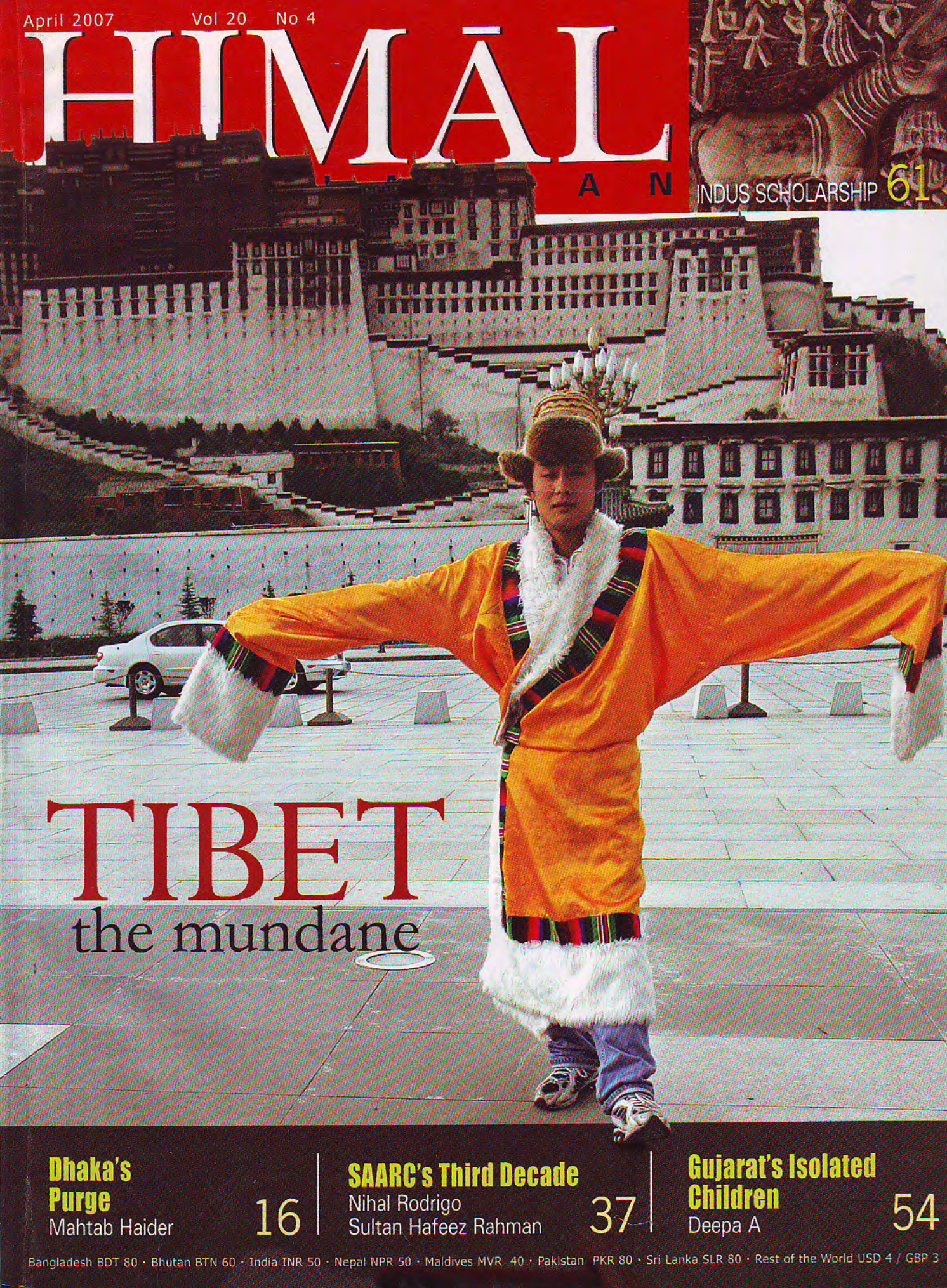


# HIMAL

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INDUS SCHOLARSHIP 61



## TIBET

the mundane

**Dhaka's  
Purge**

Mahtab Haider

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**SAARC's Third Decade**

Nihal Rodrigo  
Sultan Hafeez Rahman

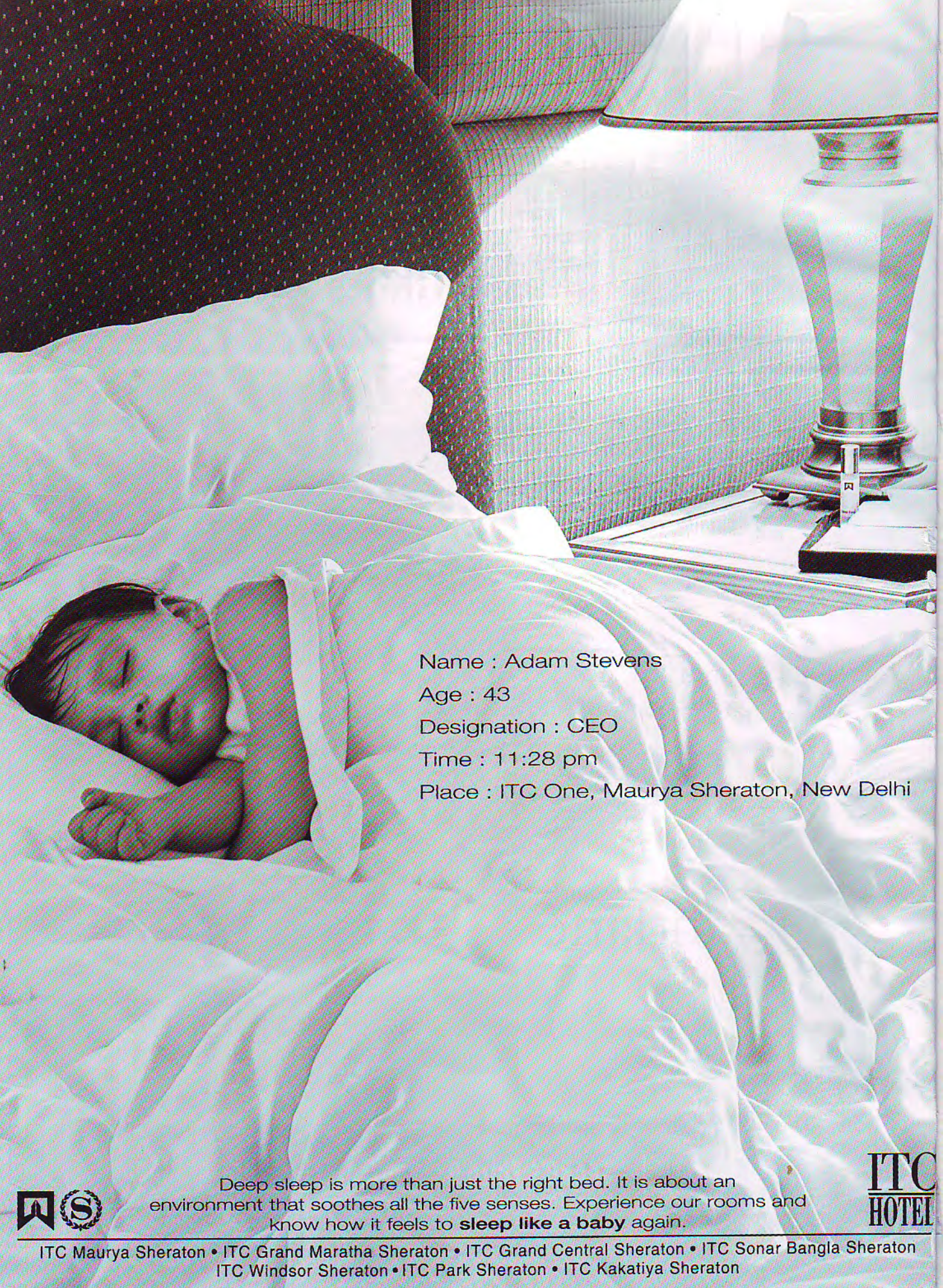
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**Gujarat's Isolated  
Children**

Deepa A

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Name : Adam Stevens

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# Tibet, the mundane

The romanticising of Tibet over the decades has done injustice to Tibetans. It has dehumanised them, and ultimately affected their fight for rights and autonomy. Tibet must be considered as just another developing country, territory, region or space. Tibet must be considered mundane – like all the rest of the world, where there are no intrinsically exotic people. From the inside, we are all average. Finally, Tibet's future must be decided by, and for the benefit of, Tibetans who live within Tibet.

It is their future that the Chinese, Southasians and citizens elsewhere must consider when we look to Tibet. It is with their future that the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, amidst India's Dhauladhar range, is clearly exercised.

Our cover image this issue was taken by Beijing-based photographer **Natalie Behring**. Posing in front of the Potala Palace in a costume rented from a nearby shop, is Zha Xi, a Chinese tourist from Sichuan who had ridden Tibet's new train line into Lhasa.

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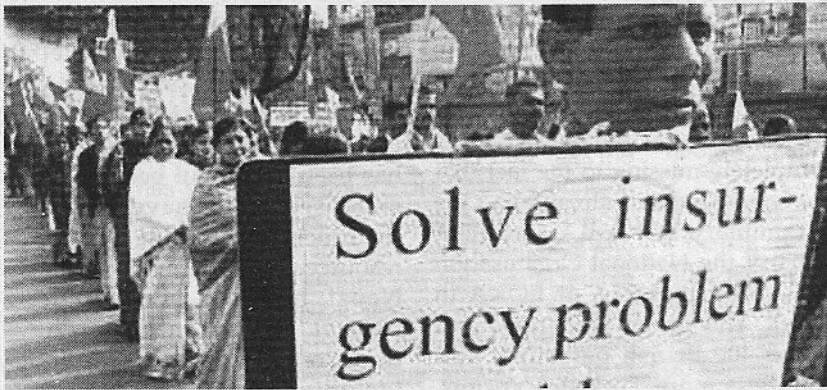
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## Hunting with the hounds



I have read very carefully the article by Walter Fernandes (*February 2007, "Hawks descend on Assam"*), and am surprised by his balancing act between the Indian Union and the ULFA insurgents. In reality, this was a typical case of hunting with the hounds and running with the hare.

The crux of Fernandes's argument is that there are hardliners among the government functionaries and the ULFA. But the criminals, masquerading as ULFA cadre – who have butchered Hindi-speaking women and children, settled in the state for over a hundred years – cannot be divided into soft- and hardliners. While of course, in India's open democratic system, dialogue and discussion must be allowed to go on; but the government must also do its duties, one of which is to punish criminals who commit murder. To term the armed forces as the hardliners is to misunderstand India's six-decade-old democratic political culture.

Nobody denies that there has been regional imbalance in terms of economic development in India, despite the execution of various Five Year Plans. That is why there is a national consensus that 10 percent of national resources are to be committed to the development of the Northeast region. I am a Hindi speaker, who has family ties with the Assamese; I also had the privilege to serve at an academic institute for nearly three decades in the area. During that time, I did not

experience any 'Hindi dominance'. Language has not been an issue in the Northeast for decades now, and should not be raised at this juncture.

As far as migration is concerned, every Indian has a constitutional right to be in Assam or anywhere else in India; indeed, that is what Fernandes himself is doing by basing himself in the Northeast. But what happened to ULFA's fight against the alleged foreigners in Assam, immigrants from Bangladesh? If it stands for Assam, as it claims, it is immaterial where in Assam the immigrants are.

As for Fernandes's plea for the so-called People's Consultative Group, this was neither a people's forum nor a consultative body, but rather a ULFA-nominated group. With the exception of one or two individuals, it was a discredited body of self-seekers that nobody took seriously. Which 'civil society' did the members represent?

## International Women's Day

I am an avid reader of *Himal Southasian*, and find the topics and content of the magazine extremely thoughtful and interesting. But with the March issue I was slightly disappointed that you missed out on an important subject – International Women's Day, 8 March.

This would have been an apt theme for the March issue of the magazine; the region offers stories

of extraordinary women, who changed the course of history and mankind. Hence, coverage could have reflected on the progress made, called for change and celebrated acts of love, courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of the region.

What credentials did they have? They simply passed on the ULFA agenda to the formal bodies in the government.

At the risk of being labelled a hawk, I put forward that there seems to be no middle ground between sovereignty (as dreamt by the ULFA) and autonomy as permitted by the Indian Constitution. So where is the meeting ground for a negotiated settlement? Till then, is there any choice but to give the armed forces the responsibility to tackle this security issue?

Fernandes has been a spokesman in the past for 'ecologically displaced' communities. Now he pleads for the ULFA. How can a small band of criminals hiding in a mountainous frontier tract be permitted to be the spokesmen of the Assamese at large? Equating it with the Indian Union is a misplaced argument in itself. This sort of academic doublespeak becomes obvious in his last paragraph: "It is important to realise that the ULFA represents the socio-economic and political aspirations of the people of Assam, even as most Assamese do not support the means it uses." What evidence does the author have to make this profound statement? Does it mean that the Assamese at large share ULFA's vision of a sovereign Assam outside India?

**A C Sinha**  
New Delhi

**Nima Chodon**  
New Delhi

Send mail to [editorial@himalmag.com](mailto:editorial@himalmag.com)



## Turkish Cypriotic

Your article on Cyprus (*Himal* September 2006, "Thin green line") is either biased, or your writer, Ananya



Vajpeyi, was wrongly informed as to why Cyprus has been divided since 1974. Vajpeyi does talk about how an Athens-led coup that

year attempted to assassinate Archbishop Makarios, then the head of the Cypriot government, which prompted the subsequent Turkish invasion. But reference was completely missing to the fact that the Greek Cypriots already had the paramilitary EOKA-B – a militant wing of the National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters, or EOKA in Greek. This group kidnapped and killed 400 British personnel and countless more Turkish Cypriots, starting in the early 1970s. As Turkish Cypriots, to this day we continue to suffer more than the Greek Cypriots. Unfortunately, I do not think your writer understood the situation of Turkish Cypriots, and ended up writing from a Greek Cypriot perspective.

**Suleyman Tosun**  
London

## Umbrella modalities

I was both attracted to and fascinated by Kanak Mani Dixit's "On the way up" column (*Himal* March 2007, "A Southasian umbrella university"). While I liked the idea of a regionwide umbrella university, I failed to see how it could be achieved. Could Dixit give an example of such an institution anywhere else in the world?

I am a Nepali Bahun, a graduate

of the erstwhile and idyllic Benaras Hindu University of India, where I read between the pre- and post-Independence days. The academic atmosphere at the time was excellent. I visited BHU recently and found it to be a parody of its former dynamic self.

How would Dixit's multi-centred, umbrella Southasian University be administered? From where? And would it be possible to make the academic standards of such a multi-faceted institution uniform? For example, would the post-graduate products of, say, Tribhuvan University of Kathmandu, be at par with those of JNU of Delhi or LUMS of Lahore? How could such standards be guaranteed? And can the writer be sure that the Southasian University would not end up as a commercial venture, a money-making machine?

**'Lotus Gem'**  
Lalitpur



## Democratic centralism

I am confused about the new 'federalism' that the Nepali Parliament passed on 9 March, and which has been covered in past issues of *Himal*. In India, federalism has been successful because every state seems to have both the technocratic and the economic resources required by that state. In Nepal, however, states under a federal system may not have important human resources, including competent engineers, medical experts, educationists and systems managers. Furthermore, the topography of the various states might not be favourable for the overall development of the states in a federal system.

Since the early 1960s, during the days of the Panchayat system, I have never been in favour of the 'go back to the village' campaign. I have always been in favour of a very democratic and centralised system, with a centralised databank, planning mechanism and capable technocrats. Democratic centralism would also be better for cost-effective economic development, which Nepal surely needs in order to employ its youth.

**Ravi Manandhar**  
Kathmandu

## 'Milakpani te ahibo'



I wanted to say how moved I was by Sanjay Barbor's story on the late Nilikesh Gogoi of Assam in the February issue.

It is sad that such positive personalities are lost to the world when narrow territorial considerations on all sides outweigh the development of human potential and cooperation between communities. Thank you for the piece.

**Rohan Belliappa**  
Sydney, Australia



## TIBET

## Yes, an autonomous Tibet Autonomous Region

How are Tibetans to proceed with Tibet, now that the 'cause' has slowed to a crawl? The Khampa uprising of the 1960s and 1970s is but a fading memory now, ready for fictionalising films. The misty-eyed insurgents who survived are now aged and on their way out. The incredible rise of Tibetophilia in the West, underpinned by the humane spiritual politics of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, has fed the world's need for a spiritual anchor more than it has provided political basis for bringing freedom or true autonomy to Tibet. Southasia's own governments, overawed by China's economic rise and intimidated by its reactive insularity, prefer not to rile the dragon.

The government-in-exile in Dharamsala has gone more than halfway to meet Beijing. There have been several rounds of talks between the two, which indicate that the latter at least recognises the Tibet issue as a political issue, whatever its harsh propaganda. But there has been nothing more forthcoming from Beijing over the half-decade that the talks have been held. Beijing seeks to overwhelm the Tibet question through the sheer weight of its power and certitude. One would wish it were otherwise, but it seems that the future of Tibet is hostage to the slow pace of democratisation within China. Those who had hoped that the Chinese economic boom of the 1990s would lead to magnanimity on, say, the identity demands of Xinjiang or Tibet, have come to realise that such magnanimity will be a long time coming. Or, alternatively, it will come all of a sudden, in a way that cannot be planned.

It was such considerations that led the Dalai Lama to propose what came to be known as the 'Middle Way' approach, which was eventually formally adopted in 1988. This was hardly a 'splittist' suggestion, but rather a sagacious attempt to seek autonomy for Tibet under the Chinese umbrella. But that was not good enough for Beijing - which leads one to reconsider why exactly China wants to keep Tibet under its overwhelming grip. It could not be that Beijing fears irredentist movements in parts of the expanse of the People's Republic, which is the reason why conservatives in India and Pakistan refuse to consider an autonomous Jammu & Kashmir. Beijing has no such fears because its autocrats wield a fairly tight command over their realm, much more than do the rulers in Islamabad or Delhi.

Besides the simple reason of Han nationalism mixed with a generous dose of xenophobia, it becomes clear that China wants Tibet as a less-than-autonomous region so that the physical spread of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo, including the wide Changthang plateau, can be used for the future expansion of the mainland economy and population. The exploration and discovery of mineral deposits in Tibet, the railway line that has made it from

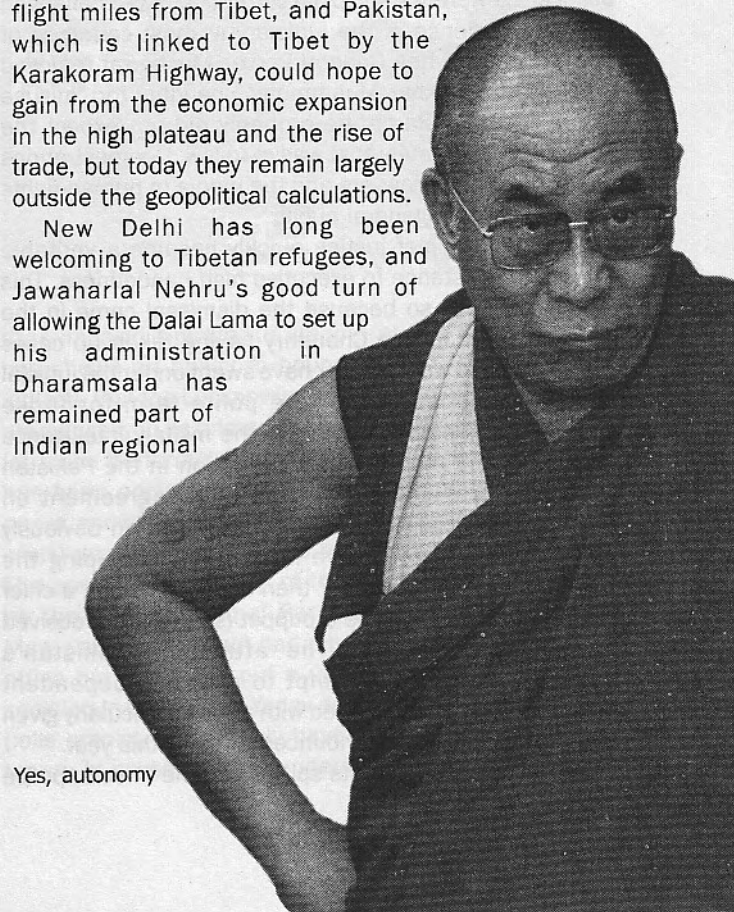
Beijing to Lhasa via Golmud and is set to snake farther south and west, can be said to be manifestations of what drives the Chinese policy for Tibet. The arrival in Tibetan towns of Han migrants is now bound to extend to the villages, even while the lived experience of decades under Chinese rule must have created its own realities for the Tibetan inhabitants.

### A return

If Beijing has successfully created a one-way street on Tibet, what is the rest of Southasia and the world to do? For that matter, what of the Dalai Lama? For the latter, a drastic possible action could be the abandonment of his Dharamsala eyrie for Lhasa - a return to the Potala palace and prayers at the Jokhang temple. There are many imponderables with such a move, and certainly it would have to be a considered action taken after hectic backdoor negotiations with Beijing. However, dramatic moves tend to create new realities. The ultimate decision would have to be taken based on two considerations: What Tenzin Gyatso feels in his innermost heart, and what the population of Tibet - four to six million, depending on your definition of 'Tibet' - would feel about this course. Would Tibetans within Tibet want the Dalai Lama back without a change in the Chinese policy on Tibet? We should be prepared to be surprised by what the answer might be.

As for the other Southasians, it is mainly India and Nepal (and, to a lesser extent, Bhutan) that have been on the Tibet-China-Southasia interface, mainly due to the advent of refugees and refugee-pilgrims from Tibet. Bangladesh, which is less than a hundred crow-flight miles from Tibet, and Pakistan, which is linked to Tibet by the Karakoram Highway, could hope to gain from the economic expansion in the high plateau and the rise of trade, but today they remain largely outside the geopolitical calculations.

New Delhi has long been welcoming to Tibetan refugees, and Jawaharlal Nehru's good turn of allowing the Dalai Lama to set up his administration in Dharamsala has remained part of Indian regional



Yes, autonomy

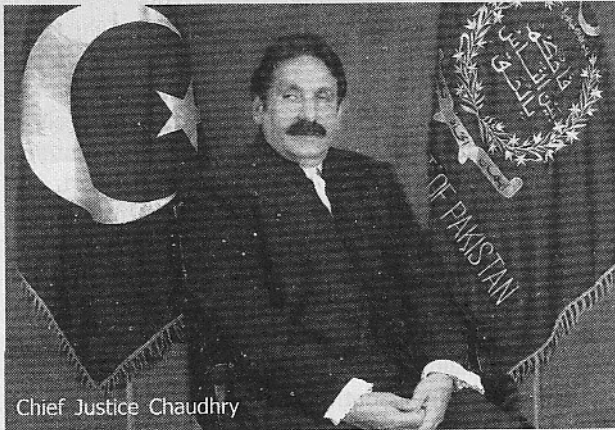


policy. This should not change, even while the world awaits evolution in the Dharamsala-Beijing theatre. As for Nepal, it is geopolitically constricted from making utterances on Tibetan affairs that might anger Beijing, but it has continued to serve as a way station for Tibetans who feel the need to visit Dharamsala, as pilgrims or as refugees. This too should not change. One can only hope that a newly democratic Nepal, as it emerges from its turmoil, would find the confidence to allow the Dalai Lama to visit the birthplace of the Sakyamuni Buddha, at Lumbini.

What will happen in Tibet will depend upon how rapidly the Chinese dragon turns democratic. By now, the realistic goal is nothing more nor less than a Tibet that is truly autonomous under Chinese suzerainty – although it is also important to deal with Tibet as a developing region in its own right. But even achieving that might be a long wait, and in the interim the only thing the Dalai Lama can do is to set his own demarche. He can either do nothing, or he can do something dramatic with its attendant risks. ▲

## REGION

### Excuse me, Milords



The tussle between the judicial, executive and legislative branches is an old one. Competing loyalties, political interference and plain corruption have challenged the independence of the judiciary in most countries of Southasia. Yet when General Pervez Musharraf removed Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry for “misuse of office” on 9 March, he probably did not expect the groundswell of protest that was to follow. Demonstrations soon spread from lawyers and the media to human-rights activists and the general public.

The ousted chief justice quickly became a veritable symbol of resistance to executive high handedness. This was particularly so because the dismissal came in the wake of Chief Justice Chaudhry having taken up cases that Islamabad would rather have swept under the judicial carpet: disappearances (the polite term for those abducted and probably killed by the military intelligence agencies), and the high-level corruption in the Pakistan Steel Mills case. There can be no disagreement on enhancing judicial accountability, but such an obviously politically motivated move is less about keeping the judiciary under the scanner than about removing a chief justice who refused to be a puppet (so goes the received wisdom in Pakistan). The attack on Pakistan's judiciary – and the attempt to control independent institutions – must be viewed with alarm, particularly given the general elections announced for later this year.

As the lawyers' protests spilled into the streets, police

barged into the Islamabad office of Geo TV, which had been airing regular coverage of the protests. There, they beat up journalists, broke windows and computers and lobbed teargas into the newsroom. Just a day before, the popular and controversial show 'Aaj Kamran Khan Ke Saath' had been banned, after it had covered the chief justice's removal and the subsequent protests. Are we expected to believe that Gen Musharraf did not order the assault (as he claims), or is the general losing his grip?

At deadline, Chief Justice Chaudhry refuses to resign, demanding that the hearing by the Supreme Judicial Council into his alleged abuse of power is conducted publicly. Even so, Justice Rana Bhagwan Das, next in line to be acting-Chief Justice, is waiting in the wings. While Das's appointment would certainly notch up the score on minority welfare, one wishes that the only Hindu judge to have risen to the Supreme Court level in Pakistan had been given the honour under less-controversial circumstances.

Such shenanigans have been witnessed elsewhere. In her drive for a compliant judiciary in the years preceding the 1975-77 Emergency, Indira Gandhi superseded senior judges and put in place her own appointees, on the plea of setting up a 'committed judiciary'. Likewise, Gen Musharraf would like others to believe that he is on a crusade for a clean judiciary – and hence the ousted Chief Justice Chaudhry. Given the high constitutional and moral authority vested in the judiciary, judges refusing to occupy positions made vacant after unfair removals of their predecessors might contribute to the independence and stature of the judiciary. A Lahore High Court judge and four other civil judges have already resigned to protest Gen Musharraf's interference. Will Justice Bhagwan Das also stand up? As we go to press, the latest indications are that he will not.

### Under the scanner

Meanwhile, the Indian Supreme Court has also been seeing its share of drama. On 16 March, with tears in his eyes and folded hands, Justice A R Lakshmanan recused himself from hearing a case pertaining to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav's disproportionate assets. This unprecedented spectacle came mere hours



after the receipt of an anonymous letter faxed to the tearful judge's residence. In choked tones, his lordship said that he was "very disturbed" over the contents of the mysterious letter, which apparently contained none-too-subtle threats. While this Caesar's-spouse approach may be laudable, it is clearly no substitute for a transparent procedure whereby a judge shows himself to be accountable to the public.

Over the past decade, initiatives such as the Committee on Judicial Accountability (COJA) have emerged to counter the alarming corruption in the Indian judiciary, as well as the misuse of powers of contempt of court and immunity. More recent moves go beyond monitoring corruption, and attempt to make the judiciary answerable to the people at large, rather than to the ruling elite. The National Convention on Judicial Reforms, held in Delhi on 10-11 March, brought together public-minded lawyers, civil-rights

activists, people's movements and consumer organisations, with a view to "reclaim the judiciary by having it restructured in accordance with the needs of the common people".

Meanwhile, across India's northern frontier, if the alleged doings of the Chief Justice of Nepal, Dilip Kumar Poudyal, are anything to go by, it is none too soon for Nepal to set in motion a similar process. Recorded phone conversations obtained by a Kathmandu newsmagazine in mid-March supplied evidence of corruption at the highest level, in a case relating to the 'fixing' of hearings for a price. As the country proceeds with demolishing old institutions of state and rebuilding more suitable ones, the judiciary too must be put under the scanner. An independent judiciary, free from executive and legislative control, is undoubtedly a prerequisite for democratic governance and maintenance of rule of law, in Nepal and elsewhere. ▲

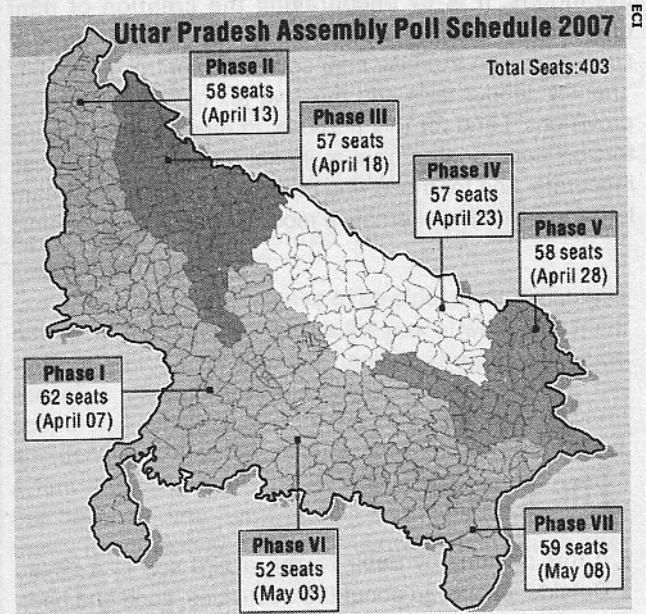
## INDIA

### The crisis of legitimacy

Across the ideological spectrum, ruling political outfits in India's north and east are in trouble. If the Congress party is struggling to recover from a string of electoral setbacks in Punjab and Uttarakhand states, the Samajwadi Party, led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, is staring at defeat in the upcoming polls in Uttar Pradesh (slated to begin the first week of April). More strikingly, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which has been in power for the last three decades in West Bengal, is facing its toughest test yet, with the controversy over the setting up of Special Economic Zones on farmland, and the latest mass killing of protestors by the state police – egged on, allegedly, by party cadre. These are disparate and seemingly unconnected events, which can be explained away as part of the rough-and-tumble nature of popular politics. But there is a common thread here, as well – the legitimacy deficit faced by political parties in India, which are increasingly out of touch with the needs of the masses.

The loss of the Congress party in the state assembly elections, party leaders claim, can be explained by widespread 'anti-incumbency' sentiment. The Congress had been in power in both Punjab and Uttarakhand for its full tenure; the party is rife with in-fighting and factionalism, which have had implications on the provision of basic services, and led to poor governance. Incumbents have more often than not lost elections in recent years due to increasing public resentment. What this trend really reflects is the increasing disillusionment with the party in power. Rising expectations from elected representatives also seem to have played a role, and the failure to meet the expectations of the populace indicates an acute crisis of 'performance legitimacy'.

This same crisis will, in all likelihood, lead to UP strongman Mulayam Singh Yadav's defeat in the upcoming polls in his state. While at the time of writing



the campaign is picking up steam – and, in the past, Yadav has shown an ability to bounce back – signs from UP indicate that the Lucknow administration has failed rather dramatically in its primary task of providing law and order, let alone performing other functions. In addition, Yadav has been accused of promoting the politician-criminal nexus, and making the state bureaucracy partisan. Several social groups within UP feel excluded from governance. The possible beneficiary of this situation is expected to be the Bhaujan Samaj Party, led by the Dalit leader Mayawati, who has not had a particularly bright record in office but is carving out a unique Brahmin-Dalit social coalition in the state. If Yadav does indeed lose, as opinion polls predict, he will only have to look back at his own tenure in government to understand why.



## Ignoring inflation

While the failure to perform needs to inspire some serious introspection within parties, there is another alarming trend currently overtaking Indian politics. Powerful political groups do not seem to have learned any lesson from the National Democratic Alliance's disastrous 'India Shining' poll plank from 2004. Despite promises to cater to the *aam aadmi* (common person), the Congress has allowed its single-minded pursuit of high growth figures to have negative implications for inflation – which has now reached a high of 6.5 percent. This is hurting the common citizen. There is no doubt that India has gained enormously from a high growth trajectory, which hopefully will be sustained. But the costs must be recognised; in the face of increasing demand, supply-side constraints have resulted in the sharp rise in the price of basic commodities. The incumbent state governments – not to mention the central government – are vulnerable to the public disenchantment linked to inflation.

But if there is one instance in which parties have gone all out to woo big business at the cost of lives and livelihoods, it is by encouraging the creation of mini enclaves – Special Economic Zones (SEZs) – where corporates can exercise near-sovereign control, and enjoy 'friendly' labour laws and massive tax cuts, among other provisions. Land for this purpose, in most cases, is being forcibly appropriated from marginal farmers and landless labourers. And for those who thought that the mainstream left would provide alternative models in such an economic

context, the CPI (M) has been in the forefront of this initiative in West Bengal.

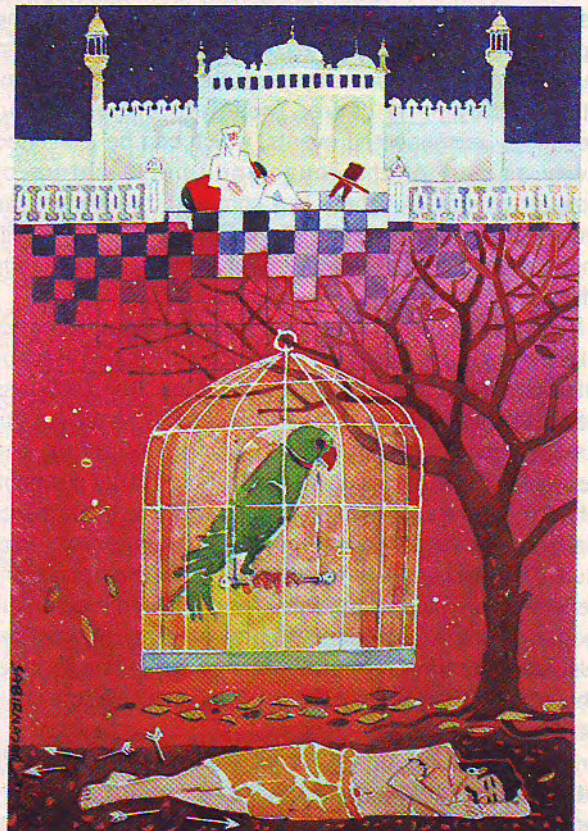
This magazine recognises the complexities involved in economic policymaking – there is a need to woo foreign and private capital, which helps in creating infrastructure and generating employment. In a competitive environment, states and countries have to offer the best possible deal to investors. But this can never be the pretext for the state to forcibly acquire land from the poor, to refuse to engage in dialogue with the discontented, to offer dismal relief and rehabilitation packages, or (if dissent grows) to permit the massacre of protestors. The Left Front government has followed exactly this course – first in Singur, and now in Nandigram, where it did not hesitate to kill the common folk. Only after large-scale opposition and national outrage has the West Bengal government agreed not to extend its SEZ plans – for the time being.

Electoral ups and downs are natural in a polity. There are certain issues that will galvanise the opposition, even in a state where there is virtual one-party dominance. In addition, state security forces will occasionally overstep their brief. But what is happening in many parts of India at present reflects the increasing disconnect between people's expectations and the performance of parties – a worrying trend in any democracy. It also shows signs of a rise in illiberal politics and a tendency of ruling parties to side with powerful vested interests, rather than to accommodate them alongside the concerns of the marginalised. ▲

## 'The Parrot'

In this painting by **Sabir Nazar**, a bird sits in a cage. Outside, people go about their activities, good and bad; their lives, pleasant and painful. They pray, they nap; sometimes they go to war. For the parrot, experience of the world is mediated by the presence of the cage: its bars are the source of the troubles with which it must contend, or against which it must rebel. Until and unless it flies, the cage is also the source of all the contentment it will know. The cage itself is suspended between the earth and the sky, seemingly between two worlds – worlds between which the parrot cannot choose. One man lies asleep on the ground beneath; another is too far away to hear the bird's calls. But the space of cage is bright, with the warm glow of possibility. The parrot can only hope for the best. ▲

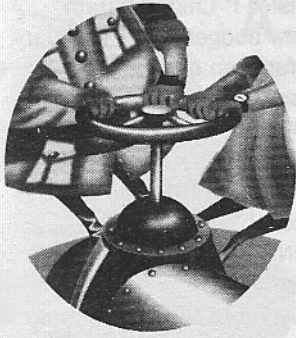
This is part of a regular series of *Himal's* editorial commentary on artwork by Sabir Nazar. Watercolour, 24" x 36"





## REGION

## Pipeline ahoy!



Sanctions are not supposed to work this way. After seemingly endless stops and starts, India, Pakistan and Iran decided during the second week of March to begin construction on the long-discussed gas pipeline between the three countries – and on a strict deadline, too. Ironically, it

was the threat of possible future US sanctions against oil companies involved with Tehran that ultimately pushed through the agreement. Construction is now slated to begin no later than September 2009.

Each country will be responsible to lay pipes in its own territory – a project that Iran has already begun, and now needs only to extend another 200 km to its eastern border. Pakistani officials say that they will be appointing private-sector contractors to put down the 655 km of pipe in Pakistani territory immediately after purchase agreements are signed in June.

The total estimated pipeline costs for each

country are: Iran, USD 4.0 billion; Pakistan, USD 2.6 billion; India USD 600 million. At the moment, involved officials are very tentatively putting an

end date for the project at around mid-2014. Better late than never, it seems the Iranian gas will flow, to energise the Southasian economy and politically stabilise the region. ▲

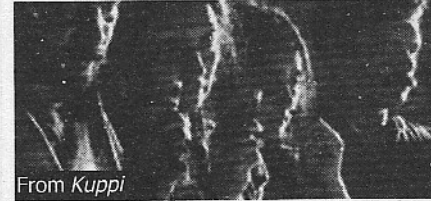
## INDIA/SRI LANKA

## Kuppi okayed

Right in time for the 16-year anniversary of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, a Tamil-language film on the event is all set for widespread release in Tamil Nadu – and has reportedly received not only the go-ahead, but also some stylistic critiques from LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Evidently a pre-release copy of *Kuppi* (which means 'cyanide') was made available to the secretive insurgent chief in his hideout. According to the film's producer, Viswas Sundar, while Prabhakaran seemed to have been "very appreciative" of the new movie, he suggested a couple of changes "to suit the sensitivities" of his cadre. For instance, when the main protagonist discusses how the LTTE *thirudinom* (stole) a government military stockpile some years ago, Prabhakaran wanted the word changed to *kaipotrinom* (seized).

*Kuppi* is actually a remake of an older film, originally in Kannada. The film's producers are now at work on a Hindi version, which they say will "include the assassination scene" – although they did not elaborate as to why the scene was not included in the Tamil version. Several additional attempts have been made in the past to release a film depicting Gandhi's 21 May 1991 assassination, but have run into longstanding legal obstacles. One of these, *Kutrapatrikai*, finally hit theatres in mid-March after 14 years of legal wrangling. ▲



From Kuppi

## REGION

## Through Bangladesh?

Just before leaving for a recent meeting of SAARC energy ministers in New Delhi, officials in Dhaka announced an abrupt about-face: they were keen to return to the negotiating table with regards to a long-proposed pipeline from offshore gas fields in Burma to India through Bangladeshi territory. Although India desperately wants to come to a deal with Burma (in fear that that gas will otherwise go to China), for the past year, Bangladesh has been pushing three preconditions to any such arrangement, including a stepdown in the trade gap between the two countries. Dhaka's position has stalled discussions, and India has been exploring more circuitous options for transporting the fuel.

The apparent change of policy was announced by Bangladeshi Interim Energy Adviser (essentially, 'Minister') Tapan Chowdhury, who said that, "There will be no conditions tagged to the pipeline." One of those conditions remains, however, as Dhaka is concurrently intensifying its appeals to Indian lawmakers to allow a power-starved Bangladesh to import hydroelectric power from Bhutan and Nepal across Indian territory.

And, with a proposal for two studies on Southasian energy trading currently in the offing – one by the Asian Development Bank and one by the SAARC organisation itself – Indian power-keepers may be more interested in hearing the Bangladeshi appeals. ▲

## PAKISTAN

## China-only zone

Following up on the bilateral free trade agreement inked last November, the Pakistani government in late February agreed to set up special economic zones (SEZs) that would accept investments only from China. Finance Ministry adviser Ashfaq H Khan said that the new deal would include a 3000-

acre parcel of land outside of Lahore, as well as a host of lucrative incentives, including five-year tax holidays for investors. Islamabad will also provide the SEZ area with water and electricity. Beijing has announced its intention to set up eight such SEZs throughout the world, and the Pakistani one will now be the first. ▲



## Settling in for resettlement



Me wanna go to Amrika!

**T**he United States government has now officially proposed to set up a so-called 'overseas processing entity' (OPE) in Kathmandu, which would begin the process of going through applications from Bhutani refugees for eventual resettlement in the US. This is the first

official movement towards resettlement in the 16 years that the roughly 106,000 Bhutani refugees have lived in UNHCR-overseen camps in southeastern Nepal.

One US embassy official in Kathmandu said that the new office would aim to process around 60,000 refugees over the next five years. This is the number that Washington DC has agreed to take in to the US, also with the hope that other countries would take in the Lhotshampa. The OPE office is to open for business in early July.

There is also speculation that the new office will be used to process applications from other refugees living in Nepal, particularly from some of the 25,000 Tibetans in the country. Last year, news broke that the US was quietly planning on resettling around 5000 Tibetans from Nepal, starting this year. ▲

### SRI LANKA

## Mihin almost off the ground

**J**ust prior to its maiden flight in early March, Sri Lanka's first budget airline (and second national carrier), Mihin Lanka, ran into technical difficulties. The airline had chartered a Fokker-27 aircraft from another private operator in Colombo to prove to regulators that it was able to utilise that type of plane for a passenger service.

Although the plan was to fly a crew and 58 guest passengers from Colombo to Trivandrum, two and a half hours later the plane was still on the ground due to unspecified problems, and officials announced that no further flight tests were planned. Once it is certified, however, the government-floated Mihin Lanka plans to tap into both the Indian and Gulf markets. At the moment, the airline does not own any plane of its own, but it will soon have a spanking new airport to fill in Hambantota in the country's south. ▲

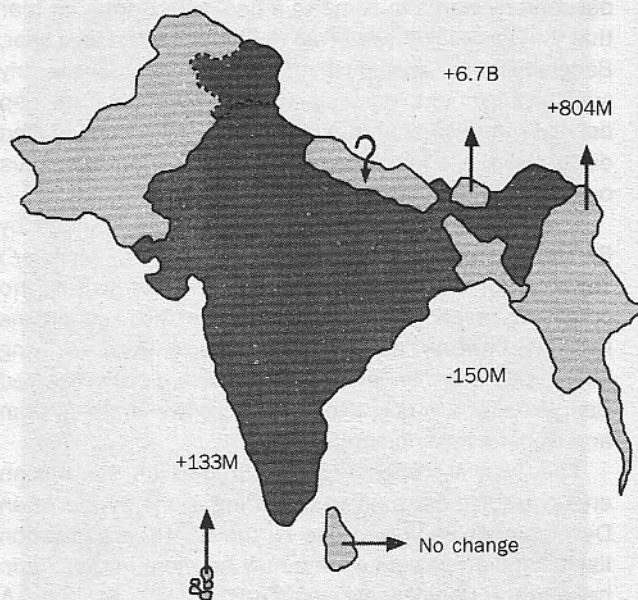
## India sets the dole

**W**hen Indian Finance Minister P Chidambaram unveiled his country's new budget on 27 February, an observer could have been forgiven for thinking he had exchanged his portfolio for Minister for Donor Assistance. For fiscal year 2007-08, Chidambaram announced that he would double India's development aid to Burma, from INR 446 million to INR 804 million. Bilateral assistance to Bangladesh, meanwhile, will plummet significantly – from INR 500 million to INR 150 million, a 70 percent drop.

Despite the recent renegotiation of the Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, Thimphu should have liked the news: New Delhi will be increasing its aid from INR 5.6 billion to INR 6.7 billion. So too should Male – aid to the Maldives is set to triple in the upcoming year from INR 44 million to INR 133 million. (Aid to Sri Lanka will remain the same in the coming year, while information for Afghanistan was unavailable.)

Meanwhile, there was some confusion over how this neighbourhood largesse would treat Nepal. Initial media reports in Kathmandu had Chidambaram cutting India's aid to Nepal from INR 2.1 billion to INR 1.4 billion. The Indian embassy in Kathmandu quickly issued a statement, however, explaining that India's assistance to Nepal is not confined to Foreign Ministry allocations, but includes a plethora of other aid mechanisms – including the promise of INR 10 billion made during Girija Prasad Koirala's June 2006 visit to New Delhi.

This is undoubtedly true, but we are still confused as to what all of the neighbourhood autocrats (Than Shwe, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, King Jigme) have done to make New Delhi so happy as to want to open the spigot all the way. ▲





## Peaceful Ocean

**A**ddressing the first Pakistani conference on the Indian Ocean, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz in early March emphasised the need to put in motion bilateral and regional joint efforts with regards to that watery expanse. In order to work against the possibility of the Indian Ocean becoming a space of competition or power-grabbing, Aziz said: "We in

Pakistan are of the view that the Indian Ocean should become a zone of peace and cooperation."

The conference, held at Bahria University in Karachi, was dubbed 'Maritime Threats and Opportunities in the 21st century: A global perspective on the Indian Ocean'. Aziz noted that the body of water could well be considered the most important of the world's oceans, in that it connects the traditional 'seven seas', as well as four of the most important waterways – the Suez Canal, and the straits of Malacca, Hormuz and Mandeb.

Meanwhile, within days after Aziz made his remarks, warships from 27 navies around the world arrived in the Karachi port to participate in the AMAN 07, a joint training exercise in the North Arabian Sea organised by the Pakistan Navy. Hey, weren't we talking zones of peace here? ▲

### BURMA/INDIA

## Antsy traders

**A** Burmese trade delegation headed across the border into India recently, making the first such visit in the dozen years of bilateral trade between the two countries. Indian trade delegations have made several trips into Burma in recent times. The impetus for the westward trip was the continually declining levels of crossborder trade through Moreh, in Manipur – the only official trade point currently open for international trade.

The secretary of the Union of Myanmar Border

Traders Chamber of Commerce, U Aye Ko, noted that the environment in Moreh itself has been increasingly less conducive to traders, with 76 days of 'disruption' in the city between April 2006 and January 2007 disallowing trade of any kind. He also noted that such a situation would only increase traders' desires to set up shop elsewhere – particularly once planned trading centres in Mizoram and Nagaland come into being. ▲

### INDIA/PAKISTAN

## No 'joint management'

**I**n a not unforeseen rejection, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee recently definitively stated that Pervez Musharraf's proposal of 'joint management' of Kashmir by India and Pakistan "cannot be the basis of a settlement of the issue of Jammu & Kashmir". Mukherjee delivered the pronouncement in response to a question in the Rajya Sabha, stating that such an option was not workable because J & K constitutes an 'integral' part of India.   
General Musharraf

had earlier emphasised his personal desire to see an end to the conflict over Kashmir, and proposed a four-point proposal that could make it acceptable to the Islamabad establishment – including the joint Indo-Pakistani management of Kashmir. Although the proposal was lauded at the time as indicative of a potential sea change in Islamabad, most observers warned that New Delhi would have a hard time accepting the idea. Well, it has come to pass. ▲

### INDIA/TIBET

## Parliamentary support

**F**or the first time, members of Parliament from New Delhi attended the annual 10 March Uprising Day, held in Dharamsala. It was on that date in 1959 that thousands of Tibetans

rose up against Chinese security forces, after which tens of thousands died at the hands of the People's Liberation Army.

The members of a new all-party parliamentary forum on Tibet also pledged to push for a resolution that would press for New Delhi's official commitment to "initiate talks and engage with China" to address the demands of the Tibetan refugee community in India. The move seems to be the result of a string of stepped-up actions by pro-Tibetan activists following last November's visit by President Hu Jintao to India. During that trip, Manmohan Singh's administration reiterated its view that Tibet was a "part of China" – a policy change first put forth in 2003 following Beijing's recognition of Sikkim as a part of India. ▲

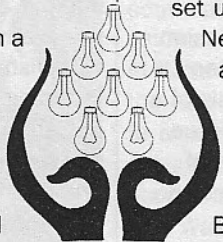


LOBSANG WANGYAL



## Ringing the region

Representatives attending the second SAARC Energy Ministers Forum in Delhi on 7 March approved an Indian proposal that would create a regional 'energy ring'. Such a plan would mean dramatically stepping up the establishment of crossborder and transnational transmission lines, with an eye towards increasing bilateral and multilateral cooperation on trading electricity and petroleum energy and products.



Addressing the opening of the meet, Indian Power Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde noted that north-south crossborder connections have been set up between India, Nepal and Bhutan, and that technical studies are currently in the offing to extend the grid to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The ministers agreed to commission the Asian Development Bank to do a feasibility study for a "common energy grid", for which USD 1 million has been earmarked. ▲

BANGLADESH/INDIA

## The ULFA bankroll

According to a report released in late February by the US think tank Strategic Foresight Group, the separatist United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is financially supporting political contenders in Bangladesh's temporarily suspended national elections. The report alleges that roughly USD 6 million – part of the estimated USD 100 million fortune in the control of ULFA's chief, Paresh Barua – is being used to bankroll at least



Barua

15 candidates, belonging to both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

Strategic Foresight researchers say that the move is an attempt on the part of ULFA to "hedge its bets" regarding the eventual election's impact on its business and militancy operations. "As long as ULFA can continue funding the appropriate candidates, it can ensure that the Bangladesh government will resist caving in to Indian demands to crack down on the militant group," the report suggests.

Barua is alleged to control extensive business operations throughout Southasia and the Gulf, including hotels, stores, factories, investment firms and driving schools. ▲

## Rally for regionalism

The first SAARC Car Rally kicked off on 15 March from Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh. The rally will cover a distance of 8000 km across seven countries and will conclude – hold your breath – in the Maldives exactly a month later.

Bhutan Foreign Secretary Yeshey Dorji, at a late-February inauguration of the event, clarified that the race was not a competitive one. Rather, he said, the rally's objective was to strengthen people-to-people contact; promote goodwill; identify the need to improve regional transport, road infrastructure and connectivity; and encourage intra-SAARC trade and economic cooperation. Around 120 participants in 30 vehicles provided by the Indian government are taking part in the event.



NEW NATION

A significant portion of the trip will actually be by boat – the jeeps have to make it to Male, where they are sure to create the greatest traffic jam the city has ever seen in its handful of kilometres of roads. ▲

REGION

## Flag follows trade

On 18 February, at the end of the second SAARC Business Leaders Conclave, regional leaders agreed on the so-called Mumbai Declaration, which states that SAARC countries must implement a 13-point policy reform agenda to raise intra-regional trade to USD 20 billion by 2010.

In addition to resolving to build new infrastructure at land border ports between all countries, the declaration asks Southasian capitals to implement the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA, which came into effect in July 2006), reduce the number of items on the

various 'sensitive lists' and remove non-trade barriers, while regularising and liberalising trade in services.

Member countries were also urged to promote energy trade and cooperation, adopt an 'open-sky policy' to improve connectivity between all capitals and major cities, facilitate tariffs and customs procedures, and reduce the cost of doing business in Southasia. Finally, the declaration suggests that, in order to simplify migration within the region, simple and long-term multiple visas must be issued to businesspeople and tourists. ▲



## Nepali trade hubs

As part of an INR 3.2 billion project to enhance the efficiency of trade across the India-Nepal border, New Delhi has decided to invest INR 1.2 billion in the development of Nepal's trade infrastructure. While the construction of facilities at four border points – Raxaul and Jogbani in Bihar, Sunauli and Rupaidiha/Nepalgarj Road – has already begun, a formal inauguration of the scheme will take place only when Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh visits Nepal. A recent planned visit by Ramesh to the northern neighbour was cancelled due to unrest in Nepal's southern regions.

Ramesh said that the new facilities "would house all regulatory agencies, like immigration, customs, border security, together with support facilities like parking, warehousing, banking and hotels in a single complex equipped with modern amenities." Altogether, as part of India's larger scheme to upgrade border infrastructure, 13 points along India's border with Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma are said to be in the offing, amounting to a total estimated cost of INR 8.5 billion. **Δ**

### REGION

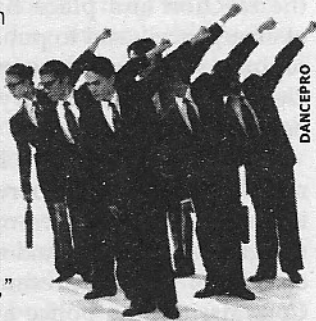
## Businessman blues

Despite the much ballyhooed economic reforms in India and Pakistan, a recent World Bank study warned that Southasia as a whole and India in particular remain weak in eliminating obstacles to business growth and job creation. The worldwide study used indicators such as ease over starting or closing businesses, dealing with licenses, employing workers, paying taxes, getting credit and enforcing contracts.

At the 134th spot, India was above only Bhutan and Afghanistan in Southasia, and was significantly lower than both Pakistan (74) and China (93). Sri Lanka (89) narrowly trailed Bangladesh (88), while Nepal (100), Bhutan (138) and Afghanistan (162) rounded off the Southasian list.

Caralee McLiesh, the study's principle author, put down India's poor showing partly to the country's massive populace. With a billion-plus population and a work force of 458 million, McLiesh said, India has only eight million workers with formal jobs in the private sector, and an alarmingly large section still lacking worker rights, protections and benefits.

Yet five rounds of formal reforms in India and two in Pakistan have succeeded in reducing the time, cost and difficulty for businesses to comply with legal and administrative requirements. "India and Pakistan are reforming very aggressively in many areas that we measure in doing business," McLiesh conceded. **Δ**

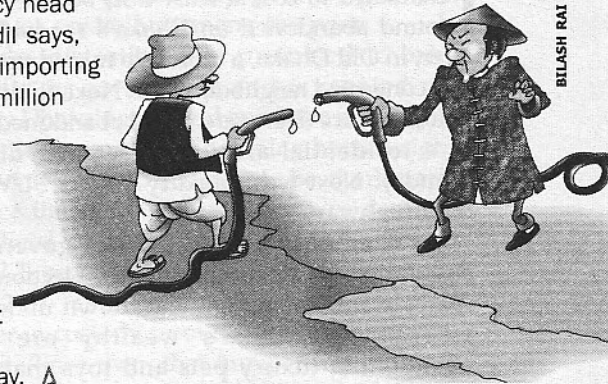


## Gas-guzzling competition

The Indian government recently moved to set up a cabinet-level panel on energy and energy security. The new body will be tasked specifically with countering Beijing's use of various types of aid to convince foreign governments, mostly in Africa and Latin America, to award it rights to offshore oil fields.

Energy-crunched India currently imports 75 percent of its petroleum usage, and many policymakers are worried that such continued dependence, coupled with China's increasingly aggressive manoeuvring, will have a drastic impact on India's long-term economic and military interests.

India's oil usage is estimated at 115 million tonnes for 2006-07, when 104 million tonnes will be imported; this use is calculated to rise roughly four percent per year in the foreseeable future. By 2030, International Energy Agency head Claude Mandil says, India will be importing around five million barrels of oil per day; at that time, China will be importing more than twice that, at around 12 million per day. **Δ**



### NEPAL/BHUTAN

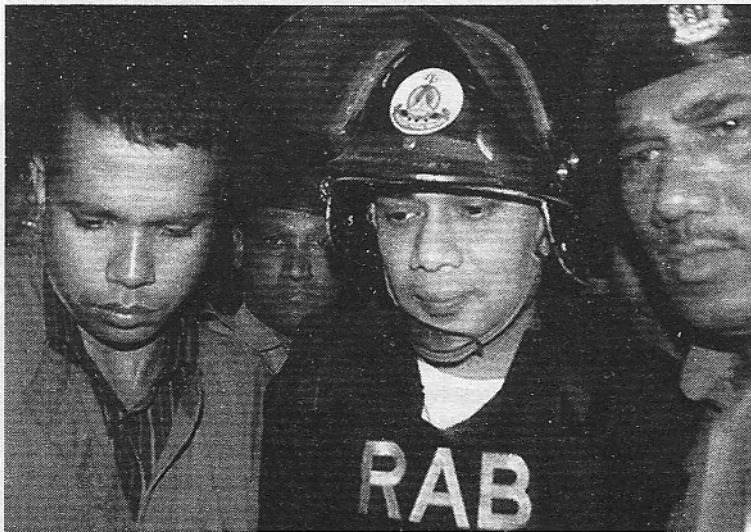
## Resource clash

For the first time in more than a decade and a half, Bhutani refugees housed in several UNHCR-overseen camps in southeastern Nepal recently clashed with locals. The confrontation took place near the Sanischare refugee camp, when Nepalis from the area attempted to stop refugees from collecting firewood in a nearby forest. During the skirmish, one refugee was killed and several more were wounded. Local communities subsequently instituted an 'indefinite' strike, calling on

authorities to close down the camp. Around 16,000 refugees live at Sanischare alone.

Refugee leaders claim that the current trouble began in January 2006, when the UN's refugee agency decided to eliminate longstanding rations of kerosene to the camp residents. Although cheaper charcoal briquettes were substituted for the gas, many refugees have said that the allotment is not enough, and that they have been forced to scavenge firewood from the surrounding area. **Δ**





In February, three Hummers – US-made luxury SUVs estimated to cost at least USD 500,000 each – were found abandoned on Dhaka's roadsides. A week later, in Old Dhaka, a crocodile turned up in the heart of a congested neighbourhood. Next, five pythons and a flock of rare deer were found abandoned; the snakes in a residential area, the deer in a disused iron foundry. Next was a luxury Toyota SUV, discarded on a highway.

As a military-backed interim government that suspended Bangladesh's January elections mounts a massive anti-corruption crackdown under a state of emergency, Dhaka's wealthy are feverishly abandoning luxury pets and toys that were once symbols of their power and opulence. By the third week of March, night raids led by the army had netted over 160 top politicians, former ministers and businessmen; their driveways and weekend retreats have so far given up a cheetah, hundreds of deer, peacocks, another clutch of Hummers and other luxury 4x4s, and even a late-model Porsche Cayenne SUV. In mid-March the interim government froze 53 bank accounts, mostly belonging to politicians, with collective funds worth a staggering USD 377 million. For the Bangladesh that lives on the other side of town – nearly half of whom make less than a dollar a day – these discoveries came as a rare window into the lives of those who have been governing them.

At the heart of the corruption that is being uncovered is Tarique Rahman, son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Over the past five years, Rahman has become an emblem of plunder and cronyism in the public eye. He earned the nickname of 'Mr Ten Percent' for his alleged cut in almost every big business deal that his mother's regime signed, and her tenure marked a meteoric rise for his business clique. Following his dramatic 8 March arrest (*see image*), Dhaka's national media reported that Rahman may not only have squirreled away as much as USD 230 million to Malaysian bank accounts – which

## Dhaka's purge

Corruption purges, high-level arrests, an unelected military government promising democracy – bizarre events are afoot in Bangladesh.

BY MAHTAB HAIDER

Kuala Lumpur has reportedly frozen – but also that his investments run as far afield as South Africa. Among other things, his closest business associates are accused of selling millions of dollars worth of overpriced electric poles to a rural electrification board in Bangladesh, which should have spent that money setting up power plants.

When the current 'interim' regime swept into power on 11 January, it did so riding on the coattails of public outrage over the crude power struggle between the two major political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In the first week of January, Bangladesh was caught in the grips of pre-electoral violence that left over 30 dead; at that point, the League was boycotting the polls slated for 22 January, accusing the BNP of having rigged the voter rolls. Though the army had been called out to aid the civilian administration in maintaining law and order, there is little doubt that a bloodbath would have ensued had the polls gone ahead.

It was against this backdrop that the United Nations, worried about the possibility of a sham election, sent an uncharacteristic letter to the Bangladesh military chief, Lieutenant General Moeen U Ahmed, warning him that he would seriously risk his forces' peacekeeping contracts with the UN if he agreed to provide security for the elections. The Bangladesh Army contributes over 10,000 peacekeepers to the UN – more than any other country in the world – and rakes in a massive USD 300 million a year in peacekeeping contracts. It was no surprise, then, that by the evening of 11 January, Lt Gen Ahmed had ordered President Iajuddin Ahmed to cancel the election and place Bangladesh under a state of emergency – and to put in place a military-backed regime, which subsequently promised a massive cleanup of the country's politics before any new elections.

In its first two months in power, the new regime restricted its anti-corruption crusade to the investigation of businessmen and politicians at the margins of the BNP's and the Awami League's inner coterie of power. It reshuffled the Anti-Corruption Commission, the police and the bureaucracy, and



sought to ensure that there was proper distance between the judiciary branch and the executive. Then, on 8 March, the generals ended weeks of speculation by arresting Tarique Rahman and a handful of senior leaders of both parties. As Rahman faces trial in an extortion case that could see him serve up to five years in prison, Dhaka is in an excited state. Through this one major arrest, the interim government has earned a groundswell of support from the capital's elite, which had had a ringside seat to follow the abuse of power under both the League and the BNP.

## Elite purging elite

But the optimism among the elite may be misplaced. With Tarique Rahman's arrest, the generals have clearly shown how far they are ready to go to see their goals met. Immediately following Rahman's detainment, they formally abandoned the pretence of ruling the country from the shadows, by activating the powerful National Security Council, which features the three chiefs of staff of the army, though it is headed by a civilian. While the jurisdiction of the council is yet to be announced, its creation is clearly a move to give a formal framework to the control the military wields over the interim government.

There are also rumours that the council will remain powerful even after the political process is eventually restored. The generals know too well that a return to democratic process anytime soon will undoubtedly result in reprisals against those who have headed the ongoing cleanup, whereas a permanently powerful council would help against any future backlash. As the military flexes its muscle, even the foreign diplomats who had helped to engineer the gentrified coup of 11 January are realising that orchestrating a return to the barracks may be more difficult. With the government still silent on a new date for elections, the word on the street is that they may not take place until 2009. The fact that this new regime enjoys the unequivocal support of certain sections of the media and civil society is ample proof that its mandate is that of one elite purging another.

Bangladesh's economy is facing a damaging slowdown. There might have been expectations of an economic boom related to the crackdown, but in fact, as the newly empowered Anti-Corruption Commission embarks on its crusade – equipped with the power to arrest anyone, without need for a warrant – a culture of fear is spreading through the business community. Amidst rumours of widespread capital flight, imports are down by millions of dollars, and the vibrant real-estate sector is faced with a crash because no one is willing to write a large cheque for fear of being investigated over the source of the funds. In the last week of March, prominent business leaders called for the interim government to lift the state of emergency as early as possible, even though the country's apex business body, the Federation of

Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, had publicly solicited the emergency during the political strife of late December.

The serial insensitivity that is the hallmark of middle-class-bodied autocracies is also beginning to show itself. Since 11 January, army-led forces have demolished hundreds of thousands of shanties across Dhaka and its suburbs, suddenly making homeless more than 50,000 people. The government has also evicted hundreds of thousands of street-side hawkers. In their stead, the administration has offered the notion of a weekend market, which has failed to take off; this has inevitably bit into the livelihoods of millions of ordinary Bangladeshis. None of this bodes well for a regime that has failed to stop the rising prices of essential commodities. The prices of most essential foods had risen massively since the last elected government relinquished power in October 2006 – in some cases topping 70 percent. The current regime's inability to rein in prices may go a long way in undermining its credibility among the poor.

For an administration that promised to bring accountability to governance and is fronted and cheered on by Dhaka's great and good, the new regime has all too quickly amassed a damning human-rights record. Not only have 95,000 people been arbitrarily arrested since the state of emergency was declared, but extra-judicial killings in custody are a continuous feature. The US-based Human Rights Watch has noted that from 12-21 January, security forces killed 19 people, either in custody from torture or in 'crossfire' during arrest. Since then, that number has grown to 50, without security forces being held accountable for even a single death.

Ultimately, none of these failings will come back to haunt this current government as much as its own lack of constitutional legitimacy. For a regime that has mandated itself to hold free and fair elections, such a prospect could become a liability. All the reforms that the interim administration institutes, all the actions it takes – including the well-intentioned ones – will still require a constitutional amendment in order to attain retrospective legality when the political process is restored. In fact, this government's own legality hinges on that same eventual amendment, which will have to be brought in by the next Parliament with a two-thirds majority vote in its favour.

Awami League supremo Sheikh Hasina recently promised to oblige this interim government with such a constitutional amendment if her party were voted to power, but there is no guarantee that she will hold the two-thirds majority in Parliament required to do so. If there is such a guarantee, however, with one single act, this government will have undone all the good it had intended to do when it seized power. For how can one rigged election be any better than another?



## Only their parents' home

Sri Lanka's new refugee policy only deals with Sri Lanka's internally displaced, and not the refugees in Tamil Nadu. But what if the latter don't want to return home?

BY DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI



NATHAN G

The Colombo government's new initiative to resettle displaced Sri Lankans has not only angered many of the people it is targeted to serve, but also fails to address the concerns of over 100,000 refugees who live in Tamil Nadu. On 16 March, international watchdog Human Rights Watch claimed that authorities were using "threats and intimidation" to force Sri Lankans who had fled because of recent fighting to return to their homes, although this has been widely disputed. According to UNHCR, there are more than 130,000 displaced people from within the northeastern district of Batticaloa alone – 40,000 of whom had fled during the second week of March. Nevertheless, by mid-March 800 people are reported to have been sent back to Batticaloa, as part of the government's plan to 'return' 2800 people back home.

Even as the internally displaced are being relocated, the new scheme, the brainchild of Abdul Risath Bathiyutheen, the Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, does nothing to address the situations of Sri Lankans who have fled to Tamil Nadu. This silence is a clear departure from the tone set by a 2002 government initiative, which sought to repatriate individuals living in the more than 130 camps in the Indian state. Some say that such an initiative is doubly important in the current context, with more than 18,000 Sri Lankans having fled to Tamil Nadu since the outbreak of the war in July last year. The refugee camps are now bursting beyond capacity.

If there is reluctance on the part of the Sri Lankan government to offer repatriation options to its refugees in Tamil Nadu, recent times have also seen a greater ambivalence within the refugee community as to how desirable it would be to cross back over the Palk Strait. Among the refugees now living in temporary camps within Sri Lanka, too, few seem to like the idea of repatriation. The position of the displaced on both

sides of the strait is encapsulated in the views of 65-year-old Yogeshwari Kanakapillai, who lives in a transient camp in eastern Batticaloa: "We made this camp our home nearly two decades ago. Our children braved the seas to seek refuge in Tamil Nadu. If they return, they will be consumed by the violence here."

At least a quarter of those displaced from the northeastern provinces of Sri Lanka have relatives or friends living in South Indian refugee camps. "We know the difficulties they have," said one internally displaced woman, referring to her sons who fled the island years ago. "They cannot find employment. They live in poverty. Education for the young is a problem. But they have one guarantee which we do not have – that they will not fall victim to shell attacks and turn to ashes from aerial bombing."

The sentiment among many in the older generation of displaced within Sri Lanka is that, despite the harassment and the lack of options they must face, their children and relatives are better off in the relative safety of the South Indian camps. This is in direct contrast to the refugees own sentiments as expressed as recently as 2002, when a majority of those living in Tamil Nadu volunteered to repatriate under a government scheme. Then, 6000 had returned to Sri Lanka. "That was in the afterglow of the Ceasefire Agreement," says R Sampanthan, the parliamentary group leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). "There was so much hope then. The conditions are very different now."

### Married and settled here

For most internally displaced, the resettlement plan introduced in March is a case of too little too late. "In fact, nearly a quarter-century late," points out Sampanthan's fellow TNA parliamentarian Suresh Premachandran, "And it still excludes the displaced



living in Tamil Nadu. One has to accept that they are a forgotten community. Resettlement to the government means resettling the internally displaced. It does not address the needs of Tamils who fled this island fearing for their lives since 1983 – and who continue to flee.”

But would an approach such as that which the Colombo government is currently using in the northeast really help the refugees in Tamil Nadu? M Rasamma, a mother who is living in a transit camp in Anuradhapura, in the northwest of the island, says no. “Tell us why our children have to come back here?” she demands. “What do they have here except renewed war and temporary shelter?”

Colombo has no answers to such questions. For a state that has neither long- or short-term plans to address the refugee question, Sri Lanka will have fresh problems if the displaced refuse to repatriate under a future scheme. While Minister Bathiyutheen says he wants to introduce a repatriation scheme at a “future date”, problems will undoubtedly arise if an eventual plan is put into action with Indian assistance at a time when refugees are still reluctant to leave. In the past, any effort to repatriate refugees in Tamil Nadu has been viewed either with suspicion or as an infringement of their right to choice. Perhaps the larger issue is that, having been left in limbo for up to two decades, these refugees have now come to consider Tamil Nadu their permanent home.

“Our children do not know Sri Lanka,” says Sugunan Kishor, a Jaffna Tamil living in a camp just outside Madras. “They identify themselves with Tamil Nadu. Some are married and settled there. To them, Sri Lanka is only their parents’ home and nothing more. We were hopeful of returning after 2002. But with the increased violence, we have no desire now to return.” Kishor once fished for a living, and he recalls with sadness how his once-fervent wish to “return home” has died: “I have my parents living in the northern district of Mullativu. I will never be reunited with them.”

For Vellamma Kadirsamy, a 56-year-old woman who has lived in the same camp as Kishor for several years, the lack of government efforts to repatriate, coupled with the now-intensified war, signifies a complete separation in the minds of many refugees. “Any hope of returning home to Sri Lanka is now over. We have nothing to go there for,” she says. “Our children are here. Some members of our families living there warn us against our return.”

Suresh Premachandran agrees. “Most refugee children in Tamil Nadu now have access to education. Though certainly our conditions of living need to be improved, some kind of continuity of life happens there. Why should they upset everything and return to this simmering volcano?” he asks. LTTE spokesman Daya Master says he understands these feelings. Following the 2002 truce, the LTTE requested the

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for help in repatriating the refugees living in Tamil Nadu back in Sri Lanka. “But now the conditions are different,” Master notes. “This is war zone, where they would be victimised yet again. It is not a question of sentiment anymore, but about human safety.”

Resettlement Minister Bathiyutheen stresses that though the refugees living in Tamil Nadu are not addressed under his new scheme, they are a “high priority”. The minister’s new plan, which seeks to establish a National Resettlement Authority, concentrates only on the internally displaced. “We are about to commence drafting a national policy for resettlement which will address many facets of the question of displacement. There are the war displaced and those displaced due to natural disasters. The refugees in South India are a different category, and need to be addressed separately.” Badiudeen has given himself a target of two years to resettle half the island’s displaced. As for the National Resettlement Authority, it is yet to start on the formulation of a resettlement policy, a policy which will categorically not address the needs of the refugees in South India.

## Hour of need

While Colombo has been unsure about what to do with the Tamil Nadu refugees, India has done little better. The refugees have long been a major political issue for Madras politicians, with which to criticise both Colombo and New Delhi. The former is pilloried for its approach to the ethnic conflict and its lack of recognition of Tamil rights; the latter, for its lack of a coherent policy, even as great numbers of Sri Lankan refugees continue to arrive on South Indian shores.

Official Indian estimates claim that besides those Sri Lankans living in the designated refugee camps, 25,000 or more live outside. Besides these, there are also around 2000 undocumented Sri Lankan migrants detained in ‘special’ camps, who are liable for prosecution under Indian migration and anti-terrorism laws. In March, the Tamil Nadu police finally took steps to issue identity cards to Sri Lankan refugees who have been living in camps for more than 12 years.

New Delhi’s approach to the matter is straightforward, says Nagma M Mallick, an Indian diplomat in Colombo. India has given Sri Lankan refugees shelter on humanitarian grounds. “What better policy is there than that?” Mallick asks. “They are not citizens of India, but refugees. In their hour of need, India has given them a home – that’s all.”

Clearly, however, that is not all, at least as far as the Colombo government and the refugees themselves are currently concerned. As Vellamma Kadirsamy notes: “Sri Lanka is only a memory for most refugees. Whether they feel connected or not, it is a home they have no wish to return to, not even for nostalgic reasons.” When and if the time comes, it may take some effort to convince them otherwise. ▲



# President under fire

The days are getting more difficult for Mahinda Rajapakse, as allegations swirl of pre-election deals with the LTTE, and human-rights violations mount.

BY ARJUNA RANAWANA

It is never easy being Sri Lanka's president. The island's chief executive has to deal with a seemingly intractable civil war, a faltering foreign-aid-dependent economy and a crumbling infrastructure. It is even more difficult being Mahinda Rajapakse these days. The rural politician, who became a human-rights activist and trade unionist on his way to becoming the most powerful person in the country, now spends time behind an extraordinary wall of security. Roads in Colombo are closed for hours when he ventures out of 'Temple Trees', his well-guarded official residence. Heavily armed commandos line the roads as his convoy speeds past, guards anxiously motioning away passers-by. While none of this is particularly unusual for a Sri Lankan president, just over a year after he took office President Rajapakse is looking particularly besieged for other reasons.

The most prominent recent furore has been over whether President Rajapakse cut a deal with the LTTE during the 2005 presidential elections to block Tamil votes for his opponent, Ranil Wickremasinghe. A recently sacked minister from his cabinet, Sripathi Sooriarachchi, said in March that he had been present at a meeting between the president's brother Basil and Tamil Tiger representatives when the alleged deal had been discussed. Sooriarachchi claims that he walked out of the meeting because he "did not agree with what was being said". (In February, Sooriarachchi was sacked along with former Foreign and Ports and

Aviation Minister Mangala Samaraweera, after they publicly opposed President Rajapakse over a cabinet reshuffle during which Samaraweera was demoted. Samaraweera claims he lost his job because he raised concerns over human-rights violations and the growing power of Rajapakse's brothers in government.)

As with previous elections, the central issue in the 2005 poll had been the on-going civil war. At that time, Rajapakse had campaigned on a hard-line platform with the backing of the Sinhala-nationalist parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). Both of these parties oppose the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement, which Rajapakse's main rival, Ranil Wickremasinghe, signed with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. As a result of this dynamic, President Rajapakse had attracted a significant number of votes from the Sinhala-dominated south. Wickremasinghe had then pledged to carry on with the peace process he had begun, and expected heavy Tamil support.

Rajapakse, who was then prime minister, won the presidential elections by a margin of less than 181,000 out of a total 9.7 million voters. In line with Sooriarachchi's allegations, election observers at the time noted that hundreds of thousands of Tamil voters did not come to polling stations because the LTTE called for – and violently enforced – an election boycott. The chief of a European Union election observer mission noted: "In the areas which the LTTE either controlled or exercised influence, there was little tangible evidence to show that an

election process had actually taken place. Political campaigning was nonexistent, and voters were prevented from exercising their franchise because of an enforced boycott by the LTTE and its proxies."

As a result, the number of voters who turned out in the Tamil-dominated Jaffna District, for instance, was abysmal. Out of around 650,000 eligible voters on the peninsula, less than 10,000 voted – 71 percent of whom chose Wickremasinghe, compared to the 25 percent of votes that went to Rajapakse. The former's supporters continue to contend that if Jaffna and other Tamil-dominated areas had been allowed to vote freely, Wickremasinghe would have won the presidency.

For his part, Wickremasinghe has revealed that his party, the United National Party (UNP), had indeed been in negotiations with the LTTE on the eve of the 2005 elections. He says that a UNP emissary met Tamil Tiger representatives and "urged them to respect democracy and allow the people of the north and east to vote freely". Wickremasinghe says the LTTE wanted guarantees that he would support an interim self-governing authority in the north dominated by the LTTE; when he refused to do so, he says, negotiations broke down.

## Trouble brewing

Although President Rajapakse's



Sooriarachchi

DUSHYANTHINI KANAGASABAPATHIPILLAI



government spokesmen have denied that any pre-election meeting took place, the president himself has remained silent on the matter. Wickremasinghe, who now heads the opposition, has directly challenged the president to prove that the new allegations are untrue, noting that "the legitimacy of the outcome of the [2005] elections is otherwise in doubt." Sooriyarachchi has also asked for a Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate his allegations, a move backed by Wickremasinghe's parliamentary group. Currently, the JVP, the other major party in Parliament, has yet to take a side on the issue.

The government's reaction has come through Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake. "There was no such pact with the LTTE," he has insisted, "so there is nothing to reveal and nothing to investigate." Media Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa says that while his - and Rajapakse's - Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) has won the most votes during previous presidential elections in Jaffna, this time around those who voted did so for Wickremasinghe. The boycott, he contends, therefore hurt Rajapakse, and "this proves there was no pact with the LTTE."

At the moment, political analyst Jayadeva Uyangoda does not see a serious crisis developing for President Rajapakse out of these allegations. "Most of the major

political parties have cut deals with the LTTE before elections from the 1990s onwards," he notes. Nonetheless, he believes Rajapakse and the government are "slightly shaken" because of the resulting uncertainty. "The president expected monolithic support from [the SLFP]. That has changed because there appears to be a realignment of the forces that actually brought him to power." While at deadline an official probe has yet to be appointed, if the allegations are found to be true, there is every reason to assume that they will spell trouble for the current Colombo administration.

Uyangoda says that the larger issue right now is the developing crisis over human-rights violations. Since Rajapakse came to power there has been an escalation of violence, with attacks and counterattacks by both the military and the LTTE leaving the Ceasefire Agreement in shreds. Government forces have made significant progress in occupying areas previously held by the Tamil Tigers, particularly in the eastern districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Buoyed by these successes, the military has indicated it will go deeper into LTTE-controlled areas in the near future. Pro-government commentators justify such action by saying that, because the LTTE is "irredeemably militaristic, it needs to be neutralised militarily."

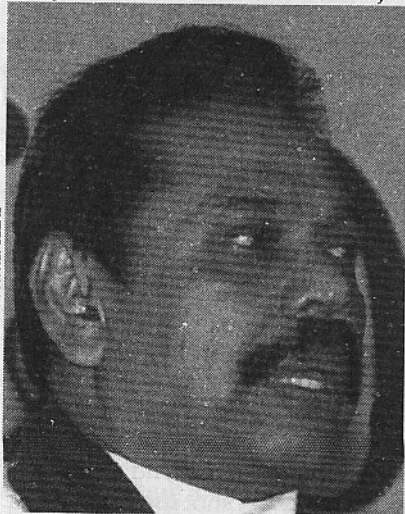
But these military successes have come at a cost. More than 4000 civilians, military personnel and LTTE cadres have died since serious hostilities resumed in November. In addition, around 200,000 civilians living in the midst of the current operations have been displaced, adding to the million or so already without homes because of the conflict and the tsunami of December 2004.

The fighting and its consequences have prompted international concern over human-rights violations. The United States, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, among the principle

donors to Sri Lanka, have expressed alarm over a recent spate of abductions and disappearances, particularly of Tamils living in the government-administered regions of the country. The country's Human Rights Commission says that from January through early March, its office has received complaints of nearly 100 abductions taking place in Colombo, Batticaloa and Jaffna; such statistics have been criticised, however, for not including abductions from within LTTE territory, which rights groups say are significantly higher. On 7 March, Defence Affairs spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said that the government has arrested at least 20 security personnel, some of whom "may be involved in abductions and killings and disappearances". In mid-March it was also announced that the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture and the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights would both visit Sri Lanka in the coming months.

Still, President Rajapakse's regime is not about to collapse. The military victories against the LTTE have been well received by his core electorate in the Sinhala community, and recent opinion polls have found that his support base remains strong. Indeed, after several smaller political parties and an 18-member group of MPs from Wickremasinghe's party joined his government in February, President Rajapakse's parliamentary majority is for the moment relatively ironclad.

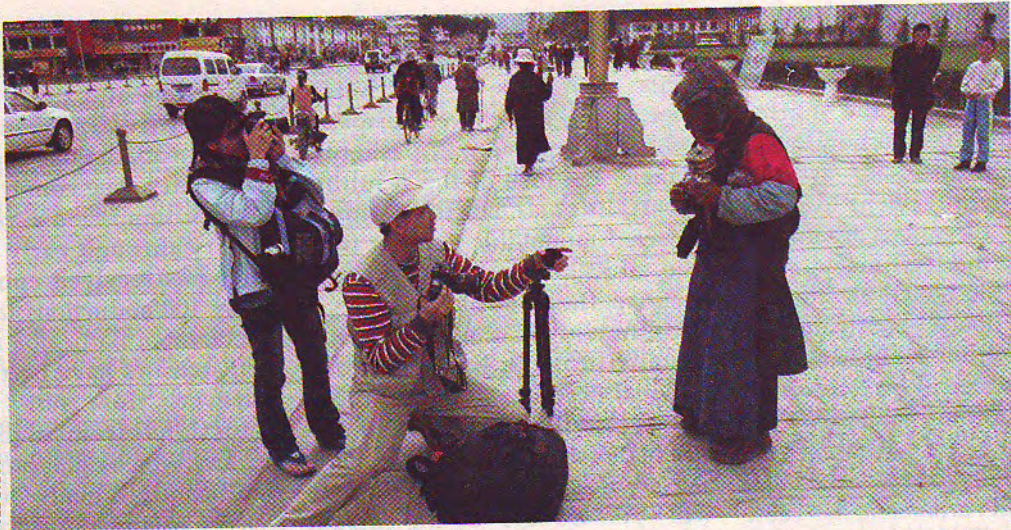
One particular thorn remaining in the president's side, however, is Mangala Samaraweera, the former minister. Currently, his supporters are canvassing MPs to form a group that would push for him to become head of the largest parliamentary group (likely to comprise of breakaway factions from the SLFP and several smaller parties), and thus make him prime minister. If Wickremasinghe stays neutral, President Rajapakse could end up with a hostile Parliament, quickly making him a weak president. ▲



The president

DUSHYANTHINI KANAGASABAPATHIPILLAI





VIDURA JANG BAHADUR

## The future of Tibetan discontent

After six decades of domination by the Chinese state, the people of Tibet continue to lack the most basic of requirements: security, health and contentment. Despite Beijing's hopes, even without the Dalai Lama's leadership the Tibet issue will remain alive so long as these frustrations continue. And while continued repression may suppress political movements at the moment, it will never be able to address the underlying causes of this discontent. The key for Tibet's future now lies with the rise of a Tibetan civil society inside Tibet.

BY THIERRY DODIN

Prominent Tibet supporter and Tibetologist Robert Thurman once compared the Tibetan cause to that of baby seals. This appears to be quite an accurate comparison. Indeed, the plight of the Tibetans, like that of the Arctic mammal, belongs to those rare causes with seemingly universal appeal and the power to forge broad and unlikely coalitions across political orientations, cultures and ages. But the comparison goes further. Strong emotionality and, inevitably, the annoyance of the self-proclaimed 'serious realists' are as inseparable from both causes as Tibet is from the Chinese motherland – at least according to the prevailing Chinese mantra. And, last but not least, both issues are far more complex than they first appear to be.

Acknowledging the complexity of an issue is a difficult endeavour when clear-cut ideologies prevail and political mythologies often replace hard facts. The position of the Beijing authorities on the Tibet issue is clear: There is no issue. Tibet always was, firmly is, and ever will be an inseparable part of the Chinese Motherland. The Tibet issue is a conspiracy orchestrated by those who opposed Tibet's 'liberation'

from imperialist foreigners (of which there were two individuals in Tibet at the time in 1951, one British and one American) and, not unrelated but more importantly, the 'international anti-China forces'. 'China's Tibet' is striving, and Tibetans, most of whom are 'liberated serfs', are thankful to the central government because they enjoy the 'best time in their history', just as 'China's other 55 nationalities' do.

This position was formulated down to the letter during the 1950s, and has been maintained throughout all of China's subsequent political upheavals, a clear illustration of Beijing's rigidity. However, even official Chinese statistics demonstrate that, six decades after 'liberation', and behind the glass-and-steel facades of contemporary Lhasa, there is an overwhelming percentage of Tibetans living in appalling poverty. This does not fit well into the rosy picture put forward above. Neither does the fact that every day Tibetans undertake the ordeal of clandestinely crossing the border to Nepal in order to receive the blessings of their religious leader, the Dalai Lama, or to get a chance to attend a school of their choice – and occasionally get shot for their efforts.

In comparison, views of the Tibetan situation among



Tibet supporters at first appear far more pluralistic and flexible. However, here too, ideologies and an inclination towards conspiracy theories often prevail over accuracy and sound analysis. Some see in Tibet 'the last antique culture disappearing', and view the intrusion of commonplace aspects of modern life, from tourism to the new Qinghai-Lhasa railway, as tools 'designed to undermine Tibetan culture'. Promotions or transfers of cadres in Tibet are inevitably denounced as 'victories for the hardliners'. The People's Republic of China (PRC)'s creeping shadow appears to some to be omnipresent – even banal network problems, hoaxes and computer viruses are often presumed to be Chinese attacks.

Whereas one might still take all this in with some bemusement, other views in circulation are more worrisome. For example, foreign development organisations working in Tibet were for many years bitterly accused of cooperating with the Chinese government, and the same blanket accusations are now directed towards corporate foreign investors. Meanwhile 'independent' reports and press releases often muddle historical facts, and produce inaccurate or inaccurately collated and contextualised figures. This contributes to a damaging reputation for hysteria and triviality for the Tibetan cause in the wider world.

## Potemkin Tibet

With obstinacy here, and encapsulation in ideological parallel worlds there, Tibet singularly seems to provide an ideal backdrop for all kinds of political oddities that are never quite comprehensible to outsiders, and have the effect of obscuring far more real Tibetan concerns. Ironically, though, myths propagated by both sides are sometimes stunningly convergent.

Currently, the most widely spread of these is that regarding China's total control of Tibet. This myth hits the global information market in two forms. First, we have the Chinese authorities praising the 'stability' of today's Tibet, and declaring that the Dalai Lama has now become 'irrelevant' for Tibetans as they are "busy becoming well-to-do". Second, however, some Tibet activists outside Tibet, and media reports inspired by them, cry out in alarm about the imminent disappearance of Tibet under the control of an apparently omnipotent China. One side wants to discourage us in the wider world from even thinking that resistance against Beijing's rule has any chance (this is what governments do, certainly those who do not have to fear not being re-elected). The other side, in not untypical NGO style, appeals to our sense of urgency (and pity) in order to win us over for their struggle (and acquire funds for this struggle).

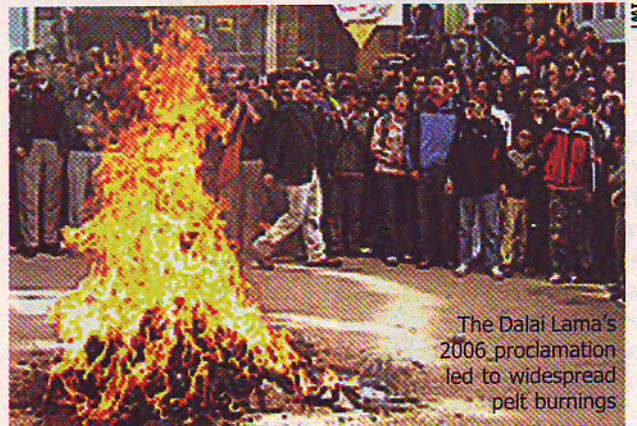
The messages we are made to believe and the agendas behind them are as obvious as they are different, but they converge in their factual perception of the status quo and the depiction of Tibetan passivity that this involves. There are problems with these

views. The perception that Beijing's hold on Tibet is particularly strong and confident is anything but accurate. Admittedly, compared with the late 1980s and the 1990s, there is less overt repression now. But this is largely because there is less open Tibetan opposition than there used to be – although this does not indicate Tibetan resignation. Rather, Tibetans have learned to articulate themselves in a less offensive, and often more effective, way, within the structures imposed on them by the Chinese state.

The public burning of wildlife pelts, for example, which occurred throughout Tibet in 2006, was a key event that left both the Chinese authorities and many Tibet supporters perplexed. Although the environmental and ethical aspects of the campaign were doubtless crucial, its unexpected amplitude and success were an unambiguous display of loyalty to the Dalai Lama, who had just recently expressed disapproval of using wildlife products in clothing. The campaign was skilfully implemented and took place strictly within the legal framework defined by the Chinese authorities. It was non-confrontational and clearly contradicted the twin assumptions of Tibetans having become helpless victims on one hand, and politically 'pacified' on the other.

As much as this episode has again confirmed that the clear majority of Tibetans inside Tibet continues to regard the Dalai Lama as its leader, Beijing's identification of the Tibet issue as a "Dalai issue" is based on an inaccurate understanding of the dynamics within Tibetan society and culture. In tune with their authority-oriented – rather than any consensus-oriented – understanding of political dynamics, the PRC authorities apparently assume that following the Dalai Lama's death, Tibetan opposition to their rule will fragment along regional and sectarian fault lines (which are indeed existent, and which they actively encourage), and finally collapse. But while the Dalai Lama is certainly a powerful catalyst of Tibetan resistance, all observations at the grassroots level indicate that Tibetan discontentment is the key to the issue.

Most Tibetans experience the mainland Chinese



The Dalai Lama's 2006 proclamation led to widespread pelt burnings



presence in Tibet, whether physical or through the bias of more discrete structures, as a nuisance at best and an existential threat at worst. Even atheist Tibetans in the higher ranks of the Communist Party (those ranks Tibetans can access) express such views. This is not because the Dalai Lama has 'stirred them up', but is the result of alienation and daily frustrations in their contacts with mainland Chinese immigrants, military, laws or officials (whether they are ethnic Chinese or Tibetans operating within an essentially Chinese system) – or, simply, exasperation, for instance regarding the Mandarin accents of Tibetan newsmakers on Radio Lhasa.

In other words, the real problem is the failure of the Chinese state to accommodate what Tibetans regard as their legitimate rights or needs, and convince them that they are better off within China than they would potentially be in an independent Tibet. The crux of the matter therefore lies with China and its policies, and not with the Dalai Lama. Hence, Beijing's assumption that the issue may resolve with the Dalai Lama's demise muddles cause and effect; it is a misconception that simply does not match Tibetan reality. With or without the Dalai Lama, the Tibet issue will remain alive as long as dissatisfaction and frustration continue to fuel Tibetan aspirations for a better and more self-determined life. Repression may suppress any political movement in the short term, but it does not fundamentally correct the situation that generates it, because it addresses symptoms while doing nothing about the underlying cause.

There have been considerable efforts to engage a new generation of Tibetans in the Chinese mainstream – mainly through education – but these have yet to pay off. In fact, today the most nationalist-minded Tibetans in Tibet are young people, many of whom speak and write better Chinese than they do their own mother tongue, and are better integrated into the Chinese system than are the large majority of their fellow Tibetans. This is not surprising; numerous parallels can be found in colonial histories across the world. It was most commonly the acculturated

younger generations educated by the colonial rulers who became the champions of nationalism. (The thorny issue of whether the current situation in Tibet can be formally labelled 'colonial' will not be discussed here, despite there being striking similarities.) Certainly, considering that Tibetans hardly make up half a percent of China's population, any Tibetan freedom movement would face a difficult time succeeding. But Beijing's hope for resolution of the Tibet issue through firm determination alone remains as hollow as the ultra-modern facades of Lhasa's main streets, which suggest progress and yet, reminiscent of Potemkin's villages, obscure the real face of Tibet.

Realistically, change for the better in Tibet does not appear to have any possibility without Chinese acquiescence. At the same time, it is only if China's leadership manages to provide a large number of Tibetans with a better life, both in terms of economic opportunities and non-material satisfaction, that a real solution to the Tibet issue can be found – and, along with this, a more dignified future for both Tibetans and Chinese, whatever their point of view. Given the current power dynamic, the Tibetan contribution towards this goal can only be minimal; the onus is on China, and it is China's further course of action that will decide whether and when the issue can be resolved. One thing is clear, though: if the Dalai Lama is not the cause of China's problems in Tibet, he is certainly the only Tibetan who can make major contributions towards their swift resolution – that is, provided China finally manages to find a more constructive way of dealing with him.

### Calibrated activism

That real policy-level progress in Tibet will depend mainly on the Chinese state's capacity and willingness to correct its course does not mean that contributions for improvement in the Tibetans' situation cannot be made by the other parties involved. So far, the focus of the Tibet movement outside Tibet has been on exerting political pressure on China; but there is a growing realisation that this approach has reached the limits



Role models: From left, the 13th Dalai Lama, the 9th Panchen Lama, Gendun Chopel, Ngawang Sangdrol



of what can be achieved, and that alternative strategies need to be considered. The central question here is what exactly 'support' for Tibet should mean. The answer now seems to be coming from Tibetans inside Tibet itself.

Recent years have seen the emergence of an astonishingly bold and creative – though sensibly circumspect – civil society within Tibet. Hardly acknowledged by the outside world, local NGOs have been mushrooming, mostly under the initiative of educated young Tibetans, and partly with the backing of mainland Chinese NGOs or individuals supportive of Tibetans. In eastern Tibet, monasteries also have a level of participation in this movement. Their work focuses on environmental, cultural and social issues, and has yielded remarkable early successes in solving local ecological problems; claiming due respect for local culture and sensitivities; and empowering Tibetans by supporting local development, health and educational initiatives.

The nascent Tibetan civil society not only operates strictly within the legal framework of the PRC, but even designs its work according to official government agendas – ie, proactive protection of the environment, respect for the feelings of 'minorities' and poverty reduction. This is the result of the realisation that a confrontational attitude to the PRC government may yield credentials of heroism but no improvement in Tibetan society at large, whereas the government is ready to accept social activism as long as its own power positions are not challenged. Indeed, the state has even come to appreciate the 'watchdog' function of non-governmental bodies as a tool to regulate the work of local authorities, who often escape effective supervision by the Centre.

This approach might appear 'un-political' to some, but experience on the ground shows that it yields practical results and benefits for the Tibetan people. Interestingly, it also echoes the course propagated by the Dalai Lama for the last two decades to drop the demand for independence in exchange for a substantial improvement in the living conditions of his people. After all, the demand for independence stems to a large extent from the experience that Tibetans have not been able to live good and dignified lives under Beijing's rule. Real opportunities to address these issues would not necessarily solve all of Tibet's problems, but calls for independence would lose some of their resonance if conditions significantly improved. What is happening here could therefore be defined as a shift of balance of Tibetan political activism from ideal (but hardly achievable), to practical, achievable goals. Simply put, this recalibration of Tibetan activism is in fact a major shift of paradigm from pro-Tibet activism to *pro-Tibetans* activism.

This new approach raises questions about the role and potential of Tibetans and Tibet supporters outside Tibet. It is an open secret that many Tibetans in exile

are still very emotional about the call to 'free Tibet', and far less enthusiastic about a more pragmatic course. This is understandable. However, except for a very small minority, the path chosen by the Dalai Lama is the one with which they are ready to go along, if only because there seems to be no convincing alternative. In this respect, the attitude of those in exile is not essentially different from that of their fellow Tibetans inside Tibet.

The situation is quite different when it comes to (mostly Western) Tibet support groups. For what appears to be a rather strong, or at least particularly vocal, minority among these, Tibet is commonly envisioned as the 'good cause' par excellence, symbolising the eternal struggle between good and evil. As such, the struggle for a 'free Tibet' itself has become something of a crusade. In this perspective, activism tends to be seen as a success in itself, and any adoption of a less-polarising approach can easily be challenged as a betrayal. At times, this has led to very awkward situations.

For instance, demands by Dharamsala to exert a degree of restraint in the way protest against Chinese leaders is undertaken has generated stark disagreement among certain Western support groups. This has reached a point where leaders of some such groups have more or less openly refused to accept what they see as a 'Dharamsala diktat' and have insisted instead on *their* 'independence'. There has also been a certain amount of support for the activities of Tibetans who openly campaign against Dharamsala's and the Dalai Lama's (and thus, implicitly, Tibetan NGOs') pragmatic approach.

One cannot fail to get the impression that some among the Tibet support groups see their role less in providing support than in providing 'guidance' to Tibetans. This raises a crucial issue of legitimacy. Whereas one may or may not agree with their decisions, the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala is democratically legitimised by the exile community, while the legitimacy of the Dalai Lama to be the voice of the overwhelming majority of his people, both inside and outside Tibet, can hardly be questioned. Support groups in comparison are at best legitimised by their members, and very few of them are even Tibetan.

To be fair, there is also something of a 'silent majority' among the support groups that has begun to diversify its activities by supporting, in one way or another, civil-society groups inside Tibet. Perhaps more significantly, they are creating a new awareness about Tibet that has less focus on fundamental issues and more on the kind of concerns that Tibetans – as any people in a poor, developing country – face. Of particular significance are efforts to enter into a constructive dialogue with potential foreign investors in Tibet. But this approach still faces formidable scepticism from a movement that too often appears to value ideology over practical progress.



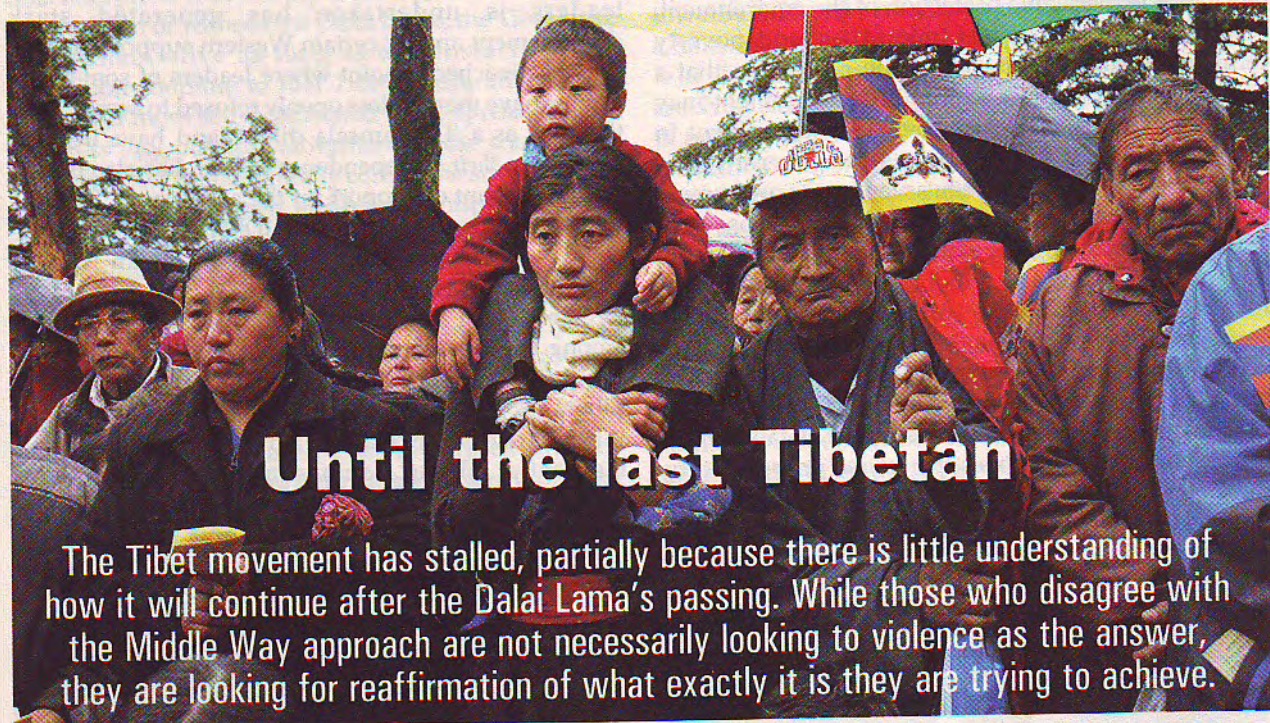
## Dignity in modern times

French President Jacques Chirac once said: "Predictions are always difficult, particularly when they apply to the future" – and so we shall abstain from conjecture about the future. The past and the present, however, are within our reach, and analysing them is the best way to be prepared for things to come. As it looks now, the only ones in any position to determine Tibet's future are the two most concerned parties, Tibet and China.

The policies of China's leadership are based on a rare blend of pragmatism and rigidity that serves two main aims: keeping power, and looking good while doing so. So far, pragmatism has not been prevailing, as Tibetan dissatisfaction, though hardly presenting any acute danger for China, has challenged both of these aims. One can hardly see how this situation could change, unless the Chinese authorities abandon their rigidity – readily or under duress – and provide substantial measures to appease Tibetan discontent. This may happen, but it may not; and even if it were to take place, nobody can predict when.

Meanwhile, the nascent Tibetan civil society inside Tibet works with the tools it has at its disposal to provide its people with what six decades of Chinese domination has failed to provide: material security, contentment and a healthy environment. Although this in no way precludes anything about what Tibet's future will be, it does imply leaving aside macro political goals and reverting to the essence and ultimate goal of Tibetan nationalism: the search for an appropriate and dignified place for Tibetans within modernity.

In seeking this, it means following the steps of several prominent Tibetans – Gendun Chopel, the late Panchen Lama, Baba Phuntsog Wangyal, Ngawang Sangdrol and many more, but primarily the current Dalai Lama, as well as his predecessor. This unlikely resurgence of Tibetan activism inside Tibet is currently the best bet for Tibet's future. Supporting it from outside Tibet is both possible and necessary, but it will require reconsideration of familiar positions, a farewell to rigid ideologies, and the unlimited acceptance that Tibetans have to make their own decisions – with the support, but not the guidance, of non-Tibetans. ▲



## Until the last Tibetan

The Tibet movement has stalled, partially because there is little understanding of how it will continue after the Dalai Lama's passing. While those who disagree with the Middle Way approach are not necessarily looking to violence as the answer, they are looking for reaffirmation of what exactly it is they are trying to achieve.

BY TENZING SONAM

**O**n a cold and wet Saturday morning a few weeks ago, several thousand of us exile Tibetans gathered once again with our leader, the Dalai Lama, in the courtyard of the main temple in Dharamsala to commemorate the anniversary of the Lhasa Uprising of 10 March 1959 – the event that triggered our exodus to India, and sealed China's occupation of our homeland. As with every 10 March commemoration, speeches were made and songs were

sung to remember those who gave their lives in pursuit of Tibet's freedom.

In his statement this year, the Dalai Lama once again reiterated his commitment to the Middle Way approach – his proposal to resolve the Tibet issue by making the key concession of giving up demands for independence, in return for a genuinely autonomous Tibet within the People's Republic of China. And once again, the unresolved incongruities of the Tibetan



situation manifested themselves. As the Dalai Lama spoke, above him stretched an enormous Tibetan national flag, still banned in Tibet for being a symbol of nationalist aspirations. Those gathered also sang the Tibetan national anthem, another expression of Tibet's separate identity proscribed by Beijing. And during the traditional march to the town centre in Lower Dharamsala that followed the speeches, the crowd once again raised slogans calling for a free Tibet, and demanding that China leave the plateau.

The Tibet movement has suffered this split-personality syndrome ever since the Middle Way approach was first broached, more than two decades ago. The Tibetan community's complete devotion to the Dalai Lama as our spiritual and political leader has meant that, for the most part, we have accepted his proposal without any question. Indeed, until recently, any expression of doubt on this matter was immediately denounced within the community as being a personal attack on the Dalai Lama himself. But while on the surface there has been a unified show of support and commitment to the Middle Way approach, deep down many Tibetans have suffered a disquieting crisis of confusion and conflicting loyalties (See *Himal* December 2006, "Roadblock on the Middle Path").

In exile, we were brought up to believe that our *raison d'être* was to fight for Tibet's independence. From the time we were children, the word *rangzen* – independence – was relentlessly hammered into us. To be suddenly told that *rangzen* was no longer our goal was almost impossible to comprehend; and indeed, during the 1980s, in the early days of the Middle Way approach, we went about our lives as if nothing had fundamentally changed in our struggle. But as time passed, we could no longer pretend that this contradiction between our loyalty to the Dalai Lama and our instinctive belief in Tibet's independence did not exist. Our confusion became more difficult to ignore, and we were stricken by a sense of helplessness and frustration. As a result, some vital force was sucked out of our movement, and it began to founder. Even our most ardent supporters began to wonder what it was that we were fighting for, and the once-impressive international support-group network that we had so painstakingly built up began to unravel for want of a clearly defined cause.

## A movement adrift

There is evidence to show that we exiled Tibetans are not alone in evincing this duality of purpose. Inside Tibet, although faith and belief in the Dalai Lama remains largely undimmed, the demonstrations that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s were all driven by the demand for independence. Even today, despite heightened security controls and measures,



any leaflet or wall poster that surfaces invariably calls for independence.

This dilemma, between supporting the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach and continuing to believe in independence, is now so deep-rooted in the fabric of our condition as exiles that it even creeps into our official statements. Last year Prime Minister-in-exile Samdhong Rinpoche, one of the staunchest supporters of the Middle Way approach, said: "Since the struggle of the Tibetan people is based on truth and non-violence, there is no need for us to lose heart, as all Tibetans believe that the truth will prevail some day." The Kashag – the executive body of the government-in-exile – in a statement on 6 July last year, reaffirmed its "determination to engage in dialogue for resolving the issue of Tibet through the present Sino-Tibetan contacts", but concluded its statement by exhorting: "May the truth of the issue of Tibet prevail soon!"

What exactly is the 'truth' to which Samdhong Rinpoche and the Kashag are referring? The official website of the government-in-exile gives us the answer:

At the time of its invasion by troops of the People's Liberation Army of China in 1949, Tibet was an independent state in fact and law. The military invasion constituted an aggression on a sovereign state and a violation of international law. Today's continued occupation of Tibet by China, with the help of several hundred thousand troops, represents an ongoing violation of international law and of the fundamental rights of the Tibetan people to independence.

How can Samdhong Rinpoche and the government-in-exile be promoting the Middle Way approach – which requires that we bury this 'truth' – while simultaneously continuing to present the case for Tibet's independence? Is it any surprise, then, that Beijing continues to view the Middle Way approach with deep mistrust, branding it as a call for "disguised independence"? Or that, before it will make any move towards a serious dialogue with the Dalai Lama, it insists that he declare, once and for all, that Tibet was never independent, that it was always a part of China?

But Samdhong Rinpoche and the Kashag are not





The new generation: Tsundue and Phuntsok

anomalous in inadvertently manifesting this contradictory position. All Tibetans are complicit in this fundamental paradox within our 'cause', and it is precisely this that has led to the gradual erosion and dissipation of Tibet's national struggle. In order to have any hope of success, the key demands of the Middle Way approach – a genuinely autonomous region made up of the three traditional provinces of Tibet, and ruled by a democratically elected local government – would have to be watered down, or even given up entirely. But making such concessions would rob the Middle Way approach of any credibility – indeed, its meaning – and there is no way that the Dalai Lama can deny Tibet's past. The result is the stalemate that we see today. Behind the smokescreen of presumed dialogue, which it has no intentions of furthering, China continues to do what it wants in Tibet with impunity. Meanwhile, the once-vibrant Tibet movement floats listlessly in the doldrums.

### Beyond the Middle Way

Two statements emanating recently from Dharamsala seem to indicate a slight shift in its thinking with regard to the Middle Way approach. In January, Samdhong Rinpoche said: "In the past, we have asked the Tibetan people not to annoy the PRC [People's Republic of China] by [engaging in] propaganda or campaigns against them. Unfortunately, since last year the PRC has not cared for our actions and they have attacked His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Under such circumstances, we are not able to ask the Tibetan people to keep quiet."

This statement reflects a welcome retreat from Dharamsala's earlier appeals to Tibetans and Tibet supporters not to hold demonstrations, particularly against visiting Chinese dignitaries, for fear of jeopardising the 'conducive atmosphere' necessary to help the Middle Way approach make progress. It comes in recognition of the fact that efforts by Dharamsala to appease Beijing have only resulted in a stepped-up campaign of vilification aimed specifically at the Dalai Lama. One immediate consequence of this climb-down was the unexpectedly large (and loudly pro-independence) crowds that turned out across the world

for this year's 10 March demonstrations – evidence that Tibetans, especially the younger generation, need only the slightest encouragement to give expression to their desire to fight for an independent Tibet.

More significantly, on 23 January, Prime Minister Rinpoche stated that Tibetans should, "Hope for the best – ie, to hope for a successful resolution of the Tibet problem within the lifetime of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama." At the same time, they should also, "Prepare for the worst – ie, to be prepared for the worst eventuality, whereby the Tibetan movement has to be sustained indefinitely, for centuries until the last Tibetan."

This grim warning is perhaps the first official admission of the possibility that the Middle Way approach may not bear fruit within the lifetime of the Dalai Lama. Assuming that this worst-case scenario comes to fruition – and all indications point in that direction – how then can the "Tibetan movement ... be sustained indefinitely"? More to the point, what is the nature of the struggle that is to be sustained indefinitely? Are we to assume that, in the absence of the Dalai Lama, the Middle Way approach can still retain the credibility to fire the Tibet movement until the so-called last Tibetan remains standing? Or should we be considering new initiatives that will ensure the continuation of Tibet's freedom struggle *while* we still have the Dalai Lama to lead, guide and inspire us?

### The stigma of violence

One of the most common misrepresentations in the ongoing debate between supporters of the Middle Way approach and proponents of independence is the reduction of these two positions to one simply of 'non-violence versus violence'. The Middle Way approach is consistently presented as the only way of resolving the Tibet situation that directly conforms to the Dalai Lama's commitment to peace and non-violence; whereas its detractors, particularly those who support independence, are unfailingly portrayed as pushing for violence. If the Middle Way approach does not succeed, we are told (usually by its supporters), the alternative is a Palestine-like cycle of unending violence and chaos.

Such a grim scenario has by now been widely picked up by the media. Almost every article on the question of Tibet seems to contain a statement similar to this one, which appeared in the 24 January 2007 issue of the US pop-culture magazine *Rolling Stone*: "Increasingly, young Tibetans reject His Holiness the Dalai Lama's commitment to non-violence, engaging instead in the tactics of Palestinian militants." The constantly emphasised point is that those who reject the Middle Way approach reject the Dalai Lama's commitment to non-violence – that supporting independence as a goal necessarily implies supporting violence as the means of attaining it.

Unfortunately, this perception is not helped by



statements made by those at the forefront of the pro-independence lobby. In the same article, Kalsang Phuntsok, the president of the Tibetan Youth Congress, which supports independence, was quoted as saying: "We are admitting at the international level that Tibetan people, and the Dalai Lama, are happy in China. We need to educate Tibetans that attacking China is the only way. If you're willing to die, you have no fear." The article then went on to say this about Tenzin Tsundue, one of the most prominent and vocal champions of independence: "Unwilling to accept anything less than complete independence, [Tsundue] and his supporters have abandoned His Holiness the Dalai Lama's peaceful approach, drawing inspiration instead from the Palestinians and other militant organisations."

I personally do not believe that Tibetans such as Phuntsok and Tsundue are actively promoting violence as a means of pushing for independence. The fact remains, however, that people increasingly equate their stance with violence, in direct contradiction to the non-violent and compassionate approach symbolised by the Dalai Lama. This subsequently sends a signal to the outside world that anyone supporting Tibetan independence must necessarily be a dangerous militant with terrorist tendencies.

This is an unfair generalisation. Why should

supporting Tibetan independence be incompatible with a non-violent approach? There are many Tibetans who are committed to non-violence as a principle, but who find no contradiction in believing that regaining Tibet's independence should remain the primary objective of the struggle. We need only take the example of Mohandas K Gandhi – a leader much admired by both the Dalai Lama and Samdhong Rinpoche – whose *satyagraha* (firmness of truth) movement, although rooted in *ahimsa*, or non-violence, was in fact a dynamic, forceful and often confrontational form of resistance, which had as its ultimate goal nothing less than India's independence from British rule.

When Tsundue says in the *Rolling Stone* article, "Youngsters tell me they don't want to join a non-violent protest. Youngsters feel non-violence is getting nothing", I for one do not believe that these 'youngsters' are necessarily asking to engage in violence. Rather, they are asking for something to believe in – a cause they can fight for, a clear goal to which they can aspire. Their frustration stems not so much from the lack of results through non-violent protest, as from confusion about what it is that they are trying to achieve.

## Anti-Apartheid lessons

When I first went to the University of California's Berkeley campus as a student in the early 1980s, the

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grounds were feverish with the anti-Apartheid campaign. The immediate issue was the divestment of the University of California's investments in companies that did business with South Africa. Day after day, the central Sproul Plaza was the scene of raucous demonstrations. The climate of student activism was contagious. But more importantly, the issue at stake was clear and uncomplicated: this was a 'good v evil' scenario, literally a black-and-white question. Apartheid was evil; it had to go. It was that simple. It did not take much effort before I found myself a willing participant in the movement. Not buying anything made in South Africa was a simple act of solidarity, and before long it became an instinctive gesture – so much so that, years later, even after Apartheid had long been dismantled, I still found myself resisting South African grapes or wines.

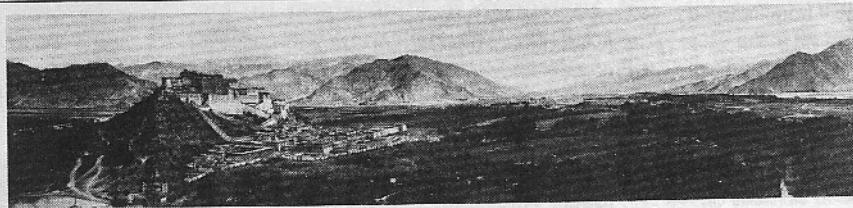
A number of years ago, when Nelson Mandela made his triumphant state visit to England, I happened to tune into a radio programme on which some former anti-Apartheid campaigners were being interviewed. Commenting on the contribution made by the worldwide grassroots campaign to defeat Apartheid, one interviewee said that the success of the anti-Apartheid movement lay in the fact that it was ultimately able to reach and draw support from every level of society; that although it was widespread and might have appeared spontaneous, it was, in fact, carefully orchestrated by African National Congress leaders in exile.

Although there is a huge difference between the anti-Apartheid movement and the Tibetan struggle – not least in the fact that China is a far more powerful adversary, economically, politically and militarily, than was the white South African government – we should not forget one important lesson: A well-coordinated and widespread grassroots movement can apply immense pressure on governments, and

achieve results. China may appear impregnable, but it is not immune to international leverage, particularly so when it seeks to play a leading role in global affairs. But we must also realise that such a movement can only be effective if it is focused around a clear-cut cause – one that pits right clearly against wrong.

We are fortunate that in the case of Tibet, as with the Apartheid regime in South Africa, there has never been any moral ambiguity. And just as the anti-Apartheid movement was guided by the moral force of its leader, Nelson Mandela, the Tibet movement is blessed in having the universally respected figure of the Dalai Lama at its head. Moreover, we already have in place a wide and committed network of international supporters who are only waiting for a clear rallying call to galvanise themselves into action.

But before this can happen, the Tibetan leadership must act upon its realisation that the Middle Way approach may not achieve the results it seeks within the lifetime of the Dalai Lama. All Tibetans believe in the truth of Tibet's independence, without any doubt or question. This is the one aspiration that can immediately dissolve the morass of conflicting goals and loyalties besetting the Tibet movement, and unite all Tibetans, whether inside or outside Tibet. Restoring the truth of Tibet back to the core of the movement, and making it once again the freedom struggle that it rightfully is, holds no guarantee that Tibet will become independent any time soon. What it will achieve, however, will be to reactivate the increasingly moribund Tibet movement by giving it focus; bring a sense of urgency to the Tibet issue; make it harder for Beijing and the international community to ignore it; and ensure that our struggle remains strong and motivated, even after the present Dalai Lama passes away. If Samdhong Rinpoche's appeal to sustain the Tibetan movement indefinitely – "for centuries until the last Tibetan" – is to make any sense, this is the only option available. ▲



## Lhasa in another age

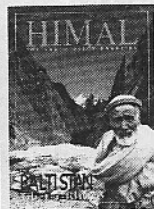
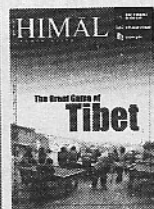
Originally published in 1916, this high-quality photograph of Lhasa is by John Claude White, the first British Political Officer to Sikkim, as well as a civil engineer and pioneer photographer. This rare image is now being made available to all interested *Himal Southasian* readers. And if you choose to

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# Autonomy and the railway

BY WOESER  
TRANSLATED BY SUSAN CHEN

Perhaps no other railway in the world could have competed with the new Qinghai-Tibet railway for the amount of attention, comment and opinion it inspired. The fact that the Chinese government decided on 1 July 2006 – the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China – as the day for the formal inauguration of the railway leaves no room for ambiguity regarding the project's 'political colour'. Driven by the intense media coverage of the new track, a massive collective interest in Tibet suddenly broke out throughout China – and, indeed, around the world. According to the numbers put out by the Tibet Autonomous Region's Tourist Bureau, 90,000 visitors arrived in Tibet within the first 20 days the railway was in operation. This has not only added an unbearable burden to the crumbling Potala Palace – which is supposedly designated as a World Heritage Site – but has significantly impacted on the lives of Lhasa locals. The prices of staple foods, vegetables and meats have all gone up dramatically, while worshippers are being forced to fight crowds inside temples.

The reaction of Tibetans to the new rail line is complex. This writer took a ride on the train from Beijing to Lhasa in January. Because it was winter – the slow season for visitors – there were few tourists on board. Instead, there were many Tibetan students heading home for the winter break. These students had been sent to 'inland' China for schooling from a very young age. In the past, because of the high cost of transportation, they could have gone for years without going home for Losar, the Tibetan New Year. The cheaper price of a train ride now helps in easing their homesickness, and this might well be the major benefit that the Qinghai-Tibet railway has brought Tibetans. The other benefit has been that the faithful from the Tibetan provinces of Amdo and Kham can now take the train to go on pilgrimage in U-Tsang, and vice-versa. Besides these, it is hard to locate the railway's merits.

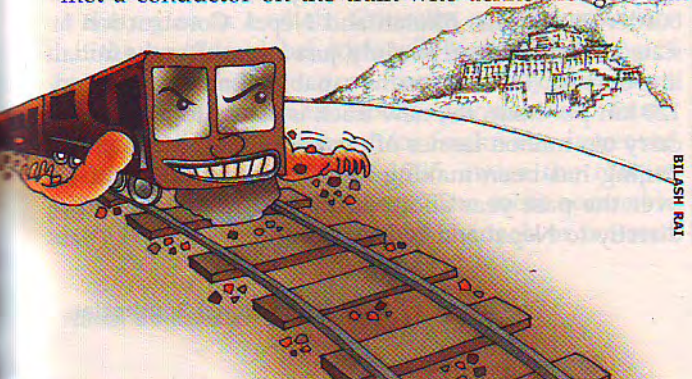
During the first seven months of the new service, the cars were overloaded in the summer and almost completely empty in the winter; the imbalance between supply and demand was evident. Indeed, this writer met a conductor on the train who acknowledged that

the railway line lacks economic value, but has political and military significance. Despite agreeing that the railroad itself may not make economic sense, many Tibetans are concerned about the opportunity it provides to businessmen and transient labourers from inland China to exploit Tibet's natural resources. According to official statistics, approximately 2500 potential mining sites have been identified within the TAR – which could in the future mean more than 30 mining sites for each of the TAR's 76 districts (See accompanying story, "Prospecting the treasure house"). With 'gold-mining' expeditions already taking place along the tracks, the nightmare that the plateau's fragile ecosystem might be further destroyed has become more real than ever.

Even though the crises of natural resources and environment that Tibet has been facing could darken the railway's reputation, they remain irrelevant to Chinese officials and state-controlled scholars. Instead, these people consider themselves messiahs and spokespersons for the Tibetans: "We want Tibetans to also have the right to enjoy modernisation," goes the official line. "Neither tradition nor modernisation should be missing." While such sentiments might at first sound logical, what is important for Tibetans is not necessarily the issue of modernisation, but genuine autonomy. When there is no power, where can one find rights? And what can one do with tradition? Furthermore, what actually constitutes modernisation? The current reality of Tibet already attests to the falsity of the kind of modernisation that has come to the plateau. Ultimately, it is just another form of invasion – sugar-coated and equivalent to colourfully beautified violence. For Tibetans, who are deprived of autonomous rights, it is absolutely necessary to learn to recognise different types of invasion.

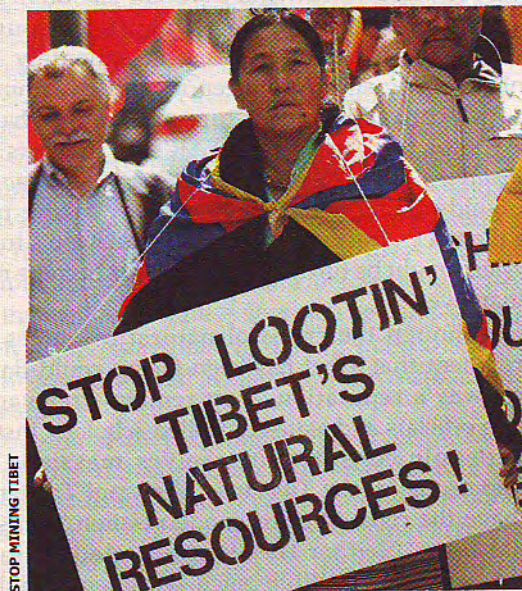
In fact, the railway by itself is not a problem. If Tibet's genuine autonomy were put into practice, the idea of having railroads connecting villages could be internally debated. But when Tibetans lack autonomy, their fate is decided by others. They can only watch as their rights are taken away, and they are further marginalised in their own land. Rather than the indigenous Tibetans, it is the flocks of 'gold-miners' who are the real beneficiaries of such 'development' projects.

Unfortunately, under the banner of 'development', the modernisation symbolised by the Qinghai-Tibet railway is flourishing in Tibet. It has not only altered the appearance of Tibetan tradition, but has also begun to change the inner essence of Tibetans themselves. Gradually, all aspects of Tibet will be completely rewritten. Is this the blessing that Tibetans have received from those who hold power? Since Tibetans do not have the right of autonomy, the Qinghai-Tibet railway cannot be, as the Chinese state claims, the "Road of Fortune". Instead, it is a road of no return – of the sacrifice of the land once known as Tibet. ▲





# Prospecting the treasure house



BY CAREY L BIRON

When Beijing heralded the opening of the new Qinghai-Lhasa train line in early July last year, Tibetans, environmentalists and human-rights activists across the globe worried in anticipation of the hordes of Han Chinese – tourists and settlers alike – that would now be able to flood onto the ‘roof of the world’. When the project was originally announced in 2001, the Dharamsala government-in-exile dubbed it a “disaster”, for reasons of both population influx and environmental damage. With around 4000 passengers now riding the rails every

## A colony's wages

As rich stocks of minerals are shipped out of Tibet, it looks as though their concomitant wealth will follow. Even as critics warn about the impact of Chinese strip-mining on the area's fragile ecosystem, others worry that Beijing is acting more and more the colonist in Tibet. One recently arrived refugee in Kathmandu noted in December that mining in the Yulong area has indeed led to short-term economic benefits among the local nomad villages. Each individual received initial compensation of RMD 40,000 (USD 5160) in order to quell anger over the mining of a sacred mountain, reportedly with more payments to come. (When large-scale extraction at Yulong began in 2005, it was estimated that the area would produce nearly USD 260 million of copper per year.) But the man also noted that, even with more than ten loaded cargo trucks per day leaving the Yulong facility for the mainland, there has been no further benefit to Tibetans. “No locals are allowed to go into the mining area,” he explains. “Nearly all the workers and officials there are Chinese nowadays.”

day (in 1980, a fourth that number of tourists visited during the whole year), those worries may indeed prove warranted. But in fact, just as much emphasis should probably have been placed on what the new 1965 km-long train tracks would be able to ship out.

In mid-February, Beijing published a report announcing the ‘discovery’ of an estimated USD 128 billion worth of minerals in more than 600 sites in Tibet – a result of a seven-year programme by more than a thousand surveyors to geologically map the plateau. Their findings are large enough to astound: a billion tonnes of iron ore, 40 million tonnes each of lead and copper. Such a backyard stockpile would be a huge shot in the arm for the Chinese economy, which has struggled increasingly in recent years to keep up with domestic demand for raw minerals in the face of steeply rising international prices. If the finds are as large as Beijing reports, they would double China's current stores of lead, copper and zinc. Tibet's mineral wealth seems to now justify the alluring traditional Chinese name for central Tibet – Xizang, roughly translating to ‘Western Treasure House’.

In the past, the focus has been on Tibet's oil reserves, which in 2005 were estimated at roughly 10 billion tonnes – a tantalising lode for the world's second-largest oil importer. But oil production in Tibet has remained low, in part because Western oil companies – including Shell and BP – have faced harsh public criticism in the West for any involvement. It is not clear how quickly Beijing will move from prospecting to extraction of Tibet's ores; at present, less than one percent of the discovered mining spots has been explored.

The fact is that there simply has not been the infrastructure required to move raw products out of the Tibetan hinterland in any kind of large-scale process. While there are now two major pipeline projects working to bring Tibetan oil to mainland China, construction on these only got underway in 2000 and 2002. Mineral transport, of course, is even more difficult an undertaking. But with the opening of the Qinghai-Lhasa train line, as well as the multitude of planned rail spurs and access roads, a major step has been taken towards realising this goal. Indeed, cargo service along the track was opened to business in March 2006 – a full four months before the unveiling of the passenger service. Rail operators are charging just RMB 0.12 (USD 0.14) per kilometre to transport one tonne of cargo.

Ultimately, the flow of Tibet's mineral wealth may not be heading only northeast to the mainland. A survey will be finalised in May for a 253-km southward extension of the train track to Xigaze, located near the border with India, Bhutan and Nepal. Construction is slated to begin as early as July, just a year after the initial line opened. Utilising trains capable of moving around 120 km per hour, the new track is slated to eventually carry ten million tonnes of cargo per year. Meanwhile, Beijing has been making increasingly louder noises over the past year about additional rail connections directly to Nepal and India. ▲



# Why Tibet matters to Southasia

BY BHUCHUNG KTSERING

When reports about the possible entry of China into SAARC first appeared a few years back, quite a few eyebrows went up. When China was subsequently given observer status to the organisation in 2005, some wondered whether SAARC would now be used as a forum for a proxy India-China battle for regional dominance. As a Tibetan living in Southasia, China's connection with SAARC has long held a particular interest for this writer. And indeed, if there is any direct relevance to China's involvement in SAARC, it is due to Tibet. In terms of physical geography alone, the main connection between today's People's Republic of China and Southasia is through Tibet.

But what has SAARC got to do with Tibet? Historically, Tibet and the Tibetan people have looked to the south for their spiritual and cultural heritage – to countries including India, Bangladesh and Nepal. But this is not necessarily why the rest of the Southasian countries should pay attention to Tibet. The political path on the plateau and beyond is taking its own route. Since 2002, there have been five rounds of discussions between envoys of the Dalai Lama and representatives of the Chinese government on the future of Tibet. As the Dalai Lama's special envoy, Lodi Gyari, said in recent testimony before the US Congress, "We have now reached the stage where if there is the political will on both sides, we have an opportunity to finally resolve this issue." So, we now just need the Chinese leadership to appreciate the vision and initiative of the Dalai Lama. Of course, a resolution of the Tibetan issue will certainly contribute to peace and stability in other parts of Southasia, as well.

However, Tibet should matter to Southasia because of its trade possibilities, as well as its strategic and environmentally sensitive location. At one time, within living memory, there was a robust trade relationship between Tibet and its southern neighbours – Nepal, Bhutan and India. A revival of such relations has considerable potential for helping to speed up the rise of the Southasian economy. If there is truth to the belief that China is a vast, tappable market, Southasia is well placed to tap it through Tibet.

Second, the management of Tibet's rich water resources and environment will have a long-term impact on the region as a whole. Critically, analysts speculate that the next big global crisis will be on the sharing of water resources. A report from 2000 by the Asian Development Bank on the "looming water crisis" found that globally, "The demand for freshwater increased sixfold between 1900 and 1995, twice the rate of population growth." Further, "The most accessible water is that which flows in river channels or is stored

in freshwater lakes and reservoirs." In the Subcontinent, most of the major rivers have their source in Tibet. According to the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, "A substantial proportion of river flows in Tibet are stable or base flows coming from groundwater and glacial sources." Thus, the impact of changes in Tibet's glacial reserves – through either climate change or more direct human intervention – will affect regions far beyond Tibet.

Already some Southasian countries are experiencing the negative impact of improper management of Tibetan river systems. Frequent flooding of the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) continues to have devastating results in India and Bangladesh. According to a 2004 report, "The Brahmaputra is mainly responsible for the annual floods that hit the eastern region of the Subcontinent. Estimates say that [2004's] floods, the worst in a decade, claimed close to 2000 lives in Bangladesh and in the eastern Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal and Assam. Millions of people lost their homes in the region that includes the foothills of Nepal." The report continued, "International agencies once again began discussing the need for a regional approach of water-resource management of the Himalayan rivers that flow through China, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh."

When reports appeared in 2006 about China building a dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo, strong reactions immediately arose from Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, which would be directly impacted by the move. China subsequently denied having any such plan, but the impact that the handling of Tibet's rivers would have on downstream countries was crystal clear. Now that China has an observer status to SAARC, the countries of Southasia have an increased need, but also a crucial ability, to pay direct attention to the situation in Tibet – environmental, political and social. Indeed, Southasia as a whole now has both the increased impetus and leverage to call for the opening up of Tibet, both physically and psychologically, to its southern neighbours. ▲

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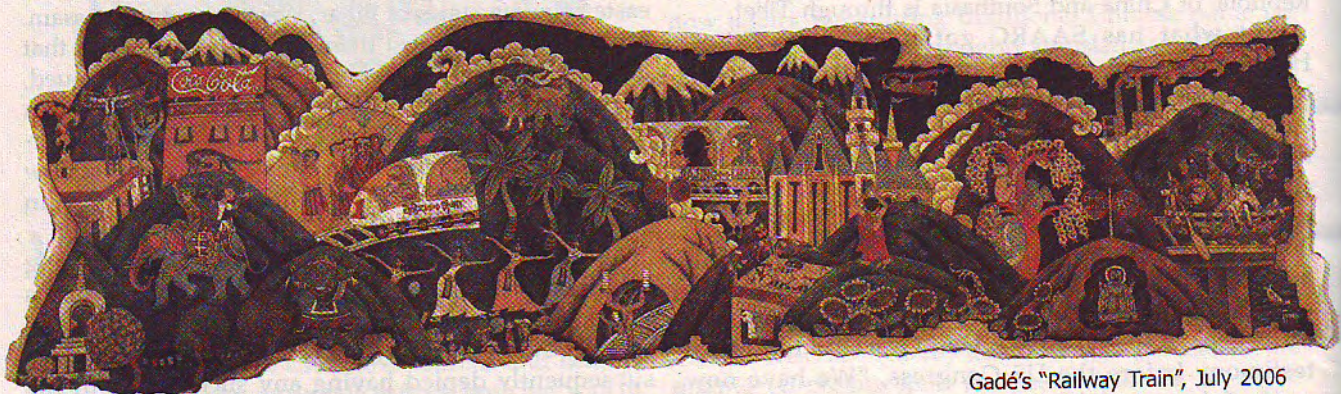
21 Apr 2007



## Beauty and contradiction in TIBETAN ART

What is Tibetan about art that bears no obvious reference to 'Tibetan-ness'? Plenty.

BY YANGDON DHONDUP



Gadé's "Railway Train", July 2006

I first met the Tibetan artist Gadé (transliterated as *dga' bde*) on a cold November day in 1994. After showing me around the Fine Arts Department of Tibet University, where he was working as a lecturer, we looked at some of his own art works. His paintings were enthralling. Some depicted elegantly posed figures swathed in warm colours, while others were of delicate bodies framed within the silhouette of a resting Buddha. Gadé uses paints he makes from mixing different types of minerals, and his work therefore carried an earth-tone colour scheme, occasionally accentuated with bright hues. Buddhist symbols imbued his works with a sense of serene beauty and mystery.

A few hours later, over lunch at a newly opened Indian restaurant on Beijing East Road, Gadé said that a Chinese postage stamp was being released that featured one of his paintings, a rare opportunity for a Tibetan artist living in Tibet. The restaurant at which we were eating was owned by two businessmen, one Tibetan and one Nepali – it is one of the joint-ventures that has boosted the economy and the mood of Lhasa residents following the years of particularly repressive control. The novelty of being able to eat spiced curries while watching Tibetan girls wrapped in colourful

saris dance to Indian music had made the restaurant, for a short while, the talk of the town. In a way, the restaurant represented Lhasa and Gadé – hybrids made of a mixture of Tibetan, Southasian, Chinese and Western influences.

Over the past 12 years, Gadé has remained consistent with his technique of grinding stones into paint – as if he were trying literally to ground his works in his native soil. His focus during this period, however, has shifted. In his early works, Gadé's figures were mainly inspired by Buddhism, which he says led him to depict a mythical Tibet that only existed in his imagination. "What I really wanted was to paint my Tibet, the one I grew up in and belong to," he says.

Gadé's current works include significant depictions of present-day Tibet – a monk comfortably sitting next to a People's Liberation Army soldier; miniature portraits of Elvis Presley, Sherlock Holmes and Mickey Mouse painted on a faint lineation of a Buddha. The juxtaposition of the local with the global is not just Gadé's own preoccupation; in this he represents a new generation of Tibetans who are at home in both the traditional and the modern Tibet. "My generation has grown up with thangka painting, martial arts, Hollywood movies, Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin,



## The Lhasa this new group knows has evolved from an ancient city into a modern metropolis, where the past and the present coexist – sometimes uncomfortably, but sometimes quite comfortably.

rock-and-roll and McDonald's," he has written. (For more on representations of Tibet, see "More mythology", page 74-75.)

Indeed, Gadé and his generation grew up during a time of political and socio-economic reforms. They have not experienced, but only heard of from their parents, the disastrous political campaigns that China and Tibet were forced to undergo. Many of them also belong to a group of privileged Tibetans who were sent to mainland China for their education. Gadé, for example, was trained in both Western and Chinese styles of painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

The Lhasa this new group knows has evolved from an ancient city into a modern metropolis, where the past and the present coexist – sometimes uncomfortably, but sometimes quite comfortably. Early each morning, young and old Tibetans alike reverently queue up to get into the Jokhang, Tibet's most sacred temple; their evenings are often spent in glittering karaoke bars and fancy nightclubs. Artists such as Gadé – as well as many of his peers, such as Dedron, Tsewang Tashi, Nortse, Tsering Nyandak, Tsering Dhondup and Zhungde – are constantly switching between these two worlds, of traditional and contemporary Tibet. Some do not even feel obliged to express any noticeably 'Tibetan' reference in their works; although physically based in Lhasa, their art includes cultural references from all over the world. The result is innovative, and shows a creativity and vitality not seen in the traditional Tibetan art forms. Undoubtedly, these works mirror the present state of Tibet – a place full of beauty and contradictions.

### Too much has happened

The history of contemporary Tibetan art starts with the controversial scholar, monk and traveler Gendun Chopel, who lived during the early part of the 20th century. Chopel's paintings and sketches, especially those he produced while traveling through India during the 1930s and 1940s, provide windows onto his innovative and inquiring mind (See *Himal October 2006*, "The new reasoning of Gendun Chopel"). Chopel's student and friend, Amdo Jampa, who died in 2002, became the first Tibetan to study art in China. Jampa's works, such as the murals he painted during the early 1950s inside the Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama's traditional summer residence, were pioneering in the sense that they combined traditional Tibetan styles of painting with photo-realist portraits.

The styles now used by the new generation of

Tibetan artists are significantly more diverse, ranging from traditional paintings to realist, abstract or expressionist pieces. In creating such works, these artists, as with their forerunners, are pushing the boundaries of what is known as 'Tibetan' art.

Many worry that such interfusion could destroy what little of traditional Tibetan culture is left standing. But to locate authenticity only with those who produce traditional art is to deny the existence, history and experience of those like Gadé. Gadé vehemently opposes being forced into a defined category: "Now", he writes, "we cannot place our identity in a fixed area, as there are too many things that have happened." This comment, which he made regarding a painting he had created depicting the arrival of the first train to Tibet in July 2006 (see image opposite), is a strident reminder to those considering how to define a 'Tibetan' or 'Tibet'. The issue of authenticity does not torment the artists themselves, it seems, but more so those who want to confine Tibetans into certain constructed and constricted identities.

How else can we explain the silence with regard to the works of, for example, Kalsang Lamdark, a Tibetan artist born in India, raised in Switzerland and trained in the United States? Lamdark is one of the few Tibetan artists who expresses himself through multimedia installations. His works are articulations of his many understandings of what it is to be a Tibetan, a Swiss and an artist; the multiple layers of his identity are at

the centre of his artistic vision.

Nobody seems to be



Gadé's "New Scripture"

interested  
in discussing

Lamdak's work in the context of contemporary Tibetan art, however. In this case, is authenticity vested only located in those who live within Tibet, or is Lamdark culturally too close and therefore of no interest?

Whether their works are produced inside or outside of Tibet, these artists are breaking away from what is commonly known and presented as Tibetan art. Their work, however, reflects an important aspect of contemporary Tibetan culture, and merits careful consideration. They represent, after all, the present state of Tibet and its people. ▲



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# Southasia, SAARC and the world

In early April, India takes over a young-adult SAARC – one nearly ready to assert its identity.

BY NIHAL RODRIGO

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who assumes the SAARC chair in April, has spoken of the importance of assessing Southasian regional cooperation “in the larger Asian context”. The implications here are twofold. First, Southasians must critically assess our own achievements within SAARC, measured against those of other Asian regional groups. Second, SAARC needs to engage more actively with such groups for wider mutual benefit.

The prime minister’s message this past December on the 21st anniversary of SAARC’s founding spoke of opportunities to “re-claim our legacy of interconnectedness to restore the natural exchange of goods, people and ideas that have characterised our shared Southasian space.” Clearly the objective envisaged was not to install the type of central control or conformity over the region as was imposed in colonial times, but rather to enhance connectivity within Southasia in areas where

such links have been obscured and obstructed – the reasons for which have

been identified, but perhaps not adequately addressed.

At various times during SAARC’s adolescent years, bilateral political issues, as well as economic disparities and different approaches to development, acted as constraints to collective action. At the 14th Summit in New Delhi on 3-4 April, both the larger Asian context and the complex mosaic of bilateral relations within the region will have an impact on the extent of collective success that can be achieved.

In realistic terms, contentious bilateral issues cannot be ignored, as national interests, real as well as perceived, have obvious direct political impact at domestic levels for governments. Happily, however, in the current Southasian context such issues are being dealt with pragmatically – being at least managed, if not settled. At any rate, they are not currently posited as obstacles to discussing issues of a regional nature, nor are they holding up SAARC summits. The meeting of the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan, for example, which concluded on 14 March in Islamabad, was described as “fruitful and positive”, “a watershed” for Indo-Pakistani relations. In the past, faltering Indo-Sri Lankan dealings, for instance, have indeed caused complications for summits and led to their delay. The 6th Summit in Colombo was a single-day meet, although it did eventually establish comfort levels in the relationship between the two countries, as well as reach a major decision on establishing the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation.

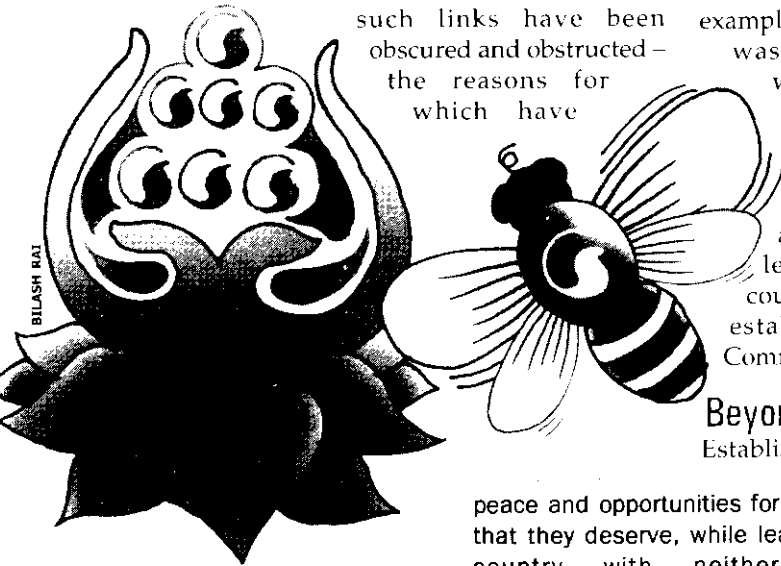
## Beyond the borders

Establishing deeper, more substantial linkages with

peace and opportunities for progress that they deserve, while leaving the country with neither basic infrastructure nor services, nor even the benefits of institutional memory enjoyed by most of its neighbours. As Afghanistan works to build itself up anew in the face of continuing insurgency, the editors, together surely with the rest of Southasia, hope that involvement in the network inherent to a regional association will help in the Afghan quest for permanent security and prosperity.

entrance into an organisation that has long missed its presence. We look forward to the formal entrance of this old friend as indicative of Afghanistan’s true return to the region, after having been sealed off for some thirty years. With the presence of Afghan representatives in governmental and non-governmental forums in years to come, we will surely see added perspective to conversations on pressing matters of security, development, modernisation, diplomacy and cultural transformation.

We celebrate, too, Afghanistan’s



## Welcome, Afghanistan!

*Himal Southasian* would like to be among the first to welcome Afghanistan into its formal membership of SAARC. Three decades of occupation, war, autocratic regimes and ethnic and political conflict have kept from Afghanistan and its citizens the



other regional entities and individual countries outside Southasia was particularly slow in the early years of SAARC. The argument was that it was essential first to achieve greater cohesion within the association, and to consolidate its programmes within the acknowledged SAARC framework, before reaching outwards. The 10th Summit in Colombo eventually noted proposals for developing cooperation between SAARC as an institution and individual states outside the region. Despite this, however, there was some initial rejection, later melting into reservations, about inviting high-level political officials (such as the US assistant secretary of state) to speak at SAARC forums on their political views and interests in the association.

By 1993, however, SAARC and Japan had reached a pragmatic agreement for the establishment of a special bilateral fund to finance select programmes, avoiding any political involvement. A similar agreement was signed between SAARC and the European Commission three years later for exchange of information, training programmes, technical assistance, trade relations and other activities. The Canadian International Development Agency did the same in 1997 to work on poverty alleviation, trade relations and projects for tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS control. Meetings between SAARC and ASEAN ministers also commenced in 1997 during the UN General Assembly in New York, and have been held regularly ever since. Ultimately, SAARC has cooperation agreements with 19 UN and other multilateral and regional organisations.

During a hiatus in high-level political meetings in SAARC following the 6th Summit in Colombo in 1991, a vaguely defined distinction evolved between SAARC as an organisation and Southasia as a region of seven different countries. At a time when SAARC political meets were not possible due to bilateral difficulties, this enabled close, specialised interactions between ministers and other leaders in the region on the grounds of 'Southasian' rather than 'SAARC' meetings. Likewise, agreements signed with UN agencies such as the WHO, UNICEF and UNDP permitted conferences of 'Southasian ministers' on such focused topics as poverty alleviation, child welfare and health – minus the SAARC logo on their identity cards. Apart from their value in promoting regional cooperation in specialised areas, the conferences also provided opportunities for informal, closed-door, ministerial-level meetings among Southasian leaders.

The Southasian corporate sector, impatient with the political constraints on high-level meetings in SAARC, established a series of practical working relations within itself, which have acted as pressure points on governments to move more quickly on economic cooperation. In fact, the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade established the South Asia-China Economic Forum in December 2004, which

functions well. Similarly strengthening the Southasian nexus through practical dialogue and action in specialised areas were the SAARC 'recognised bodies' and apex organisations of regional professionals. The government-private sector partnership is well entrenched in the Southasian political lexicon, and support of professional groups has become an important aspect of governance in the region.

## The observers

China indicated its interest in seeking some form of association or observer status with SAARC sometime after the 10th Summit, in Colombo in 1998. At the 11th Summit, in Kathmandu, the matter was considered at length, particularly the manner in which China (and others seeking status in SAARC) could participate in the association's activities, and the extent of their engagement in any decision-making. At the summit in Dhaka in 2005, regional leaders welcomed and "agreed in principle with the desire" of China and Japan to be observers.

Currently, China enjoys excellent bilateral relations with all Southasian countries – although some are perceived as being more excellent than others. China's economic rise has long been spoken of as an opportunity rather than as a threat. Beijing has established institutional linkages with virtually all of the world's regional organisations – including ASEAN, the European Union, the Arab League, the African Union and Latin America. China also opened a strategic dialogue with the US in 2005. In the meantime, however, SAARC has been a notable exception. China's foreign policy is directed to ensure a peaceful and stable environment both in Asia and globally, which would in turn permit China's economy to develop without disruption. Towards this end, Deng Xiaoping spoke of "hiding one's capacity while biding one's time". As such, China today retains a modest image, describing itself as a developing country despite being a nuclear power, a space power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the fourth largest economy in the world.

At a conference on Afghanistan held in London in February 2006, China's Foreign Minister, Li Zhaoxing, proposed a regional road network to link China and SAARC countries, including the organisation's newest member, Afghanistan. He also identified security as "the key to success in regional cooperation", and referred to the three evils of terrorism, extremism, and separatism (which, incidentally, Sri Lanka and China have in several communiqués pledged to fight against). Li gave priority to combating these threats through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in which India, Pakistan and Iran have observer status, and in which Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal seek the same.

China's relations with India, the largest of SAARC's member states, have steadily improved. Prime Minister Singh has said that after years of Western domination,



"together with China [India can] reshape the world order". Dialogue is proceeding, and Sino-Indian border disputes are being settled outside the glare of publicity. The manner in which the larger SAARC relationship with China is to proceed remains to be determined. Given the extensive bilateral dealings Beijing has with virtually all the Southasian states, however, China's relationship with SAARC should not be less than the sum total of these individual bilateral ties.

It is expected that once the parameters of the future relationship between China and SAARC have been worked out, a study would need to be undertaken of the areas in which cooperation can be mutually beneficial in what Chinese officials call a 'win-win situation'. Given the varied nature of the bilateral relations China has with individual Southasian states, the regional equation will need to move into areas that do not affect existing bilateral relations. Most recently, at the sessions of the National People's Congress, which ended on 16 March, China acknowledged the massive problems it faces given the growing disparities in the country. Poverty alleviation, of course, remains a prime and common concern of all SAARC countries and of China.

Disparities continue to abound among SAARC's member states as well, not only with respect to population, economic and military strength, but also in terms of criteria such as standing in the UN Human Development Index (HDI). These tend to help shape the relationship each Southasian country has with

countries outside the region. In Sri Lanka (which enjoys the highest HDI rating of any regional country), President Mahinda Rajapakse's economic vision seeks to achieve a balanced economic development benefiting all segments and areas of society, particularly comparatively disadvantaged rural areas. This could be termed as an essential corrective measure of localisation in a period of globalisation.

China, meanwhile, has been complemented by the UN Development Programme for moving 300 million people out of poverty in a relatively short time as "one of mankind's greatest achievements", and is now focusing added attention on marginalised rural areas. Academic institutions such as Sichuan University have already begun to hold seminars and workshops with Southasian diplomats and experts on poverty-alleviation programmes.

Of particular note is the proliferation of linkages that individual SAARC members have with extra-regional entities. India, for example, has multiple identities. Apart from SAARC, it has links with ASEAN and with states such as Japan, Korea, China and many others. While maintaining its own identity, SAARC as a regional organisation needs to venture its team onto a larger playing field – for the moment, at least into the greater Asian context, if not beyond. The observer status granted to SAARC by the UN General Assembly would be one avenue for the association to open wider its windows to breezes from outside Southasia – without, of course, being blown off its feet.

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# The collective opportunity of economic integration

An economically integrated Southasia that is at the same time open to the rest of the world would not only respond to the aspirations of its peoples for prosperity and peace, but could also be a major anchor for global economic stability.

BY SULTAN HAFEEZ RAHMAN

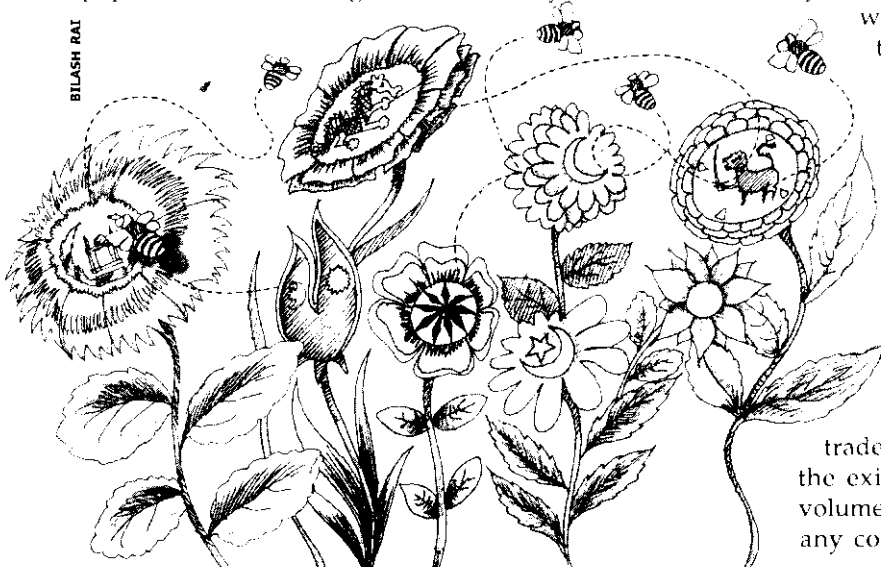
Over the past decade, globalisation and Asia's impressive economic performance, driven mainly by strong GDP growth in China and India, have created an unprecedented environment for the growth of intra-regional trade. Pakistan and Bangladesh have also registered impressively high growth rates, accompanied by significant reduction in poverty levels in both countries. All countries of Southasia have attempted – and, in some cases, succeeded – in concluding free trade agreements (FTAs) with each other. Significantly, the Southasian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) also took effect last year. Southasia is the world's fastest-growing region; over the past decade, its GDP growth has exceeded 7.5 percent. The political environment for regional cooperation and integration has improved markedly, and is reflected in SAARC's Islamabad and Dhaka Summit declarations. In addition, political pronouncements by Southasian leaders, coupled particularly with events of the past year, have raised expectations that the region could finally, to borrow a term from cricket, 'go for a six'.

While such are the expectations based on realistic appreciation of economic and political trends, there is no doubt that for the moment the economic advance does not touch all, nor is the trade scenario very rosy. While Southasia accounts for 23 percent of the world's population, its share of global GDP is only around two

percent. In 2005, Southasia's share in world trade was only 1.5 percent, one quarter of Southeast Asia's share. Exports of goods and services accounted for only 19 percent of the region's GDP in 2005. Of this, only 6.7 percent was due to services, while the services sector as a whole accounted for more than half of Southasia's GDP. Foreign direct investment (FDI), meanwhile, is still only one percent of region-wide GDP.

Trade and investment flows have played a crucial role in the economic integration of other regions of the world, and they have the potential to do the same in Southasia. The realities on the ground with respect to trade among the region's neighbours are, however, still sobering; left to themselves, they could continue to deter regional economic integration. In terms of intra-regional trade and investment in goods and services, Southasia lags far behind other regions. Intra-regional trade here amounts to only 4.9 percent of total trade, compared to almost 24 percent in Southeast Asia. The ratification of SAFTA on 1 January 2006 did mark an important milestone for the SAARC organisation, and it stipulates that SAARC will reduce customs tariffs on goods to 0-5 percent by 2016. However, that the trajectory tariff concessions would take could not be agreed upon ahead of the upcoming 14th Summit in Delhi on 3-4 April has had a dampening effect on the cheerleaders for SAFTA, and on the new 'spirit'. Notably, even after SAFTA takes full effect, a complex web of obstacles to trade in the form of non-tariff barriers will remain.

There have been several studies on the economic gains that would accrue from SAFTA. Most indicate significant advantages to both India and 'smaller' countries, particularly Bangladesh and Pakistan. However, there is much variation across studies in the magnitude predicted for these advantages. Furthermore, these SAFTA gains are not large in either absolute or relative (to total exports) terms, because most models used in the free-trade policy simulations are constrained by the existing parameters – the current small volume of trade among these countries. As such, any computation of the response of trade to





rapid GDP growth and liberalisation based on these volumes would not do justice to the potential impact from SAFTA.

The empirical results of such studies are therefore moot. Any serious investigation would consider the long-term, dynamic impacts of trade liberalisation. The evidence from existing regional trading arrangements in different parts of the world, not least within the ASEAN countries of Southeast Asia, clearly demonstrate that strengthening economic integration via freer trade is not a zero-sum game in the long run. A freely trading Southasia, supported by a liberal investment regime, would permit both restructuring of the existing production structures and specialisation along lines of comparative and competitive advantages, and yield significant benefits to most of the region's countries. In the early phases of implementing such an arrangement, some of the smaller and narrowly based economies, as well as certain economic activities and socioeconomic groups, will need protection. In other words, not only may revenue losses due to tariff drawdown be required, but so too would social protection due to job losses. However, investment flows into those countries could be counted upon to spark growth and employment-creation in the longer term.

## Deepening SAFTA

As the first step towards the grand vision of a Southasian Economic Union, not only will the present impasse in SAFTA have to be overcome, but much bolder action will need to be taken on a broader front to create a Southasian free trade area.

Deeper integration in trade and investment in goods requires, most immediately, an accelerated phasing out of non-tariff barriers, other than quantitative restrictions such as import restraints, technical requirements, inconsistent and lengthy customs procedures, and complicated documentation requirements – all of which currently prevent the easy flow of goods and services across the frontiers of Southasia. At the moment, trade documentation can take up to 20 days; import or export of goods can take up to 60 days to see fruition; an inordinate proportion of goods shipped in Southasia are inspected, against a world standard of 5-15 percent; and cumbersome procedures alone can cost 15 percent of the traded goods. Little wonder, then, that here in Southasia, trade-transaction costs, a key determinant of economic efficiency, are the highest in the world, barring a handful of regions such as Africa. High transaction costs distort economic incentives for trade in Southasia, and lower productivity.

The issue of non-tariff barriers is well known; indeed, SAARC's 2005 Dhaka Declaration emphasises that "parallel initiatives for dismantling of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers" are necessary, and calls for "expeditious action on conclusion of agreements on

mutual recognition of standards, testing and measurements with a view to facilitating intra-regional trade."

The benefits of removing non-trade barriers can be substantial. Preliminary research indicates that the trade benefits of improving port efficiency and the customs environment in Southasia are several times greater than the trade effects from reducing tariff barriers. Improvements in trade-facilitation measures, such as harmonisation of customs procedures and systems, can yield benefits similar in magnitude to those of non-tariff barriers. According to official statistics, while improving port efficiency would increase bilateral trade significantly between, for instance, Bangladesh and both India and Sri Lanka, it would increase by a lesser degree between India and Sri Lanka. This is because the initial port efficiency level of Bangladesh is much lower, and hence the improvement is greater; since the port efficiency levels of India and Sri Lanka are much closer to the world's average, the improvements are smaller. Similar patterns are seen for improvements in customs environments – increases in trade are greater for countries that initially had lower levels of efficiency. Clearly, therefore, a significant advance can be achieved by simply improving procedures, before even getting into the lowering of tariffs and the removal of non-tariff barriers.

Southasia has a strong comparative advantage in its services sector, which accounts for a substantial and growing share in the region's total output – 53.3 percent in 2005. However, due to the lack of research on services trade policy and the limited availability of data on international trade in services, policymakers have limited knowledge on how liberalisation in trade in services and investment should proceed. Liberalisation of trade in services is in many ways different from that of trade in goods. Barriers that restrict the crossborder movement of goods are rarely similar to the restrictions on crossborder mobility of services. For instance, many services transactions require physical proximity, and therefore physical mobility of providers and users is essential. Barriers to trade in services are often more complicated than tariffs, and may take the form of regulations, standards, capital and labour restrictions, as well as other policy measures that are difficult to quantify.

Broadening the current SAFTA agreement beyond trade to include investment is equally important. Evidence from other regional groupings shows that investment flows play at least as significant a role as trade in promoting integration of economies. To recall, investments from Japan had a crucial impact on the economic interdependence and integration of ASEAN. Allowing freer flows of investment within Southasia will foster country-specific economies of scale, which can be exploited on a regional scale. As a result, more fundamental structural change of the region's



economies will take place. While free trade alone will yield gains, these are unlikely to be great. However, dynamic long-term effects can be significant, particularly if combined with aggressive trade-facilitation measures, removal of non-tariff barriers and, in particular, liberalisation of the investment regime. The full realisation of the gains of freer trade and investment would also require continuous and massive investment in physical infrastructure to connect the region more efficiently. (Though related to trade, physical connectivity through air, rail and road routes is a subject in its own right, and outside of the scope of this article.)

## Cars and textiles

To undertake external sector reforms at a more realistic pace, and to make these more politically feasible, it may be prudent initially to focus on exploring the potentials of priority industries, where more-immediate and specific interventions, such as removal of non-tariff measures, can be implemented more easily. Priority sectors could be selected on the basis of an analysis of comparative advantage and strong potential for long-term economic growth and structural change. Focusing reforms on a limited number of priority sectors could increase the chances of success, permitting the positive results to be used to demonstrate the significant economic benefits of trade and investment liberalisation among Southasian countries. This would be a 'showing by doing' approach, and would help to build mutual confidence and trust.

The Southasian textile sector, for example, has strong potential for developing a regional value and production chain. Given that most Southasian countries are large exporters of intermediate and finished clothing and textile goods, the region as a whole could gain greatly if the countries were to cooperate strategically to enhance efficiency, improve product quality and thereby increase value. As India shares borders with most Southasian countries, has proven capability in marketing, and has economic linkages with the major apparel-importing countries, it could become a hub for spurring the growth of intra-industry trade in the region. With its central location and size, India could also serve as an assembly and exit point of high-value Southasian goods (as well as services) for both domestic and international markets. Intra-industry trade could also be boosted by greater crossborder foreign direct investment. For lower-value and specialised textile products, Bangladesh, Pakistan or any of the other smaller countries could become the hub.

The automotive sector also has the potential to develop as a regional priority sector. Several crucial ingredients are already in place for this to happen. Automotive manufacturing is a complex, multi-tiered production process that involves assembly of a large number of components. The assembly complexity spans the entire range, from simple mechanical components

to complex electronic parts. Hence, a degree of specialisation for each of the countries is feasible without entering into debilitating direct competition. Furthermore, advances in production technology allow for the geographical spread of assembly of parts and components to locations where economies of scale can be used optimally. Unlike in earlier production technologies, it is no longer necessary to geographically concentrate the entire assembly activity in one geographical location. The current and potential size of the market for automotive products makes it more worthwhile for manufacturers to optimally exploit economies of scale and comparative advantages for each of the countries. Incidentally, in order to fully benefit from scale economies and sub-regional specialisation, it may also be appropriate for Southasian car manufacturers – in the wake of Chinese competition – to broaden the market from the sub-regional to the wider Asian or even global level.

As other successful regional cooperation and integration initiatives have demonstrated, regional cooperation in trade and investment benefits all countries. Focusing on and recognising the longer-term and dynamic benefits of regional integration helps to eliminate the anxiety that Nepal's gain, for example, would be offset by India's loss – ie, that there is not much to be gained from such cooperative economic arrangements, or that only the small neighbours would gain. The long-term approach acknowledges that benefits will accrue to all members of the regional group, irrespective of their size. While static benefits for the larger countries in trading with the smaller countries may seem limited, the longer-term dynamic effects from integrating with smaller neighbouring countries are substantial. For smaller economies, exploiting their comparative advantages in specific phases of the regional production chain will yield significant benefits while boosting intra-regional trade, investment and integration with the neighbouring country. Some analysts have also pointed out that regional economic integration, driven by more free trade and investment, could have substantial gains for India's border states, some of which are among the poorest in the country.

The peace dividends of a more economically integrated Southasia, as exemplified by the European experience, could be enormous. Peace and stability in the region would spur the 'neighbourhood effect' in foreign direct investment; after all, the rest of the world views Southasia as a region, and events in India's neighbourhood are likely to influence FDI decisions. An economically integrated Southasia that is at the same time open to the rest of the world would not only respond to the aspirations of its peoples for prosperity and peace, but could also be a major anchor for global economic stability. Globalisation is an inexorable process, and the smart thing for Southasia would be to deal with it collectively, as a region. ▲



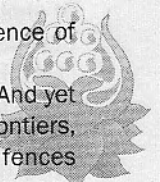
# 18 questions, Dr Singh!

*The editors of Himal believe that India's chairmanship of SAARC, beginning the SAARC Summit of 3-4 April, is a good opportunity to strike a firm blow for Southasian regionalism. It was important to ask questions about India's understanding of regionalism, and so we sent off 18 questions to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. We also received a level of assurance that the answers would come through, but they have not as yet. We though readers of Himal might like to see the questions.*

- Editors

## Questions for Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India:

- 1 We have begun to see an acceptance of the term 'Southasia' in the Indian discourse, which was not there before. Do you believe that the Indian government and intelligentsia are today more aware of the need for Southasian integration than they were, say, a decade ago? What do you think has led to this change?
- 2 India is not only large in every sense, but it borders every other country in the region while few of the others adjoin each other. What kind of regional doctrine would you like to propound to address the asymmetry of Southasia as a regional block?
- 3 Talk of Southasian regionalism is seen with suspicion by some, as a part of India's attempt to economically overwhelm its neighbours. Others see regionalism as a ganging-up by the smaller neighbours against India. How do you react to these extreme propositions?
- 4 What do you feel are the common challenges and priorities for the countries of Southasia, which an active regional framework can help tackle? Is there any prospect for common planning and implementation for social and economic development of the region as a whole?
- 5 Some say that regionalism's direct impact will be not by way of development programmes, but through economic growth that will touch all 1.4 billion people of the region. Would you agree?
- 6 We learn that 'interconnectivity' is what the Indian government hopes to push for as a way of promoting regional integration, even as India takes on the chairmanship of SAARC. What are the specific steps you intend to take towards this goal?
- 7 Which comes first, economic integration or political engagement? Can building roads, rail networks, power grids and other infrastructural links across borders achieve integration in the absence of political engagement?
- 8 You have spoken of making borders irrelevant. And yet it is India that is promoting the hardening of frontiers, with thousands of kilometres of barbed-wire fences along its eastern and western borders. How do you see the process of dismantling beginning, even as fences are in the process of being put up?
- 9 Till now, Southasian regionalism has been limited to relationships between the national capitals. Do you see a need to expand outwards from capital-centric regionalism? Should not India allow its constituent states, which may be direct beneficiaries of regional integration, to communicate more easily across international frontiers?
- 10 The India-Pakistan rivalry is said to keep all Southasia hostage. Do you think that the relationship is improving, and if so, how do you see this impacting the rest of the region?
- 11 How do you react to General Musharraf's decision not to attend the SAARC summit? Does it affect the cause of regionalism that a bilateral matter is impacting on a regional summit?
- 12 If there were one matter that has the region as a whole waiting for resolution, it would be that of Kashmir. What can you tell the Southasian audience about the prospects for resolving the Kashmir matter in the coming year?
- 13 New Delhi's relationship with Dhaka is fraught with tension, and this is reflected in India's inability to buy Bangladeshi natural gas. How would you proceed to develop the relationship, and overcome suspicions in Dhaka about Indian intentions?
- 14 The development of Sri Lanka-India economic links is held out as an example for other bilateral relationships in Southasia. What is so significant about this relationship that it is to be emulated?
- 15 Pakistan may be a different case. But how does India deal with the perception that it influences the domestic politics of its other smaller neighbours?
- 16 Many observers in the region notice a selectivity in India's engagement with the neighbours. For example, it was laudably supportive of the Nepali people's fight for peace and democracy, but has played a hands-off role in the Bhutani refugee crisis for more than a decade. How do you find a balance between principle and practicality?
- 17 How do you visualise the broader Southasian region? While Afghanistan has been included in SAARC recently, Burma and the Tibet Autonomous Region have also had close economic and cultural ties with Southasia throughout history. Is there a need to look at this larger area when thinking regionally, so that we are closer to the historical evolution of our region?
- 18 India takes over as chair of SAARC soon. What are the specific steps you plan to take to rejuvenate the organisation during India's chairmanship?





# Prospects for energy integration

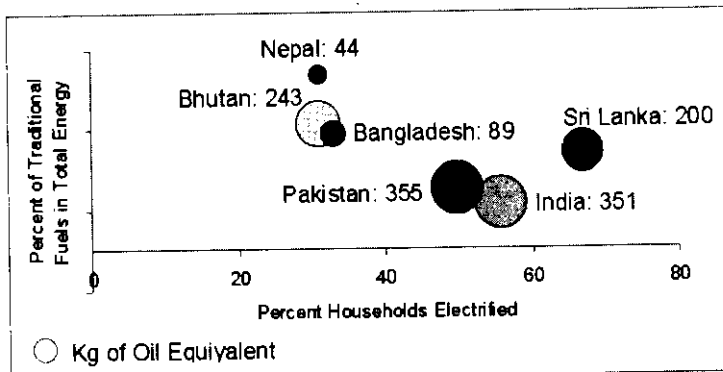
New economic realities mean that ideas for regional energy integration that were previously thought of as outlandish could soon become realistic options.

BY BISHAL THAPA, AMIT SHARMA  
AND RASHIKA GUPTA

Regional energy integration has long been a pie in the Southasian sky. And like other grand visions that fail to materialise, the blame for this lack of success has fallen on geopolitics. But the traditional vision for energy integration was impractical, regardless of geopolitics or trade barriers. It was based on the premise that the very existence of energy resources in each of the Southasian countries provided adequate incentives for trading. The quantity of resources available in the Subcontinent, however, is not great enough to justify the costs of transportation within the region. In fact, it is in this very inadequacy of resources that the key can be found to regional energy integration. All of Southasia's countries would benefit by combining their much-needed energy imports and distributing power through a common grid. Luckily, the new economic and political landscape of the Subcontinent today makes this a real possibility.

These are prosperous times for Southasia. Since 2000, regional economic growth has consistently averaged well over five percent, in spite of the political uncertainty and conflict in many parts of the region. India has set a blazing course at over nine percent for this fiscal year. Growth trends also reflect a deepening in the shift from agriculture to services and manufacturing. Increasingly, services and manufacturing sectors are driving economic growth.

Figure 1



Source: "Regional Energy Security For South Asia: Regional Report," Energy For South Asia, SARI/Energy Program.

Sustained economic growth and the change in its driving forces have altered the political constituency of energy markets. Demand now pits increased energy security against increased energy access. Southasian countries have some of the lowest per-capita commercial energy consumptions in the world, reflecting both limited energy commercialisation and low levels of electrification (see Figure 1).

Policymakers have typically sought to increase energy consumption through increased electrification, and almost all of the region's countries currently have an explicit policy of improving access to electricity. Both India and Bhutan have ambitious goals of electricity for all by 2020. Bangladesh's poverty-reduction strategy seeks to extend transmission lines to all villages. Pakistan intends to reach another 40,000 households within the next year. And Sri Lanka intends to electrify 75 percent of its households by 2010.

Policies on improving energy access were created at a time when economic growth was much more modest, oil prices were lower, and it seemed as if there was always going to be enough resources to simultaneously meet the dual objectives of growth and access. Now, the rising cost of energy, the vulnerability of supply links and the increasing scarcity of energy resources mean that somebody will have to do without. The trade-off between energy-for-growth and energy-for-access has now become visible.

Energy shortages are seen as the key impediment to sustaining today's high levels of economic growth – particularly in services and manufacturing sectors that require uninterrupted energy supply. The need to secure supplies and enhance supply-infrastructure has created a new political constituency for energy demands that rallies around the need for energy security. While an approach to energy that emphasises access could tolerate gaps in supply so long as the supply-infrastructure exists, energy security requires uninterrupted supply. The emergence of energy security as a national objective in Southasian countries has thus reshaped the demand for energy away from the focus on domestic supply-infrastructure for improved access, and towards an increased security of supply.

The emphasis on energy security is best reflected in India's current global grab for energy. ONGC Videsh – a wholly owned subsidiary of India's largest oil and gas producer (ONGC) and one tasked with the sole purpose of acquiring productive assets abroad – has secured several oil and gas 'blocks' worldwide. The company has a mission to acquire 60 million tonnes per annum of equity oil and gas by 2025. India's overseas investment in oil fields is projected to reach USD 3 billion within the next few years. Several Indian companies, including Tata and Jindal Stainless, have sought to acquire coalmines in Indonesia and Australia.

Energy-security concerns of other countries in the region are reflected in their diversification strategies. Sri Lanka is making a concerted effort to de-link its energy sources



from oil prices, and has announced a venture with India's National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) to build an imported-coal-based plant in Trincomalee. Pakistan has been aggressively seeking to utilise lignite deposits in its Thar region. To reduce its dependence on imported petroleum, Pakistan set up a 100,000 barrels-per-day refinery in collaboration with Abu Dhabi in 2000, and two more are planned. A liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal is planned for Karachi in 2009. Many of these various proposed diversification strategies will no doubt fail to materialise. The important point, though, is that energy-sourcing strategies that seemed outlandish even a few years ago during the era of low oil prices now appear far more feasible.

## Limited trade options

The economic case for regional energy trade based on distribution of energy resources has always been exaggerated, and is even less meaningful under the current demand for energy security. Reserves of primary fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – are located in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, with many of them concentrated in India (see *Figure 2*). Other than India's coal reserves, known fossil-fuel reserves in Southasia are too small to have any trade potential. Indian coal is of poor quality, and transportation over large distances remains uneconomic. In many parts of India, particularly in the coastal south and west, higher-quality coal imports from Australia, Indonesia and South Africa are competitive against domestic coal transported locally. Furthermore, Indian coal production is already overextended and unable to meet even domestic demand.

Prospects for regional energy trade have traditionally focused on bringing hydropower potential from Nepal and Bhutan into India and Bangladesh. After the success of the 1020-megawatt Tala hydroelectric project in Bhutan, which sells electricity to North India, the potential for crossborder hydroelectric trading has often seemed great. What Tala has illustrated is that trading opportunities do exist for isolated projects that add a few hundred megawatts. But the scope for a larger plan to systematically tap the vast hydro potential of the rivers of Nepal and Bhutan in order to meet India's energy demands remains limited, for reasons discussed below.

India's demand for energy, growing at over seven percent annually and facing worsening shortages, can be divided into the long-term 'base-load' demands – which include those for the electricity required to serve the high-growth services and manufacturing sectors – and more short-period 'peak demand'. The base-load demand will largely be met by power generation from coal, and supplemented by gas and possibly nuclear energy, once the Indo-US nuclear agreement becomes operational. The government of India's so-called 'ultra-mega' power-plant scheme, which seeks to push through the construction of five to eight coal plants of 4000 MW each, is an effort to meet base-load demand.

Hydroelectric power from Nepal or Bhutan, because it

is based on less-predictable river flows, is unlikely to provide the energy security needed for meeting base-load demand. This is in addition to the fact that hydro will typically be a more expensive option for meeting that demand. The lack of generation reliability from run-of-the-river hydropower plants also makes them poor candidates for peaking purposes; in order to meet peak needs, a plant must be able to switch on and off efficiently as needed. Storage hydro plants with reservoirs to manage the variations in river flows can serve as 'peaking' plants. The environmental impacts associated with building large storage dams make them difficult to build, however, and practically impossible to finance.

The absence of a transmission grid with enough capacity to bring hydropower from Nepal and Bhutan makes crossborder electricity trading even more challenging. Tala survives because of a dedicated transmission line that connects the plant to demand centres in North India. Only 150 MW of intra-regional transmission capacity currently exists between India and Nepal, though four new lines are currently on the anvil. Creation of a regional transmission grid has long been a key recommendation for improving crossborder electricity trade, and was again raised in the context of the meeting of SAARC energy ministers in Delhi in early March. Such a recommendation, however, misses the dynamics of energy demand. There are many options for transmission expansion in India: east to west, east to north, east to south, west to north and Northeast to north. Without clarity on how hydropower from Nepal and Bhutan would integrate into the Indian supply mix, the case for a regional transmission grid remains weak.

More likely than not, the status quo will remain. Hydropower projects in Nepal and Bhutan will be opportunistically developed in limited number. Dedicated transmission lines will be built to wheel power from these plants to load centres in India. Large-scale development, whereby the hydro potential of Nepal, Bhutan, and north and Northeast India is integrated to serve regional demand, remains unlikely at this stage.

## Integration, not trade

With limited fossil-fuel reserves and constraints on integrating hydro potential, Southasian countries are likely

**Figure 2:** Available energy resources in Southasia

	Coal (mt)	Gas (bcm)	Oil (mtoe)	Hydro (MW)	
				Potential	Utilized
India	91,631	920	740	301,000	29,500
Pakistan	3,100	795	39	40,000	6,500
Sri Lanka	-	-	-	2,000	1,250
Bhutan	-	-	-	50,000	420
Nepal	-	-	-	43,000	527
Bangladesh	724	434	1	775	230

**Source:** "Regional Energy Security For South Asia: Regional Report," Energy For South Asia, SARI/Energy Program. (mt - million tons; bcm - billion cubic metres; mtoe - million tons oil equivalent; MW - mega watt (thousand kW))



to remain significantly import-dependent. Energy demand has been growing steadily, at over five percent for most fuel categories, in line with economic growth. Dependence on imported oil is likely to worsen, thereby decreasing the cost-competitiveness of many industries.

The good thing is that, for the first time, these countries appear to have conceded that energy-import dependence is here to stay. This is the first – and most difficult – step towards a realistic energy-management strategy. The challenge that remains is to figure out how to manage supply vulnerability and price volatility. This is precisely where the new opportunity for energy integration emerges. By pooling together their primary-energy imports, Southasian countries can achieve the scale that they need in order to manage sourcing and supply in such a way as to minimise price volatility and disruptions.

India holds the key to the strategy of regional energy integration. Though all Southasian countries are projected to have high energy-demand growth rates, the region's most populous country commands a major share of regional demand (see *Figure 3*). The region's other countries are individually too small to achieve any scale for efficiency in management or for leverage in bargaining.

The three proposed crossborder natural-gas pipelines are largely predicated on Indian demand volumes. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, covering over 2700 km and projected to cost upwards of USD 7 billion, needs Indian gas markets to make it work. Similarly, the Iran-Pakistan-India and Burma-Bangladesh-India gaslines will be made feasible by Indian consumers. Without Indian demand, these pipelines will not be able to carry sufficient volumes to be economically viable. Spur pipelines to neighbouring countries that branch from these proposed trunk-lines would be an easy way to provide the energy security that these countries so desperately seek (See *Himal February 2007*, "Waiting for neighbourhood gas").

India's pivotal role in regional energy integration is consistent with its growing aspiration to be a global energy-processing hub. The country already has close to 140

million tonnes per annum of refining capacity, sufficient to meet domestic demand for petroleum products. The planned expansion of several existing refineries will mean the consolidation of India's position as a net exporter of petroleum products. Indian private-sector refineries offer better margins than do those in Singapore and West Asia, and are targeting exports as their key growth strategy.

An integrated Southasian energy market, with India as the hub, could afford member countries the opportunity to be more ambitious in their energy planning. Earlier recommendations – including those for a regional strategic petroleum reserve, a pipeline grid for natural gas and other petroleum products, and regional power markets – put aside previously for being too audacious, could well become a reality.

## Geopolitics of liberalised markets

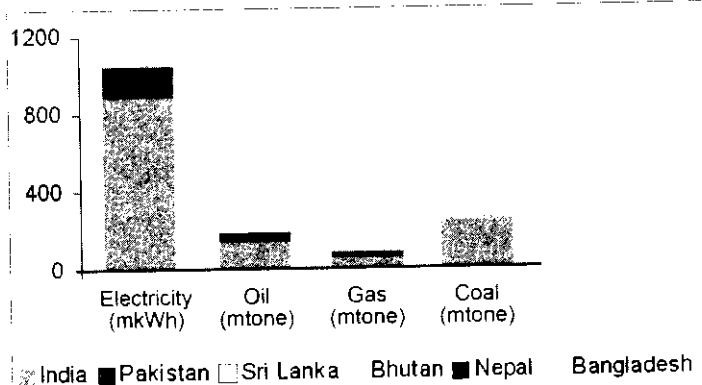
This is not the first time that an opportunity for regional integration has come to rest on India's actions. And, if it remains unexploited, this will also not be the first time that an idea is discarded for just that reason. But today, a new geopolitics makes it likely that this opportunity will not be passed over. Southasian countries have implemented significant structural and regulatory reforms to allow for private participation in energy markets. At the same time, Indian liberalisation has produced corporate players keen to tap into these new openings.

Indigenous energy markets are slowly taking root in all Southasian countries. Private participation in power generation is now allowed throughout the region. This has attracted both domestic and international investments in several countries. Fuel exploration, production and retailing have also opened up to private participation. Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka have been regularly distributing exploration and production licences to private companies for development of oil and gas fields. The liberalisation of energy markets has also been supplemented by structural reforms in many regional countries, aimed at reshaping loss-making public energy companies. Many vertically integrated utilities have been unbundled into separate functional companies, and almost all countries have plans to institute such restructuring.

India remains at the forefront of this liberalisation; except for that of coal, all of its energy sectors have been opened up. In many sectors – especially refining, petroleum retailing, exploration, production and electricity – energy markets have matured considerably. Liberalisation has been matched by structural reforms aimed at disinvestment, restructuring and corporatisation of public-sector companies. India's status as the forerunner makes it easier for other countries to connect with it during the process of regional energy integration.

Many of the emerging indigenous energy markets are still nascent, and will take time to mature. Nonetheless, these markets provide the essential framework that can circumvent government engagement and make it easier to manage the geopolitics. Some of this has already

**Figure 3: Energy demand in 2010**



**Source:** Regional Energy Security For South Asia: Regional Report, Energy For South Asia, SARI/Energy Program. (mtone - million tons oil equivalent; mkWh - million units of electricity.)



India's status as the forerunner makes it easier for other countries to connect with it during the process of regional energy integration.

translated into tangible crossborder engagements. The transmission line connecting Bhutan's Tala hydro project to North India was the region's first successful public-private partnership of its type. Indian Oil operates in Sri Lanka, and is one of the largest retailers of petroleum products in the country. India's National Thermal Power Corporation has signed an agreement with Sri Lanka's Ceylon Electricity Board to develop the country's first imported-coal-based power plant. Tata made a foray into Bangladesh to develop an integrated steel-and-power facility that would have utilised local gas and coal resources, with much of the electricity produced intended for export to India.

Liberalisation has not only made it easier for Indian companies to penetrate neighbouring markets, but has helped other countries solicit Indian partners without having to rely on the patronage of the Indian government. When Nepal recently opened up three of its largest hydro sites for bidding, it was flooded with offers, mostly from Indian companies. Such linkages allow smaller countries to develop commercial relationships directly with companies that are relatively removed from the political pressures of New Delhi.

India's growth and emergence on the world stage has

also transformed the way Indian companies operate. These companies have rapidly internationalised to take advantage of opportunities abroad. Similarly, international companies have also 'Indianised' to do business in India. Most multinational energy companies are now active in India, and use that platform to do business elsewhere in the region. Today, a country in Southasia seeking to do business with India has a plentiful choice of partners. For that country, the differences between an Indian energy company and an international one will be difficult to spot.

This new corporate environment provides the most promising basis for regional energy integration. It offers corporate governance and business ethics that are more consistent with international standards. It provides Southasian countries and businesses an opportunity to integrate into an energy market without fear of Indian political influences, while those countries can also do business without having to be encumbered by geopolitics. Better still, it allows an opportunity for businesses to influence the making of a geopolitics beneficial to the region as a whole. And what does India get in return for making all of this regional energy integration possible? Simple: profits. ▲



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# Near but far: South and Southeast Asia

BY MICHAEL VATIKIOTIS

South and Southeast Asia once enjoyed close trade relations, which ultimately helped to lay the foundations of modern culture and society throughout the mainland and island chains of the latter. Both of the principal religions of Southeast Asia – Islam and Buddhism – arrived via the Subcontinent, usually on ships borne by the monsoon winds. Yet today it is common to assume that Southeast Asia feels a lot closer to China than to India.

Patterns of colonial rule had a lot to do with this protracted separation. Burma was never ‘good enough’ to be incorporated into greater British India, even if it was ruled from Calcutta. South and Southeast Asia were regional definitions concocted by allied military commanders during the Pacific War; never mind that at their nearest points, the islands of Indonesia and India lie less than 100 km apart.

In the modern postcolonial era, the development of South and Southeast Asia has been a study in contrasts. Southeast Asian states tended to be aligned rather than staunchly non-aligned, as with India. They tended to be capitalist, solidly anti-communist and freewheeling, not socialist and tied to tedious socialist Five Year Plans. States in Southasia remain locked in bitter conflict with one another, in contrast with Southeast Asia’s relative (if sometimes fragile) inter-state harmony. For all of these reasons, there has developed a gulf that reflects little of what the two regions actually have in common: Islam, Buddhism as well as Hinduism, the common use of the

English language, and a great love of ancient traditions as well as modern nationalist symbols.

You have to cast back as far as the Bandung Conference, in Indonesia in 1955, to recall a time when South and Southeast Asia last truly chimed and communed on issues of common interest. It was really only after the late Congress Prime Minister P V Narashima Rao visited Singapore in 1994 that India’s more recent Look East policy started taking shape. In the meantime, while trade and other indices of cooperation have grown by leaps and bounds, there has remained a curious paucity of understanding. If the cultural influence of the West is waning, it is being replaced by Shanghai chic, not by Bollywood. Even Southeast Asia’s reflexive bid to escape China’s encroaching embrace has had little tectonic effect on the two regions, which remain physically near but realistically far from one another.

## Wary glances

A major political impediment to this inter-regional relationship has been the reluctance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to embrace Southasia, given all of the latter’s prickly bilateral and security problems. ASEAN officials prefer rounds of golf to red-faced arguments over ‘lines of control’. When some years ago there was debate about how to accommodate the wider Asian region into the newly formed ASEAN Regional Forum – a body expressly designed to discuss an expanded understanding of regional security – there was dismay at the prospect of having Pakistan and India haranguing each other over Kashmir. Southeast Asia does not have the stomach for the Subcontinent’s enduring conflicts – or the enduring memories and passions that fuel them.

When it comes to values, India’s much-vaunted democracy comes up short. Southeast Asia’s more developed countries would like to

see Burma pushed towards progressive political change. Pressure from ASEAN has come to naught, in part because the Rangoon junta can afford to thumb its nose at its fellow ASEAN members, so long as India and China continue to vie for closer ties. When asked why India, the world’s largest democracy, is not interested in applying pressure on the junta to change, South Block mandarins generally say simply that India does not export its ideology. Meanwhile, India can rely on the Burmese army to conduct operations against Naga rebels on the troubled border with Assam.

In the end, there simply is not much empathy between the Subcontinent and Southeast Asia. India and Pakistan, as well as Bangladesh, have all inherited a good deal of the contempt the old Indian Civil Service felt towards Southeast Asia – all malarial and full of Scottish planters gone native. Indian diplomats are inclined to see their careers better served by postings in Washington or Beijing.

Perhaps these long-entrenched attitudes are not changing as quickly as they should. But there are larger dynamics driving the two regions together. Southeast Asia needs to find a counterbalance to China’s enfolding geopolitical and economic embrace. India needs a wider regional arena in which to play the incipient superpower. This explains why Thailand has pioneered attempts to open up a new regional development zone encompassing the Bay of Bengal; it also explains why ASEAN has welcomed India as part of the East Asia Summit process spearheaded by China.

The two regions may never be able to recreate the organic ties of trade and culture that helped establish Southeast Asia’s social and religious framework in the medieval period. But eventually they will have at least overcome the sad legacy of colonial divide and rule. ▲





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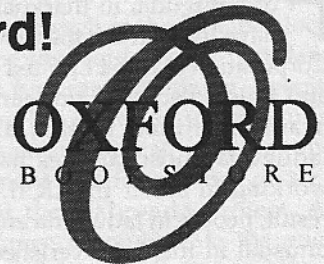
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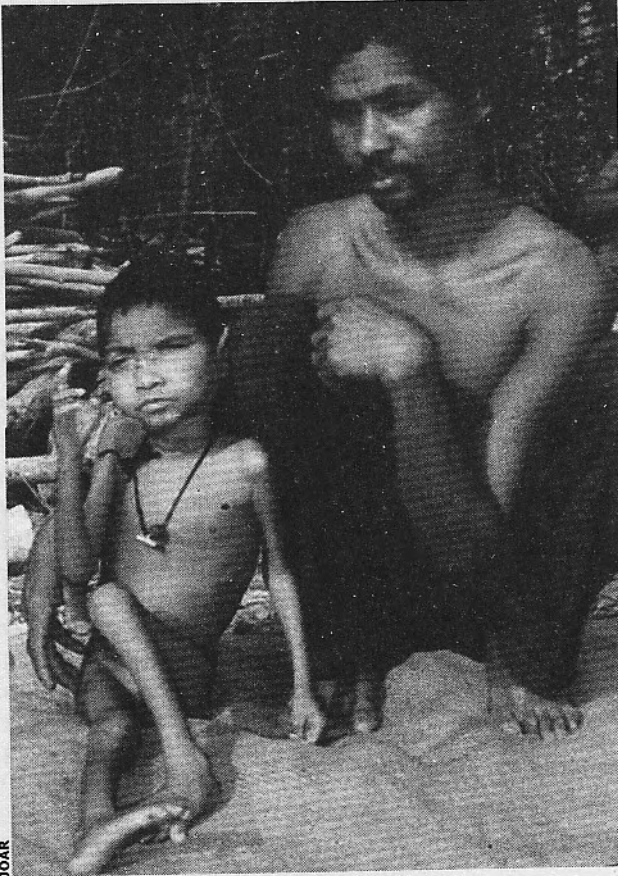
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JOAR

## Jaduguda fallout

Despite the December leak of radioactive material into the rivers and rice paddies of Jharkhand, Indian officials are unwilling to admit that their uranium facilities pose a danger to anyone – least of all the affected local communities.

BY LINA KRISHNAN

For the past four decades, the indigenous Santhals of Jaduguda, in Jharkhand's Singhbhum District, have lived in the massive shadow of the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL). India's ambitious and much-discussed nuclear programme is based on uranium mined in this area. In the villages of Jaduguda, most families have at least one member working in either the UCIL mill or the mines. As a result, people in Jaduguda enjoy a degree of prosperity unusual in this impoverished Indian state.

But it is hard to say that this relationship has been a positive one. Ill health is widespread, and accidents can occur anytime. Indeed, on 24 December 2006, in

Dungridih village near Jaduguda, a pipe burst, discharging radioactive waste into a nearby rivulet. The pipe was being used to move the waste from a UCIL plant to a storage dam. No alarms went off at the plant, nor did anyone from the mill bother to warn the village people about the leak – although some Dungridih villagers did quickly alert UCIL officials. Lethal sludge continued to leach into the water for nine hours, killing fish and affecting nearby and downstream communities that depend on the watershed for both fishing and irrigation. Anil Kakodkar, the head of the Indian Department of Atomic Energy, when he visited Jaduguda in early February, noted only that there had been a "small" leak in the pipeline, and hastened to say that it was of no risk to anyone.

In the wake of the disaster, the Jharkhand Organisation against Radiation (JOAR), a local resistance group set up in the mid-1990s, has demanded that UCIL decontaminate the soil and water. According to Shri Prakash, a local documentary filmmaker and activist, the company has removed some of the sludge, but much of it remains on the banks, covered by mud.

It is still not clear why the pipe burst. Nor did UCIL make any effort, then or later, to provide an alternative supply of water to the affected community. But all this does not surprise the people here. They have a long history of battling UCIL and the fallout of its uranium mining. Although it is something of a monopoly employer and has an overwhelming presence here, official probes have found that UCIL does not observe even routine precautions when it comes to the lives and health of the local people. Workers, for instance, regularly take their uniforms home, to wash them casually at local water sources. This is not so much due to workers being unaware, but because UCIL provides them with no washing facility on site.

Over the last decade, the local and national press has regularly reported the unusually high incidence of ill health in the area, particularly that of congenital deformities in children. Local groups such as JOAR have also attempted to increase the public's knowledge of the situation in Jaduguda. In 1999, Shri Prakash made a film titled *Buddha Weeps in Jadugoda*, which documented diseases in the community, including congenital defects in newborns, sterility in young women, and lung disease in mine and mill workers.

Although UCIL management has denied any link between uranium mining and ill health in the area, in December 1998 the Bihar Legislative Council (Jharkhand at that time was still a part of Bihar) sent its environment committee to look into the situation. The subsequent report laid blame for the ill health of people in the area squarely on UCIL operations, as did an accompanying medical team. Following this, the council ordered the evacuation of 46 families to a minimum of five kilometres away from the site, and



It is still not clear why the pipe burst. Nor did UCIL make any effort, then or later, to provide an alternative supply of water to the affected community. But all this does not surprise the people here.

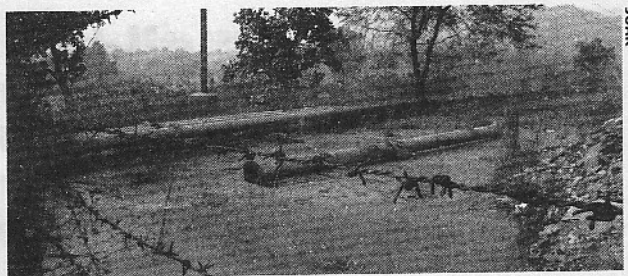
recommended putting up notice boards highlighting the site's hazards.

### Dirty business

What makes uranium mining so hazardous? In a typical extraction process, usable uranium is extracted from the ore-bearing rock, which is ground and then leached with sulphuric acid. The acid picks up the required elements, leaving behind various radioactive waste products, known as tailings. As in similar operations around the world, open ponds are used in Jaduguda to store these tailings. (Dungridih, the site of the recent leak, is occupied by families originally displaced by the construction of such ponds.) Once the pond is created, liquids from the leaching process are left to evaporate; in Jaduguda, these liquids have seeped out and contaminated the area's groundwater. Furthermore, during the monsoon the radioactive slurry regularly overflows the ponds into nearby rice fields. Finally, as the tailings do dry up, a lung cancer-causing gas called radon is released. Being airborne, the radon can be transmitted for many miles, affecting a multitude of people.

In 2000, local grassroots groups conducted a health survey in Jaduguda. The aim was to record the actual public and occupational health status of the uranium mining and milling operations. The survey was conducted in the villages near the tailings ponds, as well as in 'control' villages further away. The survey team found a discernible rise in congenital deformities among people born after the start of mining operations in 1967. In the villages near the UCIL facility, of the nine children who died within a year of birth, eight had congenital deformities. In the control areas, on the other hand, of the six recorded premature deaths, all were due to reasons such as diarrhoea, fever and premature birth. In the nearby villages, 52 men and 34 women had deformities, in contrast to just seven of each in the control areas. The team also recorded extremely high levels of chronic lung disease in UCIL's miners and millers.

None of this should take anyone in power by surprise – neither the UCIL management nor government officials. Jaduguda's is not an isolated story in the realm of uranium mining, either regionally or internationally. Indeed, it is not even unique to the poor industrial regulations of a developing country. In Canada, for instance, two decades of uranium mining in the Elliot Lake area contaminated 80 kilometres of the Serpent



River system, including as many as 10 lakes. In the United States, 22 uranium mills, now abandoned, have left behind an estimated 25 million tonnes of tailings in mostly unsupervised ponds. In these areas, too, uranium mining and milling has been linked to high rates of birth defects. Apart from contamination during storage and recycling of tailings, the experience of these countries has also highlighted the danger of mishaps. In Canada, there have been 30 breaches from tailings dams in the Elliot Lake area alone. The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission admits to at least 15 instances wherein radioactive liquid has been accidentally spilled. In a span of 18 years, there have been two floods, six pipeline failures and seven dam breaks in the US alone.

Following the Dungridih leak, JOAR and other groups have called for the emplacement of inspection mechanisms and procedures to routinely monitor the quality and safety of UCIL's facility, its equipment and working procedures. They have also recommended periodic monitoring of the exposure of local communities to radioactive and hazardous chemical contaminants. Of course, the uranium that originates in Jaduguda retains its risks even after it leaves the area – at nuclear-energy plants, in India's weapons stockpiles, or in tests that endanger unwary communities that inhabit the adjacent spaces, as in Pokhran. For its part, the Indian Department of Atomic Energy denies even the possibility of radiation leaks, declaring that all of its establishments strictly follow procedure, and are monitored regularly.

UCIL is now ready to start mining operations in other areas – Mohuldih, Banduhurang and Baghjanta in Jharkhand, Nalgonda and Kapada in Andhra Pradesh, and in the West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Huge deposits of uranium ore have been discovered in these areas, and UCIL hopes cumulatively to extract up to 3000 tonnes of ore per day. In each of these places, local communities are protesting the requisition of their land and the dangers of its use for uranium mining. Despite this, and notwithstanding the situation in Jaduguda, the uranium-mining industry is bullish in India, and the Ministry of Environment and Forests has given a conditional clearance to the Nalgonda project. As with projects from the 'green revolution' to the push for large dams, uranium mining seems to be another arena where local communities pay the price for national 'progress'.



# Islamabad's gilded cage

With recent attacks within the city limits, Islamabad has been rudely awoken from its slumber. It had better learn to take Pakistan seriously.

BY THEMRISE KHAN

Since late January, the sleepy, custom-built capital of Pakistan has seen a spate of suicide bombings. What was once the safest haven in a conflict-prone political and social zone is now besieged with security forces patrolling the streets, forcing residents of this gilded cage to own up to the reality that suddenly exists within its own borders.

On 26 January, a suicide bomber walked into a staff entrance of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, was intercepted by a security guard, and blew up them both. I was inside the hotel when the blast occurred, cocooned within its opulent surroundings. Had the blast occurred minutes later, I would have been crossing the street in the midst of the carnage. This fortuitous timing did not stop me from witnessing bits of charred flesh lying

scattered on the road, however, as I ran out to join the crowd that had gathered. This was the first suicide bombing to have taken place in Islamabad.

Before there was time to absorb the intensity of the event, a second incident occurred on 6 February at the high-security Islamabad International Airport. Once again, the suicide bomber forced himself into the premises and, during an ensuing gun battle with airport security, detonated his explosive. And again, I was nearly at the scene, having arrived to board a Karachi flight barely an hour earlier.

These events were followed by at least four other bombings in or near Pakistan – including a suicide bombing at a district court in Quetta, and explosions on the Samjhauta Express train, which had been traveling from Delhi to Lahore. The infamous 'they' say that this is all just the beginning.

Personal proximity to two major violent events in Islamabad has brought several issues, both personal and professional, into new context for this writer. The concept of existentiality seems significantly out of place when, at one moment, you sit in a five-star hotel chatting gaily with friends, and the next moment you come across a severed finger lying at your feet. Even more out of place is the fact that this finger belonged either to an unsuspecting security guard, who probably earned less than thirty dollars a month, or to a

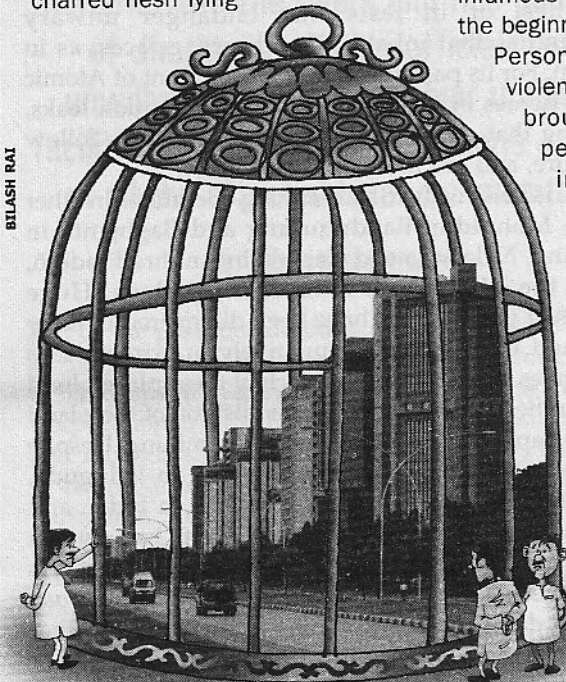
young, co-opted jihadi, brainwashed with notions of religious and political rebellion. Who should one question in such situations – oneself? The West? The ruling elite? It is virtually impossible to answer such questions when standing next to the severed finger of a total stranger.

Pakistan has always been a country of dichotomous extremes. Where else can you find women's rights so abused, yet come across a group of armed, burqa-clad women who forcibly occupy a government-run children's library for days on end? On 21 January, female students from the Hafsa madrassa of Islamabad's Lal Masjid stormed into the library carrying rifles. Their demand was that the government rebuild their mosques – which had been built on illegal land in the first place – and give up plans to demolish another 80 unauthorised mosques around the city. Army troops, rangers and police confronted the women and their thousands-strong group of supporters for days – only to finally give in to the demands. Before the agreement ink had dried, religious groups had begun to rebuild one of the demolished mosques on the same illegal land. Yet again, the so-called moderates had given in to the hardliners.

But that has always been the case, despite General Pervez Musharraf's stance towards the religious right. Indeed, the threat of extremism is not nearly as 'external' as the Foreign Office would have Pakistani society believe. Cracking down on Osama bin Laden is no more of an eyewash for the Pakistani government than it is a cover for the United States' own aims in the game of oil and global power. But the game grows deadlier as reasoning becomes increasingly blurred and the violence starts hitting closer to home.

## 10 km from Pakistan

Islamabad has never been the site of large-scale unrest. The picturesque capital has repeatedly been declared the safest city in Pakistan. Home to the country's political, expatriate and diplomatic elite, Islamabad has long wowed its visitors with its immaculate





boulevards and pristine environs. The city is now the most popular destination for those rich enough to escape the madness of strife-torn and polluted cities such as Karachi and Lahore.

Originally built to hold a population of only a few thousand, Islamabad now has to cater to nearly a million. With one of the highest urban growth rates in the country (six percent per year), land is becoming a scarce commodity, and hills and forests are being bulldozed to make way for roads and underpasses. More than 150 new cars are registered daily in the capital alone. Enormous housing projects are taking over the outskirts of town, and what is left of the centre is being transformed into an avenue of multi-star hotels and parliamentary lodges. Not even the Margalla Hills, the city's landmark mountain range, is being spared – sale of land is soaring as more and more of the rich build their retirement homes on the slopes.

But Islamabad has always been viewed as being located "10 km out of Pakistan". And truly, this massive growth and investment is in harsh contrast to the rest of the country, including the other major urban centres of Karachi and Lahore. More than half of Pakistan's population is illiterate. The maternal mortality rate stands at 500 per 100,000 live births. Overall, some 50 percent of the rural population is considered vulnerable to chronic poverty. As if such indicators were not enough, the threat of militancy has significantly added to foreign attempts to de-link poverty from religious extremism, by implementing programmes attempting to alleviate poverty.

Islamabad is the seat of the major multilateral and bilateral lenders, the key financial and technical drivers of such programmes in Pakistan. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank, the British, Japanese, Canadians – all make their lending decisions seated among the elitist clique of the capital. Whether it is investment in energy and infrastructure, poverty alleviation and gender mainstreaming, or democracy

Whether it is investment in energy and infrastructure, poverty alleviation and gender mainstreaming, or democracy and decentralisation, the world of international development in Islamabad is physically separated from the reality of rural and urban Pakistan.

and decentralisation, the world of international development in Islamabad is physically separated from the reality of rural and urban Pakistan.

Supposedly committed to transforming the country into a progressive and educated society (while always admitting that they have their own agendas), international donors have been firmly caught up within the fundamental dilemmas that now face both Pakistan and their own agenda, domestic and otherwise. Whether it is Tony Blair's new priority of climate change or the US attempt to tackle religious subversion through education, the lending scenario in Pakistan is suddenly unclear and undefined. A major contributor to this is the fact that Pakistanis themselves are unable to define what they need, and the Islamabad location of decision-making does not seem to help.

Ensnared in the 'security' of Islamabad, and security threats notwithstanding, donors prefer investing in 'safe' projects such as micro-credit, health, education and gender training, which have lots to show but little to deliver. Likewise, the arguments put forward by academic pundits that Pakistan's progress depends on democratic political and judicial institutions have been met by the donors with equal failure. The ADB's USD 350 million Access to Justice Programme and its USD 300 million Decentralisation Support Programme have both been rife with controversy since their 2003 inception, and are widely regarded as directionless. Both programmes are loans to the government of Pakistan, which already owes the ADB USD 6.5 billion. Similarly, the World Bank repeatedly and publicly

warns the Islamabad government to clean up its act on many fronts. Yet when World Bank-funded projects lead to massive displacement, the multilateral body withdraws to the shadows of the 'project document'.

Even as the political climate descends into further uncertainty, multilaterals and bilaterals continue simultaneously to chastise Pakistan for its faults and to invest heavily in it. The ADB is currently formulating a three-year, USD 4 billion development aid package – nearly a seven-fold increase over the USD 600 million packages it has offered in the past. The World Bank is likewise ready to offer almost USD 2 billion, to help rehabilitate Pakistan's entire logistical network. Bilaterals such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) have doubled their aid budgets to Pakistan in 2006-07. It is not overly difficult, then, to make sense of this generosity, given that Pakistan is simultaneously branded as a 'terror' threat.

The distance of Islamabad from the country has provided the national power elite a sense of certitude. But being faced with the religious and political psychosis that is suicide bombing and terror threats is something that throws all logic and consideration into flux. The connection between religious extremism and social development is a difficult one to explore. Poverty is either a cause or an effect of violence and extremism; in Pakistan, it is difficult to say which came first. But one thing is certain. Living in gilded cages, as our politicians, civil society and developmentalists do, is not going to help in solving the problem. The residents of this gilded cage have now awoken to a harsh reality. One can only hope that they will remain awake.



# Studies in isolation: The schools of Ahmedabad

Five years after the atrocities of Gujarat, the state's education system is taking youngsters backward, not forward.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEEPA A



In a tiny room with blue walls full of charts about birds, fruits and vegetables, 10-year-old Tamanna sits on the floor, drawing on sheets of paper strategically folded to resemble greeting cards. The room, on the first floor of a modest dwelling in the Siding Service locality of Ahmedabad, for the past seven months has been hosting a learning centre run by the NGO Pratham. "Earlier, we were in the Muslim part of the area," says Kanchanben Rathod, a teacher. "But Hindu children, especially girls, wouldn't come there, so we had to move to this place." Tamanna, whose shy smiles preface her every sentence, interjects: "The Muslim children were troubling us; we were frightened of them. So I stopped going there."

A few kilometres away at Allah Nagar, where vegetable vendors, children and goats jostle for space in the narrow paths of the slum settlement, is another learning centre managed by Pratham. Many of these children, also leaning against blue walls as they open their bags, wear skull caps. Mothers bring little girls, often wailing as they shake their pigtails in defiance, into the classroom, and stop to chat with the teacher. There are no Hindus in this area, and certainly none in the room. Both the children and their mothers speak of their lives inside the slum, having little or no contact with the world that lies beyond their inadequately covered shacks and the dusty, fly-infested lanes outside their homes.

Last November in Ahmedabad, where almost everyone is forced to navigate between real and

imagined boundaries drawn on the basis of religion, a few social workers got together to attempt to bridge the divide between Siding Service and Allah Nagar. They organised a cricket match for the children. That game quickly came to be referred to as the "India-Pakistan" match, says Jigna Rathod, who works with Pratham. "Sometimes, children say such things," she adds. Afterwards, the children traded insults and threw stones, recalls Anjana Parmar, another Pratham worker. Clearly, even a playground could not be neutral terrain, with the scorecard heavy with bias and prejudice before the game could even get underway.

## Mind-boggling borders

A policeman snoozes inside a khaki tent pitched on a lane that forms the 'border' in the Parikshit area of the city. He, and usually his colleagues, are ostensibly here to douse the neighbourhood quarrels that end up taking on communal overtones. Their presence is a forbidding indicator of the omnipresent possibility of clashes between Muslims and Hindus in the area, separated by the 'border' – a term that Ahmedabad's residents mention casually, as if indicating something as mundane as a traffic light that serves as a landmark (See *Himal* October 2006, "Gujarat as another country").

Neelam Mewada lives in Parikshit, and she laughs when asked about the skirmishes. "We've gotten used to it," says the teenager. Neelam went to a school in Shah Alam before the riots of 2002, in which the state government claims about 1000 were killed, while



activists put the number of deaths at around 2000 (mostly Muslim). "I left my studies because the school is in a Muslim area," Neelam says. When localities are identified not according to their physical characteristics but on the basis of the religion of its occupants, it is no surprise that a school can fall out of favour for being on the wrong side of the 'border'.

In a paper on the impact of the 2002 violence on the education of Hindu and Muslim pupils, based on a study of two schools for girls in Ahmedabad, researchers Suchitra Sheth and Nina Haeems wrote about how one expects schools to be spaces where religious differences can be transcended. This proved not to be the case in the schools they studied, however, one a Gujarati-medium school in the Dalit-Muslim neighbourhood of Rajpur, and the other an Urdu-medium school in Shahpur. In a subsequent piece published in April 2006, they wrote: "Even if neighbourhoods are antagonistic, one would imagine that the school could be a site for secular socialisation. The Urdu school of Shahpur of course does not offer such a chance because its students are all Muslims. But we found that the Gujarati school of Rajpur was scarcely different though it has students from both communities." The authors added later: "We asked the girls to name close friends at school and not one Dalit child named a Muslim child and neither did the reverse occur. We found that the Muslim children played in their groups and the Hindus in their own."

Perhaps these children have merely assimilated the ways of the world around them. Fr Fernand Durai, principal of St Xavier's School, Loyola Hall, recalls how he was shocked by the attitude of a few children towards their counterparts from the minority community during the 2002 riots. "Our students have always lived together," he says. "There is no differentiation on the basis of religion, so how did this come up suddenly? It means that the students must have seen or heard something, and they picked it up in no time."

Indeed, several school administrations themselves were leading the harassment of Muslim children. Khurshid Saiyed, a politician affiliated with the Congress party, says that Muslim parents had to withdraw their children from many schools in 2002 because of the threats made by the school authorities. "Their ruse was to tell parents that the children were not performing well and hence were going to be failed. They offered a compromise to the parents: if they took their children elsewhere, they would give them pass certificates." Hanif Lakdawala, director of Sanchetana, an NGO that works in health and education, refers to this as "subtle discrimination". "Schools tell parents that the child will feel isolated in that atmosphere," he explains, "so parents eventually decide they are better off taking their kids elsewhere."

Afroz Baig, who works with local schools on peace-education programmes through the NGO Samerth,



lists various tactics that some authorities have used to disallow Muslim children from attending their schools. "A school at Vejalpur didn't throw out Muslim children, but told their parents that they couldn't guarantee their children's safety," she recalls. "At another school in Paldi, the Bajrang Dal people injured the watchman, and the parents instructed their children not to speak to Muslims. How could one

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## The game quickly came to be referred to as the 'India-Pakistan' match.

survive in that atmosphere?" Baig herself was at the receiving end of such discriminatory practices, when she tried to get her son admitted into a well-known school in Thaltej. "The principal categorically told me that the school had no place for Muslims," she says.

### Chor and police

Near Chandola Lake is a school with an entryway that has been taken over by unruly shrubs. The blue letters that form its name are fading in the sun. This abandoned structure was once the L V Patel High School, run by a Hindu management that decided to pack its bags after the riots, when the area suddenly came to be dominated by Muslims. The school today functions about three kilometres away in a Hindu area.

At one time, Hindus and Muslims went to the same schools and lived in the same neighbourhoods. School managements were never identified by religion. After the riots, however, both communities moved to areas where they found safety in numbers. Says Lakdawala, "The authorities are simply not interested in the children – in areas where there are Dalit and Muslim

students, we have heard high-caste Hindu teachers saying there is no point in teaching these children." If the L V Patel management got around their predicament by moving to a new spot, others chose to shut shop altogether. The management of one Hindu school in Shah Alam sold its school building to a Muslim builder, who plans to renovate it to provide education for Muslims.

Several others from the Muslim community have also come forward to establish their own schools to accommodate Muslim children. Their action is a display of resilience and self-reliance, for the Gujarat government has done little to create or improve educational facilities in Muslim pockets. In areas to which riot victims have moved, such as Vatva and Faisal Park, there are hardly any civic amenities – no water, drainage or electricity. Parents laugh helplessly when asked if they send their children to school. Why would one think of books if there is no livelihood? Unfortunately, schools set up by Muslim trusts may not be the solution. By and large, this new wave of 'educationists' have no experience in education, and tend to place increased emphasis on religious mores and customs in an already segregated atmosphere. This leaves the Muslim pupils doubly disadvantaged.

The textbooks carry forward the theme of alienation. In the Gujarat State Board textbooks, it is not enough to qualify Aurangzeb merely as a ruler; he is always



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Assisting the Director in guiding the senior programme and management team on all financial matters, operational issues and staff development priorities and making timely decisions on all matters of management and administration; Providing creative input into the development and completion of CHRI's research, policy analysis and public education agenda and working closely with the Director in refining the quality of organisation's output; Overseeing programmes, including planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and reporting; Assisting the Director in the fund-raising efforts; Represent CHRI at a senior level; Overseeing and mentoring staff to achieve programme and organizational goals; Assisting the Director in overseeing the functions of London and Africa offices; Liaising with sponsoring organisations and CHRI's governance bodies.

#### Applicant Requirements:

A post graduate degree in a relevant area (law, social science etc.), along with a minimum of 5 years experience in same or similar field. Excellent communication skills, computer skills, knowledge and experience in human rights and strong leadership qualities are required. S/he must be a strategic and global thinker, capable of leading and bringing out the best from an excellent staff. High levels of energy, enthusiasm and commitment to the mission of CHRI are essential.

#### Application Instructions:

Send your CV, contact details of three referees and a cover letter outlining why you are applying for the position and how you would contribute to the organisation to [rc@humanrightsinitiative.org](mailto:rc@humanrightsinitiative.org), or post them to:

The Senior Administrative Officer  
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative  
B-117, Sarvodaya Enclave  
New Delhi - 110017, India

Applications will be accepted until the position is filled. Full information can be found at: [www.humanrightsinitiative.org](http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org)



introduced as a Muslim ruler who was intolerant of other faiths. Hindu mythology is never about myths or legends; it is presented as facts as sacred as the gods whose stories curiously form part of Social Studies textbooks. Exercises for children, mentioned at the end of each lesson, include suggestions to learn more about “daughters of sages”, and the textbooks are full of slant and stereotype.

Such tampering with textbooks is particularly dangerous, says Fr Cedric Prakash of the human-rights centre Prashant. He and several others worked to bring many of these errors to light. “When children learn [these biases], even their games reflect the same thinking,” says Prakash, who recently won the national Minorities Rights Award for 2006. “When they play *chor* [thief]-police, the Muslim is always the *chor* and the Hindu the police. When we used to play, we were both the *chor* and the police on different days.”

Achyut Yagnik, co-author of the 2005 book *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat*, says it is important to see how history is taught in Ahmedabad schools. “The teacher, for instance, will only talk about the destruction of the Somnath Temple [by Muslim kings],” he points out. Influential Hindu sects such as Swaminarayan also run a number of educational institutions, says Yagnik: “More than the Sangh Parivar, they are responsible for Hindutva-isation, at a direct or indirect level.” Pointing to a vicious circle, Yagnik notes that most schoolteachers in these schools are from OBC, tribal or Dalit communities. “They are attracted to the sects, possibly because of a promise of a more meaningful identity in cities and towns. They are conscious that their standing in the Hindu social pyramid is low,” he says. It is in the hope of integration that they become members of the sects, going on to adopt ideologies that encourage Muslim-bashing, a divisive credo that may eventually surface in their classrooms.

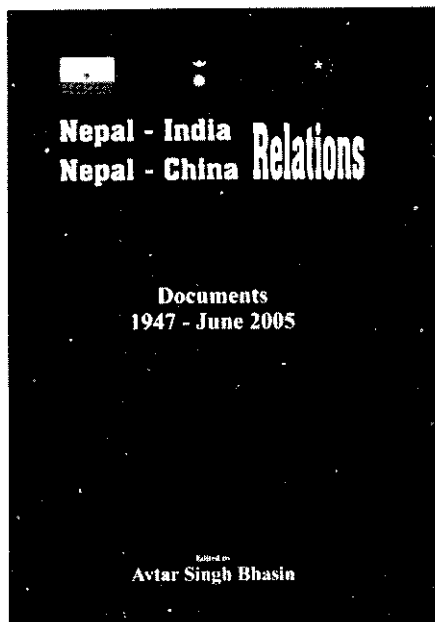
## A visit to Juhapura

In the cloistered spaces of Ahmedabad, it is now entirely possible for a Hindu or Muslim child to grow to young adulthood without meeting a single individual from the other community. It is a vitiated environment that can be exploited to create insecurity and fear. Says Shakeel Ahmad, administrator of the state Islamic Relief Committee’s legal help and guidance cell: “Our big concern is that there is no intermingling of communities because of the segregation that has happened. This alienation will have a terrible impact on the children. They are not in a position to know about each other’s culture and religion and, as a result, their tolerance levels will be low.” Adds Khandadkhan R Pathan, principal of the Republic High School at Lal Darwaja: “Hindu children will easily believe political propoganda against Muslims if they are not provided knowledge. If they know a few Muslims, then they will at least have a broader vision.”

Perhaps all it takes to demystify the dreaded ‘other’

is a simple visit. Lakdawala remembers an incident from an Id Milan programme organised three years ago at Juhapura, often referred to as the largest Muslim ghetto in Gujarat. He remembers: “A friend had brought his eight-year-old son along. The boy knew that the programme was being organised at a school in Juhapura, but on reaching there, he asked, ‘Where is Juhapura?’ My friend told him that this was the place, to which the child replied, ‘But I had heard that Muslim children carry knives; I don’t see that here’.”

Lakdawala talks about the experiences of activist and filmmaker Stalin K, also centred on Juhapura. The Hindu youngsters, mostly from poor economic backgrounds, with whom Stalin worked had particularly vile impressions about the ghetto. Stalin therefore took them on a visit. Says Lakdawala: “They walked around Juhapura for three or four hours. They ate at a bakery there; they enjoyed themselves. Stalin asked them if they saw any difference between their areas and Juhapura, and the boys said no.” The trip would have changed the youngsters’ perceptions about the area and its inhabitants. But, as Lakdawala says, it is not easy to get people to step outside the boundaries they have set for themselves. Trapped somewhere between those invisible barriers, the children of Ahmedabad and indeed all of Gujarat are forced now to live in insulated bubbles, unable to reach out to children on the other side. ▲



**Nepal - India  
Nepal - China Relations**

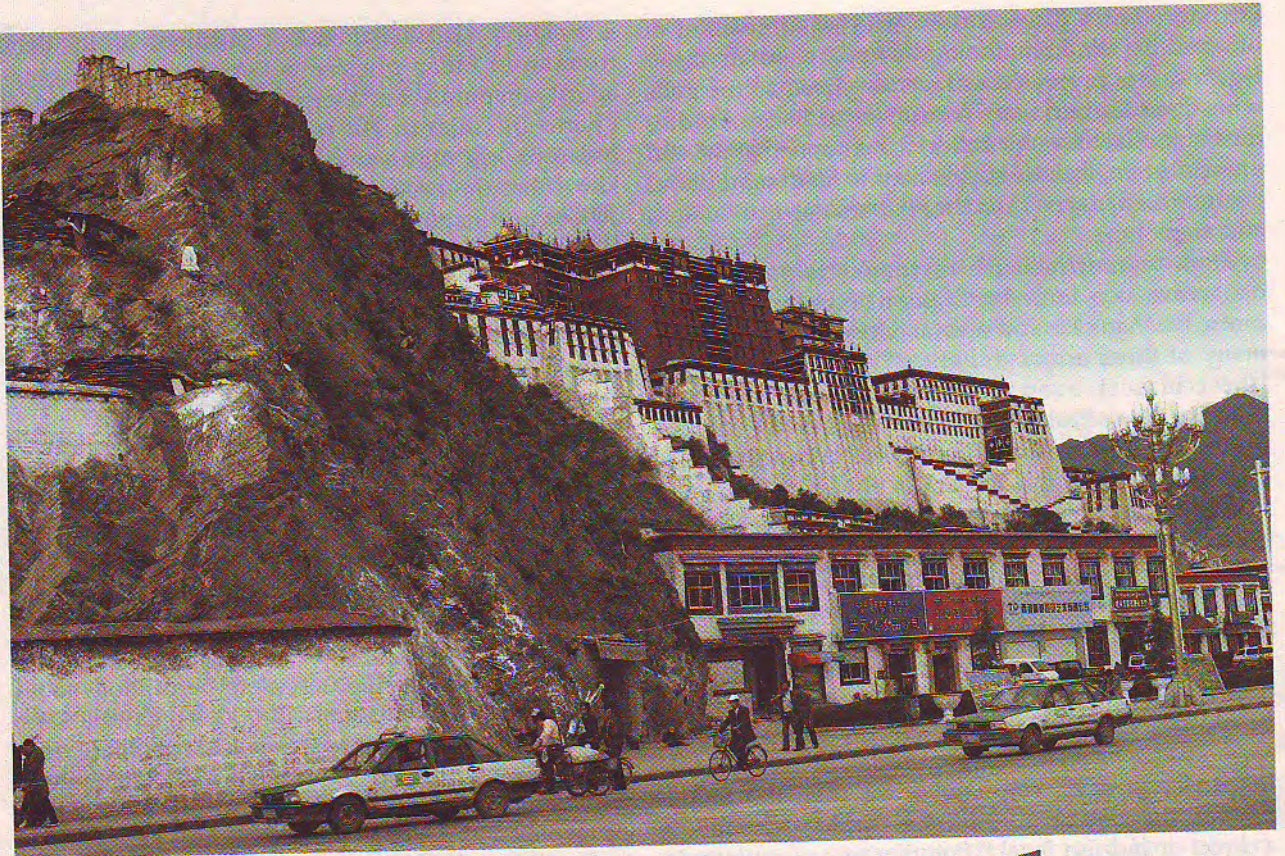
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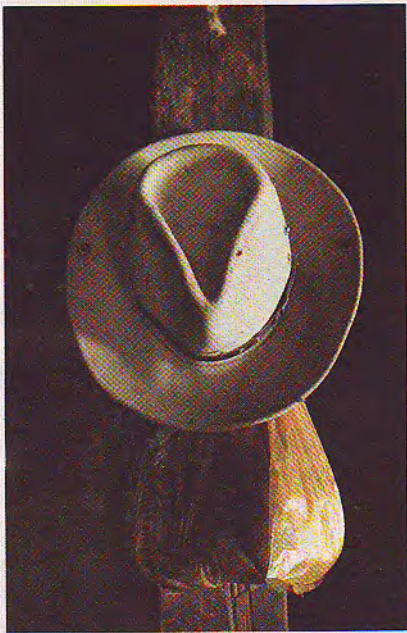


# TIBET, the mundane

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VIDURA JANG BAHADUR













# Cracking the Indus script

What is referred to as the 'Indus script' is a collection of symbols and pictograms that have been attributed to the Indus Valley (or Harappan) civilisation of present-day Pakistan and northwest India. It is believed to have been used during 2600-1900 BC. Despite the discovery to date of more than 4000 objects bearing it, the script has never been successfully deciphered. Tamil Nadu-born Iravatham Mahadevan is India's leading expert on the Indus script. He says that with new materials being regularly unearthed, and with the availability of modern analysis tools, it is likely that the Indus script will soon be understood.

BY **IRAVATHAM MAHADEVAN**

**A**fter completing the first phase of my studies of the Tamil-Brahmi script in 1968, I turned my attention towards the Indus script. I had been particularly attracted to this study by the pioneering work of two groups of scholars, one Russian and one Finnish. What I found especially appealing in their work was that, unlike all previous attempts to decipher the Indus script, they were using computers to carry out sophisticated procedures on a scientific basis. I felt that similar work should be undertaken in India.

In 1970, I was awarded a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship for this project. In 1970-71, a photographic card catalogue of the Harappan inscribed objects was assembled. The Indus texts and their background data were coded in a numerical format suitable for computer analysis. After a collaborative experimental concordance was prepared with the help of an IBM 1620 computer in Madras, publication of the resulting paper brought me an offer of cooperation from computer scientists at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) in Bombay.

This interdisciplinary collaboration resulted in the 1977 publication of *The Indus Script: Texts, concordance and tables*. As the title indicates, the book provides the basic source material for further research, but does not put forward any particular theory of linguistic decipherment. In retrospect, this has turned out to be a very salutary precaution, as the work is now used the world over by researchers, regardless of

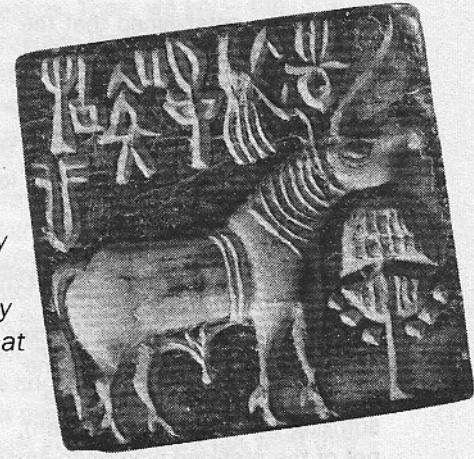
individual views on the language of the Indus script.

In 1977, a computerised 'input data file' was compiled. This is the master file from which the pictorial version of the Indus texts and the concordance were created through computer programmes at TIFR. To appreciate this achievement, one must remember that the computers of the 1970s were much less powerful than today's machines. We had to use punched cards both to put in the data and to obtain the output. There were no monitors for visual checks. The pictorial version of the Indus texts has nonetheless been widely acclaimed as aesthetically appealing and close to the originals, providing researchers without access to the originals with reliable texts to study.

Professors Gift Siromoney and Abdul Huq carried out further work on the Indus script with the help of computers during the 1980s. Their collaboration resulted in the publication of a series of extraordinary research papers, which explored the structural properties of the Indus texts – frequent combinations of signs, segmentation of texts into words and phrases, and the like. What was especially noteworthy about their work was its scientific character without any presupposition on the linguistic affinities of the Harappan people and the Indus script.

## Archaeological context

The potentialities of the computerised input data file have



not been exhausted by these achievements, however. For one thing, much of the data compiled in the file are yet to be published, and remain open to further research. For another, new data are becoming available both from the earlier sites (Mohenjodaro and Harappa) and from newer sites (Dholavira).

The format of the input data file, now stored at the newly inaugurated Indus Research Centre (IRC) in Madras, will permit all such additions, enlarging the corpus of texts and their background data for further research. I have faith that the availability of this material in an accessible, computerised form will attract younger scholars from university departments of mathematics, statistics and linguistics. They can join together in inter-disciplinary research teams to explore further the structure of the Indus script and, ultimately, its linguistic character.

The IRC is a forum for scientific investigations, without any ideological bias. This does not, of course, mean that the centre will not undertake research into the linguistic aspects of the Indus script. After all, linguistic decipherment of the Indus script is the ultimate objective of this research. What we mean, rather, is that we should not start with preconceived notions or presuppositions, and tailor our research to fit into ideology-driven linguistic models.

Let me illustrate this statement with a couple of examples. First, analysis of the Indus texts has now



conclusively established that the writing of the Indus script is from right to left, with some minor exceptions. Yet we find some scholars continuing to claim that the Indus script should be read from left to right, because that is how Sanskrit (or Tamil) scripts are written. Second, computer analysis has shown that the Indus texts possess only suffixes, not prefixes or infixes. This indicates that the Harappan language was of the suffixing type (as with Dravidian), not of the prefixing type (Indo-Aryan).

It is also necessary for well-rounded research to look beyond the inscriptions and take the archaeological context into account. Let me illustrate this with some well-known examples. First, the Indus civilisation was urban in character, while the Vedic civilisation was rural and pastoral. There is hardly any description of city life in the Rig Veda. Second, the Indus seals depict many animals but not the horse; nor is the spoked-wheeled chariot included in Indus art. At the same time, these are among the main features of society depicted in the Rig Veda. Third, the Harappan religion, as far as we can make out from pictorial representations, included the worship of buffalo-horned male gods, mother goddesses, the pipal tree, serpents and probably also phallic worship. Such modes of worship seem alien to the religion of the Rig Veda. These examples (among many others) make it very improbable that the Harappan city dwellers were the same as the people of the Vedic culture.

Ruling out the Aryan authorship of the Indus civilisation does not, of course, automatically make it Dravidian. However, there is substantial evidence favouring that supposition. The three most important aspects of this evidence

include: the survival of Dravidian languages, such as Brahui, in North India; the presence of Dravidian loan words in the Rig Veda; and the underlying influence of Dravidian languages on the Prakrit dialects of North India.

The evidence indicates that Dravidian languages were once spoken widely in North India, and one or more of the Dravidian dialects could well be the language of the Indus texts. It is extremely important to note that 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' are names of languages, not races. Speakers of one language can, and frequently did, switch over from one language to another. We should not allow research into the Indus civilisation and language to be vitiated by false notions of racial or ethnic identities.

Speakers of the Aryan languages indistinguishably merged with speakers of the Dravidian and Munda languages millennia ago. This created a composite Indian society, culture and religious tradition, which contained elements inherited from every source. It is thus likely that Indus craft traditions and artistic and religious motifs have survived, and can be traced in the Sanskrit literature from the days of the Rig Veda as well as in the old Tamil traditions recorded in the classical Sangam poetry of two millennia ago.

### Solving the riddle

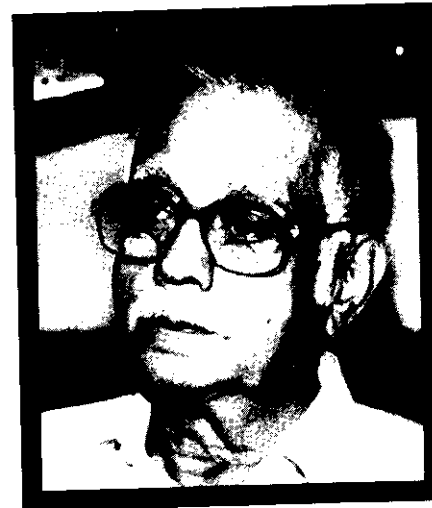
Recently, scholars Steve Farmer and Michael Witzel proposed that the Indus script was not a writing system at all, but merely a collection of picture signs conveying messages visually but not linguistically. It is difficult to take this new hypothesis seriously, however, given that concordances of the Indus texts compiled by other authors are in essential agreement, and have been able to highlight obvious linguistic features. The theory that the Indus

script is not 'writing' appears to be defeatist, born out of frustration in decipherment efforts.

Indeed, there is a view that the Indus script can never be deciphered, owing to the limited material, its repetitive nature and the absence of bilingual records. Nonetheless, I am optimistic that sooner or later this riddle will be solved. First, additional material with Indus inscriptions are being continually unearthed from older sites. It is quite likely that we will eventually reach a critical mass of inscriptions necessary for a successful decipherment.

Second, the criticism that there has been little or no progress towards decipherment is not true. While it is correct that we have not been able to linguistically decipher the Indus script, much preliminary work – determination of the direction of writing, segmentation of texts into words and phrases, and isolation of grammatical features – has been achieved. In these matters, a large measure of agreement has emerged from independent work by various scholars.

It can be hoped that future study at the Indus Research Centre will deal both with structural analysis of the Indus texts aided by the computer, and also with the archaeological and linguistic evidence such as those mentioned above. Together, they can find acceptable answers to the riddle of the Indus script. ▲



*'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 an address by Iravatham Mahadevan at the inauguration of the Indus Research Centre in Madras, 25 January 2007, originally printed in The Hindu Sunday Magazine, 4 February 2007, and carried with permission.*



# The Madras Indus scholar

INTERVIEW BY SUNDAR GANESAN

## What first propelled you to study the Indus script?

Early in the 1960s, I began working on the cave inscriptions of Tamil Nadu. They are the earliest records of not only Tamil but of any Dravidian language. So I spent several years visiting the caves, copying the inscriptions and published a number of papers. In between, I spent a dozen years in New Delhi, and became enchanted with the Indus script specimens I saw in the National Museum. Soon thereafter, I began working on it. In addition to the concordance\* that I ultimately prepared in cooperation with computer scientists in Bombay, I have published a series of papers at three levels.

First, there are about half a dozen papers on the statistical analysis and such linguistic features as can be recognised without reading the language. Second, I began working on the meaning of some of the obvious ideograms. These are pictures of objects which can be recognised

directly as representing a subject – like a man carrying a bow and arrow, who can be an archer. A human being with two horns may represent an important person or god, and so on. The other method is called ‘rebus’, that is, the transfer of sound from one picture which can be easily recognised to another word with the same sound but different meaning. The well-known example of this is the Dravidian *min*, which means fish, but also means star. So a fish can be drawn to indicate a star considered as a deity.

## The concordance you created seems to have required a Herculean effort. Do you see any scope for further expansion?

The first concordance in the pre-computer age was made by Hunter, an Englishman in India who was in the Indian Educational Service. He aligned all the signs from their outward form and prepared the concordance. But subsequently more seals have been found at Mohenjodaro, Harappa and other new sites. [Finnish scholar] Asko Parpola and his colleagues have published a concordance; and in India, I, with the help of computer scientists at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, published our concordance. The first healthy sign is there is a lot of common ground between these three concordances. While more seals have been found, they only confirm what has been found earlier; the concordance shows that there is an underlying order. This order can come only from an underlying language.

I have gone further in my analysis, and I claim to have isolated two kinds of suffixes in the language – nominal suffixes at the end of names, and suffixes which indicate what are called ‘cases’. We also know that the adjective appears before the noun it

qualifies. Then, we know the numerals. Progress has also been made in discovering the direction of writing, which is mostly from right to left, with some exceptions. We can also segment words and phrases. Well, that is good progress. In my view, the Indian tradition, mythology, religion, history, folklore, art, etcetera form the Rosetta Stone for decipherment. We can apply what we know of the Indian tradition to the pictorial figures in the Indus seals and try to work out what they could have represented.

## There are periodic reports of Indus script being deciphered. Are there standard methods to test the validity of claimed decipherments?

The best summary and evaluation of the work done so far is Gregory Possehl's book, *The Indus Age: Its writing*. I myself have reviewed five claims to decipherment – two based on Sanskrit, two on Tamil and one claiming that the script is merely a collection of numbers. My conclusion is negative – that none of the decipherments has been successful.

The first test is the direction of the Indus script. The one fact on which most scholars agree is that the Indus script reads generally from right to left. So this is the first test, which can eliminate non-serious attempts. The second test comes out of the progress achieved in segmentation of words. An Indus text can be segmented into separate words and phrases. Any decipherment will have to conform to these segments.

Another method is to match the frequency-distribution analysis of the script with similar analysis for the candidate language. The two frequency-distributions should match. To give an example, in English the letter ‘e’ has the highest frequency, of about 12 percent. If I say that the Indus script is written

An interview with Iravatham Mahadevan, 1 March 2007. Mahadevan, a renowned scholar on the Indus civilisation and the Indus script, recently donated his collection of material related to the Indus civilisation to the newly opened Indus Research Centre at the Roja Muthiah Research Library, in Madras. For more, see previous story, “Cracking the Indus script”.

\*Mahadevan's 1977 *The Indus Script: Texts, concordance and tables*, which compiled detailed images of works that had been found until then.



## Any claim from an Indian scholar becomes suspect because one immediately asks what is the mother tongue or political affiliation of the scholar.

in English and there is one character which occurs with 10 percent of total frequency, then that must be 'e'. There are other restrictions. In some languages, certain sounds do not occur in the beginning. There are other languages where certain combinations of consonants are not permitted, and so on. Applying these three tests, I can say that none of the decipherments so far have passed all the tests.

### Is research on the Indus civilisation active at the moment?

There is very little interest in the Indus script in the West – there are very few people working on the Indus script around the world. The one exception is India, but research in India has gotten inextricably mixed up with politics: the Hindu nationalistic scholars claim the language is Sanskrit, while the Tamil nationalistic scholars claim it to be a form of Dravidian. Both claims have become suspect because of their political background. Any claim from an Indian scholar becomes suspect because one immediately asks what is the mother tongue or political affiliation of the scholar. A scholar from another country is happily free of this problem. I envy that

freedom, but I too have an advantage: I am a son of the soil. The traditions of India, its mythology, its religions, its culture, its art, are in my blood, and therefore I may have insights which people who are not the inheritors of this culture may not have. This is a subjective reaction, but such resources as we have must be put to best use.

### Does the 2006 discovery of the Neolithic stone axe at Sembiyan Kandiur in Tamil Nadu extend the area of influence of Indus civilisation?

Let me first say that this is the greatest epigraphical and archaeological discovery made in Tamil Nadu in the recent past. Two stone axes were discovered accidentally by a school teacher who was digging in his backyard to plant banana saplings. One of the axes is incised with four graffiti-like marks. Fortunately he gave the axes to his friend, a trained archaeologist. The inscribed stone was brought to me, and I was immediately able to identify the four characters as being in the Indus script.

But one can have differences of opinion in interpreting the signs. As the axe was found in the lower Kaveri Valley, where there are no hills, it could not have been made locally. So it must have come by trade.

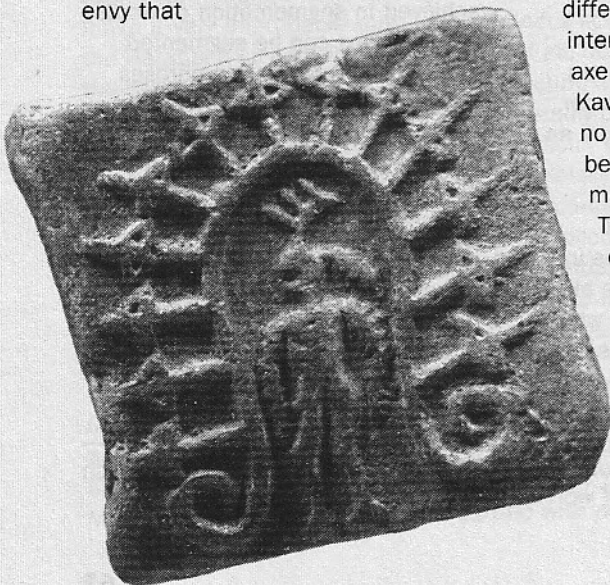
The nearest Neolithic centres in Tamil Nadu are in Dharmapuri District, adjoining Karnataka, and it is known that Harappans were in contact with Karnataka because the gold in the ornaments of

Mohenjodaro is supposed to have come from there. And we also know about the existence of Daimabad, a Harappan site in the Godavari Valley, in Andhra Pradesh. So it is not far-fetched to think that late Harappan influence could have spread to Tamil Nadu also.

One thing I would like to emphasise is that it is only in Tamil Nadu, and nowhere else in India, that the particular sign which I have identified as *muruku* occurs continuously. With the exception of a single seal found at Vaishali in Bihar, nowhere in India has this particular sign recurred in the post-Harappan period. Therefore I do think it is a continuation of the earlier tradition, and it is likely that a religious symbol would have survived. It is quite possible that after the Indus script was forgotten and was no longer a system of connected writing, individual symbols, particularly those which were considered to be divine, have persisted – such as the *swastika* and the *muruku* symbols.

### Will Pakistani experts who are working in the Mohenjodaro and Harappa regions be welcomed at the Indus Research Centre?

Why not? I think our colleagues in Pakistan should be invited to deliver talks on their latest discoveries and share their experiences with the people here. Similarly, there are people in Sri Lanka who are interested in the Indus script. There is also the question as to whether the Brahmi script, which is the parent script of all Southasian scripts, is itself derived from the Indus script. The idea is not far-fetched, and requires looking into. Scholars from countries like Sri Lanka, Tibet, Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia would all be interested to join in the investigations. What is required is a truly free academic atmosphere – free of bias, nationalistic or linguistic, and with a commitment to get at the truth wherever it may lead.





# The governed seek consent

*Socialism in villages,  
Capitalism in towns,  
In office, feudalism;  
Authoritarianism at home.*

– Bharat Bhushan Agrawal in  
*Utna wah sooraj hai*

Lahore is an intense city, one that overwhelms every one of a visitor's senses. On the road, every vehicle seeks to overtake the one in front, while the frontrunners are equally determined to stay ahead. Drivers honk in unison to warn cars coming from the other direction, who in turn hoot back to demand their right of way.

Taking a walk along the busy Liberty Market roundabout is a particular experience for the nose itself. The combined stench of open sewers, overflowing waste containers and roadside eateries is overpowering, which mixes with the strong odour of rotting carrots and crushed sugarcane emanating from the juice shops. Whiffs of cologne waft from nattily dressed office-goers hurrying past burger outlets. Extravagantly dressed housewives shopping for jewellery reek of attar.

The light, sound, sight and smell of the Spring Festival at Race Course Park create an even more compelling impression. The hustle and bustle of Anarkali Market remains undiminished till midnight. Only the Lahore Fort and the Shalimar Garden still maintain the serenity and grandeur of their imperial heyday. All in all, Lahore is a quintessential Southasian city – languid, boisterous, pensive and impulsive all at the same time. Southasians from every part of the region feel instantly at home in this city of the Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh, whose empire once extended from the banks of the Jamuna to the Khyber, from Kashmir to Multan.

The long-overdue meeting of South Asians for Human Rights, a Track-II initiative of some eminent Southasians, finally met in March. Some SAHR participants also found themselves with a ringside view on police excesses against protesting lawyers, which took place immediately in front of the provincial assembly close to the venue of the conference. Below the city's apparent calm, resentment against General Pervez Musharraf had been building among professionals and

the middle class. It erupted over a routine case of impertinence from the generalissimo. Executive intervention in Pakistan's judiciary has a long history, where 'telephone justice', dictated by influential generals, is known to have been read out by loyal judges in the courts. But the recent forced 'inactivation' of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry enraged even docile jurists. Even as police mercilessly beat up protestors, defiance of Gen Musharraf's absolute rule had snowballed throughout Pakistan; nonetheless, the general population still seems surprisingly apathetic to the drama being played out in front of its eyes.

Something even more worrying has taken place on the other side of the Subcontinent, in Bangladesh. In Dhaka over recent months, the military has quietly taken over, put a puppet on the throne, pushed politics to the back burner, and begun consolidating its hold over the state – with hardly any voice raised in protest. This young nation is otherwise known for massive rallies held for or against every decision that affect the people's lives. It has been surprising, then, that postponement of general elections for an indefinite period has been greeted with a wall of silence. In fact, the comfortable classes of Gulshan have heaved a sigh of relief. Perhaps this was exactly what they had longed for during the cacophonous regimes of the warring Begums: no more hartals, few politicians to put up with, and the reassuring shadow of military fatigues. Democratic deficit – dysfunctional institutions, dishonest individuals and discriminatory systems – appears to have given birth to indifference, if not animosity, towards popular rule in a large section of the Southasian population.

The intelligentsia of Southasia is faced with a perplexing predicament. It knows that the aberrations of democracy can only be removed with more and better democracy. But an influential section of the bourgeoisie has developed a taste for certainties of dictatorship. This is the constituency that has given rise to one after another military strongman in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Unless this group is convinced that its long-term interests lie with the rest of the people, the fate of democracy will continue to hang in balance. The daunting challenge of

Run like feudal estates by leading figures, Southasia's political parties repel youngsters of elite talents and egalitarian beliefs, who then veer towards the non-governmental organisations.



formulating a political agenda that appeals to the masses and the classes alike will test the mettle of party leadership in the coming days.

## Intimate enemies

The other challenge that will determine the fate of freedom will be the ability of inimical political parties to work together and create a support base that extends beyond parochial boundaries. The days of one or two domineering political parties straddling the scene seem to be over. As multiple parties carve out their areas of influence, only their coalition-building abilities can sustain the system of democratic governance.

In its pre-Independence heyday, the Indian National Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru was an umbrella organisation that accommodated all the varying class, community, regional and cultural aspirations of different population groups. Mohammad Ali Jinnah challenged its hegemony by appropriating the agenda of Muslim Indians. But post-Partition, the Qaid decided that he needed to be magnanimous towards minorities to ensure the stability and prosperity of his newfound country. The legatees of his political heritage lacked this foresight, however, and failed to maintain Pakistan's unity.

The Indian National Congress also disintegrated under Indira Gandhi, as disgruntled satraps of the Nehru era went their separate ways. This was the period when regional parties professing provincial agendas rose up spectacularly, particularly in peninsular India. Indians are in the process of overcoming that medieval urge of organising exclusively along communal or caste lines, as Akalis field Hindu candidates in Punjab, the Dalit-based Bahujan Samaj Party has more Brahmin and Thakur leaders than any other political outfit in Uttar Pradesh, and Lalu Prasad Yadav tries hard to overcome his rustic Yadav image.

Indian politics have come full circle. Parties in Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Punjab or Manipur are provincial, but regional rather than communal. Local supporters identify with the party they vote for to the extent that they are willing to kill or die for it. The leaderships of all these parties are alike, their support bases are similar, their agendas overlap and they all speak a near-identical political language. And so they compete with each other without animosity, and show civility towards each other when they meet outside the electoral

arena. Unfortunately, this culture has yet to take root in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, where contesting parties hate each other more than they abhor non-political usurpers.

Even when Dhaka's two warring Begums are present at the same soirée, they tend to hold court at opposite corners. Similarly, in Pakistan, for the Begum from Oxford, Mian Nawaz Sharif is merely an arriviste, while the erstwhile trader of Lahore considers his Sindhi competitor unnecessarily haughty. Aware of these cleavages, the military brass of both countries keep deepening the rifts by planting agent provocateurs in competing camps. One of the main reasons behind the success of the anti-monarchy movement in Nepal was the unity of purpose forged between the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists. The moment that weakens, however, the future of democracy in Nepal too will go the way of Bangladesh's.

Run like feudal estates by leading figures, Southasia's political parties repel youngsters of elite talents and egalitarian beliefs, who then veer towards the non-governmental organisations. Most political parties of the region have lately become anaemic, as youths form non-political platforms to pursue agendas of social change. The problem with this model, however, is that managerial operations can seldom function as manipulator, mediator and moderator of conflicting aspirations common to all emerging societies. The full impact of NGO-tsar Muhammad Yunus and his new Nagorik Shakti (Citizen's Power) party in Bangladesh remains to be seen, but if it does manage to consolidate moderate forces, the rest will probably gravitate towards Islamic extremism. The unintended consequences of running a multi-cultural state as one would a business enterprise can be too horrendous to contemplate.

Democratic politics constitute the first casualty of the search for certainties. To dissuade the intellectual elite of Southasia from the fatal charms of formulaic solutions, it would be worthwhile to let it meander through its throbbing cities and isolated villages. The societies of the Subcontinent are too complex to fit any particular *ism* or model evolved from the unique experience of some faraway European country. But no system of governance can survive for long if it fails to institute credible mechanisms of acquiring the consent of the governed. That is the clear message of the bustling streets of Lahore, for anyone willing to listen. ▲



Edwin Weeks's  
"An Open-Air  
Restaurant,  
Lahore", 1889



The trial of U Thein Zan, a 65-year-old retired Burmese sailor who was arrested for satirising government newspapers in early March, was deferred to the end of the month by a court in Rangoon. Thein Zan, who makes his living repairing radios and tape recorders, had been moved to outrage on the morning of 23 February by the contradiction between the escalating prices of essential commodities on the market and the propaganda in the junta-run papers. These assured readers that economic and social conditions in Burma were indeed improving, and that those who opposed the state were just a small group of troublemakers. Thein Zan had then cut out a number of headlines from the government papers and pasted them on his fence, alongside bits of his own lampoonery. At 11 that morning, after the fence attracted the attention of more than 100 people, police arrived, removed the clippings, and took the artist to the local council office. A salute to U Thein Zan, who dared make an individual statement, completely unprotected, against a harsh and reactive state.

Meanwhile, on 12 March, Burmese journalist U Win Tin, imprisoned since 1989 on charges of anti-state activities, turned 77 in prison. Win Tin, the former editor-in-chief of the daily *Hanthawati* and a senior member of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, is one of the longest-serving detained journalists in the world. Currently being held in a cell designed for military dogs, Win Tin's poor health has been exacerbated by years of torture. Originally short-listed in July 2006 for early release, the ailing journalist, who has repeatedly refused to sign a statement that he will give up political activities upon his discharge, has been told that he is not entitled to such favours, as he has not yet fulfilled the requirement of hard labour.

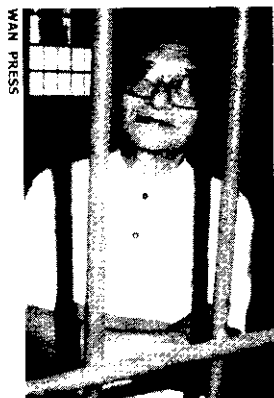
opinion is all but completely in favour of unethical land acquisition and police brutality. After more than a dozen people were killed in police firing in Nandigram on 14 March, *The Hindu* reported that, "Violence erupted as the mob hurled stones at the police," leading the police to open fire on the "violent crowd". *Chhetria Patrakar* also notices the virtual disappearance of the worthy Arundhati Roy and Medha Patkar from the pages of *The Hindu* – the one publication in which their demands for land-for-land rehabilitation in the Narmada Valley had been given extensive coverage. All that was well and good, but how dare they criticise the CPM?!



FREE MEDIA MOVEMENT

Following almost four months in illegal detention, *Mawbima* journalist **Munusamy Parameshawary** was released on 22 March, after all charges against her were dropped. Sri Lankan and international press freedom organisations launched a campaign for her release after Parameshawary, 23, was detained by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) on 24 November. Parameshawary's arrest followed her coverage of human rights violations in Sri Lanka's north and east, as well as disappearances in Colombo.

Yet the troubles of the Sinhala weekly *Mawbima* (officially labelled pro-LTTE soon after its launch in July 2006, for having exposed human-rights violations in the north and east, and for having revealed corruption in government departments) have by no means ended. In a letter to all ambassadors and heads of foreign missions in the country, **Kuruwita Bandara**, editor of *Mawbima* and **Hana Ibrahim**, editor of the weekly English-language *Sunday Standard*, wrote: "On March 13, the accounts of the Standard Newspapers Private Ltd were sealed. This will effectively force both the *Mawbima* and the *Sunday Standard* to stop publishing in the near future. In Sri Lanka's long and troubled history there has never been such a frontal attack of such intensity on a mainstream mass circulation newspaper. Actions taken by you at this moment will play a critical role in helping us carry out our role as disseminators of free expression in this country."



WAN PRESS

The staff at the *People's Democracy* might as well be given the golden handshake. Why should the Communist Party of India (Marxist) throw away precious resources on its official weekly organ, when it has *The Hindu* doing the job for it? Why should anyone visit the CPI (M)'s rather drab website for FAQs on Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal, when they can read editorials in *The Hindu* instead? Not content with infusing news reports, editorials and op-eds with **apologies for Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's blunders** over land acquisition for industry, the newspaper has even encroached upon its Letters to the Editor. A series of messages published – incidentally, from states thousands of kilometres from West Bengal – would have readers believe that public

No matter that on 8 March, International Women's Day, women MPs in both houses of India's Parliament could get no more than the customary, insipid 'assurances' with regards to the introduction of the **Women's Reservation Bill, pending now for over a decade**. Just one glance at the picture accompanying the article in *The Hindu* (right to left: Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dixit, actor Preity Zinta, and Prime





Minister Manmohan Singh's wife Gursharan Kaur, all looking rather victorious) and women's-rights activists should know that the future of gender equity in India is in safe hands. Don't be picky, sisters!

AFP State governments across India did not miss the opportunity to mark the day either, releasing scores of ads in national dailies in promotion of various programmes. The Laadli Laxmi scheme for girls' education was one ("for the common man's [sic] daughter"); another was the Godh Bharai project for the complete care of pregnant women, who were going to be gifted *sindoor*, bangles and bindis (along with iron tablets, one presumes). Whatever happened to the Muslim, Sikh and Christian Indian woman?

And then there was T F Thekkkara, managing director and the State Women Development Corporation of Maharashtra, urging in an *Indian Express* op-ed that parents of a girl should be issued a tamper-proof 'Gold Card' that would make them eligible not only for tax deductions and extra kerosene rations, but also for 50 percent of allotments of petrol pumps, gas agencies, ration shops, industrial plots, housing plots, telephone and gas connections, and

licences for autorickshaws, taxis, bus services and other transport vehicles. Whoa!

While we're at it, we have to admit that other Indian newspapers devoted their column inches to the real issues: **companies expressing their appreciation of women** on their special day. The Life Insurance Corporation of India presented its exclusive new policy for women ("you always cared for others, now a policy that cares for you"). Nokia, celebrating the spirit of today's woman, showcased its new models of phones (Nokia 6300 - slim yet powerful, Nokia E65 - many more reasons to show it off). Now, now, women, stop whining about the triple burden.

The *Times of India* told us that Kalpana Sarees was offering hefty discounts to women who "dared to bare their age". Walk in with an age certificate, and walk out with a discount adding up to the sum of your birth date. "God is a man" revealed Whirlpool appliances, while women were "God's angels on earth", who do his job for him: listen, understand and make the world a better place. Of course, we concede that if god owned Whirlpool washing machines, fridges, microwave ovens and dishwashers, his job would have been much easier.

And just in case you missed all the action in print, you could have gone online and sent a free e-card wishing someone a "wonderful women's day", courtesy the Grameen Foundation. Thank you, Yunus Dada!



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This March, *The Bhutan Reporter*, a monthly newspaper brought out by Bhutani journalists living in the refugee camps of southern Nepal, closed down due to lack of funds. Since the newspaper began publication in 2004, it had been a source of respite to the 100,000-strong refugee community, the vast majority of which is restricted to the camps in Jhapa and Morang districts and has no means of livelihood or of getting an education past high school. The paper had a monthly print run of 1000, and had been running on the basis of voluntary work and funds raised in the camps.

The last issue of the *Reporter*, published in February, contained, among other things, a celebration of the revision of the Bhutan-India Friendship Treaty of 1949, several accounts of arrests of Bhutani exiles in Bhutan, a report of a fight between refugees and the Nepali police in the Goldhap camp, pictures of high-scoring refugee students, and a small box item that demanded the return of the Duars to Bhutan from India.

This might be the time also to remember the remarkable *Bhutan Review*, a sophisticated tabloid published only during the first half of the 1990s, which exposed all the misstatements emerging from Thimpu at the time on the refugee issue.

- Chhetria Patrakar



# Women's words and worlds

Women writers from across Southasia discuss the power of writing.

BY AMMU JOSEPH



(L-R) Geetanjali Shree, A Mangai, Ameena Hussein, Bama

AMMU JOSEPH

What do women writers talk about? If the South Asian Women Writers' Colloquium held in New Delhi recently is anything to go by, the answer is: everything. The subjects discussed at the 21-23 February meet included revolution and relationships, politics and pain, gender and genocide, markets and mothers, caste and creativity, language and loneliness, form and family, success and struggle, poverty and privilege, roots and rootlessness.

The colloquium brought together over 40 writers of fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction, as well as journalism and academic writing, in at least 13 languages, from five countries of the region and farther afield. The hybrid event, dubbed "The Power of the Word", addressed concerns about literature and society, globalisation and culture, censorship and human rights. Its main aim was to explore the diverse forms of censorship faced by writers in general, and women writers in particular.

Discussions at the colloquium,

organised by Women's World India, moved between the intellectual and the emotional, as writers addressed both the personal and the political. The dialogue revolved around four intersecting themes. The first, 'Writing in a time of siege', raised questions about writers' responsibility towards society, especially in times of conflict, war, displacement and dislocation. The second, 'Closing spaces in an open market', enabled participants to scrutinise the so-called openness of the apparently globalised literary market. In the third session, titled 'Exclusionary practices', writers examined the impact of caste, class, sexuality, ethnicity and other markers of difference – in addition to gender – on literary acceptability. The final session, 'The guarded tongue', highlighted the role of family, community and other affiliations in the determination of literary content.

Perhaps expectedly, religion-based identity emerged as a major issue, cutting across countries and faiths. Referring to the peculiar situation of

the Muslim woman writer today, Karachi-born Kamila Shamsie highlighted the increasingly widespread "hijab or mini-skirt" syndrome, under which she herself becomes representative of something in vogue even as the context in which she is viewed shrinks. "In the West people want to talk to me exclusively about Islam and terrorism – anything else is seen as less important ... I am expected to deal with 'Muslim issues' whether or not I want to," she said. Ameena Hussein of Sri Lanka, on the other hand, pointed to the "cloud of self-censorship" hanging over her as a member of a community under siege.

Ahmedabad-based Saroop Dhruv and Esther David discussed the painful experience of living and writing in a segregated city and a polarised society. Dhruv, who recalled the official and unofficial censorship, as well as the literary and social boycott, that she has suffered in her home state, Gujarat, says she now plans to write in Hindi rather than in



**'I will guard my tongue for a while, and un-guard it when I find the idiom to express myself about the world I see around me.'**

Gujarati, so that she can be read outside the state. David, a Jew whose ancestral home sits on the tense border between a Muslim-dominated area and an aggressively Hindu neighbourhood, recently reluctantly moved to a less troubled part of the city; she now wonders whether she will be able to write in her new, alien environment.

Kannada writer Vaidehi, whose large family always comprised the world in which she wrote, has also not been able to insulate herself from the communal tension seeping into her corner of Karnataka. "For two years I have not written a line," she confessed. "Of course, every writer has to take a break once in a while. But that is not the real reason why I have become dumb ... The seeds of the events in Gujarat seem to be everywhere, in everybody. I have reached a turning point in my writing. I will guard my tongue for a while, and un-guard it when I find the idiom to express myself about the world I see around me."

Then, of course, there was Taslima Nasrin, who has lived in exile for more than 12 years, after a non-bailable arrest warrant was issued against her for advocating a gender-just, uniform civil code in her native Bangladesh. That development was famously preceded by the fatwa against her, and the banning of her book *Lajja* – the first in a series of official bans that have ensured that her books are unavailable in her home country and that at least one cannot be sold in West Bengal, where she now lives on temporary visas that have to be periodically renewed. Lionised by the Hindu right as long as she criticised conservative Islamic practices, Nasrin is now out of favour with them for having begun to oppose Hindutva.

## Global maramari

A key concern flagged by several participants was the cultural impact of globalisation and, especially, the

rise of English as a world language – the language of power. Bengali writer Nabaneeta Dev Sen observed that English is increasingly overpowering the identity of Indian literature, which is often reduced, especially in international circles, to works in English by a few writers based in the country and many more from the diaspora (See *Himal December 2006*, "The inheritance of stereotype").

Acknowledging that the urban, educated, middle-class readership is indeed shifting to English, Telugu writer Volga emphasised the large potential audience for regional-language writing among the newly educated. This group is currently not being catered to, she said, because the public library system is dying from neglect, and few booksellers operate in rural areas. Referring to the many innovative methods used by private companies to sell consumer products in the rural market, Volga suggested that writers and publishers also have to evolve imaginative strategies to make literature in local languages accessible to emerging groups of readers.

A contentious debate on language was sparked off by Tamil writer Bama's assertion about her use of the Dalit dialect, which conservative readers and critics often view as "bawdy, too earthy, unsuitable and unworthy" for use in literature. When some writers suggested that a glossary was necessary to make such writing comprehensible to readers familiar with the more standard literary version of their respective languages, US feminist writer Gloria Steinem pointed out that several translators of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* have used the language of similarly disadvantaged communities in their own countries to retain the flavour of the original.

Several writers identified as serious problems the influence of marketing considerations on

publishing decisions, and the impact of the impersonal, centralised selection of books by corporate bookstores. Interestingly, even those who have benefited from the 'opening up' of the global market for writing from the region see the downside of their present currency. Kamila Shamsie, whose books have been published in 15 countries and translated into 12 languages, recently learned that another writer had been turned down by a leading UK-based publisher on the grounds that the firm already had two non-British Muslim writers. "I was one of those two writers," she said. "First I felt embarrassed and guilty, and then I was furious ... Such segmentation of the marketplace creates divisions among writers."

While Malayalam writer Anitha Thampi suggested that "women's writing, like Dalit writing, has become a much-wanted commodity in the literary market," Bengali writer Mandakranta Sen suggested that this "open market believes in controlled liberation". Sen spoke from her experience of having been welcomed and lauded as long as she produced "sweet and spicy dishes and served them hot", and having lost her self-proclaimed patrons as she grew into a creative writer with both "consciousness and conscience". According to her. "Women, who have always been treated by patriarchy as commodities, are now being sold in a smarter package, more colourful and attractive, complete with a manufacturer's seal and an expiry date."

Geetanjali Shree, who writes in Hindi, proposed that what is currently taking place is really a *maramari* – a battle for spaces. "If the market seeks to direct and influence me," she argued, "I too seek to shape the market. I play my own games to turn the market around to suit me, to open shop for my own product; and I feel happy to be in the curio shop for rare items rather than in the more popular, simple, easy-appeal stores."

## Writing under siege

Writers have also been involved in



more physical battlegrounds. Speaking about the role played by writers during Nepal's People's Movement of April 2007, Manjushree Thapa pointed out that it is always difficult to write in the middle of a revolution: "Every word is politicised and every loyalty is questioned. For writers ... the challenge is to overcome the impediments to speaking out. For it is not the speaking that harms, but the silence."

In present-day Sri Lanka, however, speaking out can be lethal. Sunethra Rajakarunanayake described posters that openly stated, "Marxist Tigers, Media Tigers and NGO Tigers should be killed" - as a warning to those who dared to see the ongoing ethnic conflict from a Tamil perspective. According to fellow Sri Lankan Anoma Rajakaruna, the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act makes the message even clearer: "If you don't guard your tongue, we cannot guarantee your security."

An important leitmotif throughout

## For several writers, censorship began at home while they were still children and adolescents, as they penned romantic stories or maintained secret diaries.

the interactions was the role of the family in determining what women write and do not write, or at least what they publish and do not publish. For several writers, censorship began at home while they were still children and adolescents, as they penned romantic stories or maintained secret diaries. While some have managed to break free of those old binds, others admitted that they were still struggling to find a balance between expressing themselves candidly and not causing hurt to those around them. Still others - such as Neeman Sobhan, a Bangladeshi writer based in Rome - have consciously decided to remain, for now, "a scribbler of poems with folded wings, a writer of silences, and of books unwritten".

According to fellow Bangladeshi Shabnam Nadiya, "It is the mom-

looking-over-the shoulder syndrome that I find most insidious." While a formal ban can cause despair and frustration, she said, at least it is overt and identifiable. "But what about the other thing, the silencing that has so little formal expression but is bone-deep?"

In the end, each writer finds her own path. "I write only under siege," said Feryal Ali Gauhar of Pakistan. "It is only possible for me to write from deep anguish." But according to her compatriot Fahmida Riaz, who lived in self-imposed exile for years in India to avoid cases against her as the editor and publisher of a socio-political magazine, "My way of giving myself some support as a writer is to organise and get more women to write ... we don't always fail and flounder - sometimes we succeed." ▲



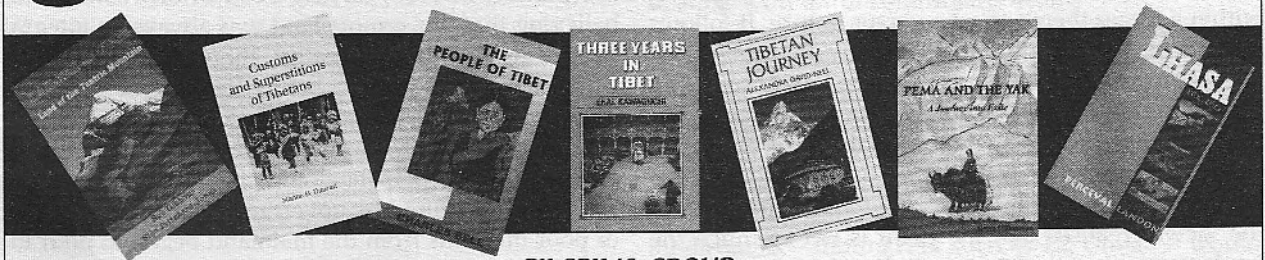
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## More mythology

Despite its good intentions, this 2005 Chinese film on Tibet falls into the same traps as all the other outside depictions.

BY TENZING SONAM

I first saw Chinese director Lu Chuan's critically acclaimed Tibetan film *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* in the unlikely environs of an ornate 19th-century opera house in the Brazilian city of Manaus, deep in the Amazon. The occasion was the 2nd Amazonas Film Festival, in which a film I had co-directed, *Dreaming Lhasa*, was also participating. Stumbling out of the packed theatre into the steaming, tropical heat of the city – for all intents and purposes, a million miles from the icy wastes of the Tibetan plateau where I had spent the last 90 minutes – my mind was abuzz with conflicting emotions.

There is no doubt that Lu Chuan is a talented filmmaker. *Mountain Patrol* is a deftly crafted, gritty and uncompromising tale of greed and heroism set within a larger theme of man versus nature. It follows a band of Tibetan vigilantes, led by the noble and single-minded Ri Tai, as it sets out across the forbidding northern plains of Tibet in pursuit of a gang of murderous poachers who have killed one of its men and left behind a trail of slaughtered *chirus* – endangered Tibetan antelopes. As the film progresses, the viewer realises that the point is not so much the tracking down of the hunters, as it is the journey itself.

Ri Tai's uncompromising search leads to the death of several of his men – killed not by their enemy but by the harsh vagaries of nature itself, which does not differentiate between those who seek to exploit her and those who are trying to protect her. The end, when it comes, is swift, brutal and unexpected. The camerawork brilliantly captures the harsh and majestic landscape of the high plateau, which is as much a character in the film as are the human protagonists.

So why did the film leave me with such a sense of disquiet?

As a Tibetan filmmaker born and brought up in exile,

I have constantly tried in my work to present a more realistic view of Tibet, and to refute the esoteric 'Shangri La' image that has found currency in the Western imagination. Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*, Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Seven Years in Tibet*, Eric Valli's *Himalaya* (also titled *Caravan*) and Pan Nalin's *Samsara* have all exploited and perpetuated this myth to their own ends. It struck me that *Mountain Patrol* is finally no different from these films in that it, too, mythologises Tibet, albeit from an interesting perspective.

### A remarkable naïveté

The majority of Han Chinese today is unaware of the political and military events that led to Tibet's annexation in 1959, having been brainwashed into believing that this remote land was always an integral part of its country. In reality, there was literally no Chinese presence in Tibet before the takeover. But this changed rapidly. Initially, only those Chinese who were compelled to relocate as part of the colonising effort – military personnel and civil servants – settled in Tibet. Then, lured by government incentives, waves of poor migrants from the mainland began to pour in, setting up small businesses and gradually transforming the demographic make-up of the country. Today, Han Chinese outnumber Tibetans in most major cities and towns of Tibet.

But it is only recently that a very different type of mainland Chinese has begun to show interest in Tibet. Artists, filmmakers, writers and spiritual seekers, not to mention tourists, have begun to flock to the area, drawn by its natural beauty and its Buddhist culture and tradition. Something akin to the interest in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism that developed in the West decades ago seems to be developing in China today.

The first Chinese film to look at Tibet through a new,



more personal perspective – one not tainted by official propaganda – was probably Tian Zhuangzhuang's 1986 film, *The Horse Thief*. Although groundbreaking for a Chinese film dealing with Tibet in that it takes a realistic and documentary-like approach to the lives of Tibetan nomads, it nonetheless succumbs to a romanticised and condescending view of the place and its culture. Sadly, nearly two decades later, *Mountain Patrol* falls into a similar trap.

The main protagonists in both *The Horse Thief* and *Mountain Patrol* fit a stereotype popular in films about Tibet – that of the silent, noble savage. This is no accident. In the absence of any genuine understanding of Tibetans or their culture, it is easier to see them as archetypes. Lu Chuan unconsciously confirms this in an interview about the film: "Actually, my personal experiences with the Tibetans weren't like everyone said they would be; they're alert, but they're actually very open – if they felt your sympathy. When I directed them, they accepted me and cooperated with me. They're that kind of people, like Native Americans and Eskimos; as minorities, they're able to preserve their purity, their nature." This upbeat view, not only of Tibetans but also of Native Americans and Eskimos, betrays a remarkable naïveté, and not a little arrogance, towards the so-called minorities.

This perception of Tibetans as a kind of anthropological curiosity is reinforced in this excerpt from a journal kept by a Chinese journalist, Teng Jingshu, who followed Lu Chuan for a few days during the shoot:

After a few rounds of drinks, the natives started to sing in their language, one after another. As the song came to its climax, everyone would hit their bowls with their chopsticks and sing together. All of a sudden, I felt like I had understood the true meaning of the movie, I felt euphoric, as if my soul had been set free. The rest of us started to sing in response to the natives.

It is not surprising, therefore, that although the portrayal of Tibetans in *Mountain Patrol* is sympathetic, it is essentially one-dimensional and patronising. In this, Lu Chuan is no different from a Western filmmaker such as Eric Valli, who offers a similar, taciturn-yet-heroic stock character in *Himalaya*, a film that also uses a superficial Tibetan motif to explore the relationship between human and nature.

## Sky burial

This facile engagement with Tibet in films is even more pronounced when it comes to representations of the



Children dressed as the Chiru, China's newly adopted Olympic mascot

country's Buddhist culture. For example, a scene of a 'sky burial' – the Tibetan custom of chopping up their dead and feeding the parts to vultures – is de rigeur for any film purporting to reveal the 'real Tibet'. This ritual, with its suggestion of the macabre commingled with the deeply spiritual, never fails to titillate the novice Tibet aficionado. *Horse Thief* has such a scene. So does *Kundun*. Valli dwells on it in *Himalaya*. Neither can Lu Chuan resist the temptation, and in *Mountain Patrol* viewers are treated to yet another sequence of limbs being hacked off and thrown to

waiting vultures.

But the stereotyping of Tibetan culture is only one of *Mountain Patrol*'s flaws. More disturbing is the fact that there is absolutely no context to the film. It is set in a Tibet that is curiously apolitical. There is no indication of a Chinese presence, let alone any representation of Chinese authority. The bad guys here are Hui Muslims. The only Chinese character in the film – the Beijing journalist through whose eyes the story unfolds – is neutralised by the fact that he is half-Tibetan and can speak the local language, and is thus soon accepted into the group.

For an audience that has no knowledge of Tibet's recent history, the film presents the country as a mythical Eastern version of the Wild West. Here, the rule of the gun prevails. Bandits operate with impunity. A man must take the law into his own hands, and only the brave survive. Either this points to a serious breakdown of Chinese control in Tibet – which is far from the case – or the filmmaker has chosen to avoid dealing with an uncomfortable reality.

Lu Chuan undoubtedly had to tread a delicate line while making *Mountain Patrol* to avoid running afoul of Beijing authorities. Although China firmly controls Tibet, the government remains especially paranoid about the area. Nevertheless, one would hope that as China grows in economic strength and engages with the world on multiple levels, a younger generation of intellectuals – filmmakers such as Lu Chuan – would break out of the cocoon of propaganda within which they have been brought up, and confront the complexities of Tibet's situation with objectivity and reason. Sadly, on the strength of *Mountain Patrol*, this is not yet the case.

In the end, it is all the more ironic that, while *Mountain Patrol* focuses on the attempts of a group of Tibetans to save the quintessentially Tibetan *chiru* from being wiped out by indiscriminate hunting, the creature itself has been adopted by China as a mascot for the Beijing Olympics. The symbolism of this act is stark: like Tibet, the *chiru* is now officially Chinese. ▲



# Callings of the Oriya heart

BY RABINDRA K SWAIN

The English-language poet Jayanta Mahapatra did not begin writing poetry until rather late in life, around the age of 40. At that time, English-language poetry in India read very haltingly – more or less like a series of *statements*. In the hands of the Orissa-born Mahapatra, however, Indian English poetry acquired a deep sense of introspection – an exploration of

*Door of Paper: Essays and memoirs*  
by Jayanta Mahapatra  
Authorspress, 2007

the self and a new look at the country's cultural context. Mahapatra's poetry did not state, but rather *suggested*; he was one of the first Indian poets to be able to manipulate the language of the coloniser to suit his own needs. His poetry is now being emulated by a body of young poets from Kerala to the Indian Northeast.

Mahapatra first received recognition abroad. In 1971, editors from the premier British literary journal *Critical Quarterly*, upon accepting seven of the then unknown poet's works, told Mahapatra that they were publishing poems from an Indian for the first time in the magazine's 15 years of publication. Five years later, in the US, Mahapatra received a major award from *Poetry* magazine, which was followed by the publication of his collection *A Rain of Rites* by the University of Georgia Press. That same year, he was invited back to the US to attend the prestigious Iowa International Writing Program. His magnum opus, *Relationship*, a long poem that deals with the rich cultural heritage of Orissa, was also eventually published in the US in 1980.

Mahapatra has published 16 volumes of poems, but over the past three decades he has also written copious prose pieces. Those works

are now collected in the long-awaited *Door of Paper*. These essays deal with a broad spectrum of themes, from hunger in Orissa, to the creative process, socio-cultural conflicts, his responses to the works of others, and meditations on the poetic use of mystery, silence and time. Whatever his theme, Mahapatra's essays bear the indelible imprint of a poet.

Since that first success in the early 1970s, Mahapatra has regularly published poetry in Western magazines, including the *New Yorker*, the *Sewanee Review* and *Poetry*. But one particular journal, *London Magazine*, would never touch his poems. His reflection on this in *Door of Paper* is revealing, as to why and how Mahapatra's poems are the way they are:

I remember Alan Ross, the [*London Magazine*] editor, having written me on a 5 cm by 10 cm rejection slip, when he had returned my poems, that my work was unsuitable for publication because it tended to be philosophic. My own writing has always reflected an Oriya sensibility and I have felt myself to be an Oriya poet who happened to write in English. I suppose our sensibility, the Indian sensibility, is different from the Western one and this stands in the way of the Western reader.

## Moulding the language

What Mahapatra had previously said of the Spanish writer Camilo Jose Cela's prose is also true of his own: "Cela ably demonstrates a prose ... that reads like a poem". Nearly every piece collected in *Door of Paper* also bears ample testimony to this sentiment. Many of these essays try to explain what he has left unsaid in his poetry. Mahapatra, who pioneered the type of English-language poetry that is dominant in India today, has been described as waging an undeclared war against the 'poetry of statement' that was being widely practised in the 1970s.

In the works collated here, Mahapatra undertakes to fill in some of the gaps inherent to that process – exploring his own unconscious, and sorting through the disparate elements that determined the character of his art. Mahapatra says that he "never realised the implications of what [he] was doing ... But I ask myself: what use is a poem if it is easily understood, if there is a straightforward working of the words of the poem, more in the manner of statement? True poetry, perhaps, has always lent itself to an indirect approach and where one returns to an overwhelming absence." This "true poetry" ultimately "liberates" the poet (and hopefully the reader), giving him an inner "freedom."

In order to express a heightened feeling, a poet uses a heightened language, a sublimated one. If need be, Mahapatra says, he also "moulds" that language to suit his need to forge a new direction, and he himself did so using a language that "came naturally" to him. Mahapatra has previously noted that he started writing in English simply because he was educated in an English-medium school. He now suggests that, in the beginning, he wrote his poetry in English because of a fascination for the language, and that his vocabulary came from being a voracious reader of fiction.

A lifelong college physics professor in Orissa, Mahapatra indeed acquired a stupendous appetite for reading





early in life. Preliminary influences included H Rider Haggard and R M Ballantyne, as well as the French novelist Roger Martin du Gard's *Jean Barois*, which he recalls "showed me how to be true to myself more than any dogmatic teaching of religion can ... I could go on to question the existence of God, whom my parents had taught me scrupulously to believe in."

### Literary nakedness

Although long recognised as a writer in English, Mahapatra did not become a bilingual poet until well into the 1980s. As with Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre, however, that evolution was not unappreciated, and his five volumes of poetry in Oriya have subsequently won him many followers among young Oriya-language poets. When Mahapatra first turned to the language, however, he was treated by his fellow Oriya poets as an outsider. This was uncomfortably similar to how he had long been sidelined for "the criminal act of writing in the colonial language."

After long years of writing English-language poems – that too, successful ones – he found that he still was not reckoned as a poet among his own people, who largely did not know what he was doing in his English poetry. At that time, whatever readership was there for this type of work was mainly confined to academics.

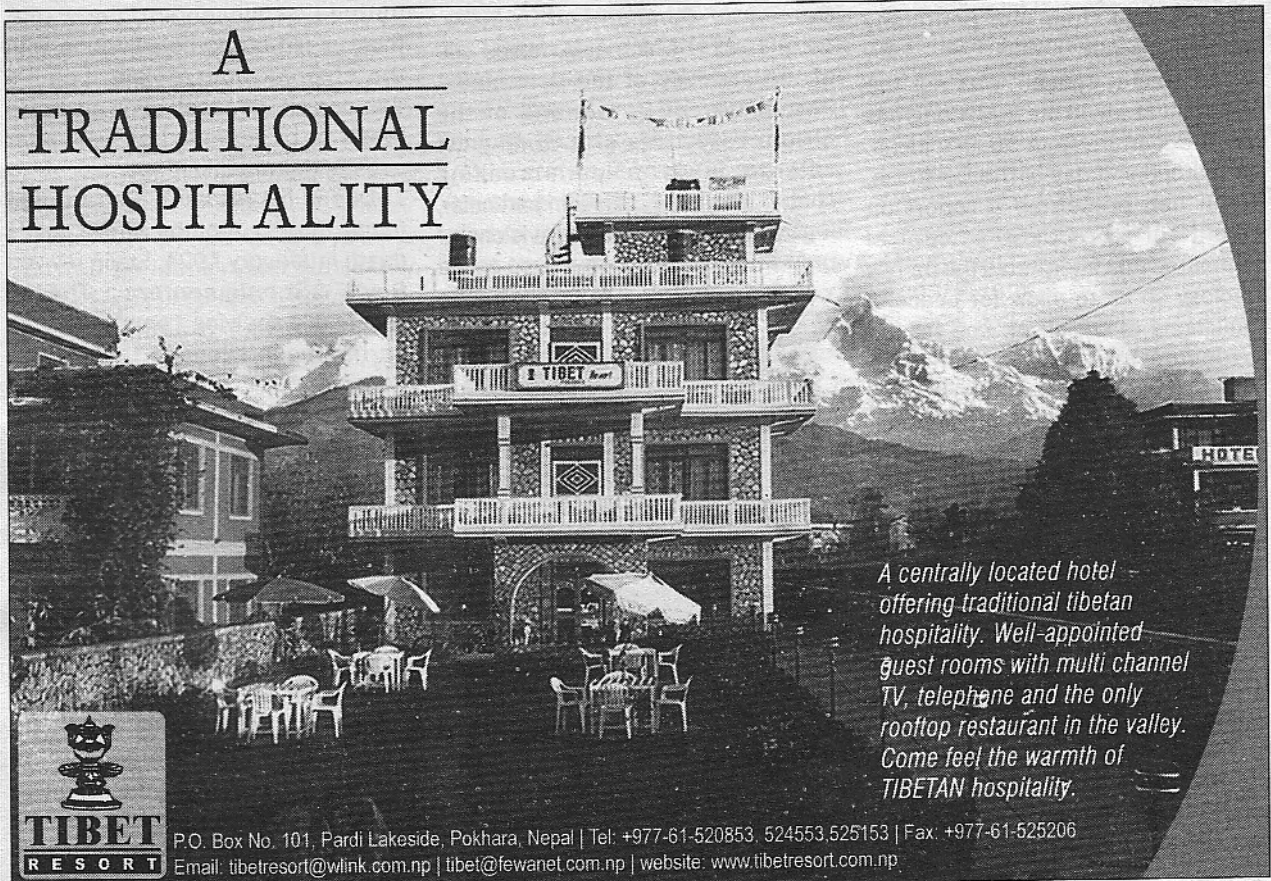
As such, he decided to try his hand at Oriya. After writing a few poems, he discovered that what he was doing in Oriya – speaking of the common people, the marginalised, in a language intelligible to them – he could not have managed in English. Even if he had succeeded in doing so, he now admits, it would not have been communicable through English.

When Mahapatra deals with this experience in a piece titled "The Absence of the Absolutes", his stance is one of both self-defence and apology. In an attempt to understand his own turn from one language to another, from the acquired to that of the mother tongue, he finds a lot that he could not have seen at that time:


"I could now talk to the man in the street ... I used simple, colloquial words because my vocabulary in Oriya is severely limited ... But I spoke with a literal nakedness." He admits that his Oriya poems "did not have the sophistication of the English ones. They were different, complementary. Maybe these were the poems that revealed the naked truth in naked language, stripped of all exaggerated aestheticism ... But my writing in Oriya was a blow in self-defence. I had dropped my masks."

On these and other matters, Mahapatra's sense of humility is great. Though he began as a poet by writing relatively self-indulgent pieces, Mahapatra soon began to deal increasingly with social issues. In *Door of Paper*, we find several essays that tell of "the sadness of his land". Indeed, Mahapatra always obeyed the callings of his heart, which made his poetry subjective. He says, "As a writer I do not pretend righteousness. Only this I am aware of – that a writer should, first of all, be honest to himself and to his readers." ▲

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# Escaping 'official Marxism'

BY SANKAR RAY

*History is a slaughterhouse*

– G W F Hegel

But for the suppression of Communist International documents from the post-Lenin years, the subsequent series of splits and divisions among the world's communist parties might have been nipped in the bud. This dynamic cannot be blamed on the then-head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Nikita Khrushchev, whose controversial 'secret speech' to a closed session of the 20th Congress of CPSU in 1956 denounced Josef Stalin for the personality cult he had fostered, and for his reprisals against those who differed from him politically and ideologically.

The 'secret speech' was not the only point at which the 20th Congress saw a departure from Stalin's ideas. On the opening day of the Congress, Stalin had presented a report on behalf of the CPSU's central committee that interpreted the party's ideology so as to allow for peaceful transitions to socialism, and for the extension of an olive branch to 'bourgeois nationalist' parties such as the Indian National Congress. Such interpretations seemed to suggest a return to the ideals of Vladimir Lenin, from whom Stalinist ideology had made a sharp departure. Following the Congress, CPSU veterans who had collaborated with Stalin launched an inner-party offensive against

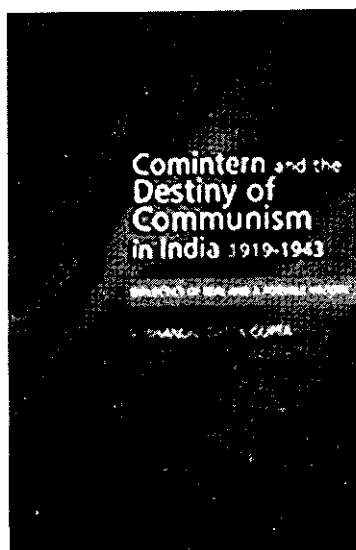
some of the major conclusions in the report. The seeds of a schism were thus sown that were to quickly grow into a global phenomenon – one of particular importance to the Third World.

Until the opening of the Communist International (Comintern) archives in 1987, historians had to depend mostly on the Comintern journal, *Imprecor*, to try and understand these inner workings. Since then, however, researchers have been able to uncover a mountain of information about the Comintern's actions around the world, including in India. University of Calcutta political scientist Sobhanlal Datta Gupta's new *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India, 1919-1943* – which also makes use of the archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain and of the private collections of a communist veteran – is a path-breaking contribution in this genre. In particular, it gives new insights into revisions of the CPSU's position on the so-called 'colonial question' – its stance on the

struggle for liberation from imperialism. For students of the history of the process of national liberation in the Subcontinent, this is exciting material.

At the Comintern's Second Congress, in 1920, Lenin's *Theses on National and Colonial Questions* was accepted after a lively debate on the comparative merits of two drafts: Lenin's and the alternative *Supplementary Thesis*, drafted by the Bengali communist M N Roy. In his thesis, Lenin asked the communists of the Third World to forge a "temporary alliance" with the bourgeoisie in the colonies for the sake of the fight against imperialism, even while maintaining an "independent class role" so as not to lose ideological orientation. Lenin argued that the bourgeoisie in colonies such as India had two roles – one of conflict against colonial rule, and another of compromise with it. Roy, a man Datta Gupta describes as being of "ultra-left orientation", disagreed with Lenin, saying, "The salvation of India doesn't lie in the nationalist movement", and that there could be no cohabitation with the colonial bourgeoisie. Lenin's democratic mindset allowed Roy's thesis to be accepted as well, after substantial modifications.

During his research, Datta Gupta found that six months after Lenin's death in January 1924, Stalin revived Roy's *Supplementary Thesis*, essentially shelving Lenin's. Though he had been silent at the Second Congress, Stalin now rephrased Roy's work so as to rule out any acceptance of native nationalists such as the Indian National Congress as anti-colonial forces. It thus becomes clear how Stalin, in the name of Leninism, led a clean departure from Lenin's approach to communism. Datta Gupta quotes Stalin's heretofore-unknown comments on M N Roy's draft: "I believe that the time has come to raise the question of the hegemony of the proletariat in the liberation struggle in the colonies such as India, whose bourgeoisie is conciliatory [with British imperialism]," emphasising that the



*Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India, 1919-1943: Dialectics of real and a possible history*  
by **Sobhanlal Datta Gupta**  
Seriban, 2006



victory over the conciliatory bourgeoisie was the main condition for liberation from imperialism. This was a prelude to the so-called *Colonial Thesis* that came out of the Sixth Congress in 1929, in which the Comintern, led by Stalin, decided that the Indian bourgeoisie had surrendered to imperialism, and would therefore have no role in the freedom struggle.

## Russification

After 1989, those who felt the urge to insulate themselves against the hangover of 'official Marxism' – the official, Stalinist-Soviet ideology of the post-Lenin years – were grateful to the CPSU leadership for opening up the Comintern archives, itself a decision that came out of the *glasnost* of the Gorbachev period. A milestone in post-1987 research on the Comintern era was a 1992 conference, attended by Datta Gupta, called 'The Communist International and its National Sections', held in the Netherlands. For the longtime Comintern researcher, the conference was a watershed. It was here that Datta Gupta first began to fathom what it would be to explore the wealth of the Comintern repository, an opportunity afforded to him three years later with an offer from The Asiatic Society in Calcutta.

In November 2002, at a seminar hosted by Manchester University, Datta Gupta presented a paper called "The Comintern and the Hidden History of Indian Communism". Here he proposed, "It is now possible to reconstruct the secret – the untold – history of Indian communism by arguing that during the Comintern period, beneath the layer of the official version, there was an unofficial, suppressed, alternative discourse of Indian communism, unrecognised and unknown until now." His comments referred most importantly to the ideas of the 'Berlin group' of Indian revolutionaries, represented by Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, Maulana Barakatullah and Bhupendranath Dutt. In a document submitted to the Comintern, Datta Gupta writes, these

thinkers suggested "an alternative understanding of the strategy of anti-imperialist struggle, which was sharply different from Roy's position in the sense that they looked upon nationalism from a positive angle and considered India primarily as an agrarian country." The Berlin group's ideas were not taken up, however, and probably did not reach Lenin – something that Comintern giants such as Grigory Zinoviev, Nikolai Bukharin, Leon Trotsky and Roy himself worked to ensure.

Official Soviet ideology had massive sway on the workings of the world's communist parties. The Communist Party of India (CPI), too, blindly accepted the 'Russification' of Comintern and its imposition on the 'sections' (affiliate communist parties) such that the sections became completely subservient, despite dissension from European parties. Lenin himself had sensed this problem. In his report to Comintern's Fourth Congress (1922), he praised the resolution on the organisational structure as "excellent", but curtly added, "It is almost entirely Russian".

Material from the Comintern archives seems to have unnerved the one-million-strong Communist Party of India (Marxist), the CPI (M). The CPI (M)'s erstwhile general secretary, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, wrote in the party's journal *The Marxist* in 1996 that the Sixth Congress's *Colonial Thesis* "bore a definite shade of sectarianism". But one of the arguments for splitting the CPI – and the subsequent creation of the CPI (M) – was the endorsement of the same: those who had been readying for the 1964 split had supported the Sixth Congress thesis on the colonies as it helped them to refute the 'reformist' CPI's tacit support to Nehruvians.

Nonagenarian communist theoretician Narahari Kaviraj recently recalled to this reviewer an episode in Calcutta's Dum Dum Central Jail that took place after the start of the 1962 Indo-Chinese war. That conflict had bitterly divided the CPI between those who blamed either China or India as the aggressor. "We asked

Muzaffar Ahmed, aka Kakababu, the oldest communist, to take a party class [ie, a lesson in politics and ideology]. When Kakababu defended Stalin's characterisation of the Indian bourgeoisie, I asked what he thought of [Bulgarian Comintern leader Georgi] Dimitrov's thesis, which recommended a united front with the Indian National Congress against fascism. He only reiterated his stand." Ahmed had considered Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose to be reactionary and pro-imperialist. His jail-time assertion of the Sixth Congress line was therefore consistent. Not long afterwards, he and other like-minded CPI members split to form the CPI (M), a party that stuck to Stalinist ideology.

The Indian communist movement suffered due to a blind adherence to Stalin and Stalinism, which led to a poor, sectarian understanding of the national freedom movement and the Indian National Congress. Marxism-Leninism, the CPI failed to note, is based on dialectical logic: real change is understood to come about through a struggle between opposing forces – not by rigid adherence to a single, predetermined path. In Marxism, revolutionary perspective is constructed through a balanced combination of internationalism and national specifics; no two successful revolutions are similar. Stalin's understanding of dialectics was shallow and one-sided. It is of little surprise, then, that a CPI that was carried away by Stalinism came to make formulations and analyses that seem quaint and dangerous today. A ludicrous brand of sectarianism throttled the 'revolutionary possibilities' of the Subcontinent. The Comintern archives strongly suggest that many socialist states failed due to adherence to an official Marxism created during the Stalin period. Through studies such as Datta Gupta's, the opening of the archives now provides an opportunity to salvage Marxism from 'official Marxism', which the international communist movement has still been unable to overcome. ▲





# Oh, Ghalib!



Just a stone's throw from the sedate, tree-lined, high-end New Delhi neighbourhood of Nizamuddin East is a patch of Old Delhi – one of the places along the Jamuna that has seen the longest continuous inhabitation. Take a turn and a dip off the road called Mathura Road, and you are suddenly transported through time, cultures and senses. The lane winds ahead, towards the *dargah* of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Aulia. On the left-hand side of a plot cleared of all humanity, standing alone behind some imposing iron bars, is the *mazhar* of Mirza Ghalib.

Asadullah Beg Khan (Ghalib), the foremost *shayar* of Urdu, is rather lonely here. All the excitement of this Muslim *mohallah* is on the outside of the enclave, where the faithful throng on their way to the Nizamuddin dargah. With nary a thought for Ghalib, they also ignore the insistent sellers of *chadars* (offerings for the shrine), caps and posters of the Swiss Alps. Beggars here seek alms in a decidedly jocular manner.

Three cats do give Ghalib company, however, lounging about in the harsh afternoon light. Some plastic bags whirl dervishly about in the breeze. Nearby rises the dusty concrete block that houses the Ghalib Academy, along with its library and the Qami Council for the Promotion of Urdu Language. Further down the lane is *Karim's* famous Mughlai eatery, where they claim to have been serving succulent kebabs in an unbroken line of ancestry that goes back to the Great Mughal himself. Outside, in the lane, a young chaiwallah boy pours tea – extra strong, extra milky and extra sweet – in tiny, dirty porcelain cups. Ghalib would have liked the tea this boy pours, for sure.

What Ghalib would not have liked is the sign that announces his tomb. It is in white-on-blue Nagari Hindi and Roman English, with Arabic. Urdu completely absent: "Inside the marble enclosure lies the grave of the great *shayar* of Urdu and Persian Mirza Ghalib (1737-1866)..."

What would the inhabitants of this exalted corner of Delhi – Muslims all – feel about this oversight? Perhaps they do not need to read the signboard because they already know it is Ghalib in there. But should they not feel somewhat *agitated*? Perhaps they have opted for an existential Sufi answer, along the lines of, "*Arreh sahab*, what difference does it make to anyone, least of all to Mirza Ghalib, in what language is written the notice pointing out his *mazhar*? The Jamuna will continue to flow, and those who need to understand what this place is and means, will do so."

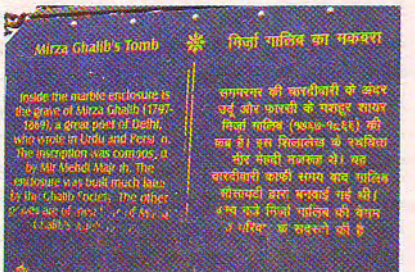
Well, okay, but those of us who cannot conjure the Sufistic response must instead draft a shrill note, and send it to Mrs Sheila Dixit, Chief Minister of Delhi.

Dear Chief Minister Dixit:

There used to be a time when the titles of Hindostani films out of Bombay (before it became called Bollywood) used to run in both Hindi and Urdu. Now, Urdu has been banished. On a related matter, you as chief minister are privileged to have the tomb of Mirza Ghalib, great *shayar* of Urdu, in your great city. The signboard to the *mazhar* displays notices in English and Hindi – *lekhin Urdu ko kya huwa?! Perhaps you would like to do something about this?* Pictures attached as evidence.

Sincerely,

*Kanak Mani Dixit*

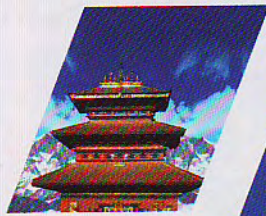




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