HIMAL

THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

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January 1998 • Vol 11 No 1

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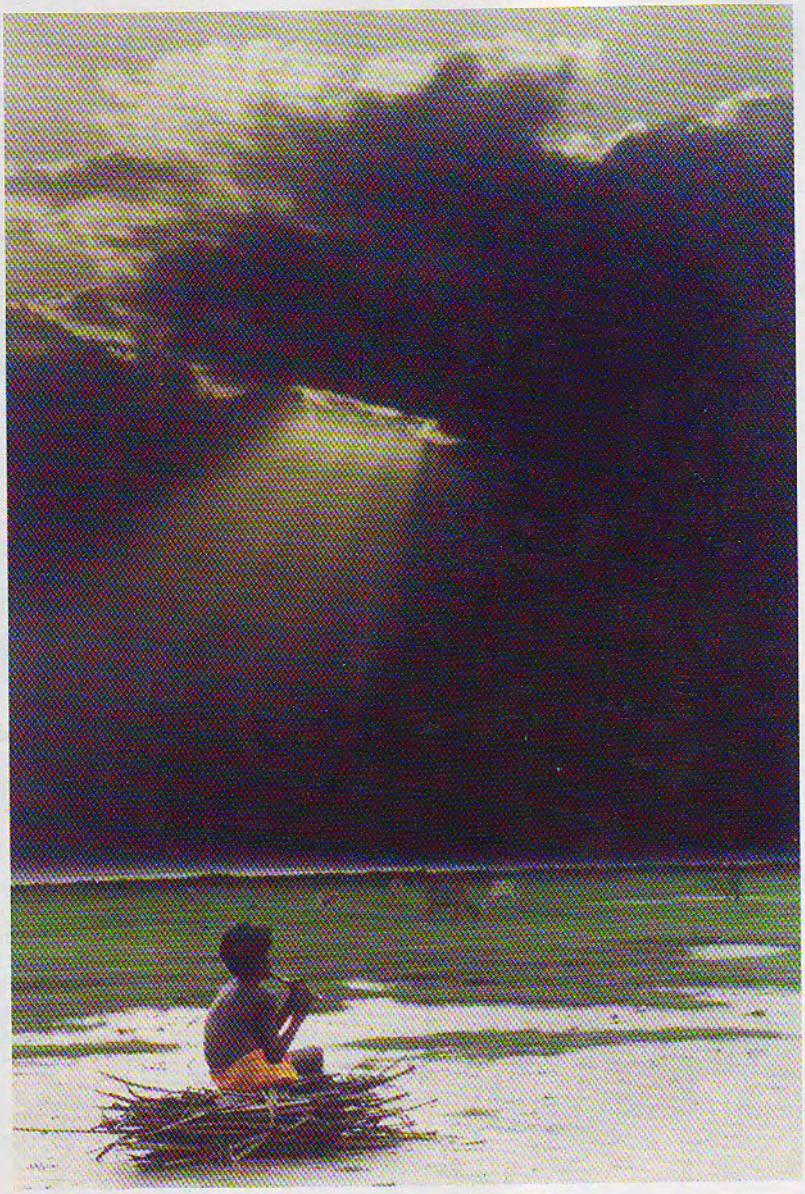

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INSIDE

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THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

Vol 11 No 1 January 1998

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HIMĀL
THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

HIMAL SOUTH ASIA

HIMĀL
THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

Himal is going monthly with this issue. With increased frequency, we hope to serve South Asia with the same depth we have striven for in the past, but with an added sense of immediacy.

To mark this final transition into evolving as a voice for the South Asian region, as readers will have noted, we have said goodbye to the white signature triangle which has appeared as part of our masthead for a full decade. It has not been easy to let go of that bit of white space, which was our identity since Himal was started in 1987 as a Himalayan magazine. The triangle remained in place as we metamorphosed into a South Asian magazine in the spring of 1996.

Since that transition, we used the title 'Himal South Asia' to emphasise our new Subcontinental focus. With the magazine having established an as yet small but significant presence all over the region, as planned, we have now reverted to the single title 'Himal', with the descriptive tag line of "The South Asian Magazine".

Symbols and names, however, can never substitute for good copy. All of us at Himal are committed to developing this magazine further into an independent journalistic publication that looks out for the interest of the people of South Asia.

Mail

Colombo bias

Having tecently become a subscriber of Himal, I find your atticles more 'located' than most of the Western reports that I generally get to read. But your stories still come from a distance - the distance that is from Colombo to the northeast (of Sri Lanka). This need not necessarily be so for you can get all the information about the northeast by reading <www.tamilnet.com>, <www.tamilguardian.com> or Taraki's articles in the Colombo *Sunday Times* and *Midweek Mirror* at <www.lacnet.org>.

Having said this, I would like to point out two instances where I disagree with your reporting. The first is the description of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam as fascistic (albeit within quotes) in the September/October issue (pg 7). No militant group could have achieved as much as the LTTE has by imposing their will purely by force. They have to engender considerable loyalty and devotion, also. A single-minded focus on self-determination, a track record of good government and a singular lack of corruption all contribute to these feelings. Certainly, the Tigers are merciless towards their enemies, but they do inspire dedication amongst the general population.

The second point on which I would beg to differ concerns your story on the Liberation Tigresses in the "Briefs" section of the December issue in which you mention tbat women cadres are being sent into battle by the LTTE because they lack men fighters. In an article in *The Sunday Times* of Colombo on 27 April 1997, D. Sivaram demonstrated that the LTTE could fulfill its recruiting needs from just one area of Batticaloa if the need arose.

Similarly, recently in the *Tamil Guardian*, Harry Goonetileke, an ex-Air Force Marshall, confirms that the LTTE has no recruiting problems. The argument that women are fighting because there are not enough men is not credible. Women are being used in the current battles because they have gained enough combat experience to be used in such critical situations.

The Colombo government is doubly frustrated - over the slow progress in opening a 'Main Supply Route' to the north, and by the decay of its political package. So, in its war of words, it has begun accusing the LTTE of using women and children as cannon fodder (note the Foreign Minister's speech recently at the United Nations), of drug dealing and, of course, terrorism.

I urge you to be cautious in making such accusations.

Avis Sri-Jayantha
New York

Hitler's Himalaya

The article by two journalists about Nazi SS member Heinrich Harrer *(July/August 1997)* was welcome. What the article did not mention, however, were the other earlier Nazi expeditions to the western Himalaya that were undercover plant-hunting expeditions disguised as mountain-climbing or exploration expeditions.

Nazi-era expeditions to this area, although better-known perhaps for their mountain-climbing exploits, nevertheless had the financial, scientific, and political ideological quest that was derived from the period when they were instigated. Fot example, the German Research Council-sponsored expedition to the Hindukush in 1935 led by Arnold Scheihe, collected local cultivars. These plants came from an environment that would match the colder, dryer conditions of Hitler's expanded "lebensraum" to the east of Germany in which they would be planted. Scheibe, like SS leader Heinrich Himmler, was trained in agriculture and later in World War II headed the Institute of Plant Breeding at Munich TH, where he carried out research under the aegis of the Nazi SS "Das Ahnenerbe" (race ancestry organisation), according to German sources.

Perhaps most interesting to scientists today is that the paradigm "landscape ecology", the methodology proposed for examining scientific plant distribution, was first enunciated at a Berlin conference in 1938 by Carl Troll, a biogeographer recently returned from one of these expeditions to the western Himalaya. Troll, who was very familiar with mountain conditions, renamed his paradigm "geoecology" in 1966 and later created a Commission of Mountain Geoecology. Of course, not all members of these expeditions were confirmed Nazi party members, and there is no indication that Troll himself was a Nazi, but it is interesting to note that the environmental determinism inherent in this paradigm is still to be found today in the writing of some scientists working in the Himalaya.

Nigel J.R. Allan
Chaura Maidan, Simla

Editor's enlightenment

To make a flippant remark about something as tragic as violence against women is to express a level of contempt that seems surprising coming from a magazine like Himal. The photo you poked fun at

in the September/October "Mediafile" shows a woman cowering in the face of threatening advances from a man, as published in Unicef's *The Progress of Nations 1997*.

The image was part of a series, by a male Bangladeshi photojournalist, documenting the lives of a group of prostitutes in Dhaka. Ironically, your derisive suggestion - that the woman is shielding her face with her hands in response to off-key singing by the man - underscores the very message of the essay that the photograph illustrated: Violence against women, the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today, continues because women are so undervalued that society is largely blind to violations against them. And when society does take notice, its response is often to blame or belittle the victim.

Your piece illustrates just how far we have to go: If the enlightened editors of a publication dedicated to analysis of social issues don't 'get it', what hope is there for the masses?

Catharine Way, Editor
The Progress of Natious 1997
Unicef, New York

Himal's editors certainly believe that violence against women is heinous. The point being made by columnist Chhetria Patrakar was that Unicef printed the wrong picture to depict the subject. In fact, we have come to know reliably that the woman in the picture was turning her face away from the camera, not cowering before the man in right frame.

Don't pick your nose

Anyone coming to Nepal these days is overwhelmed by the amount of literature intended to publicise Visit Nepal '98. While not delving into why there should be so much puhlicity within the country about the event, since tourists who are in Nepal are already "visiting Nepal", I would like to share with your readers the contents of a leaflet which left me flabbergasted.

Titled *Nepal Bhraman Barsha* (Visit Nepal Year) and in the Nepali language, the leaflet is meant to tell Nepalis how they should comport themselves when foreigners are around. I paraphrase: "Please don't pick your nose and ears in front of foreigners"; "Do not spit everywhere, and hawking is disgusting; the noise is disturbing to others"; "Let us not show the uncultured behaviour of urinating and defecating in public when we need to observe the call of nature"; "Let us not covet the goods of others, nor stare at the tourist so that it is difficult for him"; "Don't displease the tourist you have just met by asking him about his income and domestic affairs".

Just a few more: "When talking with a foreigner, do not touch his body", and "Do not hasten to shake the hand of a female traveller until she has offered hers". And finally, as if any Nepali villager has to be told this, "When you see a tired and fatigued traveller, bid him sit down and make him welcome".

I do not wish to make any comment other than to point out that Nepal is more civilised and sensitive than the writer(s) of the booklet understand, and foreigners too are more adaptable than are imagined by those who seem to be managing Visit Nepal '98.

Mark Turin
Himalayan Languages Project
Leiden University, The Netherlands

Marx, Mao and the Maulana

About Maulana Bhashani, writes Contributing Editor from Dhaka, ***Afsan Chowdhury****.*

In "How the Pakistani Left Missed the Bus" (Septemher/October 1997), Mazhar Zaidi has presented some facets of pre-1971 Pakistani Left politics which are not generally known in Bangladesh. I would, however, like to add some notes on Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani which may illuminate some of the points Zaidi makes in his artiele.

Maulana Ahdul Hamid Khan Bhashani was a peasant leader and the link between East and West Pakistani Leftists from the late 1950s and later, when the Moscow-Peking split occurred, between the Maoists. But he was uot an ideologue. In fact, his leaning was more towards the anti-British Wahahi movement that swept Bengal and parts of India in the middle of the 19th century. (This was the unsuccessful revolt in which half-literate peasants huilt a massive rural network and support base.) Bhashani's alliance with the Left in Pakistan was more of a reaction against the elite class and the establishment. It was a marriage of convenience, and it did not work out in the end.

Peasant leader

Bhashani became prominent by championing the cause of migrant and local Muslims during the "anti-demarcation line movement" in Assam during British rule. He was responsible for holding a referendum in Assam which led to the addition of Sylhet district to what became East Pakistan. But the one meeting this lungi-clad peasant leader had with M.A. Jinnah didn't go

well. Bhashani had burst into tears describing the plight of the people he was leading in Assam, which apparently turned off the sophisticated Jinnah. After the meeting, Jinnah is learnt to have said he did not like politicians who were so emotional. It seems Jinnah was not exactly impressed by Bhashani's peasant demeanour either.

But by 1949, Maulana Bhashani had set up the Awami Muslim League in East Pakistan, in which one of the emerging leaders was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bhashani took practically all the Bengal leaders with him into his party. Even Sheikh Mujib's mentor, H.S. Suhrawardy, who later became prime minister of Pakistan, joined up. In 1954, the Muslim League was completely routed in East Pakistan.

Suhrawardy, however, was uncomfortable with Bhashani's constant call for regional autonomy for East Pakistan and the need for Pakistan to be distant from the United States. This was also embarrassing for the pro-American leadership within the party and a confrontation finally took place at a national meeting held at Kagmari. Bhashani left the Awami League with his supporters and founded the National Awami Party (NAP), which was joined by Wali Khan, Ghouse Bux Bizenjo, Ajmal Khattak, Mian Iftikharuddin and other leftists and anti-centrists.

In 1958, after he came to power, Gen Ayub Khan had Bhashani arrested. Among the charges was that Bhashani had tried to arouse hostility towards a country (the US) friendly towards Pakistan. A bizarre turn of events, but one that only reflected the nature of Ayub's martial law.

Ultimately, Pakistan's relations with China and the US greatly diminished Bhashani's appeal and, along with that, his clout. In fact, when he visited China in 1960, Bhashani was told by the Chinese leadership that Pakistan was a friend of China's; China was a friend of the peasants of the world; ergo, if Bbashani supported Ayub Khan, it would be a service to the peasant cause. Maulana fell for this logic, which showed just how gullihle or limited peasant perceptions can be. After his China visit, he did little to oppose the military rule of Ayub Khan. And when he finally returned to the arena in 1965, supporting Jinnah's sister, Fatima Jinnah, in the presidential elections against Ayub Khan, the political agenda in East Pakistan had already been expropriated by the Awami League under Sheikh Mujib.

Bangla leader

There was a time when the Maoists of East Pakistan were reckoned a major political force. But their worst move perhaps was to appeal for a united Pakistan even as the Awami League, with its pro-Bengali six-point programme, was sweeping everything else out of the political sphere after 1965. NAP split into two and the Maoists split even further, into how many factions nobody even knows. Bhashani ended up neither here nor there.

In this catalogue of the history of that period, I have been told by numerous Maoists that Pakistan's military intelligence let out a good number of Maoists to counter Sheikh Mujib, whose ascendance was beginning to become total. It was Mujib, not Bhashani, who was a threat. And obviously, as events showed, the Maoists failed to rein in Mujib. But in 1969, when the anti-Ayub movement took off and Sheikh Mujib was being tried for treason, he sent a message from the courtroom to "start the struggle". Within days, Bhashani had mobilised the students of Dhaka and elsewhere into a force which overwhelmed the Ayub *raj* in East Pakistan.

I believe that by this time, the Maoists had no place in Bhashani's heart and he had opted for more practical politics. In the section titled "Debates Within" in his article, Zaidi mentions that Bhashani was kicked out of West Pakistan by Gen Musa. That would hardly have been a significant incident since Bhashani had probably lost interest in Pakistani politics by then. However, Zaidi is very correct when he mentions that many of Bhashani's colleagues found his decision to support Sheikh Mujib very strange.

What Bhashani did was move to an extremely radical position, taking all the Maoists with him and refusing to participate in a "bourgeois election". Despite his being anti-Awami League, most of his actions benefitted the League and that included the boycott of the 1970 elections by NAP (Bhashani). He was the only one who had a mass support base and it is possible that by staying out he ensured the chances of Mujib's victory.

As early as 1957, at Kagmari, Bhashani had said that he would be forced to say *assalamalaikum* (goodbye) to West Pakistan if full autonomy was not granted. He was also the first politician to declare "independent East Bengal" at a public meeting in 1970 after returning from a trip to the cyclone-hit coast where millions had died.

During the liberation war of 1971, he spent his time as a virtual "VIP" prisoner because Indian officials did not trust his pro-China leanings. And after 1971, he ranted and raved against the "Marwari" takeover of Bangladesh. With the death of Sheikh Mujib, when Islamic fundamentalists felt their time was coming, his angry reaction forced the military junta to look for allies elsewhere.

The Maoists were, as Zaidi writes, far too dependent on China to make an impact on history. And the man in Pakistan on whom they depended was not a Maoist at all. He was a Maulana, a peasant leader who had never read Marx, who was also a deeply revered Pir, who abhorred Islamic fundamentalism and never really let anyone know what went on inside that thoroughly peasant mind of his.

Readers are invited to comment, criticise or add to information and opinions appearing in Himal. Letters should be brief, to the point, and may be edited. Letters that are unsigned and/or without addresses will not be entertained. Include daytime telephone number, if possible.

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INDIA • NEPAL • SRI LANKA

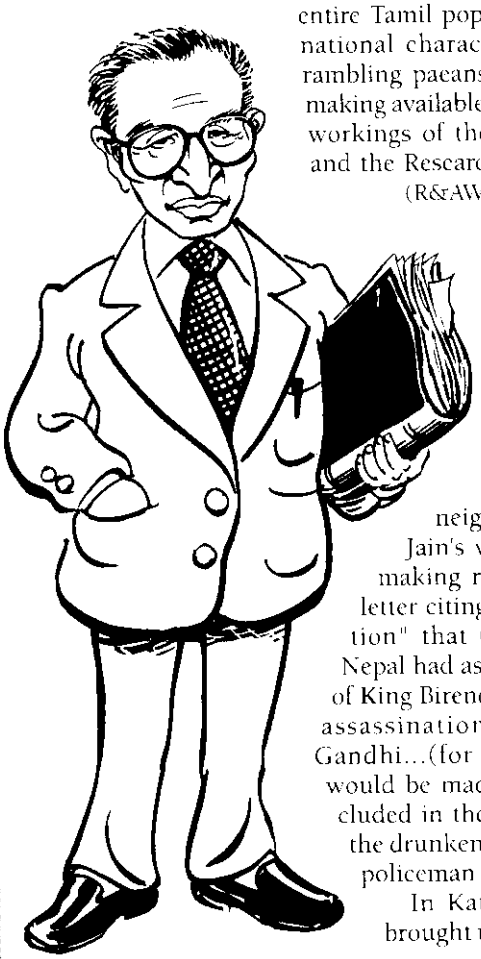
RAW WOUND

THE LEAKING OF the "interim report" of Justice M.C. Jain, who constituted the one-man commission to investigate the death of Rajiv Gandhi, has suddenly changed the course of South Asian politics. Even though it is by all accounts a document of mediocre investigative methodology, Jain's opus brought about the fall of the Gujral government and splattered New Delhi's relationship with Colombo and Kathmandu.

The Jain report recklessly revealed privileged information that would otherwise be the most highly guarded of state secrets. Whether in providing details of VVIP security procedures or releasing affidavits of former prime ministers and police department alike, what Jain delivered was a journalist's bonanza and a diplomat's nightmare.

In investigating an assassination of unparalleled political import regionally, there was a lackadaisical attitude towards investigative procedures and a loose pen that seemed to want to pass comment on anything that crossed its path.

When Jain is not casting aspersions on the entire Tamil population and its "anti-national character", he is repeating rambling paeans to Rajiv Gandhi, or making available piles of reports on the workings of the Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). One wonders at the state of affairs in the Indian judiciary, of which retired Justice Jain must be a quality product for having been given the job back in 1991 by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao.



SUBHAS RAI

As far as India's neighbours are concerned, Jain's volubility extended to making reference to an R&AW letter citing "unverified information" that Queen Aishwarya of Nepal had asked a courtier general of King Birendra "to arrange for the assassination of Shri Rajiv Gandhi...(for which) Rs 10 crore would be made available." Also included in the report are said to be the drunken utterances of a Nepali policeman confirming the matter.

In Kathmandu, the report brought unwarranted titillation to some who had occasion once again to relive the dying days of the Panchayat system eight years ago when Queen Aishwarya had garnered a very poor image. A good part of the polity, however, immediately erupted in reaction against what was seen as a deliberate attempt to tar the royal family.

The Nepali foreign ministry was on the mark when it lambasted "the malicious and irresponsible act of outright misinformation on the part of an agency of the Government of India" (i.e., R&AW). The reaction from Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa's office, however, missed the point, for it condemned not the very presence and snooping by R&AW but lashed out at *India Today*, which had carried a piece criticising the report for "the malicious act of publishing such a baseless, fictitious and misleading news report..." This and other remonstrations against the magazine were quite misplaced, for the article in question was one long criticism of the ham-handedness involved in the writing of the report.

The Indian government's reaction was a masterful example of word wizardry: "Government has seen an article in a leading Indian weekly on the (Jain Report) which contains references to reports casting aspersions of a very serious nature on Their Majesties the King and the Queen of Nepal. These reports are groundless and misguided. Government regrets that such aspersions have been made and dissociates itself from these reports."

The quick and contrite damage-control exercise doused the flames of passion immediately and even King Birendra seemed mollified, for after first refusing permission he allowed the Nepali Army Chief to travel to an official function in Dehra Dun at the invitation of his Indian counterpart.

Onward to Colombo, where there was a certain amount of barely concealed glee that New Delhi finally had its comeuppance for mischief done, even if more than a decade late. For Jain, in his zeal to disclose anything and everything, had confirmed the well-known 'secret' that Indira Gandhi had started the support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam, and that Rajiv Gandhi too had been party to it when his turn came. Affidavits from former Prime Minister V.P. Singh confirmed that "the first batch of training of militants was done in 1983 under the Congress government...Then in 1984 weapons were given to all the militants." The judge also included communication from the Tamil Nadu police naming the six camps run by the LTTE in five districts of the Indian state.

There is much more on Sri Lanka and quite a few *ad hominem* attacks on Tamil politicians and parties of India, but what is interesting in sharp

contrast to the bedlam that briefly engulfed Nepal is that Colombo's reaction to the Jain report was muted. No notes verbale were delivered to the Indian High Commissioner's portico in Colombo. For all the import of what has been revealed - far more serious than the unsubstantiated aspersions on the Nepali queen - the Lankan press did not seem to go to town on the matter.

In all this, one agency whose 'cover' is blown is the Research and Analysis Wing, New Delhi's spook agency that is active within India and in neighbouring countries. Justice Jain takes great pains in detailing the R&AW's activism in Sri Lanka.

In Nepal, the open disclosure of R&AW activity in the country was glanced over by Nepali commentators, who seem to take it for granted that the agency operates in Nepal. It required Ashok K. Mehta, a former soldier in the Indian Army who knows Nepal well, to write in *The Indian Express* that, "The Jain Commission report is quite preposterous...Anyone with the foggiest idea of how R&AW operatives work, especially the low grade ones in Nepal, would have laughed at this report..."

PAKISTAN

THE PRIME EGO

THE POLITICAL CRISIS that engulfed Pakistan in November-December overshadowed all other matters in this country for weeks on end. Some saw it as a rank tussle for power between the judiciary and the executive, others as the last stand of a principled judge against a dictator-in-waiting. Either way, the Prime Minister came out on top, notwithstanding the fact that the President sided with the judge.

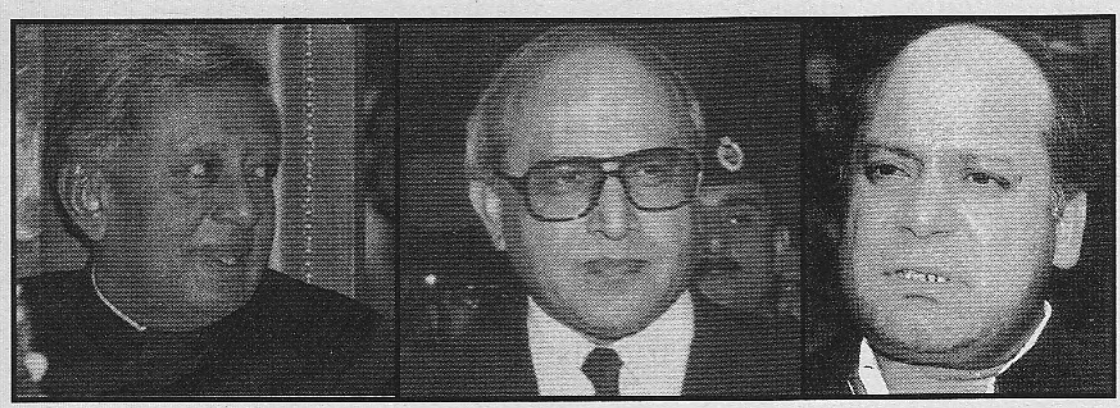
The solution was hailed as having come from "within the democratic system" rather than from outside. Until the last uncertain, tension-fraught minute, there were strong rumours of an army takeover, and the relief that this didn't happen was palpable. The immediate crisis may be over, but surely there are more like it waiting in the wings, although for the moment nothing seems to clutter the horizon for the Prime Minister.

How Nawaz Sharif proposed to rule was clear enough already when, utilising his massive and unprecedented parliamentary majority, he rammed an anti-terrorist bill through Parliament in mid-August. The Anti-Terrorist Act 1997 (ATA) gave police unprecedented extra-judicial powers, to even kill suspected terrorists, while the special courts to be set up will not have the same safeguards for defendants as do regular courts.

In pushing through this bill as with other dire actions of the executive, the only obstacle in its way seemed to be Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah. In July 1997, he initiated public hearings into the killings in Karachi and the Shia-Sunni violence in Punjab. Later, he summoned government representatives to report to him on what action had been taken. Justice Shah said the judiciary would not remain a "silent spectator" as the conditions deteriorated.

The introduction of the ATA only exacerbated the tension between the judiciary and the executive. In reaction to the bill, the Pakistan Law Commission suggested measures to strengthen the existing judicial system (including strengthening the police investigative branch) and warned against establishing a "parallel court system".

Sharif chose to ignore the warnings and the recommendations, and instead challenged the Chief Justice head on, by downsizing the number of judges in the Supreme Court. From then on, matters spiralled out of control, with all sorts of unprecedented situations arising almost daily. Sharif faced contempt of court charges; Justice Shah was "de-seated" by a parallel court of his fellow judges; ruling party goons attacked the Supreme Court building in full view of satellite tv cameras; the President sided with the Chief Justice... The lengthy drama culminated with the resignation of President Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari and Justice Shah, due to retire in Febru-



There were three, and then there was only one. (Chief Justice Shah, President Leghari and Prime Minister Sharif.)

ary 1998 anyway, going on leave.

This fracas cost the country dearly in economic terms, with foreign exchange reserves alone dropping USD 300 million in two weeks of the crisis. But a greater damage was done in terms of the people's confidence upon the ruling institutions, already in tatters over years of dictatorships and political instability. This latest round had nothing to do with institutions or issues: a matter of egos, a clash of personalities had taken the country to the brink. Those representing the different organs of state obviously did not feel bound by the limits of their authority. As one analyst noted, the powerful failed to realise "that precedents set in the years of dictatorship could not he followed in a period of democracy, however imperfect it might be."

As it is, the checks and balances are weak in Pakistan. Now, with two of the personalities gone, who will rein in Nawaz Sharif? The Prime Minister, with a Parliament eating out of his hand, had no need to ride rough shod as he did recently. Will he get worse, or will he reform, now that his ego is satiated?

INDIA

HINDI, HINDU, HINDUSTAN

THE WORLD'S LARGEST democracy, whatever may he its quality, is up for elections again. The fallout of the Jain Commission report brought down the government of I.K. Gujral, Parliament has been dissolved, and the battle lines drawn.

In February's elections, the "stability card" will emerge as the make-or-break issue. Millions of Indians, who see economic growth and industrial development as more important than identifying the killers of Rajiv Gandhi (since it is already well known that the LTTE was responsible), are keen to elect a government that will last. The Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which was the single largest party in the last Parliament, thinks it can hijack the stability card from the Congress.

The BJP leaders have cause for optimism, for the post-Rajiv Gandbi Congress resembles the Mughal Empire in decline. However, Prime Minister-in-Waiting Atal Behari Vajpayee would be mistaken if he believes that the BJP can emerge as a monolithic party like the Congress of the Nehruvian era. For the BJP's conservative plank can never occupy the centrist political space in Indian politics that the Congress has held on to for fifty years.

Look at what the Congress was able to do: In Mizoram, northeast India, predominantly Christian, the Congress promised a "good Christian government" to upstage former rebel chief Laldenga in 1988. In other states, it appeased extreme as well as moderate Hindu and Muslim opinion to forge unbeatahle electoral partnerships. In the Northeast and the South, it forged alliances with regional parties to win elections and form governments.

Since, for them, India is **mahaan** *if it delivers enough in consumerist items, today, India's middle classes would want a decisive BJP victory.*

The BJP has a far too-well-defined a political agenda to be able to make friends and win allies with the ease of the Congress. It may engineer defections like it did recently in Uttar Pradesh - but that cannot be overdone by a party which claims the moral high ground. So, for all practical purposes, the BJP itself will remain a "cow belt" phenomenon of the Hindi beartland.

If the BJP wants to win more than two hundred seats, it will have to forge alliances with the regional parties. Not without reason did 'Atalji' congratulate former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda for "bringing regional parties into the Delhi power structure, so that we were all able to interact and understand them". This, even while other BJP MPs were lambasting Deve Gowda for a hundred failures, real or perceived.

The early-December massacre of three score Dalit children, women and men in Jehanabad, Bihar, served only to tragically emphasise the power of caste in "Hindi India". This caste divide alone will prevent a cakewalk for the BJP with its slogan of "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan". When as Prime Minister, *raja* V.P. Singh, opened a pandora's box with the promise to implement the Mandal Commission report, the power tasted by the "intermediate castes" in successive state governments in Lucknow and Patna has by now ensured that parties like the Janata Dal and the Samajwadi Party will not fall before the sweep of a BJP steamroller.

If the BJP fails to sweep the polls in North and Western India, it can expect even less from the south and east. In these two areas, and even

in Maharashtra to the west, the BJP's only hope is to build a network of alliances. In east, south and northeast of India, the regional parties have come to stay.

Whatever their track record on governance, like the backward-caste parties of the north, these regional parties have built strong platforms by catering to the distinctive identity of the people. And in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala, the communists remain well entrenched.

And so, in all likelihood, India's forthcoming elections will deliver the complete marginalisation of the Congress, its centrist political platform having become largely irrelevant. Societal polarisation will instead pit the BJP, with all its monolithic aspirations, against the regional parties, the backward parties, and the Left. Sentimentalism alone will probably not work, which is why fielding Sonia Gandhi may not be such a good idea for the Congress.

February's elections will thus bring to centrestage the battle between India's so-called mainstream, symbolised this time by the BJP, and the "other India", represented by the backwards, the regional parties, and the Left, which aspires to lead them.

This marginalisation of the Congress will probably not be all too palatable to the "mobile Indian middle classes", who have after all been the greatest beneficiaries of the modern Indian state. These are people who have lost their regional roots through the centralising process of the post-colonial governance. But, since for them, India is *mahaan* (great) if it delivers enough in consumerist items, today, these middle classes would want a decisive BJP victory.

But India's other segments are perhaps not yet ready to give a complete mandate to politicised Hinduism. The BJP has grown fast, but not fast enough to totally substitute the Congress. And the power of the smaller parties cannot be underestimated either. Political pluralism, thankfully, may still have a place in post-Gujral India.

△

- Subir Bhaumik

BHUTAN

VIDEO NIGHTS IN THIMPHU

AS RECENTLY AS the late 70s, it was possible for the Berkeley professor Leo Rose to write in his *Politics of Bhutan* that most families had as much land at their disposal as they could cultivate, and that in many villages the local authorities still had land available for distribution to any family that wanted it. Things have changed now. With population increasing at more than three percent and the decision to withdraw *tseri* (shifting cultivation, known as *jhum* further east) land from production, pressure is growing on land in Druk Yul, including on the 72 percent of the country still under forest cover.

Migration from villages to urban centres, the all-too-common phenomenon elsewhere which Bhutan might have been spared, is increasing. Thimphu Valley's annual growth rate of 10 percent means it will reach its calculated limit of around 60,000 persons in just a few more years. Ironically, it is Bhutan's very success in extending basic education deep into the rural areas that is responsible for this. Young people are using

ELISABETH KALBFUSS

Jobs are not so plentiful anymore: hanging out in Thimphu.

their education to seek alternatives to the drudgery of semi-subsistence agriculture.

As the UNDP put it in typical donor agency politesse to the sixth Bhutan Aid Meeting in Geneva earlier this year, "employment has the potential of becoming one of Bhutan's critical development issues". Not that the Thimphu government is not doing anything about it. It has ambitious family planning targets - to increase the contraceptive prevalence rate from 25 percent at present to 36 percent by 2002 and to reduce fertility from the current level of 5.6 to 2 surviving children per woman by 2012.

But even if these goals were to be achieved, the momentum resulting from a young age structure will continue to rapidly increase the population for the next half century. About 50,000 persons are expected to enter the labour force in the current (eighth) plan itself.

Used to be a time when all educated Bhutanese could hope to find a job with the civil service. However, with the decision to convert the civil service into a "highly professional, compact and efficient organisation" (to use the official formu-

lation) that avenue seems to have been largely cut off. Of the 94 university graduates looking for jobs in 1994, only 15 were inducted into the civil service.

Prospects for employment outside of government are, for the moment, bleak. The main opportunities in the industrial sector lie in developing the nation's vast hydropower resource and establishing small and cottage industries. Power exports to India will, of course, continue to be a major contributor to government revenues. (Delhi recently raised the price of electricity that it buys from the Chukha power project in western Bhutan to INR 2 a unit, and construction on the 1020 MW Tala project has just begun.) The natural resource industry, such as cement, that cheap power will make possible within the country will typically be capital intensive, with relatively weak employment linkages to the local economy.

As for cottage industry, weaving is the only handicraft that has a large market base. It enjoys two advantages - national dress requirement laws, and the tendency of people, as they become richer in Thimphu, to prefer the more expensive locally woven textiles to cheaper machine-made imports even when these (mass produced in Punjab, India) faithfully replicate the traditional Bhutanese designs to the last check. But, weaving, despite being an important supplementary source of income, is hardly likely to appeal to the increasing numbers of junior-high and high school graduates emerging from the country's expanding school system.

Many come to Thimphu seeking jobs in hotels and restaurants, often staying with relatives employed in government. But, with the restriction of tourist numbers that results from Bhutan's low-volume-high-value tourism policy, only a few of them succeed. The rest take odd jobs, and hit the bars in the evenings. Juvenile delinquency is on the rise. The murder which took place outside Club X, a local disco, a few months ago gave rise to much consternation and soul-searching, but the modernising process has been unleashed and it will be hard to bottle up expectations.

The imperative of tackling the unemployment problem, although still incipient, but gradually becoming acute, may eventually force Bhutan to ease up on the relatively cautious policies it has followed so far on tourism, foreign investment (a maximum of 20 percent equity participation allowed), forest-based industries, and procedures for employing expatriate labour.

Can the South Asian toad leapfrog?

We gave them Rajneesh, and they gave us Bill Gates.

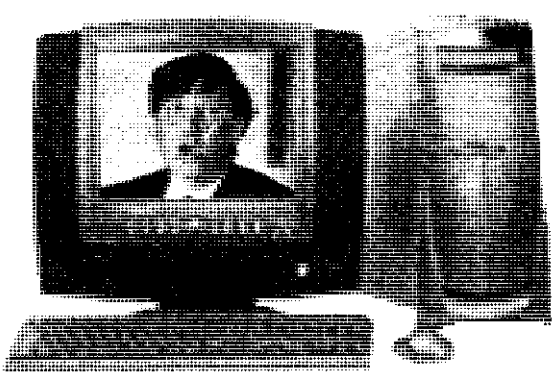
by ***Kunda Dixit***

In one of the more ill-timed trips he has ever made, Fidel Ramos, the Philippines' cigar-chomping president, decided to pay an official visit to India in March 1997. Nothing wrong with that, of course; a portrait in front of the Taj Mahal is a must in the photo album of every head of state. But no one had warned Ramos that Bill Gates was going to be in New Delhi on the same dates.

The result was that while Gates got banner newspaper headlines and top slots in every television news programme, Ramos barely managed a brief mention on page 12 of the national papers. Understandable, since Gates' private worth is more than the GNP of some medium-sized countries and he rakes in more cash every day than the Philippines makes daily from all its exports.

So, why be surprised that Gates was able to meet H.D. Deve Gowda, then warming the Prime Ministerial chair, twice? And in every interview while in India, Gates chanted the mantra of technology and how it would miraculously lift India out of poverty. The television stations controlled by global media moghuls and multinational entertainment empires swallowed whole Bill's panacea. They broadcast the guru's message to India from satellites hovering 24,000 miles above the Indian Ocean. India's domestic media basked in the warm glow of rare appreciation from the world's foremost money-making brain, who is trying to do to Netscape with Internet Explorer what George Bush did to Iraq with Cruise missiles.

Bigmouth Bill.



In all the *tamasha* of the Gates visit, even the cybersceptics got a little carried away by the hype. "Leapfrogging" became the favourite verb during the Gates visit, and we all desperately wanted to believe that Information Technology in all its avatars would vault us into NIC-hood. Or, as one Indian politician once put it, "go from making potato chips to making microchips".

Being more a businessman than a visionary, Gates' eyes were more on India's cheap, English-speaking youngsters to hire for his silicon sweatshops in Bangalore. Here they are, lined up like women in a Nike factory in Vietnam, solving problems for their sleeping clients in Austin. Oh yes, and the Millennium Bug. That will keep India's techies in business well into the 2000s.

Speed and greed

So, can Information Technology succeed where all earlier development cure-alls failed? We are told that the Internet and the World Wide Web will level the playing field, democratise information and ensure that an informed public will take part in decision-making and hasten development. However, if history has taught us anything it is this: technology by itself is never the answer. It is not neutral, and technology always prioritises the interests of the civilisation that spawned it.

The fact that computer ads have started

resembling automobile commercials provides proof that Information Technology is an offshoot of the same culture of consumerism and waste. There is that same obsession with design, speed, acceleration and the call for a spirit of adventure. The planned obsolescence of cars has its parallel in the never-ending cycle of annual software and hardware upgrades. The latest issue of the PC monthly, *Personal Computer World*, has more than 600 pages - more than three-fourths of them are ads.

All added up, the corporate values that drive Information Technology are the same ones that messed up the earth with the unbounded plunder of natural resources. Assembling an average CPU and monitor weighing 25 kg leaves behind 70 kg of waste, uses up 7800 litres of water and 2300 kilowatt hours of energy. Using a Pentium-pro for email is like driving to work alone in a Mitsubishi Pajero.

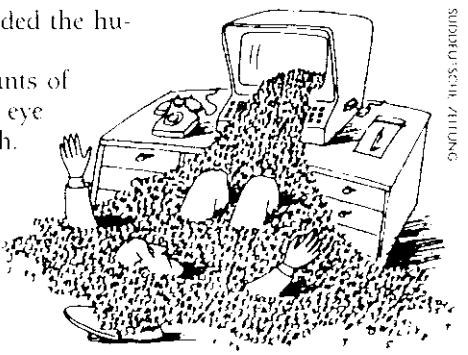
At the ballroom of New Delhi's Oberoi Hotel on a recent rainy November day, the launch of an e-commerce company is in full swing. A screen on the wall displays the projected image of a monitor hooked up to a site selling merchandise through the Web. Virtual multinationals have discovered India's middle class! They have their eyes on the prize: the number of Internet users in India is to rise from 10,000 in 1995 to (some hope) 8 million by 2002. That is twice the population of Finland - the land of Nokia and the world's most wired nation.

At the Oberoi, the slick brochures are breathless with optimism: "Hoping to attract buyers and dealers from Canada and Brazil to Kenya and Malaysia? Looking for business news from the US, Sweden and Australia? Or trying to cut phone and courier costs between your offices in Baroda and Bangkok? Get online. No other medium can match the efficiency, and speed." Or the greed.

Global neurons

Is this what the information revolution will finally come down to - a lazy way to do home shopping? Or, a cheap and instantaneous postal system for my niece to request music videos from Asia's favourite video jockey in Hong Kong? Billions of gigabytes of information whiz around the world in nanoseconds. This information can be linked, making it possible to regard individual computer hosts as neurons and the wired planet as one gigantic brain. Biologically, however, human beings have not evolved as fast. Information travels these superhighways with speed, volume and intricacy which have exceeded the human capacity to grasp it all.

We can send vast amounts of data in the twinkling of an eye to the other end of the earth. But what is it that we are really communicating? Does it have any use? Does it add up to knowledge? Is it making the world a better place? Obsessed with the quantity and speed of its transmission, we seem to have lost track of the quality of that information.



SUDDHASSHIL ZHUNG

Garbage in, garbage out.

All this technology has its uses. After I finish writing this piece, I will press the send button and shoot this file via my local ISP to Himal, which is a 30-second bicycle ride away. That is the real miracle: that a newsroom in New York is as close as the office next door. This is the end of geography.

But let's face it: this technology is for South Asia's information elite - those well off enough to have the right political connections to get a phone line, afford the hardware and the service provider's fees. And whatever the apostles of Bill Gates may say, for the moment the Web is still very much a case of garbage-in-garbage-out. Such a pity you can't read it in the toilet.

Mix information technology with a worldwide free market and you have today's great globaliser. A multimedia juggernaut that carries with it the monoculture message that will result in what German ecologist Wolfgang Sachs calls "cultural evaporation": erosion of diversity and its replacement by a uniform value system. The Internet's linguistic imperialism could speed up this uniformity, while further dividing the world into the Knows and the Know-Nots.

And while we may think we live in the Age of Information, more and more of it is useless in working out answers to global problems, defining lifestyles more suited to a planet with finite resources, or in seeking social justice and equity. The "convergence" of telecommunications, television and computers and their supranational ownership propagates the values of a globalised throwaway society. It is aggravating information overload and burying what is essential ever deeper under an avalanche of shallow words and superficial images.

Virtual insurgencies

So, what next? The consensus seems to be that Information Technology is like a tiger, you can either ride it or be eaten up. So, deep in the

ISP = Internet Service Provider, a company or agency which provides the hub in a country through which subscribers can link to the World Wide Web.

rainforests of southern Mexico, the Zapatista guerrilla leader subcommandante Marcos gives interviews via the Internet. The New People's Army in the Philippines, now with its own website, wages low-intensity conflict against the military in the thickets of cyberspace. What an irony that a communications system designed by the US military to let its links survive a nuclear attack by a communist superpower is the potent weapon for leftist insurgents in the Third World.

Across the world, non-governmental organisations, human rights activists, trampled minorities, suppressed democracy supporters from Indonesia to Burma, indigenous groups like the Ogoni and the Karen have found silicon bonding and solidarity via the Internet. Its inherent anarchy, its decentralised nature and freedom from official control has ironically made the Internet the most ideal medium to fight the commercialism with which the Internet threatens to undo itself.

It is tempting to find either/or answers to the questions of what Information Technology can do for developing areas of the world like South Asia. Mimicking the computer's binary code, we tend to argue about Information Technology in terms of either/or, good/evil, centralising/decentralising, globalising/localising. Probably, the future is going to be a messy analog mishmash. There are parts of the world that will be enslaved by Information Technology, others will be liberated. Transnationals will cash in on the commercial potentials of the Web, but savvy producers from the South will also be able to reach buyers for organically grown tea, market jute bags or sell neem-based pesticides. And those who yearn for freedom in the world's remaining dictatorships can use it to bypass official controls.

The degree to which South Asia can benefit from the Internet's potential for democracy, bring about true decentralisation, or spread knowledge or education, will depend on how much support the information-poor get to 'log on'. At present, only donor-funded NGOs and research centres in the Subcontinent can afford to buy computers, get hooked to a phone line and connect to the Net. The joke is that 90 percent of Indians do not have a phone, while the rest do not have a dial tone. Even existing phone lines are not reliable enough for modem use. But Bill Gates is not investing in phones; the rates of return on hiring Indian programmers is much more lucrative.

(A version of this article first appeared in Choices *magazine.)*

Lilies and wild flowers

The Internet is shedding its exclusivist character.

by Shahidul Alam

Internet evangelist Jeffery Barlow says that the Internet is the ultimate democracy. Others agree that it will take on the autocrats of the world. The beauty of the Internet, they all tell us, is that nobody owns it. In all the hype about the Internet, this perhaps is the hardest to stomach.

The Internet is no ethereal medium that flows ubiquitously through our universe. Physically it consists of computers, telephone lines, modems, satellites, and cables - all things that somebody owns. It is peopled by providers, users and regulators. The people who command what you see and read are almost entirely from the North, mostly from the USA. This is also true of much of the physical embodiments of the Internet.

The US is trying to pass laws that prevent users from encoding their information in a manner whereby it cannot be decoded by the government. There are bodies that determine who should be allowed to own top-level domains of entire nations. The language etiquette developed for the Internet is an entirely Western construct, and the lingua franca for the Net is, of course, English. The ownership of the information content on the Net is almost exclusively Northern, and even the few websites that are developed by organisations in the South are generally located physically in servers in the USA. The information flow on the Net, is as yet almost entirely North to South.

All this is true. But then the Internet is here to stay, and the technological benefits cannot be ignored. For the moment, the Net is correctly seen as elitist, and the small inroads it has made in the South have almost exclusively been within the domain of the powerful. Rather than designing creative methods of using the Net to the advantage of the poor in both North and South, the tendency has been to dismiss it as a tool that will only benefit the wealthy and therefore not worth pursuing.

Ironically, in countries like Bangladesh, developing agencies have taken the option of using the Internet as a purely profit-making exercise. Three years ago, when there was no Internet in the country, small private organisations took the initiative of setting up simple 'offline' email networks. The systems had their failings, and offered only basic services, but for many organisations, particularly those in remote locations, they provided essential connectivity.

The Internet is now being seen essentially as a money spinner and today, of the four major ISPs in Bangladesh, three are run by the famous NGO troika: Grameen, BRAC and Proshika. While the enterprise of these NGOs in trying to become profitable is to be lauded, because of the commercial nature of the NGO ISPs, the ethics of using donor money and clout to set up what amounts to unfair competition to other commercial providers is questionable. It is also certain that these

SHAHIDUL ALAM/DRIK

Madras cybercafe: but what we really need are cyber dhabas!

purely commercial concerns will never venture into non-profitable activities like the establishment of an Internet exchange, or setting up of a grassroots network all over the country, essential if the less-privileged in Bangladesh are to profit from the Internet.

Changes are afoot, nevertheless. UNDP is actively supporting a plan for the Bangladesh Institute of Specialised Information to set up an 'intranet' that will link major academic and research institutions. There are also plans to provide computers and connectivity to major public institutions. A number of organisations offering web design and hosting are emerging, and with time, the asymmetric flow of information may well be addressed.

In the rest of the South (excluding the Asian tiger economies to the east) the story is somewhat similar, and typically governments have played a far from dynamic role. An interesting exception is Mongolia, where the government has shepherded the private enterprise of Datacom, which is using microwave radio to telephonically link up most of the major locations in this massive country.

In India, recent moves to break up the government-run VSNL's monopoly as a service provider and sharp reduction of rates bode well for use of the Internet and email. Already, cybercafes do brisk business in Calcutta, Madras, Delhi and Bombay, and on a late-night visit to one of them in Madras, an eight-year-old turned up with his dad to buy tickets for the film *Ishq*, straight off the net. At another Internet cafe down the road, called Net@cafe, students were applying for scholarships in the US.

The Internet is highly fashionable, but it should be remembered that most of the use is still for email. The VSATs which link you to the global system are centralised, and with existing tariffs and connectivity problems, it is still impossible for people outside of the major cities to have access to the Net. What is needed therefore, is a hybrid technology that uses the full range of Internet services in the centre, but offers off-line connectivity to users in the periphery.

Today, the number of Net users worldwide is close to the population of Bangladesh, and it is growing exponentially. To be sure, most are still wealthy, white and male. After all, the investments required for developing the infrastructure are enormous, and a modem costs more than a cow. But this will change.

Sanjeev Rajbhandari, 'Mr Internet' of Nepal, talks of how the ratio of expatriates to locals amongst his users was 80 to 20 when he started a few years ago, but was now almost reversed. Undeniably the Net is for the moment owned, consumed and controlled by a minority, but as long as the Internet does allow a lone voice to be heard, it is up to the South to ensure that while the lilies of the Net (the mega-networks that control the information flow), continue to bloom, the wild flowers of the South, through their tenacity, resilience and their amazing ability to survive on the most slender of resources, continue to find a place under the sun for themselves in what will inevitably become the largest human collective of all.

S. Alam is Director of Drik Photo Agency in Dhaka, which also provided one of the first email services in Bangladesh.

From rotis to wafers

THE INDIAN TELEGRAPH Act of 1885 decreed that the delivery of all national communications would be under the control of government, and so when the Internet came along, the "service provider" which linked you to the World Wide Web necessarily had to be the government-owned monopoly, Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL). And so while Bangladesh, for example, zoomed ahead with more ISPs in Dhaka than, possibly, mosques, India lagged behind.

India's Net surfers suffered as the monopoly did what monopolies do. VSNL charged high prices for notoriously slow connections (in mid-December, it finally announced a 30 percent cut in rates) and put up preconditions on users that had other countries laughing. Downloading and connection speeds are likened to local trains in the mofussil, and even when a link is made, the "sessions" are interrupted on an average every 20 minutes due to line breakdowns. One Western news agency reported that in Bangalore, the Indian equivalent of Silicon Valley, a user on an average modem could expect to spend up to half an hour each morning just trying to connect to VSNL.

Well, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) claims that all that will change. In early November, it announced a radically reformed Internet policy which finally superceded the Indian Telegraph Act. What DoT said it would do was end the monopoly of VSNL and permit unlimited number of private Internet service providers (ISPs). It would allow market forces to dictate connection fees, said DoT, and that India aimed to provide a "level playing field for all the ISPs".

Over a hundred companies are said to be waiting for this signal, so that they can fulfill the unsatiated demand of browsers in hundreds of Indian cities. The 'online community' in India is now expected to expand exponentially. Today, India with nearly a billion citizens, has no more than 80,000 connected individuals. With its new policy, the government hopes that there will be up to two million personal computers connected to the Net by the year 2000.

No one should have any objection to that, if indeed it will happen.

Netizens of Sri Lanka

No ISP is an island.

by *Afdhel Aziz*

Sri Lanka's online presence has increased exponentially over the last couple of years, with more and more service providers joining in. The market leader has been Lanka Internet, which has aggressively targeted both commercial and domestic users by providing Internet presence to companies from the banking, tourism and retail industries. Its website <www.lanka.net> is probably the most comprehensive at the moment, featuring as it does the Lanka Business Web, a handy collection of the main commercial sites. It also contains other interesting places like a Virtual Gallery of Sri Lankan Art, TNL Radio online (which you can listen to with a RealAudio setup), and several weekly and daily newspapers as well.

A strong competitor is CeyCom with its site <www.ccom.lk>. From energy companies to casinos, finance and banking institutions to hotels, Lions and Rotary to professional organisations such as the Association of General Practitioners and the Chartered Institute of Marketing Newspapers, all have their sites with CeyCom.

For slightly less formal news about what's happening in Sri Lanka, the web surfer can try the site maintained by Web Syndicate <www.xasia.lk#>, a small but fast-growing company. Their Explore Asia site contains information on regular events in the island, as well as information on restaurants, shopping, bars, clubs and other cool places.

Online news agencies

It is possible to get Sri Lankan news culled from a number of sources (including a strangely large volume from Xinhua, the Chinese news agency) sent direct to an email address. One of the best and longest-running is SLNet. Covering everything from the latest military and political news to current events and sports, it also features articles sent to the service by members on subjects as diverse as refugees fleeing the worsening human rights situation within the country, to the US Visa Lottery, the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and appeals for help for bone marrow transplants. SLNet also provides regular news about the country. It is a not-for-profit effort supported most commendably by LacNet. To subscribe, a message has to be sent to <slnet-request@lacnet.org> with the note "help".

The Daily Resume on Sri Lanka <janath@slt.lk> is a condensed news bulle-

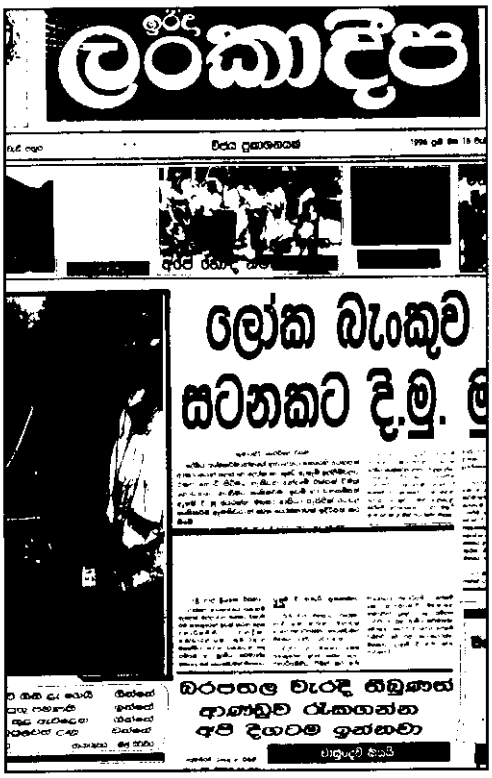
tin, published every working day, that covers important political and commercial news in the Sinhala and Tamil press, which are not reflected in the English papers. The site covers 19 newspapers and tabloids and also includes the only Jaffna paper *Uthayan* (as and when available).

The publishers of Daily Resume claim that "It is the vernacular press that not only reflects, but also creates, the public opinion in Sri Lanka and a good knowledge of what is heing exposed to the general puhlic through these publications will definitely help you determine the flowing directions of Sri Lankan public opinion at this crucial juncture... English-reading Sri Lankans and those who are interested in Sri Lanka are exposed only to the English media, and may not be quite aware of the true sentiments of the majority."

"They just don't get it"

Vasee Nesiah has been a major player in the Internet market in the country since its inception and now runs MediaSolutions, a multimedia producer that services the Asian and European markets from its base in Colombo. Answering some questions via email, tbis is wbat he had to say on the Internet in Sri Lanka:

> *As you know Lanka Internet used to have the best web team - over a hundred web sites of every possible sort, approximately five million rupees in web development revenue over 16 months, almost every major newspaper and magazine published online, live cricket commentary since the 1995 Cricket World Cup, Live Radio since 1996, and so on.*
>
> *However, there has been a sudden drop in Lanka Internet's activities which has allowed CeyCom to come to the fore. They have pretty much got the mix right and their site is improving regularly. Although there are several other small-time web site developers almost all of them are destined to remain small timers.*
>
> *They just don't get it. It's not enough to convert a Microsoft Word document to "html" or even fiddle around with something like Microsoft Frontpage. To be successful you need to have two things: first, access to resources, and ISPs are best positioned to do that; and secondly, an understanding of what makes the Web tick. Fancy graphics are useless if nobody visits your site. At its peak, Lanka Internet's site had about 2.5 million hits, but that number in itself means nothing. What matters is that there were about 5000-plus repeat visitors, that's why a site is successful. You have to have repeat visits.*
>
> *As far as I am concerned, the web business has peaked. This is true in Sri Lanka and other countries. Static web sites are no longer enough to cut through the clutter. There are 17 zillion sites out there. You have to have sites that function, sites that do something more than display text and animate graphics. That's the long and short of it.*
>
> *Not that the Web is devoid of any commercial benefits whatsoever. Small- and medium-sized businesses gain the most - some of them have struck it rich. I know of a gem merchant and an aquarium fish exporter who did quite well for themselves (a few millions in orders) on the Web. And, of course, the travel trade always does well on the Web. However, the long-standing impediment to genuine web commerce - transaction capability - remains the same in Sri Lanka as throughout the world. Local banks must learn to accept credit cards without signature verification. Without that, local web sites will remain stagnant.*
>
> *But despite the advances, there is still not enough interconnectivity practised in the market, which would lead to increased traffic through all sites and a higher profile for Sri Lanka on the Net altogether. This is perhaps due to the belief that increased traffic generates increased profits which should not be passed on to competitors. But since Lankan web companies still don't seem to have cottoned on to the potential of web-based advertising, this argument seems slightly pointless.*



<janath@slt.lk> tells you what the English press does not, in the Net.

A. Aziz, a freelance journalist, is presently at the London School of Economics.

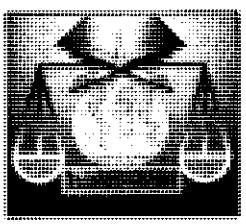
<.pk>

This domain name is not controlled by the Pakistan government.

The maulanas are getting wise to it, the militants are catching on, the porn-freaks love it, the movers and shakers like it and loathe it: the Internet in the Land of the Pure, while still in its diapers, is thriving on a mini boom.

A boom that holds all the promise to turn into a major one, almighty government willing. With the state holding a monopoly over the Web business, private operators here are chomping at the cyber-bit. In fact, they're quite furious about the free surf that the state-run giant PTCL (Pakistan Telecommunications Corporation Limited) enjoys.

"These people can't tell the Internet from a fishing net," fumes an operator. While that, of course, is stretching it a bit too far, the reaction stems from the fact that private operators are cut up about the exorbitant sums they have to cough up to the PTCL, which has its own service provider named Paknet. "PTCL does not have to pay the taxes we do," says Faisal Ahmed, managing director of Fascom, the only data network operator in the country providing Internet service. "In addition to everything else, such as 300,000 rupees a year for the licence to operate a service, we have to pay a four percent tax on turnover which means almost half our profits are gone."



Then there's the fear of PTCL suddenly reducing tariffs. Says Hasan Khan, marketing manager for CyberNet - one of the latest, flashiest and fastest-expanding Internet service providers: "We know very well that PTCL could knock us all out in one go by just slashing its tariffs for a little while... Even now we exist basically because of the superior quality of our service - in spite of the fact that our rates are twice as much as those of Paknet (the official service, part of PTCL)."

Myopically far-sighted

The telecom czars draw flak on other grounds as well. Official licences granted to private Internet service providers still forbid the transmission of certain types of information, all kinds of data encryption and voice relay over the Internet, oblivious of the fact that there is no way to enforce such regulations. "The licence seems like it's out of the Government of British India Act of 1886," quips Shahab Khokhar, deputy general manager at Digicom, the first Pakistani company to offer online email and Internet facilities. Amazingly, according to the Pakistan Telecommunication Act of 1996, you would be on the wrong side of the law if you tried attaching devices like a modem on telephone lines.

However, in its haste to play the poking policeman, officialdom has missed out on some matters in its own backyard. Believe it or not, the <.pk> domain name used to define Pakistani sites is not controlled by the Pakistani government but by an individual in the United States, Ashar Nisar, with whom all those who want the tag must register. The Pakistan government, it is reckoned, was caught napping while Nisar picked up the domain name.

The government also goofed up on an opportunity to develop a full Internet node using a gigantic submarine fibre-optic cable which will connect most of the rest of advanced Asia in 1999. Desperate last-minute attempts at salvaging the situation saw Pakistan obtain only an offshoot connection from the cable. As in so many other cases, senior PTCL officials were quick with their defence, explaining the lost chance as part of a "far-sighted policy".

This is perhaps the same policy that's goading the PTCL to cling on to its monopoly. Telecom authorities remind us that since PTCL made the initial investment, it is quite justified in holding on to the monopoly as the private Internet service providers are only riding piggyback on its success. As Mian Javed, chairman of Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), puts it: "Large investment in telecom system infrastructure in the country was made by PTCL, and the returns from this investment can't just be ignored when we make that infrastructure available to private value-added services." The regulatory body's chairman also dismisses the notion that PTCL does not have to pay taxes. "We pay excise and other taxes even on the lines in PTCL headquarters."

Spreading Net

All the official bunglings have made things slower, hut have not put a stop to the march of technology; the Net is spreading. There are now at least 25,000 Internet account holders in Pakistan. With a family often availing of one personal account, the figure of actual online users could be well above the 100,000 mark. Over the last one year, more than half a dozen private ISPs have entered the market, while companies and individuals are scampering to get connected. This is what the mini hoom is all about.

Thousands of Pakistanis now have their own multimedia pages on the World Wide Web, the fastest-growing part of the Net. Political parties and militant groups, media organisations, students, the smut crowd, and even some maulanas like Israr Ahmed <http://www.tanzeem.org> have their own homepages. Net riders can now access their favourite newspapers; browse through party manifestos, stock exchange listings; send an email to Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif; download verbatim the Pakistani Constitution; place advertisements; make hotel reservations; shop for books; or even savour the audio of the pop group Junoon's latest numbers and Nusrat Fateh Ali's qawwalis.

There has been some creativity too. Like the venture of Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) - a non-profit organisation funded among others by UNDP - which was among the first to offer electronic mail access to individuals and corporations. The SDNP, by not providing direct online Internet access keeps the costs down even as it reaches out to a wide community who can't afford such 'connectivity'. The programme's resource managers keep their clients constantly updated on development-related information by accessing sources and feeding them off the Net.

Some of this promises a happy ending for the Internet story in Pakistan, almost raising visions of cyber-happy women in *purdah* carrying online feminist debates with their counterparts, which the Net certainly would support. But no. We're still talking South Asia. Pakistan carries with it all the baggages of patented South Asian virtues - a paranoid bureaucracy, profusion of low-techies, poor and thin telecom links, and that small matter of illiteracy and poverty. Here, even the Net has to wait to conquer. And yes, here many may well take it for the fishing net for some time to come.

This text is based on interviews and reporting in the Herald *magazine's special Internet issue of June 1997.*

Net profit

by *Mukesh Patel*

TRADING ACTIVITY on the Internet - in contrast to information about product and services - is a relatively new development. The major impediment till recently was lack of a reliable and secure method for transfer of funds. The ethos of open, unrestricted access could not easily square with security necessary to protect buyers and sellers.

However, with the advent of sophisticated encryption algorithms, 'firewalls' and user-access monitoring and restrictions, many of these basic problems have been overcome. Globally, Internet-based commerce is poised to take off and the projected turnover is expected to exceed USD 100 billion by the end of 1998. The figure was no more than USD 100 million in 1995.

Thus, Internet commerce is increasing at a phenomenal rate and the main beneficiaries are small-scale businesses which could otherwise never hope to market their ware beyond their local district. The inherent advantage of the Internet is local presence combined with the potential for global impact. It enables small players to market their products directly to a global audience. Also, increasingly, a larger proportion of Internet-based trade will be transnational.

An example of the brave new world which is already here is in a transaction recently concluded by this writer. Then located in Crete, he was recently able to rent out his apartment in Edinburgh, Scotland, to a couple in New York, all with no more effort than posting a "for rent" message in an appropriate bulletin board. The rest of the transaction was negotiated and settled via email exchanges, and the landlord and tenant never met in person. As with learning and exchange of information, the Internet renders virtual the whole arena of trade and commerce.

The attraction of buying and selling on the Internet is its seamlessness - geographical location of either buyer or seller does not matter. For trading in 'soft' goods such as magazines, tutorial courses and counselling/consultancy, the Internet alone is sufficient. But in order to exploit the full benefit of e-commerce, aspects other than the Net have to be modernised and updated.

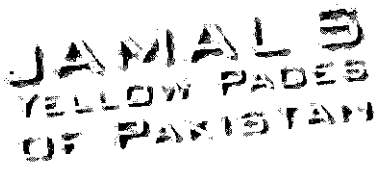
Cybercash

For example, while an order may be taken on the Net, the exporting has to be made hassle- and corruption-free and also easier. This means doing away with the tedious and non-cyber activity of form-filling and rubber-stamping. Only then will small- and medium-scale industries and traders be able to take full benefit from the Net.

Once ordered, the goods should be delivered efficiently and without hitches. At present it is normally easier to smuggle goods in or out of South Asian countries than to do so legitimately. Also, the quality and specification would have to live up to their description on the Internet site. The improvement in basic infrastructure to allow for fast, efficient delivery will also need to be in place before such fantastical notions can become reality.

Simplifying bureaucratic procedure alone will not suffice, though. Before a person sitting in New York can select and order a carpet from a handweavers' co-operative in Pakistan, a lot of ground reality in South Asia will have to change. For the New Yorker, accessing the carpet weavers' website should be just as quick and easy as visiting the website of the local pizza takeout. That means payment with credit cards or alternative modes of e-cash should be possible. This is something that the average South Asian bureaucrat would blanch at as a matter of routine.

The problem is that most of the policy-makers in our countries are hopelessly oblivious of the advantages of the Internet, generally because they have had little or no exposure to it. Even those who do have some experience usually lack the suppleness of mind and intellect to deal with the change in perception required to fully comprehend its impact on all aspects of human activity.



Imagine the loss of comprehension that the average scribe must have felt when confronted with the idea of the printing press, and then the reader will understand why those in South Asia who control media and communication resources fail to see the obvious advantages of the Internet. As in other arenas of society and economy, in all likelihood, then, the countries of the Subcontinent will continue to lag in the area of e-commerce. They will, therefore, make less e-cash.

M. Patel is a Web-savvy businessman presently based in Ahmedabad.

HIMAL SURVEY

Subcontinent.net

Email may bring down borders, or it may not.

Geo-political, geographic and economic obstacles have prevented easy communication between and within South Asian countries. In fact, it can be said, there is less talk across frontiers here than in any other region. However, a mindset for discussion has now been created by the prospects of enhanced intra-regional commerce, the increasing acceptability of the Subcontinental worldview, and expanding interaction among South Asian professionals in seminars and workshops. South Asia's scholars, students, activists, bureaucrats, business people and politicians are more willing now than in the last 50 years to consider each other. At this very moment, email arrives to be the carrier of dialogue...

Electronic mail - the transfer of typed messages through the computer and phone lines - does not heed national boundaries and cannot be bound by regulation. Himal, which itself receives most of its copy from all over on email, is convinced that electronic mail - not to talk of the wider utility of the World Wide Web - can help usher great changes in South Asia. By allowing continuous and informal exchange, email is already helping develop empathy and understanding.

To see if others believed in this promise of the newest communication technology, Himal's editors sent out a query note through the lines to South Asianists all over the world. They were asked to respond to the proposition given below. Overall, the reply from scores of respondents was sobering. Many readers (only a few of whose responses are summarised below), while acknowledging the potential of email, cautioned against attaching too much store by email.

The proposition:
"Email will greatly enhance communications across South Asian frontiers and help advance regional rapprochement and social development."

SUMEGHA AGARWAL, journalist in Australia, agreed that email was "the most accessible and egalitarian mode of communication across frontiers", and that it would make it easier for Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis "to pick up from where they had left off at the time of Partition".

NAILA SATTAR, a student of development from Dhaka, worried that, for all its effectiveness, "email was only for South Asia's literate and wealthy... The voice of the poor and illiterate will continue to remain unheard in cross-border cyberdebates."

SAFDAR HASAN SIDDIQI of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy, referring to his group's reliance on electronic mail to carry out its activities, agreed that the medium was helping develop effective contact between various organisations of South Asia, and particularly India and Pakistan.

Bangalore-based writer RAMACHANDRA GUHA, while believing that email would lead to regional rapprochement, cautioned, "I am not so sure of 'social advancement'". He added, "That would require more work than a mere technology, albeit the latest, can provide."

Said a COLOMBO ACADEMIC who inexplicably wanted to remain anonymous, only a select portion of Asia's population have email, "and building dependencies on such facilities can be an oversight". He cited the example of

an English radio station in Colombo which had begun taking song requests over the fax. The music swayed more and more towards a very narrow "pseudo-Western" taste, he said, because the average listener did not have access to fax.

IFTEKHAR ZAMAN, Dhaka academic who presently heads the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in Colombo, agreed that because it was "freer, faster and cheaper", email would help strengthen "regional public opinion" in favour of rapprochement. However, he said, "Those who matter remain in a totally different world, email or no email." Also, as email use remains restricted to the younger generation, the gestation period for any change in policy would be fairly long.

OBAIDUL HAQUE, specialist in development communications in Dhaka, believed that the power of email was completely underutilised as yet in the Subcontinent. Although there were some discussion groups, little effort was being made to publicise resource locations in terms of email addresses of users by area of interest and country. " Also, South Asians continue to regard email as akin to letter-writing and forget the advantages of its immediacy and the informal approach. Unless, we learn to respond quickly and succinctly, we cannot fully take advantage of email's potential.

ISWARAN, with the Madras Foundation (which believes in "the power of networking and communications technology to produce social good") also repeated words of caution. "Prejudice will not disappear because of new high technology, and email could actually enhance and aggravate existing problems." Some of the best cross-cultural communication, he insists, will continue through "old-fashioned letters written over several weeks and pondered over before being dropped into the mail box. Old technology is still valid and powerful."

ADIL NAJAM, scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "Email, like any technology, is just a tool. The motivation to 'do the right thing' still has to come from people. If that motivation was lacking before, why should it suddenly appear now over email?" The Internet may have the potential for good, but it can equally be a technology of oppression, says Najam, pointing to how the white supremacist movement in Europe and the racist militia movement in North America have taken advantage of electronic networking. "Suddenly, the bigots are discovering others like themselves all over the world."

The various South Asian "bulletin boards" continue to be inhabited largely by South Asian students studying in the United States, says Najam. "While there have been some tremendously useful exchanges on controversial topics, such as the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war and the birth of Bangladesh, there is just too much mud-slinging, name-calling and so-called 'email flaming'. Especially on issues relating to religion, the email wars have been terrible - real exemplars of religious intolerance."

Hey, people are talking

WHEN A TWO-DAY meeting of Pakistan-India Peoples' Dialogue on Peace and Democracy ended in Lahore in November 1995, a group of journalists who were part of this people-to-people initiative decided that they would keep in touch and exchange articles to be printed in newspapers on either side of the border.

"Thank God for email," said one. The others agreed. Given the restrictions on exchanging information and publications across the border, the exorbitant costs of faxing, and the poor quality of telephone lines, electronic mail is indeed a god-send for communicators. (The bad phone links between South Asian countries do not affect email communications because the lines are all routed through Western or Southeast Asian hubs, whose links to the individual Subcontinental countries are always good.)

The Indo-Pak relationship, the most acrimonious in the Subcontinent, can be mellowed by electronic communication. For these two countries whose journalists, academics and activists who have not talked to each other for decades due to obstacles ranging from the political to the postal, email suddenly provides an unrivalled and accessible means of communication. A computer and a modem makes mincemeat of barriers, and there need be no reason for hesitation other than one's own diffidence.

The electronic exchange between journalists and activists is just the beginning. Even today, too few Indian and Pakistani academics based in each of their own countries are calling each other over the Net. And decades of intellectual inertia have to be overcome before policy-makers and politicians on the two sides start contacting each other through their computers.

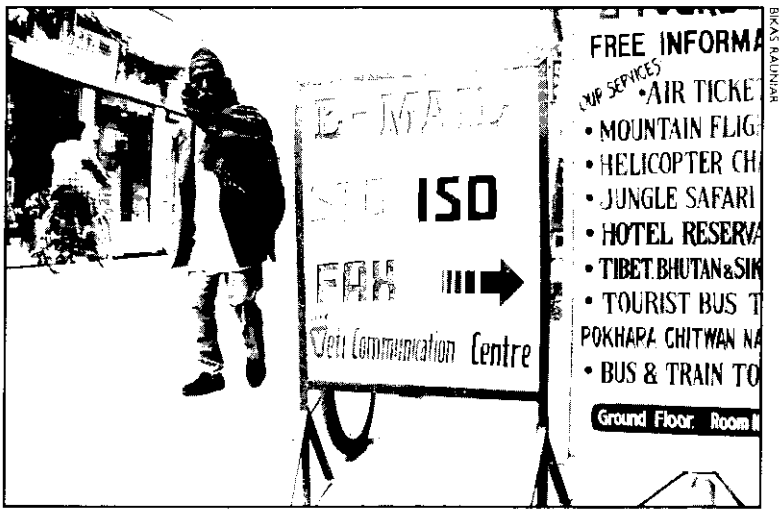
But, make no mistake, email is helping shift the very ground on which the Indo-Pakistan enmity rests. People are talking.

DOUGLAS KREMER, German South Asianist and former computer consultant, strongly disagrees with Himal's proposition. Even though he advocates introduction of email everywhere, Kremer is a sceptic due to the harsh economic reality of email technology. He writes: "One was led to believe decades ago that telephones, railroads, and airplanes would do all these great things for India, and look at India today: only the elite enjoy the fruits of the great Information Technology harvest (and airline deregulation). Thirty percent of the population remains 'poor', cut off from access to technology other than satellite television. Or are Bihari dalit children now emailing their pen pals in Bangalore? I cannot comment on other SAARC countries, although at last check no one I knew in northern Pakistan had email.

"Who will provide the money for equipment, training, and utilising email? The United Nations, which is bankrupt? The SAARC governments? Do these governments feel any less threatened by email and the hroad dissemination of information than China does? Would King Jigme Singye Wangchuk be pleased if the Lhotshampa disseminated information on human rights abuses in his kingdom? Would Sheikh Hasina Wajed award non-Muslim Bengalis free computers to freely practise their religions via video conference? Will the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers email each other to discuss Kashmir? Would a future Porters' Union representative in Kathmandu email daily wage rates to load carriers in the hills? Hardly."

MARCUS MOENCH, Chairman of the Colorado-hased Institute for Sustainable Environmental Transitions, is in "qualified agreement with the first half of your proposition and am uncertain on the rest". In his son's school, which is half Hispanic and half white-collar professionals, there is an email network to contact parents. "But it only works for the wealthy Anglos," he writes. "Very, very few in the Hispanic community have email. Less wealthy Anglos also don't. Email has, as a result, enhanced the ability of the wealthy to organise and communicate without effort." On the plus side, however, Moench is engaged in setting up a virtual institute with partners across South Asia. "This would not have been possible in the pre-email age. Communications would have been too expensive and unreliable. In this case, email enables people in South Asia to tap international resources and disseminate their work internationally."

BIJU MATHEW, who teaches at Rider College, New Jersey, writes: "If the anti-colonial struggle and the multiple nationalisms it produced in the Subcontinent has been fundamentally regressive, then technologies such as email at least give a person the possihility of overcoming nationalism without simply heing nostalgic." On the other hand, one cannot discuss the potential of email without asking questions of access. Within the constraints of being an elite technology, because it was a technology nurtured and developed inside the academy, email's growth reflected a certain "liheralism". However, writes Mathew, the last few years have seen the 'privatisation' of the Internet. "There is rapid commodification happening of an as-yet uncommodified domain. I seriously douht that this will produce more democratic forms."



BIKAS RAUNJAR

Email in Thamel. Shoppers at Kathmandu's tourist quarter can eat, drink and send electranic mail.

Once the Web takes over, resource-poor South Asia will not be able to stay online in any meaningful way, Mathew says, "unless we begin to build regional networks that are self-sustaining". This means allowing and operating through "a system of local South Asian connectivity wherein the telecom resources we are using are our own, that is, hosts, satellites and hubs which are regionally cost-effective." But even here, hecause email and its ancillaries will remain the domain of the government and corporate elite, Mathew predicts that the interests of "the people" will he largely sidelined.

MANISH NANDY, scholar and American diplomat, says, "People in South Asia are chatty. They will find email suits their style. That's because email language is informal, casual, almost grammar defiant. It will encourage people to communicate with more immediacy even as they discover the high cost of not-knowing or not-knowing-in-time." So, writes Nandy, "There will be more interaction, more information, and more knowledge in South

Asia. But, more understanding demands more than a chat. If people and societies understand the potential, and consciously seek to broaden understanding, genuine change will come. It will not occur by happenstance."

Nandy ends his communication with: "Cameras have improved vastly in the last 20 years - shutter speed, aperture control, automatic focusing, faster films with incredible latitude. Still, by and large, people are producing the same stupid photographs. The content and style of photographs can improve only with a conscious search for verity or beauty. This metaphor may be equally true of the email."

RAJESH B. SHRESTHA, computer professional from Cambridge, Massachusetts, writes that the key word in Himal's proposition is 'enhance'. Email will not solve all the communication problems, but it will enhance the existing processes and trends towards regional rapprochement and development. "Since email can reach out to a personal level while being scalable to a vast populace, it is probably the best-suited medium of communication. Email possesses the natural flair of the spoken language. It has the versatility to take on both the most informal as well as formal means of communication. Email is the long distance equivalent of allowing people to speak."

SASANKA PERERA, sociologist at Colombo University, believes that even if problems of technology were resolved, there would remain problems of access. "For example, let me pose the question, why did you, editors of Himal, ask me to comment on these ideas? Two things come to mind. One, both you and I read English, so that helps. Two, you and I both have access to email, which also helps. This means that for email to help South Asia resolve its problems, accessibility in terms of language and hardware also need to improve substantially. Or else, only a few individuals will decide the agenda and dictate terms. Even the universities in the state sector may be left behind, while the better-funded NGO sector may have a greater voice. So as things are, only certain voices will be heard, and certain agendas will be set, and only certain projects will be implemented."

Perera, therefore, suggests that the editors rephrase their initial clause to read: "Email will greatly enhance communication across South Asian frontiers for certain kinds of academics bureaucrats, activists,..."

VIJAY PRASHAD, Assistant Professor at Trinity College, Connecticut, is not sure that email will itself "enhance understanding and empathy among divided peoples", notably because of the form itself, which allows unrevised and unreconstructed thoughts to be transmitted across vast distances. "When one sits down to write by hand or to send hard copy, one tends to take more care with the text. On email, there is a tendency to write unformed opinions from the top of one's head. Now, I believe that one must have faith in our best collective judgement, but the fact that rumour-mongering is rife on the Web must put our enthusiastic sides on notice. Email is useful, but it is no formal substitute for the print media, for the telephone, and for face-to-face contact."

Prashad ends with some lines from an article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* by S. Srinivasan, "It is great to access the Internet from my hovel in the village. But what is the point if my family has to shit outside on the ground next to my hut?" Srinivasan ended that piece with the comment, "Eat your kilohytes, bit by bit."

Neo-Luddite on the loose

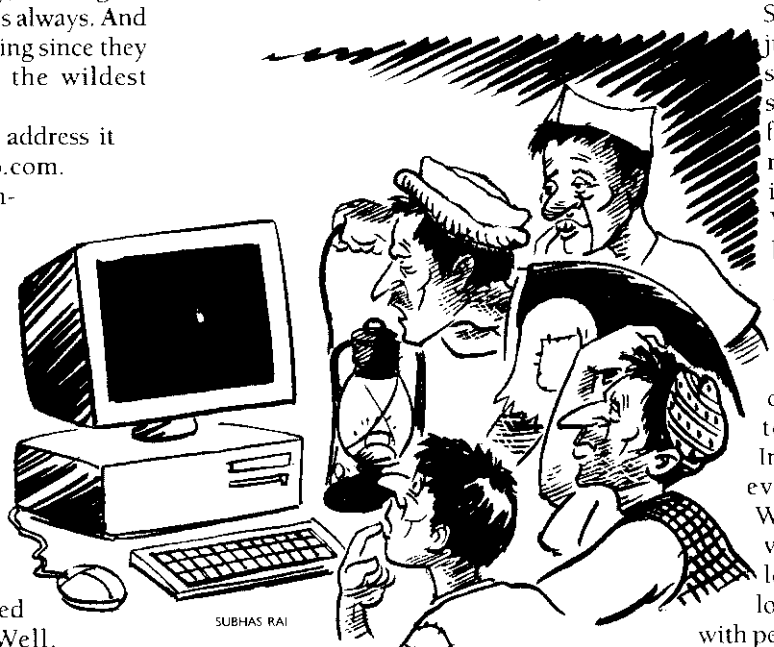
by Shanuj V.C.

Computer Anthem: Have you saved, have you saved?
Ludditespeak: We don't shave, we don't shave.

SO HERE'S ANOTHER great print push for the even greater Internet cause. Himal, tu has turned Brutus. Here was a magazine which said it revered the printed word. Now what's to become of us poor heathens, gawky as we're with machines? Another technological marvel is passing us by, leaving us green-eyed and silly as always. And it's particularly pinching since they say the Internet is the wildest orgy ever.

If I had an email address it would be vc@dumb.com. And amidst the runaway technological success of the WWW (woof woof woof) consider the plight of the average South Asian postal person. My own postman's angst was most upsetting. "Sar, they say I'm going to lose my job and my post office will be used for a mortuary." Well, don't you believe the snobbish high-tech dandies, I told him. They've, without checking with any one of us, gone ahead and emailed the epitaph for the entire global postal administration. They insult with snide references to "snail mail". But surely, the dogs, better judges than humanity and without a computer terminal to their name, would never silently suffer such a parting with the much-awaited visitor.

Then, what about the whole art of actually posting a letter? The writing done (using rhe mighty fountain pen, the pagan tool), the address all properly capitalised on the quaint-smelling envelope, a furtive lick and then the journey to the fire-engine red postbox. One last check, and you put your hand into cool netherworld, careful that you don't crush the letter on its way down. The whole orgiastic experience will be a thing of the past if VSNL and PTCL have their way.



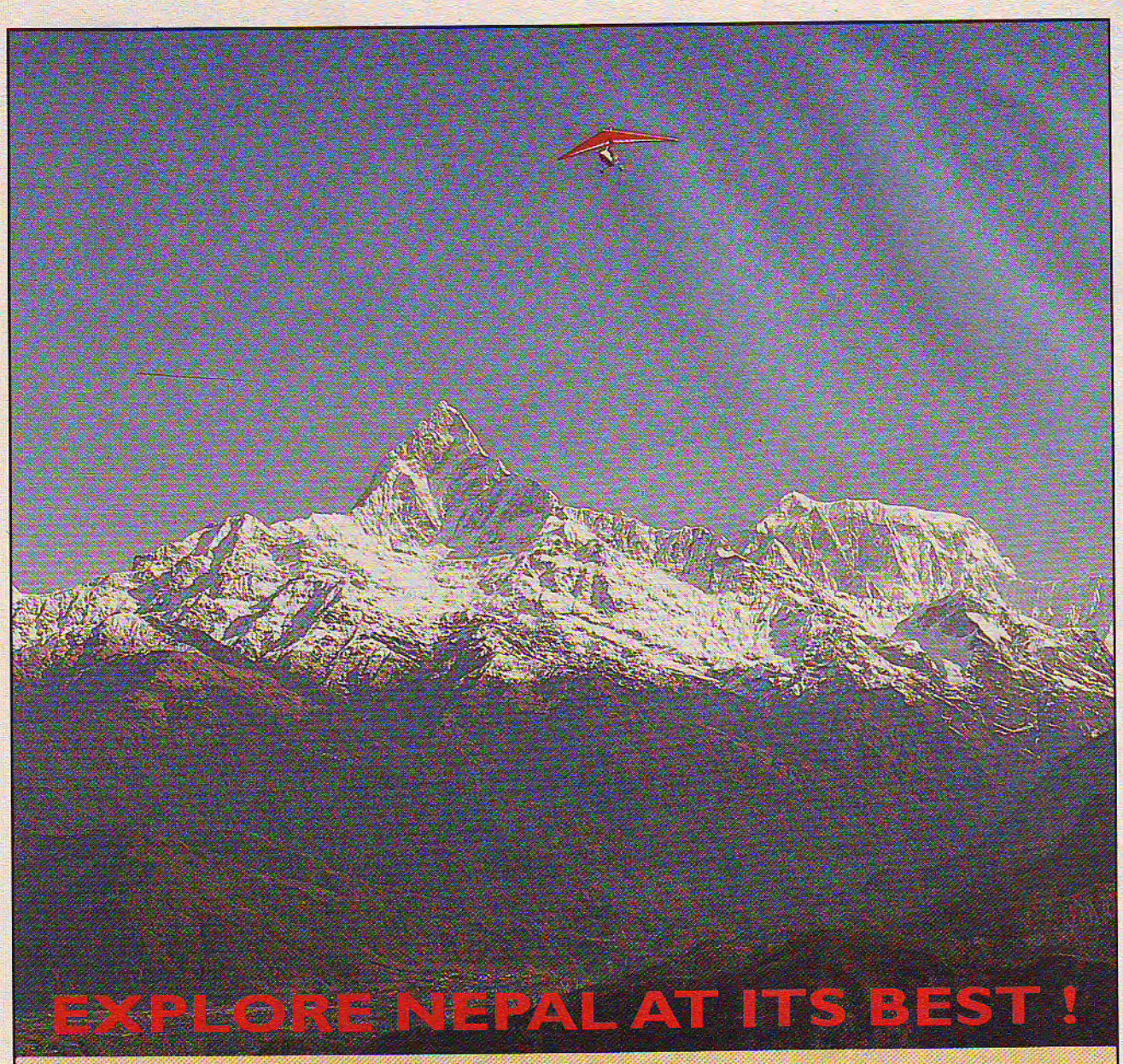
SUBHAS RAI

But our Netizens will never fathom the heauty of ink on paper. These are the one-day buffs who do not understand the intensity of Test match cricket. These guys are far too lost in the hype of their own making: sitting pretty in the Cyheria mansions which look down upon the honest ghettos. What colossal hype: trying to sell us the idea that the Internet is the greatest democracy of all time, that geography as we know it is gone, and that a massive revolution is underway. Hot air, blah-hlah.

Tell me, honestly, is there need for more talk, more communication, more onslaught on the Queen's language? Is not what the Subcontinent needs just some quiet introspection? Let's not stretch matters any further, already we're meddling too much into others' affairs. We need silence, not babble.

In all this, the higgest betrayal has come from the print-media. Should every other magazine have to carry a hoo-haa Internet story? Should everyone have a Website that no one visits? Shouldn't the low-tech sub be allowed to sit in a corner with pen and paper? Should the ones with aversion to machines, he marginalised?

We're not whining. I, the post man, the librarian, the lion's share of South Asia's population, are made of sterner stuff. We won't let ourselves be raped by technology. In the august company of the Queen of England (on whose Net site I am going to use a flame thrower one of these days), we shall stand up for the pure and genuine. Long live hard copy!



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Hair-raising amendment

IN RECENT months, before the announcement of elections, New Delhi saw frenzied debate over the Women's Representation Bill - proposals for 50 percent, 33 percent, 25 percent or 2 percent quotas; reservations for backward caste women, other backward caste women, scheduled caste women, and simply 'the other' women; rotating constituencies, revolving constituencies, flying constituencies, or 'fly-by-night' constituencies; and so on.

In all the debates and politicking, the question of hair was completely lost sight of. For women's hair - whether it should be long or short - emerged as the symbol of emancipation and as a criteria for judging who does or does not support this fight for representation.

During the parliamentary session at which this question was raised, it seemed that the then ruling United Front would support any woman with long lustrous tresses. Janata Party icons do not include any woman with 'bob-cuts'; that's reserved for the Congress Party and its offshoots, as these have had in the past rallied behind the short-haired Indira Gandhi.

But, icons apart, an analysis of hair, including the length of hair, is imperative if the issue is to be decided sensibly. As Samson's hair was shortened, his strength depleted. That's the male gender, so the opposite should hold true for women. At least that is what is believed by one school of thought - popularly called the 'bob-cut' Cavillers and which counts Sharad Yadav, central minister and foe of the other Yadav, Laloo of Bihar, among its main protagonists.

It was he who started the whole "hair thing" as it came to be known. He decried women who went in for the bob-cut. Hardly something that the demure Bharatiya Nari should be seen going out with.

Yadav and other self-appointed protectors of India's ancient, hallowed, and male-centric culture, seemed to have quite forgotten that widows in Banaras shave their hair, and that nuns similarly go with the *desi* bob-cut. They also seemed to have missed what a recent all-India survey revealed, that most women who kept short coiffures were those in middle age whose hair was thinning.

The ire of the minister, incidentally also with short hair, seemed to have been directed mainly against the relatively young, fashionably cropped, urban, activist, probably English-speaking, and probably Westernised Indian Woman. A woman with short hair is definitely someone who will speak up and talk back to Minister Yadav.

It is obvious why Yadav does not want women with short hair, on the streets, or in Parliament and state assemblies, where the female ranks would swell under the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill for increasing women's representation in the hallowed halls. The prospects of a bevy of middle-aged women with thinning hair cutting him short at every sentence must seem horrifying. Better, almost, to drop the women's issue altogether and raise the caste slogan.

-Suchita Vemuri
(Women's Feature Service)

Sharad Yadav and Indira Gandhi both have/had the bob cut.

Karate queen

"THEY SHOWED us videos and told us of horrific incidents of violence against women. I was in tears," said Rani Padamsee, participant in a recent Unicef-organised conference in Kathmandu on violence against women.

The scenes must have been really terrible if Padamsee was moved to tears for, as can be seen by the pose she strikes in the picture, the lady is a fighter. Literally and figuratively.

In 1988, at the age of 20, she became the first woman karate black belt in Bangladesh. Today, Rani Padamsee is proud of her role in popularising the sport among women and girls of her country. Besides her two weekly columns in national Bangladeshi papers and frequent lecture-demonstrations for women's NGOs and girls' schools and colleges, she runs the Bengal School of Shotokan Karate that she established five years ago.

Padamsee is a firm believer in the need for women to be active physically and in sports: "You develop strength, stamina, and most importantly, self awareness and confidence." Traits which are particularly important for women in male-dominated societies like those in South Asia, agreed seminar participants who saw Padamsee in action during a lecture-demonstration at the hotel lawns one evening.

For the karate queen of Bangladesh, a good defence is the best offence. But she still allows for time to cry when injustice is done.

Mumbai still Bombay

KANAK MANI DIXIT

BEST is still best, while airline tags still prefer BOM for MUM.

ONCE UPON a time there were seven little islands where prehistoric men and women pottered about in an eco-friendly fashion. As time wore on, they discovered fish and became the islands' original Koli inhabitants. They built a shrine to their goddess Mumba Devi on Chowpatty beach and called their domain Mumbai.

Came the Magadh emperors, followed by the Silhara dynasty, Muslim kings from neighbouring Gujarat, and then the Portuguese in 1534. The Portuguese thought the islands formed a wonderful bay and called the place Bombay (*bom* = good in Portuguese).

And so Bombay it was as far as the non-natives of Mumbai were concerned, until nearly five centuries later a sabre-toothed saffron tiger came to power. The tiger using, as it always did, fear as its greatest weapon, decreed that the city revert to its original Koli name, Mumbai. No one dared raise a voice against the rechristening.

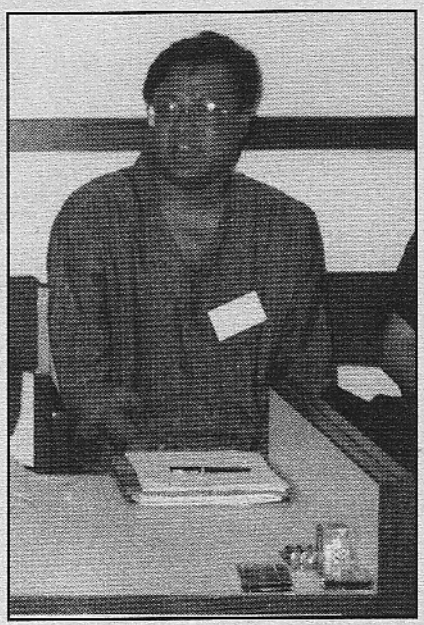
Problems arose. What was the city to do with its ubiquitous bright red buses painted over with the logo BEST for Bombay Electrical Supply and Transport undertaking? Thought the tiger for a moment, and simply changed the name of the utility, which became *Brihanmumbai* Electrical Supply and Transport. With the new name standing for something like Greater Mumbai. And what of Bollywood, the world's most prolific film industry? 'Mollywood' was already cornered by Madras, which refused to surrender the moniker even after changing its own name to Chennai.

Finally, the central government in New Delhi decided that things were getting out of hand and for the sake of international and commercial purposes the name Bombay should be retained. So the Bombay International Film Festival, which had in the meantime changed from BIFF to MIFF, became BIFF once more and many other such momentous reversals were affected. The tiger was not happy and roared loudly scaring all the people. But the erstwhile Bombayites, now Mum-baikars, remained characteristically mum.

And so they remain to this day, pale imitations of their former selves, cowering with fear, paying out more and more protection money. For the moment, mum's still the word in Bombay.

DEPARTURE

The legal activist



"The judicial process can play an effective role in integrating environmental and ecological considerations in avoiding disasters. To do that, the expansion of the concept of 'person aggrieved' or 'standing' is crucial to keep up the spirit of the emerging human values so strongly realised and advocated by a new generation of activists."

-J. Mustafa Kamal, 1994

It is to this new generation of activists that Mohiuddin Farooque belonged. As an advocate at the Bangladesh Supreme Court and also the Founder and Secretary General of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), all through a legal career so tragically cut short, Farooque fought against a conservative judiciary for the enforcement of the rights of the poor and the underprivileged. In particular, he spoke up loud and clear for those who lived under the threat of 'destructive' developmental projects.

Farooque, who died of lung infection in a Singapore hospital, aged 43, sought the path of public interest litigation. After a decade-long battle, in 1996, he succeeded in earning several landmark judgments in which the Supreme Court recognised a healthy environment as a fundamental right to life. That same year, the Supreme Court expanded the concept of *locus standi* and gave a broader interpretation to the term "aggrieved person".

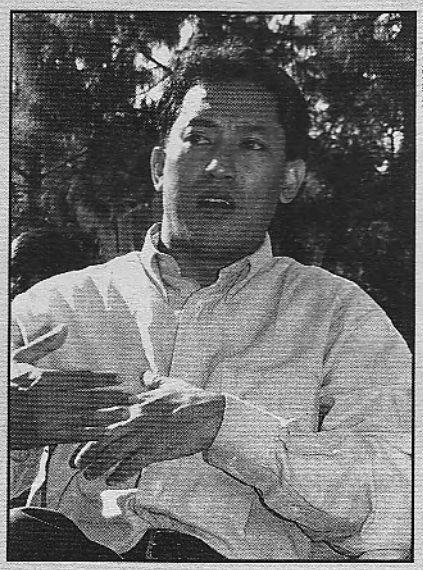
The activist lawyer's cases ranged from challenging polluting industries to filing public nuisance cases against those encroaching upon public properties, and those responsible for noise pollution in the name of election campaigns. He even argued on behalf of

"An event of South Asian significance"

RAJA DEVASISH ROY is one of the three chiefs of the indigenous Chakmas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), and also a practising lawyer in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. He was present when a peace accord was signed on 2 December between Sheikh Hasina Wajed's government and the Parbotyo Chattogram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) to end 25 years of fighting in the CHT. Calcutta-based political scientist **Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury** recently talked to Roy about the agreement. Excerpts:

What is the future of the peace accord?

There is no doubt that a new chapter has opened up for the people of CHT. After fighting for their cause for so many years, they now have to make an assessment of what they have received through this agreement. Prior to 2 December, both the negotiating parties felt that they were being pushed towards peace. The new regime in Dhaka, to its credit, took a fresh initiative to resolve the entire problem in the CHT. There was also the impact of the Gujral Doctrine and the latest policy moves of India on Bangladesh. Dhaka was also feeling the economic pressure of deploying the army in the CHT over an extended period. The agreement must be seen from an optimistic viewpoint, although it is true that it may not necessarily lead us to a permanent solution to the long-standing CHT problem.



BIKAS RAUNIAR

Raja Devasish Roy

Elsewhere in the region many accords between governments and rebel groups have not led to peace. Why should this accord work when they haven't?

If you are referring to the many agreements signed between the Government of India and the rebel groups in Nagaland, Assam and Tripura, those agreements were signed where the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India [which provides for the administration of the Tribal Areas in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram] is operative. India has a federal political system where there are constitutional provisions for the devolution of power which we do not have in the Constitution of Bangladesh. In that sense, the CHT accord provides much more than what can be achieved through most of the agreements in India. However, much will of course depend on how the CHT accord gets implemented. In this regard, I feel that there is a need to build a consensus among the major political parties in Bangladesh, including the BNP, Jatiyo Party, and maybe the Jamaat.

Is there a lesson in the CHT accord for the rest of South Asia?

Of course. This shows that there can be understandings even between apparent arch rivals. Nobody wants war. For the sake of peace and prosperity there is a need for such dialogues which can lead to successful agreements. It was the political will of both the Bangladesh government and the PCJSS which helped prepare the ground for such an accord. At the same time, we in Bangladesh also have to learn from the success and failure of other similar agreements signed earlier in South Asia. It is a two-way learning process.

So do you think the accord in its present shape can be implemented?

Within the unicultural model of the Constitution of Bangladesh, usually there was no official recognition of the indigenous people in the CHT. No special status was granted to them. The present agreement can at a certain point of time create an atmosphere when the devolution of power would be possible within the constitutional framework of the country, not only for the people in the CHT, but also for the rest of the inhabitants of Bangladesh. On their part, the indigenous people in the CHT have to realise that the required administrative changes should not undermine the sovereignty of Bangladesh. This is necessary for the successful implementation of the accord. Further confidence-building is required on both sides. Nevertheless, I should say that this agreement is an event of South Asian significance.

minor petitioners to prevent Bangladeshi children from being trafficked to the United Arab Emirates as camel jockeys.

A bright student at Dhaka University where he topped in his law degree, Farooque obtained his doctorate in International River Law from the University of Manchester. The author of several books on the subjects he chose to battle, Farooque was a visionary who refused to sit back and complain. He made things happen.

One ambition which Farooque did not live to see was to bring forth the day when the citizens of a country victimised by a development project in another would qualify for redress in the latter's courts. Others who follow Farooque's shining example, in any of the countries of South Asia, may see through what the lawyer from Dhaka himself could not.

-Ruchi Pant

Dukhini bridges a gap

SHAHIDUL ALAM/DRIK

TWENTY-FIVE years after 1971, Bangladeshi and Pakistani actors have come together for the first time in a theatre venture. And the subject they have chosen is the trafficking of Bangladeshi women to Pakistan. Directed by Sara Zaker of Nagorik Natya Sampradaya, Dhaka, and written by Shahid Mahmood Nadeem of Ajoka Theatre, Lahore, the bilingual Bangla-Urdu play features actors from both countries. The production is by Ajoka and the Chittagong-based Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts.

Dukhini (The Sorrowful One) was premiered in Lahore in mid-October, before going to Islamabad and Karachi. It then travelled to Kathmandu at a regional seminar on violence against women, en route to Dhaka and Chittagong.

Based on real-life incidents, the play is woven around the suicide of a Bangladeshi woman in Pakistan. Her final action of setting herself on fire registers a strong note of protest against the abuse she suffers and gives courage to three other Bangladeshi women - a maidservant, a prostitute and the wife of an old man - who come to visit her grave.

The plight of women who are transported across the breadth of India to be forced into the sex trade in Pakistan has long been under-reported. Generally, the women are either abducted or sold by family members. There are many who also pay hefty sums to be taken to Pakistan, which is regarded as a land of opportunity. More often than not, these employment-seekers, too, find themselves on the streets after being sexually abused by employers.

No amount of publicity, through newspaper reports, feature and documentary films on the situation, has been able to make a dent on this cross-border 'flesh trade', say the producers of *Dukhini*. It has been difficult for social workers to come to the aid of these women because then they would either face prison sentences as illegal immigrants or, also likely, be booked under what are known as the "Hudood Ordinances" for sex outside marriage.

The 'apprehended' women would also face deportation; back home, the families refuse to take them back for being 'soiled'. It has also been the experience that the Dhaka government itself prevents repatriation, on the excuse that the women have no papers or passports to prove their identity as Bangladeshi citizens.

Dukhini makes a powerful statement on the issue and humanises it by telling the story of the three Bangladeshi women, and the dead Dukhini, through dance, song and narrative.

Shahid Nadeem, who wrote the play based on research material collected from both countries, said the producers faced not a few problems, such as visa restrictions and withholding of permission for performances. This was due to governments "being constrained by the desire not to tread on political and social toes", he says. The show went on only because of the efforts of some enlightened bureaucrats and politicians in each country.

For the director, Sara Zaker, the opening in Lahore was a homecoming of sorts. She used the opportunity to visit her birthplace Abbotabad, where her father used to serve in the army. "Pakistan is a foreign country to me now," she said, "but it has been very nice coming back. We have got a really warm reception and the audiences have been wonderful."

It can only be hoped that the audience response is not limited to the play alone and that it extends to the message behind it too.

Di, Sush, Ash...

THIS IS the latest brag from Hyderbad's very own rickshaw guys. "*Arre maam, shahar ka three three chokaries world sundaris!*" ("Town's three chicks have become world beauties!")

Indeed, this Nizams' city in the Indian south has added on a third flattering beauty spot to its rugged Deccan cheek. This time courtesy a former plumber's daughter, Diana Hayden, the new Miss World show-off. Diana, like former Miss Universe Sushmita Sen and former Miss World Aishwarya Rai, is another rare breed from the Hyderabad Stable.

While dwelling on the Hyderabadi hat trick, note also that both Di and Sush were born in the same polluted lowgrade industrial Sanathnagar locality (talk of lotuses from the muck). Further, Di and Ash studied in the same St Ann's School in Secunderabad, the twin city across the Hussain Sagar.

But these beautiful connections should not come as a surprise, for Hyderabad is heir to the aesthetic legacy of the Nizams. One story goes like this: a maid while dusting the palace broke a chandelier just as the Nizam wafted by. Fearing the worst, the maid cowered, but was amazed when the king emperor ordered her to break another. "I like the sound," the Nizam gushed.

So what next? A fourth beauty needed to lean on the one remaining empty pillar of the city's landmark Char Minar.

Remembering to forget

Vasco da Gama's 500th anniversary touches a raw nerve in Goa.

by Frederick Noronha

Suddenly, the Portuguese are big news in their former colony of Goa, now better known as a tourist destination and a one-time hippy hangout. But Lisbon is unlikely to be flattered. The very thought of commemorating the fifth centenary of Vasco da Gama's arrival on India's west coast has had people agitated. Swaths of newsprint have been consumed by the subject.

India's youngest ex-colony is looking over its shoulder at its long, and often uneasy, Portuguese past. In the process, Vasco da Gama's 1998 quincentennial is taking on shades of the Columbus controversy which engulfed North and South America in 1992.

Like any historical figure, Vasco da Gama is understood (and misunderstood) in diverse ways. Lionised by his countrymen, he has his sceptics elsewhere. Did he undertake pioneering "discoveries", as Portugal would have it even today, or was Vasco da Gama merely the "first European to travel by sea to India", which is how he is described in the US-published *Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, which goes on: "He established Portuguese power in India and Africa. His methods were harsh, and he was not a good administrator. He was sent back to India as a viceroy in 1524, but soon died."

Historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam is rather severe in his evaluation of the Portuguese explorer in a timely book that is just out *(see following review)*. This obscure nobleman from the Alentejo was transformed into the Great Argonaut mainly through the creation of legend, writes Subrahmanyam. Vasco da Gama, who today is known as part of the generation of great discoverers along with Magellan, Cabral and Columbus, was one thing in real life and quite another in the myth that survives.

Not that there are no mixed feelings in Goa. While some insist on his greatness, others point out that the sea trade in the Indian Ocean was there centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese navigator. While some Goans say Vasco da Gama is a "historical personage" who cannot be wished away, there are others who deride him as someone sent East to loot and extend the empire. Most displeased are the freedom-fighters who helped free Goa from the Portuguese (the territory joined India in 1962); the planned quincentennial celebration, they maintain, questions the very bona fide of their activism against colonialism.

While it is not hard to understand why the memory of Vasco da Gama evokes strong emotions in Goa (as in pockets of Portuguese-influenced Asia, including Kerala and Sri Lanka), the debate has got bogged down in cliches, sloganeering and polarisation. This has left little ground for a sober re-evaluation of the impact of the first European colony in Asia.

Past to present

Goa's leading English-language daily *The Navhind Times* kicked off the controversy a few months ago by offering its col-

umns to those on both sides of the debate. It soon became clear that the two sides had simply studied different history texts. The Deshpremi Nagrik Samiti (Patriotic Citizens' Committee), with stalwarts of the anti-colonial struggle in it, bring up one phalanx. Others, like the former MP Erasmo Sequeira, maintain that the celebration should be accepted "in the right perspective". The good that came from this meeting - some might call it clash - of cultures must be noted, is Sequeira's view. Says he, "The Taj Mahal was built by the Moghuls and today we take pride in it as a great Indian monument, instead of thinking of destroying it as a vestige of colonialism."

There were those who began to pronounce anything Portuguese as suspect, and even a seminar on Portuguese laws became the target for protest. It was seen as an insidious attempt to glorify "anything and everything Portuguese". The Fundacao Oriente, a private cultural foundation which has been running its Indian delegation from Panjim for the past couple of years, faced more questions than it cared to answer.

The you-versus-me tone of the controversy reflected the polarisation that has afflicted many aspects of Goan society in recent years. Those with sympathies for the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh see Portugal-bashing as a Catholic versus Hindu thing. The subtle insinuation is made that those who follow an imported religion are anti-national. The result of this has been that the minority Catholic community of Goa has had to go on the defensive.

"da Gama epoch"

There is no denying that Vasco da Gama's legacy touches all of Asia, including the Subcontinent. Statesman scholar K.M. Pannikar argues that a clear epoch of Indian history began with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in 1498 and lasted till the British pullout in 1947. This "da Gama epoch", in his view, brought far-reaching changes which were overwhelmingly negative.

Among those who see a more benign, if not positive, legacy is microbiologist Nandkumar Kamat, who points out that the explorer "was an instrument of history" who catalysised "cataclysmic changes in India's agrarian economy". Without Vasco da Gama, there would have been no Portuguese trade pockets, no maritime trade, no import of foreign plants and hence no diverse resource base which presently is the mainstay of the Indian village economy.

American and African plants spread in India via Portuguese sea routes. Grafting techniques came to Goa first in the 16th century, and so did what are today among India's most useful plants. "The Portuguese imported about 300 species of useful plants to India, and Goa was their chief emporium," says Kamat. "Before Vasco da Gama, India did not cultivate sweet potatoes, tapioca, tomatoes or pumpkins. Think of it, the potato comes from the Andes mountains of South America. But India produces the largest potato crop in the world today, surpassing Europe." Cashew, chikoo, papaya, tobacco, guavas and pineapples entered India through Goa. Chillies - hard to think of Indian food without them - arrived on Portuguese galleons.

All this notwithstanding, the Portuguese legacy is probably even more crucial for a little outpost like Goa, which has had a unique experience even by the global standards of colonialism. It is often forgotten that Goa's colonial rulers were the first to

Tango or mango?

ALTHOUGH LISBON AND New Delhi set up a committee to decide on the quincentennial commemorations, the Indian government's response has been ambivalent. The question is how exactly to celebrate a Portuguese arrival even as India celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the Britishers' departure. In Goa, India's Home Minister and communist leader Indrajit Gupta made it clear that he frowned on such celebrations.

A joint Indo-Portuguese meet meant to commemorate Vasco da Gama's landings, scheduled for early 1997, was postponed and has not yet happened. The Marxist-led Left Democratic Front in Kerala (where lies Calicut, da Gama's landing site in 1498) said it was resolutely against any celebration of an event which heralded the "advent of colonialism".

Lately, however, the Trivandrum government seems to have had a change of heart as economics crowded out ideology. Kerala is now planning a tourism-linked fete to cash in on the event. But plans are uncertain at present and protestors have decided to go by the hundreds to the site where Vasco da Gama landed to prevent any possible commemoration.

Some varsities and not-for-profit institutions - including, interestingly, the Jesuit-run Indian Social Institute - are jointly sponsoring a global workshop in Delhi in February 1998. It will look at "Five Centuries after Vasco da Gama: From Colonialism to Globalisation", connecting the past with our present. Some big names, South Asian and international, are to be invited, including Junius Nyerere, Ivan Illich, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gamini Correa, Mahasweta Devi, Wole Soyenka, Hanan Ashrawi and Tissa Balasuriya.

In Goa itself, obviously, many other functions are planned, including a seminar on the impact of the 'discovery' of the sea route to India. Meanwhile, Portugal has undertaken a public-relations exercise by sending a lot of cultural groups to put up performances in Goa, and earn badly-needed goodwill in its former colony.

"We opened up the world..."

A.M. Hespanha

Five centuries ago this month, Vasco da Gama was somewhere between Portugal and the coast of what is today Kerala. As a controversy raged on in the Internet, Frederick Noronha **interviewed** A.M. Hespanha, **the Lisbon-based head of the National Commission for the Commemoration of Portuguese Discoveries.**

Why do the Portuguese still evoke such strong suspicions in a place like Goa?

Surely there are opposing recollections about the colonial era. But today suspicion or mistrust can only arise from a lack of information. Portugal has become a peaceful, modern and forward-looking country. Even its former colonies in Africa, where colonial wars raged for more than 20 years, have without exception very good relations with the ex-colonial power.

Are the Portuguese more defensive about their colonial past than, say, the British?

The Portuguese are not free from nationalistic bias, certainly, but the new generation of historians and scholars basically have the same intellectual attitude as their colleagues all over Europe. In universities and high schools, students use balanced texts, where the darker sides of Portuguese expansion are openly analysed. Old, apologetic historiography - which also ran its course in the UK, France and Germany - is quite out of fashion.

Possibly due to a lack of contact with the newest academic work, Goan intellectuals have what I would call an "old-fasbioned view" of how the Portuguese view their past. Our Commission is ready to help build awareness about this new wave of Portuguese scholarship.

The very name of your Commission contains the term "discovery". What is its meaning?

The Portuguese discovered, in the most precise sense of the word, some very important sea routes. For the first time, they sailed from Europe to Madeira and Azores, in the early 15th century. These proved to be key points in the exploration of the central and northern Atlantic. In 1486, Dias for the first time rounded the Cape of Good Hope, opening a seaway that has lasted for long. Magalhaes realised the first circumnavigation of the world. From the European point of view, Vasco da Gama opened the way to India in 1498, Cabral to Brazil in 1500. Lesser-known Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in China and Japan by sea.

All this effort meant systematic nautical drills, scientific and technical innovations, cartographical skills and also spirit of adventure and endurance. We feel that whatever was the final results of the enterprise, these achievements must be remembered as a Portuguese contribution to world history.

But were not many of these routes navigated upon earlier by other people, even if this fact might not have been known in Europe? Isn't this like saying that Christopher Columbus "discovered" America?

When I speak of discovery I'm referring to sea routes that were never used before, as far as we know, either by Europeans or others. This is surely the case of Vasco da Gama's route, as it is of the Portuguese navigations in the South Atlantic. In contrast, the North Atlantic had been crossed by the Vikings during the 7th-10th centuries.

You must remember that Goa was then a core-zone in world history, where products and cultural messages of the whole world converged. In this sense, we used to say that the Portuguese "opened up the world", putting peoples and cultures in contact, preparing for the global village where we live today. The result was obviously both good and bad. On the other hand, to speak of a 'discovery' concerning peoples or lands - except for desert islands like the Azores or Cave Verde - is ethnocentric bias, although a common one in European historiography. We try to avoid it. However, the expression "discovery of Brazil" is the official Brazilian designation for Cabral's voyage.

You recently said that the "Portuguese people are adult enough to accept that our ancestors were limited people - not angels - that they made mistakes..." What would you list as their mistakes as far as say Goa is concerned?

Mostly, religious intolerance, after the mid-16th century. In a way, India's Muslims and Hindus were made the victims of historical events verified in Europe, at times centuries earlier. The Portuguese saw Muslims of the Subcontinent as the heirs of Muslim Arabian invaders who arrived in Iberia in the 8th to 12th centuries. In fighting them, the Crusade, the Holy War, was always fair.

At a later period, the Hindus were made victims of Portuguese religious zeal, developed in Southern Europe as a reaction against the Reformation. As a historian, I believe that only this kind of large contextualisation can give a rich, unbiased and, finally, fair judgement of historical events.

come and virtually the last to leave. The toe-hold achieved in India in 1510 remained a toe-hold, but the Portuguese remained till 1961.

The impact of this long spell of alien rule left its mark in this state of a mere 3702 sq km area, and current population of 1.3 million. If Goa is considered 'different' today - and attracts so many tourists as a result - it is clearly due to its unusual past. The Portuguese touch is evident in the cuisine (including *feni*, the distinctive liquor), in the architecture, and the Goan identity itself.

Lisbon's rule opened the local population to international forces, which explains the adaptability of Goans worldwide, says noted Indo-Portuguese historian Teotonio R. de Souza, a Jesuit priest till recently. "They do not feel estranged anywhere." Adds de Souza, "Goa was the hub of Portugal's entire Estado da India. All their military, trade and missionary activities were routed via Goa, and this could not but leave a deep impress upon the local populations."

Peter Nazareth, a noted Goan writer based at Iowa University, also underlines this aspect. "Goans are cultural brokers, mediating between cultures. From the dawn of Portuguese colonialism, West met East in Goans; and after that, others could also meet this mix in Goans," he writes. At the same time, Nazareth believes that Goans have lost some of their creative energy due to the long stint with colonialism. As for the self perception of Goans, he believes that it is a weakness "when we don't know who we are and don't try to find out".

Colonial collaborators

Historians critical of Lisbon point out that anything the Portuguese want to disown is today ascribed to various "aberrations" in the country's past. The scholar de Souza also decries what he sees as the tendency to perpetuate the myth about the Portuguese being "good colonialists".

In a study comparing British and Portuguese colonialism, anthropologist Paul Axelrod writes that Britain made a conscious effort to transform the village economy for colonial ends - with canals and plantations - and also believed in indirect rule. On the other hand, Portuguese colonialism was oriented towards mercantilism. This consisted of owning small chunks of land from Mozambique to Timor, controlling trade, and extracting resources from the interiors. Goa happened to be the hub of Portugal's colonial network, and was one of its largest landholdings east of Africa.

For his part, de Souza says that unlike the British the Portuguese placed excessive emphasis on missionary activity. Lisbon's failure to keep pace with the industrial revolution meant that they had to follow a different tack than the British in the colonies. Says de Souza "This was why Portuguese colonialism was more 'homely' and church- and kitchen-based, less machine-dominated."

Some hard facts have had to be faced, too. Delhi-based Jesuit priest Walter Fernandes points out that, in most cases, foreign domination was made possible by collaboration between local elites and the invaders. "Colonialism may be a thing of the past, but the collaboration continues; globalisation is an offshoot of the colonial age," he says.

"Some Goans, particularly from the upper strata, internalised (and accepted) colonial values. This has become so natural for them, that they don't even question it as something alien or out of place. It has become almost like a part of our own body," says Charles Camara, a Goan scholar doing research at Stockholm University.

But can the colonial ruler be blamed for everything going wrong today? One local paper suggested that instead of wasting their energy decrying the planned quincentennial celebrations, freedom fighters should bring "to the gallows" Indian politicians "whose corrupt practices are destroying India and Indians more than all the atrocities committed by the colonisers."

Clearly, blaming only the 'outsider' is not very helpful, and there is still scope for a critical re-evaluation of the region's past. "I doubt Goans would have been better off under some local (rulers like) sultans or *nayaks*, if the Portuguese had not taken over the place in the 16th century," says de Souza.

That is a point of view, but one that would be vociferously denied by all those keen on burying the Portuguese legacy. The debate is leading nowhere. East is east and west is west, said Kipling, and on taking stock of the legacy of a long-dead mariner, the twain do not seem about to meet.

F. Noronha is a journalist from Goa.

Vasco da Gama peers out from atop the Viceroy's Arch, Old Goa.

Lusophile historian

The Malabar coast when the gentleman came by.

If we are to live by myths, it is better to live by our own myths.

Those of us who did our schooling in the 1950s and 60s may recall being taught that we were discovered in 1498 by a Portuguese adventurer. The history book this reviewer recalls studying was written by a Jesuit historian who had come to India as a Christian missionary: it succeeded in conveying the idea that we here in our part of the world began to exist only after (and perhaps because) Europe discovered us and gave us significance.

However, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam points out in *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, the European "myth-building enterprise around Gama" has been so successful that even a recent title by India's National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) - that too, in Hindi - actually accepts and propagates many of the Eurocentric myths surrounding him.

Earlier, histories were restricted in their reach and influence to specific cities like Bombay. But the NCERT text has helped disseminate these very same myths across the entire country, with corresponding largescale damage to children's minds. Such myths have helped fuel the present controversy regarding whether or not we should participate in the celebrations to mark the arrival of Vasco da Gama outside Calicut 500 years ago.

Subrahmanyam is no doubt a first-rate scholar who obviously finds a great deal of pleasure in his work. But he concedes that his book carries no radical interpretation, no new facts, no major revision of Vasco da Gama or his journey. It is based instead on "a careful sifting of a mass of tangled materials..."

Subrahmanyam does not have the astonishing abilities or flair of Sardar K.N. Panikkar, for instance, or even the latter's mature sense of history which *Asia and Western Dominance* manifests. Though that book was written more than 40 years ago, there is not much to fault in it even today. It remains one of the classics of history.

Some tantalising questions that remained are, however, answered. For instance, Subrahmanyam provides sufficient evidence to confirm that Vasco da Gama did visit Goa - a controversy that continues to rage off and on even today in Goa. The author also does a fairly conclusive job of demolishing the myth of the Muslim pilot Ibn Majid, who is alleged to have shown the voyager the route from the African east coast to Calicut.

The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama
by Sanjay Subrahmanyam
Foundation Books, New Delhi, 1997
400 pp, INR 495

reviewed by Claude Alvares

Decidedly, Subrahmanyam has not produced an hagiography. In fact, the fresh reporting of gory details associated with the adventurer - he would take captives, chop off their limbs and string them in pieces on the masts of his ships to intimidate others - have considerably upset the Portuguese who wish such descriptions are better interred with Vasco da Gama's bones.

Myth and its making

Vasco da Gama's first sea voyage to India around the Cape of Good Hope was not the result of some grand human inventiveness or due to any inherent or nurtured Portuguese genius. On the contrary, our adventurer was unable to provide a demonstration of even elementary civilisational endowments on his arrival at Calicut.

This was not because he had left them behind in Portugal but because these were in short supply in the home country itself. The tawdry gifts he brought with him in his caravel were those of a pauper civilisation, and the Samudri Raja of Samorin and his advisers looked at them in scorn. In these circumstances, it was necessary to create a legend and invent a myth.

Portugal did this consistently over the past five centuries. As the myth expanded, the prospects of Portugal also improved. Even today, Portugal is keen to exploit the quincentennial for a glorious reassertion of its place within the European Community, a region which kept it at the margins for centuries. Subrahmanyam reconstructs the myth-making in great detail and with considerable finesse.

The Portuguese themselves have never doubted that they could have done with a better hero. Even today, Vasco da Gama continues to give them a headache for they must explain his arrogance, tactlessness and plain barbarism. It is difficult even in the best of circumstances to view his personality with any kind of affection. He only evokes consternation, never admiration or awe. But despite all this he remains a Portuguese hero, probably because they have no one else.

His patrons' voice

A non-resident Indian lodged in Europe and dependent upon European bosses - and grants from Portuguese foundations - that Subrahmanyam is, would be anxious to respect such sensitivities. The question left to ponder, therefore, is whether he has carried forward the myths associated with Vasco da Gama, or worse, added some of his own.

Very interesting, in a study of this nature and scope, the author has not hazarded an opinion of what he personally thinks of his study. And in the end, we come away with a view of Vasco da Gama that is embarrassingly close to official European history.

This version argues that it is not really necessary to adjudicate the past, which is best forgotten. We should dwell instead on the more positive outcomes, like the introduction of potatoes, tomatoes, cassava and chillies; as if our adventurer set out from Portugal with the seeds in his pocket. The plants are actually the contrihutions of South American peasantry.

Should an Indian historian not feel ashamed to write history as Europeans wish to read it; to turn a blind eye to the brutal exercise of power; and substitute in its place an apolitical sequence of events, bowsoever elaborately detailed? Curiously, Subrahmanyam provides no discussion on the Treaty of Tordesillas: the insouciant division of the globe in 1494 by the Pope into two parts, one for Spain, the other for Portugal, and the unilateral, overnight declaration of ownership over unknown lands and peoples.

Neither is there any allusion to Europe's pathological drive to garner power, its demented urge to intervene and impose itself on the lives of others. Instead, we are introduced hy Subrahmanyam in minute detail to the petty preoccupations and intrigues of the kings and courts of Portugal and Spain, to the titles collected by Vasco da Gama, and descriptions of his newly acquired properties.

The mentality which Vasco da Gama carried with bim then and which he continues to symbolise even today has not been discarded: it is all too readily apparent in an unrepentant Portugal's refusal to apologise for the imposition of this arrogance, arbitrariness and violence, the disruption of local cultures, and her stubbornness in upholding his 'heroism'.

Here again, a comparison of Subrahmanyam's work with Sardar Panikkar's is instructive. Panikkar generated a new paradigm in historical writing, inaugurating and placing history written with an Asian perspective on an exalted plane as an equally valid - and rival - body of knowledge. The great scholar advised us that if we are to live by myths then it is far better that we use our own myths rather than ones borrowed from others. Subrahmanyam's myths - Europe's as well - suggests Vasco da Gama can be understood without engaging in what he and the Europe he represented stood for. Such a proposal is not only an affront to history; this reviewer suspects it is self-serving as well.

C. Alvares is a Goan journalist and activist whose book, Decolonising History, *was published by the Other India Press in 1997. This review is printed by arrangement with the Third World Network Features.*

"Hearty welcome," reads the ad in *The Hindu*, "to Miss Beryl Selvaraj, MBA, d/o Mr S.P.S. Selvaraj (Proprietor of GOPAL TOOTH POWDER). Welcome to India on completion of your

MBA in England." Wishing Ms Selvaraj success and God's Blessings in all Your Future Endeavours are a whole list of Selvaraj family members, plus staff and workers of the Gopal Tooth Powder works. May I, on behalf of everyone I know, similarly wish Ms Selvaraj a hearty welcome and very, very shining teeth as only tooth powder can make them?

What is VAW? It is part of a recent spate of **acronymisations**, which has a whole unpleasant department for itself under the title of developmentese. VAW refers to Violence against Women, and seems to have been the outcome of the coverage of a very worthy regional seminar held recently in Kathmandu. That seminar ended with a "Kathmandu Commitment" and plan of action to end violence against women and children, but if you start reducing all important subjects to acronyms, you merely trivialise. This same may be said for other genderised acronyms like WID, WAD, and GAD (figure them out yourself).

This from *The New York Times* of 15 October, on what's currently classy among rice varieties among the gastronomes of the Big Apple: "**Bhutanese Red Rice**, the new darling of the culinary world, has short, pinkish grains and, because it is partly milled, cooks faster than other red rices. Its mild, sweetly nutty flavour takes to good spice." That's the good news, and I hope that the Bhutanese rice farmers had a good year exporting to Manhattan. The bad news is that about 90 percent of all rice consumed in the United States is grown in the United States even though they might have origins in our Southern climes. For example, as the *NYT* tells us, there are US-grown basmati varieties, known as Kasmati, Texmati and Calmati (grown in Texas and California) which are preferred to the Sub-continental varieties "because they do not require rinsing". Pah! Rice which does not require rinsing cannot be 'rice' as we know it!

Bravo to Bhaktapur Municipality in Kathmandu Valley for striking a **blow for regionalism**. They charge upwards of 600 Nepali rupees to overseas tourists to visit the ancient township, but recently announced a 'contribution' of no more than NPR 30 per tourists if they happen to be from India, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Now, let us see if anyone else could think about beginning to emulate this example. The India International Centre in Delhi for starters, which demanded *firang* membership rates from a Nepali journalist. And this, despite the 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty of peace and friendship which stipulates that both countries regard each other's citizens as one's own!

NOTICE

It is to notify to all concerned that, to help conserve and maintain the historic and cultural heritage of Bhaktapur the contribution of Rs. 30/- per tourist from **India, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka** and **Maldives** will be taken from 1st Jan. 1998 while entering the old core city of Bhaktapur. The contribution for the tourist of other countries remains the same as before.

BHAKTAPUR MUNICIPALITY

Sanjoy Ghose, the activist working in Majuli island in Assam, who was abducted by the ULFA, is most likely long gone - killed or died accidentally. But the coverage has not subsided, mainly because the development worker comes from one of the best-connected families of New Delhi. The tragic end of Ghose, meanwhile,

SANJOY GHOSE

7 DECEMBER 1997

Today is Sanjoy's birthday.
We want to wish him.
Where is he?
We have a right to know.

Family and friends of Sanjoy Ghos

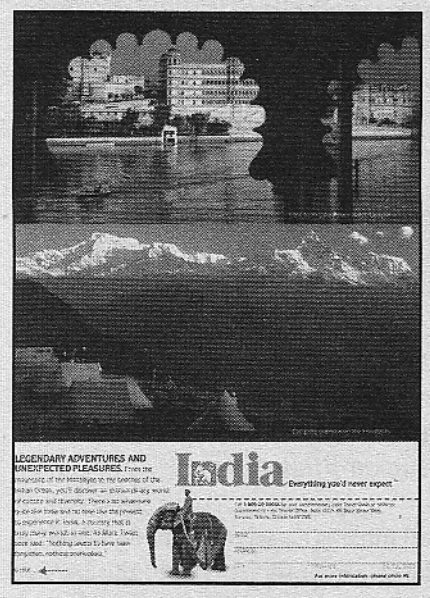
seems to prove a development theory that I have developed. The best test of a development project is whether it has made enemies. If it has not, then most likely the work has had no impact. In the instant case, the retribution seems to have been extreme and tragic.

The take on the **Asian financial crash** (actually term that 'Southeast Asian') in an article in the *International Herald Tribune* was that the region suffers from a stunted form of capitalism marked by authoritarian leadership, little regulation, poor accounting standards, and excessive corporate secrecy. "For years, the Asian economic miracle blinded the world. But it was often the mere sheen of capitalism without its substance." Ah hah, something new being said. So what's the solution? The writer, who teaches business and economic journalism at Boston University, says the only way out is for an unfettered press that can improve corporate accountability and national economic openness. Okay, but India has an unfettered press, and look where it is. What gives?

For too long, **typhoons** in the western Pacific have gone with American

names like Betty, Kate and Zelda (actually, I doubt if they ever get that far - there are not enough typhoons to go around). The World Meteorological Organisation recently decided that from the year 2000 onwards, typhoons shall carry Asian names. Fair enough, but they are likely to carry East Asian names where the typhoons hit, something like Hiroko, Bai Ling or Keiko. So here's an idea so that we also get to name South Asian names. How about christening cyclones and hurricanes in the Indian Ocean as well, which as yet go nameless? The names, if they have to be female, could be after the great silver screen actresses of yesteryears: Madhubala, Waheeda, Sharmila, Bimala. *Bimala?*

The slogan of an Indian Government tourism promotion campaign currently underway in Canada is "**Everything you'd never expect.**" I would say that again, for the picture



of the Indian Himalaya printed in one ad in the Canadian edition of *Time* shows the very Nepali panorama of the Annapurnas, including the peak of Machhapuchharey.

When the British Foreign Secretary suggests **mediating** between India and Pakistan on Kashmir, the Indian national press foams at the mouth and ack acks him out of the sky. But it is awfully indulgent when Yasser Arafat suggests that he is ready to play go-between between Isla and NDelhi. "Arafat Stirs Hornet's Nest" wrote one national daily, but buried the story deep inside. There was no follow-up the next day and that was the end of it. Poor Robin Cook, he should have been born Arab.

"Please read 'Nepal for friendship with all nations: HM' instead of what inadvertently appeared in the main news on page one of the Saturday issue of **The Rising Nepal**. The error is deeply regretted. The Editor." That is all the notice said, in bold type. I wonder what the error was: Nepal *not* for friendship with all nations?

It is great for newspapers when corporate giants slug it out, for explanatory or condemnatory advertisements are the **welcome fallout**. I saw this happen yet again in the full-page advertisement brought out by Suzuki (slogan: "Belief in India, Committed to Maruti"), seeking to dispel "disinformation" about its role in producing the Maruti line-up of vehicles in collaboration with the Indian Government. Luckily for the publishers of more than one national daily, the fight over control of Maruti delivered them full-pagers. Now I wonder why Suzuki would not think of a certain South Asian magazine which is having to survive on a diet of Nepal-based ads...

Elites of the world, unite! is the message read by *Media Mail*, a progressive newsletter published by the Magic Lantern Foundation in New Delhi, in the syrupy television coverage of the funerals of Mother Teresa and Princess Di. Write the editors, "The Western media barons not only control peoples' way of thinking in their countries, but also control the thought patterns of the third world elites." Saying that the Indian English dailies sang paeans to Diana's beauty and personality only to get mileage from her tragic death, *Media Mail* writes, "It proves that the globalisation of the thoughts, concerns and understanding of the Indian elite is complete."

My personal best magazine reading for the month of December is hereby awarded to **Najam Sethi**, editor of Lahore's *The Friday Times* and *Aaj Kal*, but writing in the *Outlook* of 15 December, who encapsulates in four paragraphs the grand drama that took place in Islamabad having to do with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah and President Farooq Leghari. You go read it yourself, but here is some additional food for thought which Sethi offers, on the role of the Pakistani Army, "A largely Punjabi army chose to side with a Punjabi prime minister rather than a Sindhi chief justice." Hmmm, had not thought about it quite that way...

How nice that Bhutan released a special **Druk Yul postal stamp** on the occasion of the 50th year of India's independence, and held the releasing ceremony in New Delhi rather than in Thimphu. And how much nicer would it have been for the little country with the finest stamp collection in the world to have similarly commemorated Pakistan's 50th and Bangladesh's 25th.

–Chhetria Patrakar

V O I

THE SECOND BAD WRITING CONTEST, sponsored by the journal Philosophy and Literature, *chose the following passage (which in fact is one sentence) for its first prize, from* Plato etc: The Problems of Philosophy and Their Resolution *(Verso 1994) by Roy Bhaskar.*

Indeed dialectical critical realism may be seen under the aspect of Foucauldian strategic reversal - of the unholy trinity of Parmenidean/Platonic/Aristotelean provenance; of the Cartesian-Lockean-Humean-Kantian paradigm, of foundationalisms (in practice, fideistic foundationalisms) and irrationalisms (in practice, capricious exercises of the will-to-power or some other ideologically and/or psycho-somatically buried source) new and old alike; of the primordial failing of Western philosophy, ontological monovalence, and its close ally, the epistemic fallacy with its ontic dual; of the analytic problematic laid down by Plato, which Hegel served only to replicate in his actualist monovalent analytic reinstatement in transfigurative reconciling dialectical connection, while in his hubristic claims for absolute idealism he inaugurated the Comtean, Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean eclipses of reason, replicating the fundaments of positivism through its transmutation route to the superidealism of a Baudrillard.

CALL THIS TEACHING? From "Indian education: A process of learning only to forget", article in The Asian Age *by Nita Kumar, on neglected ethical and cultural values in teaching.*

This is our typical school: a depressing box-like building on the model of the Victorian prison, workhouse, or factory. Classrooms built for 30 students, now accommodating 50 or 60. Children laden by artefacts of a bygone era which for us constitute modernity and progress: tunic, tie, belt, badge, socks, shoes, back-breaking school bags. A routine of competition, moralising, disciplining, bell ringing. A daily fare of rote learning, copying and correcting. Teachers neither professional nor efficient. We are not talking now of students' abysmal level of self-reliance, responsibility, research ability, questioning and creativity. It is their very ability with maths, science, and languages that is pathetic. When the two shortfalls come together, we have school graduates who can neither speak English nor know Sanskrit, who have not learnt a modern work-ethic and are not trained in a hereditary craft either, who can neither observe modern traffic rules nor have the initiative for independent action.

There are strong gender biases in our society and there are strong class and communal biases. But the biggest bias we have displayed in the 50 years of our Independence is towards children. In this respect we adults, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian; Congress or BJP or CPM, women or men; old or young, poor or rich, we adults have all divided our nation right down the middle into ourselves, the adults, and them, the children. We are in a position to act; they can neither protest nor demonstrate nor vote. But we have not acted - sufficiently, because otherwise our failure would not have been so great.

TEMPLE FOR SACRILEGE. A letter in Seminar *magazine from Ratnakar Tripathy, asking why it was necessary for the magazine to bring out a special issue on Bihar.*

On a symbolic level Bihar is a part of our national selves that we would like to promptly jettison in the 1990s - the unlettered crude rusticity, the whiny vernacular register, the mustard oil in the hair, a compulsive allegiance to caste, an ego burdened with heavy doses of sycophancy and violence, a ritualism without belief in reason, and of course a genius for turning the greatest gifts of European Enlightenment into the rank slush of buffalo-sheds. Bihar reminds the sleek, modern terrier of his slovenly bovine self. Bihar in brief is a temple meant solely for sacrilege.

...Despite all this, I firmly believe that the moment we all stop declaring Bihar as the mysterious other, and

own it up, a good part of the mystery will vanish instantly. Our own sense of identity will also become less fidgety and desperate. The West in any case looks at us basically as Laloos, despite our English, our democracy, industry, scientific manpower and what have you. There was a time when we produced Nehrus and Jinnahs, but now we only have Gowdas, Laloos and Mulayams, and should feel contented with that. And with likely personalities such as Miss Patna, Miss Ranchi, and Miss Mongyhyr, too.

...The trouble is that in a story crammed with pastoral images, we the 'cream' of Bihar can take an outside peek at this process. Being a participant is tough in a state where salaries come late by eight or nine months. It is for the resident Laloos of the coming generations to heal the sufferings disguised by the bragging epigrams. Let us say that they owe it to Hema Malini's cheeks, if not the wrinkled bellies and foreheads of the distressed millions.

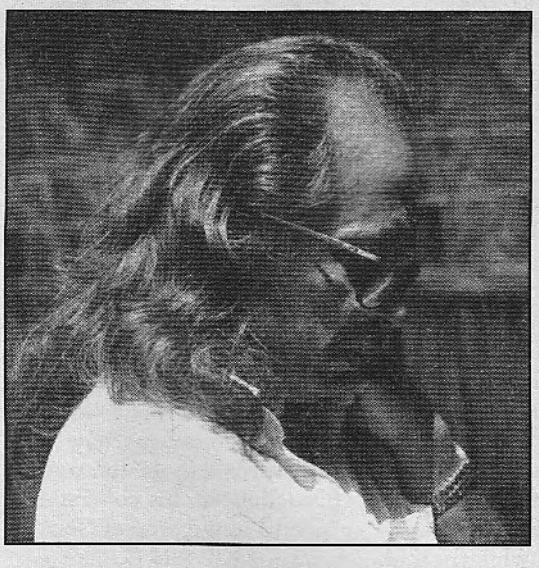
ATOMIC ENERGY AND POULTRY OUT. *List of industries in which foreigners and joint ventures are not allowed in Nepal, from an information circular put out by the government.*

1. cottage industries
2. beauty parlours, barber shops, tailoring, driving schools
3. arms
4. ammunition
5. radioactive materials
6. real estate (except construction industry)
7. motion pictures (in national languages)
8. security printing
9. mint
10. retail business, travel agencies, trekking agencies, water rafting, pony trekking, horse riding, cigarettes, alcohol and bidis, internal couriers, atomic energy, tourist lodges, poultry, fisheries, bee-keeping, and consulting services like management, accounting and legal.

ECOLOGICAL DEMOCRACY. *Ecofeminist philosopher Vandana Shiva, in an article "Bioethics: A Third World Issue", says ethical concerns regarding the environment are not a luxury of developed societies alone.*

There are a number of reasons why bioethics is even more important for the Third World than for the West. Firstly, ethics and values are distinct elements of our cultural identity and our pluralistic civilisation. The ancient Ishoupanishad has stated, "The universe is the creation of the Supreme Power meant for the benefit of all creation. Each individual life form must, therefore, learn to enjoy its benefits by farming a part of the system in close relation with other species. Let not any one species encroach upon others rights."

On his 60th birthday His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote a message to me after my speech on new technologies and new property rights, "All sentient beings, including the small insects, cherish themselves. All have the right to overcome suffering and achieve happiness. I therefore pray that we show love and compassion to all." Tagore in his famous essay Tapovan had stated, "Contemporary Western civilisation is built of brick and wood. It is rooted in the city. But Indian civilisation has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fueled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilisation." Compassion and concern for other species is therefore very indigenous to our pluralistic culture, and bioethics builds on this indigenous tradition.



Farhad Mazhar: Left of what?

by Naeem Mohaiemen

The Bangladesh government's 1995 case against poet and activist Farhad Mazhar resulted from the publication of his article, "The Ansar Rebellion", in the Bengali magazine *Chinta*. The article examined the Bangladesh Ansar paramilitary force's 1994 rebellion demanding better working conditions, and the government's ruthless suppression of the uprising using another paramilitary force, the Bangladesh Rifles.

The case ended within a very short period, and a chastened government set Mazhar free under a court ruling. As reported in the international media, the case was a victory for progressive, anti-censorship forces in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Placed within its full context, however, the case becomes a more complex issue, illustrating the rise of a New Left element in Bangladesh that leaves traditional "progressives" confused at best, suspicious at worst.

Mazhar vs the state

Farhad Mazhar has a history of involvement with causes that have led to direct confrontations with the state. In the early 70s, he was associated with Shiraj Shikdar's Sharbahara Party (*see Himal September/October 1997*), paralleling the "armed struggle" strategy of West Bengal's Maoist Naxalite movement. And after he returned from a decade-long self-exile in America, he was involved with the Oikya Prokriya party, a political grouping that attempted to unify left groups of Maoist inclination.

For this veteran class warrior, the 1994 Ansar Rebellion was vintage "class warfare", and he launched into the cause with relish. In the *Chinta* article, he wrote, "The Ansars are marginalised, economically deprived, and they have no job security... There is no one in this cruel society to listen to the Ansars. In this intolerable situation, revolt was inevitable. We want to insist at once that this rebellion was just."

A primary focus of Mazhar's piece was the fact that, in suppressing the revolt, the government was forced to pit working class soldiers against each other:

> *The state gathers manpower from the oppressed subaltern classes. And it is with armed forces built with this manpower that the ruling classes perpetuate their control over poor peasants and working people. The BDR forces that shot and killed the Ansars are also 'peasants in uniform'. And yet the BDR sepoy did not know that he had killed his brother... When poor people from the same class awake, they will surely discover their own pride in the Ansar revolt.*

Predictably enough, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government promptly arrested Farhad Mazhar under the Special Powers Act and banned the offending issue of *Chinta*. What was less predictable was the fact that, within a short time of his incarceration, the court would throw out the arrest warrant and order Mazhar's unconditional release.

One factor that may have strengthened the court's resolve was the international attention focused on the case. With astonishing speed, an international brigade of writers, artists and intellectuals mobilised to bombard the Bangladesh government and overseas embassies with petitions protesting the arrest. It was surprising how quickly the Mazhar case gained international exposure. Barely a month after the arrest, Mazhar's supporters had

"Absolutely no use of pesticides" is one of the 'principles' promoted by the Nayakrishi (new agriculture) movement with which Mazhar is associated.

reached *The New York Times* letters page (featuring high-powered signatories such as French philosopher Jacques Derrida). The Internet played a vital role in this, spreading translations of Mazhar's article to global email accounts within days of his arrest.

During the campaign to free Mazhar, major Bangladeshi intellectuals defended his right to publish. His release was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd at an impromptu press conference. In the two years since then, Mazhar's articles have been appearing regularly in the local Bangla papers, when earlier his writings were mostly restricted to *Chinta*. But despite all this, Mazhar remains defiantly outside mainstream Bengali intellectual circles. In fact, in the *Chinta* article, he had already crossed the intellectual "party line" by attacking the hypocrisy of the intelligentsia's selective human rights concerns:

> *If a son of the middle or upper classes dies, even if a rich man's terrorist son is killed in a brawl, the entire city is in mourning... And yet there is no conscientisation when Ansars, peasants and workers are shot like animals. We notice the same people who love to chant formulas of 'democracy' and 'human rights' getting busy to condemn the struggle of the oppressed masses.*

Mazhar remains an independent activist with no affiliation with the dominant political parties. His progressive politics is far more radical than those of established 'progressive' thinkers and activists, however. Mazhar has openly attacked the BNP's rightist policies, but has not spared the slightly-left-of-centre Awami League (AL) either. In fact, his disappointment with the AL is greater, given its initial commitment towards a secular state. His criticism of the AL's electoral alliance with the 1971 war-collaborators Jamaat-e-Islami was extremely strong in particular.

Most recently, he clashed with those who suggested that "fundamentalist" newspapers like *Inquilab* be banned. Mazhar vehemently defended the right to publish regardless of one's persuasion. Meanwhile, he said, intellectuals would do better to spend their time critiquing the "fundamentalist"-favouring amendments that have been added to the Constitution.

The cultural activist

Farhad Mazhar is much more than a political activist. Through his organisation, UBINIG (the acronym stands for Research on Alternatives to Development in Bengali), he has been involved in environmental activism, in opposing the use of Bangladeshis as guinea pigs for the abortion pill RU-486, criticising American media focus on child labour as an excuse for US protectionism, and establishing Narigrantha Prabartana - Dhaka's feminist bookstore and organising centre for women-empowerment projects.

Along with grassroots organising, Mazhar has also pioneered a new strand of cultural activism. One aspect of this has been his Nabapran project - focusing on the music of the wandering Bauls. In Mazhar's view, Baul is one of the earliest progressive, humanist elements of Bengali culture - a vital counterpoint to the increasing eclipse of secularism in the nation's cultural and political life. Nabapran actively seeks to rehabilitate the wandering Baul musicians, by giving support in areas like Jessore's Lalan Mazar, associated with a great Baul singer of the last century, and also by bringing the musicians to perform in urban centres like Dhaka.

Another innovative cultural initiative has been Mazhar's project to rescue Islamic culture and iconography from the clutches of religious extremists. He does this by practising his art (that is, poetry) from within an Islamic culture framework. As described in the foreword of *Ebadothnama*, his collection of "poems in worship of God":

> *Progressives, in trying to reject the [reactionary face of religion], have also thrown away its core... They ignore the ultra-modern conflict or tension between Allah and his best friend Prophet Mohammed, or the feminist revelation of Sri Chaitanya's worship in the form of Radha. In the battle against Imperialism, we need to rediscover that which is our own asset, the core of our being.*

In the introductory poem, he echoes and answers his own critics:

> *Do you believe in Allah?*
> *You're the scoundrel,*
> *unrepentant communist!*
> *Why are you suddenly*
> *writing these poems to God?*
> ...
> *No fraud I.*
> *I don't pray in the mosque, just*
> *to get people in my boat*
> *and I won't ever in the future*
> *either.*

What does Mazhar mean by all this? From various references to *Ebadothnama* in interviews, it can be gathered that the poems are part of an overall strategy of reclaiming indigenous culture as a tool for fighting Imperialism. By creating art within the structure of reli-

Corpse of the Custodian

Lord, the mosques of Dhaka city
Famed all over the world
On the pillars and ceilings are many designs.
In the age of the British, the sahebs came
and created the Asiatic Society
Right or wrong, they did much research on all this.

Today I see the new Bengali
With white eyes, just like the saheb
Rooting around the mosque
Doing all sorts of research
I pray that they get their doctorates
And are rewarded even more than the sahebs.

Myself? I am an uncultured illiterate, O Lord
I don't understand all this art and architecture
But when I go to the Buriganga river, my heart turns cold
All I remember are the rebel soldiers
Hanging from the noose, waiting to be buried
I cut the rope and bring them to the ground.

At the funeral, there was no one.
The beautiful pillars and mosque ceilings
All built on the corpse of the rebel soldiers
Enough of this farce, I have to leave.

SUBHAS RAI

Bangla is not yours

You have made my mouth and tongue with this Bangla language
My throat plays with soft sensuous vowels
With every breath I feel the vibration of long words
My eyes shut as soothing consonants spread over this body
I adore it so much, O Lord, adore my Bangla language!
I devour it greedily as if it were the fruit of heaven
Are you envious? You did not announce yourself in this language! And yet, I try ta always promote the queen of languages
So she may stand ahead of all other languages, Arabic even.
People today wonder - Bangla, are you also divine?
Are you that which came from nowhere?
Are you the carrier of Allah's message?

I am happy that Bangla is not yours
For if it were
You would be vain, for no good reason
From the reflected glory of my Bangla language.

Burkha

O Lord, my girlfriend does not wear a burkha
She tells me, those who are faithful
They never look at a woman's body with evil eyes
They gaze only with Allah's pure eyes
Only the lechers and unfaithful shout for burkha.
Let Allah put a black blindfold on their impure sight.

What is your judgment?
Look, the tailor eagerly awaits your answer
Crafty business plans: he waits with scissors and cloth
Waiting to turn on the sewing machine at your order.

Think it over, not bad - this idea of mine
Men wearing sharp clothes, all the airs
Even a prayer cap.
But the imbecile walks with a black blindfold
In the streets, not a burkha in sight
But people easily see
Who is the lecher and who is the faithful.

All selections from Ebadothnama, *1990. Translated from the original Bengali by Naeem Mohaiemen.*

gious musings, Mazhar is de-mystifying religion and bringing it into the realm of open debate. There remain no sacred cows (or books). He boldly tells God that he is glad that the *Koran* did not come in Bengali - otherwise God would become too vain in the face of the beauty of the language. Blasphemy? Not if you read the entire poem. And certainly, there was no outcry after the book came out. Within the structure of *Ebadothnama*'s overall reverence, it seemed that even the occasional cheeky irreverence (*Don't mess with me God!/I've always got some tricky conundrums ready for you,/in my bag of tricks.*) was allowed and forgiven by the readers.

Communist mullah

Intellectual circles continue to regard Farhad Mazhar with trepidation. Some see *Ebadothnama* as Pakistan-era dabbling in religious wordplay. Others dub him the "Communist Mullah". Few rush to embrace him or his strategy; NGOs generally do not reject USAID money as UBINIG does, nor is there a rise in progressive art that experiments with elements of Islamic culture. Meanwhile, Mazhar continues to be an unrepentant practitioner of his Left politics - calling for working class unity in newspaper columns, extolling the virtues of indigenous Bengali art at seminars, fiercely confronting multinationals, and verbally pummeling all established political parties. And just when his opponents think they have him pegged as an "Islamist in disguise", he writes: "Every Bengali is simultaneously Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian."

Although his detractors retain a strong voice, Farhad Mazhar's projects appear to be gaining followers. His activism may provide a blueprint for creating a New Left in Bangladesh: seeking inspiration from many sources - alternative economic theory, anti-Imperialism, and indigenous culture. Is this, then, a strategy of Left politics that can be followed and duplicated with success elsewhere in the Subcontinent?

N. Mohaiemen, who works for HBO's Interactive Media group in New York, is writing a book on the Bangladesh liberation war.

Postcards from Pakistan

Satellite television is reaching out, but the target audience is still Indians.

by Nupur Basu

It's 11:30 on a lazy Sunday morning, India time, and if you want to look over the wall for a friendly neighbourhood chat, this is probably your best bet. Stop surfing the tv channels and select Star Plus where anchor Aamir Qureshi overcomes all visa and travel restrictions and takes you to Pakistan for half an hour in *Postcards from Pakistan*.

Within seconds you are transported to Lahore, the city the anchor describes as *dilwalo ka shahar* (where the large-hearted live). And what do people with large hearts do: keep outsized pets, naturally. The camera zooms in on two brothers Chand and Khalid as they walk their pet lions through the streets of Lahore. The brothers are *pahalwans* (wrestlers) (they hetter be if they want to keep lions!) and the camera treats you to some cuddly moments as Chand and Khalid play with their fearsome pets as thougb they were mere cats. The Lahori lions are between four to eight years old and drink many litres of milk and consume many kilos of meat daily; their meals are incomplete without dessert, and they equally favour ice cream or kulfi.

Lahore is Pakistan's most happening and eventful place, and the Dastaan Theatre Company is staging a performance. We have some of Lahore's actors and directors talking about new experiments in theatre that are shaping contemporary Pakistani stage. There is talk of carrying the art to other destinations as well. Actress Nadia Faisal says she wants to take her plays across the border to India and later on to UK. Ali Hassan, another stage artiste, says that young talent in Lahore is just dying to burst out. Stage veteran Shoiab Ahmed says that he has infinite faith in the young people, and hopes that theatre will hold its own against film.

Proceed, then, to Mohenjodaro, the pride and heritage of all of South Asia. The pages in the history books come alive as the camera pans the ruins of Mohenjodaro. Senior archaeologist Ahmed Hassan Daro (some rhyming there) tells you that nowhere else back then was there such a planned city as Mohenjodaro. Excavations are on, and there are problems reaching the bottom-most layer of soil as the water table has been rising. Soil salinity is also a rhreat to the ancient brickwork. A nearby barrage on the Indus is the culprit, and the excavators are trying to drain excess water by digging bypass canals.

Anchor Aamir

From the plains of Mohenjodaro, to the exotic mountainous region of Kafir Kailash, in north Pakistan. Here, the camera zooms in on rhe local nomadic tribals in the midst of their favourite festival, Chilam Josh. Below snow-capped mountains, beautiful women and men dressed in tribal finery sing and dance. You are told that there are no arranged marriages here and therefore no social challenges like dowry. The reporter insists this is where real peace and happiness is to be found, and the anchor invites the viewer to come to this valley and decide for self.

Time for another journey, this time a pilgrimage to Hasan Abdal. The camera catches up with hundreds of Sikhs, many from India, who have come on pilgrimage to the famous Gurdwara Panja Sahib in Pakistan. While for the young this is just an exciting picnic, for the older ones it's an emotional voyage. Many say they left after Partition and are completely overwhelmed that they have been able to return after so many years. There isn't much probing into the tragedies of Partition but the story gently touches upon it, which seems all the better.

The close links between India and Pakistan are evident in other stories as well. In a presentation titled "Dance of the Mohenjodaro", Pakistani choreographer Sheema Kirmani tells us about her gurus, Mr and Mrs Ghanshyam from Calcutta, who set up a dance school in Pakistan. Her inspiration came from dance maestro Uday Shankar who, she says, took the best of all forms. Kirmani refers to the changing attitudes to dance in her country, and how even today Pakistani society frowns upon female artistes who dare perform on stage.

All this and more is showcased on *Postcards from Pakistan*. A great heginning to learn ahout a country which is otherwise almost out of hounds for Indians. Tbe older generation that had emotional bonds with pre-Partition India is passing on. It is important that these links be reaffirmed with those younger, to prevent any further division of hearts and minds. The success of this programme would lie in being able to do just that.

N. Basu is a filmmaker, television journalist and writer based in Bangalore who is presently with NDTV.

A poor man's Max Mueller

A secular, liberal, urbane, globalised Indian fails to grasp India.

As one wades through *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, one can't avoid feeling that though Shashi Tharoor probably got himself a good literary agent, what he really needed was a stern editor, someone who could impose a semblance of discipline on his intellectual waywardness. A good editor, for example, would have insisted that Tharoor make up his mind on the tone of the book.

In the event, he at times appears to be making a statement on the confusion of his midnight generation; while at other times the book is just a diary of his personal pain at discovering the ugly and violent side of Mother India; often it reads like introductory material for a political science course at some university in America's Midwest; and, in parts, it assumes the tone of a rambling magazine piece by a writer who is trying desperately to engage the attention of an indifferent reader. And then there are times when the text is reduced to a plain travelogue. A demanding editor would have imposed some order on this conceptual chaos.

But Tharoor, a senior official at the United Nations in New York, does write easily and fairly elegantly. That talent nonetheless is not sufficient to hide the fact that he does not have anything new or original to say after the first 22 pages. He begins with an interesting and novel argument:

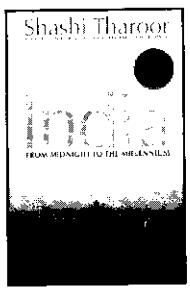
> *The only possible idea of India is that of a nation greater than the sum of its parts. An India that denies itself to some Indians could end up being denied to all Indians.*

Along similar lines, the most thoughtful line in the entire book appears early enough on page 8:

> *The singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural.*

The next three hundred pages are devoted to taking the reader through a quick, at times sweeping, chronicle of events presumably meant to sustain the basic 'India in the plural' argument. Since Tharoor does not live in India (as he tells us quite frankly), his understanding of the daily unfolding drama is necessarily second-hand, and inevitably patchy; he tries to set right this deficiency during his periodic visits to the country, times when he also attempts to sort out his identity problem.

Tharoor's perception is that of a secular, liberal, cosmopolitan, urbane, and globalised Indian. But the India



India: From Midnight to the Millennium
by Shashi Tharoor
Viking Penguin, New Delhi, 1997
392 pp, INR 400

reviewed by ***Harish Khare***

he encounters is full of medieval prejudices carried to their conclusion with the tools of violence and hate. He is painfully baffled. He is baffled by the Sonia Gandhi phenomenon. He quotes, predictably enough, Mani Shanker Aiyar's gushing eulogy to her and then concludes that if "a former diplomat with a Cambridge degree" does not "squirm at the prospect of pledging allegiance to a leader whose only qualification to lead is the name on her marriage certificate", then it would be premature to write the dynasty's obituary.

Tharoor is naturally baffled by the rise of Hindutva just as he is baffled by the caste calculus. There is the nagging refrain that too much democracy has derailed the rebuilding of India, a familiar leitmotif in all NRI-writings, and that perhaps India could have been a giant Singapore. Tharoor is unable to avoid the lamenting tone, and the result is there is too much Naipaulism here without the insightfulness of a Naipaul.

One reason Tharoor is not able to add to our understanding of why it seems impossible to even maintain order in India is his inexplicable and inexcusable reluctance to observe the simple courtesy of sourcing quotations and opinions. Take for example this passage on page 32:

> *Nonetheless, Indira Gandhi once memorably confessed to an American interviewer, "I do not have a political philosophy. I can't say I believe in any* ism. *I wouldn't say I'm interested in socialism as socialism. To me it's just a tool.*

The statement becomes meaningful only in a certain context. But the reader is left absolutely clueless as to when Indira Gandhi made this memorable observation. It could have been before 1969, during the Emergency, during her years of political exile, or during her second innings as prime minister. Knowing the period would make a difference in the understanding.

This kind of indifference to basic discipline persists throughout the book and detracts from its usefulness even as a 'quickie' reference guide to modern India. The end result is that one cannot help feeling that Mother India has once again managed to confuse and befuddle another chronicler who tried to play the poor man's Max Muller.

H. Khare is Deputy Editor of The Hindu *daily. This review has been printed by arrangement with the* Indian Review of Books.

CLASSIFIEDS

Instant Everest

These days climbers die live.

In Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, the compelling account of the deaths on Everest in the pre-monsoon season of 1996, two images stuck out as being superbly illustrative of everything that is currently wrong with climbing the highest mountain on earth.

The first centres on Yasuko Namba, a middle-aged Japanese businesswoman, who despite limited credentials as a mountaineer and a previously poor performance on the mountain, rallied on summit day to power her way up the final few hundred metres. She had, says Krakauer, "the summit in her cross-hairs". This idea of the mountain as quarry, with its echoes of tiger-shoots in the jungles of the Terai, seems apt. Self-glorification through a struggle with nature has long been an occupation of people with too much money and not enough respect.

The other image is of the team Krakauer joined as a reporter for the American magazine *Outside*. As Krakauer waits at the South Col, a place whose windswept misery clearly made an impact on his psyche, he reflects on the hollowness of his experience: "In this godforsaken place, I felt disconnected from the climbers around me - emotionally, spiritually, physically - to a degree I hadn't experienced on any previous expedition. We were a team in name only, I'd sadly come to realise."

The vacuum that lies at the heart of this book is a lack of emotional engagement. Krakauer quite likes most of the people he shares the mountain with, but they are acquaintances only, not friends. There is no shared dream or common purpose - in sharp contrast to expeditions of an earlier age like that which made the first ascent of Everest in 1953. When Yasuko Namba is found the morning after her ascent, exposed on the South Col with a three-inch carapace of ice over face and close to death, the misery is compounded by a sense that she and the others who lived or died on the mountain did so alone.

This impression has prompted a rash of negative publicity in the West, the theme of which is the death of a noble ideal. The last time newspapers were interested in Everest, Ed Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were reaching the summit, the Americans Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld were pioneering the West Ridge, Chris Bonington's team were plotting their way up the Southwest Face. These were great endeavours and now, public opinion believes, we are left with cynicism and greed. The attitude is reinforced by the garbage and dead bodies apparently strewn on the mountain, a physical manifestation of the mountain's corruption.

Into Thin Air
by Jon Krakauer
Macmillan,
London, 1997
xxii+293pp,
£ 16.99

reviewed by Ed Douglas

But mountaineers are not so impressed by this argument. Last year while talking to the eminent American climber Royal Robbins, this writer asked him about the events on Everest. He professed a complete lack of interest. "What did they expect?" he replied. It's a view shared by many climbers with experience of Everest. Put a large number of inexperienced people near the summit on a regular basis, and sooner or later a number of them are going to die. The only surprise was that it was Rob Hall, a cautious and highly experienced guide, who was caught out high on the mountain.

Instant drama

The inquisitorial nature of Krakauer's account has generated more than a little discomfort. While the general public - in the West at least - are used to inquiries and criticism if something goes wrong, mountaineers are usually reluctant to point a finger at individuals in public. Krakauer has no such misgivings and is critical of the Seattle-based guide Scott Fischer (who also perished at the same time) and his Russian employee, Anatoly Boukreev. Krakauer has no sympathy for the Russian's laissez-faire attitude which he correctly identifies as being a cultural difference from the American abhorrence of fatalism.

Krakauer's additional title for his book is "A personal account of the Everest disaster". All the way through the book one cannot help wondering which tragedy he means. The multiple deaths of those terrible days and nights in May 1996, or something else? Certainly, there have been many other tragedies on Everest. Statistically, 1996 was a pretty safe year given the numbers active on the mountain at the time, a point Krakauer does make in his concluding remarks.

Traffic jam below Everest summit.

SCOTT FISCHER

The tragedy got so much attention partly because of the tragic final hours of Rob Hall, who said goodbye to his wife for the last time over his radio before he froze to death near the South Summit, but also because some of the climbers involved were well-known Americans whose colleagues at base camp had lots of very sophisticated communications equipment with which to keep in touch with the world's media.

This instant access to the dramas enacted on Everest's slopes has been one of the most significant changes of recent years. Problems encountered by mountaineers are played out in real time, not reported at a later date when the immediacy is gone. And physical access to the mountain itself has been made much easier. Helicopters flying into the Everest region have cut weeks off the approach march endured by John Hunt and his team.

The convenience of such rapid communications has cut the real story of Everest, the story, if you like, of Chomolungma, out of the agenda. The real story of Everest is not about the private aspirations of men and women who enjoy climbing, but the story of those who live and work in the Khumbu, who bring up their families and follow their *dharma* in the shadow of the mountain.

And while the general public are riveted by what they perceive as a tragedy, the actual story is more hopeful. Western environmentalists may warn that the Everest area is being spoiled, but there is a convincing argument to be made that the management of the region is a success, albeit a qualified one. The numbers visiting may have increased exponentially in the last 20 years, but much of the region's allure has been effectively preserved.

Western clean-up expeditions may have attracted most of the attention, but local efforts have done reasonably well in reducing the impact of the consequent increase in garbage, both literal and cultural. The mountain's South Col, though much improved in recent years, is still something of a blight, but only to mountaineers who go there. Compared to the air pollution in Kathmandu the issue hardly merits the attention it's received in the media.

Ultimately, Jon Krakauer's account is a catharsis of the guilt he felt following those harrowing hours. Guilt at survival, guilt over the death of the guide Andy Harris and his failure to notice the young New Zealander's distress, guilt at the pain he caused relatives of the dead in his uncompromising assessment. It is a horrifying story brilliantly told. But it is not about Everest, more a comment on the over-confidence of people who believe that money and position make the slightest difference when a storm settles on the roof of the world.

E. Douglas is a mountaineer and guide whose book, Chomolongma Sings the Blues: The Story of Everest, *was recently published by Constable, London.*

East India, Inc.

The Americans want to mix oil and water.

by Subir Bhaumik

American business is eyeing gas reserves of Bangladesh and the Indian Northeast, but have they studied the history of East South Asia?

It was a big gathering. Politicians from Bangladesh, Nepal and the northeastern states of India had converged in Calcutta along with senior executives of more than 130 US companies to attend what was called the "US Investor Summit: Emerging East". (Bhutan, though invited, chose to stay away.) The conference ended on 11 December with a call to "highlight the possibility of a new kind of trade - trading in energy, fuel and power".

"To enable this trade to happen, markets have to be developed in India that will be the anchor for the development of these pipelines to move gas from where it is plentiful to areas where it is in demand," said the press note of the Indo-US Joint Business Council, the organisers of the conference. Within hours, however, the American "vision" for the eastern sub-re-gion of South Asia came under attack from Bangladesh and the northeast states.

Gas renaissance

Bangladesh has a proven natural gas reserve of 23 trillion cubic feet, but estimates place the actual reserve at more than twice that. The northeast Indian states like Assam and Tripura have natural gas reserves estimated at half that quantum.

Of the five memoranda of understanding (MOUs) signed during the conference, two concerned exploratory studies into the possibility of bringing natural gas from Bangladesh and northeast India across to industrial centres like Calcutta for developing power and fertiliser plants. While the MOU between power giant Enron and the Calcutta-based RPG group called for a "joint study of gas requirements in eastern India", the one signed by UNOCAL and the Indian company Paharpur Cooling Towers was described grandly by both sides as "Project Energy Renaissance".

A UNOCAL press release on Project Energy Renaissance said the project aims at creating pipelines to transport up to one billion cubic feet of "competitively priced clean burning natural gas to industrial centres in West Bengal and beyond." Obviously there is a market in mainland India for gas from Bangladesh and the Northeast, but given the deep-seated misgivings that these regions harbour against the Indian heartland, there was bound to be a reaction.

THE TELEGRAPH

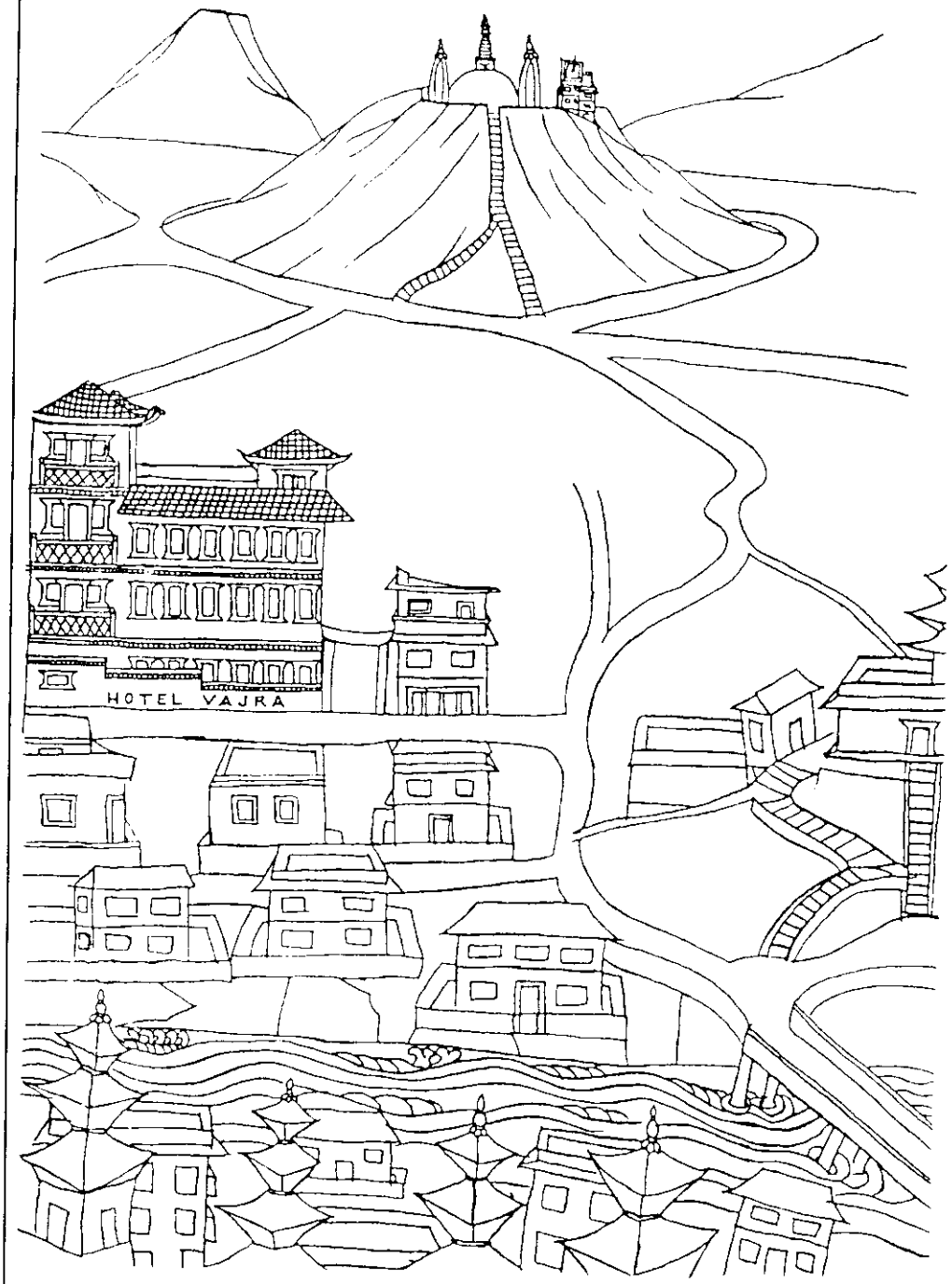
Secretary Daley and Enron CEO Rebecca Mark in Calcutta.

The MOUs involving UNOCAL and Enron and the Calcutta-based companies provoked an immediate and fierce outburst. "These US companies are planning to take our gas to India but we want our gas to speed up our industrialisation, not India's," remonstrated Bangladesh's Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed.

Minister Ahmed told Himal that the Awami League government's topmost priority was the speedy industrialisation of the country by using its natural gas reserve. This is why it is keen to secure foreign investment in the country's energy sector, but it was not clear in Calcutta how Dhaka hoped to attract foreign investment by blocking out the very market in West Bengal where the American investors saw some prospects.

Bangladesh has recently offered a number of potential hydrocarbon 'blocks' (areas) to foreign prospectors, tying them up in production-sharing contracts. Exploration has started in more than 20 blocks, including some in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the government recently signed an agreement with rebel tribesmen to bring back peace, a primary requirement for foreign investment (*see Briefs*).

The Bangladesh minister's sentiments were also shared by the leaders present from Assam and Tripura. "We want to create industries and jobs in our own state by using our gas, we do not want this to be taken away to West Bengal or any other Indian state," said Tripura's Industry Minister Tapan Chakrabarty. Tripura has a 75 percent Bengali population and is ruled, ironically, by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which is the same party that governs West Bengal and which acted magnanimous host to the Americans. "We have our own vital considerations, as all states in India are a bit on their own



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

Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside

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

John Collee
The London Observer

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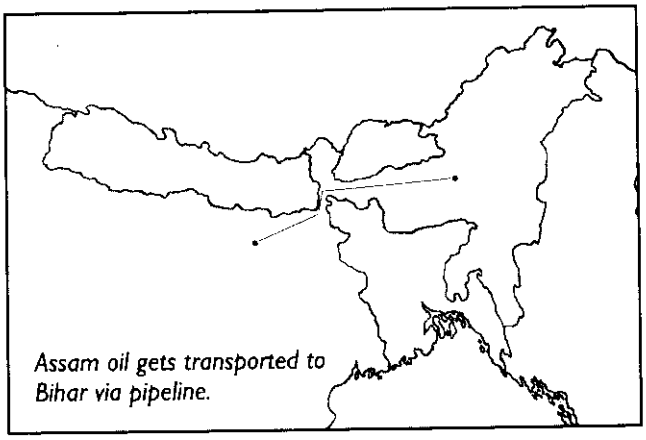

Assam oil gets transported to Bihar via pipeline.

now," said Chakrabarty.

Assam's Industries Minister Gunin Hazarika supported Chakrabarty. "We cannot allow the Barauni syndrome to be repeated," said Hazarika, referring to the oil refinery deep in the state of Bihar. Practically all of Barauni's supply of crude travels from Assam through a 1400 km-long pipeline, a symbol in Assam of Delhi's long neglect of their state. In November, separatist rebels from Assam blew up the pipeline in three places.

American history

"The question is much larger than those raised at the Calcutta investors' conference," said Assamese economist Shantikam Hazarika. He said that Bangladesh and the Northeast had always remained suppliers of raw material to the industrialised states like West Bengal, which had to change now. "The Americans are not bothered by history because theirs is not a long one, but we are uncomfortable with the long history of just being a hinterland to West Bengal. We now want our own industries with the gas we've got."

This argument finds ready takers in Bangladesh and neighbouring northeast Indian states. Their officials and business leaders want to use their massive natural gas reserve to set up gas cracker, fertiliser and power plants in their own region.

If the US delegation, led by Commerce Secretary William Daley, had expected unquestioned acceptance of their grand vision for an "Emerging East" investor summit, they were predictably shocked at the criticism. "If such attitudes persist, how can regional cooperation, or sub-regional cooperation succeed? Leaders need to look beyond their nations now," said US amhassador to India Richard Celeste.

The Americans, however, have cause for hope. While gas-rich countries and states have said "no" to pipelines, those with hydel power potential have welcomed US investment and offered to sell cheap power to mainland India, where a huge deficit is expected within the next few years. Nepal's Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa told the investors' conference that his country had a hydel power potential of 83,000 MW against a projected local demand of 750 MW by the year 2000. "But we are keen to generate cheap hydel power for sale to India's northern grid, which is expected to face a power deficit of around 20,000 MW by the turn of the century," Thapa said.

In the meantime, India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, on the border with China and with a hydel power potential similar to that of Nepal, was rolling out the red carpet for Enron. "They are sending a team to our state soon. We promise them cheap hydel power without human displacement because our density of population is the lowest in India and all our proposed schemes are run-of-the-river types," said Arunachal Pradesh's Power Secretary Bhaskar Kulbhe.

"I am indeed excited by the prospects this state has to offer," said Enron's chief executive Rebecca Marks.

To ensure that their grand 'vision' for the northeastern quadrant of South Asia takes off, Marks and her cohorts may have to make marginal compromises and pick up some lessons early on: promote some industries locally, and don't siphon off all the resources for some fancy growth zones.

S. Bhaumik is BBC correspondent for India's northeast.

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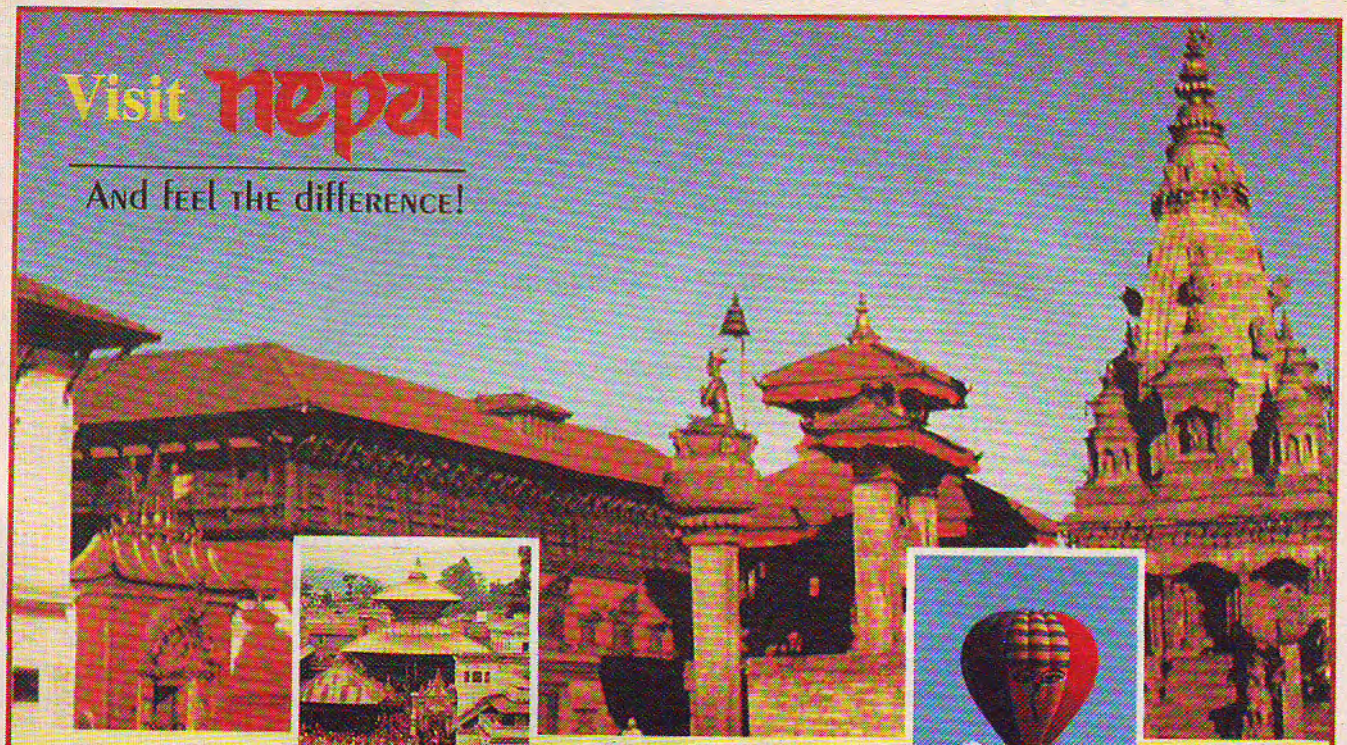

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Abominably yours,

At face value, this is great news for the feminist movement: men will be extinct by the middle of the next millennium. And not just human males, male sea horses and male crocodiles will join male dodos in the happy hunting grounds for the truly vanquished. Forget global warming, forget the ozone hole. The real ecological transformation sweeping the planet is feminisation. Men are slowly but surely castrating themselves out of business, and they are taking the males of other species along with them.

Just look at the facts: in the West, the average male's sperm count is 25 percent below 1955 levels. If this trend continues, *babuji* will be as sexually significant as an impotent tapeworm. As a sign of things to come, men in pubs in Denmark compare each other's sperm counts as if they were talking about the stock market.

"I hear Lars is down 17 points to 2.5 million."

"Well, he shouldn't complain. At least he's still above the Bang & Olufsen Index. My zoa have lost 50 percent of their value in the last quarter."

Pretty soon, we'll have drive-through sperm counters in our cities which will feed individual data to a central computer to calculate the national average for display on a digital scoreboard on busy Ring Road intersections in the place of population read-outs. And why hadn't our family planners thought of this before: zapping male gonads with spermicidal laser guided death rays? It would have saved women a lot of labour.

And it would have been much more efficient than spending 50 years to produce a cocktail of chemicals like butyl benzyl phthalate and nonyl phenol. For decades, we flushed these tonics down our toilets, gurgled them through bathtub drains, sluiced them down kitchen sinks, and used them to dryclean trousers with. As we now know, the chemicals turned out to be oestrogen mimics, meaning their molecules acted as if they were the female hormone, oestrogen. It is the residue of these chemicals in our drinking water that have over the decades turned our men into women. In short, phenols and phthalates favour phemales.

First indications that things are not right came a few years ago when scientists examining the wee-wees of male crocodiles didn't find any. Shocked, they turned to the ocean and found that male sturgeons were laying eggs and male salmon were spawning. A fad was sweeping the reptile and fish kingdoms - they were all having a sex change!

Male lab mice made to drink water laced with phthalates showed similar tendencies, they'd suddenly start cross-dressing. It all looks like something we cannot just leave to our scientists, it calls for an *X-Files* investigation.

Agent Mulder: Look Scully, another crocodile with no balls.

Agent Scully: There is something mysterious going on in these Everglades, but something tells me the truth is out there.

Mulder: *(taking out a beeping cellular phone from his inside pocket)* Mulder. Yes! OK! She's here with me. We'll be right there. *(snaps phone shut)* They've found another suspected hermaphrodite in Miami Zoo, let's go.

Scully: *(in car)* Something tells me it is an alien plot to sterilise our planet and then colonise it. If the males cannot reproduce, then humanity will just wither away.

Mulder: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Sterilise and colonise, that's wild. Ha-ha-ha. What will you come up with next, Scully? I've never laughed so hard in this entire series.

Scully: *(miffed, looks daggers at her partner when something catches her eye)* Mulder, Stop!

COMMERCIAL BREAK. Buy buy buy. Hype, hype, hype. Consume, consume, consume.

Scully: Mulder, what's happening to you? You're actually laughing, and you're growing mammaries!

Mulder: *(looks down at his chest with an expression of horror)* Do something, Scully! I've lost all sensation inside my pants! It must be all the phthalates that leached from the inner linings of the baked beans cans I ate while working late!

TO BE CONTINUED.

The more perceptive among you will now have realised that this is happening all over the world. Have you noticed how Hollywood stars are looking more and more effeminate lately? Where are the glorious hunks of yesteryear? Arnold, who used to shoot down Soviet gunships with his bare hands, now gets pregnant in the movies! Sylvester the stallion has shrunk to a shadow of his former self - playing wimp characters and concealing the ripples on his biceps as if they were something obscene. And when male actors aren't acting wimpy, they're playing men who are playing women - Robin Williams as Mrs Doubtfire and Dustin Hoffman as Tootsie.

Science tells us that all human foetus are female. It is later, when the x-chromosome triggers the secretion of mullerian inhibitor hormone to suppress its female characteristics that the foetus turns male. What we have done with the new chemicals is we have turned nature's clock back to the original female characteristics. With proper use of these chemicals there is no reason why South Asian males should not transmute themselves into future Kalpana (Watch-that-satellite-spin) Chawlas and Diana (Smirk) Haydens.

I know it is very tempting for the more radical among us to declare victory over the tyrant sex. But look at it this way: if males become extinct, sooner or later so will females. Unless of course we use all the science at our disposal and reproduce by parthenogenesis. Who needs gonads?

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