abroad,

Joining your empire,

Taking your grand children to the club for a swim,

Or a gelato in summer,

Is not what 'Desh needs right now.

Your nightmare has to cease.

The picture perfect scenario.

Is unreal in this land.

If my bad poetry doesn't get to you,

Disaster will.

Wait till your kid gets kidnapped,

Wait till you are taken hostage for a ransom,

Wait till your area gets bombed.

Woman, what are you waiting for?

Wake up, women!

'Shadharon' is not your land,

You have been raped in 71,

You have been violated all your life.

With nothing more to part with,

Defy Routine,

You were meant to be an epidemic.

So be it.

Pass it to the next voice lying in your next room.

Invade her heart, teach her the langue of freedom,

Be brutal in the process

Wake her, shake her up and tell her

That all that you have taught her for so long

Was simple Routine.

She needs to change her Major from Business to  
Development,

Walk in the crowd,

Get arrested,

Beat the shit out of the bastards that wear the garb of  
propriety and preach intolerance.

Get there, woman.

And help me get there too.



'Dream of Moha Maya': Kanak Champa Chakma

*Amra kotipoye amrar stri* – a poem on the bureaucrats' wives, *Hanufa bua* – the ever-loyal house help, *Shadharon* – ordinary

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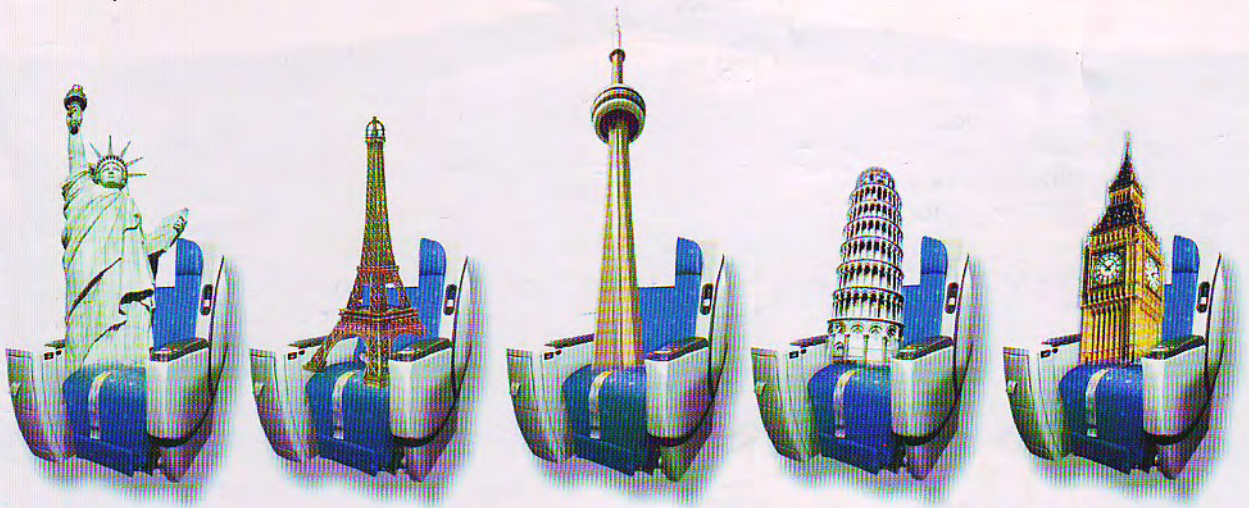
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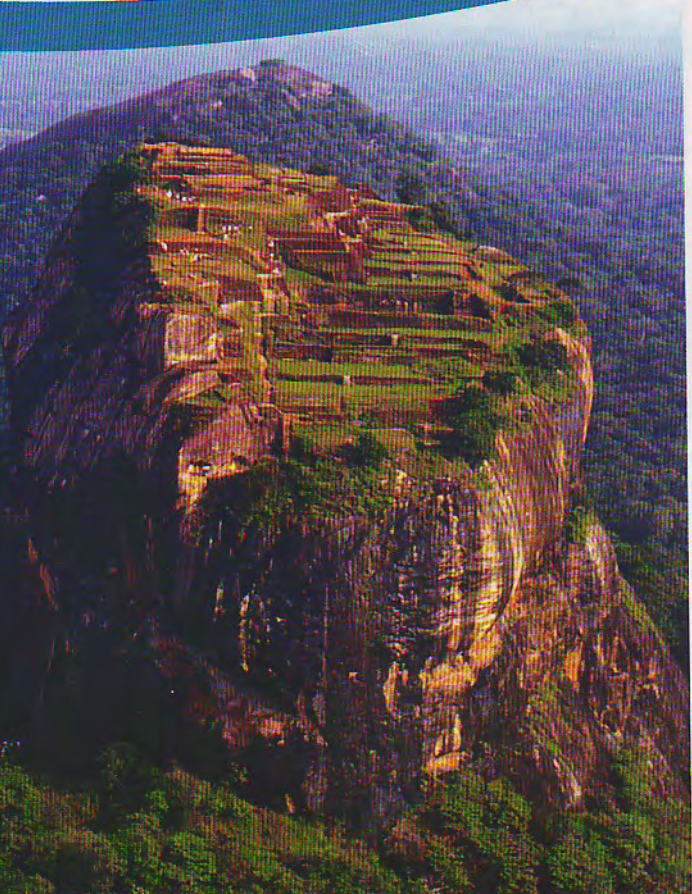
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