

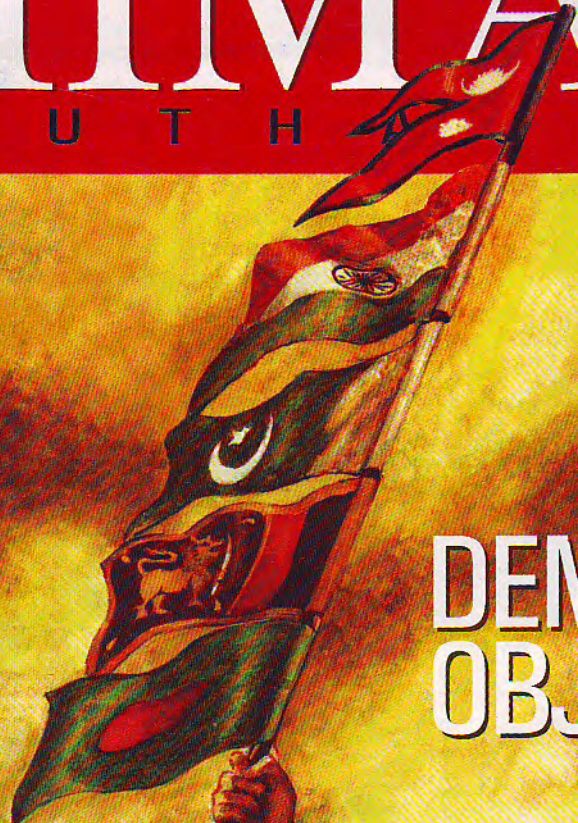
January 2007

Vol 20 No 1

HIMAL

S O U T H I A N

MANIPUR
WAR 31



DEMOCRACY: OBJECT OF DESIRE

**Beijing-Dharamsala
Directions**

Lodi Gyari

59

**Jaffna's
Open Prison**

Ammu Joseph

17

**Roots of Dalit
Rage**

Sukumari Muralidharan

20



Name : Adam Stevens

Age : 43

Designation : CEO

Time : 11:28 pm

Place : ITC One, Maurya Sheraton, New Delhi

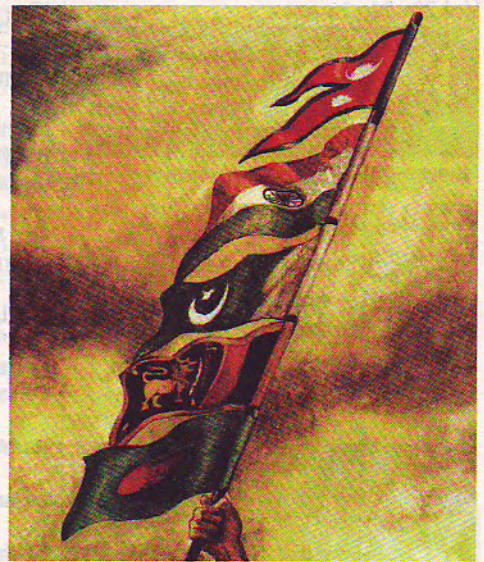
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Democracy in South Asia

“Liberty Leading the People” was painted by Eugene Delacroix in 1830 to commemorate the July uprising of that year in Paris, which brought to an end the rule of Charles X. Artist Subhas Rai’s adaptation of Delacroix’s work first appeared on *Himal Southasian’s* cover a decade ago, as part of an issue titled “Goodbye Nation State” (July 1996). This time, we use a slightly altered image to highlight the commitment of Southasia’s people to popular self-rule – democracy – and their willingness to protect and to fight for this system of government against all odds. Where democracy is denied, the desire for it does not die, even after decades of autocratic rule. This and the added truth that the more people experience democracy, the more they are willing to fight for it, are confirmed by the report excerpted in this issue. *State of Democracy in South Asia* was brought out by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. The five larger countries of the region which were the subjects of this study are represented by the flags held aloft by Subhas Rai’s Liberty.



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Editor
Kanak Mani Dixit

Assistant Editors
Prashant Jha
Himali Dixit

Desk Editor
Carey L Biron

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Marketing Manager
Komal More

Editorial Assistance
Ashmina Bhattarai
Prakriti Mishra

Contributing Editors
Calcutta Rajashri Dasgupta
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Karachi Beena Sarwar
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Manisha Aryal

Creative Director
Bilash Rai

Design
Roshan Tamang

Web
Rupendra Kayastha

Administration
Sunita Silwal

Subscription
subscription@himalmag.com

Sales
Santosh Aryal
Shahadev Koirala
info@himalmag.com

Distributor
Bazar international

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Contributors to this issue

Aasim Khan is a Delhi-based journalist with CNN-IBN.

Ammu Joseph is an independent journalist and media-watcher based in Bangalore. Among her publications is *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues* (Sage, 1994/2006), co-authored with Kalpana Sharma.

Atul Mishra is a research scholar at the School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

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

Hartosh Singh Bal is a freelance journalist based in Delhi, and co-author of *Certain Ambiguity*, to be released by Princeton University Press.

Harsh Dobhal is the editor of *Combat Law*.

Imran Ayub is a journalist with Karachi's *The News*.

Kekhrisutuo Yhome is a research scholar in the Department of History at the University of Hyderabad.

Miranda Husain is a Lahore-based journalist with the *Daily Times*.

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

Shylashri Shankar is a Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.

Siddharth Anand is a Delhi-based journalist.

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

Tanaz K Noble a freelance journalist presently based in New Delhi.

Tsering Namgyal is currently based in Taiwan. His collection of essays *Little Lhasa: Reflections on Exiled Tibet* was published this winter.

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta is in the Indian Administrative Service and based in Bombay. Her writings can be found at www.indianwriting.blogspot.com.

V K Shashikumar is editor, 'special investigations', CNN-IBN.

Vijay Prashad teaches History and is director of the International Studies Program at Trinity College in the US. His most recent book is *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, Leftword.

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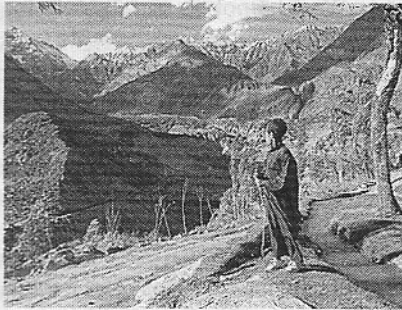
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India	Central News Agency (P) Ltd., 4E/15 Jhandewalan Ext, New Delhi 110001. Tel: +91-11-51541111 Fax: +91-11-3626036 Email: subs@cna-india.com or sanjeev@cna-india.com
Nepal	The Southasia Trust, Lalitpur, Kathmandu, Tel: +977-1-5547279, Fax: +977-1-5552141 subscription@himalmag.com
Pakistan	City Press, 316 Madina City Mall, Abdullah Haroon Road, Saddar, Karachi 74400 Ph. +92-21-5650623/5213916, email: cp@citypress.cc

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A break in the borderlands



M Hussanan's "Feet across the frontier" (*Himal* December 2006) was a poignant reminder of the traumatic experiences of an audacious 20th century experiment to carve out borders between nation-states in the region we call Southasia. As citizens of different countries in the region, we have become schooled in seeing our world, neighbours, friends, allies and antagonists from the vantage point of centres of states that were created less than a hundred years ago.

The story is also a reminder of how the transformation of temporal and spatial frontiers

No part of it

I don't even know where to begin. I want to congratulate Prashant Jha, the writer of the recent Gujarat cover story, for a piece of great work. To begin with, I am only talking about the quality of writing. The presentation of facts and research are both first-rate. My hat's off to you, and God bless you. Evil, immorality, extremism and illegality exist among us and around us, no matter the country or society. The only thing to do at the individual level is to absolutely refuse to have any part of it. Therein lies the secret to peace and self-preservation for the people of the Subcontinent. May enlightened minds like the ones which grace your pages prosper and prevail.

Syed Kamal
Houston, USA

fundamentally altered hundreds of years of social and cultural interactions between peoples who live in a familiar landscape of mountains, valleys, meadows, forests and rivers. Hussanan's story is an important reminder of how modern techniques of creating borders have affected the lives and livelihoods of people who have traditionally been moving across our

region's frontiers, and have evolved rich cultures and traditions based on mutual exchange.

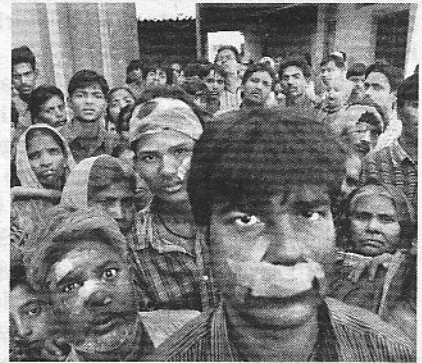
Himal Southasian would help foster critical thinking on borderlands by publishing more such pieces, and thereby create a much-needed break from state-centric approaches to understanding the history of modern state-building efforts in the region.

Sanjay Barbora
Guwahati

Put it behind

Your article "Gujarat as another country" (*Himal* October 2006) belongs in the garbage bin. People like you are more dangerous than those Islamic terrorists. With your poison pen, you bring society to its lowest level. First of all, look at your reference to 'fascism' in Gujarat – if it is that bad, why don't you live in Saudi Arabia? If you publish an article like this, do you know what they would do there? They wouldn't react very well.

I do not believe one bit of the thrash you printed – if it were true, Narendra Modi would not be winning in the Muslim wards. People are having a field day making hay out of the Gujarat riots, calling it a genocide. But have you seen the pictures of burnt babies on the Godhra train? This was never mentioned once in the article, nor condemned. I condemn any riot or killing of anyone. A few years ago in one of India's southern states there were caste



riots, along with significant property damage and killings. Who was killed? Only the people of the chief minister's caste. Did people call it a genocide? No.

Stop spreading lies and hate. All of this took place years ago. No decent human being likes it. Put it behind you, and write articles that can bring harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Otherwise, should Hindus keep people aroused about the biggest holocaust of all time – the killing of 80 million Hindus during Islamic rule?

Prasad Yalamanchi
(By email)

Himal nominees

The editors of *Himal Southasian* would like to congratulate three of our contributors from this past year, for their nominations for the Lorenzo Natali Prize 2006. Dolly Kikon's "Divergent memories in Manipur", Gabriele Köhler's "Paradox of the Southasian welfare state" and Wasbir Hussain's "The

Naga talks move along" all appeared in the September 2006 issue of *Himal*. The Lorenzo Natali Prize is administered by the European Commission, and is awarded for excellence in reporting on issues of human rights, democracy and development. We only wonder if the selector missed some of our other issues!

- Editors

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

The need to be 'unpatriotic'

With the hoopla over the imminent rise of India on the world stage consuming large sections of national and international media, the underbelly of the Indian state remains hidden. Comfortably ensconced in the establishment consensus, urban middle classes either support or find it convenient to ignore some of the darkest manifestations of the current politico-security set-up. Recent reports suggest that Delhi has not learned its lessons, and continues a morally questionable and politically unwise strategy in 'disturbed areas' – i.e., Kashmir and the Northeast.

Despite a string of non-violent protests – ranging from an on-going six-year-long protest by activist Irom Sharmila, to a nude demonstration by middle-aged women in front of the army headquarters in Manipur, to myriad civil-society demonstrations – Manmohan Singh has not agreed to repeal the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The Act gives even non-commissioned officers the right to shoot to kill, on the basis of nothing more than the mere suspicion that it is necessary to do so in order to "maintain public order". The AFSPA has resulted in gross human-rights violations, among the starkest being the rape and murder of Manorama Devi in 2004. Two years after he said that the Act would be made "more humane", Prime Minister Singh merely repeated the promise to amend AFSPA on his recent visit to Imphal.

Such indifference to popular outcry and willingness to countenance the killing of innocents is not only unethical, but also results in the generation of perceptions extremely dangerous to a democracy – that non-violent protest does not yield effective policy change. Delhi's myopic, military-

centred solutions have repeatedly resulted in alienation, which, in turn, feeds militancy. The AFSPA has been in force since 1958; clearly it has not been able to tackle insurgency in the region. Would it not be more astute for the Delhi durbar to think more innovatively – in its own self-interest, if not in the interest of its citizens – rather than persist with an act that only exacerbates conflict? Imagine the political message that would be conveyed, and the goodwill the Indian state would earn, if it were to decide to unilaterally repeal the Act.

Pending parliamentary questions

The security forces and intelligence agencies have a lot to answer for in another realm as well. Exactly five years after the Indian Parliament was attacked on 13 December 2001, extremely disturbing questions have emerged about the conspiracy behind the attack, the manner in which a select few have been victimised, the investigation process, the nature of the trial and the role of the state agencies.

Take professor S A R Geelani, who was branded a terrorist by a special cell of the Delhi police, and has now been acquitted only due to a sustained and arduous legal battle supported by leading academics and activists (See *Himal*, September 2005). But co-accused Mohammed Afzal has been held as guilty and sentenced to capital punishment. This has provoked an outcry in Kashmir due to the perception of yet another instance of the persecution of a Kashmiri Muslim by the Indian establishment. Interestingly, the Afzal judgement has been welcomed by large sections of the political class in Delhi, regardless of the fact that he had inadequate legal representation at the trial stage. There is indeed evidence that points to Afzal's involvement in the case, but the nature of this involvement remains ambiguous. Afzal, after all, was a surrendered militant, who claims that he was

introduced to one of the attackers by a person he had met at a Special Task Force (STF) camp in Jammu & Kashmir. This throws up interesting questions about the role of the STF and other agencies in the run-up to the Parliament attack.

As claims are verified and more testimonials recorded, the case details get murkier. It has become clear that all players are hiding something, and that the truth has not yet been fully brought into the open. In the work ethic of opacity that characterises the functioning of India's security agencies, we have still not been told the answers to some burning questions: Who were the five militants shot when the attack was foiled?



What led the police to Afzal in the first place? What was the evidence to link the attack to Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed? What was the basis on which a connection was drawn to the involvement of the Pakistani state, which led to a military stand-off between the two countries? What is needed now is an inquiry demanded by Parliament that will look at all of these questions. Instead, all that has been done is the creation of an atmosphere wherein to question official statements and to defend the rights of the accused are seen as somehow unpatriotic.

By their very nature, security agencies become accustomed to and comfortable with the idioms of subversion, violence, impunity, militarism and manufacturing evidence. An innocent life is seen as expendable in the larger 'national interest', which of course

is defined on the populist platform, while protest is seen as an inconvenience that must be ignored or suppressed. But citizens – and in this instance, the citizens of India – must be ever vigilant. They must keep a check on these tendencies within the establishment and insist on a humanist approach by the state mechanism. India prides itself on being a democracy – and indeed, it has shown remarkable resilience in accommodating diverse interests within a pluralistic framework. But its actions in the Northeast and Kashmir, which have an alienated populace, rob the system of a good deal of political legitimacy. New Delhi must pay heed to popular aspirations in both these regions. If it is to retain systemic credibility, it must repeal the AFSPA in toto, and come clean on the investigations in the case of the 2001 attacks on the Indian Parliament. ▲

REGION

Living with the bomb

With George W Bush all set to sign the Indo-US nuclear deal after its recent ratification by the US Congress, it is time for the Southasian peace lobby to engage in some deep introspection. The doomsday scenario projected by the anti-nuclear discourse has not come to pass, and in hindsight the strategy experts in favour of the Indian tests seem to have played their cards well. While morality and the threat of mass destruction remain more powerful than any other argument against nuclearisation, it is crucial that the peace constituency is candid about its failures and comes up with a more effective case against the bomb.

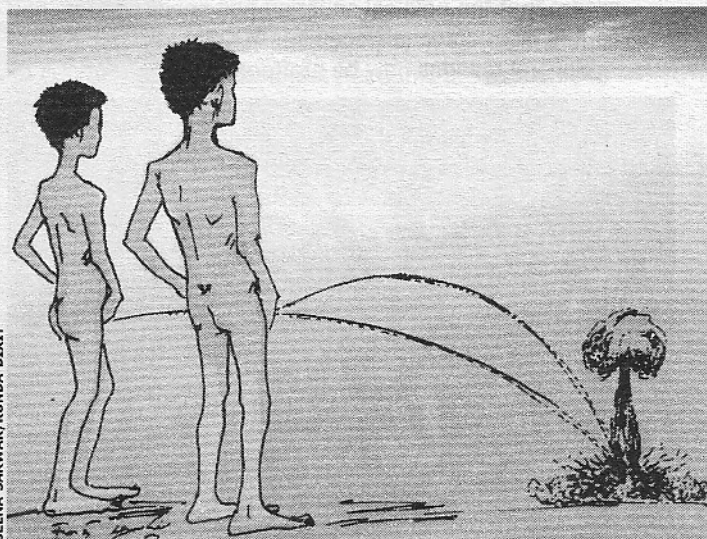
Let's look at arguments made by both sides in India, in the run-up to and the aftermath of the tests. The peaceniks said that nuclearisation would wreak complete devastation and would ruin relations between New Delhi and Islamabad. Those in favour of the tests responded with the theory of deterrence, and claimed that rational actors would not use the bomb. Instead, they argued that overt announcement of nuclear programmes would compel all actors in the region to build a semblance of cordial ties. The jury is still out on this particular point. Southasia came close to a nuclear holocaust, during both the Kargil war and 'Operation Parakram' after the attack on the Indian Parliament. The threat of destruction looms large, and all it will take is a single spark or streak of irrationality to set events off in a chain of madness.

But the fact remains that a full-fledged conflict has not taken place between India and Pakistan since the tests; at present, bilateral relations, despite obstacles, are more intimate than ever in the last few decades. This can be attributed to a range of factors, from the change in the geo-political environment to the nature of the current leadership in both countries – a liberal economist in New Delhi and a PR-friendly autocrat in Islamabad.

Irrespective of the causes, however, what is true is that relations between India and Pakistan, contrary to what was predicted, have not hit rock bottom due to the nuclear tests.

Leaders of the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace also said that it did not make economic sense for India to test the bomb, and that Delhi would not be able to withstand the sanctions that would come its way after the tests. Irrespective of whether we agree with the growth-based model India is currently pursuing, it is clear that the sanctions had little impact on the economy. The economic problems that remain, including the lack of equitable distribution of resources and the persistence of poverty, must be attributed mainly to neo-liberal strategies adopted by the state.

The most potent argument unleashed by the peace lobby was that going for the bomb would lead to a slump



BEENA SARWAR/KUNDA DIXIT

in relations with China and international ostracisation. On both counts, the lobby has been proven wrong. After a brief period of tension – when India pointed to the Chinese threat as justification for the tests, and Beijing insisted on a UN resolution asking New Delhi to cap, roll back and eliminate the nuclear programme – relations between the two sides have reached a level of normalcy. Bilateral trade is booming, and both sides are trying hard to ensure that their simultaneous rise in the international order does not lead to conflict. The nuclear deal with the US and the apparent willingness of almost all members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, including China, to treat India as an exception have all but cleared the way for India's comfortable accommodation in the nuclear club.

Of course, there is no direct and immediate cause-and-effect relationship between the nuclear tests and developments that have subsequently taken place in these diverse spheres. But the point is that, morality aside, the strategic arguments deployed by the anti-nuclear lobby have all but collapsed over the past eight years. This may have happened because of the lack of a coherent argument, the absence of party political support, or the sheer power of a militarist ideology. But let us be honest enough to recognise that battling the hawks on their own turf has not been an astute move if the aim is to stop the spread of nuclear weapons in the Subcontinent.

This magazine has consistently and vociferously spoken out against the Pokhran and Chagai explosions. Indeed,

in a special issue we carried articles from various perspectives in an attempt to build a powerful discourse for a nuclear-free Southasia. And it remains that it would take only one irrational hand on the trigger during a run of spiralling tension to bring devastation to Southasia. Given that we live in a region in which time from take-off to strike is under ten minutes, the two main protagonists moving to nuclear-tip their missiles would do well to pull back and jettison their acquired warheads.

The fact that the nuclear Armageddon has not hit Southasia may be making the pro-bomb argument seem retrospectively coherent. But the threat posed by these weapons remains. Nuclear weapons need to be opposed for the simple fact that they are dangerous weapons, unethical in both intent and in action, that take lives of huge numbers of innocents – and pose the threat of taking infinitely more. It is important not to get caught up in the debate of whether they serve the interests of a national-security state, for that is a distraction from the moral and humanist high ground that peace activists do and must occupy. As soon as we cede ground to the 'strategists', who have the support of the powerful political and military set-up, by accepting their posing of the nuclear question in terms of inter-state conflict, war, power and deterrence, we will lose the argument. Exactly like the well-intentioned peace lobby in India did. Instead of a techno-activist campaign, what is needed is a political campaign rejecting nuclearisation on moral grounds from the grassroots. ▲

BANGLADESH

Contested elections

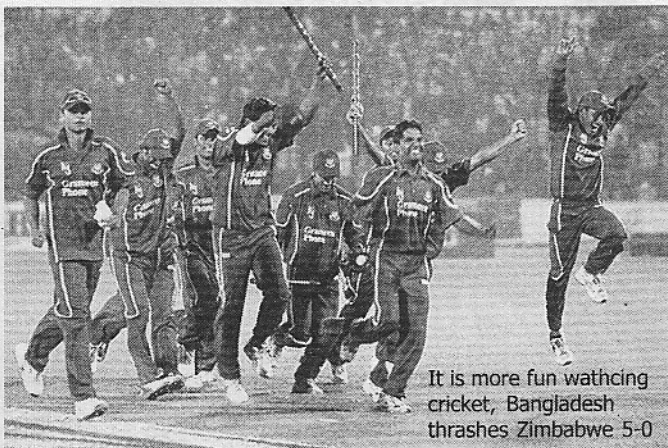
There is much good news to celebrate in Bangladesh. Professor Yunus's Nobel Prize has greatly restored a sense of national esteem to a people used to being trashed. And then there is cricket. Bangladesh whitewashed fellow minnow Zimbabwe 5-0 and then blew away ICC Associate team Scotland 2-0. All would be great except that the political situation has never been as bad as it is now, dateline December 2006.

Several reasons may be proffered, but the root of it all

is the absurd – or is it insane – conflict between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The AL has vowed that elections will not be held under the present electoral schedule, while the BNP has declared that elections must be held under the same. Neither side is budging as of this writing, yet both parties are keen to go to the polls. The Awami has accused the BNP of having rigged the entire system, including the Election Commission, to ensure a return to power. The BNP says that the AL is trying to scuttle the elections because it knows it has no chance of victory.

The two hostile political alliances are now on the streets, engaged in violent agitation. Bodies have fallen and regular bloodletting is reported every day from all over the country – it is as common as the stones that fly when the partisans face each other.

The BNP of Begum Khaleda Zia, which has just left power to contest in the polls, heads a four-party alliance. The alliance includes the Jammat-e-Islami, considered condemnable for having opposed the nationalist war of 1971. The Jammat's core group of loyal voters helped the BNP come to power in 2001 – the alliance now holds tight because it knows the benefits of the embrace. The Awami leads a 14-party alliance and has been further



It is more fun watching cricket, Bangladesh thrashes Zimbabwe 5-0

strengthened by the presence of the Jatiyo Party of ex-President Hussain Mohammed Ershad – a dictator of the past but now a useful ally – and the recently formed Liberal Democratic Party, made up of ex-BNP veterans opposed to that party's leadership by Begum Zia and her family.

Of course, nothing is more contested in Bangladesh than the issue of elections. Contesting elections is a matter that comes up only afterwards. There is a curious and total lack of political trust among the players. Elections are held under a 'non-partisan caretaker government' (NCG) that sits for 90 days to see the polls through, because it is taken for granted that the party in power will cheat in the elections. This year even that was not enough.

Sheikh Hasina's AL had demanded that the system be reformed for various reasons, but the BNP was not keen. When the time came to choose the head of the caretaker government, the former refused the person who would have been the Chief Advisor, as the head of the NCG is titled. As the crisis continued, and one person after another was turned down by each of the parties, the seat stood vacant.

Then President Professor Iyazuddin Ahmed, a BNP nominee to the high office, took everyone by surprise and nominated himself Chief Advisor, while remaining president. He also took for himself the crucial Home and

Defence portfolios. President Prof Iyazuddin, a retired university don, has not exactly passed the test of being non-partisan, though the BNP of course vehemently disagrees. Meanwhile, the AL-led movement now has a one point demand: the resignation of the professor as the Chief Advisor.

The diplomatic community has been busy counseling transparency and accommodation to both sides, but not much of either is evident. Meanwhile, the army was called in, called back, introduced on the street, and then told to stay put in the barracks, ready to help should an emergency hit the civilian government.

Latest reports are unfortunately dire. Once the Chief Justice refused to hear a writ challenging the president's self appointment as Chief Advisor, not only were the High Court premises and the judges' chambers ransacked, but the streets have once again become the final arbiter of Bangladeshi politics. And that so even as the deadlock remains: the BNP wants elections on January 22 at all costs, the Awami League wants to prevent that at all costs.

With the cricket season over, there is nothing that can guarantee any kind of a result or even a conclusion. No matter what happens, the political system has taken a lot of water and a future voyage of democracy in the Padma-Jamuna delta does not look too smooth. The coming weeks should show just how off-course it will end up. ▲

BHUTAN

His Majesty the Son

Even as Crown Prince Wangchuk was being proclaimed king in Thimphu after the abdication of his father Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in Kathmandu the Bhutani human rights activist Tek Nath Rizal was being admitted to hospital. The ailments of Rizal, 59, are said to be related to ill treatment meted out to him during nearly a decade spent in Bhutanese jails, often in shackles and handcuffs.

So on the one hand we have an Oxford-trained, smartly outfitted King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, representing a Druk regime responsible for terrible excesses, receiving greetings from high personages the world over. On the other we have a sick man in poor health in a Kathmandu hospital, representing a dispirited lot of refugees, discarded 16 years ago by Thimphu and disregarded by Kathmandu (which has plenty of problems of its own) and New Delhi



(whose motto on Bhutan reads 'If it aint broke, don't fix it').

There is no need to doubt father Jigme's intention of bringing democracy to Bhutan by the year 2008. The task for the new king – fresh with an education we are sure emphasised all the values of the classical Western liberal philosophy – is to ensure that fundamental freedoms are available to all citizens of Druk Yul regardless of faith, language or origin. At the very least, the new king represents an opportunity for change, because his coronation brings to an end the formal rule of the man known to be the progenitor of the depopulation policy – the ministers Dawa Tshering and Dago Tsering were but King Jigme's accomplices at the time of the great Lhotshampa exodus a decade and half ago. To an extent we are concerned for King Jigme as he goes into retirement, for he has done so with the burden and blame of depopulation resting squarely

on his shoulders.

The new king should, if he can, try to battle the racist, exclusivist noises coming out of the Tsongdu, the Druk Parliament. But he will swim against the tide only if he understands that a new Bhutan will never be democratic if it has been built on the ruination of the lives of a seventh the country's population. The Bhutani citizens in the refugee camps of Jhapa and Morang must be allowed back.

Meanwhile, the United States' offer to take in 60,000 of the refugees can be read at two levels. At one level, third-country resettlement is a humanitarian response to the plight of individual refugees rendered stateless for an inconceivably long time, and stark proof of the failure of the international community (and most importantly India) in redressing a wrong. At another level, the US initiative punctures the refugees' legitimate campaign for return with dignity.

The Bhutanese refugees who are offered third-country settlement in the United States, like members of any other Southasian community, are likely to take it up. Half of the

refugee lot will thus be headed across the Atlantic, and some others to other Western countries allegedly willing to host the Lhotshampa. That will leave only a few to continue the fight for the right of return.

If third-country resettlement does take place, the happy Ngalong power elites of Thimphu might want to consider the fact that, in a roundabout twist, the refugee problem might suddenly get more prominence than ever before as members of this expanded diaspora find their voices. But, if cruel fate does bring the disappearance of the Bhutani refugees, it will be doubly important for the international and regional community to look out for the interests of the Lhotshampa remaining within Bhutan.

For all that it did not do during the Lhotshampa refugees' continuing travails in exile, let the New Delhi government commit itself now to looking out for the interests of the Lhotshampa population that remains within Druk Yul – the members of which are already second-class citizens and will now feel more beleaguered than ever before.

SRI LANKA

Nationalist brinkmanship



The report of the Expert Panel appointed by President Mahinda Rajapakse to advise the All Party Conference on a political solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka is in deep limbo. The nationalist outcry against its recommendations, adopted by a majority of 11 out of 17 members of the

panel, has been so strong that the government has publicly dissociated itself from the report, and even the president may distance himself from it.

The report makes proposals that could form the basis for a reasonable political solution on the island, by seeking to balance the competing interests of the main ethnic communities. While it does not go as far as to explicitly propose a federal solution, the report is clear that a solution lies in going beyond the present unitary constitutional framework.

The report also calls for the merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces for a period of ten years, to be followed by a referendum to ensure that the will of the people of the east is being served. Interestingly, the report came at a time when the Supreme Court had just ordered the two provinces, which had been temporarily merged for over 18 years, to be de-merged – a decision welcomed by the nationalist parties.

Truth be told, there is no reason why the report should not be acceptable to the ruling party of President Rajapakse, for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party has in the past adopted a liberal and progressive attitude on power-sharing as the solution to the ethnic conflict. Unfortunately, the report seems likely to fall victim to the heightened nationalist sentiment in Colombo, which has been fuelled by the ongoing military conflict.

The government seems bent on eliminating the LTTE presence in the east regardless of civilian and military losses. After the split the LTTE suffered in that part of the

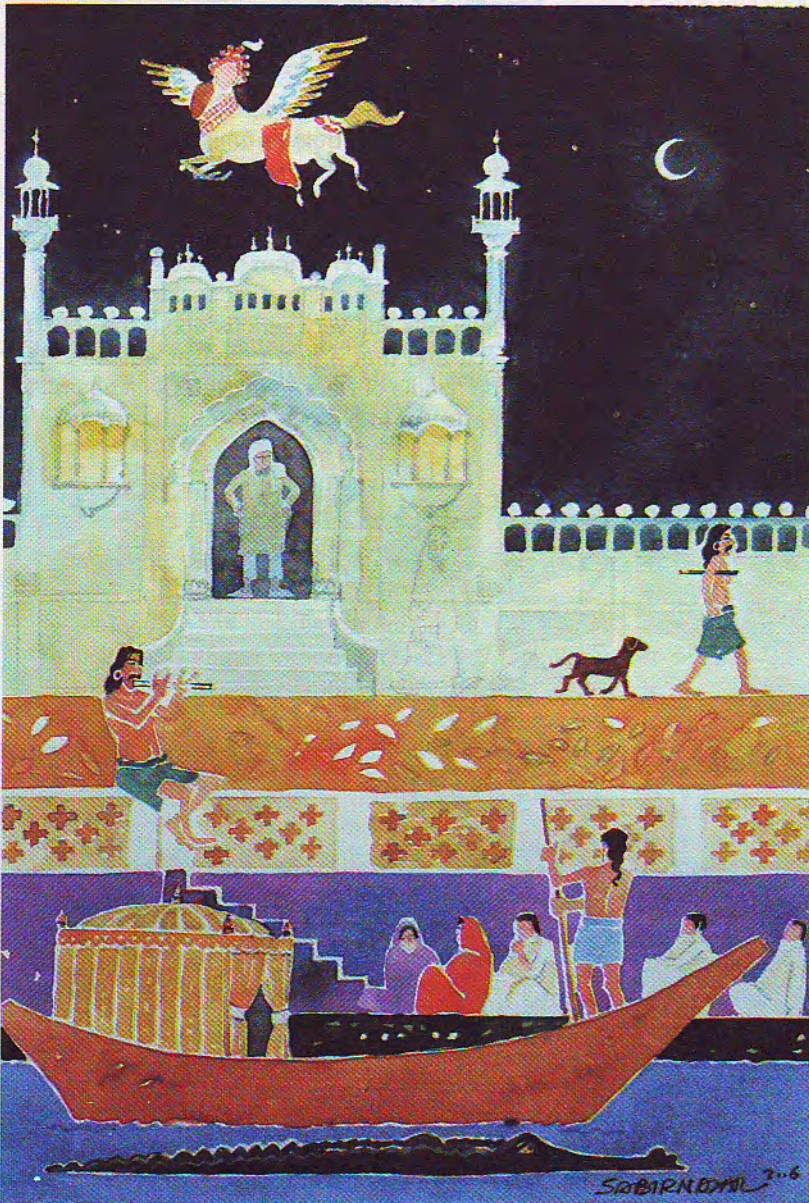
country in 2004, its strength there has been severely reduced. The rebels have been ousted from Batticaloa town, and the area of Vakarai is their last remaining stronghold.

The general feeling in Colombo is that the government has got the LTTE pinned to the ropes, even as the organisation is internationally ostracised. The media has played its part to harden popular sentiment against any compromise with the Tamil Tigers. Meanwhile, this increase in nationalist sentiment makes it more difficult for the government to engage in, and for civil society to advocate, political reform that could lead to a realistic resolution. The fate that seems to await the majority report of the Expert Panel is a stark example of this. The

Rajapakse government risks losing the support of the nationalist parties if it prepares to implement the panel report.

The rise in popular sentiment in favour of a military response to the LTTE has also received a boost from the LTTE's political intransigence and suicide bomb tactics. Faced with the Tigers' own attitude, those who call for an end to the fighting and a restarting of negotiations find themselves vilified and intimidated. In times like these, those who are anti-war are ipso facto considered pro-LTTE separatist. For the foreseeable future, those who stand for a peaceful, negotiated and power-sharing settlement of the ethnic conflict will have a thankless task. That is the report from Sri Lanka. ▲

'Ashiq, bhor, faqir tay kutay'



In Heer Ranjha, the popular tragic romance of Punjab, Ranjha leaves his worldly belongings behind and sets off to join his lover Heer. He tries to spend the night at a mosque near the river he must cross in order to get to her, but is thrown out by the mullah, who tells him that lovers, bees, beggars and dogs (*ashiq, bhor, faqir tay kutay*) are not allowed there. Ranjha tries to get the boatsman Luddon to take him across the river, but he is again refused as he has no money. Ranjha then plays his flute, and at its sound Luddon's wives refuse to leave without him. Waris Shah's version of this tale of spiritual pleasures and the rejection of worldly acceptability ends in tragedy when both Heer and Ranjha die at the hands of a society that will not allow them their happiness.

In this painting by Sabir Nazar, whose work appeared on Himal's December 2006 cover, one figure of Ranjha walks away from the mosque, his flute under his arm and his hands in his pockets, followed by a brown dog. Neither seems to mind being placed in the same undesirable category as they turn their backs on the building, symbolic of conventional morality and social hierarchy. In the doorway of the mosque the mullah stands disapprovingly. Painted as the building's façade in dull pastels of beige and blue, the frowning man is indistinguishable from the intolerant institution he has built. ▲

24"X18" Watercolor

INDIA

India onto the Iron Silk Road

Railways, has been asked to conduct a feasibility study of the project. The sudden re-think seems to be linked to worries that, while India stood watching, China would be successfully improving its own regional relations and connections, particularly given its recent agreements to build rail tracks in Burma and Thailand.

The TARN agreement was signed by 17 countries, including China, under the auspices of the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Although currently hampered by a great disparity in gauge sizes, the ultimate plan for TARN, sometimes called the 'Iron

Silk Road', will be a linking of Europe with Chinese ports, and the inclusion of several branch routes.

Alongside a great number of West, East and Southeast Asian states,

Nepal and Sri Lanka are for the moment the only Southasian countries that have signed up. The remaining countries have until the end of 2007 to enter into the agreement. **▲**

INDIA/PAKISTAN

No on Iran gas, then maybe

Here is where India and Pakistan agreed to something - the rejection of the final report of a consultant mutually appointed with Iran to find a way out of the gas-pricing impasse. Agreement would have revived the chances of the Iranian pipeline, but now the project appeared dead in the water. Initial reports stated that both Islamabad and New Delhi had rejected Singapore-based Gaffney Cline's conclusion out of hand, with India's Petroleum Minister Murli Deora saying that the pricing recommendation was "not acceptable" to the Indian and Pakistani governments.

Days later, however, Pakistan said that this was untrue. A spokesman for the petroleum ministry in Islamabad said that the new conclusions were still being examined. Although all details are currently being kept secret, the ministry spokesman said that the matter would be addressed at a meeting in Tehran scheduled for January.

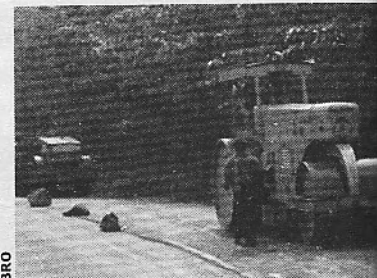
Deora himself also subsequently backtracked, saying that New Delhi was still very serious about the USD 7.2 billion project, and that a new proposal was due "very soon". By the middle of December, New Delhi had raised its previous offer for Iran's gas by a full 50 percent. **▲**

REGION

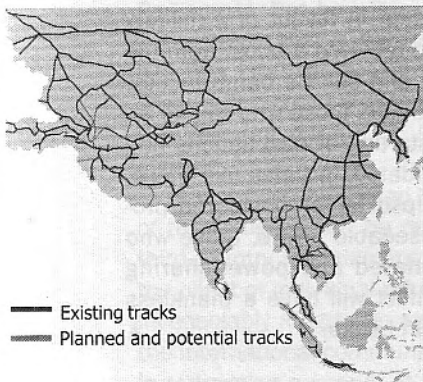
What's up, BRO?

New Delhi recently unveiled a far-reaching plan to extend its road network into Bhutan and Burma, as well as into Jammu & Kashmir. After a board meeting of the state-run Border Roads Organisation (BRO), Minister of State for Defence M Pallam Raju announced that India was planning on building more than 7600 km of roads into all areas of the Northeast - in an attempt, among other things, to both strengthen its relations with China and assert its control over the area.

To facilitate this increase, the BRO's staff will be increased by 75 percent over the next three years, to almost 45,000. Raju also announced an increase in road-building in states that have experienced ultra-left political violence in recent years. **▲**



BRO



— Existing tracks
- - - Planned and potential tracks

Although India did not sign the so-called Trans-Asia Railway Network (TARN) agreement on 10 November, within a few weeks New Delhi seems to have changed its mind. Rail India Technical and Economical Services, a public enterprise under India's Ministry of

REGION

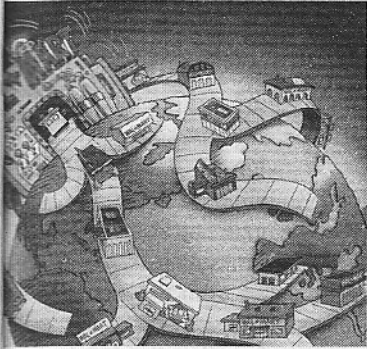
Going global

According to a World Bank report, globalisation could spur rapid growth in average incomes around the world over the next 25 years, growth faster than during the previous quarter century. This income boom is expected to be led by developing countries, particularly in Southasia. The gross domestic product of the region is already estimated to have expanded by 8.2 percent in 2006 - twice the rate of developed countries.

India saw the most expansion, with non-agricultural growth in excess of 10 percent backing an overall growth of 8.7 percent. Bangladesh, because of stronger remittance inflows and flourishing services and manufacturing sector output, saw growth rebound to a high 6.7 percent. In Sri Lanka, growth rose to an estimated 7 percent due to a good harvest and post-tsunami reconstruction activities. Of the Southasian countries the Bank looked at, only Nepal posted a sluggish economy, having grown at under two percent over the past year.

The report, "Managing the Next Wave of Globalisation", also suggests that the number of people around the globe living on less than a dollar per day could be cut to half by 2030 - from 1.1 billion to 550 million - by which time global trade is projected to rise more than threefold over its current levels. **▲**

Wal-Mart seeks entry



that the plan was to open "several hundred" Wal-Mart stores across the country.

Currently, companies such as Wal-Mart are only allowed to operate as wholesalers in India. They cannot yet legally operate as retailers. Especially following the experience of the US and other places, many in India worry about the effect of the sudden presence of big-box retailers on local and small-scale shops. Left parties have long been asking the New Delhi government to keep Wal-Mart out of the Indian market, and are still emphasising that the new deal would contravene regulations on foreign direct investment. By joining with Bhartia, Wal-Mart is gaining access

to the Indian market through a backdoor loophole, they claim.

Wal-Mart's announcement of its Bhartia tie-up came just ahead of the Indian-US Business Summit in Bombay. The event brought to India the largest trade mission from

the US to any country in the world – the US firms that came to Bombay to inspect business opportunities numbered over 250. With the promise of an imminent clinching of the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal, at least 25 of those firms were reportedly from the US's civilian nuclear sector. ▲

COURTESY RON ZALME

Just a day after Wal-Mart, the massive low-end US retail chain, announced its intention to enter the Indian market, Indian trade officials threw on the brakes, saying that they would have to study the plan some more. Wal-Mart, which is the US's largest retailer, had entered into a deal with India's Bhartia Enterprises, known for its mobile-phone service. Sunil Mittal, the Bhartia chairman, said

INDIA

Indians happiest, and most restless

Two new surveys have revealed that Indian youths are both the happiest young people in the world, and the most likely to leave their homeland.

The first survey, conducted by MTV, has found that young people in developing countries are twice as likely to feel "happy" about their lives as are those in first-world countries. Indian youth, it was found, are by and large the most happy, while Japanese youth turn out to be the most despondent.

But a second survey, conducted by the BBC, deduced that Indian youths were among the most likely to emigrate to other countries in search of a better future. The report polled 3000 teenagers, aged 15 to 17, in ten major cities around the world. Respondents in New Delhi tied with Nairobi for those who would most like to emigrate out of their respective countries – 81 percent.

MTV's survey, which focused on 16- to 34-year-olds, concluded that although only around 43 percent of the world's youth claimed to be happy with their lives, this low number was caused mainly due to respondents in richer countries. In the US and Britain, for instance, only 30 percent of the survey sample reported being happy. It was also found that the happiest youth in the developing countries were by and large the individuals who claimed to be the more religious.

Interestingly, the BBC survey received the largest negative response to its question on emigration from Baghdad, where 50 percent said that they would remain in war-torn Iraq. The survey did find outstanding agreement on one issue, however: that the US-led 'war on terror' was not making the world a safer place. Just 14 percent of participants in the poll disagreed with that contention. ▲

REGION

Human-rights failures

The SAARC Human Rights Violators Index, released in mid-December by the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR), has named Bangladesh as the worst regional violator of human rights. In 2005, Bangladesh experienced the most organised political killings, the highest number of extrajudicial executions in countries with no active insurgency – a whopping total of 396 – and was deemed the most dangerous placed in Southasia for journalists.

Bangladesh was followed by Bhutan at number two, then the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India. Thus, it beat out the quasi-military dictatorship in Pakistan, the period of royal coup in Nepal, the authoritarianism of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in the Maldives and the absolute monarchy of the recently abdicated King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in Bhutan.

Criteria used to produce the index include political freedom, torture, right to life, and violence against women. Although the ACHR acknowledges the controversial aspect of their ranking exercise, they emphasise that the index is based on systematic analysis of incidents and patterns of human-rights violations in the region. ▲



RUSTY STEWART

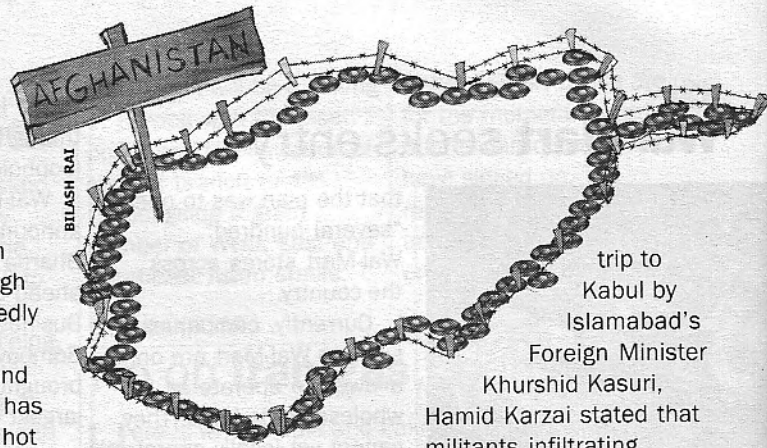
A 'neutral' Afghanistan

Amidst dreary assessments of Afghanistan's progress five years after the ouster of the Taliban, two US experts on Southasia recently published a five-point proposal for the country's development. These included asking the United Nations to call a conference that would declare the country a "neutral state ... like Switzerland".

The proposal was drawn up by former Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth and former ambassador Dennis Kux. The two also urged the Kabul government to accept the so-called Durand Line as

the official frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although Hamid Karzai reportedly is in favour of designating the Durand Line as the border, it has long been a political hot potato in Kabul.

Hopes for a neutral Afghanistan appeared far off, however, and the indeterminate border seems more vulnerable than before. The same week the Inderfurth report appeared, Pakistani Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao noted that Islamabad was seriously debating mining its long border with Afghanistan. The move would come in the wake of



trip to Kabul by Islamabad's Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri, Hamid Karzai stated that militants infiltrating Afghanistan from Pakistan were severely affecting relations between the two neighbours. Kasuri's main priority in Kabul was to solidify plans to hold a large crossborder jirga, in an attempt to stop the crossborder movement of insurgents. ▲

a rejection by Kabul of General Pervez Musharraf's proposal of fencing the shared frontier, and would be aimed in particular at stemming the flow of weapons from Afghanistan to Pakistani militants.

During a simultaneous

INDIA/BURMA

Sagging trade

An 18-member trade mission from India headed over the border into Burma in late November to try to understand why crossborder trade was not happening at any greater level. Despite having started more than 11 years ago, Indo-Burmese trade is currently totalling less than INR 73 million per year, and has fallen rapidly in recent years. This includes less than INR 33 million worth of Burmese exports into India, a decrease of more than 50 percent from 2003-04 levels.

Meanwhile, some of the states of Northeast India are attempting to take the situation into their own hands. Following the example of Manipur, Nagaland has recently joined the push to increase direct trade with Burma. The

Nagaland government wants to promote trade through the village of Pangsa where, although there has been a grandly named International Trade Centre since 1996, till now all crossborder trade from this point has been done by barter only.

When the Nagaland transport minister, Imtilemba Sangtam, recently visited the Pangsa trade centre, he urged the locals to approach the Rangoon government regarding the building of roadways into the area. Currently all official trade must come through Manipur's Moreh trade point. Meanwhile, Manipur Governor S S Sidhu in early December said that a new international bus service from Imphal to Mandalay is being seriously considered on both sides of the border. ▲

AFGHANISTAN

Accept Taliban, NATO told



Kasuri

On the eve of a crucial meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in late November in Latvia, Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri told the gathered foreign ministers that NATO forces were losing the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Kasuri not only said that NATO was bound to fail in the

endeavour, but also warned the organisation against sending any more troops into the region. One miffed Western diplomat noted that Kasuri was "basically asking NATO to surrender and negotiate with the Taliban".

Indeed, an effort seemed to be afoot to convince Western powers to attempt to come to a deal with the Taliban, and also to set up a new government in Kabul – one that would certainly undermine or sideline Hamid Karzai, the apple of the American eye. Recent 'peace deals' the Pakistani government has struck with Taliban militants in areas of the NWFP have been widely criticised for allowing the rebels a free hand to strike across the international frontier at NATO forces posted in Afghanistan. Afghans who fear that the Islamabad government is now actively attempting to undermine President Karzai's government may not be far from the truth. ▲

India versus Burmese citizens

The international pressure group Human Rights Watch has called on the Indian government to rethink its recent decision to offer a military aid package to Rangoon. When Indian Air Force chief S P Tyagi visited the new Burmese capital in the jungles at Nay Pyi Taw on 22 November, he offered a multimillion-dollar package that HRW says included helicopters, naval surveillance planes and upgrades to Burma's current fighter-plane fleet. Earlier in the month, the head of the Indian Army announced a new cooperative training project between the two militaries.

Human Rights Watch warns that any weapons or training aid will inevitably be used by the Burmese government against its civilian population, including in relation to the various ongoing ethnic conflicts. The country's military is currently in the process of building up its largest mobilisation in more than a decade, with more than 50 battalions reportedly going into operation against separatists in Karen state alone.

New Delhi did call a halt to military aid to the autocratic regime of King Gyanendra in Nepal during his 15-month takeover, but has shown no proclivity to do so in the case of the Burmese junta. "India may think it has to compete with China to cultivate good relations in the region," noted one HRW researcher, "but this is going too far."

SRI LANKA

A Northeast merger

In Sri Lanka, the president-appointed 'experts panel' of the All Party Conference submitted a report to Mahinda Rajapakse in early December, recommending a measure of power devolution to the country's northern and eastern provinces, as well as a 'merger' between those two areas over the course of a decade.

The report came after two weeks of continuous debate and the collation of hundreds of suggestions, including those collected from the general public. Its conclusions will now form the basis of debate for the All Party Representative Committee, which until now has been unable to tackle the issue of power-sharing. Of the panel's 17 members, six Sinhalese, four Tamils and the one Muslim representative ultimately endorsed the final report. Dissenting reports came from members of the nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

No Lhasa consulate

Despite the floating of another proposal prior to Hu Jintao's recent Southasia visit, Beijing has turned down New Delhi's request to open a consulate in Lhasa. The reason given for the denial was that China does not allow any country to operate consulates in Lhasa.

Of course, that is with the exception of Nepal, whose consulate has been in operation since long before the Dalai Lama's escape in 1959. In fact, at that time there were two countries with consulates in Lhasa - India's outpost was forced to close after the war in 1962. New Delhi has been keen to reopen its diplomatic office in Tibet

since 2003, when India formally acknowledged the Tibet Autonomous Region as being part of China. Subsequently, China recognised Sikkim as part of India.

Despite Beijing's anxiety over Tibet, however, closer regional integration is becoming increasingly inevitable. It was recently decided that India would open a consulate in Guangzhou, while China will open an office in Calcutta. As the road through Nathula is upgraded, revitalisation of the old Calcutta-Lhasa route cannot be too far behind. Then, India will most likely have its Lhasa consulate.

INDIA/TIBET

Beijing boilerplate

When there is little on the ground but soft-mouthed diplomacy, look to the opposition. BJP leader L K Advani became an instant star among the Tibetan community-in-exile during Chinese President Hu Jintao's three-day visit to India in late November. During a meeting with President Hu, Advani urged him to allow the Dalai Lama to visit Tibet and push for a resolution to the stagnant Tibetan situation.

The BJP leader's query reportedly took the Chinese dignitary by surprise, as it was the first time in long while that an Indian leader had brought up the topic with a top Chinese official. President Hu responded with Beijing boilerplate, reiterating that before any such visit could take place the Dalai Lama must publicly accept that Tibet is an integral part of the Chinese state - quite unmindful of the fact that the Dalai Lama has been shouting himself hoarse saying that he accepts that formulation.

Just broaching the subject, however, brought Advani many thanks from the Tibetan population in India. If India were made up of a Tibetan majority, is there any doubt that the BJP would sweep the next elections?

Advani targets Beijing



Karen villagers cleaning up in the army's wake, April 2006



A SEZ for Nepal

New Delhi has decided to help the Kathmandu government to develop a special economic zone (SEZ) in the southern border town of Birgunj. The move constitutes the first such assistance that India has ever offered to another country, and comes on the heels of another controversial SEZ-creating spree in India.

The decision also represents another step in the ongoing competition for influence over regional countries between India and China. The news of Indo-Nepali collaboration came amidst reports of the Nepali government having been actively looking for Chinese assistance to build an SEZ along its northern border with Tibet. China's SEZ programme is significantly more advanced than its nascent counterpart in India, although New Delhi is currently seen as pulling out all stops in attempting to catch up. As of now Nepal does not even have legislation allowing for the presence of special economic zones, something that would have to be passed now by an interim Parliament with Maoist presence. All indications are that the comrades will not scupper any deal in the making, however, with India or China. ▲

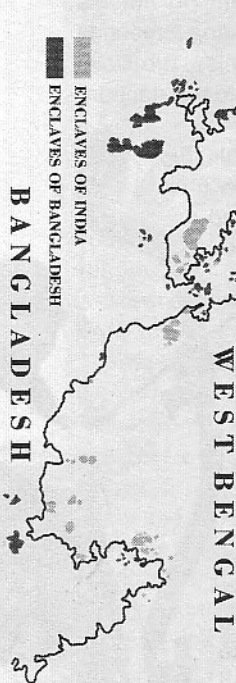
BANGLADESH/INDIA

Encaged in enclaves

Here's some data on Indo-Bangla relations. India has 111 'enclaves' surrounded by Bangladeshi territory, covering about 17,160 acres, while Bangladesh's 51 enclaves within India cover 7110 acres.

The Indian Parliament has recently been told that New Delhi has no real control over its Bangladeshi enclaves. Although 1974 bilateral legislation agreed on an exchange of enclaves, an article in the agreement stipulated that those citizens living on the enclaves could, if they desired, remain citizens of their respective countries. Either way, little action has taken place in the interceding three decades, although bilateral talks did resume in 2001. Enclave citizens, meanwhile, continue to live caged lives, with neither water nor electricity, schools nor doctors - despite the existence of all of these amenities in the enclaves' immediate surroundings.

While New Delhi now wants to conduct a joint survey and census of the two countries' respective enclaves, Bangladesh is maintaining that doing so is not a prerequisite to exchanging enclaves as set forth in the 1974 agreement. ▲



Five new dams

General Pervez Musharraf and his Cabinet in late November decided that Pakistan would forge ahead with plans to build five major dams by 2016. These will include the highly contentious Kalabagh dam (on the Indus River), and others in Akhori (Haro River), Munda (Swat River), Kurram Tangi (Kurram River) and Diamer-Bhasha (also on the Indus).

Although Gen Musharraf has in the past said that building mega-dams was of personal importance to him, as elsewhere dam projects in Pakistan have been controversial. Conflicts have arisen not only over displacement and rehabilitation, but also due to larger worries that traditionally marginalised provinces, such as NWFP, will have their waters diverted for the benefit of richer regions, primarily Punjab. Perhaps in reference to the ongoing controversy, in announcing the decision Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission Akram Sheikh pointedly emphasised that it was now incumbent upon all organs of the state to implement the plans. ▲



Anti-Kalabagh protest, Karachi

REGION

India's land ports

In what observers have dubbed a "breakthrough in the trade versus security debate", the Indian Cabinet in early December agreed to create 13 new integrated checkpoints (ICPs) on the country's borders with Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Burma. In addition, a new body will be created to oversee such matters, to be called the Land Ports Authority of India. The project is slated to cost around INR 8.5 billion.

ICPs are currently planned for Wagah (on the Pakistan frontier), Moreh (Burma), Raxaul (Nepal) and Petrapole (Bangladesh). During the next stage, more land ports will be set up in

Bangladesh and Nepal - at Hili, Chandrabandha, Sutarkhandi, Dawki, Akhaura and Kawarpuchiah in the former, and Jogbani, Sunauli and Rupaidiha in the latter. Additional points are expected between India and China, to expand beyond the current one at Nathula.

Officials have also stated that in the near future India's border trade would undergo a process of redefinition. This will do away with 'positive lists', which stipulate what can be traded - as are in use with Pakistan and at Nathula - and towards more inclusive 'negative lists', which simply denote what cannot be traded. ▲

Life in an open prison

For those who have been stuck in Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula since hostilities on the island heated up in August, the past few months have been a relentless descent into deprivation, chaos and fear.

BY AMMU JOSEPH

After citizens from Sri Lanka's Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts fled their homes in early December to escape the renewed war between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka Army, thousands ended up in the east-coast region of Vaharai – and found they had nowhere else to go. On 15 December, seven internally displaced persons, including a young child, died and many more went missing as they attempted to flee Vaharai in overloaded boats, braving the rough seas during the stormy season.

The fresh crisis on the east coast may well eclipse the sustained crisis that has crippled the northern district of Jaffna since August, when a major offensive by the LTTE provoked retaliation by the army, and led to the partial closure of the A9 Highway connecting Jaffna to the rest of the island. The consequent and continuing siege of Jaffna has left civilians feeling like they are inside a drum being beaten at both ends, according to A Kumaravadivel, the Vice-Chancellor of Jaffna University.

At first glance, Jaffna looks like a charming little town, refreshingly free of the urban blight that has defaced comparable urban spaces elsewhere in Southasia. But the first signs of the extraordinary circumstances of life in Jaffna appear on arrival at Palaly Airport. The bus that transports passengers from the aircraft to the rudimentary terminal buildings has blackened windows, as well as a partially painted windshield that offers only the driver a narrow view of the road ahead. Armed escorts on motorcycles accompany vehicles out of the extensive high-security zone within which the airport is located. The landscape is dotted with bombed out, long-abandoned homes. Outside the zone, vans and buses transporting civilians to the town of Jaffna tend to avoid the main road, which is used by military convoys and where there are dangers of various kinds – including landmines. Within the town, many corner plots and buildings have been taken over and fortified to serve as security outposts, manned by soldiers.

A map at the Jaffna office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reveals that, since August, at least 37,000 people living near the army's high-security zones and artillery points have fled their homes to escape daily shelling between the warring sides. They have joined the ranks of more longstanding internally displaced persons in Jaffna, this geographically isolated part of northern Sri Lanka that, unlike its neighbouring districts, is technically under government control. Of these latest additions to the sizeable population displaced by the long, drawn-out war, about 8000 are living in temporary camps, while the rest have sought refuge with relatives and friends.

The blocking of the A9 Highway – the only land route connecting the peninsula with the rest of the



Queuing for supplies

JAY CHANDIRAM

Jaffna residents are coping with the difficult situation with varying levels of resilience, resignation and resentment.

island, and the lifeline on which the northern district depends for its sustenance – has not only trapped residents within the embattled area, but also prevented people and goods from coming in. Travel and transport by sea and air have also been affected by the renewed conflict, with commercial flights between Jaffna and Colombo having been reintroduced only during the last week of November. Mobile phone services have also been suspended since August, adding to the sense of isolation.

According to residents, the period since August has been the worst they have faced in over two decades of war. The biggest problem is the acute scarcity of food, which has made Jaffna residents almost entirely dependent on the limited rations distributed through cooperative stores. Citizens are forced to spend long hours queuing for the meagre provisions available at these stores, with staples such as rice and flour in one shop and other basic necessities at another. Not only are the quantities inadequate, but various essential items, including infant food, are unavailable from time to time.

The prices of the few commodities available in the open market, including vegetables, have tripled or even quadrupled since August, placing them out of reach of most citizens. In any case, as Kumaravadivel points out, human beings do not live by bread alone – they need a variety of other items to lead anything resembling a normal life, and many such products are unavailable. While gasoline and diesel are slowly re-entering the market, kerosene, for example, which is much more important for running households, is

still in short supply.

Towards the end of his visit to India in November, President Mahinda Rajapakse announced that his government would buy food and other essentials in Tamil Nadu, and transport the goods directly from there across the water to Jaffna. He pointed out that this would be the easiest and fastest way to get the commodities to the population there. As of mid-December, however, these supplies still had not reached Jaffna, although on 16 December local newspapers did report that food from India was on its way.

Judith Bruno, head of the Jaffna office of the child-support organisation UNICEF, estimates that the district's population of roughly 600,000 requires a minimum of 10,000 metric tonnes of food every month. There is clearly a limit to how much food can be brought in by ship, especially during the rainy season. The bishop of Jaffna, Thomas Savundaranayagam, has been consistently highlighting the urgent need to reopen the A9 Highway in order to dispel the feeling among the people that "they are living and suffering in an open prison." His appeals have fallen on deaf ears, however, with both the Tamil Tigers and the army sticking to their rigid stances on the issue.

White vans

Another casualty of the renewed conflict is public health. With the scarcity of affordable, balanced food, malnutrition has become a significant, and growing, problem. Local pharmacies have run out of commonly needed medicines. Although the hospitals in the

A role for India?

A recurring theme in conversations with peace advocates and activists – both in Colombo and in Jaffna – is the apparently widespread feeling that India has a crucial and urgent role to play in brokering peace in the island nation. While acknowledging the unhappy history of India's involvement, particularly regarding the IPKF and Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, many activists now believe that the time has come for New Delhi to move on for the sake of the people of Sri Lanka. This view seems to indicate some loss of hope in the intermediary efforts, led by the Norwegians.

According to Bishop Savundaranayagam, "As our closest neighbour, India has a moral responsibility to bring this long-standing war, which has been bleeding the people, to an end." Citing geographical proximity and cultural links between India and Sri Lanka, he said that the Indians are best placed to "understand

the situation" and to play "an effective role." Apart from the fact that the Tamil people have a special affinity for India on account of cultural, linguistic and religious ties, the bishop continued, the Colombo government is sensitive to India's opinion – and would think twice before rejecting Indian intervention.

Vice-Chancellor Kumaravadivel agrees, noting that "Indian influence has been in Sri Lanka since the days of the Ramayana, whether we like it or not ... Peace will be stable only if India plays a role in bringing about an agreement and ensuring the implementation of the agreement." This plea for Indian involvement, a shedding of the present hands-off approach, is especially poignant because it is made from Jaffna, where the issue is primarily humanitarian. From the distance of Colombo and Delhi, geo-strategic issues may play a greater role in policy decisions. The worry is that the suffering of the people of Jaffna may figure less so.

peninsula have been able to continue functioning with essential drugs and materials provided by both the government and international agencies – they still face a shortage of equipment, as well as power cuts and a scarcity of fuel to run generators. Consequently, seriously ill patients need to be transported to Colombo on chartered flights by the Red Cross.

Education in Jaffna has also suffered. Schools, which were closed for two months, were recently reopened to enable children to prepare for their exams. Even so, in November children could be seen standing in food queues during school hours. The once-famous University of Jaffna, though not officially closed, had to “suspend all teaching activities” and “function without students”, according to the vice-chancellor. A third of the student body comes from outside the peninsula. After the troubles began in August, the university had to house and feed the marooned students for two months before they could be repatriated home with the cooperation of the armed forces. Kumaravadivel says he is trying to ensure that classes can be resumed in January. “Arrangements are being made to bring back students from the outlying districts, and to ensure that they are safe and have accommodation and food,” he says.

The problems faced by Jaffna’s residents are compounded by the fact that the new hostilities have led to widespread unemployment. The prohibition of fishing in the name of security has left whole communities of fisherfolk without any source of livelihood. A shortage of materials has meant no work for a wide range of skilled and unskilled workers alike, including masons, carpenters and other artisans. With a variety of shops unable to replenish supplies, many have downed shutters. With the fuel shortage that prevailed until recently, auto drivers and others in the transport sector had a limited scope to earn a living. An estimated 2000 people employed by the relatively small number of private-sector businesses in the peninsula have lost their jobs.

Despite the heavy presence of security personnel and the dusk-to-dawn curfew, forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings have increased in Jaffna. People in the area speak in hushed tones about the unmarked ‘white vans’ carrying masked, armed men who take individuals away from their homes at night. Many are later found dead, while others are simply not seen or heard from again. A white van without a

A white van without a license plate has long been a symbol of terror in Sri Lanka, associated with disappearances that have occurred across the country since the 1980s.

license plate has long been a symbol of terror in Sri Lanka, associated with disappearances that have occurred across the country since the 1980s. According to residents, these dreaded vehicles have now reappeared. Most of the time, families are unable to trace missing relatives, let alone secure justice for murdered ones.

Jaffna’s local press, which now comprises three Tamil newspapers, has been a target of intimidation and violence. In November, the papers’ editors were reportedly told by the armed forces not to carry any news about the LTTE, including messages and speeches related to the group’s ‘Heroes Day’ events during the last week of that month. This put them in a difficult situation, where they would necessarily antagonise one side or the other no matter what they did.

One newspaper, *Uthayan*, has been under direct attack for several months. In May, on the eve of World Press Freedom Day, two employees were killed and three others seriously injured when six armed men attacked the office. The attackers had come looking for two journalists, but not finding them, assaulted the non-editorial staff. In August, a driver working for *Uthayan* was also killed, and warehouses containing the paper’s printing equipment were burned to the ground. In September, two armed men again forced their way into the offices, threatening the paper’s staff if they did not print their statement. In December, a policeman standing guard outside the office was shot dead. According to local journalists, self-censorship has become a survival strategy.

Jaffna residents are coping with the difficult situation with varying levels of resilience, resignation and resentment. Witness to the turmoil of war for more than 20 years, they enjoyed a brief respite from their troubles after the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. But now, with the renewal and escalation of conflict, they are once again haunted by fear and anxiety. Civilians in Jaffna are paying a heavy price for the fact that both the Rajapakse government and Velupillai Prabhakaran’s LTTE have, over the past several months, deviated from the admittedly thorny path to peace.

On 24 November, with tensions running high in anticipation of the ‘Heroes Day’ speech by Prabhakaran, Bishop Savundaranayagam said, “I hope and pray that they will not opt for a military solution.” He pointed out that attempts to solve the country’s political problems through military means have been tried again and again, and have invariably failed. During Prabhakaran’s subsequent speech, the LTTE head asserted that there was “no other option but an independent state for the people of Tamil Eelam”. This development, coupled with the anticipation of the government’s likely response on the ground, has left people in Jaffna feeling more vulnerable than ever. ▸



The roots of Dalit rage

The symbolism of Dalit politics is a tactical response to the threat of violence lurking beneath the surface of Indian democracy. The benevolent tolerance that caste Hindu society affects may well be misplaced.

BY SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

In January 2006, Bant Singh, a Dalit peasant and community organiser, was assaulted near his home village in Mansa District of Punjab state. Left for dead by his assailants, he was denied attention at the district hospital, except on payment of an inducement that was plainly beyond his means. His condition deteriorated badly and three of his limbs had to be amputated when he was finally placed under competent medical care. Even as news of the shocking crime filtered out, there was little hint that the perpetrators, known to be two former headmen of Bant Singh's village, would ever be brought to justice. In a zone where the liberties guaranteed by the Indian Constitution are little more than a phantasm, and the hierarchical privileges of caste and class the reality, Bant Singh had been punished for being found guilty of an unforgivable crime. He had shown faith in the rule of law, and sufficient persistence to fight a prolonged legal battle to bring to justice three men guilty of the sexual assault of his young daughter (See *Himal October 2006*, "The Dalit sword of Mansa").

In September, as Surekha Bhotmange prepared an evening meal for her family in Kherlanji village of Bhandara District in Maharashtra, a mob of local thugs broke into her house. She was dragged outside, along with her daughter Priyanka and two sons, Roshan and Sudhir, one of whom is visually

handicapped. The women were lashed to a bullock cart and brutally gang-raped, before all four were murdered. Witnesses to the grisly carnage were sworn to secrecy. Their assent was easily secured, since they had just witnessed a crime that left few boundaries intact between observation and participation. Surekha's husband Bhaiyyalal lived to tell the story, but his complaints at the local police station went unrecorded until the four charred bodies of the victims were discovered the following day.

The Bhotmanges belonged to the Mahar caste of B R Ambedkar, and saw themselves as heirs to the great tradition of cultural rebellion that he represented. Their faith in the social mobility that education could bring, and their resistance to all efforts to snatch away part of their property for a water scheme that would bring them no conceivable benefit, was seen as a challenge to the casteist status quo. Like Bant Singh, they too fell victim to the alternative system of conflict resolution that prevails as the final bulwark of an ascriptive, hierarchical social order.

When atrocities against the living remain unrequited, it might occasion some shock that supposed outrages against idols should provoke violence and calls for retribution. On 30 November, when news broke of a statue of B R Ambedkar being vandalised in Kanpur District of Uttar Pradesh, Dalit

organisations mobilised for a day of protests. Violence was reported from diverse parts of the country, but the most demonstrative incidents were in Maharashtra, where one of the Indian Railways' most prestigious commuter trains was set aflame between Bombay and Pune. Nobody was killed in the incident, though sporadic clashes elsewhere in the state did claim two lives.

Symbolism over substance?

The realities of a world where little is achieved without conflict compel the new Dalit movements to make certain tactical choices. The hazards of pursuing their interests with necessary zeal cannot be discounted, since violence lurks just beneath the surface of India's democratic order. But the pursuit of accommodation is not a sufficient answer, since that entails the risk of yielding on core Dalit interests.

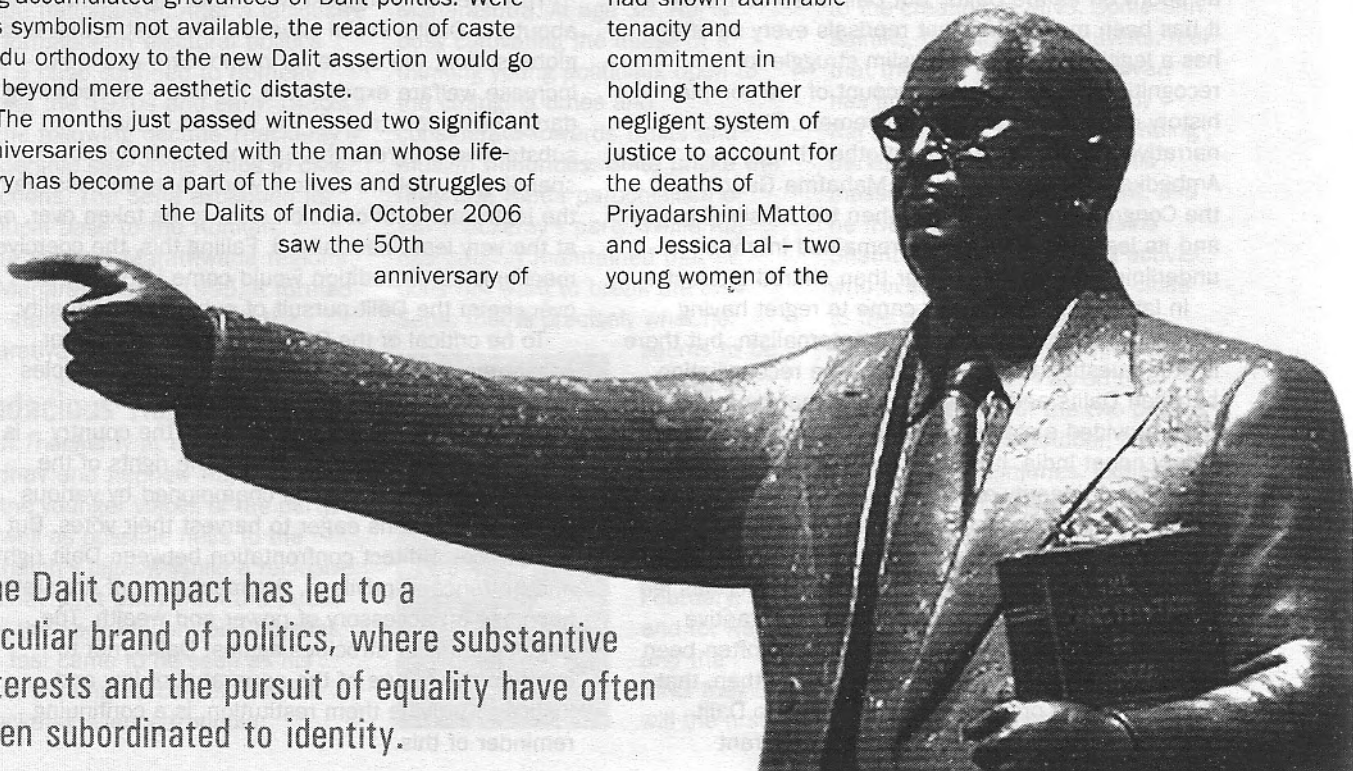
Partly in response, a delicate compromise has been fashioned which places symbolism above substance. A statue of B R Ambedkar, installed at a prominent vantage point in the smallest town or village, is often regarded as a sufficient triumph – one that would sustain the solidarity of the movement, even as substantive gains remain elusive. It is this precise phenomenon that has led to a proliferation of statues of the man revered today as one of the great Indians of the 20th century. These rather hastily fashioned icons have proven offensive to the sensibilities of some, especially those with an ideological predilection towards the Hindutva strain of politics. What they fail to realise is that the iconography of Ambedkarism is a safety valve for the long-accumulated grievances of Dalit politics. Were this symbolism not available, the reaction of caste Hindu orthodoxy to the new Dalit assertion would go far beyond mere aesthetic distaste.

The months just passed witnessed two significant anniversaries connected with the man whose life-story has become a part of the lives and struggles of the Dalits of India. October 2006 saw the 50th anniversary of

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. This conversion was a climactic act of cultural rebellion, and the fulfilment of a vow made in 1927 after a Satyagraha he led to assert Dalit rights to a water source invited the furious reprisals of upper-caste orthodoxy. A few weeks later, 6 December was the 50th anniversary of Ambedkar's death.

As journalist Jyoti Punwani wrote in a recent opinion piece, for all the significance of these anniversaries for the Dalits, it was as if they did not exist for the mainstream press. On 5 December, Punwani observes, a prominent newspaper in Bombay "carried on page one, pictures of two residents who live near Mumbai's Shivaji Park, ready to leave home with bags packed". They were leaving their homes temporarily because of the compelling need to "avoid the influx of Dalits to Shivaji Park on 6 December, Dr Ambedkar's death anniversary". It was not as if the residents of the area were strangers to large and disorderly gatherings. The Shiv Sena had been laying waste to their neighbourhood for at least 40 years during the Dussehra observances, charged by their leader Bal Thackeray's oratory. In comparison, the annual assembly of Dalits on the occasion of Ambedkar's death anniversary had invariably been a model of sobriety and civic responsibility.

In the media narration again, the Kherlanji atrocity existed not as a brutal crime that called out for punitive sanctions, but as a looming presence that somehow enhanced the aura of menace hovering over the Ambedkar death anniversary observance. The media, Punwani argued, had shown admirable tenacity and commitment in holding the rather negligent system of justice to account for the deaths of Priyadarshini Mattoo and Jessica Lal – two young women of the



The Dalit compact has led to a peculiar brand of politics, where substantive interests and the pursuit of equality have often been subordinated to identity.

urban middle class murdered by men who believed they enjoyed absolute impunity on account of their social circumstances. Priyanka Bhotmange's was no less poignant a case, demanding as much if not more commitment on the part of the press.

The reasons why Priyanka Bhotmange did not merit the same treatment as someone like Priyadarshini Mattoo are fairly clear. Shortly after the violent affrays over the vandalisation of an Ambedkar statue, a prominent English-language news channel ran an hour-long programme of debate and discussion centred on a single question: Are Dalits becoming pawns in a larger political game? Of the invited audience in the studio, 85 percent voted affirmatively, and among those who phoned in their responses, a still larger proportion concurred.

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that elite opinion – even in the upper- and middle-class strata that do not have reason to feel directly threatened by the assertive new strains in Dalit politics – tends to view the Dalits as a people who have not yet attained the political maturity to act on their own behalf. This perception, it seems, is derived from the elaborate symbolism of Dalit politics, particularly in relation to the iconography of Ambedkar. But in drawing the facile conclusion that Dalit politics is yet to attain maturity, elite opinion may well have mistaken contingent tactical adjustments with inherent characteristics.

A recent report on the status of India's Muslims, prepared by a commission headed by the eminent jurist Rajinder Sachar, pointed out that on several vital counts, India's principal religious minority is perhaps as poorly off as the Dalits. But Dalit assertion, even if it has been met with violent reprisals every so often, has a legitimacy that the Muslim struggle for recognition has lacked, on account of the complex history of India's nationalist movement. This is a narrative that includes, among other things, Ambedkar's historic pact with Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress party in 1932, when the Muslim League and its leadership seemingly remained intent on underlining differences rather than shared interests.

In later years, Ambedkar came to regret having yielded to Gandhi's magnificent paternalism, but there is little question that the terms of the reconciliation between Dalits and caste Hinduism that he authored have provided a stable underpinning for the politics of independent India. It is also true that by making the assertion of identity an object in itself and consecrating the principle of unequal treatment under the law as a means of redressing centuries of institutionalised inequality, the Dalit compact has led to a peculiar brand of politics, where substantive interests and the pursuit of equality have often been subordinated to identity. It is unsurprising then, that the established order is able to respond to Dalit assertions of identity with a variety of tolerant

benevolence, while the pursuit of substantive equality has been known to call forth extreme violence.

Coercive focus

It would be evident that identity has been the main concern of the Dalit party that has, in three recent episodes, exercised power in India's largest state of Uttar Pradesh. These intervals in power were invariably terminated due to the fickleness of the parties with which that main vehicle of Dalit politics in UP – the Bahujan Samaj Party, or BSP – was compelled to enter into coalitions. But running through all the BSP's efforts was an agenda that was followed to the point of obsession: to pack the administration with trusted functionaries, from the state capital on down. Particular attention was placed on the police forces, to ensure that functionaries of the law at the local level were amenable to the diktat of the party.

This is a rather chastening reality. Under a political dispensation in which welfare commitments are professedly strong, the most powerful incentive in contesting elections should be to gain control over the welfare mechanisms – like health and education – rather than the apparatus of coercion. Substantive economic progress for the Dalits would presumably come from enhanced welfare expenditures, channelled through the social infrastructure. The reality in India, as manifest in the administrative actions of the BSP, seems the opposite. The overwhelming concern of a party of the oppressed, during its brief interludes in power in the largest state in the country, is not to augment welfare, but to capture the instruments of coercion.

This seems to suggest two rather significant points about the Dalits' social situation. The first is that under globalisation, the space for manoeuvre available – to increase welfare expenditure, for one – is becoming dangerously constricted. The second is that substantive progress through increased public spending on welfare sectors would only be possible if the instruments of coercion were to be taken over, or at the very least neutralised. Failing this, the coercive mechanisms of tradition would come into play, to overwhelm the Dalit pursuit of substantive equality.

To be critical of the Dalits' seeming disdain for constitutionalism and liberal democratic principles would be easy. But the experience of Uttar Pradesh – and indeed other parts of the country – is testimony to an undeniable fact. The rights of the oppressed may verbally be championed by various political formations eager to harvest their votes. But in a situation of direct confrontation between Dalit rights and entrenched privilege, the machinery of the state becomes an accessory of power and wealth. The ongoing litany of atrocities against Dalits, not to mention the failure of the apparatus of law and justice to provide them restitution, is a continuing reminder of this.

There is something about conflict among kin that keeps history engaged, and often bitter. The Mahabharata, for example, is nothing if not a story of epic battle between cousins. Egos may drive such conflicts, but their spoils have always been political. In Bombay today, two cousins, Raj and Uddhav Thackeray, have their horns locked in combat. At stake is the militant legacy of Bal Thackeray – Raj's uncle, Uddhav's father, and the founder of the Hindu-nationalist Shiv Sena. Inevitably, the politics will be titillating; but what about the battlefield, the heart of Bombay? Is the Shiv Sena losing its grip over Dadar, the area of the city that has been its stronghold for years? And is the Marathi urban middle class finally shifting loyalties? The answers to these questions may well define the trajectory of Maharashtra's politics, and Bombay's future.

But first, a brief foray into the past. In the late 1960s, Bal Thackeray built his political party, the Shiv Sena, out of a rabble-rousing lot of disgruntled Vijnanarastrian youth. As the appeal of Maratha parochialism weakened, the party moved towards militant Hindu nationalism. After a lacklustre performance in electoral politics and a base confined to Bombay during the 1970s and early 1980s, in the following decade Thackeray's leadership saw some gains in civic elections. The Sena expanded its political base to the Konkan, Vidarbha and Marathwada regions of Maharashtra. In 1995, it formed the state government with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Audacious Raj

With Thackeray at the helm, his son Uddhav and nephew Raj emerged as the younger voices of the party, as well as possible heirs to the patriarch's legacy. While a reclusive Uddhav kept away from the public eye, the fiery, elegant and popular Raj fast came to be seen as his uncle's fitting successor. But Bal Thackeray silenced popular

Bal, Raj and Uddhav

In the Shiv Sena's traditional stronghold, many are excited about the breakaway formation headed by Bal Thackeray's nephew Raj – even if they don't know exactly what the new party stands for

BY ATUL MISHRA

speculation by anointing his son Uddhav the party's working president in 2004, decidedly settling the issue of succession. This ended Raj's chances of heading the Shiv Sena and discord developed rapidly between the two. In December 2005, Raj quit the Shiv Sena, claiming he had "suffered" in the party.

After a state-wide tour, in March 2006, Raj announced the formation of a new political party, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). The new party is pledged to the building of a vibrant, dynamic Maharashtra. At age 38, Raj is busy cultivating the image of a thinking young politician, open to the changing times and considerate towards Dalits and Muslim minorities, quite unlike the firebrand Hindu parochialism of Bal Thackeray's party. While Raj has publicly maintained that he does not want to break the Shiv Sena, that is precisely what he



seems to be aiming at. Bombay's civic elections are due in the first week of February, and for Raj and the MNS they will the first

crucial test.

Till a year ago, one could feel the Shiv Sena's unchallenged supremacy as one stood under the shade of Sena Bhavan, the party headquarters located on Dadar's N C Kelkar Road. The rebel Raj has begun his assault by establishing his headquarters on the same street, just a few metres away. He has called his offices Rajgadh, 'Raj's fort'. Furthermore, directly facing Sena Bhavan is a 4.8-acre piece of prime real estate bought by Raj and his associates for a whopping INR 4.2 billion prior to the creation of MNS. Some Shiv Sainiks, the old party activists, feel that the awe that Sena Bhavan has inspired is now diluted by Raj's audacity. "Raj is surrounding us. His office is right here, this massive property in the front, and he lives next door," complains Shambhu Panchal, a Sena activist who lives in the tenements close to the nearby Plaza Cinema.

MNS's presence is imposing – symbolically as well as on the ground. Activists of the two parties clashed this past October, leading to a number of injuries. Explains Nitin Gujar, an MNS supporter who participated in the clash: "We wanted to show [the Shiv Sena] that though we are different from them, we are not cowards. *Apna gaand mein bhi dum hai boss* [Hey, we too have guts]." Plenty of guts – that is something the two

If politics in the Subcontinent is an affair of biding one's time, Raj Thackeray has time on his side; the question is whether he has the patience.

Senas seem to have in common, requiring police barricades to separate the two headquarters. The Shiv Sainiks have long taken pride in flexing their muscles for their "Supremo" Bal Thackeray. And with Raj's youngsters equally adventurous, the barricades appear to be nothing more than a gesture.

Pocket money

Dadar residents have been traditional Shiv Sena supporters, and it is from here that the party expanded its base to spread across Maharashtra. With the MNS on the scene, there is now palpable excitement in the area. The Kamble family has been living near Swaminarayan temple for over four decades. Swati Kamble feels Raj's party will get jobs for the youth, and hopes that it will do so for her son, who will graduate soon. But the son just shrugs. *Manse* (pronounced *mans-ay*), he says, using the Marathi acronym for the MNS, "is no different from Sena. Same violence, same old populist rhetoric." One gets the same response from a lot of people in the area.

And yet, there is also an optimism that reason cannot explain. It does not matter if they do not know what exactly Raj's vision is – if indeed he has one – or what the MNS has done in the nine months since its establishment. The important thing seems to be that the MNS is new, while the Sena is old. Bal Thackeray seems to be almost a spent force. And Uddhav? Too arrogant to approach the people; too arrogant for politics. Raj, on the other hand, is accessible. The MNS does not act like the moral police. Raj has encouraged Western-style ballroom dancing during inter-collegiate cultural festivals, organised cricket and body-building competitions. Some

students – gathered at the Canopy restaurant near Ruparel College – agree that Raj will "make it big". Just exactly what that means remains unclear. A party functionary informs this writer that each young activist of the MNS gets INR 5000 a month. The claim is loftier than the actual amount, but it appears to be working for now. The hope of something new, and pocket money, is attracting young followers.

Bombay's political analysts differ in their views on the MNS's prospects. The lack of a coherent ideological position seems to be the biggest obstacle. "Raj Thackeray doesn't know what his party stands for," says one observer. "He shuns the Bal Thackeray brand of militant Hindutva, but uses the old legacy. His past record makes Muslims sceptical. And there is little in him to appeal to Dalits." In the months following the formation of the party, many disgruntled Shiv Sena leaders and activists did join the MNS. But a substantial reverse-switch has undermined Raj's momentum. Meanwhile, the old guard has tended to stick to the old party, even as many of the youth are attracted to Raj's outfit.

Raj Thackeray's politics is struggling to emerge from the shadow of what is not a principled departure but a personal feud, and to acquire a niche of its own. At the same time, the clash of personalities is also an asset for Raj over the Uddhav-led Shiv Sena. "If Uddhav and Raj were to make a speech from the same dais, people would see Bal Thackeray in his nephew and not in his son. Between the two, Raj wins handsomely," the political observer adds. Perhaps that will ensure that Raj makes a substantial dent in the Shiv Sena's vote bank, although it does not necessarily mean that it will be the MNS which will receive the resulting votes. Some say that

he is definitely harming the Sena, but is doing greater harm to himself because the votes are likely to land in the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party's bags.

Whatever the differences, all agree that the 1 February 2007 civic elections will decide the future of Raj and the MNS. In Raj's favour is that, unlike Narayan Rane and Sanjay Nirupam, senior leaders who quit the Shiv Sena to join the Congress Party, he has floated his own party and appears determined to see it through. Also to his advantage is the absence of any credible competitor of his age in the entire platform of Maharashtra politics. If politics in the Subcontinent is an affair of biding one's time, Raj Thackeray has time on his side; the question is whether he has the patience.

'Bombay' is an uncomfortable noun to encompass this jazzy, global city. Here, parochial politics coexist with cosmopolitan economics. Dadar remains the playfield of this politics, its people now busily anticipating the twists that the conflict between cousins will take. In the end, one cannot really gauge whether the middle-class Maharashtrian of Dadar is shifting loyalties. But there is definitely flux, and it is visible.

Raj Thackeray has posed an impressive challenge to the Shiv Sena's dominance, and recent speeches at Shivaji Park have changed the state's political equations. Although there has never been a more influential orator at the park than Bal Thackeray, that is now in the past. Raj has crossed the street from his house, walked away from his uncle's shadow, and taken the centre stage. He has displaced the patriarch. Whether the people have replaced the Bal with Raj remains to be seen.

Some names in this article have been changed on request.

'Rape to riches' to the Women Protection Act



Mukhtaran Mai leads an anti-Hudood protest, Multan

Pakistan's new pro-women legislation is a significant step. Pervez Musharraf should be credited for a bold move, and held accountable for his pledges.

BY MIRANDA HUSAIN

Many critics of President General Pervez Musharraf have been dismissive of his Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Bill 2006, which was passed unchanged by both the National Assembly and Senate, and enacted into law on 1 December. The new bill has been attacked as being little more than the grande finale of the president's latest political reinvention tour, and for addressing just two of the five aspects of the country's oppressive Hudood Ordinances – adultery and rape.

Opponents insist that the principle purpose of the new legislation remains the consolidation of Gen Musharraf's 'enlightened moderation' credentials on the international stage. Indeed, even the bill's much-awaited parliamentary debut before the National Assembly in

mid-November appeared to have been timed for maximum impact. It was on the same day that *In the Name of Honor*, the ghost-written memoir of Mukhtaran Mai – the gang-rape victim who has since become an international icon against female subjugation – went on sale in Pakistan.

Many have felt that this coincidence was orchestrated to dilute memories of the general's infamous 'rape-to-riches' faux pas at the 2005 United Nations General Assembly in New York, when he suggested that Pakistani women often alleged rape to secure either financial compensation or fast-track resident status to Western countries. It may also have been designed to erase memories of the president's placing of Mai, also in 2005, on the country's 'exit-control' list, which barred her from attending a conference in the US to

share her ordeal.

But while Gen Musharraf's critics continue to insist that any change in his approach to the plight of Pakistani women is merely cosmetic, it must nevertheless be noted that no political party in the country voted against his women's bill. Thus, the general has secured his place in history as the only Pakistani leader to have ever successfully challenged any aspect of the Hudood laws (See *Himal* December 2006, "Fighting Hudood, protecting women").

Firewall protection

The Women Protection Act (WPA) addresses the most controversial aspects of the Hudood Ordinances, a group of laws that date back to 1979 and Zia-ul Huq's rule – those pertaining to adultery and rape, which the new bill categorises as two separate offences. While adultery remains within the purview of Islamic law, the WPA abolishes the death penalty and flogging for those accused of this crime and also reverses its non-bailable status.

The WPA's most significant achievement, however, is the removal of rape from the jurisdiction of Islamic law, under the rationale that the Koran makes no specific mention of this crime. Instead, rape is now in the ambit of Pakistan's criminal legal system, under the Pakistan Penal Code. That this inclusion abolishes the Hudood prerequisite of four male witnesses is also a significant accomplishment. The Hudood provisions pertaining to adultery and rape made no distinction between consensual and non-consensual unlawful sex. As such, any woman filing a rape charge would automatically find herself open to adultery charges if she were unable to fulfil the eyewitness criterion,

since she would have inadvertently admitted to having had unlawful sexual relations. Thus Pakistanis must also welcome the introduction of safeguards to prevent a woman from being liable on adultery charges when, for whatever reason, she fails to prove her case before the courts.

Yet even before it entered into law, the bill's presentation before the National Assembly succeeded in upsetting the political applecart, with various parties fearing that the government had deliberately manoeuvred to shape possible alignments ahead of the forthcoming general elections. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a government coalition partner, was the most vociferous in protesting the bill. Indeed, although the six-party religious alliance, which heads the provincial governments in both NWFP and Balochistan, did not vote against the bill, it did boycott the assembly proceedings. Vehemently opposed to any changes to the Hudood Ordinances, the MMA leadership accused the government of tabling a bill in violation of Islamic injunctions set out by the Koran and Sunnah, simply to appease its Western allies on the 'enlightened moderation' front.

This was to be expected. Even during the bill's review process, the MMA refused to participate in the meetings of the parliamentary-approved committee appointed to ensure that the bill's provisions in no way violated Koranic injunctions. When the government subsequently responded by setting up a parallel body comprised of nine religious scholars outside of the parliamentary framework, Gen Musharraf's critics were quick to point to his unwillingness to jeopardise a parliamentary alliance with religious elements so close to the general elections, despite the fact that the Council of Islamic

Ideology had already determined that none of the bill's provisions violated Islamic injunctions.

The image of the general 'kowtowing' to mullah pressure was further reinforced by the fact that the version of the bill passed by the National Assembly included a last-minute provision, in the form of three amendments, to appease the religious alliance. The criminal offence of 'lewdness' (later termed as 'fornication') was inserted into the Pakistan Penal Code, and defined as consensual sexual intercourse between any man and woman not married to each other. However, before a charge of fornication can be made, two eyewitnesses must now be produced; furthermore, anyone found guilty of levelling false allegations is liable to the same punishment – up to five years in prison and a PKR 10,000 fine. While it did cave in to the MMA by including the fornication offence, however, the government simultaneously introduced a 'firewall' to protect women from false accusations, by stipulating that no allegation of rape can be converted into an allegation of fornication.

Broken alliance

The MMA's refusal to back the Women Protection Act, along with its subsequent threats to resign from the National Assembly, will likely be taken in stride by the government, since it appears that Gen Musharraf had, to a certain extent, already been seeking to distance himself from the religious parties. Perhaps believing that the clipping of his enlightened wings is too high a price to pay for their support, he had begun looking beyond 'traditional' allies to keep his options open.

Enter the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). That the general-president managed to secure the

support of Benazir Bhutto's secular liberal party, despite the last minute MMA-friendly amendments to the bill, has further fuelled rumours of a secret deal between the former prime minister and the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML), as well as of Bhutto's possible return to the political scene in the run-up to the elections. Indeed, Gen Musharraf must be aware that any inclusion of Bhutto in a future government would further enhance his reformist image in the eyes of Washington DC, especially at a time when the US is becoming increasingly sceptical of Islamabad's claims of reigning-in pro-Taliban elements in its tribal areas and curbing crossborder militant attacks into Afghanistan.

An added bonus of PPP support for the bill was the proverbial slap in the face it gave to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). This party, overseen by Nawaz Sharif, co-signed the Charter of Democracy with the PPP in May 2006, formalising the two parties' commitment to use the power of the ballot to oust Gen Musharraf's military regime. Sharif's party had long slammed the women's bill as a government tool calculated to divide a united opposition. That PPP support for the bill vindicated the PML-N charges was of little satisfaction, however, since it became apparent that Benazir Bhutto had readily ditched her alliance partner in service of her own political interests.

Like the PPP, when the PML-N was in power it had unsuccessfully challenged the Hudood Ordinances. But while the PPP has seized the opportunity to support the current leadership – thereby claiming the moral high ground by publicly placing the safeguarding of women's rights above and beyond political rivalries – the PML-N decided "on

The general has secured his place in history as the only Pakistani leader to have ever successfully challenged any aspect of the Hudood laws.

Many educated Pakistani women, including those committed to promoting women's rights, believe that there is too much coverage of rape in the country.

principle" to abstain from voting on the bill, proudly boasting that it would never do business with a "usurper's government".

Perhaps realising that he had devastatingly misplayed his cards, however, Sharif soon engaged in a rather clumsy political about-face. Thus, soon after the women's bill was approved, the PML-N decided to throw its weight behind an additional bill, the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law) Amendment Bill, tabled by PML President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain. This legislation addressed such issues as women's inheritance and divorce rights, as well as the marrying of women to the Koran, a principally tribal custom whereby families and mullahs coerce their daughters into not marrying.

Yet the Anti-Women Practices Bill throws up another intriguing political fact. From the outset, Shujaat had reportedly been recommending that these additional clauses be incorporated into the women's bill, and was taken aback that the draft presented before the National Assembly made no mention of them. One explanation for their exclusion is that the government did not wish to further delay the bill's approval by Parliament, especially given that on 14 November the ruling MMA government in NWFP had successfully passed the Hasba Bill, legislating the rule of Islamic law in that province – although this was subsequently blocked by the Supreme Court in mid-December. Thus, if the government were made to further postpone its much-touted reformist bill, this would have indicated to Gen Musharraf's critics and the international community that the mullahs were more efficient and committed to pushing through their mandate than was the moderately enlightened

leadership in Islamabad.

Custodians of honour

The issues raised by the passing of the women's bill and its enforcement into law go beyond questions of political manoeuvrings and the quest for power. Rather, they highlight the ongoing power struggle over Pakistan's very identity as a country. Gen Musharraf has correctly noted that this struggle is being conducted by "religious extremists" on the one side and "liberal fundamentalists" on the other – both of whom show no hesitation in exploiting the plight of women to serve their respective agendas.

It is unfortunate that it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between the two sides. On the one hand, the MMA charges the Women Protection Act with promoting a "free-sex zone" in Pakistan, as well as encouraging "promiscuity among young girls". On the other, many educated Pakistani women, including those committed to promoting women's rights, believe that there is too much coverage of rape in the country. The fallout of this, they fear, is that "the international community has the wrong image of women in Pakistan."

Thus, both the political establishment and certain sectors of civil society are complicit in positioning Pakistani women as the un-elected custodians of national honour. When a woman's right to self-determination is thus negated, any move aimed at transferring the burden of responsibility for sexual violence against women from victim to perpetrator ceases to be limited to the domain of fundamental human rights. It instead becomes linked to notions of morality and the promotion of

Pakistan's 'soft side' on the international stage, for which women are made to bear exclusive responsibility.

This state of affairs needs to be reversed if any new legal framework to protect women is to be truly effective. Unless we recognise the safeguarding of women's rights as an a goal in itself – central to the development of the country, and of great moral value – we will continue to exist in a twilight zone where we qualify the plight and position of women according to the particular audience to whom we are playing. Pakistanis saw this in 1979, when Pakistan simultaneously introduced the Hudood Ordinances and ratified the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. And Pakistanis have seen this again in 2006, with the passing of both the Hasba and the women's bills, albeit that the central government is trying to challenge the Hasba Bill in the Supreme Court.

The answer, therefore, lies not in criticising any reformist moves (however tentative) by the current leadership for the simple reasoning that they are coming from a military regime. Rather, we must give the government the benefit of the doubt, and then strive towards holding it accountable to fulfilling its commitments. Gen Musharraf must be pressured to honour his pledge to introduce more legislative safeguards to protect the fundamental rights of the women of Pakistan. Finally, Pakistanis must care less about what the international community thinks about the plight of women in Pakistan, and start caring more about what the country's citizens themselves think about the situation. Gen Musharraf has taken the first step. It is up to the country to complete that journey.

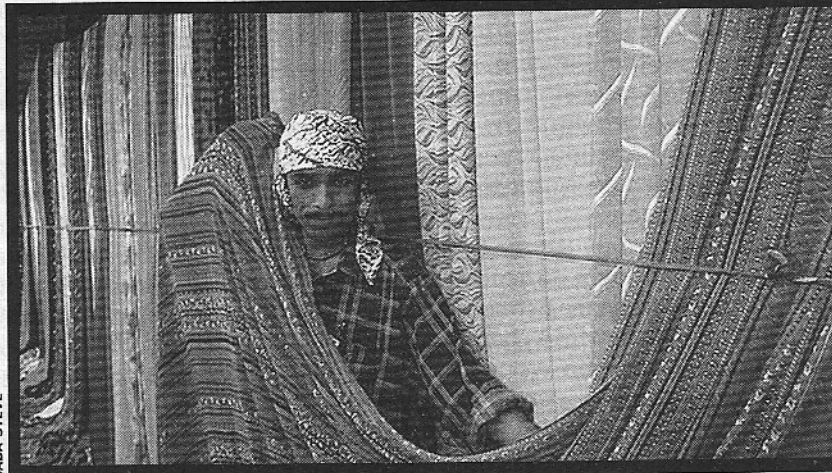
A tear in Pakistani textiles

BY IMRAN AYUB

A spate of textile-production units shifting from Pakistan to Bangladesh has alarm bells ringing in Islamabad. Since the translocations began all of a sudden a year ago, Pakistani trade and textile authorities have become frantically engaged in talks with local industry representatives, attempting to

or completely shifted their businesses to Bangladesh, citing rising business costs and declining returns within Pakistan. Worried industrialists are not optimistic that the situation could change significantly under the Islamabad government's existing trade rules. The latest data released by the Federal Bureau of Statistics

industry, as is done in India and Bangladesh. "In India there is a government-backed TUFSS [Technical Upgradation Funding Scheme], which subsidises the textile industry with loans from commercial banks," says garment exporter Zakir Lalani. He notes that New Delhi launched the scheme in 1999, and is now extending it to



BABA STEVE

Faced with soaring production costs and inept government reactions, Pakistan's crucial textile industry is beginning to pack up and move to Bangladesh.

convince them to stay in the country. Pakistan's textile ministry, first formed in Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz's Cabinet in 2004, appears convinced that time is running out for the country's textile exporters, largely due to an increased cost of doing business. Many worry that a continuation of the situation could trigger capital flight, and cause massive unemployment.

"There is an offer of a tax-free investment environment from Bangladesh for our industrialists to set up production units," admits Federal Textile Secretary Syed Masood Alam Rizvi. "We have not found anyone taking up the offer, but obviously it's a wakeup call for all of us."

Despite Rizvi's claim, however, industry sources reveal that at least a half-dozen Pakistani textile companies have already partially

reports that Pakistani textile exports declined by 10.3 percent, to less than USD 2.5 billion, during the first quarter of this fiscal year, which ended in September. Over the same period last year, that figure was more than USD 2.7 billion.

"We are challenged by a double-edged sword," says Shafqat Elahi, chairman of the All Pakistan Textile Mills Association (APTMA), the largest trade body in the country. "On one hand, we face tough competition, mainly from China as well as India and Bangladesh. On the other, our industry is bearing the highest production cost in the region." Things are looking so gloomy that there are even fears of losing the domestic Pakistani market to Chinese, Thai and Indonesian competitors.

The APTMA is particularly angry that Islamabad has not done enough to cushion the

2010. This translates as a continuing threat to the Pakistani competitors. Like Lalani, many industry players see power tariffs in Pakistan as the most critical reason for high cost of doing business. The free gas that Dhaka has offered the industry in Bangladesh has led to similar demands in Pakistan.

Along with prohibitive energy prices, higher interest rates on bank loans, which have witnessed a more than 140 percent jump in the last two years, are adding to the industry's problems. While the industry seeks access to European and US markets, there is a growing sense of discrimination. While a large number of other textile-producing countries have gained relatively easy access due to their being less developed, or for other considerations, Pakistani producers find themselves having

to compete with all the handicaps back home. Nor has textile production remained free of geopolitical considerations. The US used to receive more than 85 percent of Pakistani textile exports, but those levels have dropped by 68 percent since the attacks of 11 September 2001.

Some exporters claim the failure as a diplomatic one, with Pakistani authorities unable to win concessions from Western countries for Pakistani calico. "In fact we are more eligible for EU concessions as a reward for our role in the 'war on terror'," suggests Lalani. While the EU offers zero-percent tariffs on Bangladeshi garment imports, it charges what is referred to as an 'anti-dumping' duty on some Pakistani products. This 13.1 percent duty was added in 2004 to bed-linen imports from Pakistan, claiming that cheap products from the country were causing injury to the European textile industry. The decision hit Pakistan hard, as bed-linen exports to the EU countries had previously earned more than USD 400 million per year. This move, coupled with stiff competition amidst rising production costs, may push textile exports down even further by the end of this fiscal year. Last year, textile products accounted for more than 60 percent of the USD 18 billion worth of total Pakistani exports, which gives an indication of the industry's importance.

"It is the total of these pressures that have pushed local investors to look at the Bangladesh option," says Shabbir Ahmed, a bed-wear exporter. "Some have really capitalised on the opportunity."

Poor incentives

When local industry representatives first visited Bangladesh in October of 2005, the Islamabad government was criticised for having not taken the initiative to offer the sector a better incentives package. "There is a need to determine priorities first," says Faisal Shaji, a financial analyst. "Expansion of industrial operations is a worldwide pheno-

He says that the cost of doing textiles business in Pakistan is much higher than in other Southasian countries, mainly due to exorbitant and unbalanced energy costs.

mena, but the case in Pakistani textiles is different. Being a developing economy, the country can't afford the shifting of business units of the core industry."

While the government did offer the textile sector a PKR 40 billion relief package through export rebates and concessions on loan mark-ups, textile businesses are desperate for more. "We will lose our export orders, which we find difficult to comply with because of a rise in production cost," warns Aziz Memon, chairman of Kings Group, a large garment exporter. "Once we lose a market after having failed to service our booked orders, it is next to impossible to get back there again."

Textile exports in Pakistan are projected to earn USD 11.5 billion this fiscal year, up from USD 10.1 billion last year. But Shaji feels the sector may miss that target specifically due to issues of incentives, which are still unsettled between the industry and the government. He says that the cost of doing textiles business in Pakistan is much higher than in other Southasian countries, mainly due to exorbitant and unbalanced energy costs. "The fertiliser industry pays PKR 81 per million BTUs [British thermal units], while the textile sector pays PKR 246 for the same," he says.

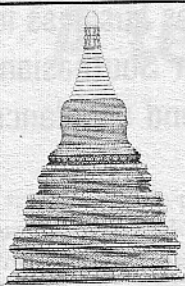
Pakistan's textile problems can also be traced to outdated and obsolete management practices within the industry, however. Shaji blames the industry for not taking modern managerial practice seriously enough back when it could have afforded to do so. In the meantime, competing countries such as China, India and Bangladesh did invest in this area, thereby better equipping themselves for the challenges ahead. "In our

industry," he notes, "there is almost no attention placed on human-resource training. Plus, there is hardly one operation in the whole country that avoids wastages."

While Islamabad promises that it will address the issue, it is insisting on long-term policy changes rather than short-term relief. Textile Secretary Rizvi says that a national committee is slated to submit its recommendations by the end of December. While he speaks optimistically of the committee's current interaction with a spectrum of textile bodies, Rizvi also expresses some helplessness amidst the current scenario: "In the free environment, one can't stop anyone from shifting his or her business and production unit. But the government is concerned that it could cause unemployment, and that's why we are here with an incentives plan."

And it is not as though Islamabad has sat on its haunches. The current slowdown comes on the heels of a USD 6 billion investment by the government in the sector over the past five years. Experts see the textile ministry's new strategy as a last-ditch attempt by Islamabad to keep local industries in the country, and to keep the sector competitive. Textile manufacturers are also pinning their hopes on the government's actions. But there is a strong feeling among both industry players and government officials that if the new approach fails to attract local industry, Pakistan may witness desperate – and potentially catastrophic – moves from the industry.

"The government will have to take all proposals into account before finalising the strategy," says analyst Shaji. "If it doesn't work, I fear we will miss the last boat." ▽



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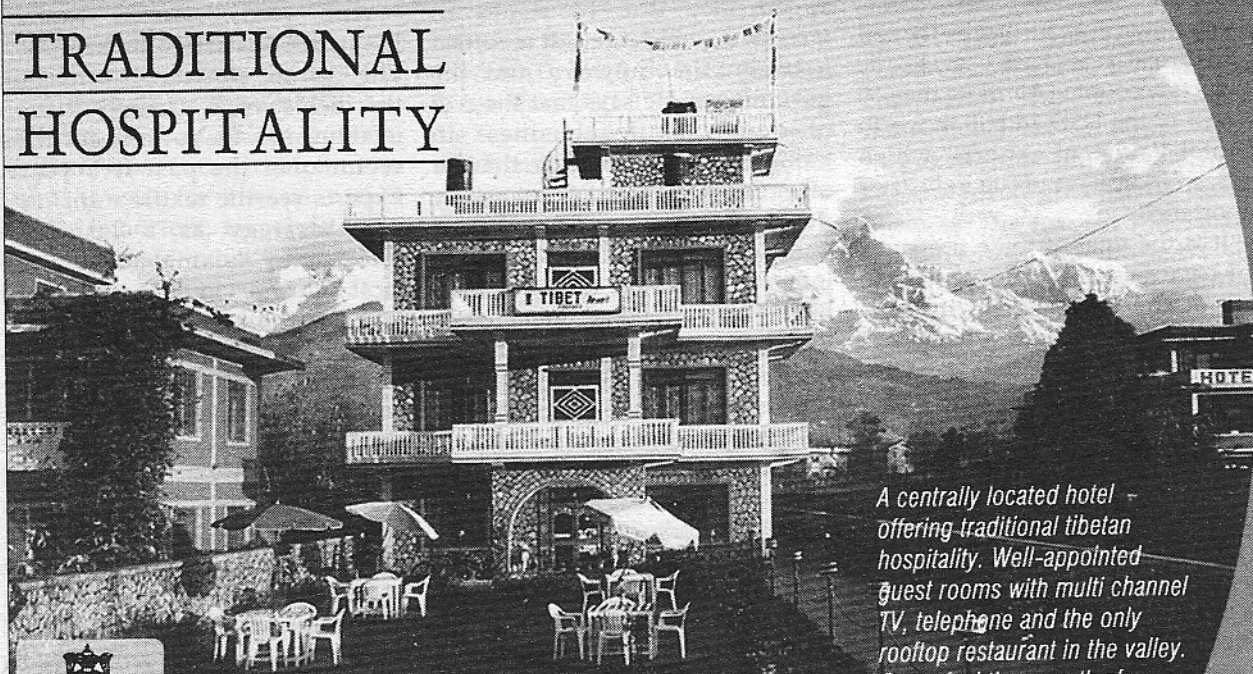


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Finding Manipur's hidden war

Faced with New Delhi's alternating intransigence and incompetence, militant groups in Manipur are threatening to take their battles to the streets.

BY V K SHASHIKUMAR

Armed ethnic groups have parcelled Manipur into tribal fiefdoms, and are now holding the state's economy for ransom. Two groups – the Meitei-dominated United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and a faction of Naga insurgents, the National Socialist Council for Nagalim-Isak Muivah group (NSCN-IM) – are at constant loggerheads, jeopardising the state's growth potential. "There are many armed groups in Manipur because arms are easily available. If you have two pistols, you can form a group and start collecting money from the people, from the state government departments," explains R K Meghen, alias Sanayaima, the reclusive 65-year old leader of the UNLF.

National Highway 39 passes through Senapati District of Manipur, an area that particularly illustrates the complexities of a region where tribal hostilities have assumed layer upon layer of competing influences. Rival histories, competitive jostling for identity and geographic location, and other such dynamics have combined to make the hidden war in this area almost intractable. Senapati District is a stronghold of the NSCN-IM, and the Naga underground elements here virtually run a parallel administration. "I have to collect tax, and you will have

to give it to me voluntarily," says Brigadier Phunthing of the NSCN-IM.

In addition to the Senapati and Ukhrul hill districts in Manipur, the NSCN-IM also lays claim to the state's southern hill districts of Tamenglong, Churchandapur and Chandel. The group is demanding the integration of these districts to form a state called Greater Nagaland. But this goal is in direct competition with the UNLF's agenda of an Independent Manipur. Caught in the crossfire is the Kuki tribe, which hope to claim the hill districts for a separate Kuki state. "In Manipur there are three communities: Kukis, Nagas and Meiteis. So you can't have a solution for one and ignore the others, if you want the entire region to be in a situation where there is peace, stability and tranquillity," says Seilen Haokip, a spokesperson for the Kuki National Organisation.

The Kukis, primarily hill tribals, say the British divided their traditional lands of Zale'n-gam, between India and Burma. Modern Zale'n-gam runs from the Sagaing Division in Burma in the east, to the Nantalit River in the north, to the Burmese Chin state in the south. The Kuki National Organisation (KNO) agitates for statehood for Kuki-dominated areas in Manipur within the Indian Constitution. "If India wants us to

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be part of the Indian union, we are happy to do that. Then recognise our territory by way of statehood," says Haokip. "The KNO's objective is to find solutions within the framework of the Indian Constitution. We firmly believe in being Indian."

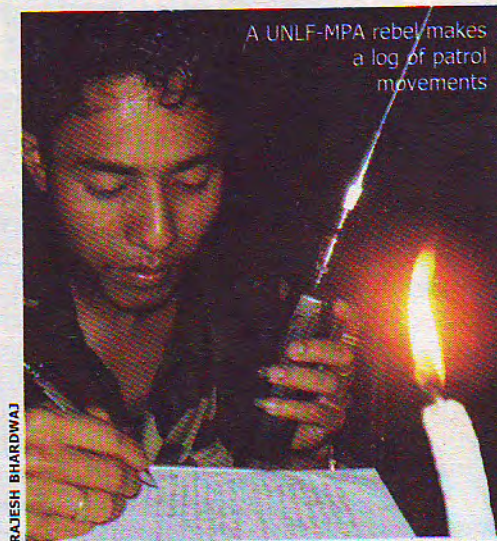
Divided by the Indo-Burmese border, the Kuki community wants New Delhi to constitute the state of Kukiland, culled from the Manipuri hill districts. They also claim to have petitioned Rangoon to delineate a similar state in Burma. This writer recently visited the jungle camps of the Kuki National Army in southeast Manipur, and saw armed Kukis training close to the India-Burma border, near Moreh. The Kukis have eight armed factions, which are all united under the KNO. Currently the Kukis are maintaining a ceasefire with the Indian Army in accordance with an agreement signed in August 2005. The pro-India stance of the Kuki National Army (KNA) allows them to carry arms and keep training despite the ceasefire.

The KNA is tiny but tough. Recruits who fall out of line invite harsh punishment. The medical facilities at KNA camps are basic, and simple infections can claim lives. This tough existence is rationalised by the language and spirituality left behind by American Baptist missionaries, who worked to convert the Kuki and Naga tribes to Christianity during the first half of the 20th century. Visitors to Kuki camps can still hear the English refrains of gospel songs:

He gives me love and happiness,
To give me comfort while I am on earth.
There is nobody else besides Christ who can make
me happy...

KNA recruits are young, many just 15 years old. To motivate them, a strong sense of faith is crucial. At all KNA camps, the Bible and the gun lay side-by-side. Similar sights can be seen at NSCN-IM camps in Nagaland.

The Kuki children's army prays, then loudly takes an oath. "Hallelujah, I have finished all sins. I am done with my past life, I am going to reach for the everlasting life. In everything you do rejoice in God. Thank You." Their small chests bulge outwards. "I will always work for my God and my nation. For the sake of my nation I will undergo every suffering. For the sake of my nation I will stick to my path. For the sake of my nation I will wage war." Ironically, Nagas and Kukis are adherents of the same faith, yet they continue to engage in a brutal ethnic clash, including with each other.



A UNLF-MPA rebel makes a log of patrol movements

Manipur Intifada

The NSCN-IM claimed nearly 900 Kuki lives during the ethnic cleansing of the 1990s. The Kuki militia does what the army cannot – it protects Kuki villages from both the UNLF and the NSCN-IM. Its force is 1500 men strong, and is armed with an array of weapons. "At present, we use AK-47s, M16s, DC and 60mm mortars," says Major D J Haokip of the Kuki National Army. Like the Nagas, the Kukis are deeply suspicious of the Meiteis. "When the NSCN-IM aggressed on us, and from 1992 to 1997 slaughtered us, where was the UNLF?" asks spokesman Seilen Haokip. "Did they ever prevent the NSCN-IM from killing Kukis? Were they able to protect them if they did? 900 would not have died – 350 villages were uprooted, more than 50,000 have been displaced."

Ten years ago, Ngamkholien was a victim of the Naga-Kuki conflict. He is now a committed Kuki militant. "I love my land and my nation. And I cannot tolerate it being oppressed and violated. That's why I have sacrificed my life to take up arms," he says. But UNLF leader Sanayaima says that the Indian Army's ceasefire with the KNO's armed wing is nothing but a strategy by New Delhi to keep the ethnic cauldron simmering. "India is very much trying to keep us divided on ethnic lines, pitching one ethnic group against another – the same old divide-and-rule policy. The colonial game still going on," he says.

The failure of India's quasi-federal constitutional arrangement to accommodate regional aspirations and assertions of ethnic identity is evident in Manipur's restive existence. The UNLF's secessionist agenda is to spark an *Utop Lan*, a Manipuri Uprising, and the inspiration is the Maoist movement in Nepal. "The Nepal experience is very inspiring," Sanayaima said during an interview at the India-Burma border. "We'll come to see some sort of Intifada ... That is part of the strategy, and part of the strategy is to tell the world that something is happening here, and you are morally obliged to come to our help. India should not be allowed

to simply massacre our people."

The UNLF's rebellion has been ongoing against the Indian state since 1964. Now it plans to take the war out of the jungles and into the streets of Manipur, by sparking civil unrest. "One of the biggest factors in our strategy is that we're fighting with the people, not just the armed cadres. We're fighting along with our people," Sanayaima said. "Take our population into consideration, and then take India's deployment – about fifty to fifty-five thousand. Pitted against two million people, 55,000 is nothing."

Sanayaima, who happens to be a descendent of Manipur's royal family, plans to mobilise the state's citizens by proposing a solution that he knows Delhi will not accept. "We've made a four-point proposal," he explains. "Number one is to hold a plebiscite under the UN. Number two, that UN peacekeeping forces are deployed in Manipur. Number three, UNLF will deposit all its arms to the UN authority on a date fixed by the UN prior to the date of the plebiscite. And India should also reciprocate by withdrawing all its forces from Manipur. Number four, the UN is to hand over power according to the result of the plebiscite."

In order to earn the goodwill of the Manipuris, Sanayaima says that the UNLF has flagged off development projects in rural areas. "If you go to rural areas you'll find many projects being implemented by us – irrigation systems, water-supply streams, even roads in interior areas," he notes. "Otherwise, these would have gone to the pockets of the authorities." Local politicians and officials are also 'persuaded' to allot funds to the UNLF's projects, using threats if needed. "We ask MLAs, ministers, bureaucrats to do what is beneficial for the people. We want to tell them that one day they will have to join the people when the people rise up. Otherwise, they don't have any future."

For 26 years, Manipur has been ostensibly run by the Indian Army under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Human-rights violations fuel the secessionist fire, one of the most recent and notorious being the 2004 rape and murder of activist Manorama Devi, allegedly by soldiers from the Assam Rifles. For Meitei insurgents, this tragic incident was not an accident. Rather, they see it as an inevitable product of the conflict. "It is this conflict situation that will push the people forward, to rise up against the system that represses them. And ultimately, they will rise up," said Sanayaima.

The rebel chief is particularly sure of this last point. For more than 10 years, the UNLF's armed force, the Manipur People's Army, has fought a hidden, protracted war against the Indian Army. Now it wants to take this war aboveground, in the form of a popular uprising such as the Palestinian Intifada. Doing so just might take the Indian government by surprise.

Unwilling annexation

From the last Indian Army post at Hengshi, this writer trekked for five days along the Indo-Burmese border of southeast Manipur, to reach the operational headquarters of the 293rd battalion of the Manipur People's Army, the MPA. It was a long, difficult trek through densely forested hills and bamboo jungles, escorted the whole way by MPA cadres.

The Manipur People's Army is a well-oiled guerrilla force. Wireless radios, intimate familiarity with the terrain, and local intelligence have helped them to successfully take on the Indian Army over the past decade. The force's cadres walk the mountains with



When I began to grow and reach the level of college, I gradually realised that India is something different from what we are.

Sanayaima, UNLF chief

practiced ease, even though most of them are not hill people, but rather Meiteis from the Imphal Valley. For these rebels, war with the Indian Army is all about fighting for their "freedom". The UNLF contends that the Merger Agreement, signed in 1949 between Maharaja Bodh Chandra Singh and then-Home Secretary V P Menon, was flawed. It soon became the bone of contention between the Meitei secessionists and the Indian government. According to the UNLF, from 1947 to 15 October 1949, the day Manipur officially merged with India, Manipur was in fact an independent country. Manipuri secessionists say that any accession was actually the annexation of an unwilling people, and herein lies the genesis of the Manipur-India conflict.

What is worrying is that the conflict shows no signs of letting up. Instead, it continues to draw youngsters such as Chinjacha, a national sports champion, into a bloody battle with the Indian Army. "I was a good martial-arts player," Chinjacha recalled. "I was a kickboxer, and I won three or four medals at the state level, and also at the national level." Alienation is what drives these young guerrillas. The Manipur People's Army does not pay its fighters, but it has high morale and could fight on for years.

Clearly, the root of the conflict is political; there can be no military solution to the hidden wars of Manipur. Indeed, Sanayaima, the man who leads Manipur's violent secessionist movement, was once a student of international relations and political science at Calcutta's Jadavpur University. Sanayaima says that when very young, he did believe in the idea of 'India'. "I grew up and I thought that I'm an Indian. When I

was in school, I thought of myself in that environment. But when I began to grow and reach the level of college, I gradually realised that India is something different from what we are."

Nonetheless, without a creative political and administrative strategy in place, the central government is preparing for a new phase of military operations. In fact, India has begun transferring military equipment to Rangoon in advance of a major joint military operation against Indian separatists based in the Burmese frontier. Reports suggest that New Delhi has given Burma an unspecified number of T-55 tanks, armoured personnel carriers, 105mm light artillery pieces and mortars. The India-Burma joint military action is intended to search and destroy camps of insurgent groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Khaplang faction (NSCN-K), the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the UNLF.

The NSCN-K, located just across the India-Burma border, says that about 3500 Burmese soldiers have been deployed to Burma's northern Sagaing Division. But the Manipur People's Army says it is equipped and ready for an extended guerrilla war. The MPA told this writer that its plan is to hit the Indian Army and political institutions in a series of strategic manoeuvres, which Sanayaima says is aimed at sparking a mass uprising against the government. "We'll always try to give a surprise to the Indian forces.

Even Pranab Mukherjee, India's [then-] Defence Minister, admitted in Parliament that it was difficult to get to our base areas," the UNLF leader said. He also indicated that the MPA's 2000 fighters are prepared for an urban guerrilla war. "We have always avoided direct confrontation, and that is part of our strategy. We fight when we want. We fight when we can."

Conflicting ethnic aspirations have brought tribal formations in Manipur to the edge of all-out civil war. And the troubled Northeast continues to hamper New Delhi's broader vision of plugging into the economies of its eastern neighbours. The current reality is that India's much-discussed integration with Southeast Asia actually comes to a sudden halt on the Indian side of the Moreh bridge in Manipur, at the main link between Burma and India. This bridge, painted yellow in Burma and white in India, stands witness to Manipur's deepening ethnic conflicts, and to opportunities that continue to be lost for this region in a fast-globalising world. The Moreh bridge is actually the entry point of the much-ballyhooed Asian highway project, for which the Indian Border Roads Organisation has already built the first 100 km in Burma. Yet New Delhi continues to fail to tap the potential of this highway, either to reduce ethnic tensions or to enable the growth of trade – to the detriment of many, in and out of Manipur and the rest of the Northeast.



Project Manager - Integrated Data and Information Systems

The International Water Management Institute (IWMI), based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, conducts public goods research and capacity building activities related to water and land management, with the goal of improving food security, livelihoods, and the natural environment in developing countries. IWMI requires a highly competent and motivated individual for the position of Project Manager - Integrated Data and Information Systems. The successful candidate will be based in the Global Research Division at IWMI's Headquarters in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

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Counting Parsis

BY TANAZ K NOBLE

The Parsi community, the most highly educated demographic in India, currently comprises 0.0069 percent of the country's population – less than 70,000 in 2001 – and is shrinking quickly. The community's negative growth rate is setting off alarm bells about its possible extinction. If census projections are anything to go by, the Parsis – descendants from Persian exiles who landed in Sanjan, Gujarat, during the 8th century – might not last until the end of this century. "At the rate we're declining, we should be extinct in 100 years," says Ava Khuller, head of the demographics department at the Parzor Foundation, a UNESCO-funded organisation dedicated to the preservation of Parsi culture.

The Parsi community's last positive population growth rate was recorded during 1931-41. While census figures for 1881 gave a count of 85,400 Parsis in India, the 1941 census reported nearly 114,900. Since then, the population has decreased by about 10 percent per decade, compared to 21 percent growth for India as a whole. By 2001, the national census recorded only 69,600 Parsis. While India's under-six age group makes up about 15 percent of the country's population, only 4.7 percent of the Parsi community falls into this category. More than 30 percent of Parsis are over 60 years old, compared to just seven percent for the country as a whole. The Parsi birth rate is as low as six per 1000 per annum, while the death rate is as high as 18 per 1000. Given this imbalance, says Ava Khuller, "We are losing about 6900 Parsis every year."

Other statistics show a community that would appear to be doing extremely well. Both literacy rates – 98 percent – and the sex ratio – 1050 girls for every 1000 boys – are among

the highest in India. Given the decline in numbers, such figures have perplexed demographers, sociologists and doctors.

No conversions

The Parsi population count is no doubt affected by a tradition that does not allow for mixed marriages. Of late, there has been abandonment of that tradition. A 1978 study of Delhi's Parsi community found that 33 percent of Parsi marriages were to non-Parsis,

genetic diversity and impacts the health of offspring. An inbred individual is likely to possess several physical and health-related problems, including reduced fertility. A newly discovered, untreatable defect known as G6PD (Glucose 6-phosphate dehydrogenase) deficiency has also become prominent within the Parsi community, causing blood-related problems such as anaemia. Other ailments conspiring against Parsi girls and women

The community not only doesn't allow conversions, but expels a woman who marries out. This tradition does not bode well for a community that has only around 1075 girls under four years of age.

and that that number had doubled to 66 percent just a decade later. Despite this trend, Ava Khuller points out, "Our community not only doesn't allow conversions, but expels a woman who marries out." This tradition does not bode well for a community that has only around 1075 girls under four years of age.

If a Parsi woman does marry within the religion, this only increases what is already a widespread problem in the community – inbreeding. Cousin marriages are allowed, confirms Khuller, and refers to a practice that dates back to when the Parsis first left Persia. "They brought their womenfolk, and inbreeding continued in India with the same religious zeal that made them leave their motherland – to protect their religion," wrote pathologist Dr P K Antia in a paper entitled "Parsis and Blood Diseases".

The consequences of centuries of inbreeding are taking a harsh toll on Parsi children. If practiced repeatedly, inbreeding leads to a reduction in

include breast cancer and diseases of the uterus, ovaries and fallopian tubes, each of which (as well as the treatment of which, in the case of breast cancer) can directly impact fertility.

On top of all of this, a Parsi woman is likely to marry too late to have children, if she marries at all. A study conducted by the Parzor Foundation revealed that, since 1980, roughly 25 percent of women aged 40-49 were unmarried. Taken together, Ava Khuller notes, "In order to merely meet the replacement ratio, every Parsi woman who does reproduce must have at least three to five children each, or the community will still have a negative growth rate." Such a solution, according to fertility specialist Dr Faram Irani, would require an interesting inversion on modern trends: marrying young and having more babies. From issues of health to fertility, inbreeding and social mores, it seems that the Parsis of India are bound to shrink until a community, sadly, disappears. ❧

The imperfect pure democracy of Panchayati Raj



KING

It may sound like a good idea, but at least in one corner of Madhya Pradesh the system of Panchayati Raj is not all that it is made out to be.

BY HARTOSH SINGH BAL

The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.

– The Indian Constitution

The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny ... it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction.

– James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*

This reporter arrived in Madhya Pradesh in 2002, when the Congress party Chief Minister Digvijay Singh had a high reputation in MP for being an effective leader. In Bhopal (so went the view from Delhi), groundbreaking innovations were taking place in government policy on health, education, Dalits, tribals and, most importantly, Panchayati Raj. No doubt, decentralisation and the devolution of power to the villages was an admirable step, designed to empower the people. But throughout the course of reporting from Madhya Pradesh, it became clear to this reporter that the reality was something else.

The first time I had to face up to the contrary facts surrounding Panchayati Raj was when starvation deaths began to be reported from Baran, a Rajasthan district adjacent to Madhya Pradesh. As I traveled to the affected villages, it became obvious that deaths were the result not of a shortage of foodgrains in the state, nor even of such a lack in individual villages. The failure instead took place at the lowest level – the *sarpanch* had failed to shift the grain the final 500 metres. People were dying in sight of food stocks that could have saved their lives.

The two worst-hit villages were Suans and Bilkhedha

Mal. In Suans, the five quintals of wheat required to be stocked by the government were available with the sarpanch. His name was Gopal Gujjar, and he admitted: "We gave wheat only to those who had no one to look after them. I don't know the names, the *patwari* has a list. Not one of those who lost relatives were given wheat. This would have meant going around the village to check the condition of each person or household, and this was never done."

To a lay observer, this situation might have seemed the consequence of the nature of the panchayats in Madhya Pradesh, each consisting of at least six widely dispersed villages. It would have been difficult to gather information from each. But further investigation showed that this was not why people were dying. The reason was not distance but neglect. When starvation deaths started taking place in Shivpuri, a district bordering Rajasthan, I found that sarpanches had never even bothered to find out the condition of Dalits who lived and died just a few hundred yards from them.

What this episode exposed was the weakness of the much-talked-about Panchayati Raj system. My belief was shaken that the panchayat system would function better than any alternative that would involve the district administration and its bureaucrats. The sarpanch, who heads the system of village government, turns out to be the weak link, because of his proximity to and participation in local prejudices.

Sarpanch autocrats

When the Digvijay government, in a limited but still substantial manner, decided to redistribute village grazing land to Dalits, high castes across the state suddenly drove their cattle through the standing crops planted by the Dalits. The sarpanches lent their full support to the action. As in the case of the starvation deaths, the sarpanches did not consider themselves accountable in any fashion for wrongdoing, and there was nothing at the lowest level that could make them accountable.

It is necessary to stress the role of the sarpanch time and again, because in practice that is what Panchayati Raj reduces to. The other *panches* rarely if ever exercise any power, and the institution of the Gram Sabha, or village assembly, tends to be mostly defunct. In the absence of an active NGO working in an area, I have never come across villages where the Gram Sabha convenes. Thus, the entire process of administering accountability in Panchayati Raj is based on a fiction. As a result, the sarpanch is an autocrat, at the moment constrained only because a complete devolution of power has not taken place.

None of these conclusions should come as a surprise. The Greeks, used to the idea of small city states, had often been sceptical of democracy. The founders of the American republic have put on record many of their apprehensions about pure democracy, while arguing for the division of power that exists between the executive, legislative and judicial branches in any republic.

At the level of a village panchayat, what is missing is precisely this division of power. Any other source of authority is found tens of kilometres away. In the confines of the village, there is no media to scrutinise the aberrations that take place. The sarpanch himself embodies the caste dynamics that have always run village politics in India. In such a setting, to think of the panchayat as a positive force is to be led by belief rather than observation.

Devolution trap

Reservation is one of the few instruments that work against the misguided pure democracy of the panchayat. For all the problems in implementation, the reservation of seats for Dalits and women does somewhat remedy the situation. But in nine out of ten cases, a woman sarpanch is merely a proxy for the *sarpanchpati*, in which case things remain little changed. Nonetheless, the rare exception is worth promoting. In highlighting the lack of enlightened Panchayat leadership, it becomes clear that this system can offer no check on current problems, and that these issues would only worsen with any further devolution.

There seems to be no easy solution available. Any attempt to make the Gram Sabha a functional body would require external verification, and the vesting of the district administration with the power to act against a sarpanch who fails to convene the Sabha. Such power already exists in theory, but a more stringent use is anathema to proponents of Panchayati Raj. Neither do they look favourably upon the possibility of a division of powers between the panchayat and the representatives of the executive. Various states have come up with differing administrative mechanisms, but the inherent problems continue.

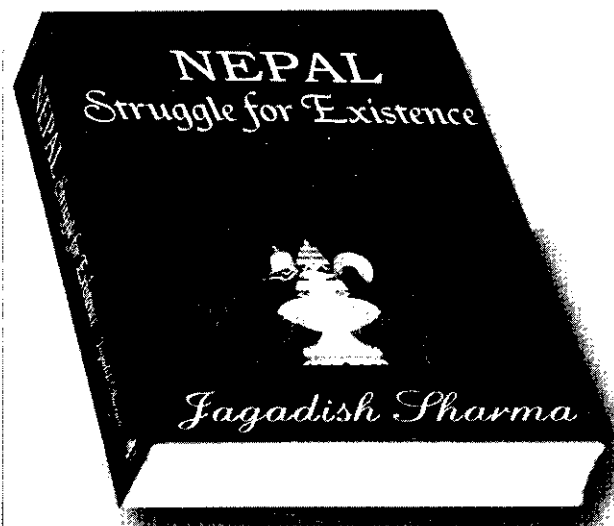
At the time, much of the criticism levelled against Digvijay Singh dealt with his failure to devolve real power to the people, or to provide enough funds to the

panchayats. But the fact was that the panchayats were failing to perform in the very cases in which powers had been devolved to them, and it was difficult to see how this would be rectified by devolving more powers. In the form of the sarpanch, the system continues to embody the power imbalances and prejudices that have always existed in village society. In such a situation, to be carried away by dogma because the work of a handful of dedicated outsiders has made the system work in a few places is to fail to face up to reality.

Writing before the State Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 2003, the current Union Minister for Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyar, claimed: "Curiously (but reassuringly), however, it is not so much on the achievements of the past three years as on his plans for the next five that [Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Ajit] Jogi is taking his campaign to the people. And his single most important prescription for the future is what, in my view, has given Digvijay Singh in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh his two terms in office and the imminent promise of a third – Panchayati Raj."

Digvijay was subsequently wiped out at the polls, while Jogi was also forced to make an exit from government. The people themselves do not seem to have the faith in the benefits of Panchayati Raj, even though the proponents hold it out as an article of faith.

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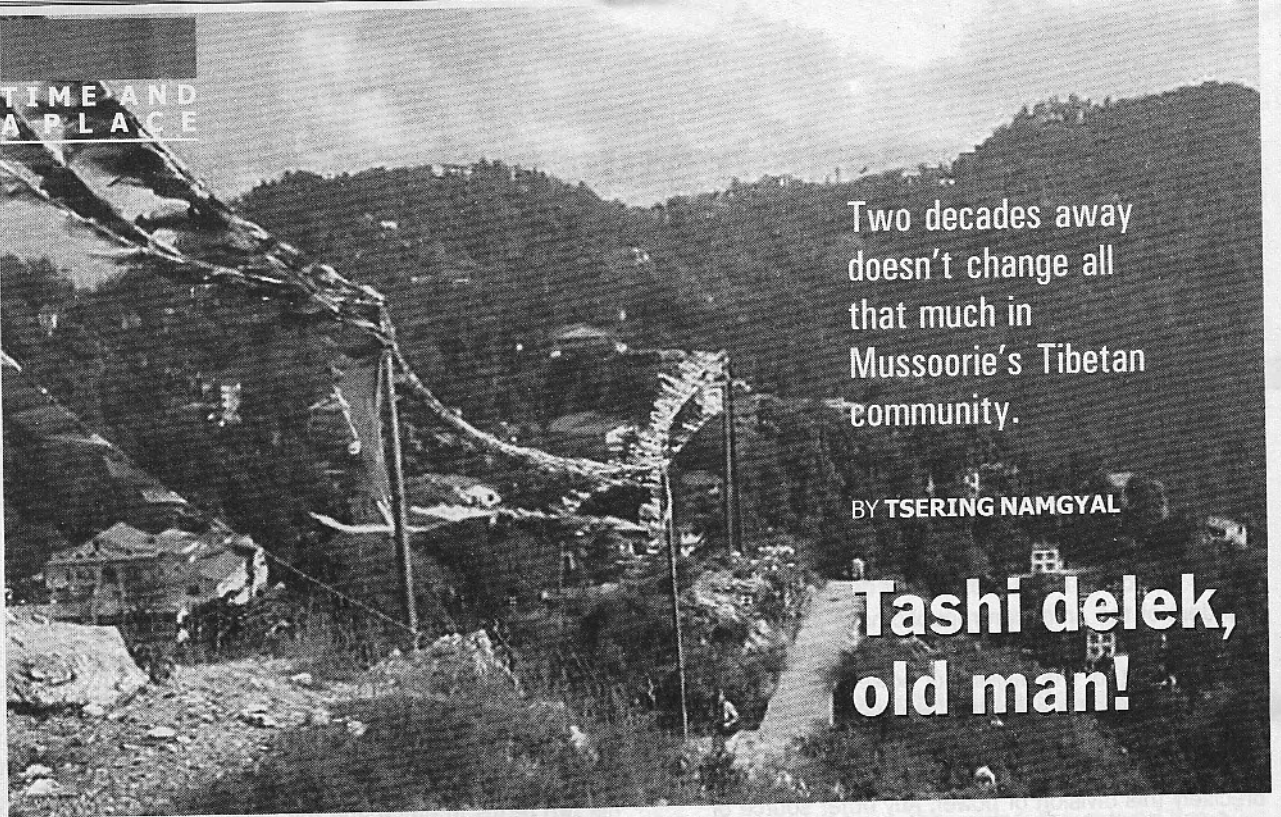
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Two decades away
doesn't change all
that much in
Mussoorie's Tibetan
community.

BY TSERING NAMGYAL

Tashi delek, old man!

I jumped into a bus in Dehra Dun. The rickety vehicle pulled out of the crowded market along Rajpur Road, past the leafy residential buildings and the Sakya Monastery, before zigzagging upwards towards Mussoorie. It was an easy ride, and I got there within 45 minutes. Upon arrival, I decided to share a cab with a group of people heading further up the mountain, towards Happy Valley. Today, most of Mussoorie's roughly 5000-strong Tibetan community lives in Happy Valley. In April of 1959, the Dalai Lama established the first Tibetan government-in-exile here, before it was shifted westward to Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. In Happy Valley was also located the Tibetan School which I had attended for two years. I was returning after having been gone for two decades.

"I watched the movie *English, August* last night," said the driver, who bore a moustache so auburn-coloured that I almost mistook him for a European. "A good movie about English-obsessed IAS officers. I move a lot of them to the academy every day," he said, referring to the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy for Administration, which produces the men and women of the Indian Administrative Service. We all lumbered on towards Happy Valley. The driver said he did this trip at least ten times a day, and that he knew almost everyone who showed up on the road. Just a few minutes later, he screeched to a halt and waved to a guy in a thick jacket who was walking along. "Arre, Jai Singh, come *yaar*, there is always a seat in my taxi. Five rupees, only."

That we were already four people in the front and six in the back did not seem to deter our voluble man at the wheel. "Arre, no problem *yaar*. Sit upon him," he said, pointing towards me, by the door. "Don't forget, the luggage hold is still empty!" The guy in the jacket was quite big, and he proceeded to sit right on my lap. I tried to squeeze my neighbours to make space for this

intruder, but met with little success. They looked passively ahead but refused to give a centimetre. I was relieved when we finally reached Happy Valley. I got unsteadily off, paid the driver, and continued on foot. I walked past the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy, and then on towards the Tibetan School.

The Academy itself did not appear to have changed much since I was here last. Its grounds looked well taken care of – the shooting range, the equestrian grounds, the gym and the tennis courts gleamed in the afternoon sun. But new buildings seemed to have cropped up all over the valley, which now struck me as more congested, narrower somehow. I walked past the Birla House and towards the Tibetan School.

I ambled along the road by the deserted-looking football ground, and arrived behind the main school building. An abscessed dog was scrounging for his lunch at a garbage bin near the school gate. Some Tibetans were walking aimlessly about. A couple of old colonial-era houses stood below the road, looking quite untended. Abandoned shoes and plastic bags littered their slanting red roofs.

Apple cheeks

Recognising an old haunt, I stopped by a tea shack nearby. The owner, who I had last seen during the 1980s, had aged significantly – only his smile (now toothless) remained intact behind the jars of sweets on the counter. But he was somehow withdrawn, and when I came in he shied away into the kitchen. A woman came to take my order and I asked for a cup of tea. She replied to my efforts at conversation, "The school has not changed much at all. But most of the older teachers have either retired or immigrated."

A black-and-white framed picture of the Dalai Lama (almost teenage-looking) hung above the table. Two students were eating noodle soup, shy and reticent

with their faces almost touching their bowls. Outside, a couple more students were eating, equally wordless. I wanted to talk to them, to see how their experiences at the school compared to my own, but they would not be drawn in. An odd air of despondency hung inside and outside that little shop. "Go visit the monastery, it has not changed a bit in 40 years," the lady suggested.

I paid for my tea and left. Two tiny, apple-cheeked boys in immaculately clean uniforms emerged from the gate, greeting me with heart-warming reverence. After reciprocating happily, I proceeded into the playground, where some kids were playing on a small grassy lawn on the forecourt. Some teachers were standing and talking on the side.

I walked into the huge, rambling building that had housed the boy's dormitory, another leftover from the colonial past. As I reached the portico at the top of the steps, hundreds of uniformed boys swarmed out of the dining room, having just finished lunch. They came out singing songs and chatting loudly along the high-ceilinged, nearly pitch-black corridor. I remember there used to be lights.

The girl students, I noticed, were already out of the dining room. Outside, they lay scattered about in the warm afternoon sun, all of them holding books under their arms. I was gratified to note that nearly all looked happy and healthy. Above the football grounds, a couple of teachers and some kids were drinking tea and relaxing. Nearby, students were shopping at a store that also housed an antique flour mill – established, a sign proudly declared, in 1905. It remained busily in operation, steadily releasing a pungent mustard smell out into the roadway.

As I sat there in the sun, prayer flags fluttered in front of one of the school's dormitories. A couple of labourers were busily pouring the concrete of a new construction. Tall banshee trees were silhouetted against the sky, and flakes of white clouds gathered above.

Pala and Bond

My solitary homecoming almost over, I began walking back down towards Mussoorie town. Upon reaching the main thoroughfare, I went to the bookshop situated along the road that led to the picnic spot known as Company Garden. For some reason, the bookstore was busy with immaculately dressed men purchasing thick works by Salman Rushdie. I decided to continue a bit in the direction of Company Garden, and came upon a Tibetan elder leaning against the roadside railing, trembling faintly with infirmity. He also took the support of a walking cane, and was vigorously reciting mantras. I greeted him and asked his age. He said he was 77 years old.

He wore a cowboy hat, the kind preferred by Tibetans for ceremonial occasions, and had on brown trousers and several grey sweaters, one on top of another. He said he lived in the old people's home just below the road, where he had arrived in 1996. One of his eyes stayed perpetually closed, and the other eye

"You look like you go to Bodhgaya a lot," she said, as if Bihar owned the Buddha.

was evidently not providing him much vision. But his mind remained sharp, and he spoke to me with some warmth. He used to work in a monastery in northern Tibet, but that was long, long ago. He described to me in detail how he had escaped into India from Tibet. A young Tibetan student walked past, greeting the old man, "*Pala, tashi delek*" (*Pala* means 'old man'). After a while, I bade goodbye to the old man, although my thoughts remained with him for quite a while afterwards.

From there, I walked until I arrived at the Cambridge Bookshop, on Mall Road. Outside the shop was a large announcement, *Mr Ruskin Bond will be here at 4 PM*. Books by the famous local author – he lives in nearby Landour – were piled high in the shopfront windows, competing with those of Zadie Smith's. I hung about the neighbourhood for ten minutes or so, and when I went back in Mr Bond had already arrived. "So are you the famous Bond?" I asked. "Not James Bond," he responded. We talked for a few minutes. He said he was feeling a little tired that day. For someone like myself, who had enjoyed his writings in the past, the meeting was a happy coincidence. I took some pictures and left.

Down at the Mussoorie bus stand, the five o'clock bus had already left, so I decided to share another cab. This time, there were only five of us. I struck up a conversation with an amazingly handsome man with an immaculately trimmed moustache, who was sitting next to me. He told me he made ice cream in Lucknow, and had just decided to come over for a day trip to Dehra Dun and Mussoorie.

A cheerful couple from Bihar sat in the front. They were in a very exuberant mood, particularly the woman; a holiday seemed to give everyone a new bout of energy. The husband was at times somewhat taciturn, but the lady sent us into fits of giggles every time she started to talk. "Do come to visit us when you come down to Bihar. You look like you go to Bodhgaya a lot," she said, as if Bihar owned the Buddha.

I asked the ice-cream executive what kind of ice cream he specialised in – Vanilla? Strawberry? Chocolate? He had no idea what I was talking about. "I sell only one type of ice cream," he said. "What kind?" I enquired again. "Just one kind, but quite well-known," he responded, mysteriously. All of this in Hindi. He said it was too warm inside, and wrestled his jacket off.

As we arrived in Dehra Dun, the Lucknow ice-cream manufacturer said he wanted to alight at Rajpur Road. As he jumped out of the car, he remembered to compliment the driver, "A beautiful taxi, by the way!" He handed me his card. "Do give me a ring if you happen to come to Lucknow," he said as he turned away. The card said Managing Director, Merry Ice Creams.

Democracy:

“Pakistan must hold the record for overthrowing the maximum number of military regimes, while Nepal could claim the record for having the shortest period of autocratic rule,” remarked political psychologist Ashis Nandy, deploying his characteristic playfulness to emphasise the widespread support for democracy among the people of Southasia. He was referring to the Pakistanis’ continuous challenge to dictatorship and King Gyanendra’s 14 months of adventurism, which ended in April of this year.

The aptness of Nandy’s comment, made at the launch of the report on the *State of Democracy in South Asia*, is confirmed by the findings of this substantive study conducted over three years in the five larger countries of the region. The survey data provides ample proof that Southasians, across demographic categories, appreciate democracy and want it for themselves and their societies. People may be denied the practice of pluralism for years, even decades, but they do not let the yearning for it die in their hearts. And the more a public experiences democracy, the more it is willing to protect it.

The report, released in the first week of December, was brought out by the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). Its results map people’s perceptions about democracy: its meaning and desirability, its institutions, and its relationship to diversity, security, and economic outcomes of governance. In

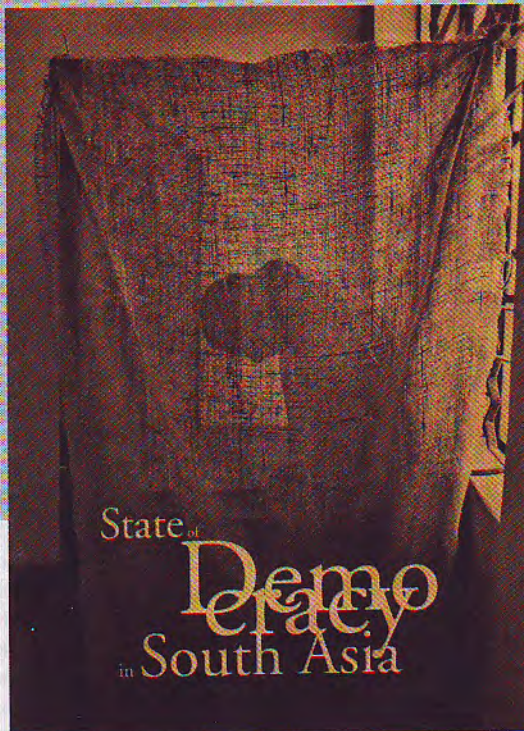
essence, this is an attempt to deliberately complicate the existing discourse on democracy, which has tended to revolve around a unilinear model of democratic evolution. Rather than use a hand-me-down formula to try to understand pluralism, the study seeks to locate democracy in the region – to discover not only what Southasians think about democracy, but how they have adapted its very idea.

The report’s findings confirm that the region’s citizens have a healthy regard for popular self-rule even as, of course, they understand its weaknesses. Not only do Southasians associate the term ‘democracy’ with popular governance and political freedoms, they also attach to it the values of liberty in the fullest sense: equality, justice and dignity. Given that the democratic value of equality is understood in the Southasian context in terms not of formal political equality but in a fuller sense of socio-economic parity, the challenge remains as to how to make democratic systems sensitive to that aspiration. To highlight just one of the complexities found by the study, the finding that democracy can survive in conditions of mass poverty has a flip side: democracy is no guarantee for the removal of poverty.

It is in the intellectual honesty of the exercise, and the willingness of the authors to face up to precisely such “inconvenient facts” that lies the strength of *State of Democracy in South Asia*. Indeed, there could have been no other way to approach this research, for there are myriad and paradoxical manners in which democracy has affected our societies. But the answer to democracy’s problems is more democracy, not less – that is what the people tell us through the survey questionnaire.

It is the truth that many Southasians suffer in undemocracy. The message of *State of Democracy in South Asia* is that though our institutions may be weak for now, the guarantee for the future lies in the fact that the population is attuned to the self-evident, simple, yet powerful offerings of democracy. In the following pages, *Himal Southasian* presents key extracts from the report, in the belief that the results of this rigorous and at times daring exercise must be shared with as large an audience as possible. The details, of course, are to be found in the finely produced original 220-page study. We thank CSDS for the permission to present our readers with these excerpts.

- Editors



The image by Dhaka photographer Shahidul Alam that appears on the cover of the CSDS report says it all. After the popular uprising that brought down the dictator Hossain Mohammad Ershad in December 1990, in a booth created behind a burlap curtain, a woman casts her vote. Her deep concentration, evident even in the unclear silhouette, speaks for the high value placed by the people in democracy, which for them is not at all a nebulous concept.

Object of desire

Southasia's tryst with democracy is studied for its deeper meanings by a team of scholars from Colombo, Delhi, Dhaka, Kathmandu, Lahore and Pune. The effort is to examine the scope of the promise of democracy; to trace institutional slippages in that promise; to catalogue the blockages in democracy's functioning; and to evaluate the outcomes of the democratic enterprise in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The experience of South Asia demolishes any remaining excuse for not adopting democracy. This is the essence of a study of democracy in the region conducted as a collaborative effort by academics from five of South Asia's larger countries.

This is a region marked by a bewildering array of diversities, multiple and overlapping structures of social hierarchy, widespread poverty and inequality, and intolerably high levels of illiteracy. Conventionally, each of these features is understood to be a source of concern and justification for not adopting a democratic system. Not just when they gained independence, but even subsequently, not many expected South Asia's countries to choose democracy, much less remain democratic. Even many of the region's scholars were sceptical about the possibility of popular self-rule taking root. Yet democracy continues to be the reigning ideology and aspiration of the peoples of the region, by far the preferred arrangement.

Not only is democracy becoming a fact of life in South Asia, but each of the countries of the region also has crucial lessons to offer, to its neighbours and to the rest of the world. If India shows depth in its support for democracy and pro-diversity policies, Bangladesh reflects much deeper levels of political identification and participation. Pakistan has a high sense of national pride and Nepal confirms the vitality of people's aspirations and their ability to struggle for a republican and democratic order. And Sri Lanka, amidst a civil war, has a civil society wedded to peace. The South Asian story is, in this sense, truly a story of democracy.

South Asia's experience of democracy defies conventional wisdom by offering its own, unique scenarios. South Asia not only witnesses the continued relevance of political parties; there is also deep interest in participation in politics, both for self-fulfilment and for the pursuit of collective interests. Alongside

influencing public policy, party politics here has the capacity to shape and articulate social identities and is the vehicle of these identities. Clearly, the South Asian experience has valuable lessons for Western democracies grappling with the challenges of diversity. In a nutshell, the idea of democracy has transformed South Asia as much as South Asia has transformed democracy itself.

Aspiration for democracy

The survey, conducted among nearly 20,000 respondents across the five countries, provides evidence to suggest widespread support for democracy across the area studied. When asked to spell out what the term 'democracy' meant to them, nearly everyone who responded offered positive descriptions. In all the countries surveyed, less than one out of ten had immediate negative associations. This support for democracy goes beyond a mere liking of the term, to an approval of the institutional form of democratic government. People in the region favour the rule of "the leaders elected by the people". All but a handful of those who responded took issue with the idea of representative democracy. Doubt or uncertainty with regard to the suitability of democracy surfaced in the form of a lack of response. Nearly a third of the persons interviewed – much more in Bangladesh and Pakistan – declined to answer this question.

The citizens of South Asia do not simply like democracy, they prefer it over authoritarian rule. With the exception of those in Pakistan, about two-thirds of those who responded preferred democracy to any other form of government. Only one out of ten responses supported the idea outright that "sometimes dictatorship is better than democracy". But there is a significant number who are either indifferent or claim ignorance about this choice. About a quarter in other countries and half the respondents in Pakistan said that it made no difference to them if government took a

When people living under non-democratic regimes pay even lip-service to the idea of democracy, they must be understood to be making a significant statement.

Nearly everyone thinks of democracy in positive terms

Those who describe 'democracy' in negative terms (%age)*

Bangladesh	2
India	7
Nepal	9
Pakistan	8
Sri Lanka	1

*Non-response excluded



democratic or non-democratic form.

The results of the survey permit a limited conclusion: democracy has become an object of desire, something that is viewed positively, is considered suitable, and whose presence is generally preferred over its absence. This is not a trivial finding in a region often believed not to be conducive for the development of democratic practice. During the time that the survey was taken, moreover, the region had some of the few surviving military dictatorships and executive monarchies of our time. When people living under non-democratic regimes pay even lip-service to the idea of democracy, they must be understood to be making a significant statement.

The meaning of 'democracy'

If the concept of democracy has transformed political imagination in South Asia, this region too has left its imprint on the idea of democracy. Departing from its received textbook meaning, democracy has come to bear a new set of significances. The textbook understanding, itself drawn from a high theory developed from the experience of democracy in Europe and North America, privileges certain elements. These include popular control over rulers, availability of equal rights and liberties for citizens,

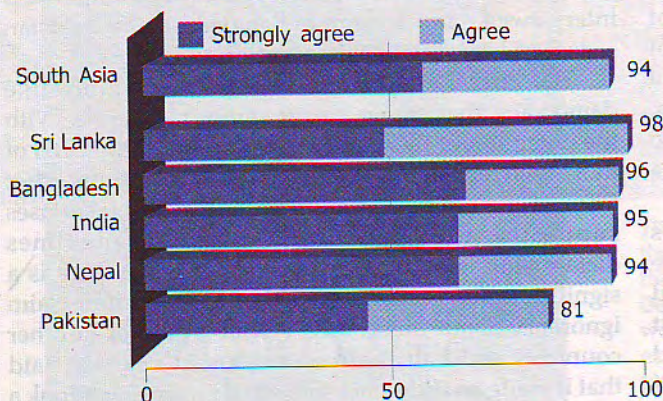
the idea of rule of law and of protection against the tyranny of the majority. In its South Asian version, democracy is associated principally with the ideas of people's rule, political freedom, equality of outcomes, and community rights. The South Asian version of the idea of democracy, as seen in the mirror of public opinion, does not accord equal centrality to the idea of rule of law and the institutional-procedural dimensions of democratic governance.

The most common association citizens have with the idea of democracy is 'freedom'. A closer look, however, brings out the differences between the dominant understandings of democracy as freedom. For one, the language of freedom is not used equally by all sections of society: the elite, the more educated and the better-off tend to be more enthusiastic about 'freedom' than those at the lower end of the social hierarchy. Also, while people associate democracy with freedom, they do not necessarily emphasise freedom over democracy's other attributes. When forced to choose the most salient feature of democracy, only six percent of respondents region-wide picked up the classical virtue of freedom of expression. But most significantly, those who did mention freedom rarely understood it in the classical, negative sense of the absence of constraints imposed by the state or society. They would rather the state play a greater role in the provision of public goods than view it as a source of threat to their liberty. Freedom is understood by ordinary citizens in a wider and positive sense that includes political freedom but extends to freedom from want.

The idea of equality undergoes a similar transformation. Democracy in its classical sense presupposes formal political equality. But in the South Asian context, the idea is expanded to include socio-economic equality, dignity and access to material well-being. Nearly one in three persons, from the elite as well as the masses, who offer any meaning of 'democracy' associate it with some substantial outcome in terms of equality and the fulfilment of basic necessities of life, including security. An even larger proportion opt for the satisfaction of these "basic necessities" when asked to pick the most essential attribute of democracy. When asked to choose what they like most about democracy, the feature people stress aside from freedom is that democracy provides dignity to the poor. The non-elite and poor within the sampled set tend to use this language more than do the rest. This difference is reflected across the countries as well, as the language of equality is more popular in the

Overwhelming support for democracy

Those who agree with the rule of leaders elected by the people (%age)



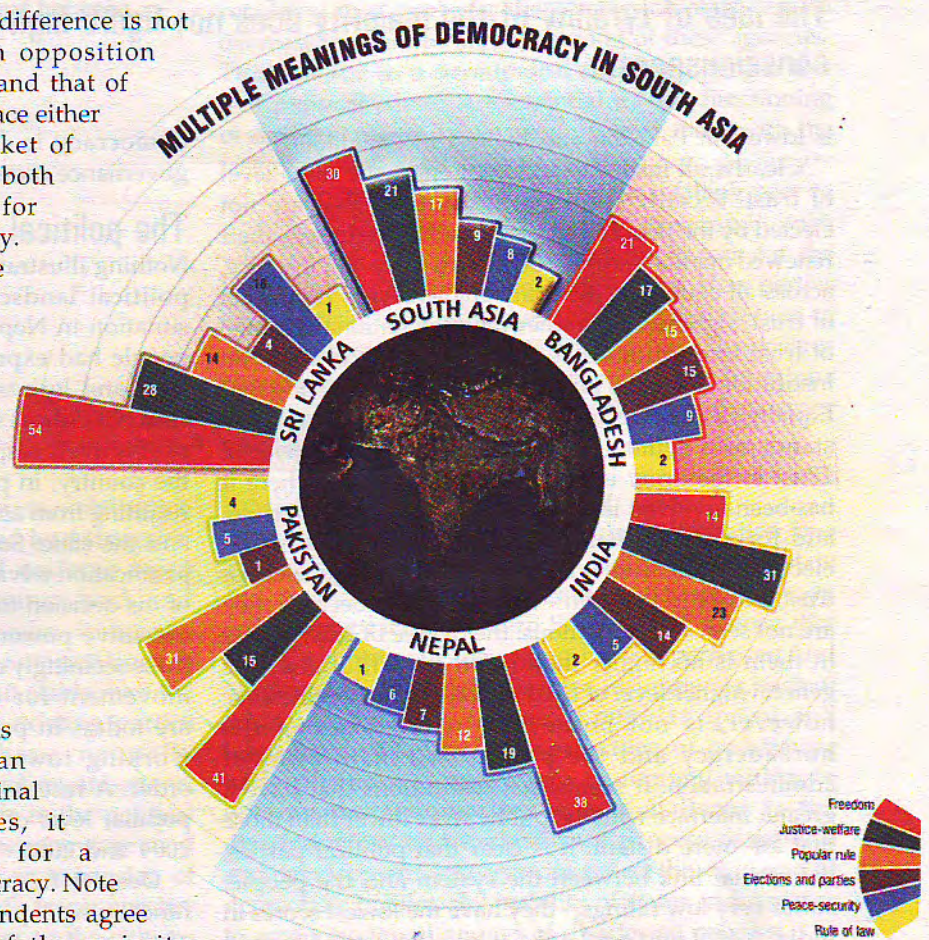
region's poorer countries. Yet this difference is not the kind that would suggest an opposition between the language of freedom and that of equality. It is not that the citizens place either freedom *or* equality into the basket of democracy; their interpretation of both these values allows them to opt for freedom *and* equality simultaneously.

Democracy in popular discourse is associated with the language of rights, and this language too sees a major shift in South Asia. In their adoption of this vocabulary, South Asia's citizens have shifted the principal locus of rights from the individual to the community. It is the introduction of modern politics, competitive or otherwise, that provides incentives for the creation of some of these communities. In this sense the community is less a primordial entity and more a political artefact. While the emphasis on community rights provides an opportunity for struggle by marginal social groups and communities, it simultaneously creates space for a majoritarian interpretation of democracy. Note that nearly two-thirds of the respondents agree that in a democracy the will of the majority community should prevail.

What about democracy understood as a form of government? Not only does this occupy a secondary meaning of democracy in the popular imagination, but the South Asian rendition is somewhat distinctive. Here, the idea of popular control takes clear precedence over institutional mechanisms. For instance, in spelling out what democracy means to them, citizens mention 'periodic elections' more often than they do political parties. This should not be interpreted as a rejection of the 'procedural' definition in favour of a 'substantive' view of democracy. It is rather that in South Asia, one kind of democratic procedure – representation through regular elections – is valued over other kinds of more impersonal controls and processes. Thus, it is the choice offered by democracy that lies at the heart of the definition of and support for democracy in the region. Democracy is valued because it provides a possible escape from the capriciousness of rulers and an opportunity to be the maker of one's own destiny.



Even when they think of democracy as a form of government, South Asians do not associate it with the idea of the rule of law.



Even when they think of democracy as a form of government, South Asians do not associate it with the idea of the rule of law. Only a miniscule proportion of citizens associate democracy with the various institutions and practices that contribute to the rule of law. Similarly, the idea of tyranny of the majority does not figure high in the popular consciousness and there are few takers for it even when it is placed on the menu as a possible anxiety about the workings of democracy.

Trust in institutions

Modern governance produces a range of institutions: one set of such institutions is governments at different geographic levels. Then there are other, non-elected institutions. Finally, the political party is the central institution in the functioning of democracy. All institutions taken together, South Asia is characterised by a modestly robust level of trust in institutions. The democratic institutions in the region have won the trust of a majority of the population. Overall, trust in political institutions

The idea of tyranny of the majority does not figure high in the popular consciousness.

is lowest in Pakistan and highest in Bangladesh.

Clearly, all institutions do not enjoy the same level of trust. Broadly speaking, institutions that are not elected by the people and that do not have to seek their renewed mandate seem to be trusted more. For instance, across all countries, the army enjoys a very high level of trust, significantly higher than the national average of trust in institutions. Is this because the army as an institution is usually far removed from the public gaze? Equally, it may be because the army conventionally stands as a symbol of national pride and strength. Trust in the army is high even in countries where it has been involved in direct political action – Pakistan, and for a period Bangladesh. Similarly, courts and election commissions too enjoy a very high level of trust, except in Pakistan – there, possibly because they are not seen as autonomous, the degree of trust placed in them is no higher than in other institutions. The general higher level of trust in non-elected institutions, however, is not borne out in the cases of the bureaucracy and the police, two main arms of administration. It seems that institutions that have a greater interface with the public score lower than those that are more distant. It is clear that political parties, the crucial link between the system and the people, suffer very low ratings – they have the lowest scores in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka while they stand second from the bottom in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Such low ratings for political parties augur poorly for democracy. What is undeniable, however, is that if political parties fail to adequately represent larger sections of society and their aspirations, and function more as instruments for the capture of state power, they are more likely to be viewed with derision. The low trust in parties has created space for the functioning of a non-party political domain – extra-parliamentary movements and a voluntary sector – representative of newer forms of political practice and institutions. Finally, people have relatively higher trust in institutions that are more abstract and general – not just the army, courts and election commissions, but also the higher levels of government – at the national and provincial rather than local level. The two most visible political institutions having direct interface with the people – the parliament and political parties – enjoy low levels of trust, as do the police and civil administration. All this indicates that behind the challenges faced by



democracy in the region lies the failure to make governance more people-friendly.

The political parties

Nothing illustrates the place of political parties in the political landscape of South Asia better than the situation in Nepal. Just a couple of years ago, many people had expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with and low trust in political parties, which were seen not only as self-serving and corrupt but incapable of effectively responding to the major challenges facing the country, in particular the near civil war situation resulting from an armed conflict between Maoist rebels and the state. Such incapacity, in fact, was the major justification advanced by Nepal's monarch in defence of his decision to ban all political activity and assume executive powers. Yet, and to the surprise of many, these seemingly discredited political parties led a mass movement for the restoration of democracy and are today, in partnership with the erstwhile rebels, working towards crafting a new constitutional order. A recent survey in the country shows that the popular level of trust in parties has shot up between 2004 and 2006.

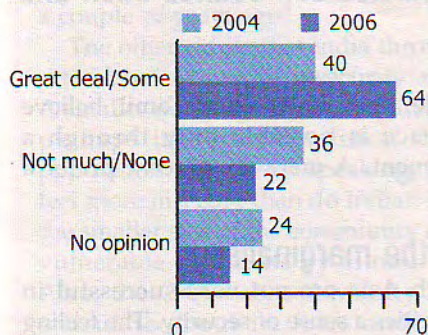
Despite frequent attempts to ban or restrict the functioning of political parties in the different countries of the region, they have almost invariably bounced back to claim public allegiance. Unlike in many other parts of the world, political parties here remain the principal force around which public contestations are organised, serving to structure political alternatives for the people, formulating policies and translating them into a popularly intelligible set of choices.

Such vitality should be a matter of surprise to both South Asians and others. Political parties in South Asia are usually described in terms of lack: immature, inchoate, insufficiently institutionalised, devoid of organisational structure, not professional in their functioning, and deficient in ideology or policy agendas. This popular reading does not consider a possible explanation of the vitality of political parties in South Asia: that parties occupy the role they do in this region not despite but because of the absences mentioned above. It is precisely because political parties have not developed clearly-defined organisational structures and have not acquired an institutionalised, professional existence that they manage to occupy a very large space in the public life of the region. Since most political parties are still very

The fact of a larger number of smaller parties brings parties closer to the citizens and makes it easier for them to engage in democratic action.

Trust in political parties shot up in Nepal between 2004 and 2006

How much trust do you have in political parties?



young and not distanced from their mass mobilisation phase, they can organise resistance and lead struggles. It is because they are inchoate and undergo rapid mutations that the parties can bounce back and surprise everyone.

The nature of party-political competition in South Asia has remained anything but stable over the last few decades. Fragmentation of existing parties and the rise of new parties have naturally resulted in the proliferation of political organisations, sometimes causing a virtual stampede in the political arena. A close look at the level of citizens' engagement with political parties shows signs of an expansion of electoral democracy's base. The fact of a larger number of smaller parties brings parties closer to the citizens and makes it easier for them to engage in democratic action. More than two out of every five adults in the region say they feel close to a party. If we go by evidence available from India across four decades, the level of party identification is on the rise. A question on the degree of participation in the activities of political parties shows that one-sixth of citizens in South Asia take part in party activities. This level of direct participation is high for any democracy and higher than peoples' involvement in trade unions, NGOs or any kind of socio-cultural organisation, barring of course religious organisations. The level of self-reported membership of political parties in the region is fairly high, higher than the global average. It seems that the political parties of South Asia are not facing a crisis of popular indifference and lack of public involvement.

The various simultaneous demands on the parties – that they represent and give voice to the people, help them access state resources and, above all, respond to their many demands and problems – seem to have contributed to an 'expectation overload' over time,

resulting in a growing dissatisfaction with, and a decrease in trust in, the functioning of these agencies. This has led to a paradoxical situation: people feel that political parties are essential for the functioning of democracy but do not seem to trust them with the task of making democracy work. Routinely, parties are accused of having short-term horizons, falling prey to populist agendas, and being obsessed with winning elections without adequate concern for the longer-term consequences of their actions. How parties cope with these challenges, reorient themselves to contemporary requirements and develop themselves as agencies effective in discharging the functions expected of them will determine the shape democracy will take in the region.

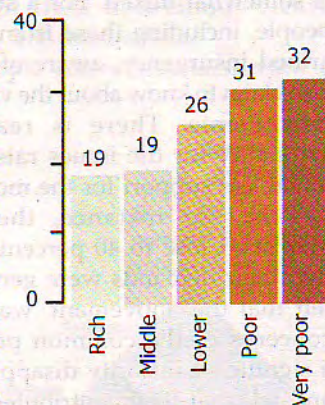
Insurgency and democracy

An extreme manifestation of popular mobilisation, one that seeks to challenge the very legitimacy of the state and democratic politics, is armed insurgency. It is an unfortunate fact of modern South Asian history that all the countries of the region have experienced and continue to be troubled by armed insurgencies, each of which enjoys some degree of popular appeal and legitimacy. Whether as expressions of embryonic nationalisms, as struggles for autonomy within or without the nation-state, or as a challenge to the discriminatory and exclusionary process of growth and development, insurgencies reflect the dead-end of democratic politics, the inability of states and regimes to accommodate the urges of disaffected peoples.

The relationship of these struggles with political parties and the democratic process is rarely straightforward. Many armed struggles trace their genesis to state bans of certain parties or demands and, in this sense, can be seen as extensions of party politics, albeit extra-constitutional ones. The use of physical force and violence has inevitably invited a brutal response from the state, the strengthening of the repressive apparatus, and the promulgation of draconian legislation restricting fundamental

Naxalites enjoy more sympathy among the poor

Those who believe that Naxalites are friends of the people (%age)*



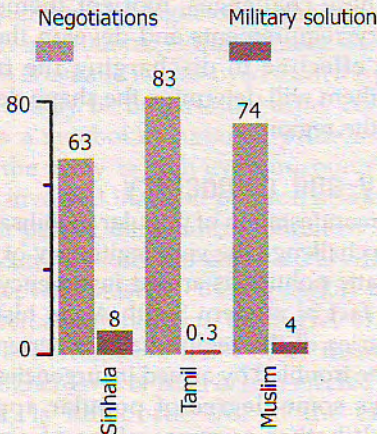
*Responses are for those who had heard about the movement and live in states with a significant Naxalite presence

All institutions do not enjoy the same level of trust. Broadly speaking, institutions that are not elected by the people and that do not have to seek their renewed mandate seem to be trusted more.

Since most political parties are still very young and not distanced from their mass mobilisation phase, they can organise resistance and lead struggles. It is because they are inchoate and undergo rapid mutations that the parties can bounce back and surprise everyone.

All communities in Sri Lanka agree on negotiating with the LTTE

Sri Lanka: Preferred way to achieve peace



rights and freedoms. Continued violence not only brutalises the state structure but also society, with ordinary citizens trapped between two warring sides. Thus, though armed insurgencies emerge out of an absence of democracy, and usually claim to be working to usher in a more substantive democracy, their very mode of functioning seizes the agency of the people, makes everyday political practice difficult and thereby serves to cripple and delegitimise democracy.

It is thus not surprising that the response of the common citizen to the phenomenon of armed struggle is somewhat mixed. For a start, not only are many people, including those from areas not experiencing armed insurgency, aware of insurgencies, but they also claim to know about the various demands of these movements. There is reasonably widespread sympathy for the issues raised. There is, however, much less support for the movements' methods.

Take, for instance, the case of the Indian Maoists. Close to 40 percent of those surveyed felt that their demands were genuine and nearly a fifth felt that the 'movement' was working to meet the concerns of the common people. Simultaneously, a significant majority disapproved of their methods and felt that they contributed to a generalisation of violence. This might explain why there is much greater sympathy, if not support, for a political settlement through peaceful dialogue and negotiation, rather than a military solution. Even in Sri Lanka, after over two decades of violent conflict resulting in the death of thousands of people and the displacement of many more, over two-thirds of the

Sri Lankan people, both Sinhala and Tamil, believe that durable peace is possible only through a negotiated settlement. A mere six percent prefer a military solution.

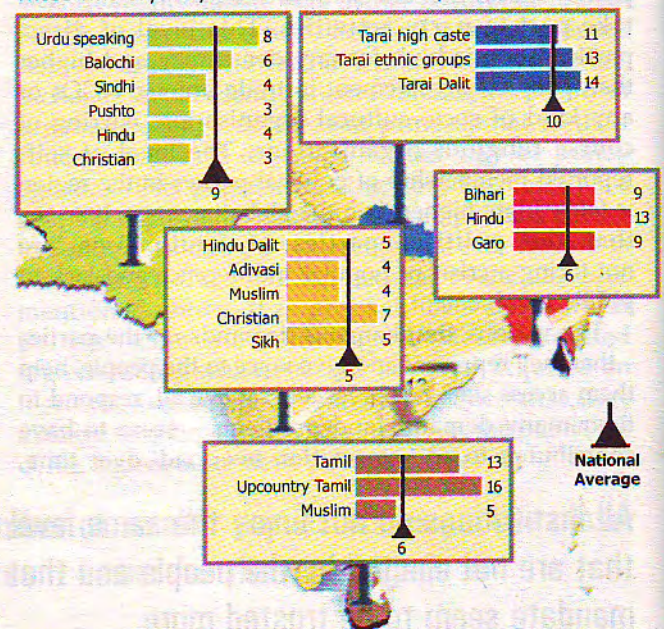
Insecurity of the marginalised

Societies in South Asia are not very successful in giving their minorities a sense of security. The feeling of insecurity is higher among minorities in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. A sense of exclusion exacerbates this feeling. Thus, in Sri Lanka the upcountry Tamils feel more insecure than do Tamils in general and the Tarai Dalits feel more insecure in Nepal than they do in India. What is worse is that some groups feel that this sense of insecurity has increased over time. This is true not only of Bangladesh's Hindus, but also of its Garos. In Nepal too the feeling of insecurity has increased in the Eastern and Mid-far Western regions.

Our discussion of security is further complicated by two findings among minorities in India. Muslims in Gujarat experienced one of the most concerted attacks from Hindu fundamentalist forces in 2002, yet this does not reflect in responses from Indian Muslims. Is this because India's Muslims think primarily in terms of locality, so that their perception of security takes into account only what comes to pass in their vicinities? Does this have something to do

Marginal groups are insecure

Those who say they feel 'unsafe' where they live (%age)



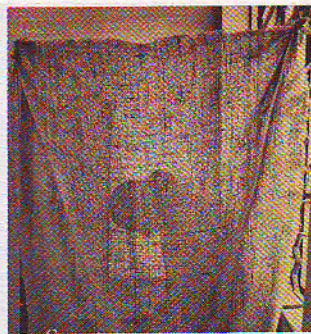
with unarticulated fears within the community? Are Indian Muslims comparing the present to the immediate past of Gujarat violence and indicating that they feel a little more secure now than they did a couple of years ago?

The other riddle that India throws up is the more articulated feeling of insecurity among Christians. A smaller minority when compared to Muslims, and perhaps in better condition than the Muslim population objectively speaking, Indian Christians feel more insecure than do Indian Muslims. Perhaps the smaller size of the community makes it feel more vulnerable to threats by Hindu fundamentalists. Also, the Christian community is possibly more articulate about its fears and conscious of the distance being created by verbal and physical attacks against it.

Many factors feed into the feeling of insecurity among marginal and minority sections. One is obviously objective material conditions; another is social tensions and the level of tolerance of diversity; a third, the official policy of the state towards minorities and marginal groups; and finally, the level of mobilisation based on identity among majority communities in particular, but among all sections of society in general. Identity-based mobilisations produce divisive imaginary histories, social distances and political separation, leading to an increase in feelings of vulnerability.

The material outcome

South Asia is the site of an audacious experiment to realise simultaneously two of the most cherished goals of humanity: freedom to decide one's destiny and freedom from want. Since the region combines the existence of mass poverty with experiments at mass democracy, the fate of the South Asian experiment can decide two of the most perplexing questions of our time: One, is a certain degree of material prosperity a pre-condition to the growth



It seems that the political parties of South Asia are not facing a crisis of popular indifference and lack of public involvement.

and endurance of democracy? Two, is democracy a reliable instrument for achieving freedom from want?

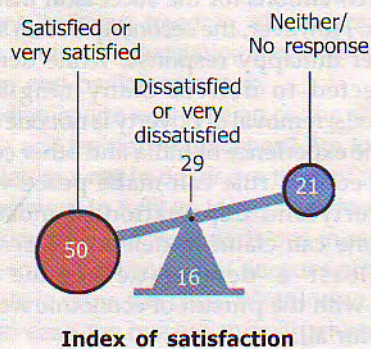
An understanding of the objective presence of poverty does not by itself give us a map for politics unless we understand how poverty registers in the minds of the people. The results of the survey do show a mis-match between objective economic conditions and subjective perceptions of economic conditions. Unlike in some other parts of the world, there is a tendency in South Asia for downward economic identification; most people think and say that they are poor. When asked to place themselves on a ten-step ladder, more than 60 percent respondents placed themselves on the lowest three rungs. Even among the most privileged, nearly one-third placed themselves on the lowest three rungs.

Another seeming disconnect – that between people's economic conditions and their level of satisfaction – matters much more to democratic politics. In spite of very negative economic indicators in objective terms, people report a relatively high level of satisfaction with their present economic situations, alongside expectations of a better future. For one of the poorest regions in the world, it is amazing that the proportion of those who are satisfied with the current economic condition of their households clearly outnumber those who are dissatisfied.

The fact that the people take a less harsh view of

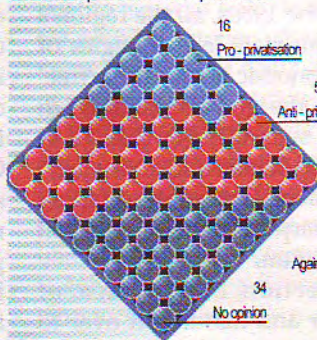
Very few people are dissatisfied with their economic conditions

South Asia: Current economic condition of their household



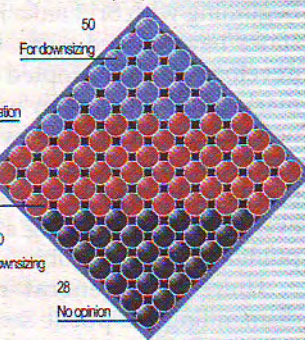
Clear rejection of disinvestment in the public sector...

South Asia: Should public sector units be handed over to private companies?



...as also of the downsizing of government

South Asia: Should the number of government employees be reduced?



Authors and methodology

The State of Democracy in South Asia is the handiwork of the Lokniti Programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, and was supported by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm and the Department of Sociology at Oxford University. The principal investigators were Peter R de Souza (CSDS), Suhas Palshikar (University of Pune) and Yogendra Yadav (CSDS). The country coordinators were Imtiaz Ahmed (University of Dhaka), Sanjay Kumar (CSDS, Delhi), Krishna Hachhethu (Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu), Mohammed Waseem (Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad), and Jayadeva Uyangoda (University of Colombo). The report was edited by Harsh Sethi, editor of the journal *Seminar*.

A number of methodologies were utilised for conducting the study. A **cross-section survey** was carried out in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka through a scientific selection of a

sample of the population. This method was used to tap the perceptions of people on a wide range of issues such as the meaning of democracy, trust in institutions, and security concerns. The survey sample size by country was 3301 for Bangladesh, 5389 for India, 3249 for Nepal, 2854 for Pakistan and 4616 for Sri Lanka. The mapping of public opinion was balanced with a series of **dialogues** with social and political activists in different regions of each country, which recognised the existence and salience of varying positions and viewpoints of the actors engaged in reforming and radicalising democracy.

Scholars were invited to join in by conducting **case studies**. These case studies focused on the uniqueness of situations, issues or locations, in order to illuminate the 'performance dimension' of democracy. Finally, the study developed a broad framework for the **qualitative assessment of democracy** in each country by a team of scholars from that country.

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their conditions than would objective data reduces the pressure on the state and provides it with room to engage with these questions of economic circumstances in the long run. At the same time, this very space can be used to disengage from or to mask the issue. The people's 'misrecognition' of their condition makes political mobilisation on issues of class very difficult. At the same time, it also underlines the autonomy of popular consciousness and expands the scope of political intervention. Thus, the mismatch between the objective and the subjective cuts both ways: if an 'excessively' broad definition of the poor expands the political constituency of the struggle for freedom from want, the misplaced sense of satisfaction and optimism serves to blunt the edge of this struggle.

The marginalisation of the struggle for freedom from want is best illustrated by the divergence between the opinion of the mass public and policies pursued by all the states of South Asia with regard to what is often described as economic reforms, and sometimes LPG (liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation). Beginning with Sri Lanka in the 1980s, all the region's states have moved away from state-led strategies of development and adopted economic policies of a 'free' market and integration with the global economy. In none of these countries was such a major change in policy preceded by democratic debate and consensus-building. Some of these decisions lack public sanction even now, thus creating a sharp disjunction between public policy and public opinion.

There is a general rejection of the idea of dismantling the public sector and handing it over to private companies in all five countries surveyed. For

every defender of privatisation, there are three or more who reject this policy. The people still look up to the government as a provider of basic services. An overwhelming majority of the people reject proposals regarding the handing over of electricity, schools, hospitals, drinking water or bus services to private companies. Ordinary citizens also view any proposal for the downsizing of government with suspicion and place it at par with the withdrawal of public services. Opposition to liberalisation is weaker when it does not directly affect public service or government. On balance, more people in South Asia favour the entry of foreign companies than those who oppose it, though there are strong variations here along the lines of country and class.

That the disjunction between economic policy and popular preference takes place at a time when the region is expanding its democratic structures and institutions is a reminder of the two big questions posed at the beginning of this section. It seems that the first question has a happy answer; there are no economic preconditions for the successful installation of democracy. However, the second question seems to invite a rather unhappy response; while democracy can be expected to deliver many tangible and intangible goods, removal of poverty is not one of them. Once again the experience of India and other countries shows that people's rule can make peace with the misery, poverty and deprivation of most of the people. All one can claim in defence of democracy is that at least a democratic regime is not incompatible with the pursuit of economic well-being and security for all.



The judicial activist

Are the courts of India straying into the executive and legislative folds?

BY SHYLASHRI SHANKAR

In 1993, political scientist Gerald Rosenberg published a book on the American court system titled *The Hollow Hope: Can courts bring about social change?* At that time, Rosenberg's answer to the titular question was negative, and he argued that courts are constrained by a multitude of factors – institutional, ideological and structural. Over the last two decades, however, judges throughout the world have become increasingly active in promoting 'non-justiciable' rights – those issues that by traditional practice cannot be settled by a court of law.

Judges in India, Brazil and South Africa have ruled in favour of rights to health, education, better environment and housing, and women's rights, among others. Such actions have prompted some scholars to note the "decline and fall of parliamentary sovereignty", the "global expansion of judicial power", and even the creation of a "juristocracy". Indian judges have stormed ahead, issuing judgements on seemingly every question imaginable, including the sealing of illegal urban constructions, affirmative action in educational institutions, religious freedom, alcoholism and pollution, and even castigating the behaviour of governors and parliamentarians.

Are Indian courts encroaching on the domains of the executive and legislative branches? Are judges telling the legislature what to do, or are they merely prodding the government to fulfil its legal obligations? A close examination of some legal decisions in public-health cases over the past couple of decades shows that the latter is more often the case. What Indian judges have done is to ease the process through which citizens can

hold the government accountable for its failure to comply with its statutory duties.

Since the early 1980s, India's Supreme Court has increasingly become the champion of poor and vulnerable citizens, handing down judgements in favour of rights to education, livelihood, health and social justice. In health, by the late 1990s the justices had moved from a narrow focus on the rights of organised workers to health benefits, to more expansive judgements informed by the general right to health for all citizens.

The failure of municipalities to provide adequate public sanitation and clean water subsequently became some of the most frequently litigated cases. Over 80 percent of these complaints were upheld on grounds of a 'right to health'. In a case dealing with the degradation of Jaipur city, the court ruled that the 'right to life' included rights to food, shelter, reasonable accommodation, decent environment and a clean city. The ruling judge said that through its proactive stance, the court could compel a statutory body to carry out its duties to the community, including the creation of sanitary conditions.

What's already promised

Why are Indian judges increasingly solicitous of social rights? Some, such as legal scholars S P Sathe and Upendra Baxi, attribute the change to 'penance' for the judiciary's quiescence during Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule of 1975-77. The post-Emergency period saw judges such as P N Bhagwati and Krishna Iyer evolve procedures that made it easier for citizens to approach courts, including through public interest litigation (PIL). This relaxation of procedural rules allowed public-spirited persons to appeal to judges simply by writing a letter.

The judicial community in turn expanded the interpretation of Article 21, which states that a person cannot be deprived of life or liberty except according to procedures established by law. The article was now interpreted to encompass economic and social rights, such as basic education, health, food, shelter, speedy trial and equal wages for equal work. Judges even found that, in order for a right to be treated as fundamental, it need not be included in the fundamental rights section of the Constitution. In the 1992 *Peerless v Reserve Bank of India*, the court argued that "the right to self interest is inherent in the right to life ... Right to life includes the right to live with basic human dignity with necessities of life such as nutrition, clothing, food, shelter over the head, facilities for cultural and socio-economic well being of every individual. Article 21 protects right to life."

A spate of judgements from the 1980s onwards established precedents for a transformation by which non-enforceable social rights – enumerated in the directive principles section of the Constitution, but once unprotected by the courts – became enforceable. For instance, according to one observer in 2003, the introduction of midday meals in the primary schools of India "would not have happened without the Supreme

Court cracking the whip.”

Throughout this course, judges have carefully highlighted legislative actions as the basis for all shifts towards justiciability, emphasising time and again that their judgements have merely ensured that citizens received the entitlements already provided to them by law. During this period, Indian courts in various states have directed the government to implement existing laws on wearing helmets, sided with a PIL petitioner who asserted that authorities must not provide groundwater with high fluoride content (and subsequently asked the state to consider evacuating affected villagers), banned noise pollution and the sale of firecrackers, and outlawed child labour for children under 10 years of age.

The Supreme Court has not lagged behind in this process. During the past two decades it has directed Pepsi, Coke and other manufacturers of carbonated drinks to reveal the highly secret contents of their products, upheld charges against those accused of adulterating liquor, required the Uttar Pradesh government to set up a monitoring committee to ensure safe drinking water, awarded compensation for negligence in medical treatment, directed that a committee examine ways to improve services in government hospitals, and ordered the state to evolve a time-bound plan to deal with inadequacies in mental hospitals. All of these decisions instructed the state to follow through on issues that it had already promised to act on by law or policy.

Contrast this with the small number of cases where the courts have struck down new policies, on grounds that they conflict with prior constitutional obligations. For instance, citing the obligation of the government to improve the situation of public nutrition, the Madras High Court halted a new method of distributing sugar that allotted greater quantities to persons with higher income, saying that it would result in inequitable distribution and nutrition. Where new policies were required, the judges usually asked (not directed) the government to do so. The courts urged the central government to pass legislation banning the use of carcinogenic insecticides and colour additives; the government of Kerala was pushed to issue a new order banning smoking in public places; and a Delhi judgement compelled the state government to switch to clean fuels by mandating the phasing out of old taxis, unless they were converted to using compressed natural gas.

Poor enforcement

Judges do not tend to be crusaders. After all, the judiciary is an arm of the state, and judges are conscious of the limits of what they can do within that structure. The modus operandi of the court is to ask the government to set up expert committees to assess possible actions, and then to issue directives based on the recommendations of those committees.

The enforcement of these directives tends to be

patchy at best. High-profile cases, such as those dealing with the quality of air in Delhi or the sealing of illegal buildings, have indeed generated some compliance by the government. But preliminary findings from the author's study assessing judicial behaviour on social rights suggest that the enforcement of judgements on complex issues, such as hospital management or municipal provision of clean water, has been lax unless civil-society organisations are actively involved in the follow-up. Despite judicial support, the poor enforcement of several important court decisions has prompted right-to-food campaigners, for instance, to focus on non-legal avenues to carry out their work.

The judiciary has proven itself capable of monitoring enforcement only in cases where complexity is low and solutions clear. So even when judgements have been made alongside ringing declarations about the right to life with dignity, universal human rights and the like, implementation suffers in the face of governmental excuses, such as budgetary and manpower constraints.

It would be unfair to blame judges for the poor enforcement of their decisions. Judges may have more time to influence enforcement at the high-court level, where they typically serve for 12 to 18 years, than at the Supreme Court, where they serve less than six years. High caseloads do not allow judges the time to follow up, and so issues are not revisited unless individual judges take a personal interest in them, as with Justice Kuldeep Singh's passion for environmental causes. Moreover, social-rights litigation, which deals primarily with the provision of public goods and failures of the government to fulfil its public-interest obligations, does not lend itself to easy solutions. To be successful, enforcement in such cases requires greater budgetary resources and coordination between different government agencies. The only tools available to the court in cases of non-compliance are contempt-of-court orders. Given this, what are judges to do when senior bureaucrats plead their inability to, for instance, pay government teachers salary arrears?

In this light, Rosenberg's 1993 assessment seems still to hold true: courts can only have little impact on social change. Legal victories rarely change official actions or social relationships in significant ways, because judges cannot influence social behaviour without the support of the public and certain key actors.

Nonetheless, courts have become more important in public life in India, and this is partly due to the general deterioration in governance. Plagued by a splintering of politics and the squabbling of coalition partners, the executive and legislative branches have shifted some of the burden of governance to the judiciary. In order to avoid a meltdown in the next assembly elections, for instance, the Delhi government has recently sought to deflect ire over the sealing of buildings by reiterating that the courts have been “forcing us to demolish shops”. But judges have not yet crossed the line into lawmaking. One hopes that they never will.



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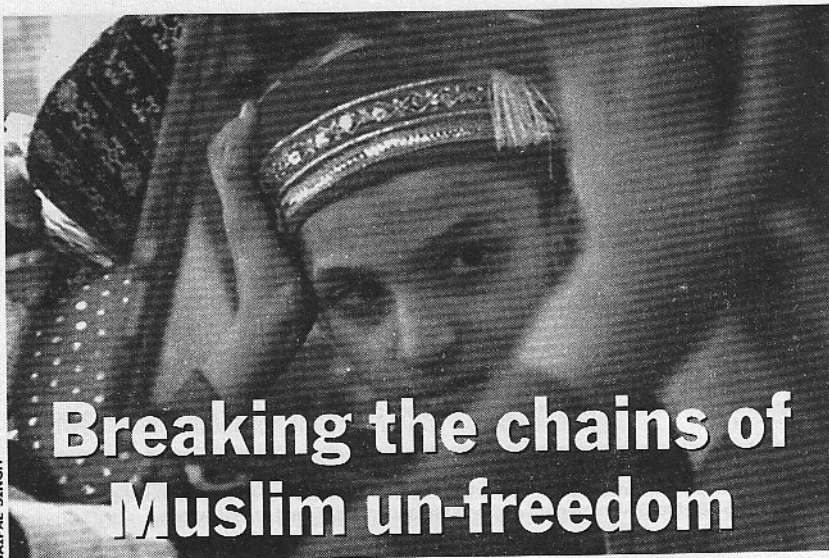
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JAIPAL SINGH

Breaking the chains of Muslim un-freedom

The late-November release of the Rajinder Sachar Committee report, which found that India's Muslims have been systematically excluded from state institutions (save for the dubious privilege of being imprisoned), resulted in weeks of spirited, countrywide debate. That report has of course confirmed something that everyone already knew; the challenge now is what to do about it. Once the battle lines are drawn, words like *appeasement*, *introspection*, *reservation*, *sub-plan allocation* and *affirmative action* fly regularly across the ideological divide. But there should be another way to think about the report's assembled facts and figures. What is most crucial about the report's pages is the kind of politics they will ultimately be able to catalyse.

Being the brainchild of India's economist-prime minister, the thrust of the Sachar report is not so much on the problems of security or identity faced by the Muslim communities of the 13 Indian states with the highest Muslim populations, but rather on the question of economic equity. What the Sachar panel mapped out is what Amartya Sen would call the 'economic un-freedoms' of the Indian Muslims. The real success of the Sachar committee would be if its report became a milestone in the

efforts to deliver equity to the Indian Muslim community; if discussion sparked by Mr Sachar were to go beyond newsroom debates, and become part of the popular parlance in ground-level Muslim politics. This would hopefully lead to a situation wherein education and employment become larger 'Muslim issues' than are the Babri Masjid and *fatwas* in the larger society.

As with all contested terrains in a developing society, the idea of equity brings with it its own politics. For India's Muslims – or, for that matter, any marginal group – equity is among the three major issues that shape the community's political anxieties, the other two being security and identity. While it is impossible to talk of a monolithic Indian-Muslim political agenda, it is still possible to say that the Sachar committee report gives a thrust in one particular direction: towards a politics of equity.

OBC dead-end

Politics for Indian Muslims in the time after Partition revolved around the quest for security. The community's overwhelming support for the Congress party was perhaps due simply to the promise of safety that Jawaharlal Nehru had made them. However, this politics was also rooted in the feudal history of the country. The feudal

The real test of the new Sachar report will be if it can catalyse a Muslim movement in India towards equity.

BY AASIM KHAN

Muslim elites were comfortable playing the *mai-baap* (top dog, the provider), while the masses slowly slid into a state of social hopelessness. In the post-Nehru era, the Congress party grew increasingly apathetic towards the demands of the Muslim underclass, and simultaneously began its flirtations with popular sentiments among Muslims that were founded on identity.

The Congress's shift from a politics of security to one of identity, however, was never completed. The reason for this was a crucial shift that occurred after the 1975-78 state of Emergency and following the splitting of the Janata Party – a shift that was most visible in the Hindi heartland of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where a majority of the country's Muslim population lived. Muslims here felt that they had a better chance if they stuck with the lower-caste movement, together with which they could fight the common oppressor – namely the upper-caste *zamindar*, who in many cases would also be the Congress representative. The fact that Islam does not allow caste differentiation hardly made a difference.

The Other Backward Class leaders in particular were able to wrest the Muslim electorate away from the Congress counterparts. Over the next two decades, as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took over the communalisation that the Congress had started (with, for instance, the Ayodhya issue), Muslims fell for the charming secular symbolism of the OBC

movement. In Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav championed the anti-Hindutva cause, while the Samajwadi party chief, Mulayam Singh Yadav, earned the sobriquet of Maulana Mulayam.

But there was a crucial disconnect. OBC politics was still inherently one of identity, more about breaking new ground with symbolic assertions of power than a real politics of empowerment or equity. Muslim support was assured because the OBC leaders promised to keep the forces of Hindutva at bay. But with the collapse of the Ram temple movement, this basic premise eventually fell apart. Indeed, the destruction of Babri Masjid catalysed an important trend among the Muslims in India – they decided to take things in their own hands. Strategies such as sticking together (at the cost of ghettoisation) are not merely driven by insecurity, but are also long-term political strategies to consolidate the Muslim vote against the communal parties.

Though it is yet to make itself fully visible, the rift between the Muslim community and the lower-caste Hindu leadership is a growing phenomenon. There are significant indications that, sooner rather than later, Muslims will 'make a break'. Already Lalu's supposed pro-Muslim image has come under fire, and the bravado he showed in arresting L K Advani during his 1990 rally in Ayodhya is a fading memory in the changing political landscape. The results of the recent Bihar elections are telling in the way in which the Pasmanda Muslims went along with Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, preferring the Kurmi-heavy Janata Dal (United) to the Yadav-influenced Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). A majority of Muslims in the state belong to the Most Backward Classes, and economically come closer to the Kurmis than the Yadavs. The situation at hand for Mulayam Singh Yadav is even more apparent. Between open dissent by long-time supporters and Muslim

leaders such as Kalbe Sadiq floating their own parties, Mulayam's control over the Muslim electorate is clearly facing a breakdown.

Few places to turn

As such, it will be interesting to see which way the Muslim electorate is headed. This writer believes that the shift will be towards a politics of equity, because issues concerning identity often deal in little more than rhetoric, and because the Muslim masses are coming to understand this fact. The Personal Law Board, the fatwas and the burqas might make prominent news headlines, and the media may insist on raking up again and again the discourse on terrorism, but such issues do not really matter for the Indian Muslim masses. While most people have been appalled by the findings of the Sachar report, it should be good news for those who are willing to begin a debate around the serious issues – the ones affecting the Muslims of India, and ones that the masses are now making the core of their own politics.

One has only to look at the recent state elections to see that this is in fact the trend. In Assam, Muslims have formed a new political outfit, the Asom United Democratic Front (AUDF), which succeeded in securing double-digit figures in the state assembly in April. While security issues form the core of political anxieties for the Asamiya Muslims – who are often accused of being illegal immigrants – it may not have been the most important issue in these elections. At face value, it might appear that the AUDF appealed to the Muslim vote bank because it represented Muslim identity and addressed the issue of security better than did the Congress. But if one ignores the 'maulana' image that AUDF supremo Badruddin Ajmal projected to his voters, one still has to contend with the fact that he was a Bombay-based business tycoon who moved around one of Assam's poorest constituencies in a fleet of

luxury cars. What Ajmal really did was offer the Muslims of Assam, so far tied to the Congress, a chance to get the best political bargain.

If the Assam case leaves any doubt, at the other end of India was the Kerala state elections, which took place at the same time and clarify matters even better. For a long time now, Muslims in Kerala have voted for either the Indian United Muslim League or the Congress Party; communists had always been considered off-limits. This time around, however, Muslim voters played a major role in routing the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and even the Muslim League itself from the state assembly. What Muslim voters really wanted was someone who could deliver equity – and in this case, they decided on the communists.

But this is only one side of the story. In states such as Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the Muslim electorate still has no choice but to vote for the party that stands against the BJP – and that is the Congress. Post-2002, the Muslim communities in these states remain so gripped with fear over Narendra Modi's Hindutva experiment that they can do nothing but vote to keep the BJP from coming to power. Such a political attitude might last for as long as the fears of Modi remains palpable, and till then the slogans of equity – demands for jobs, education, healthcare – may not be raised at all. And that remains one of the most disheartening failures of the Indian state: that it is unable to provide a community space where talk of equity and development can truly take place.

On the whole, it can be said, Indian Muslims are ready to move on to the politics of equity – perhaps more eagerly than one would expect – and away from the shackles of a politics of security and the stereotypes of identity. The real success of the Sachar committee report will be in its ability to catalyse this movement.

A Hindi film called *Mother India*, made by a well-known director, Mehboob, released in 1958, became an unprecedented critical and popular hit of its time. Our parents took us to the theatre with the enthusiasm of missionaries escorting children to a moral science class. *The Statesman* reported that it almost won the Oscar for the best foreign film, losing to Federico Fellini's *Nights of the Cabiria* by a solitary vote in the third round.

The narrative was constructed around the memories of an old woman, Radha, eponymous wife of Lord Krishna and therefore Mother of India, who had been abandoned by her depressed husband after he lost his arms in an accident. She had three sons: one drowned; the second was a good boy; the third, Birju, a rebel who grew up to become a dacoit. Impoverished Radha was a paragon of virtue, and spurned the attentions of a leering moneylender, Sukhilala, who demanded sex as interest on his loan. Whether this moneylender was a symbol of the World Bank or not was left unclear, but there were plenty of other allegories. In a climax that had father, mother, brother and sister India in tears, Mother India shot her dacoit-son Birju to save the honour of the village. It was an epic superhit, its peasant-patriotism and femmynobility high on the approved agenda of a nation that still wanted to believe in itself.

Radha was played by Nargis, a Muslim. Jaipal, Kalyan Singh's slightly precocious son, thought this ridiculous. Mother Pakistan was a Muslim; how could Mother India be a Muslim as well? Could Muslims partition the motherland and still claim ownership of both nations? "You Muslims are greedy. You want everything. You take your own country, and then say India is your country as well."

"Yes," agreed Shyam Singh. "Muslims must make up their minds. They go to Pakistan when they like, they live in India



SHANSHAD RUSSAIN

Blood brothers

BY M J AKBAR

when they want. We Hindus can't do that."

"My father was born in Pakistan, so he went to Pakistan. I was born in India, so I live in India," answered Mustafa, who had inherited his father's terse logic.

"Ha!" responded Jaipal, "you stayed back because you want the property that your father left behind! You go and see him whenever you want. What difference does it make to you? Only Hindus suffered in the partition of their motherland."

"What is there to argue about? Indian Muslims marry among us, so they are one of us," reasoned Kamala, who was always anxious to find balm in the most obscure cupboard, for he hated confrontation of any kind. "Nargis married Sunil Dutt just after the release of Mother India. Sunil Dutt was her son, Birju, who she killed.

Sunil Dutt is a Hindu. She married a Hindu, so it's all right, isn't it?" Since Freud had not reached Telinepara, no other interpretation was made.

"You mean to say that I have to marry a Hindu in order to become an Indian?" asked Mustafa, with a touch of anger. "I will never marry anyone but a Pathan girl."

"Why are we taking film people so seriously? It's all fake. Which one of us is going to find anyone as beautiful as Nargis?" said Kamala, displaying his usual good sense.

"If it's all make-believe, why do Hindus keep saying Raj Kapoor is much better than Dilip Kumar?" asked Altaf, rising above his usual timidity.

Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar were superstars; the first a Hindu and the second, disguised by his pseudonym, a Muslim. Multiple identities stitched disparate imperatives, but loyalties were absolute. A superstar both borrowed and returned identity to his community.

I was bored by this conversation. My favourite star was Dev Anand, the third of the men who dominated the film industry in the fifties. Dev Anand lived on the street and beyond religion. If he had any faith it was in himself. He would gamble with thieves, dance with bar girls, drink to celebrate and win the day without trying to save the nation. Dev Anand was liberation, and gave our generation its first beautiful essay on love and adultery, forsaking the world for the gorgeous Waheeda Rehman in that wondrous classic, *Guide*. Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor carried the past in their eyes. Dev Anand wore the insouciance of the future.

I loved the songs of Dev Anand's films.

Main zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya, Main fiqr ko dhoen main urhata chala gaya.

I dealt with life as it came, I turned worry to smoke rings.

I dreamt of the day I could start smoking.

Jo mil gaya usiko muqaddar

samajh liya, Jo kho gaya main usko bhulata chala gaya.

What I got became my destiny.
What I lost, I simply forgot.

Could philosophy be more enchanting than this? [...]

The best warren for a loaf was the great Anarkali bazaar, named after the dancing girl in the court of the Great Mughal, Akbar, who won the heart of his son and heir, Prince Salim. The magic of myth burnished these names from history. Anarkali, blossom of the pomegranate, made an empire tremble with the flick of an eyelash, lost her prince but won her legend, and found an immortal home in a grave in the heart of Lahore. Akbar, lord of the world, picked up his sword against a cherished but obstinate son who preferred the love of a slave to the demands of empire.

Happily, while Anarkali and Akbar heated my perennially warm imagination, they also resolved those nitpicking dilemmas of Mother India in a film called *Mughal-e-Azam* (The Great Mughal).

I saw Anarkali reincarnated in the exquisite poise of Madhubala, the actress who defined beauty for a generation. Lahore, mesmerized by the movie, sparkled with her image. She soared above the Mughal skyline of Lahore on dozens of huge billboards as other faces faded in deference to her grace. At Shah Alam Gate, Anarkali looked up in prayer towards God, mysterious, haunting, bewitching, her face framed by a black dupatta and lit by the soft touch of a candle. She lived again in the protective embrace of Salim, glancing around the hem of a white muslin dupatta, her lips parted in a smile that was both a challenge and an invitation, her eyes dancing to a silent melody. And there again, alone, unencumbered by pretenders: she lifted a shimmer of a veil with fingers dressed in jewels; a large nose ring, swaying slightly, was held by a thin bridge of

Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar were superstars; the first a Hindu and the second, disguised by his pseudonym, a Muslim. Multiple identities stitched disparate imperatives, but loyalties were absolute. A superstar both borrowed and returned identity to his community.

pearls that swept into her hair; her eyes spun gossamer traps that floated and disappeared and her succulent lips – the arc of a bow above, and lush heart of a melon below – destroyed all the laws that kept this world in place: morality, order, obedience, fear.

I saw the emperor through the looking glass of an enchanting slave.

But it was the emperor who gave me back my identity when we went, a cluster of cousins, to see the film. The curtains rose above a dark screen on which, slowly, a map of united India appeared. A deep regal baritone spoke three simple words: *"Main Hindoostan hoon!"* I am India! I am Mughal. I am Muslim. I am India. My India is not a part of India. It is the whole of India. I am not just Pakistan; I am this vast Subcontinent that sprawls from the rough-diamond mountains of the Hindu Kush in the northwest to the turbulent waves of the Bay of Bengal and the sweet rhythms of the Indian Ocean beyond the shores of sultry, sunburnt Kerala. I am Muslim. I am everywhere.

Through two hours of epic narrative I found myself, my past, my culture, my language, my flirtations, my loves, my rebellion, my poetry, my music, my intrigues, my art, my suffering, my sacrifice, my oath, my father, my mother, my present, and perhaps even my future. Who else could have made this film except an Indian Muslim from Bombay, K Asif, who distilled history in a dewdrop and squandered a fortune in pursuit of an elegant glance? Who else could have been Anarkali except Madhubala, shy and erotic, in life and on screen the quintessential Indian Muslim lady? Life and art

overlapped repeatedly like the streams of Muslim and Hindu cultures. Akbar's son, Salim, was played by Dilip Kumar, named Yusuf Khan at birth. Salim's mother and the emperor's wife, Joda Bai, was a Hindu: Salim's blood fed from both Mughal and Rajput genes. Prithviraj, a towering Hindu Pathan from Peshawar, acted the part of Akbar, an empire-builder with bloodshot eyes and iron will who bowed before Allah while his queen worshipped Krishna. Salim's childhood friend was Durjan, the son of Raja Man Singh, who gave his life to save Anarkali. Anarkali, a Muslim, danced to an ancient Indian Hindu beat, while the immaculate voice of Tansen floated, paused, rose and fell, went back to the Hindu shastras and then moved four centuries forward to become the music of a contemporary genius, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan.

They did not toss their heads in the Mughal court, they merely raised their eyes. Anarkali destroyed her nemesis when she looked an emperor in the eye before being led away to death, and passed an immortal judgment: *"Yeh kaneez Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar ko apna khoon maaf karti hai!"* This slave forgives Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar for taking her life!

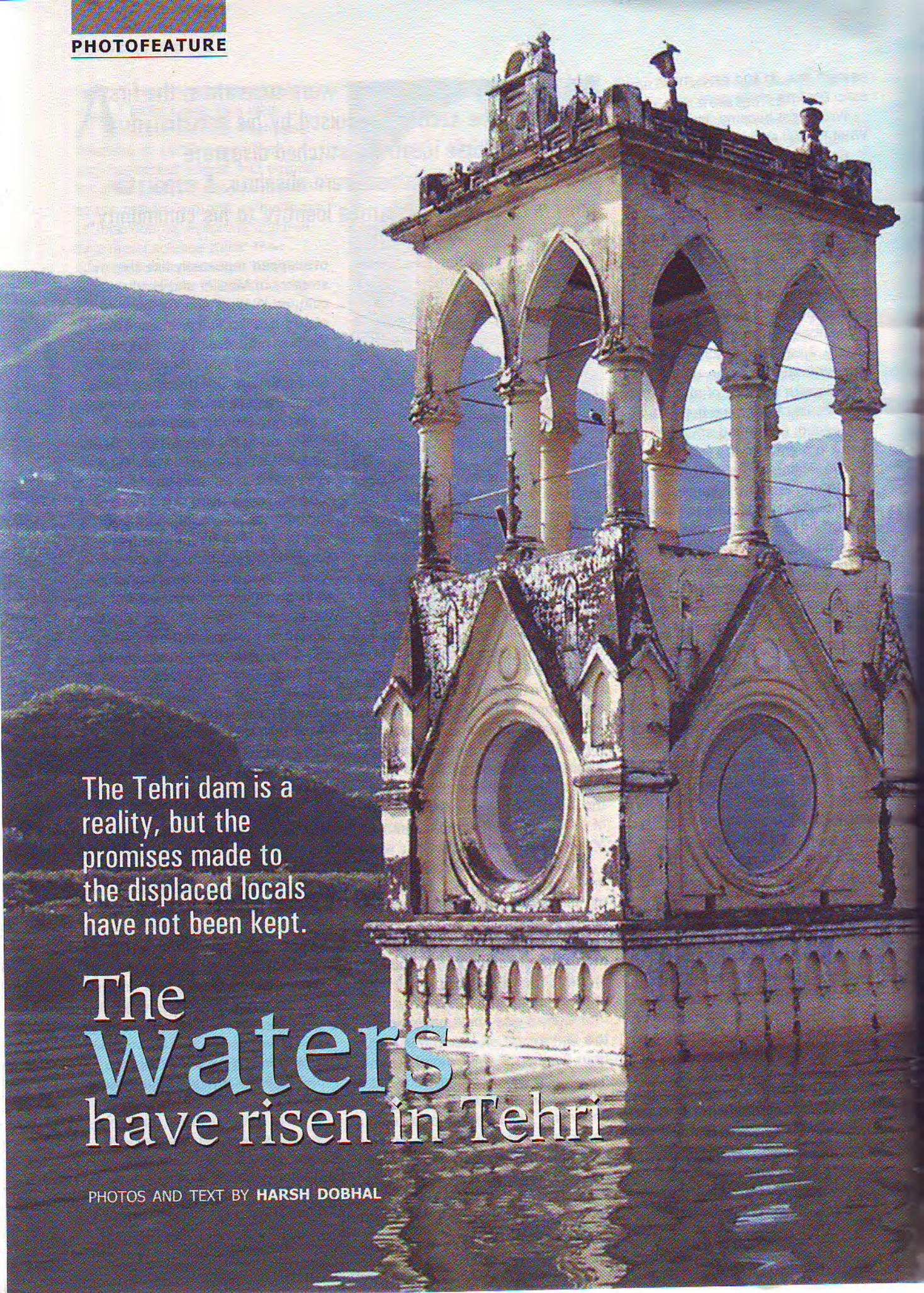
In that summer of discovery, Anarkali turned me into a teenager.

'Elsewhere' is a section where Himal features writings from other sources that the editors would like to present to our readers. This selection is from M J Akbar's book Blood Brothers: A family saga, published in 2006 by Roli Books, Delhi.

The Tehri dam is a reality, but the promises made to the displaced locals have not been kept.

The waters have risen in Tehri

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY HARSH DOBHAL



Construction of the controversial dam at Tehri in Uttaranchal is now complete, and over the summer the hydropower plant began producing electricity. Following the shutting of the dam's Tunnel 2 in October 2005, the town of Tehri and other nearby villages are now completely submerged, and more than 100,000 people have been adversely affected, most of them uprooted and moved elsewhere. But despite being at the centre of three decades of legal wrangling, at the time of completion many of the USD 1.2 billion project's most crucial questions passed unanswered.

The Tehri Dam Project aims to supply an enormous amount of crucially needed resources to increasingly parched and energy-starved areas of North India. Officials with the Tehri Hydro Development



UTTARANCHAL



New Tehri

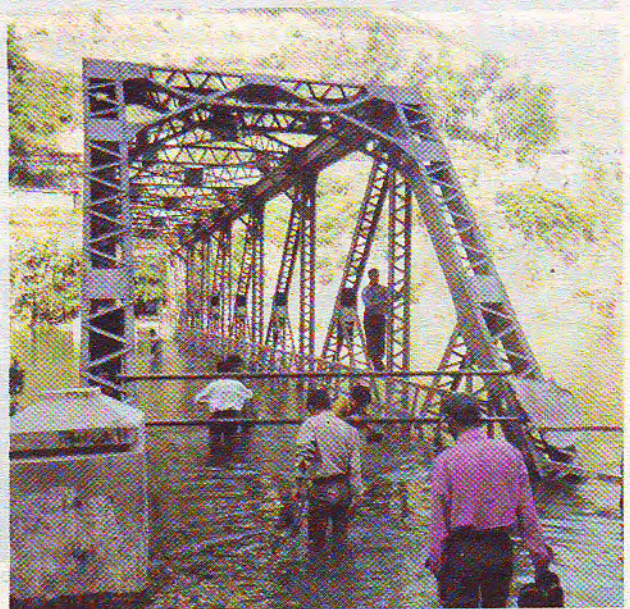
Uttarkashi earthquake.

Indeed, in 1991 then-Prime Minister P V Narsimha Rao remarked that the earthquake raised a significant question about the project, a contention agreed with over the past three decades by a string of officially appointed committees. In 1996, the Hanumantha Rao committee pointed out that the dam was being built in violation of the conditions that accompanied its environmental clearance. Both the S K Roy committee, set up by Indira Gandhi, and the 1990 Environmental Appraisal (Bhumla) committee also recommended that construction be halted.

Engineers from the Soviet Union, which had agreed to bankroll the project on concessional loans, subsequently noted in reviews that the dam's site in a seismic area had not been adequately considered by the Indian planners. The International Commission on Large Dams – no great naysayer as to the construction of dams – has declared the Tehri project to be one of the most hazardous sites in the world.

Corporation claim it will generate 2400 megawatts of electricity, supply 100 cubic feet of water per second to Delhi, and irrigate 270,000 hectares of land in downstream Uttar Pradesh. At the same time, apart from the old town of Tehri, the dam is directly affecting about 125 villages, completely submerging 33 of them. Nearly 5200 hectares of land are being inundated, and almost 5300 urban and 9250 rural families displaced.

Worries about the Tehri dam also exist on a much broader scale. The dam is constructed at the confluence of the Bhagirathi and Bhilangana rivers in Garhwal, and the 855-foot-high edifice – the fifth tallest dam in the world – is intended to hold back a reservoir that extends 45 km into the Bhagirathi Valley and 25 km into the Bhilangana Valley. Unfortunately, in what many national and international experts have said resembles an act of wilful ignorance, this 43 sq km lake lies directly atop an active seismic area known as the 'central Himalayan gap' – just 45 km from the epicentre of the 6.8-strength 1991





Bimla Bahuguna, wife of activist Sunderlal Bahuguna – the last to leave Tehri town

Such experts have repeatedly suggested that an earthquake of large magnitude could result in the bursting of the dam, which would almost immediately swamp downstream towns including Deoprayag, Rishikesh and Haridwar. An estimated 12 hours after the dam broke, the city of Meerut would be underwater.

The rehab game

Along with such catastrophic projections, a more immediate concern has been the government's poor record on rehabilitation of affected families and communities over the past three decades of development project building. The Tehri oustees have themselves cited hundreds of examples of discrepancy between what was promised and was received, as well as a general absence of political will for rehabilitation. While the officials admit that more than 500 families are yet to be rehabilitated, those affected contend that the number of such families is over 1000. Affected families were promised employment for one adult at the time of acquiring new land, but this has not happened. Furthermore, the creation of the town of New Tehri has significantly altered the social, economic, cultural and administrative dynamics of the entire area.

Besides those recently displaced, there is also the plight of the families that were resettled in areas around Haridwar and Rishikesh a quarter-century ago, when the Tehri project began. The promised hospitals, roads, irrigation canals and link roads are still nowhere to be seen. In addition, resettled individuals have experienced the disorientation of being cut off from their traditional social fabric, which has delivered social disintegration.

The numbers impacted by this 35-year-old project run significantly higher than just those whose lands have been submerged. They include the myriad communities that, in the process, have lost link roads, schools and hospitals. But in the face of calls by local villages for new roads, bridges and ropeways, the government's rehabilitation policy still does not clearly state anything about the fate of these 'peripheral' people. In the narrow-sighted drive to get the Tehri dam built, such questions have long been pushed off, to be dealt with another day. But with electricity production and drinking water now running in far off Delhi, they remain unanswered – even as settlements and infrastructure stand inundated. ▲

'Seeking unity through equality'

Although five rounds of discussion have now taken place since 2002 between Beijing and the Dharamsala government-in-exile, until recently little has ever been made public about the substance of those talks.

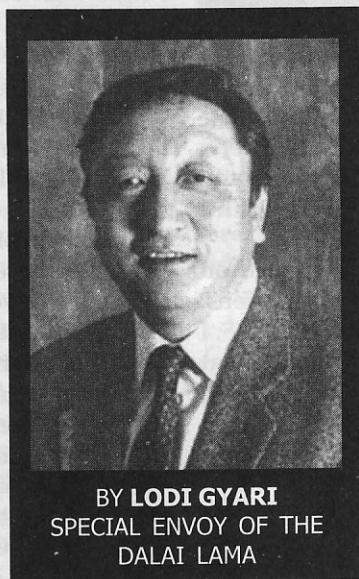
Since 2002, representatives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government have completed five rounds of discussions. These have gone a long way towards establishing a climate of openness that is essential to reaching mutually agreeable decisions regarding the future of the Tibetan and Chinese people.

We Tibetans have been encouraged by the new focus within China's leadership on the creation of a "harmonious society". A society built on harmony is a society built on consensus, and one that takes into account the needs of all its peoples. This is particularly true in a country like today's China, which is comprised of so many distinct nationalities.

Similarly, we are encouraged by the concept of China's "peaceful rise", whereby it will develop as a "modern socialist country that is prosperous, democratic and culturally advanced". While this philosophy candidly addresses a number of issues that confront China today, to be lasting it must take into account the aspirations of the Tibetan people; peace and stability can only be achieved by peaceful means. Embracing its diversity and protecting the identity of the Tibetan people is integral to China's successful "peaceful rise".

His Holiness the Dalai Lama's forward-looking approach to Tibet's future shares a common vision with these ideals of harmony and peaceful development, as illustrated by his deep understanding of humanity's interdependence and his philosophy of universal responsibility. In an address to the European Parliament, His Holiness said: "Today's world requires us to accept the oneness of humanity. The world is becoming increasingly interdependent. Within the context of this new interdependence, self-interest clearly lies in considering the interest of others. Without the cultivation of a sense of universal responsibility our very future is in danger."

Ever since the re-establishment of contact between representatives of the Dalai Lama and the Chinese



BY **LODI GYARI**
SPECIAL ENVOY OF THE
DALAI LAMA

leadership in 2002, concerned individuals, organisations and governments have shown a keen interest in better understanding our discussions. Up until the present we have resisted giving details, knowing that China prefers to operate cautiously and free of scrutiny, particularly on sensitive issues like Tibet, and recognising that to openly discuss the dialogue could adversely impact the process. Thus, in our public statements following each of the five meetings so far, we only provided a general assessment without divulging the content of our discussions.

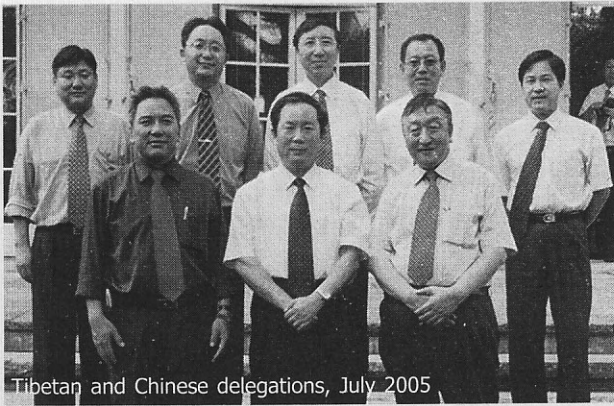
In recent times, however, there have been articles in the Chinese media, under a pseudonym, detailing

our discussions with the Chinese leadership. Similarly, we have learned that our counterparts in the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party have been briefing foreign diplomats based in Beijing about our discussions. We do not take issue with the Chinese authorities making this information public. As a matter of fact, we would have liked our dialogue process to be as transparent as possible from the beginning. But, these developments have led to the circulation of speculative, uninformed and one-sided information about some of the important issues at stake. This has not only sent a confusing message to the international community, but also distorted His Holiness the Dalai Lama's position on and good intentions to the Chinese people.

Focusing on the future

The five rounds of discussions that we have had with the Chinese leadership have brought our dialogue to a new level. Today, there is a deeper understanding of each other's positions and recognition of where the fundamental differences lie. On the surface, it may appear that there have been no breakthroughs, and that a wide gap persists in our positions. But the very

From a speech given to the Brookings Institution in Washington DC, 14 November 2006.



Tibetan and Chinese delegations, July 2005

fact that the two sides have been able to explicitly state our positions after so many decades represents a significant development. How can we even attempt to make real progress unless we fully understand our differences?

Our Chinese counterparts have also remarked on the progress we have made through our discussions. Following our fourth round of meetings in July 2005, I reported that Vice Minister Zhu Weiqun "stated that we need not be pessimistic about the existing differences, and that it was possible to narrow down the gaps through more meetings and exchange of views".

There are several issues which are of utmost importance as we continue our dialogue with the Chinese leadership: His Holiness the Dalai Lama's firm commitment to a resolution that has Tibet as a part of the People's Republic of China, the need to unify all Tibetan people into one administrative entity, and the importance of granting genuine autonomy to the Tibetan people within the framework of China's Constitution.

First, the status of Tibet. China's lack of trust in His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people is one of the most critical obstacles we currently face in our dialogue. To take a case in point, the Chinese side seems to believe that because His Holiness the Dalai Lama has stated that he wants to look to the future as opposed to Tibet's history to resolve its status vis-à-vis China, he has some sort of hidden agenda. This could not be farther from the truth. Revisiting history will not serve any useful purpose, as the Tibetans and Chinese sides have different viewpoints of their past relations. We have therefore chosen to base our approach on Tibet's future, not on the past. Debates over Tibet's history, before we have reached mutual trust and confidence, are counterproductive, making it more difficult for the Tibetans and Chinese alone to untangle this issue.

In 1979 Deng Xiaoping laid down the framework for resolving the issue of Tibet by stating that, other than the issue of Tibetan independence, anything else could be discussed and resolved. Thus, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said we should recognise today's

reality that Tibet is a part of the People's Republic of China. He is committed to his decision that we will not raise the issue of separation from China in working on a mutually acceptable solution for Tibet.

While the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach involves resolving the issue of Tibet within the framework of the People's Republic of China, it also embodies his deep concern for the survival of the Tibetan identity, culture, religion and way of life. It was adopted by His Holiness after deliberating at length with Tibetan leaders in exile over many years. It is now fully endorsed by the democratically established institutions in exile, including the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies and the popularly elected Chairman of the Cabinet, Professor Samdhong Rinpoche. Rinpoche's role in this effort has been crucial. Because of prevailing conditions, His Holiness is not in a position to openly seek the endorsement of the Tibetans inside Tibet. Nevertheless, he has used every opportunity to explain his approach, and has received favourable reactions from all levels of Tibetan society. He has also been encouraged by the strong support expressed by a number of Chinese intellectuals and scholars.

The Middle Way approach represents the Dalai Lama's commitment to look to the future, instead of the past, to find a solution that will provide maximum autonomy for the Tibetan people and bring peace and stability to the People's Republic of China and the entire region.

Second, concerning a single administration for the Tibetan people. Since His Holiness the Dalai Lama has addressed the fundamental concern of the Chinese government about the status of Tibet, it is our expectation that they should reciprocate by acknowledging the legitimate needs of the Tibetan people. Today, less than half of the Tibetan people reside in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The rest reside in Tibetan autonomous counties and prefectures in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. All Tibetans residing in these Tibetan areas share the same language, ethnicity, culture and tradition. Furthermore, just as the Chinese nation has sought to unify many different regions into one nation, the Tibetan people, too, yearn to be under one administrative entity so that their way of life, tradition and religion can be more effectively and peacefully maintained.

Historically the division of a nationality area into many administrative units contributed to the weakening and erosion of that nationality's unique characteristics, as well as its ability to grow and develop. This can also hinder or even undermine the nation's peace, stability and development. Such a situation is in contradiction to the founding goals of the People's Republic of China, namely the recognition of the equality of all nationalities. Thus in order to thrive, the Tibetan people cannot remain divided, but

must be accorded the equality and respect befitting a distinct people.

The Chinese side makes the argument that the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region parallels the area under the former Tibetan government. Thus, their argument continues, our position that the entire Tibetan people need to live under a single administrative entity is unreasonable. This question will lead us inevitably to the examination of Tibet's historical legal status under the Tibetan government, and will not help in reaching a common ground on which to build a common future. The Chinese government has redrawn internal boundaries when it has suited its needs, and could do so again in the case of Tibet to foster stability and to help ensure Tibet's characteristics remain intact. The point here is not about territorial division, but how to best promote Tibet's culture and way of life.

The Chinese side is also characterising our position as a demand for the separation of one-fourth the territory of China. First of all, since the Tibetans are not asking for the separation of Tibet from China, there should be no concern on this front. More importantly, it is a reality that the landmass inhabited by Tibetans constitutes roughly one-fourth the territory of the People's Republic of China. Actually, the Chinese government has already designated almost all Tibetan areas as 'Tibet autonomous entities' – the Tibet Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Prefectures or Tibet Autonomous Counties. Thus, our positions on what constitutes Tibet are really not so divergent.

Having the Tibetan people under a single administrative entity should not be seen as an effort to create a 'greater' Tibet, nor is it a cover for a separatist plot. It is a question of recognising, restoring and respecting the integrity of the Tibetans as a people and distinct nationality within the People's Republic of China. Furthermore, this is not a new or revolutionary idea. From the beginning, the Tibetans have raised this issue, and representatives of the Chinese government have recognised it as one that must be addressed. In fact, during the signing of the 17-Point Agreement in 1951, Premier Zhou En-lai acknowledged that the idea of unification of the Tibetan nationalities was appropriate. Similarly, in 1956, Vice Premier Chen Yi was in Lhasa and said that it would be good for Tibet's development as well as for the friendship of Tibetans and Chinese if in the future the Tibet Autonomous Region included all ethnic Tibetan areas, including those now in other provinces.

The Tibetan people are striving for the right of a distinct people to be able to preserve that very distinctiveness through a single administrative entity. This would give the Tibetans a genuine sense of having benefited by being part of the People's Republic of China, and would embody the respect for the integrity of the Tibetans as a distinct people.

The Chinese leadership is clearly aware that this

aspiration of the Tibetan people is voiced not just by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans in exile, but by Tibetans inside Tibet, including prominent members of the Communist Party. Knowing this, certain elements of the Chinese leadership have lately been trying to alter the public perception by orchestrating and arranging written opposition to the aspiration by some of the Tibetans inside Tibet.

The importance of autonomy

Third, regarding genuine autonomy. According to the Chinese Constitution, the law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy as well as the White Paper on Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet, the Tibetan people are entitled to the following rights: full political right of autonomy; full decision-making power in economic and social development undertakings; freedom to inherit and develop their traditional culture, and to practice their religious belief; and freedom to administer, protect and be the first to utilise their natural resources, to independently develop their educational and cultural undertakings. The Constitution also states:

All nationalities in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities... Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority nationalities live in compact communities, in these areas organs of self-government are established for the exercise of the right of autonomy.

In treating the Tibetan people with respect and dignity through genuine autonomy, the Chinese leadership has the opportunity to create a truly multi-ethnic, harmonious nation without a tremendous cost in human suffering. As Hu Yaobang, former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, said: "It is not possible to achieve a genuine unity amongst the nationalities of the country as long as complete autonomy is not implemented in the areas of the minority nationalities."

Some detractors in the Chinese government allege that our proposal for a single administrative entity for the Tibetan people and the implementation of genuine regional autonomy as provided in the Constitution is really an effort to restore Tibet's former system of government in Tibet today, or an effort by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to personally regain power over all of Tibet. Nothing is farther from the truth. In his 10 March 2005 statement, His Holiness reiterated his position, saying:

My involvement in the affairs of Tibet is not for the purpose of claiming certain personal rights or political position for myself, nor attempting to stake claims for the Tibetan

administration in exile. In 1992 in a formal announcement I stated clearly that when we return to Tibet with a certain degree of freedom I will not hold any office in the Tibetan government or any other political position, and that the present Tibetan administration in exile will be dissolved. Moreover, the Tibetans working in Tibet should carry on the main responsibility of administering Tibet.

The task at hand is to develop a system that would grant the kind of autonomy required for the Tibetans to be able to survive as a distinct and prosperous people within the People's Republic of China. So far, in our discussions with our Chinese counterparts we have not proposed specific labels for how Tibetan areas would be designated, although it should be noted that the Chinese-authored 17-Point Agreement does propose a similar arrangement for Tibet. Nor have we specifically proposed formulas that ask for higher or lower levels of autonomy than Hong Kong and Macao. Each of these areas has its unique characteristics, and in order to succeed, their solutions must reflect the needs and qualities of the region. We have specifically conveyed to our counterparts that we place more importance on discussing the substance than on the label.

The Tibetans have the legitimate right to seek special status, as can be seen in the following quote by Ngapo Ngawang Jigme. He is the most senior Tibetan in China's hierarchy who, by virtue of his position, has endorsed many of China's views on Tibet. In 1988 he said:

It is because of the special situation in Tibet that in 1951 the 17-Point Agreement on the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, between the central people's government and the local Tibetan government, came about. Such an agreement has never existed between the central government and any other minority region. We have to consider the special situation in Tibetan history while drafting policies for Tibet in order to realise its long-term stability. We must give Tibet more autonomous power than other minority regions. In my view, at present, the Tibet Autonomous Region has relatively less power of autonomy compared with other autonomous regions, let alone compared with provinces. Therefore Tibet must have some special treatment and have more autonomy like those special economic zones. We must employ special policies to resolve the special characteristics which have pertained throughout history.

Other important Tibetan leaders, including the late

A single administrative entity would give the Tibetans a genuine sense of having benefited by being part of the People's Republic of China.

Panchen Lama and political leader Bapa Phuntsok Wangyal, have strongly advocated the legitimacy of Tibet's special status. Similarly, the former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Yaobang, had acknowledged that Tibet is unique from other autonomous regions and provinces, and has argued that the validity of Tibet's special status must not be contested.

There are some other issues, which are based on misperceptions of His Holiness's views by detractors in the Chinese side, including the allegation that His Holiness the Dalai Lama is asking for all Tibetan areas to be populated solely by Tibetans and to be rid of the People's Liberation Army. The detractors in the Chinese government have deliberately misinterpreted His Holiness's concerns in these areas, just as they denounce any effort to manifest the Tibetan identity as separatist. His Holiness has very honestly expressed the need for the Tibetan people to maintain their distinctive way of life and protect Tibet's fragile environment. He has had this in mind when he raises concerns about the large influx of people from other parts of the People's Republic of China and the extensive militarisation of Tibetan areas. We are fully aware that these are issues of concern to the Chinese government, as these matters have been extensively discussed during our meetings. I am confident that through the negotiations process we will be able to dispel these concerns.

The solution

The Dalai Lama is widely recognised and admired for his honesty and integrity. He has been pragmatic and flexible in wanting to negotiate with the leadership in Beijing on the kind of status Tibet should enjoy in the future, and has held steadfast to his commitment to non-violence and dialogue as the only logical means of resolving the issue of Tibet. It is a reality today that in spite of their tremendous suffering resulting from some of China's policies, the Tibetans have not resorted to non-peaceful means to respond to this injustice. This is largely because of the unwavering insistence on peace and reconciliation by the Dalai Lama and the hope he provides to his people.

Some detractors in the Chinese government seem to believe that the aspirations of the Tibetan people will fizzle out once the Dalai Lama passes away. This is a most dangerous and myopic approach. Certainly, the absence of the Dalai Lama would be devastating for the Tibetan people. But more importantly, his absence would mean that China would be left to handle the problem without the presence of a leader who enjoys the loyalty of the entire community and who remains firmly committed to non-violence. It is certain that the Tibetan position would become more intractable in his absence, and that having their beloved leader pass away in exile would create deep and irreparable wounds in the hearts of the Tibetan people. In the absence of the

The absence of the Dalai Lama would be devastating for the Tibetan people. But more importantly, his absence would mean that China would be left to handle the problem without the presence of a leader who enjoys the loyalty of the entire community and who remains firmly committed to non-violence.

Dalai Lama, there is no way that the entire population would be able to contain their resentment and anger. And it only takes a few desperate individuals or groups to create major instability. This is not a threat, but a statement of fact.

The Dalai Lama's worldview, his special bond with the Tibetan people and the respect he enjoys in the international community, all make the person of the Dalai Lama key both to achieving a negotiated solution to the Tibetan issue and to peacefully implementing any agreement that is reached. This is why we have consistently conveyed to our Chinese counterparts that far from being the problem, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the solution.

Providing genuine autonomy to the Tibetan people is in China's interest, as it makes efforts to create a peaceful, stable and harmonious society. But resolving the Tibetan issue is also important to the international community, particularly to our region. The historically volatile Central Asian region has revived and has already become an area of conflict. Here Tibet can play a stabilising role, which is important to the countries in the region such as India, China and Russia, as well as to the United States and other countries. Tibet, which for centuries played the vital role as a buffer in the region, can help create a more cohesive and stable region by serving as a valuable bridge. A number of political observers from the region also acknowledge that resolving the Tibet issue is an important factor in the normalisation of India-China relations. Understanding the great mutual benefit for all concerned, His Holiness has consistently supported closer India-China relations.

There is also increased awareness of the vital importance of the Tibetan plateau from the environmental perspective. Just on the issue of water alone, it is an undeniable fact that over the next few decades, water may become as scarce a commodity as oil. Tibet is literally the life-source of the region, serving as the source of most of Asia's major rivers. Therefore, protecting Tibet's fragile environment should be accorded the highest priority.

To date, the Chinese authorities have resorted to political and military pressure, and intimidation to stifle the Tibetan people. This is clearly demonstrated by some of the recent actions by the top party leader in the Tibet Autonomous Region, as well as the persistent attempt to deny the Tibetan people their religious freedom and other human rights. These actions can not only harm the sincere efforts by both sides for a mutually beneficial reconciliation, but also create

embarrassment and difficulty to the Chinese leadership; they will do substantial damage to China's efforts to be a peaceful and responsible power internationally, and the creation of a harmonious society at home.

We have no illusions that coming to a negotiated solution will be easy. Having identified each other's position and differences, it is now our sincere hope that both sides can start making serious efforts to find a common ground and to build trust. In furtherance of this goal, His Holiness has made the offer to go personally to China on a pilgrimage. This has met with considerable opposition from Tibetans, both inside and outside Tibet, as well as from friends in the international community who are not convinced of China's sincerity. But His Holiness is committed to doing everything he can to dispel the climate of mistrust that continues to exist.

We fully support China's effort to create a harmonious society, as well as its aspirations for a peaceful rise. After all, its successful, peaceful rise will depend on internal harmony and stability, which can hardly be achieved without the Tibetan issue being resolved. The People's Republic of China is a multi-ethnic nation state whose internal diversity is a reality. It is based on this reality that a harmonious society needs to be created. And in looking forward to finding a solution for Tibet, it is in China's best interest to have the Tibetan people accept their place within the People's Republic of China of their own free will.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people are deeply grateful for the outpouring of interest and support from the international community. It is an invaluable source of inspiration. At the same time, we are fully aware that ultimately the issue needs to be resolved directly between the Tibetans and Chinese. I also want to note that my delegation has received the warmest hospitality and the highest courtesy from every level of the Chinese government during our visits. Similarly, the personal conduct of our counterparts has been exemplary.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has a vision of the Tibetans being able to live in harmony within the People's Republic of China. Today's China was born out of a historical movement for the people's self-determination, and the Constitution asserts that it is based on principles of equality. Let us build our relations on this equality, and give the Tibetan people the dignity to freely and willingly be a part of this nation. We cannot rewrite history, but together we can determine the future.

A republic and two kingdoms

*The fences have grown into a jungle,
now how can I tell my children
where we came from?*

— Tenzin Tsundue in *Exile House*

Bhutan is still one of those quaint kingdoms where the anniversary of the ruling dynasty is also its national day. On 17 December, even as the royal government in Thimphu was celebrating the 99th year of Wangchuk conquest, Bhutani police at Phuntsoling arrested a group of refugees who wanted to return home. That was to be expected. Like all supremacist regimes, Druk Yul has always been extremely hostile to all forms of difference, dissent and diversity. But in their 16th year in exile, the attitude of the largest democracy in the world must have frustrated the Lhotsampa refugees to no end. For it was the Indian police who, for the umpteenth time, helped thwart the homecoming by turning the refugees over to the Bhutani authorities.

India does not want to play a facilitator's role when it comes to the Bhutani refugees' return home. New Delhi insists that the question of the refugees is a bilateral one between the Bhutani kingdom and Nepal, with no role or responsibility for the republic that must be crossed to get from one to the other. That is the line Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee parroted once again in Kathmandu during his December visit. Mukherjee told media persons on 17 December that Nepal and Bhutan should take the initiative to solve the problem. At least he recognises that it is indeed a problem. The Wangchuk regime refuses to accept even that.

At the United Nations, Bhutan was considered as an extra vote in the breast pockets of Indian envoys, ever since the tiny Himalayan kingdom was recognised as a member of the world body in 1971 at the behest of the then-Soviet Union. Aware of his limitations in the international arena, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk used his apparent Shangri La-esque vulnerabilities to the hilt to enthrall Westerners and entrench his rule. He turned Bhutan's postage stamps into much sought-after exotica by

having some of them printed in three dimensions. He enhanced the lure of his country by admitting no more than 6000 tourists per year. As an absolute ruler for over three decades, King Jigme cultivated connections and built relationships that would protect and patronise his line at all times. Just as the international community was about to get inquisitive about kings and their ways in the wake of Gyanendra's adventurism in Kathmandu and the royal-military coup in Thailand, King Jigme pulled a fast one: he declared that he was abdicating in favour of his son.

As the son rose in Thimphu in mid-December, the Delhi-based press was gushing over the abdication of the statesman-king and the instatement of this Oxford-educated prince. The fact that Bhutan has the dubious distinction being the second worst human-rights violator in Southasia was hardly mentioned in dispatches from New Delhi. Bhutan routinely proscribes cable television, controls the national press and severely punishes any opposition. But such things are overlooked by the regional and international media, which choose instead to highlight the absence of traffic lights in Thimphu. Not adequately informed by the mainstream press, very few even in Southasia know that Bhutan holds the record of having expelled the highest proportion of a national population anywhere in the world.

The cleansing in Bhutan has been so pervasive yet under-examined that nobody even knows the real number of Lhotsampa who have been tortured, maimed, killed and evicted from their homes by the Wangchuk regime. Besides the 107,000 in the Nepal refugee camps, some estimate that about 100,000 of them are scattered around in India. Thousands others have migrated to countries outside Southasia. Lhotsampa miseries and struggles have gone unnoticed by the region's intelligentsia.

No less galling is the silence of the normally voluble Indian civil society over the plight of the refugees who have been languishing in the makeshift camps of eastern Nepal for a decade and a half. A

Nepali
speakers in
Burma,
descendants of
Pathans in
Bangladesh,
Tamil
plantation
labourers in Sri
Lanka and the
Kashmiris of
Kathmandu
form the
invisible
threads that
bind this region
together.

generation born and brought up in these camps have come of age as exiles. They have seen the rise of Maoists in Nepal and their subsequent rehabilitation, transparent and with the aid and abetment of Indian authorities. The lessons they draw may be completely different from what the Joint Secretary (North) in the Indian Foreign Ministry reads in reports arriving at his desk from the Jhapa refugee camps. For now, the tentative resettlement offer for 60,000 select refugees by the US has succeeded in confusing a lot of exiles who are without identity, jobs or future in the temporary camps. However, such a step cannot succeed for one simple reason: symptomatic treatments are ineffective, if not actually counterproductive, as long as the underlying cause of the malaise is not addressed holistically.

Messy monarchies

The root of all evils in Bhutan is the bigotry of its monarchy. Even the well-oiled propaganda machine of the Thimphu regime operating out of the Indian capital cannot hide the fact that it is one of the last bastions of racial purism in the world. While this may keep curious outsiders happy, it cannot be the basis of building a tolerant society and resilient country. This is the lesson that Bhutan's new king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, all of 26 years old, will do well to learn from the experiences of the 250-year-old Shah monarchy of Nepal. As he ascends the throne, he is exactly where King Birendra was in 1974, in socio-cultural terms. Though educated at Eton, Harvard and Tokyo universities, Birendra chose to tread the traditionalist path of his father, and modernised the institution of monarchy only in name. Today the future of the Shah line itself is under assault. From all we know, the new king's father's experiments are smarter than but otherwise not different from Birendra's.

Apart from being the oldest state in Southasia, Nepal is a large country in terms of population. Though badly bruised by the decade-old conflict, it will survive the present shake-up, and may even emerge stronger for it. But should a fate similar to that of Rolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot districts – in all roughly the size of Bhutan – befall Druk Yul, it is doubtful whether the country would emerge as tenable a state. Had it been just the future of Bhutan that were at stake, there would not have been as much cause

for alarm. After all, mountains did not move in the wake of the politically engineered annexation of Sikkim into the Indian Union. But there are at least two dimensions that make Bhutan a test case for tolerance of diversity in the Southasian region.

First, the risk of democratic struggles in Bhutan being construed as Buddhist-Hindu confrontations is extremely high. It has happened before in Sri Lanka. Unaware of regional complexities, neo-Buddhists from the West have been foolishly highlighting religious angle in their dispatches on Bhutan out of New Delhi. This is a danger that Thinley Penjore, the president of the Druk National Congress, takes pains to point out to anybody who listens. He is one of few Drukpas to have chosen self-exile, and worries about the consequences of portraying a political struggle in black-and-white terms of racial conflict. Even though he knows that what the Thimphu regime has done is nothing less than ethnic cleansing, he tries to highlight the plight of every Bhutani national under an autocratic monarch.

Second, there is a long history of voluntary migration in Southasia. Faced with political, cultural, economic or natural hardships, people have for centuries moved across all boundaries in the Subcontinent. Nepali speakers in Burma, descendants of Pathans in Bangladesh, Tamil plantation labourers in Sri Lanka and the Kashmiris of Kathmandu form the invisible threads that bind this region together. But since a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, a souring of communal relations in Thimphu can cause tremors in Thiruvananthapuram. This is something that US diplomats, so keen to provide simplistic success to the Jhapa refugees, will not be able to understand unless Maharastrian intellectuals explain it to them: the experience of the Bombay blasts had consequences for communal relations in Gujarat. Let the US diplomats understand that national aspirations cannot be bought by offers of ad-hoc resettlement policies.

During the last 12 months of political developments in Nepal, the Indian political elite has displayed a sense of maturity seldom before seen. It remains to be seen whether a similar sagaciousness will end the ordeals of over 300,000 Lhotshampa in all, and all Ngalongs and Sarchops in Bhutan. ▲

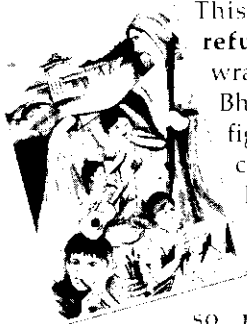


As the new king ascends the throne, he is exactly where King Birendra was in 1974.



Nandita Das is a fine actor of Hindi (and Marathi, and some other 'regional') cinema, known for her down-home, dhoti-clad, rural/urban, lower-middle-class characters. Her specialties are a bindi on the forehead, braided tresses, a frown on her fine brow, and the camera invariably catching her in harsh light. Essentially, your young Shabana Azmi. But she does have an alter ego, who dons a boy-cut hairdo, bare arms, and looks as svelte and Western-urban as they come in soft, indirect light. To locate the chameleon in this lady, Chhetria Patrakar had to go to the pages of the Karachi magazine, *Newsline*. Das was in the city-by-the-sea to act in a film directed by Mehreen Jabbar, in which she played the part of a Sindhi woman. So Nandita, will it be braids and bindi once again?

Conde Nast, the USD 2 billion publishing house, has decided to make a grab for the Indian market, announcing that it will put mags such as *Vogue*, *CN Traveler*, *Glamour* and *GQ* on stands by next autumn. For this, it has already hired ex-MTV chief Alex Kuruvilla as CEO of Conde Nast India. Listen to the guy, speaking to *Financial Express*: "The cover price [of *Vogue*] will be over Rs. 100, so the segment we are targeting is niche. These people typically enjoy fashion and luxury and are looking for a premium offering... Aspirations are growing here and so is the market for luxury brands... there has been a dumbing-down of content because of a mass-market approach... Both advertiser and consumer pressure, in my opinion, will compel media houses in the country to bring quality into their work. As international publishers and brands make a beeline for India, I see the quality ethic creeping into the system here." Smart man. He will make much money.



This poignant picture of **Lhotshampa refugee** kids being shielded from the wrath of Tashichhodzong, the seat of the Bhutani government, by a Christ-like figure, comes as a New Year greeting card from the Lutheran World Federation, which has supported refugees in the Jhapa camps for more than a decade and a half now. At a time when donor fatigue has caused so many supporters to evade the interminable refugee problem, LWF has remained true to its motto, "Uphold the rights of the poor and oppressed", by not forgetting the Lhotshampas. The image is by Amit Subba of the refugee camp Beldangi-II in Jhapa District, east Nepal.

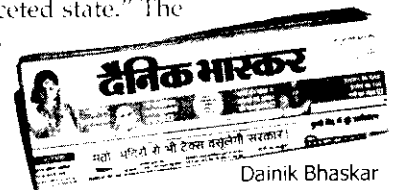
The pages of *Impact*, "the media, marketing and advertising weekly" from Delhi, which usually provide

breathless coverage of big-money media matters, have lately been carrying upbeat, confident ads by **bullish Hindi dailies** of North and West India (UP and Bihar still clearly lag behind). Read their boastful text, gawk

नई दुनिया
Nai Dunia विश्वास की परंपरा

at their circulation numbers (as certified by the National Readership Survey '06), and you can just taste their self-assurance when these English language ads, aimed at Anglo media buyers and ad agency-wallahs, let them know in no uncertain terms who's got the real power. *Nai Dunia*, out of Nagpur: "Finally, the truth has prevailed. *Nai Dunia* has added 3.42 lakh new readers in the last one year. With this phenomenal 44% growth, the leading Hindi daily now officially has a total readership of 11.07 lakhs. So, if you want to be heard loud and clear, you know where to put your money."

Further on down in *Impact*, **Dainik Bhaskar** announces in loud print that it has "1 crore, 11 lac readers in Rajasthan." Additionally, 56 percent of this 11.1 million readership reads *only Dainik Bhaskar*. And about the *Bhaskar* Punjab edition, in another full-pager, the publishers announce, "There's a whole new Punjab out there. A Punjab that's progressive and modern, where the old and the new exist together in perfect harmony. And *Dainik Bhaskar* is proud to be the voice of this new, multi-faceted state." The energy these ads exude confirms that something is boiling in the Hindi press, and the Anglo press had better be watching out!



From *Dawn* of Karachi, we have a report of extreme harassment suffered by reporters in the **tribal areas of NWFP** at the hands of the government authorities and militants alike. These were journalists working in South and North Waziristan, Mohmand, Orakzai, Khyber and Kurram agencies and Darra Adam Khel. Three journalists, Amir Nawab, Allah Noor and Hayatullah, were killed recently, while others, including 'Shakir', 'Mujib' and Dilawar Wazir, narrowly escaped attempts on their lives. Many reporters have fled for the safety of Peshawar, while others have left the profession altogether. Some time ago, there were 28 journalists working in South Waziristan and 25 in North Waziristan, but today there are hardly any. Said a journalist from North Waziristan: "The local Taliban calls us spies while the political administration and law-enforcement agencies do not let us report freely."

Reporters sans Frontiers' "**Journalist of the Year**" prize for 2006 was awarded on 12 December to 76-year-old



Burmese journalist U Win Tin, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison for "subversion" and "anti-government propaganda" in 1989. After more than 17 years in Insein jail near Rangoon, he refused to renounce his commitment to the National League for Democracy. A political mentor of Aung San Suu

Kyi, U Win Tin's health is said to have been attenuated by two heart attacks. In 2001, this newest RSF laureate was awarded the UNESCO Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize and the World Association of Newspapers' Golden Pen of Freedom Award. But what will the old man do with all these awards in prison? What can be done to rescue him and other great Burmese souls from the grip of the dictatorial junta?

The November issue of the in-flight magazine of Air India, *Namaskar*, proudly announced that the carrier was unanimously selected "**Best South Asian Airline**" by readers of the *Travel Trade Gazette* periodical, with the award "given out at the glittering 17th annual travel awards ceremony by TTG Asia Media in Pattaya." Then *C Patrakar* went to the Jet Airways website, and there it was again: "Jet Airways has [been] voted India's best airline at the 17th Annual Travel Awards 2006 function of TTG Travel Asia at Pattaya." This required some head scratching. Hard to believe that the Maharaja actually made the grade, given that we happen to know of other competent airlines such as Sri Lankan, and including of course, Jet. Also, what exactly is it that makes AI 'Southasian', given that it serves more overseas destinations than its own sister carrier Indian Airlines? And why is Jet the best only in India, and not Southasia as a whole, when it clearly outclasses every airline in terms of age of fleet, in-flight service, *khana*, and so on? The scratching continues.

Chhetria P is always tickled to find items that highlight South India as an entity separate from the rest of the country (though no separatist support intended - I like India as it is, thank you). So here is a plug for the **South India Commercial Directory 2006**. Available for INR 524 as a CD-ROM, the directory has the dope on 31,000 companies from the manufacturing, trading and service sectors of this region, covering more than a whopping 1000 categories. So for those who want to expand their markets in South India, what are you waiting for? Go for it! Might not be a bad idea for a certain (and 'only') Southasian mag, eh?

Valuable footage taken by American cameraman Leonard Lear during the 1971 war, which languished in his basement in New Jersey for a quarter century,

was exhumed by filmmakers Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud and converted into the acclaimed documentary, '**Muktir Gaan**' ('Song of Freedom'). On 15 December, ten years after it was first shown to wide acclaim, the film was re-released in Dhaka. Said Tareque Masud, "Our main aim is to present some incidents of the liberation war before the young people. We hope that they will be able to realise that the war of our independence was a result of people's united effort." Good show!

The country with the least **inter-media civility** in our corner of the globe has to be Bangladesh. In the middle of December, one media group accused the high profile sister dailies *Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* of land-grabbing on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue in downtown Dhaka. The publishers of *Star* and *Alo* responded credibly enough, reasoning that the deal was done above-board. But this being Bangladesh, they *had* to go one step further, claiming: "The campaign against us is an attempt to protect the ill gotten wealth of Al-Haj Mussadeq Ali Falu, Chairman and shareholder of NTV, RTV and daily *Amar Desh*." So it was not them, but in fact Mr Falu who abused access during the tenure of the BNP rule, "taking full advantage of his proximity and closeness to former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to amass huge amounts of personal wealth, property and personal power." Then, naturally, a columnist of *The New Nation* of the Ittefaq Group got into the mess, all high-sounding but having his own axe to grind. After firstly declaring how such "vitriolic, fanatical and baseless critique" debases journalism as a whole, he went on to darkly claim that the one "Bengali daily" involved in all this was staunchly AL-partisan, and itself took "recourse to tendentious reporting and commentary towards denigrating BNP, and advancing AL political causes." And how could you have reached this far without reference to the 'foreign hand'? Wrote the columnist, "There is a credible school of thought that believes that the AL-partisan virulent tendentious reporting is being carried out at the behest of a foreign intelligence agency working towards seeing a compliant AL government gain state power."

There is a lady of Indian origin who did a space walk outside the **space shuttle Discovery** the other day. The dailies of India then had a field day, front-paging a very poor photograph of Sunita Williams taken from space. But there was an apparent lack of enthusiasm in the press of the neighbouring Southasian countries. Such is the level of nationalist parochialism we have achieved, don't know who to thank for it.



- *Chhetria Patrakar*

Theatre serves the nation

Another year of the Prithvi theatre festival brings all of India to the stage.



BY UMA MAHADEVAN-DASGUPTA

Six decades ago, when Zohra Sehgal asked Prithviraj Kapoor why his traveling theatre company was called Prithvi Theatres, in the plural, he explained that his dream was to have a theatre in every town in India. Today that dream may remain unfulfilled, but Prithviraj's vision has taken shape in a different way – in the form of the Prithvi Theatre in the suburban Bombay neighbourhood of Juhu. Here, the gates are never closed, and in fact there are no gates to close. The Prithvi Theatre, set up in 1978 by Shashi Kapoor and Jennifer Kendall, hosts over 400 performances by over 50 groups throughout the year, providing them with complete professional and technical facilities. The policies of this intimate 200-seat playhouse – its scaled leasing practices and reasonable ticket pricing – have long offered great support to Bombay theatre. In all, around 65,000 viewers come to see plays at Prithvi every year, and not just for the celebrated Irish coffees at the theatre's café.

Three and a half years before Independence, Prithviraj had started a professional theatre company with the motto *Kala desh ki seva mein*, "Art in the service of the nation". With

2006 being Prithviraj's birth centenary, this year the annual Prithvi Festival adopted Prithviraj's motto for its theme. For three weeks in November, the festival brought together 28 productions and 45 shows, as well as free platform performances in the Prithvi courtyard and discussion sessions with playwrights. Spread over four venues – the buzzing Prithvi stage itself, the magical Horniman Circle Garden at the other end of the city, the amphitheatre at Land's End in Bandra and the Yashwant Natya Mandir at Matunga-Dadar – the festival kept the spirit of theatre burning bright in Bombay.

But *Kala desh ki seva mein* is a difficult motto to work with in 2006. What do these words mean for us today? "60 years down the line," wonder organisers Sanjna Kapoor and Sameera Iyengar in the festival bulletin, "what role do theatre artists and their art play? What role do we want to play, as theatrewallahs, as citizens of this country?"

Tamasha

Some answers were provided in the choice of productions hosted during the festival. Take the Arpana theatre company's "Cotton 56, Polyester

84", a play written by Ramu Ramanathan, translated by Chetan Datar and directed by Sunil Shanbag. This rich and textured story set in Girangaon, Bombay's textile-mill district, pays tribute to the labour of the mill workers. The festival bulletin quotes Parvatibai Mahadik, the widow of such a worker, in conversation with Hridaynath Jadhav, who plays a mill worker in the production: "My husband worked for 13 years before the mill closed down. He would come home with vegetables or fish, just like Bhau Rao in the play. I would also examine his *dabba* to see if he had eaten everything. That's how my life was. That's why I liked the play."

Another well-known Bombay play, Manoj Joshi's "Shobhayatra", written by Shafaat Khan and directed by Ganesh Yadav, is a dark and energetic romp through textbook and contemporary history. "Kashinama" by Usha Ganguly's troupe Rangakarmee, inspired by Kashinath Singh's "Pandey Kaun Kumati Tohe Lage", is set in the ghats of Benaras and is a paean to, in Ganguly's words, the "shyness, simplicity, carelessness" of this holiest of cities.

"Parkadal" ("The Milky Ocean"), a Tamil play with English subtitles performed by the young members of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, uses a combination of different media, theatrical as well as technological, to tell the old story about the churning of the ocean. P Rajagopal, the director, explains his objective: "Perhaps we – the collaborators in this production which cuts across ages, beliefs and backgrounds – wanted to emphasise that, in spite of 'modernity', the universal themes of peace, identity, responsibility, sharing and compassion that enable life have not really changed."

Other productions included Abhijat Joshi's "Aanthma Taranu Akash", Ahmedabad-based Fade In Theatre's fresh and daring Prithvi debut; Bangalore's young Harami Theatre's "Butter and Mashed Banana", a wry take on censorship; "Bhagavadajjukam", by the Abhinaya Theatre of Thiruvananthapuram, a

classical piece given a contemporary treatment; Nilu Phule's lively *tamasha* "Kunacha Kunala Mei Nahi!!!" and Satish Alekar's "Mahanirvan". There were also productions that attempted a direct response to painful contemporary issues such as communal violence. "Hidden Fires", written by Manjula Padmanabhan and directed by Jayant Kripalani, was a series of monologues that dealt with the Gujarat riots; and "Kharaashein", directed by Salim Arif, was based on Gulzar's writings on communal riots. In reference to the ironic silence after the violence, the play reads:

No one was killed in the city.
They were only names. Murdered...
No one was beheaded
They were mere caps with heads
inside
And this blood stream on the
streets
Drips
From the voices slaughtered.

The high point of the entire festival, however, was Kanhailal's classic "Pebet" (See *picture*), performed by H Sabitri and the Madras-based Kalakshetra team in the dreamlike venue of the Horniman Circle Garden. In more than three decades of its performance, the play has lost none of its relevance or its angry intensity. Folk-theatre legend Habib Tanvir led the standing ovation at the end of the riveting performance. For Kanhailal, the play is part of his ongoing effort to discover a new theatre in the indigenous Manipuri context, "that could shatter the ways of seeing and doing of the city theatre convention ... 'Pebet' was created for the spirit of resistance that is incarnated in the being of the actor without assertion or ideology."

This is how it was

A Tagore festival, brought to Bombay in partnership with the Calcutta-based Happenings, consisted of four plays: Naya Theatre's "Raj-Rakt", Sopanam's "Raja", Kalakshetra's "Dakghar" and Trityo Sutra's "Raktakarabi". Curated by Habib Tanvir in Calcutta in August 2006, this

project, which attempts a rediscovery of Tagore as a playwright, brought together such celebrated directors as H Kanhailal, K N Panikkar and Tanvir himself.

"Raja", performed by the Thiruvananthapuram-based Sopanam, is about a king who has never been seen. Panikkar uses the folk-ritualistic art form of Theyyam to represent the king shrouded in darkness. "Raj-Rakt", Naya Theatre's most recent production, is a powerful depiction of the struggle between religious and secular power. By adapting Tagore's 1890 play "Visarjan" and melting it with his 1887 novel *Rajarshi*, Tanvir dramatically restructured a play that was flawed and difficult to perform (both Tagore's and Shombhu Mitra's later stagings being considered failures) to create a truly effective dramatic collision between the will to sacrifice and the will to preserve.

Kalakshetra's "Dakghar" is a multilingual production in Manipuri, Bengali, Assamese, Rabha, Bodo and Tripuri. "Dakghar" became for Kanhailal "an instinctive choice as it depicts what it is to be natural with nature and human with human society ... Through destruction and reconstruction of the text, I created a performance text which centres around the 'inner action' of the actors, that leaps to 'controlled ecstasy' in evocation of a dream in tune with Tagore's sensibility and aesthetics."

Not only the success of the festival, but also the health of theatre in India, can be gauged from the sheer diversity and varied experience of the theatre groups that participated at the Prithvi festival. The Rangakarmee troupe, for instance, which has completed 30 years of existence this year, leads the Hindi theatre presence in Calcutta. Set up in 2002 as a residential school for underprivileged rural children, the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam of Tamil Nadu seeks a balance between maintaining the creative spirit of the Kattaikkuttu theatre tradition and finding ways to survive in a changing world. And Manipur's

Kalakshetra, set up in 1969, is a research theatre that has continuously sought to create a new theatre idiom – a physical language based on sound and movement and impelled by the force of live theatre in its indigenous context. Based in Imphal, the group has constantly shifted locations within the city. Since 1997, it has been working in the Langol Lairmanai neighbourhood, where it now has its own land, with *kutcha* sheds for office, work and performance spaces.

Free platform performances ran every night of the Prithvi festival. These included songs by Nageen Tanvir, performances of Naya Theatre's Ponga Pandit and Sarak, poetry readings by Naseeruddin Shah, and renditions by the sweet-voiced young choir of the Indian People's Theatre Association.

The Prithvi festival is truly a festive occasion, when Bombay neighbourhoods are adorned with paper lanterns, glittering masks, silver and gold tissue, and many welcoming faces. In a city of punishing distances, and one where so many things happen at once, the festival is one of those events during which members of the audience are forced not only to make time for theatre, but also to choose between equally compelling productions that are being performed on the same evening in different parts of the city.

Invariably, impossibly, we make the time. And then, when it is all over – not only the crazy, exhausting, zigzag commutes across town, but also those intoxicating moments when drama unfolds gloriously, magically before one's eyes – we begin to look forward to the next year's festival. We recall the words of Parvatibai, the mill worker's widow, after she saw "Cotton/Polyester": "I started crying while watching the play. My friend asked why I was crying, and I said, 'I see everything – Bhau, his Muslim friend, the drinking, reading newspapers, their son, the mother who is afraid she will lose everything.' I remembered my life ... this is how it was."

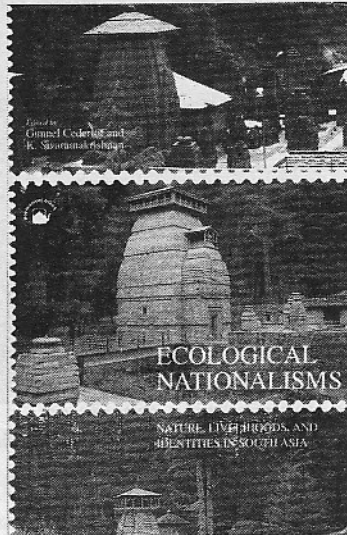
Politics of resource patriotism

BY KEKHRIESITUO YHOME

Debates over questions of livelihood, subsistence and peoples' rights have figured large in recent discourses on the environment, both popular and academic. This is a shift away from previous debates, which had been primarily concerned with conservation, ecological balance and sustainable development, and had been triggered by the effects of global warming and environmental degradation. The current discussion tends to place particular focus on identity politics, especially in the form of rights over nature and claims over resources. These have been articulated through various political and cultural assertions, including outright ethnic movements.

Ecological Nationalisms offers a new way of understanding the relationships between the concepts of nature, nation and identity in Southasia. Gunnel Cederlof, a historian at Uppsala University in Sweden, and K Sivaramakrishnan, a professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, have chosen a host of contributors that do much to redefine debates on both environmental politics and histories of the region. These provide many interesting stories of struggle over nature and natural resources, and how these struggles have been intertwined in claims of national identity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the book's introduction, "Claiming Nature for Making History", the editors write that the aim of the book is to explore "the relationship of struggles over nature, and its conservation, to issues of citizenship, subjecthood and nationalism". By redefining nature as "the space or reference point for national aspiration", they are able to blend the concepts of nature and nation.



Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan contend that claims of identity are often made as political assertions to legitimise rights over nature or land. Emphasising that these are political claims to territory, resources and "the desire to maintain subsistence", they argue that indigenist and traditionalist claims cannot be dismissed as mere "acts of strategic self-essentialising cultural identity politics."

The editors define ecology as "the interrelatedness of environment and organism", and emphasise that the concept of 'ecological nationalism' involves a radical change in the relationship between human beings and the environment. Elaborating on this concept, they present two different types of ecological nationalism - the "metropolitan-secular" and the "indigenist or regionalist". While the former sees nature in terms of how it could be used materially and economically for the country, the latter is a reaction by indigenous or regional groups to such exploitative practices of the state, or by marginalised populations to global capitalism's encroachment on their lives and livelihoods.

The use of the term ecological nationalism is apt, for it points out the problematic nature of the current academic division of 'nationalism' into two main types. The first is 'civic nationalism', in which membership in the nation is determined by citizenship of a territorial state. The second is 'ethnic nationalism', in which the nation is defined in terms

Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, livelihoods, and identities in South Asia
 edited by **Gunnel Cederlof and K Sivaramakrishnan**
 Permanent Black, 2006

of ethnicity. When it comes to environment, civic nationalism is associated with the metropolitan secularists; this group tends to place unitary nationalism above all else, and align themselves with forms of ecologism that reject a complex web of sub-national claims and rights to land and nature. Ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, is seen as providing "a space where right-based identities are produced in combination with place-based identities mediated by claims on nature."

In national interest

Ecological Nationalisms is divided into three sections. The first, "Regional Natures, Nation and Empire", is comprised of three essays, each of which highlights how state intervention is legitimised and how this process destabilises the authority of indigenous communities over nature. Anthropologist Kathleen D Morrison investigates the history of interaction between hill and plains people in the Western Ghats during pre- and early colonial periods, and explores how claims to resources were reflected in the

way in which distinct identities formed and were sustained.

Cederlof then looks at two decades (1820-1843) in the history of the people of the Nilgiri hills. He describes how this area was gradually integrated into the British administrative structures with an eye towards providing "security and prosperity", and how this has resulted in the dismantling of the local ethnic Toda authority. The third essay, by 'human geographer' Urs Geiser, examines the environmental history of the North-West Frontier Province, focusing on the official forest bureaucracy and its "century-old discourses". Geiser demonstrates how contemporary forest officials in the NWFP justify and reproduce that colonial discourse by stressing the ecological importance of sustainable management of forests, while simultaneously emphasising the 'national interest' to legitimise the scientific management of those forests. They ascribe the failure of their so-called 'mission' to 'uninformed' people.

The book's second section is titled "Competing Nationalisms", and focuses on the relationship between nature and nationalism. In this, 'nature' features as a point of reference in the imagination and the cultural construction of identity. One example of this is the essay by University of Sussex historian Vinita Damodaran, which recounts the past century-and-a-half of marginalisation of the hill people of Chotanagpur in Jharkhand, an area that in recent decades has seen significant cultural resistance. Damodaran contends that, in the post-Independence era, the projection of the Adivasi identity versus that of *diku* (outsiders), and the focus on a history of injustice, have produced a symbolic landscape of Chotanagpuri identity.

New Zealand anthropologist Antje Linkenbach then examines two relatively recent movements of protest in Uttarakhand – the Chipko movement, and the statewide assertion for political autonomy and separation from Uttar Pradesh. According to this essay, territory and

resources play an important role alongside culture and religion in the formation of identity in Uttarakhand. A similar argument is made by Bengt G Karlsson, the director of the Nordic Centre in India, who explores the dynamics between forest and community in Meghalaya. In the Northeast, Karlsson writes, "the politics of nature is intrinsically linked to ethnic mobilisation and aspirations for increased political autonomy."

Two Canadians, Claude A Garcia and J P Pascal, then examine the politics of a sacred forest in Kodagu District in Karnataka. After a systematic investigation of the ecological character of the area, they refute the idea that sacred groves are environmentally virgin forests. Instead, Garcia and Pascal note that various stakeholders have very different views of sacred forests: they are alternately valued symbolically, as resources and also simply as "space". The authors conclude by observing that sacred forests "merge environment, history and religion", and are fundamental in the definition of the relationship between man and nature.

Local knowledge

The final section in *Ecological Nationalisms* is titled "Commodified Nature and National Visions". The four essays included here are concerned with the confrontation between the 'metropolitan-secularist' and the 'indigenist or regionalist' views on nature, as discussed above. German social anthropologist Gotz Hoeppe analyses the entrance of the state into the lives of fishermen in Kerala. Taking two cases, Hoeppe looks at the contradictions between the state's scientific knowledge and the local knowledge of the fishermen. He subsequently concludes that, in both interventions, the intimate local relationship and indigenous knowledge with nature is marginalised by the state's scientific knowledge for the exploitation of nature.

German anthropologist Wolfgang Mey presents a fascinating historical account of the Chittagong Hill Tracts,

emphasising that the state's definitions of development and identity have excluded the hill people in the national discourses on history and identity. Sociologist Sarah Southwold-Llewellyn then analyses the cosmopolitan and nativist claims of rights to the forests in a village in the Hindukush mountains, and illustrates how ecology and access to resources defines the conceptualisation of the Pakhtun socio-political organisation and identity. The section ends with sociologist Nina Bhatt's interesting analysis of the forest bureaucracy in Nepal in the aftermath of absolute monarchy and the advent of multi-party democracy in the early 1990s. Bhatt examines the links between national parks and national identity through forest staff's understandings of their roles as "stewards" or "defenders" of national interests in nature management through "hard work [and] ... bravery". But, in the changed context, Bhatt notes that the "experience of the bureaucratic subjectivity" suggests an ambiguity regarding duties to the park and duties to the country.

The importance and relevance of *Ecological Nationalisms* lies in its novel treatment and methodological contribution to the current debate on identity politics and ethnic conflicts in Southasia. One point of departure from earlier ethnic studies is this work's addressing of the problematic nature of 'nature' and its related concepts in the understanding of identity politics. The conceptualisation of the relation of struggle over nature, and the politics of identity formation or 'national' identity, is a significant breakthrough in the study of ethnic politics. The political landscape of Southasia is dotted with diverse forms of ethnic politics, and this book provides a new approach in understanding this complex scenario.

The interdisciplinary approach of the book enabled the authors to view and engage with such diverse issues as livelihood, nationhood, identity, subsistence, conservation and politics. From

historical, ethnographic, environmental, political-geographic and political-economic perspectives, the authors unearth the complexities and relations of identity politics and struggles over nature. *Ecological Nationalisms* will be of great service for both social scientists and

students of environmental conflicts and identity politics, and will help in leading to a greater understanding of the nuances of contemporary regional conflicts and politics. One of the book's contributors poses the question, "Can a journey into [environmental] history help us

understand, or grasp at least some of the underlying dynamics of these struggles?" This reviewer would answer affirmatively, and would strongly recommend this work for students of politics, history, economics, anthropology, sociology, ecology and globalisation in Southasia.

Don't let the light go out

BY VIJAY PRASHAD

In 1981, the cinema theatre near my home in Calcutta became a *mehfil-e-mushaira*. At the end of each show, *majnoohs* walked out of the darkness humming tunes and reciting *ghazals*. Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* allowed non-Urdu speakers to revel in the richness of Urdu culture, which most of us non-Muslims saw as exotic and attractive, yet distant. (Muslim culture would be further rendered exotic in 1982 in two films, *Nikaah* and *Deedar-e-yaar*.) These are all films of decline, where a supposedly homogenous Muslim culture is rife with problems – some easy to overcome (divorce rates), and others intractable (the demise of the *kotha* culture). The elegance of the language thrilled many urbane Indians, who enjoyed the patois but felt uncomfortable with the working-class and rural sections that actually spoke it.

As Ali's movie thrilled, Biharsharif burned. The local Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chapter provoked a major fight over cemetery land, the first confrontation since 1945. The riot that ensued left many dead, and inaugurated a new dynamic in Indian politics. In the mid-1980s, 60 riots shook the small towns and cities of Uttar Pradesh. Late in that decade, in 1987,

Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* (written by Rahi Masoom Raza) entered the homes of millions of people. All this prepared the terrain for the rise of Hindutva, and for the mayhem of the 1990s.

Umrao Jaan's lyricist Shahryar anticipated this evolution, as the courtesan travels to Faridabad, the town that neighbours Ayodhya, and sings, "Yeh kya jagah hai, doston." What kind of place is this, friends?

With *Anthems of Resistance*, Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir, two brothers hailing from Hyderabad, in the Deccan, come bearing a substantial gift. Archaeologists of a lost sensibility, they tear the wild foliage of communal hatred aside and take us to a promised land: this is not freedom itself, but the articulation of revolution by a generation of poets. The story begins in 1934, at a Chinese

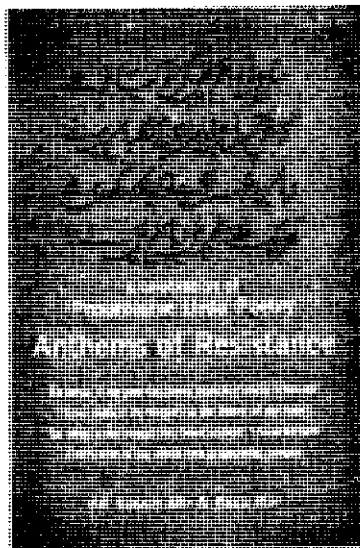
restaurant in London, where some of the greatest artists of the day met to found the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). Their unabashedly modernist manifesto called upon artists to "rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated so long; to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future."

The Urdu writers in the group inaugurated a tradition known as *taraqqi-pasandi* (progressivism), and poets such as Firaq Gorakhpuri and Josh Malihabadi wrote revolutionary anthems to shake off the cobwebs of custom for the creation of an enlightened future. Majaz, in 1933, offered "1917" as example:

*Kohsaaron ki taraf se surkh aandhi
aayegi
Jabaja aabaadiyon mein aag si lag
jaayegi
Aur is rang-e-shafaq mein ba hazaraan
aab-o-taab
Jagmagaaega vatan ki hurriyat ka
aaf-taab*

*A red storm is approaching from over
the mountains
Sparking a fire in the settlements
And on this horizon, amidst a thousand
tumults
Shall shine the sun of our land's
freedom.*

The progressive writers, who delved into the rich resource of the



Anthems of Resistance:

A celebration of progressive Urdu poetry

by Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir
Roli Books, 2006

Urdu language and the imagery of Urdu poetry, delivered verse at a prodigious rate. During the 1930s and 1940s, there remained spaces for poets to enthrall (mostly male) audiences, and to find their couplets on the lips of millions who went in search of freedom. These were, as Ali and Raza Mir put it, “anthems of resistance”. But from the start, they came with equal parts hope and disappointment. A decade after the inauguration of the PWA, the Subcontinent parted and the full freedom of the socialist imagination never happened. Sahir Ludhianvi bemoaned the “same procession of robbers”, who now “wear new clothes”. Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s evocative “1947” poem begins wearily and despondently, “*Yeh daagh, daagh ujaala, ye shab gazeeda sahar*” (This tarnished light, this ashen dawn), and then asks, “Where did the morning breeze come from, which way did it depart?”

Cinema ghazals

But their grief did not last long. Ali and Raza Mir tell us that the poets were “disillusioned by the nation-state” – although it seems from their own evidence that they were merely angered at the direction taken by the new countries. Strong poems for the Telengana fighters (from Makhdoom) or against religious obscurantism (from Kaifi Azmi) indicate that these poets sought to throw in their lot with the struggles of the people to build a better world. Their despondency did not remove them from the fight – too much was at stake. The claustrophobia of their feudal society, the chimera of capitalist freedom and the frustrations of thwarted desire for independence led them, as with Sikandar from M S Sathyu’s 1973 *Garam Hawa*, into the arms of the communist and people’s struggles.

Theirs is the tradition of song, the ghazal, and it is fitting that the poets found employment writing songs for Hindi cinema. Sahir, Kaifi Azmi, Majrooh and others took to the medium with gusto. *Pyaasa*, from 1957, was the apex, with Sahir’s red-

hot indictment of the political class:

*Zara mulk ke rahbaron ko bulaaao
Ye kooche, ye galiyaan, ye manzar
dikhaao
Jinhen naaz hai Hind par unko laao
Jinhen naaz hai Hind par voh kahaan
hai?*

*Go, fetch the leaders of the nation
Show them these streets, these lanes,
these sights
Summon them, those who are proud of
India
Those who are proud of India, where
are they?*

Currents that had borne this generation of poets along and extended their political horizon now began to shift. Between 1947 and the early 1970s, the dominant classes in India were held back from self-exertion by the clamp of secular, socialist nationalism. The state did not move in a communist direction, but it also did not move toward full-fledged market capitalism. The freedom movement charged the government with the regulation of license and the sheltering of the indigent. By the 1970s, the freedom movement’s coalition exhausted its potential, and its objective basis withered; globalisation’s lures smashed the import-substitution industrialisation model. The patriotism of the bottom line dominated over forms of national solidarity.

The thug was now as much a hero as the outcast (*Awara*) and the inherently socialist farmer (*Do Bighaa Zamin*). Cinema’s Muslim, for instance, was not to be the exotic nobleman or the nationalist partisan, but rather the gangster’s ruthless henchman, the *miyanbhai*. Cinema’s music also withered. Repetitive beats and meaningless lyrics pulsated through storylines that reflected either the pursuit of wealth or the individualistic revenge of the slum child. The poet no longer controlled the lyric, but was told to produce a set piece. “It is like being told that a grave has already been dug,” Kaifi Azmi grunted, “and now an appropriately sized corpse has to be found to fit in it.”

Living tradition

As the progressives died, their tradition appeared to die with them. But Ali and Raza Mir point us in two particular directions, from both sides of the Indo-Pakistani border. Pakistan’s Kishwar Naheed and India’s Javed Akhtar, both born in the early 1940s, are heirs of the tradition, but marked by their different locations. *Anthems of Resistance* offers a chapter dedicated to the work of the latter, who stands in for an entire tradition. Akhtar commands a large audience – not only because he is one of the premier songwriters for Hindi cinema, but also because he has parlayed his success into a poetry career. He does not mimic the tradition that he comes from, but has produced a style in keeping with the modern age. A mirror placed before the world shows it to be venal and hypocritical. Akhtar also inherited the tradition from his family (his father wrote for the cinema, and his maternal uncle was Majaz), and it was perhaps irrelevant that the broader culture had begun to turn away from the *mehfil* and its charms.

Kishwar Naheed, on the other hand, worked within a different social framework, where Urdu had not lost its central place. Naheed and other feminist poets (Femida Riyaz, Ishrat Afreen, etc), Ali and Raza Mir explain, “are the true inheritors of the tradition of progressive poetry, its champions, and its trailblazers”. Pakistani arts cultivated that milieu, and its social conditions produced its poets. Zia-ul-Huq’s misogynist laws, the disembowelment of Pakistani civil society and the increased militarisation of the state created the objective conditions for sentiments such as this, by Kishwar Naheed:

*Ye hum gunahgaar auraten hain
Ke sach ka parcham utha ke niklen
To jhoot se shaah-raahen ati mile hain
Hare k dahleez pe sazaaon ki
daastaaenen rakhi mile hain
Jo bol sakti theen voh zubaanen kati
mile hain*

*It is we sinful women
Who, when we emerge carrying aloft*

the flag of truth
Find highways strewn with lies
Find tales of punishment placed at
every doorstep
Find tongues which could have spoken,
severed.

In May 2002, Kaifi Azmi passed on. The fires from Gujarat continued to smoulder, and the anguish of those bitten by the snake of communalism weighed heavily on progressive hearts. A generation had passed

away, but its problems had been bequeathed to another. The generation of the PWA poets had worked in an internationalist era where poetry had been meaningful to a broad segment of society; the same could be said for Chile's Pablo Neruda or Turkey's Nazim Hikmet. Now, outside the lyrics of cinema music, poetry does not command the kind of mass audience that it once did.

Not for nothing, then, is *Anthems of Resistance* a celebration – a

nostalgic look at a combative tradition that no longer has a popular appeal. The feminist poets of Pakistan and Javed Akhtar's verse continue the form of the Progressive Writers' Association, but they cannot have its impact on the broader culture. The medium has shifted, and others, in different media than poetry, will carry forward the values of the PWA. That is the hope of Ali and Raza Mir's evocative and powerful book. If not, what kind of place is this, friends? ♣

Fluid dynamics: A prediction for the 24th century

BY SIDDHARTH ANAND

*These are warning signs, the end of
the world is nigh.*

– Kavita Pai, *Turbulence*

In a clue so cryptic as to discourage even the doughtiest crossword zealot, *Turbulence*, the latest Reader from the New Delhi-based new-media initiative Sarai, gestures towards a fast-forward future – one that has already arrived, and is very chaotic. Dubbed “a practice for and of a time that has no name” by an editorial collective based in Delhi and Amsterdam, *Turbulence* is the sleekest, edgiest and grittiest avatar yet of the Sarai Reader Series.

Now in its sixth year, the Reader has acquired a reputation of being the wild child of the publishing calendar. It has become known for

*Sarai Reader 06:
Turbulence*

edited by **Monica Narula,
Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Ravi
Sundaram, Jeebesh Bagchi
Awadhendra Sharan and
Geert Lovink**

*Centre for the Study of Developing
Societies, 2006*

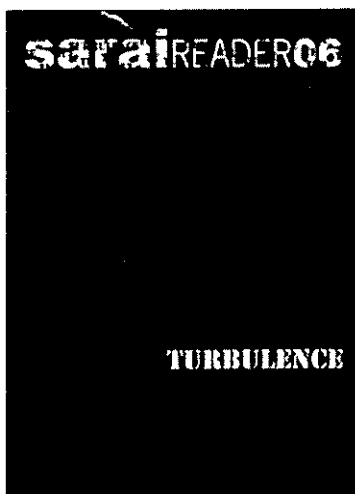
collections so ambitious and diverse that each preface over the years has included a defence of ‘eclecticism’ – and every review has chosen to comment on it. While proving that it is possible to be both eclectic and consistent, *Turbulence* seeks to push the boundaries beyond a mere celebration of communicative diversity, by setting out to map terrain that is, at times, unnerving.

The title of this new volume is perhaps the most intriguing of any Reader to date. *Turbulence*, as any student of science knows, is a crucial

factor of fluid dynamics, and refers to the opposite of the phenomenon of ‘laminar flows’ – an ordered flow of fluid such that information about future behaviour of that flow can be predicted by determining the exact nature of the present.

Turbulent flow, on the other hand, while proceeding in the same general direction as laminar flow, has to contend with the additional complexity of randomly fluctuating velocities. A further engagement with physics reveals deeper, more profound, metaphors: turbulence is the transition from order to disorder; turbulence increases with an increase in velocity; turbulence increases with friction and grittiness, and remains one of the unsolved problems in physics. However, it is by only the most veiled of gestures – the cryptic clue mentioned at the beginning of this review – that *Sarai Reader 06* reveals its intention to serve as an atlas-cum-almanac for the exact point of transition into turbulence: 2300 AD.

This is, admittedly, a long shot. But as the opening quote of art writer Cédric Vincent's “Mapping the Invisible: Notes on the reason of conspiracy theories” states, “there is



no such thing as a coincidence ... Nothing happens in this universe ... unless an entity wills it to happen." Apart from signalling the dawn of the 24th century, 2300 also happens to be the critical value of another scientific term - the 'Reynolds' constant', at which a fluid normally shifts from laminar to turbulent flow. Hence, 'Re 2300' is the point at which turbulence is achieved in a fluid system under normal conditions.

Ideological and obdurate

Turbulence clarifies its intentions with R Krishna's opening piece, "The Time of Turbulence". From that point on, the collection sucks the reader into a compelling and chaotic world of pirates, profiteers, hyper-textual encounters and "modernity's fractally germinating, ever questioning bastards". Vincent's succinct unpacking of the concept of the conspiracy theory sits shoulder to shoulder with anthropologist Michael Taussig's excellent "Cement and Speed" - a text that somehow speaks simultaneously of the love of craft, the violence of development, and the

collapse of time, space and distance.

The Reader itself is divided into short sections that are both internally coherent and chronologically cohesive. Both Taussig's and Vincent's texts are found under the first section, "Transformations". In the "Weather Report" section, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina lies alongside a first-person account of the tsunami that struck Southasia's southern shores in 2004. A funeral party mourning the killing of a 16-year-old girl in Kashmir by security forces is witness to the fury of the almighty in "Zalzala", meaning 'earthquake'.

"Strange Days" is one of the most engaging sections of the Reader, and provides a historical context to the present-day flux. Ground-level texture from the *ghadar* of 1857 sits uneasily alongside Bangladeshi journalist Naeem Mohaiemen's account of the deification and contested legacy of Shiraj Sikder, the leader of Bangladesh's violent leftist Sharbahara Party. Meanwhile, Delhi literature professor Debjani Dengupta's text is a narrative carefully

pieced together around the Direct Action Day that took place in 1946 in Calcutta.

As with the Sarai Readers that preceded it, *Turbulence* moves beyond the purely textual, with images by Ravi Aggarwal and Monica Narula, among others. "Like Cleopatra", a graphic series by the Delhi- and Assam-based artist Parismita Singh, stretches the fabric of street-survival and alienation to breaking point, as it builds a seemingly innocuous narrative of life in Delhi University's North Campus.

Sarai Reader 06, like the rest of the series, works precisely because the contributions seem to have been edited by a thoughtful and light hand. Each text speaks out for itself, unburdened by the baggage of its neighbours. The Reader's single underlying theme, if there is one, is probably best summed up by Berlin-based computer wizard Frank Rieger's closing text. "If we don't enjoy taking on the system, we will get tired of the contest," he notes. "And they will win. So instead of being angry, ideological and obdurate, let's be funny, flexible and creative." ▲

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Imagining pickle

There is a particular way to eat pickle. You reach for the earthen, porcelain or glass jar standing on the shelf, and open the airtight lid. First, let the oily, spicy aroma permeate your olfactory nerve-endings; dig in with a spoon and add the stuff to your daal-bhaat; and then ascend towards heaven. This is how it has been since time began in Southasia.

Cut to the seat 29D in cattle class, looking at the poor specimen of roti and mutter-paneer that the airline chef has deigned to make part of your destiny this afternoon on the Kathmandu-Delhi flight. All of it pretty bland, and the taste buds unanimously send the signal to the brain: "Pickle! We want Pickle! Help us tackle this loss!"

Brain gets the SOS. Instructs eye. Eye scours the tray for the pickle container, and finds the guy trying to hide behind the bowl of raita, staring up at you menacingly. Mixed Pickle, produced by Merry Food (Rasulabad, Allahabad-4), tries to sneak away. Grab it before it jumps off the tray.

Next comes the challenge of opening the Mixed Pickle container. Now, the opening of a small, sealed plastic-and-foil container is just about as far as you can get from the Southasian tradition – nay, the very culture – of ingesting pickle. And it doesn't help that this container is designed not to be opened, as if the Rasulabad pickle-wallah were afraid the secret selection of condiments would become public knowledge if some brave adventurer actually managed to break into the strongbox and get at the innards.

Whoever thought the innocent act of eating pickle would require the resilience of an explorer in the deep Sahara? That is the level of perseverance and mechanical acumen needed to open this sachet (as some would call it, after Pan Parag) of Mixed Pickle, mixed because it contains 15 gm of seasonable vegetables, salt,

edible oil, chilly, mustard, fenugreek, turmeric, and asafoetida powder.

There is supposed to be a flap here where it says "Peel", but it is invariably impossible to locate, howsoever many flights you fly and howsoever many Mixed Pickle containers you are provided by the airline catering department.

The very idea of peeling requires that there be a section that can be lifted. It should be possible to get a finger-nail in there, lift the flap, get more of a hold on the foil, and pull it all the way back to reveal the tablespoonful of masalafied mango-citrus concoction within. But what do you do if the flap is actually pasted firmly against the container top, so that no act of peeling can possibly take place? You can keep trying, and so the hour-and-half flight is spent wrestling Mixed Pickle, while Lucknow passes underneath starboard, and then Faizabad, until it is time to prepare for landing and stow one's tray.



The point being made by way of this foray into the technique and frustrations of opening pickle sachets is that in Southasia we must either do something well, or not do it at all.

Getting an idea, or setting the agenda, is not enough. You have to have the ability and willpower to see the thing through. This rule of thumb goes for any activity: driving a bus, conducting an insurgency, being Prime Minister, running an airline, or placing pickle into pickle containers near the confluence of Jamuna and Ganga.

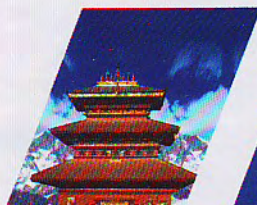
You, down there, in Rasulabad. Yes, you, Sir. Can we have a show of Southasian genius by ensuring that pickle is not only to be imagined to exist inside a very fine-looking container? The idea is to allow access, so that one can enjoy the mouth-watering *achar* that you have doubtless produced. Let us just get the technology of unbolting sorted out.



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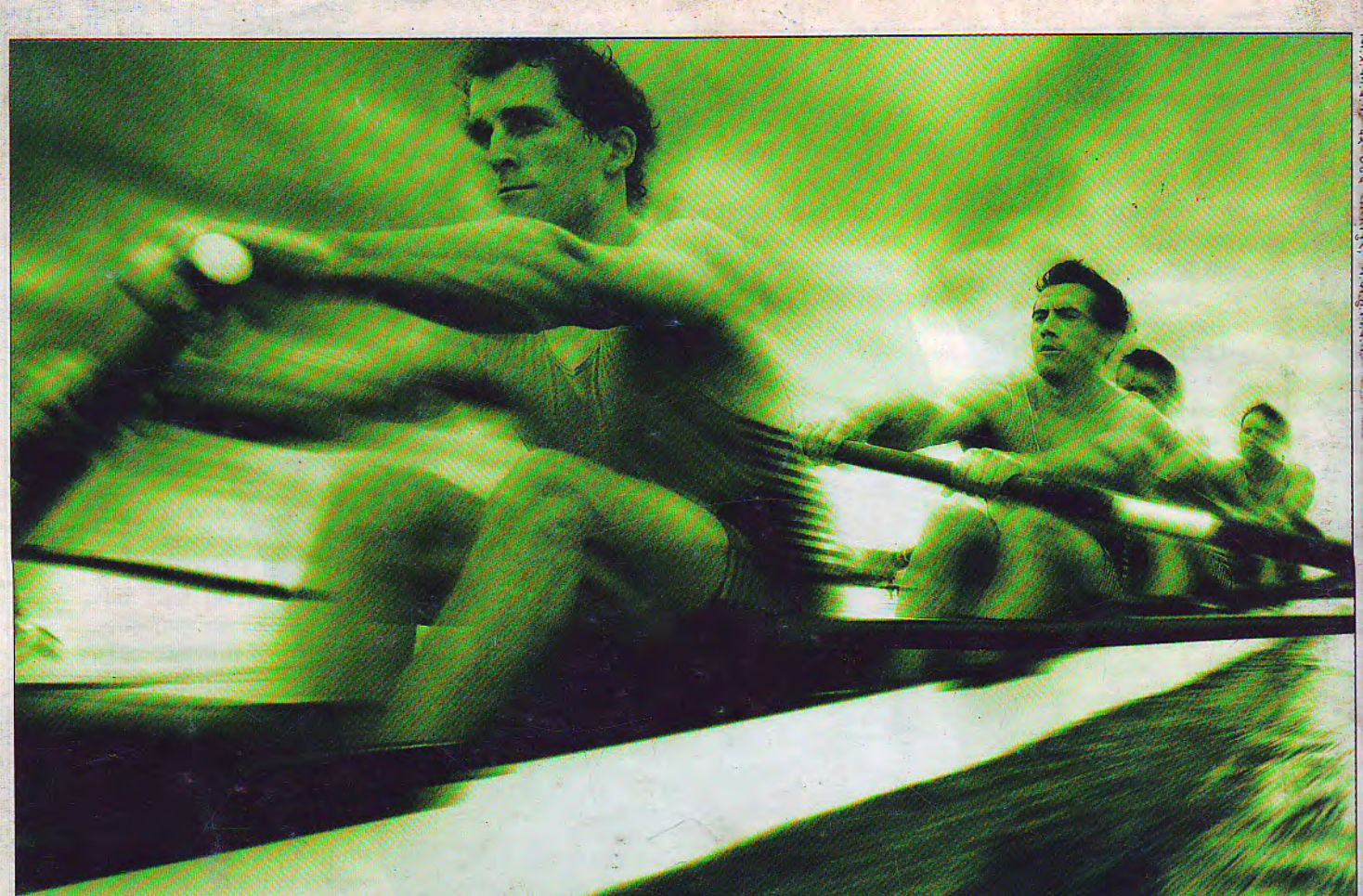
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