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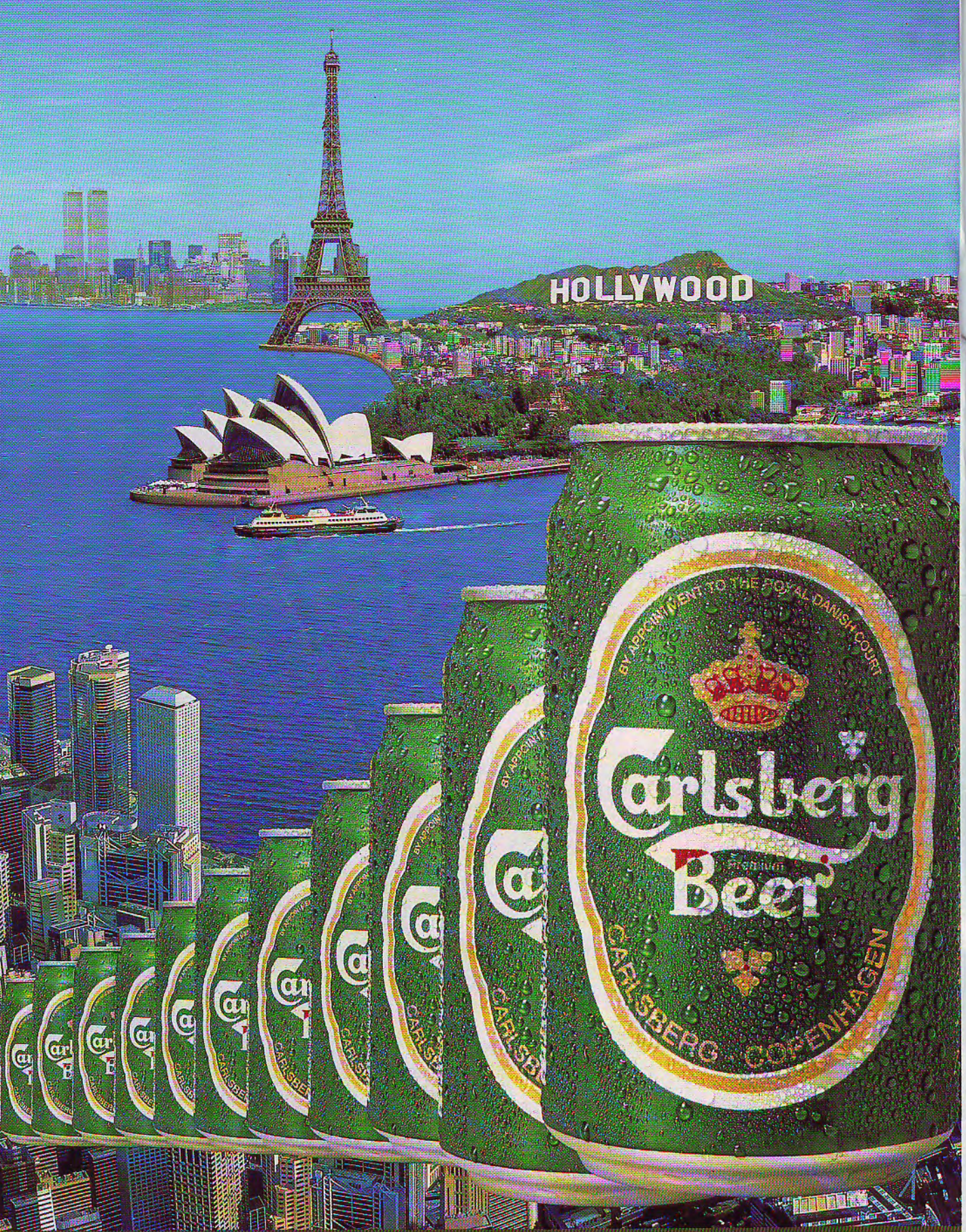
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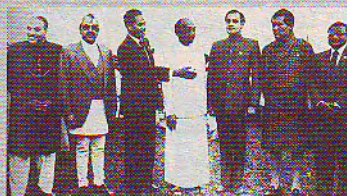
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Cover

10 SAARC is unwell:
long live South Asia
by Rita Manchanda



18 "Hunger is more powerful
than nationalism."
Interview with Ashis Nandy

21 "Why should school children
need for India, Pakistan,
Bangladesh."
Interview with I.A. Rehman

25 Extremely Irritated in Colombo
by Sasanka Perera

Departments

3 Commentary

Host as hostage
Badge of nationalism
We, the third force
Ration card monster
The gas rush

Krishna's Corner

28 Briefs

Hiroshima mon amour
Exit editor



An American story
Pipe dream

Analysis

33 A failed mountain book
by Nigel J.R. Allan

40 Mediafile

Feature

42 Lessons from Ladakh
by Martijn van Beek

48 VOICES

Opinion

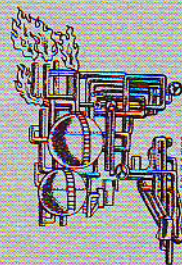
51 Sex and marriage in Nepal
by Shanta Basnet Dixit

Review

54 A Dragonfly in the Sun:
An Anthology of Pakistani
Writing in English
reviewed by
Shobhana Bhattacharji

Saarconomy

56 The willing fields
of Bangladesh
by Quddus Mia



60 Aominably yours

Columbus didn't read it you should



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SRI LANKA

HOST AS HOSTAGE

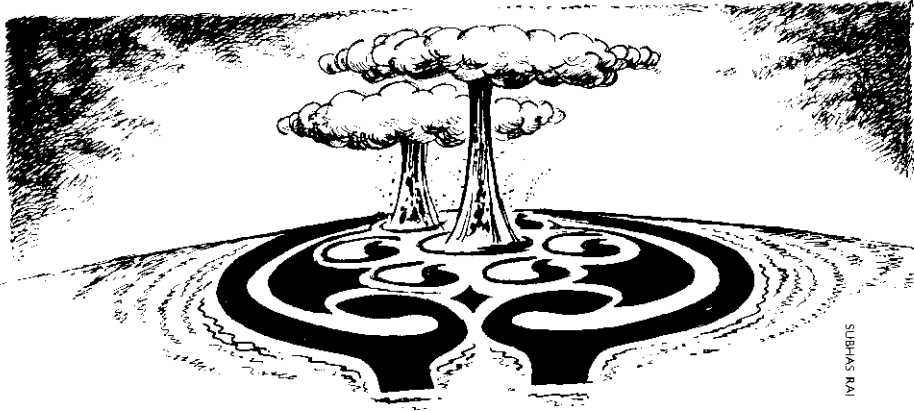
THE TORRENTIAL rain in Colombo preceding the SAARC summit and the gloomy skies visible through it reflected the general mood. Colombo was host to the summit but was not a city of cheer. The rains had caused havoc; trees were down, the potholes had deepened, and some areas of the city were totally inaccessible due to flooding.

Metaphors of the separatist war were everywhere in the intensified security and check points. The summit days were suddenly declared holidays for the government sector; not in a mood of celebration of course, but due to anxiety over security. Public transportation was halted, and many shops were closed. Colombo was a ghost city: a *cordon sanitaire* for the SAARC leaders to meet in. The public was at a distance or behind closed doors, largely unconcerned about the goings-on anyway.

If President Chandrika Kumaratunga had hoped to strut on the regional stage by holding the 10th SAARC summit (the original venue having been shifted from Nepal in deference to Sri Lanka's desire to play host in its 50th year of Independence), she had certainly not counted on India and Pakistan playing spoilsports by turning on the nuclear heat. So, what could have been a glorious moment for the Lankan president on the international and national scene, instead became a mere side-show: that of a well-dressed, and well-mannered – points of emphasis that are her regular occupational hazard – woman upstaged by the tension between India and Pakistan.

The eyes of the international and national press were firmly on Atal Behari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif: their talks, their body language, their statements. That there was a summit declaration at all in the face of the two bickering giants, observers say, was due to Kumaratunga's statecraft, diplomacy and sheer personal charm. But that again was behind closed doors, away from public gaze.

The Sri Lankan public was more pre-occupied with the postponement of the provincial council elections – a long-standing threat, which has now become a reality under an island-wide Emergency. Elections were to be held in five of the provinces; the parties had begun campaigning; and women's groups had invested money and energy to demand in-



SUBHAS RAI

creased women's representation on the electoral list. But, ultimately, it was the military that won the day. The argument was that a master plan was in place to rout the Tamil Tigers by the end of the year, and that to pull out troops from the war zones to provide security for the elections would cause expensive setbacks.

Lankans, by and large, are deeply sceptical of this promise, having heard it before with different sets of dates. Even if the military were to succeed in capturing the last 40 km of the road to Jaffna, this accomplishment would hardly qualify as 'winning' the war. After all, winning wars is not about capturing or retaining territory alone; wars are fought on many fronts including the one for social justice.

For Sri Lanka, it was bad enough that the SAARC summit coincided with the postponement of the local elections. What was worse was that it achieved little with respect to the one promise that may have been the



jamboree's saving grace – the beginning of a serious process of reconciliation between India and Pakistan. The expectation was belied.

Indeed, the Colombo Summit's fruitless outcome was as disappointing as Chandrika Kumaratunga's 1994 election pledge to abolish the presidential system. It is widely believed that she will call for early presidential elections in January 1999 to strengthen her hand, and to herald a return to a more decentralised and accountable form of governance – something that the now-deferred provincial council elections were to provide in the first place. △

-Neloufer de Mel

INDIA • NEPAL

BADGE OF NATIONALISM

"KALAPANI" - BLACK waters - the term has an ominous ring to it in much of South Asia due to its association with the hellish colonial-era penitentiary in the Andamans. In Nepal, too, the term carried the same connotation despite the country's having evaded British rule. But not any more. Today, emotions on Kathmandu's streets run high the moment "Kalapani" comes up.

The place Kalapani lies at the junction where China, India and Nepal meet in Nepal's northwestern corner (*see map*). A cursory glance at the map does not reveal anything remarkable about the area. Its only significance, but a strategically important one, is

the location of that most valuable of mountain prizes high up on the border with Tibet/China: a pass in an otherwise impenetrable Himalayan barrier. (This was the same pass that the star-crossed Kailash-Manasarovar pilgrims of India were headed for when they were killed in a landslide at the village of Malpa in Uttar Pradesh's Pithoragarh district in mid-August this year.)

Since the 1962 India-China war, India has maintained a military presence at Kalapani some distance south of the pass, a position that the Nepal government claims falls within its territory and thus wants vacated. India does not accept Nepal's claim.

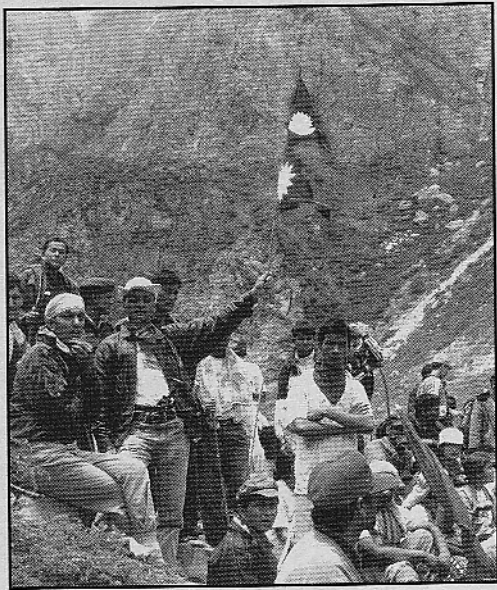
The sticking point is the source of the Mahakali river. Under the 1816 treaty between Nepal and the East India Company, Kathmandu had to give up all its conquered lands west of the Mahakali river (also known as the Sharada in India), and that document is still the recognised basis for the frontier between western Nepal and the Indian region of Kumaon.

Around the area in question, there are three branches of the Mahakali, and the controversy rests on which one of these is the Mahakali proper and which are just tributaries. India claims that the eastern-most branch is the Mahakali, while Nepal claims it is the one which flows just west of the Indian military camp. There are also those in Nepal who claim that the third branch, furthest west (and by all accounts with the largest flow), is the 'real' one.

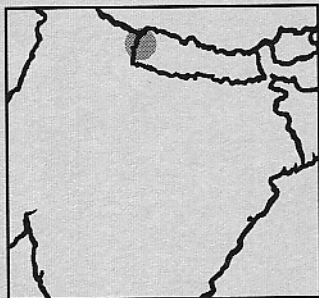
The issue of the Indian post at Kalapani suddenly burst upon Nepal's national scene in 1996, following the two countries' signing of the Integrated Mahakali Treaty, which envisaged the building of a massive 6500 MW high dam at Pancheswar. (The "integrated" in the treaty was meant to end the earlier controversy over construction on the Tanakpur Barrage, built downstream on the Mahakali, which had resulted in the inundation of some hectares of Nepali territory.)

Where the Mahakali Treaty hoped to make a fresh start leaving behind previous misunderstandings, it unleashed another, more powerful controversy. When the treaty came up for debate in the Nepali Parliament, the main communist opposition party came armed with 27 'flaws' in the agreement, one of which happened to be the existence of the Indian camp at Kalapani.

The affair immediately became highly charged. The Kathmandu government took the matter up with New Delhi, which although dismissive of the claim, agreed that a joint expert committee should meet to get to



GANESH KHATRI



Political activists wave the Nepali national flag against the backdrop of Kalapani landscape.

the bottom of the matter. Till now, the two sides have met formally three times, without agreement.

Successive governments in Nepal (the present one is the fourth since 1996) have had to play to the national galleries by maintaining, with varying degrees of stridency, that "Kalapani is ours". Parties in opposition, meanwhile, have lost no opportunity to use Kalapani as a battering ram against the government of the day. Going outside Parliament, bandhs and protest rallies have been organised. Newspaper write-ups have built up the frenzy.

It all reached fever pitch when the student wing of the Marxist-Leninists, recently split from the United Marxist-Leninists, went on a "Long March" to Kalapani to try and plant the Nepali national flag there. (They were prevented from doing so by the Indian police.) The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu did not help matters by issuing a statement, much in the style of Nepali politicians themselves, claiming that Kalapani was India's. Forced into a corner, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala has, on more than one occasion, parroted the same refrain, "Kalapani is ours!"

The proper thing to do with Kalapani would be for both sides to let the expert committee carry through with its work away from the media glare. The issue's politicisation in Kathmandu has little to do with the Nepali politician's love of motherland, and everything to do with domestic factional politics. Those who issue the strident cry, "Kalapani is ours!" are more interested in cornering domestic opponents than resolving a bilateral border problem and 'reclaiming' Nepali land.

Except for stray reports, the goings-on in Nepal and the anti-India rhetoric that has been spewing out have not been taken up by the national papers in India, busy as they have been with the travails of nuclear-dom and the shakiness of the BJP coalition at the Centre. Even when the Delhi media's attention was on the Malpa landslide, there was no mention, even in passing, that Nepal has been claiming proprietary rights to the route the pilgrims would have taken up the pass.

If the high-decibel level of the Kalapani campaign continues in Nepal, it is only a matter of time before politicians in Lucknow and Delhi begin to pick up the opposing refrain. Should that happen, Kalapani will cease to be a cut-and-dried matter of horder delineation to be agreed upon by technocrats with the help of ancient documents and maps. It would then become a question of 'national honour' in India as well, at which point, the Nepali hope of possibly reclaiming Kalapani

would recede even further.

One would go so far as to ask whether the Nepali politicians, so cynically using Kalapani rhetoric for party-specific gains, are not themselves acting against the national interest. For, if Indian politicians too get engaged with Kalapani, then resolution of the problem would become remote. And the Indian military camp would continue to stay where it is.

PAKISTAN

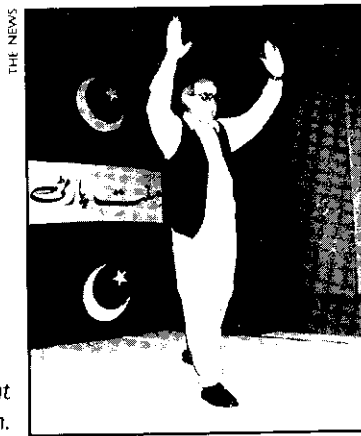
WE, THE THIRD FORCE

WHEN FORMER Pakistan president Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari launched a new political party in Lahore on 14 August, the Independence Day, it was widely seen as an attempt to provide an alternative to the two main political groupings, Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League and Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party. So far, however, the newly formed Millat (National) Party has failed to make any wave in Pakistan's muddy political waters and Leghari remains yet another pretender to the third force.

The country has seen a host of these. Most prominent among them in recent times have been former cricketer Imran Khan, former chief of army staff Gen Aslam Beg and, not to forget, Qazi Hussain Ahmed of the Jamaat Islami.

The basic rallying point of all of them is the same, even though the remedies they suggest are different: the two main parties have failed to govern the country, therefore it is time someone else, more specifically "we the third force" took the reins. An approach that is flawed from the very outset, for rather than proving themselves more capable, the sole emphasis is on discrediting those who are or have been in power. They want power not as a natural democratic consequence of their political worth to the people, but rather by default.

In a country where politics is nothing but a hlatant route to power, the theory is that those who do not see a future for themselves at the hustings, often try to establish their political credentials to ensure a place in a government formed without a general election. It is in these 'governments by decree' that those who wield the real power, the generals, make their appearance. The launch of a new party always has Pakistan's political pundits



Leghari at the launch.

wondering whether the new entrant is backed by the military.

Third-party politicians have been known to resort to all kinds of stunts to seek favour with the army establishment. They have asked that incumbent governments be thrown out and a national government be set up, or worse still, a government comprising of so-called technocrats. How these technocrats are to succeed where popular governments have failed is, of course, not discussed.

The concept of a third force in Pakistan, mainly because of its purported links with the army, is quite different from the one in, say, the United Kingdom, where the Liberal Party has for long been seeking to assert itself. Since the UK liberals present themselves as a political alternative rather than as an aspirant to back-door entry to power, they are also able to propagate their ideals, which in turn leads to some of their views being adopted by the two main parties.

The only time this has happened in Pakistan was when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto borrowed a few catchy slogans from the socialists and incorporated them in his popular agenda in the late sixties. With President Ayub Khan on one side and the feudal politicians he had persecuted on the other, Bhutto emerged as a third force and went on to become a popular leader. As his popularity rose, his party gradually took its place as one of the two main parties striving to retain the status quo.

Bhutto's was one unique case, and even his rise was attributed to the days he spent in the Ayub administration where he had acquainted himself with the power mechanism of the state. That is exactly what was lacking in Imran Khan when he first emerged on the political scene. Leghari has plenty of experience in this regard, but is short on charisma and political ideals (or even slogans) to mobilise the people. That is, if he is actually looking to achieve this end.

-Asha'ar Rehman

INDIA

RATION CARD MONSTER

EVEN WHILE the SAARC leadership met on Bentota's sunny beaches, India's prime minister was being embarrassed by his insistent ally, Bombay's don, Bal Thackeray. As part of his cleansing drive, the Maharashtra government of the BJP and Shiv Sena was forcibly removing "illegal immigrants/infiltrators" from the slums of Bombay.

It was no coincidence that most of those removed were Bengali Muslims, who as Thackeray claimed, "would have decided our fate by voting [against him]". His argument was that they were not Indian citizens, and that they were stealing jobs. The issue made headlines when the West Bengal government strongly objected to the move. In the melee that ensued (Maharashtra vs West Bengal), the poor immigrant was left stateless.

The Bangladesh government, as always, got into the farcical act of denying that any of its citizens had crossed the porous border into India to earn a living. The beleaguered Indian Central government wobbled along ambiguously.

Thackeray's move was flawed on two very important counts: he blatantly abused, for sectarian reasons, the loopholes in India's weak system of guaranteeing procedural rights to immigrants (assuming all those he got deported were indeed immigrants), and he attacked, on purely economic grounds, the keystone of Bombay's prosperity - migration.

India's Foreigners Registration Act gives a foreigner certain procedural rights, such as a chance to argue his case in court, and to prove his citizenship through any of the following: ration card, birth certificate, voter ID, or domicile card. However, the law in India, unlike most other democracies, overwhelmingly favours the authority, where the victim is guilty till he proves his innocence. Proving innocence is easy when you have the means, not when you are barely cobbling together a square meal.

Now add to that the wishes of a very powerful and belligerent man who is convinced that all Muslims in his country are "infiltrators", and all Hindus who cross borders "refugees". You can end up with a situation where carrying around proof of citizenship matters about as much as a tumour on your foot. On

the day they were caught, probably no amount of proof could have saved the Bengali Muslims from deportation. The mala fide nature of Thackeray's deportations was apparent when the Calcutta High Court decided that three of the first lot of deportees packed by train across India were in fact Indian citizens.

Over time, India has come to an uneasy peace with the Bangladeshi immigrant. Nearly every year since 1971, India has been (to use the term in vogue) "pushing back" a few hundred immigrants – a fraction of those who cross over. Nevertheless, the number has been increasing every year, from less than 300 annually in the 1980s to a high of 750 in 1997. By July this year, 582 had already been deported, and another 122 were in remand. This increased push back reflects the escalating pressure of the ultra-conservative lohhy which seeks to create a Hindu Rashtra.

The fact is that Bangla-speaking immigrants have been an important source of cheap labour in the cities of India, and particularly in Bombay where they have contributed to the competitiveness of the gold, diamond and zari industries. Bomhay is facing hard times; the recession is threatening all jobs, big and small. It is then no surprise that Thackeray managed to read the city's pulse, concocted a cause for the job scare, and targeted the silent and scared immigrant. At least in this respect, Thackeray is not alone. Malaysia and Indonesia, when up against a recession, are also busy shipping out Bangladeshi (and other) migrant labour.

To pass, a recession requires downward adjustment of wages and asset prices. Fluidity of labour is critical to the survival of domestic industry. Capital and productivity, not deportation, are solutions to a recession. The best policy is to let wages and asset prices adjust in a free market, and hope that improved productivity will improve the capital output ratio. Circling your wagons to cure a recession is possibly the worst remedy.

Because of the apathetic attitudes of both the New Delhi and Dhaka governments, the upper courts seem to be the only recourse left for migrants. But this is hardly a viable solution; the judges are not there to deal with such issues on a case-by-case basis. The Central government in New Delhi must intervene, and interpret the problem with the understanding that the question is no longer about citizenship; it is about the violation of basic rights to push forward a sectarian agenda. To refer this issue to the courts or to committees will be unfair to all immigrants (national or international) in any part of any country.

For years, Bangladesh and India have been

ignoring the porosity of their borders. Now they must admit the fact and allow those who did migrate to stay on and work, for the logical end to the retributive justice that the Shiv



DECCAN HEARLD

En route to Dhaka via Calcutta.

Sena has in mind is far too ugly to imagine. A cleansing has no logical limits of purity. And retribution, specially when couched in terms of job snatching/undercutting, could lead to 'cleansing' drives in other cities as well. The facade of moral probity and liberal attitudes towards neighbours, that India once maintained, is fast vanishing and the country is lapsing into a redneck mentality that does not go with its size.

Countries create borders hoping that the people inside them would reinforce their sanctity, and that by not crossing these borders, citizens would somehow forget the other side. Unfortunately (for these countries and their creators), shared dreams are not so easily jettisoned, nor are common destinies. If a Bangladeshi 'infiltrates' India, he does not do so to defile its purity. He does so because economic circumstances compel him to look towards those who, until the last redrawing of that map, were part of his shared dream.

-Shantanu Nagpal

BANGLADESH

THE GAS RUSH

BANGLADESH THESE days is getting to know what nouveau celebrityhood is all about. Sitting on a potential USD 25 billion treasury chest of gas deposits, gone are the days when this deltaic country could only attract foreign

aid workers. Now it's the turn of energy entrepreneurs. (see page 56)

But, as is the case with newfound celebrity status, the Dhaka government is realising that the experience can be an unnerving one: a blown gas field; rumours of financial skull-duggery; relentless pressure from cut-throat multinationals and their battery of lawyers; a sacked energy minister; bidding scandals; and the accusation that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed is lining up the richest gas-field of them all for her close friend.

All these find the government squirming in acute discomfort, without a real clue about what to do with this recently discovered gift of nature. Then there are the heated arguments over selling or not selling gas to India, and the fears of repeating a Nigeria where poor villagers can only helplessly stare at the export pipelines that pass them by. Finally, there is this doomsday scenario: what if the reserves dry up within 20 years, leaving Dhaka "paved with gold", and the rest of Bangladesh in "literal darkness", as some predict?

For all that, there are immense possibilities of a rich and fulfilled Bangladesh. Al-

though the extent of its energy reserves have not yet been proven, the world's biggest energy companies believe that Bangladesh is heir to at least twice as much gas as Britain's share of the North Sea. "It's going to have a huge impact," says Calgary oil man Robert Ohlson. "At the end of the day, Bangladesh could become self-sufficient."

Dhaka officials reckon that just extracting the gas could bring in USD 25 billion in terms of new investment, and the national treasury could be richer by another USD 2 billion a year in revenue from its share of the fields. And that, calculates the World Bank, could double the country's current per capita income of USD 300 within a decade - provided, of course, that the money is used well.

However, by some accounts that is least likely to happen. Says Osman Chaudhary, a leading Bangladeshi economist: "Given our government's record, I'm not very confident. The way the system is now, the money will go into a few pockets." Like Nigeria's, then, will be Bangladesh's fate.

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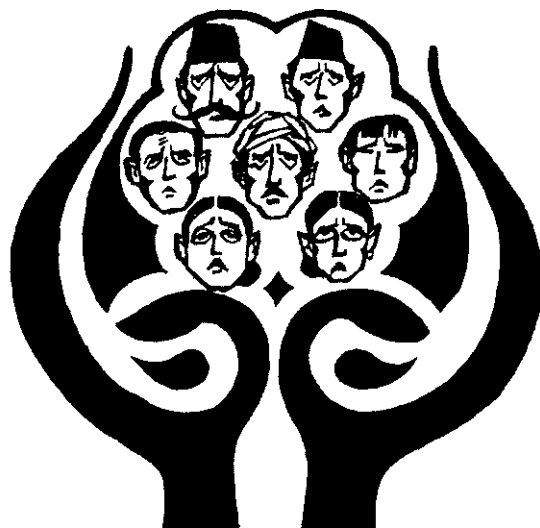
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S LONG

It may be too early to organise a requiem for SAARC, but the region's future lies beyond its vacuous flag-waving. The future of the Subcontinent cannot be a state project.

by Rita Manchanda

The latest SAARC summit concluded in Colombo on 31 July in the wake of the India-Pakistan nuclear tests – without discussing the tests. The “heads of state or government” gave their wordy speeches, but nobody was listening. This was definitely the most dismal summit in the organisation’s tortuous 13-year history, notwithstanding the halmy breeze on Bentota beach.

By living the lie of sappy multilateralism and ignoring the immediacy of bilateral rivalries and conflicts in the Subcontinent – in particular between New Delhi and Islamabad – SAARC had confirmed its reputation as an organisation long on words and short on deeds. After years of unrequited hope, the realisation was now complete that little else can be expected from an organisation that revolves entirely around the need-to-pon-tificate of prime ministers and presidents.

Barred from discussing the here-and-now issues such as nuclear warfare, refugee flow, and migrant labour, the leaders who gathered in Colombo played safe. They trotted out a laundry list of commitments that were easy to agree to because they were so easy to forget, on halting women’s trafficking, banning child labour, lowering travel barriers, enhanc-

ing trade, and so on.

Colombo provided definitive proof that this organisation of regional states is not headed anywhere, but did this also apply to efforts to bring South Asia’s people together? Was a “South Asian community” still worth fighting for? Among the scholars and journalists interviewed immediately after the summit (*see box*), there was healthy scepticism about romantic notions of historical togetherness, and doubt that Subcontinental camaraderie could be rekindled at the wave of a wand.

At the same time, these experts believed, by and large, that there was no other way forward but to continue to expand the space for people-to-people involvement across the borders of South Asia, well outside the realm of government. It was important to continuously keep opening more doors, most importantly between India and Pakistan, for that frontier and that rivalry had the potential of foreclosing all other possibilities.

Waste of time

The scepticism of scholars may at first seem surprising, given the many cross-border and South Asia-wide activities taking place. The



SAARC IS UNWELL LIVE SOUTH ASIA

last decade has seen a mushrooming of regional dialogues initiated by a wide variety of organisations, from development NGOs to chambers of commerce, research institutes, activist groups and donor agencies. There have been South Asian book fairs, theatre, film and dance festivals, artist camps, student tours, and so on and on. A decade ago, it would have been difficult to imagine the ease with which people from the various countries are meeting today. Nearly every day, somewhere in a South Asian capital or city, or even outside the region, a South Asian meeting of some kind or other takes place.

And yet, the separation of national societies remains significant, and the fact of the matter is, after decades of nationalistic separation, the rebuilding of trust requires not scores, not hundreds, but thousands of self-igniting initiatives.

Some of the pessimism regarding a South Asian coming-together has to do with the misperception of the role of the SAARC organisation in bringing about 'togetherness'. There is, indeed, the unfortunate trend of equating South Asia with SAARC, even though one is a region and all that it encompasses, while the other is an inter-governmental organisation with all the restrictions that the term connotes.

There was, in fact, a time when observers fawned over SAARC, saying that at the very least the SAARC summits forced the leaders to meet once every year or two to mouth support for peace, regionalism and development. After 13 years of such pontification, the point has been made,

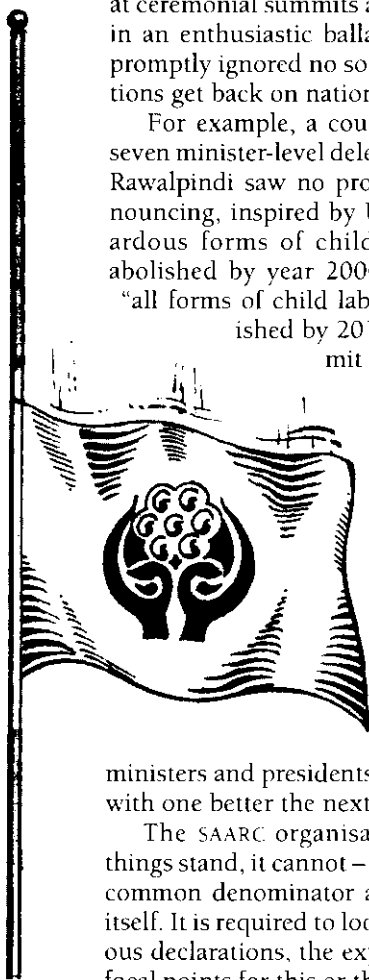
and the public is tired. The organisation's institutional profile remains sterile, and the so-called "SAARC process" is choked by treaty congestion. Commitments are rushed through at ceremonial summits and ministerial meets in an enthusiastic ballast of rhetoric, to be promptly ignored no sooner than the delegations get back on national *terra firma*.

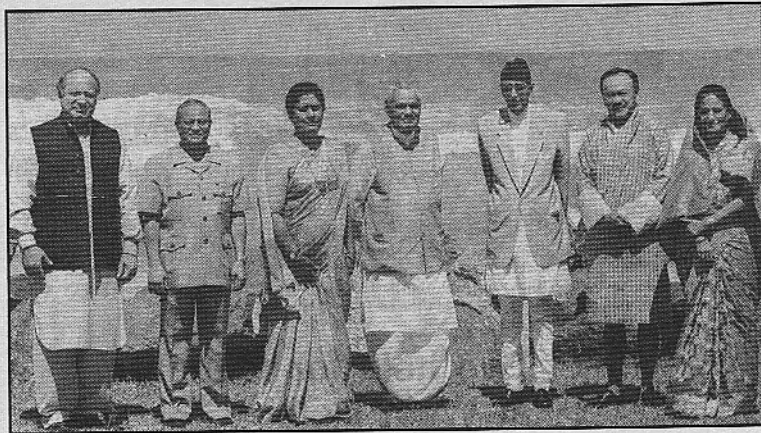
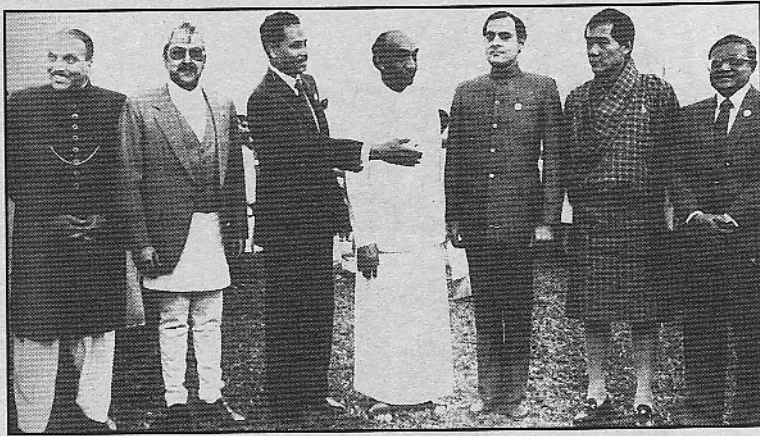
For example, a couple of years ago, the seven minister-level delegations which met in Rawalpindi saw no problem in grandly announcing, inspired by Unicef, that "all hazardous forms of child labour" would be abolished by year 2000, and, further, that "all forms of child labour" would be abolished by 2010. At the Male summit of 1997, one delegation proposed tele-

scoping plans for the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) from 2005 to 2002. Some of those present were incredulous at the audacity of the suggestion, but the prime

ministers and presidents (and king) came up with one better the next day: SAFTA by 2001!

The SAARC organisation must – but as things stand, it cannot – rise above the lowest common denominator agenda it has set for itself. It is required to look beyond the pompous declarations, the expert committees, the focal points for this or that, the poverty commissions, and other soft-focus subjects that promise but do not deliver. A secretariat that is hostage to the desires and procrastinations





From there to here to where: the first SAARC summiteers of 1985 (top) and the latest.

of seven different foreign ministries, with practically no authority for independent action, can hardly be expected to direct the organisation.

If the rude awakening of a suddenly nuclearised South Asia had been expected to force the 1998 summit to a higher plane, that hope was belied by the attitude of insecure governments unwilling to discuss the matter in public fora. The credibility of the organisation hit rockbottom with its inability to discuss nukes barely weeks after the India and Pakistan blasts. The very body language of the Indian and Pakistani delegations was enough to make one despair over this bilateral enmity which was holding the interests of 1.3 billion people ransom.

The widening fault line across the Attari-Wagah border sucks in the whole region, and there is no one among the leadership of the other South Asian states with the moral stature to take a public stand against Pakistan or India, more particularly the latter. The nuclear tests, followed by the breakdown of the India-Pakistan dialogue, will echo (at the official level) for years to come.

In the middle of all this, Mian Nawaz Sharif was heard saying that his meeting with Atal Behari Vajpayee was a "waste of time".

The Pakistani high commissioner in New Delhi was sent in to fill this diplomatic breach, to ingeniously explain that his prime minister had not meant the obvious, but instead had meant that it would be a "waste of time" to resume the dialogue unless there was in the first place an agreement on how to conduct the dialogue.

Peaceniks vs nuclear-mongers

In the most polluted pond, a lotus flower blooms. And so it was with the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan, which, so we were told by the papers and television, led to an outpouring of joy on both sides. Actually, much more spontaneous and significant was the upsurge of anti-nuclear protests held by tens of thousands of citizens in the two adversary countries, and picked up by many in the neighbouring countries.

Thus, while the suddenly-nuclear enmity of India and Pakistan did definitely paralyse the SAARC organisation, the Pokhran and Chagai blasts seem to have energised activists in each country of South Asia to work ever harder for regional cooperation. They will continue their independent efforts to talk over and around the guns and cannons.

The positive fallout of the nuclear tests was that everybody now knows there is a substantial body of sober opinion in the Subcontinent which does not buy establishment-speak. This body of opinion is not to be pooh-poohed, and it goes far beyond the 'alternative-wallahs' and so-called peaceniks who have long fought for a "people's SAARC". If it is the India-Pakistan divide which is spoiling South Asian progress, then one can only thank the nuclear-mongers in New Delhi and Islamabad for having forced these tens of thousands of citizens who want rapprochement to emerge from the woodwork.

Given that now we know that the numbers for peace are significant, what is the way ahead? Anthropologist Shiv Vishwanathan, for one, is persuaded that real experiments in criss-crossing nation state boundaries are already happening. Part of this conviction comes from the response he received from Pakistan to his anti-nuclear article "Patriot Games" in the *Economic and Political Weekly* immediately after the Pokhran blasts (see also *Himal*, July 1998). "If they've already crossed the boundaries in their head why should crossing physical boundaries be a problem?" asks Vishwanathan.

Political scientist Rajni Kothari is convinced that regionalism across South Asian frontiers will occur only when there is greater space for democracy within each of the coun-



tries. He says, "Once there is greater federalism, greater democratisation through 'regionalism' within the country, it may be more amenable to regionalism outside. For example, the challenge to a monolithic hegemonic India in South Asia must come from within, that is, the democratisation of the state structure of India, a breakdown of the country into its own various regions."

For Kothari, the future South Asian community lies, therefore, in a confederal structure, which would include India in its various parts. Adds Kothari, "For the moment, the problems of governance can only become more acute as institutions such as the judiciary, the university and civil society as a whole come under pressure, reinforcing the centralising authoritarian tendencies of individual governments."

Psychologist Ashis Nandy believes that regionalism will be much more difficult to achieve in the hands of the increasingly paranoid and insecure governments who need external enemies. However, he says confidently that there will be countervailing forces at play. He says the political class is being discredited in all the countries, and there is hope in this. The very people who are trying to build up the image of a monolithic enemy are trusted so very little by the public, he says.

Nandy also feels that, incongruously, the "dissent of the couch potato" will push forward the South Asia togetherness agenda. For example, the Indian news consumer, with an increasingly short attention span, has already gulped down the euphoria unleashed by the nuclear test and, totally bored, would like to move on. Nandy points at opinion surveys by STAR TV which reported public support for the tests in India going down from 90 percent right after the Pokhran blasts to 60 percent three weeks later. "My personal guess is that the support for the bomb in India is at about 36 percent, which is the figure we got in a 1997 survey."

Many other social scientists also believe that for every act of "fencing-in" by the state authorities, there will be hundreds of "secessionist" impulses, made up of cross-cutting vested interests. "This textured weave of vested interests will grow through everyday political changes rather than any grand socio-political engineering design," says Nandy. Thus, the Nepali businessman, a staunch nationalist no less, will look to India as his main market, or to Bangladesh, for the export of turnip seeds. The writings of an ardent Bangladeshi nationalist are more admired in West Bengal than in Bangladesh. When millions of cross-cutting cultural, economic

"No! There is no such thing as a sense of South Asian community!"

Shekhar Gupta, editor, New Delhi

"Do I feel South Asian? Do I feel Nepali? Where have we been able to develop a Nepali community or a Bangladeshi community, let alone a South Asian one?"

Rishikesh Shah, scholar-diplomat, Kathmandu

"You have to find a better basis than the assumed Indian civilisational link on which to anchor a South Asian community."

Tapan Bose, filmmaker and human rights activist, Kathmandu

"South Asianness doesn't exist, we only wish it were there."

Rochi Ram, lawyer, Karachi

"It is difficult for countries which do not see themselves as successful to come together and establish something of value."

Dinesh Mohan, educationist, New Delhi

"The regional identity is emerging at a non-official level, at the people's level. In that sense South Asianness has begun."

Chowdhury R. Abrar, educationist, Dhaka

"Once you go outside the region, you do feel a definite sense of civilisational commonality as a South Asian."

Dipak Gyawali, economist-engineer, Kathmandu

"There's no South Asian spirit because there are deep-rooted, historical antagonisms among the countries, which shapes the popular perception."

Shabdeen Malik, lawyer, Dhaka

"Culturally, we South Asians feel close, but there is a distancing politically. It's really time to have a 'civilian' SAARC."

S. Balakrishnan, development consultant, Kandy

Terminologically speaking

BACK IN 1989, when the publishers of the prestigious *Cambridge Encyclopedia* came out with a new edition for the region entitled *Cambridge Encyclopedia of India*, the cover carried in small type, "Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka", while it was only on the title page that "Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives" was included. When Rishikesh Shah, former foreign minister of Nepal, enquired of the publishers, their marketing department told him, "Nobody has heard of South Asia."

Interestingly, the term "South Asia" was a Western invention, a neutral post-colonial term popularised in the newsroom of the BBC and by journalists and academics elsewhere to replace the "Indian Subcontinent". The terminology became completely kosher once it was endorsed in the appellation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). That was in 1985, and "South Asia" was readily pressed into use by scholars and media everywhere.

However India – and more particularly New Delhi as the self-regarded inheritor of the historical legacy of the entire Subcontinent – was irritated at first by this semantic development, and at the alacrity with which everyone wanted to dump "Indian Subcontinent" and go for "South Asia".

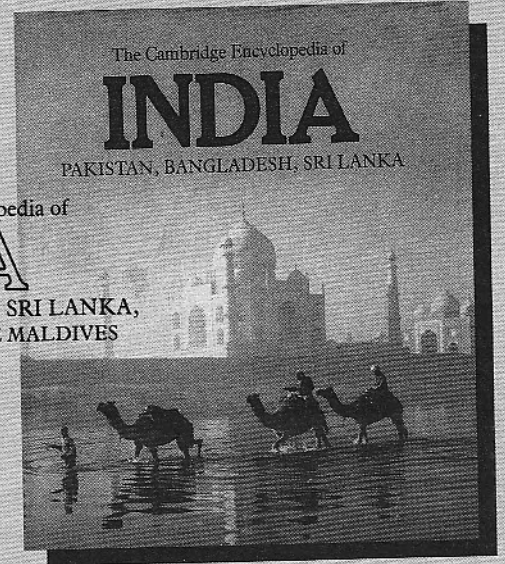
Today, while true regionalism is yet a mirage, "South Asia" has successfully achieved popular usage. Even the English press in India has succumbed to its use over the last five years. In July, significantly, Delhi's *The Asian Age* daily changed its section titled "Pakistan, Bangladesh and [in small letters] SAARC", to read, simply, "South Asia". Which was the obvious thing to do in the first place.

Whereas barely a decade ago, the *Cambridge Encyclopaedia* did not countenance "South Asia", today, library shelves abound with new works that use the term as a matter of course. A random look at the shelves will reveal titles as varied as *South Asia Vision and Perspective*; *South Asian English*; *Islamic Contribution to South Asia's Classical Music*; *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*; *States, Citizens*

and political interests get to play freely on the surface, that is when South Asia will begin to move towards a community, or a confederation, as Rajni Kothari would have it.

Non-state, non-romantic agenda

In the roadmap of the way ahead that is being contemplated by South Asian thinkers, there



The Cambridge Encyclopedia of
INDIA
 PAKISTAN, BANGLADESH, SRI LANKA,
 NEPAL, BHUTAN AND THE MALDIVES

and *Outsiders: The Uprooted Peoples of South Asia*; and *The South Asia Human Development Report*, this last the brainchild of the recently deceased Mahbub ul Haq.

Every year, a fresh crop of regional groups emerge carrying names such as the South Asian Chamber of Commerce; the South Asian Media Association; the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre; the South Asia Forum for Human Rights; the Climate Action Network of South Asia; or the South Asian Network for Food, Ecology and Culture. Numerous *Rosas* (Regional Office for South Asia) have sprouted, based mostly in Kathmandu or Colombo, opened by international agencies such as Unicef and Save the Children. Then there are quite a few South Asian organisations which do regional work without using "South Asia" in their name, such as Duryog Nivaran, a Colombo-based organisation which studies disasters, or the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, also based in Colombo.

The battle of terminology seems won, and "South Asia", the term, is here to stay. The work now involves building South Asia as a place and as a sensibility. Δ

- R.M.

is an implicit recognition of the need to anchor a collective South Asian destiny in multiple networks of non-official groups, interacting across borders to tackle common concerns of poverty, illiteracy, environment, human rights and governance. This is, to begin with, quite different from state-initiated efforts which are driven by the need to exercise trans-



regional leverage to counter the pressures of a globalising economy. SAARC fits into this need to form an economic bloc, and certainly the process has its uses, but we must recognise that bureaucratised regional frameworks privilege the national identity above a regional, ethnic, linguistic or even a feminist or environmentalist identity.

As a human rights activist who watched the recent Colombo summit from the sidelines said, "I do not believe it is the agenda of states to promote a regional identity. It is to promote their own identity. In Colombo, I saw a gathering where everyone had gone to make sure that their national positions were not compromised, whether it was on the nuclear issue or refugees."

The SAARC system, after all, brings together Indians as Indians, Bangladeshis as Bangladeshis and Nepalis as Nepalis, with each group zealously defending its own sacred turf. And it goes without saying that the geo-political dynamics of the region is defined by the central colossus that is India. It is not only that the other states are contiguous with India and linked through India, but that much of their history and culture is defined in relation to what is today's India. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the self-image of the Indian elite as the successors to Imperial British India has bred what is perceived by the neighbours a hegemonic state. For this reason alone, a South Asian peoples' future cannot be contemplated through the lens of the nation-state, which would necessarily buttress India's paramount geopolitical role.

The limitation of the state project for South Asia can be seen in an interpretation of a seemingly innocuous statement by the Indian Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath at an exclusive briefing to an association of retired Indian diplomats in New Delhi; he said that the recent Colombo summit had celebrated a "sense of fraternity" among the South Asian countries. Scholar Rajni Kothari was quick to point out that "sense of fraternity" was just another way of asserting that India had been able to estab-

lish its dominance over the partners while isolating Pakistan, which is what happened in Colombo. Indeed, to many non-Indian observers, the 1998 summit was an exercise in which India got its way with host Chandrika Kumaratunga playing handmaiden to New Delhi's determination to keep the nuclear issue and peace and security concerns out.

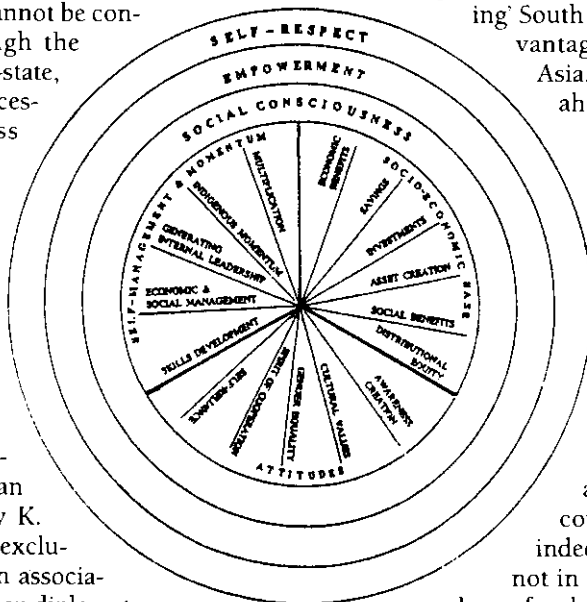
The goings-on at SAARC summits and other do's are far from the thoughts of many who are seeking to promote discussion across borders. For those who are most serious and unromantic about the need for such discussion, the challenges are very practical. For example, feminist economist Bina Aggarwal, who has done extensive work on gender and land rights in South India and Sri Lanka, has doubts about whether, at least in the women's movement, there is a living sense of a South Asian community. She may have been called upon to lecture on land rights at places like the Kathmandu University, but she believes that this was more an outgrowth of the work of various feminists' networks rather than an outreach emerging from a sense of a South Asian women's community.

Aggarwal makes a distinction between the many conscious initiatives within the women's movement to build a South Asian consciousness and the organic existence of a South Asian community, which she feels does not exist to any significant degree. In understanding this subtle distinction between 'feeling' South Asian, and 'taking advantage' of living in South Asia, perhaps, lies the path ahead.

To evolve a South Asian sense of community, one cannot be taken in by the prattle emerging from the SAARC summiteers, nor by sentimental notions of oneness, shared culture, history and mindset. The age-old ties and the cultural complementarities may indeed exist, but they are not in themselves enough to

make up for the concrete divides created by 50 years of state-building and history-making in the different countries.

It is important, extrapolating from what Aggarwal says, to discard (or at least not use) the idea of "organic" South Asian-ness and instead consciously build modern-day bridges



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Travels and tribulations

IT IS not all smooth sailing when South Asians want to meet each other across frontiers. In fact, it is getting harder, by some counts. This seems to be a period of pullback as far as intra-regional travel is concerned, no matter what the SAARC declarations say about the need for easing travel procedures. This reality was nicely captured, if indirectly, in a television footage from the Attari-Wagah border in mid-August, which showed Indian and Pakistani activists who were maintaining a candlelight vigil to mark the 51st anniversary of Independence being kept apart by the men in khaki.

These are times when every South Asian government, with the possible exception of the one in Male, is facing significant internal security threats. This has led to a fencing-in, and regional travel is among the first to be affected. Take the case of Nepal, often touted as the most convenient meeting place for South Asians for the ease with which all and sundry get a visa on demand at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport.

Over the past few months, however, Nepali immigration is suddenly creating difficulties for selected South Asian travellers, particularly those holding Sri Lankan passports, presumably at the request of India.

If even peaceful Nepal is putting up barriers, then could Bangladesh be far behind? Was it just an aberration that the Bangladesh embassy in Kathmandu in July delayed and in effect denied visas to three Nepalis and a

couple of Kathmandu-based Indians to attend a regional conference on minority rights, to have been hosted by Dhaka?

In Sri Lanka, on the eve of the SAARC summit, the Colombo Foreign Ministry is known to have sent out 'advisories' to its embassies that no visas be issued to visitors during the summit period, undermining efforts to host a parallel people's SAARC forum during the summit. Indeed, the Colombo summit could have been held on the high seas, so minimal was the involvement of South Asia's people (as opposed to governments) or media.

Within India, the heightened siege mentality has prompted moves to amend the Foreigner Registration Act. Taking a leaf out of Pakistan's statute books, punishment for infiltration could include the death penalty. Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena-backed state government of Maharashtra got itself into a frenzy and deported alleged Bangladeshi migrants from Bombay. Further, the India-Pakistan tensions following the nuclear tests have, as expected, severely curtailed cross-border travel.

Hopefully, this low point in intra-regional travel will soon be superseded with easier passage in the near future. And, over time, we could hope that all South Asian frontiers will be like the Nepal-India border — completely 'open' rather than 'porous'.

△

- R.M.



BIKAS RAJANAR

on a practical plane. What is required seems to be a conscious forging of a modern-day South Asian identity rather than rhetorically relying on a spontaneous overflow from a sense of civilisational commonality that is rooted in the collective memory of a history and culture.

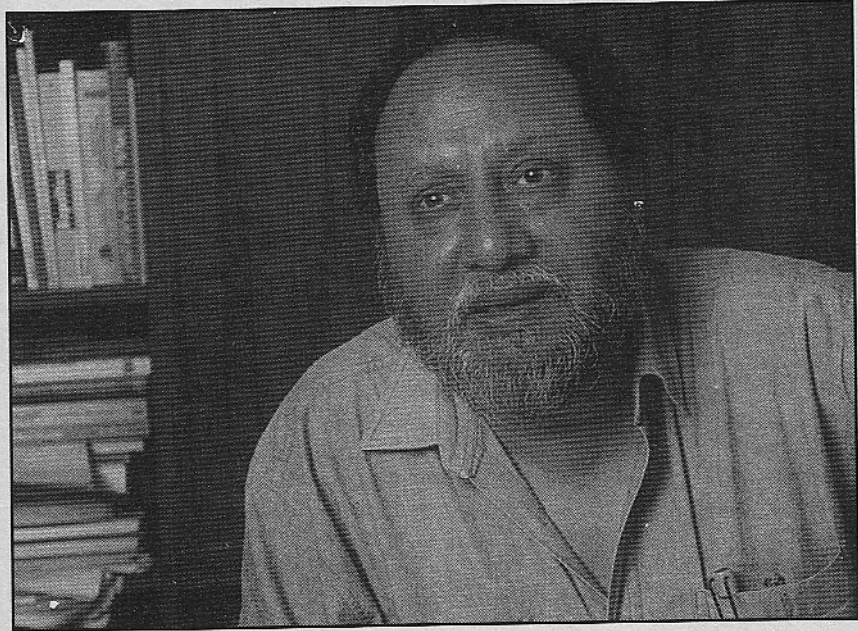
After half a century and three generations who have grown up in walled-in nation states, after all the prejudices, animosities, and snide references to each other, we have, to some extent, lost the possibilities of using the cultural route to a South Asian future, at least in the beginning. The lived memory of community has worn off and the forging of a com-

mon political destiny is a long way off. We have to begin, instead, by appealing to the professional instincts of economists, sociologists, teachers and historians. When we see how the various parts of South Asia can benefit from economic exchange, when the modern-day angst bred by communalism and political opportunism is tackled in each country, that is when a South Asian future will beckon. △

R. Manchanda is a Delhi-based print and television journalist.

The ideal frontier is the India-Nepal open border.

Ashis Nandy, psychologist, author and social commentator, who is with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, spoke to Rita Manchanda.



“Hunger is more powerful than nationalism.”

• *Is there such a thing as a South Asian civilisational community?*

There is no such thing as a South Asian ‘community’, only South Asian ‘communities’. Even the term ‘South Asian’ is defensive, a substitute for ‘Indian’. Unfortunately, the term ‘India’ has been hijacked by the Indian nation-state. I do wish the old term ‘Hindustan’ had survived. I myself use ‘South Asian’ because I do not want my non-Indian colleagues to feel I am appropriating their space. In the original sense, India’s civilisational spread is from Afghanistan to Vietnam.

• *Is there a validity in narrowing it down to a South Asian region?*

Culturally we are close to each other. It is a land mass of hundreds of interlocking communities, they are not less than 600. In the past, these communities kept a check upon each other and at the same time provided a certain vivacity and dynamism to the larger region. Today, we’ve lost that. I do not care how many nation-states are drawn up behind rigid boundaries; the nation-state is a bor-

rowed concept from 19th-century Europe.

• *Is it possible to consciously forge a South Asian community?*

We have not even been able to develop an Indian community, a Pakistani community, a Bangladeshi community! It is bogus to seek a monolithic South Asian society. What we have to have, instead, is a concept of interlocking communities constituted in a kind of confederation of cultures, to use a term used by Ali Mazrui in the African context.

• *Have we lost these interlocking communities in modern times?*

Take the Sindhi refugees who came to India at Partition. One of their great fears is the gradual decline of their culture. As their children grow up without Sindhi, picking up a standardised version of Hindi, they feel they have not only lost their property and their land but also a part of their religion. That religion, they shared with their Muslim neighbours, including some of their holy figures

and places of worship. This kind of inter-relationship has been lost: that I am not only what I am, that I can properly define myself only with reference to you. This kind of cross-reference was one of the binding cements of the Subcontinent’s civilisation, and I think that is dissolving.

• *Are we romanticising the past when we seek a consensual South Asian future?*

That’s an urban middle-class response. The fact of the matter is that the majority of the people in the region live that life. It is not in the past, I would say it is an attempt to export into the past what is next door to you, what is actually at the ground level the dominant force. When we did a survey in 1997, we found that the majority of Indians, including Hindus, opposed the demolition of the Babri Masjid. I am very proud of that.

• *Do we know each other any longer as we move into the third post-1947 generation?*



I remember an old illiterate Muslim from Jama Masjid being interviewed on television last year. Asked what was different after 50 years, he said, previously we did not eat with each other and we did not inter-marry, but there was some kind of understanding of each other. Today, he said, there was much less resistance to mixing, but more and more we live in separate worlds.

• *Have our history books reinforced prejudices?*

On the contrary, our [Indian] history books emphasise our commonalities. However, these commonalities are defined very mechanically. Our history books have been secularised, which basically means that they are hostile to all religions, as encumbrances which have survived. I am not a believer, but most do believe. There is no respect for that.

• *History in Nepal, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka has also to serve the nation-building project of reinforcing their 'otherness' vis-a-vis India.*

India is a very large country. It is natural that in their attempt to define their identity, these countries have denied cultural exchange or cultural encounter on which the vivacity and vigour of their own cultures have depended. That is disastrous. In Pakistan, even the Pakistanis know the history books are known to be atrocious. But there is also a reaction against this sort of thing. It is very difficult to sustain an anti-Hindu rhetoric when most people have not seen a Hindu for 50 years. There are hardly any Hindus left in Pakistan. In fact, there was much greater exposure to the domination of a Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Anti-Hindu rhetoric in Pakistan has been sustained by the poor relations with India, and I wonder what would happen if that relationship improved.

• *There is a heightened siege mentality in all the countries. In India, there are moves to amend the Foreigners Act to expel Bangladeshis.*

I suspect that all this is transient. While some Indians are pushing out Bangladeshis, others have very strongly taken up their cause. If they

[Bangladeshis] have come here they should be given work permits. People have crossed national boundaries for centuries, and they will not stop doing so just because you've declared a part of the land Bangladesh and another Pakistan. It will take quite a few generations to accept the notion of impenetrable boundaries. In any case, refugees will come whenever economic factors push them out. Hunger is more powerful than nationalism.

• *What are the prospects for a regional consciousness, given the mounting problems of governance all over and the growing insecurity of our ruling elites?*

The more our problems with governance, the more the institutional decay, the more there will be need to create external enemies. But there are countervailing forces: the more there are official versions of history, of what we should believe, the more the young will be sceptical. The Indian public, for example, does not trust those very people who are busy building up this 'other', the enemy. The whole political class is getting discredited in all our countries.

• *Do you see the SAARC organisation promoting a South Asian consciousness?*

No, perhaps among intellectuals, but I doubt even that. Basically, SAARC is an official initiative of governments which realise that they cannot do without each other in simple matters like trade and visas. I do wish the organisation had more promise, but much more helpful is the way ngos have started working together on theoretical and practical matters. It is commitment which has pushed them together and therefore their effort will not die easily.

You see, everywhere in South Asia there are societies which are independent, which cannot be ignored. They work within the everydayness of political change rather than seek to engineer political change from above. Among such people, there are cross-cutting interests everywhere. As the first generation South Asians die out, many of the cultivated animosities will lose out. Time takes care of a lot of problems.

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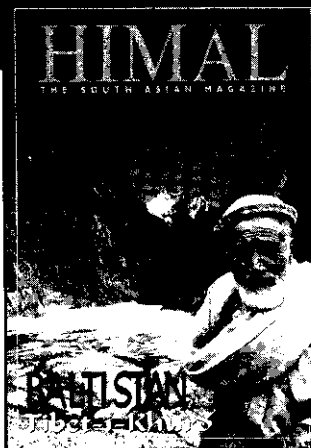
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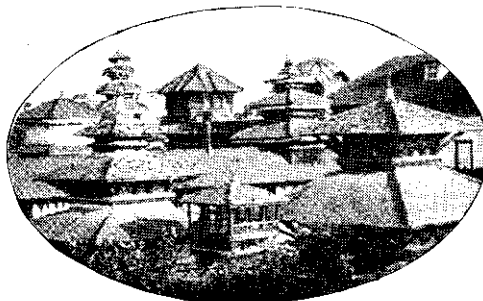
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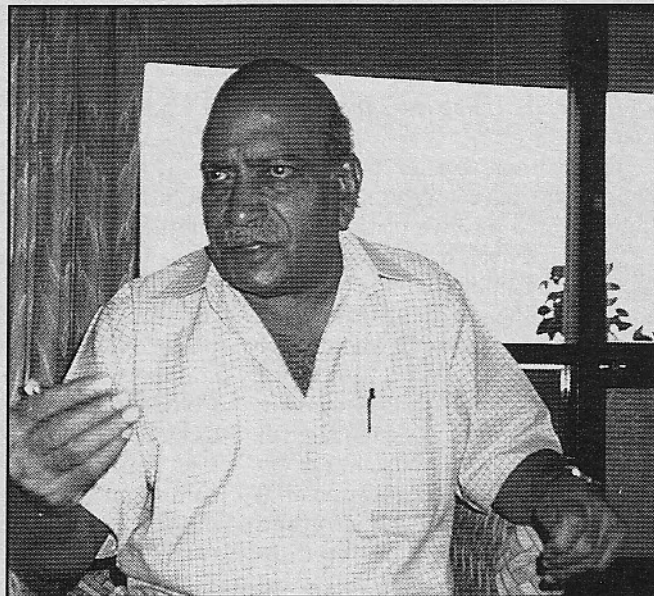
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I.A. Rehman is journalist and chair of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan as well as of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy. He was interviewed by Kanak Mani Dixit.



KANAK MANI DIXIT

“Why should school children need visas for India, Pakistan, Bangladesh?”

▲ *Who is to be blamed for the continuing distance between South Asian peoples?*

The ruling elite of South Asia, in whose interest it is to keep the people of the region apart. The elite would like to erase all history. You see, when politics was communalised, history too got communalised. Some of the seeds of confrontation were of course sown by the British themselves. To my mind, successive governments of India and Pakistan have been following the politics of the early 1930s. Instead of making a clean break from the troubled past, they want that past to be alive.

At the turn of century, India represented a unity of people with a shared history and a common purpose of ousting alien rulers. People subscribing to different religions had lived together for many centuries and a considerable cultural intermingling had taken place. Back then, to my mind, there was something like an Indian people, an Indian character, and something like an Indian hope. Unfortunately, the failure of the political leadership in the third decade

of this century led the people of India up the path of mutual hatred.

▲ *Do you see some kind of federation as the ultimate future of the South Asian countries?*

We should not jump the gun, for when we do so we alarm those in the establishment. Firstly, we have the difficult task of convincing the custodians of power that their confrontational attitude, which ignores the geographical, cultural and economic pulls within the region, actually does grave harm to their own long-term interests. The inter-state conflicts have drained our societies of so much resources. If these conflicts were resolved, the elites themselves would be more honestly and securely ensclosed in power. Today, they all rule by usurpation and imposition rather than by popular will. We should have been building schools, hospitals and industries rather than lapsing into this stupidity of testing nuclear devices.

The ruling elite of our countries have created such a cage for themselves and their societies, inventing disputes and keeping them alive, dis-

torting the history books, destroying the education system, creating refugee problems, and making it difficult for us to talk to each other or meet each other. They will start air services but for the ordinary person, railway travel is ever-more difficult. Postcards will not reach their destinations in India or Pakistan, but the rich can always pick up the phone and dial Karachi or Bombay. A poor family in Karachi has to travel a thousand miles overland to get an Indian visa, but the Karachi rich have no problem in flying to New Delhi to buy *dahej* [dowry] for their daughter's wedding. SAARC promises no visa requirement if you are an MP or a judge of the high court, but they come from the very category of people responsible for creating the confrontation amongst us!

▲ *So who would you ease the visa requirements for?*

For school children! Why should they need visas to go on tours from Pakistan to India, from India to Bangladesh? The only fear of the establishment is that the children will discover that the hatred incul-

cated by the history books has no basis in fact.

▲ *Who are the ruling elites that you refer to?*

Firstly, there are the politicians. Those who have forgotten how to compete on a positive platform and, for sheer survival, have to create hot spots and flashpoints where there are none. Then there is the civil and military bureaucracy, among whom there is also a vested interest in defence spending. As far as businessmen are concerned, many have surrendered to state patronage. In Pakistan, for example, there is no genuine industrial bourgeoisie, and all industry and trade have developed and been diverted elsewhere on the premise that Pakistan and India will never be friends. Normal trade and economic relations, therefore, are not in the interest of such vested business interests. The system of patronage would change.

▲ *Who are the other culprits?*

Academia is part of the problem, for the direct and indirect control by government has brought most scholarship to heel. Academics do not feel free to express themselves, and there are some countries where the law prohibits university professors from expressing opinions on matters of the day. As far as the press is concerned, it is also part of the problem when the newspapers only publish what is bad about the neighbouring country.

▲ *Are there not some good trends in the media?*

Yes, satellite television, for all its problems, is helping in demolishing some of the mutual myths. This is help from an unexpected quarter, for the electronic media is helping Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis understand their neighbours. I would only hope that these channels will soon be available to enterprising people who can uplink truly South Asian programmes. This would also help do away with some of the vulgarity that we see at the moment. Meanwhile, I have heard that a Punjabi channel is to be launched, which is sure to bring the population on the two sides of the India-Pakistan

border a little closer. This will have a good impact on all of South Asia.

▲ *Where did we take the wrong turn in the Subcontinent?*

In the decade of the 1950s, the countries of South Asia were still finding their way into the future. It was in the 1960s that the opportunity was missed. A fundamental mistake was made in attaching ourselves to distant power blocs instead of discovering commonalities nearer to home. The Cold War and the power game made us more and more dependent on overseas patrons, and our freedom was compromised.

The 1960s therefore was the period of definitive break. You see, when problems arise among societies, the sooner they are resolved the better. With the passage of time, they become more and more chronic. Between India and Pakistan, whenever we had some agreements, such as the Nehru-Ayub agreement, or the Nehru-Liaquat agreement, or the Shimla agreement, we did not sincerely follow them up. Even when the two governments were negotiating settlement, they were telling their own peoples, "No, no settlement."

▲ *How will you undo the five decades of extreme nationalist education?*

That is a tragedy and a challenge. We have been living in enclosed wells, unable to look at each other in the eye. We have been so status-quo oriented, we cannot look beyond our noses.

The younger generation does not have any experience other than that of being Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani. We can begin to reverse this trend, firstly, by writing a common history of South Asia. This history would expunge all the bate material inserted by vested interests. We should open places for South Asian students in each other's colleges and universities. A South Asian Open University is needed.

Non-politicised professionals should meet. Pakistani farmers in the Punjab want to know why their kin across the border have done so well. When there is waterlogging and salinity, why should advisers come from overseas rather than from Rajasthan?

They want hotlines to London and Washington DC, whereas we need hotlines between Lahore and Bombay to treat cancer patients effectively.

▲ *Those seeking regional rapprochement are accused of being romantics.*

I do not think we are romantics. For example, in the India-Pakistan people-to-people dialogues we do not only embrace and shake hands, we also discuss nuclear war, Kashmir, disarmament, communalism, sectarianism and good governance. It is not being romantic to work towards democratic governance and rule of law.

I have had personal experience of sitting with people in the power structure – politicians, bureaucrats, retired military officers – and talking of South Asia, India and Pakistan. They, too, have come to realise that the headlines they make are transient, whereas a people-to-people dialogue is all about building the future. In our work, we have come to realise that those in the power structure are actually helpless, prisoners of their own creation. So the people have the responsibility of taking the politicians off the hook. We have to prepare the ground so that the prime ministers of India and Pakistan will not be afraid that if they make peace they will be thrown out of office.

▲ *What are your own plans in the days ahead?*

More than anything else, we should work to increase each country's stake in the other's economic and political stability. We have been foolish enough to believe that if India gets weaker, Pakistan gains. This is a fallacy, for it is absolutely in the interest of Pakistan to have a representative, secular, democratic and stable India. It is also necessary for India to have a stable, secular, democratic Pakistan. We should hardly be waiting for our neighbours to collapse and die.

We are bent on creating a public lobbying force to get over the initial hurdle of elite interest which is holding our long-term interests hostage. Creating this public opinion is not as difficult as some think, for the desire to communicate is there very close to



the surface. We have seen that whenever the state lowers its guard, the people immediately respond. When you open up the possibilities, the public responds immediately and overwhelmingly.

Of course there are roadblocks created by the state machinery and the media which is dependent on the establishment's favours. In India and Pakistan, the papers have become political ideologues, promoting certain political interests and the material interests of publishers and editors. And so they find it easy to distort and caricature the people-to-people initiatives.

▲ *Is it true that India does not need a*

South Asian community as much as its neighbours?

Of course India needs its neighbours. The combined weight of South Asia is such that an ascendant South Asia will make an impact worldwide. And because each country will benefit according to its size and weight, Indian stands to gain immensely. Also, when all the neighbours benefit, imagine the economic fallout for India's states and regions which are adjacent to these countries!

That India is too big is a fallacy which is going to cost it, for it immediately creates a sense that a big country must spend on a large defence force, it must have so many nuclear weapons of such size,

and so on. Who will this logic hurt but the people of India.

▲ *Is there a difference between SAARC's view of South Asia and the so-called people's view?*

SAARC is still an organisation of reluctant members. It has not been able to do even what it has set out to do. They may sign formal agreements and make promises on agriculture or on the girl child, but they do not have the mechanism to implement. SAARC is not a functioning organisation, as a cooperative clearing house or promoter of understanding. It is there, it should continue, but much more is required by South Asia.



Position Announcement

Head, Mountain Natural Resources' Division

VAC 98/5

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) was established in 1983 to promote an environmentally sound mountain ecosystem and to improve the living standards of the mountain populations of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas (HKH). This autonomous Centre focuses on the specific, complex, and practical problems of the HKH, covering all or parts of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan. The Centre, with an annual budget of \$ 5 million, is answerable to an international Board of Governors. The Centre has a staff of about 130, including 25 senior internationally recruited professionals, at its headquarters in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Tasks

The Division Head is expected to perform the following tasks.

- Manage the overall divisional research, training, information dissemination, and networking activities
- Interact and collaborate with national and international organizations having all or parts of their mandates in mountain development
- Work closely with the Directorate and other Divisions of the Centre in the overall planning, management, and development of ICIMOD as a fully integrated mountain development centre
- Act as a focal point for integration of key aspects of natural resource management in the HKH

Qualifications

- A post-graduate academic degree or equivalent in forestry, soil sciences, or other fields of natural resource management.
- At least 15 years' experience in natural resource management or research, of which part should have been gained in the HKH/Qinghai Tibetan Plateau
- Experience in managing multidisciplinary teams, particularly in association with international/regional agencies, is desirable
- Capacity for intellectual leadership and skill in working with colleagues of different national and cultural backgrounds
- Excellent knowledge of English
- Well versed in word processing and other aspects of modern information technology, and this should preferably include GIS and Remote Sensing

Salary and benefits are competitive with comparable UN positions. The candidate should preferably be aged between 45 to 55 years. It is anticipated that the successful candidate will assume the position in January 1999. Applications, together with the phone/fax numbers or e-mail addresses of three referees, should reach the following address by 1 November 1998. Additional information concerning the position will be made available on request.

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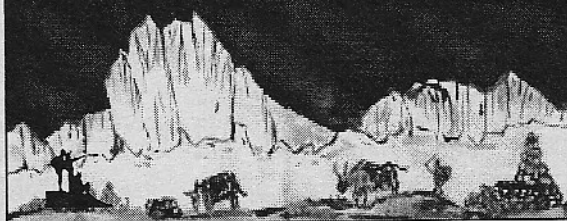


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Extremely Irritated in Colombo

by Sasanka Perera

Already, three or four days before the SAARC Summit on 29-31 July, Colombo residents were experiencing grave disruption in their lives as the traffic police went about practising the fine art of blocking roads and diverting traffic. It got worse once South Asia's collection of sorry excuses for democrats and leaders actually landed at Katunayake Airport.

We would probably have somehow survived this phase of conferencing and media frenzy better had the 84,000 deities of the Sinhala pantheon been in a good mood. But the offerings of fretful Buddhist commuters did nothing to assuage these deities and the streets of Colombo reeled from the devastating impact.

One of the things that was going on in the minds of the thousands who were stuck for hours by road closures near and far from the conference venue of Bauddhaloka Mawata was, why on earth did we bring this upon ourselves? After all, this summit was to have been held in Nepal, and this traffic horror would have been Kathmandu's problem. Alternatively, the Nepalis could have airlifted this bunch of politicians to some mountain resort in a remote corner of the Himalaya. There, they could have been made to eat momos.

But no, that was not to be. The Sri Lankan government actually asked for special consideration to be able to hold the conference out of turn in Colombo in order to show off in the 50th year of Independence. I suppose the Nepalis happily agreed so that they could keep their own hills unpolluted by the pres-

ence of South Asian nuclear thugs and their apologists. Or, more likely, since the Nepali government is not known for its own principled positions on anything that is worth having a principle about, they perhaps agreed simply to avoid the nuisance.

On the other hand, perhaps it was a good idea to have the summit in Colombo to mark the nation's 50 years of Independence. For one thing, the siege conditions under which the conference was held, restricting the ability of citizens to move around freely, closure of major highways or parts of them, *ad hoc* holidays declared for some individuals because they could not come

to work, were all indicative of Sri Lanka's failure as a nation-state, a country at war with herself, where chaos has become routinised.

But forget the commuters for a moment. What about the conference itself? Were any major decisions made? Will we be able to travel across the region without visas within the coming year, can we carry out regional trade without encountering unfriendly taxation? Did we convince the nuclear thugs to throw away their dangerous toys? If there was any real advance, it has been a well-kept secret.

In the final session, however, I do remember the Maldivian president saying that the food and hospitality were excellent. Personally, as a Sri Lankan nationalist, I am relieved. At least now we know, and the rest of the world knows, that we are good cooks, and are also capable of making beds for people to sleep comfortably on.

Other than being adequate cooks and bed-



Announcing Film South Asia '99

Himal announces the second edition of Film South Asia, the biennial festival of South Asian documentaries. Film South Asia '99, to be held in Kathmandu in September 1999, follows Film South Asia '97, the first-ever event of its kind which Himal organised in October 1997.

A total of 55 films from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were screened during Film South Asia '97. Some 50 film-makers, film activists and journalists from South Asia attended the four-day festival giving the event a truly Subcontinental flavour. A rough categorisation of the 55 films showed the following: 20 were social commentaries, 9 about personalities, 9 on environmental subjects, 1 historical, 10 ethnographic portrayals and 6 in other categories.

Film South Asia '99 will showcase quality documentaries of the Subcontinent and Subcontinental sensibilities on any subject under the sun. The festival will have both competitive and non-competitive section and the films to be screened at the festival will be chosen from the entries by the festival selection committee. Three outstanding films from the festival will be awarded citations and cash prizes by a three-member jury.

A selection of 15 films from Film South Asia '99 will go around South Asia and other parts of the world as part of Travelling Film South Asia '99 just as one from Film South Asia '97 did (*see below*).

Entry forms will be available from end-September 1998. Look out for more information on Film South Asia '99 in these pages.

TRAVELLING FILM SOUTH ASIA REPORT

After the overwhelming success of Film South Asia '97, the first-ever festival of South Asian documentaries, in Kathmandu in late October 1997, Himal decided to take a selection from the 55 films shown at FSA'97 around South Asia and the world. Fifteen documentaries were chosen with the help of the festival's three-member jury to reflect the quality, thematic variety, and geographic range of documentary-making in the Subcontinent.

For the convenience of local organisers everywhere the films were shown in VHS tapes.

The objective of Travelling Film South Asia (TFSA) was to give film-makers, enthusiasts, scholars, students and the general audience an opportunity to view the latest and finest films from the Subcontinent. TFSA was an excellent opportunity to tell South Asian audiences of the concerns of serious filmmakers from their neighbourhood. Outside South Asia, Himal hoped to create an awareness and a dialogue about South Asian concerns.

TFSA's worldwide journey was made possible by the support and interest of individuals and institutions all over South Asia and overseas. Their voluntary efforts in arranging venues, accessing equipment, finding sponsors, publicising and hosting the event, were well rewarded, we believe, in terms of audience participation all over.

Everywhere the festival went, there was something unique in the event. In Pakistan, this was the first time since the 1960s that India-made films were publicly screened. The crowd that came to see the Bangladeshi *Mukhtir Gaan* in Lahore was matched by the Calcutta audience attending the screening of *Mr. Jinnah: The Making of Pakistan*. All over, the film screenings led to discussions of issues covered, from the loss of traditional culture to re-evaluation of history, and from sexual identity to macho-communalism.

TFSA has proved conclusively that there is a worldwide audience for quality documentary films on South Asia. It also proved that there is an audience all over the Subcontinent for documentaries. The only thing lacking, by and large, is the venue.

The next edition of the biennial festival of South Asian documentaries, Film South Asia '99, will be held in Kathmandu in September 1999.

The following is the complete itinerary of TFSA with names of organisers, sponsors and supporters:

Venue	Date	Organiser	Supporter/Sponsor
New Delhi	6-8 Feb 1998	Himal	India Habitat Centre
Dhaka	12-14 Feb 1998	Chalachitram Film Society	Goethe Institut
Princeton University	5-7 Mar 1998	Naila Sattar, South Asia Students' International Centre	Woodrow Wilson School, Department of History, Department of Politics, Department of Women's Studies
University of California at Berkeley	10 Mar-5 May 1998	Raba Gunashekhar	Centre for South Asian Studies Graduate School of Journalism
Harvard University	11-13 Mar 1998	Manisha Aryal William Fisher	Department of Indian and Sanskrit Studies, Department of Anthropology, The Asia Centre
University of Pennsylvania	16-18 Mar 1998	Robert Nichols, David Ludden	Department of South Asia Regional Studies
Colorado State University	19-21 Mar 1998	John Riley	Asian Studies Programme, College of Liberal Arts, Centre for Applied Studies American Ethnicity, Office of International Education
Lahore	21-25 Mar 1998	Farjad Nabi Beena Sarwar	The News International, The American Centre
University of Alabama at Birmingham	26-28 Mar 1998	Stephen Mikesell	Department of Anthropology, Centre for International Programmes
University of Hawaii	29-31 Mar 1998	Gregory Maskarinec Mary Chin	Centre for South Asian Studies, School of Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Studies
University of Chicago	2-4 Apr 1998	Gregory Price Grieve	Centre of South Asian Studies, International House Film Society, South Asian Outreach Educational Project
Cornell University	6-10 Apr 1998	Prasanna Dhungel, Eknath Belbase	Department of English
Wheaton College	6-8 Apr 1998	Bruce Owens	Department of Anthropology and Sociology
Karachi	16-21 Apr 1998	Tamasghar Media Network	The News, USIS
Calcutta	20-22 Apr 1998	S.V. Raman	Max Mueller Bhawan, Goethe-Institut
Jamshedpur	23-25 Apr 1998	Amitav Ghosh	Celluloid Chapter
Islamabad	14-16 May 1998	Peter Claes	Asian Study Group, Islamabad The Human Development Centre, The Allama Iqbal Open University Television Trust for Environment, The British Council
Colombo	26-30 May 1998	Nalaka Gunawardane	
Pondicherry	5-7 June 1998	Prashant Sharma, Dr Palani	Aurofilm
Auroville	8-10 June 1998	Gerard Carabin, Surya Rimaux	Indian Institute of Science Film Society
Bangalore	12-14 June 1998	Sumit Basu, Nupur Basu	International Institute of Asian Studies
Leiden	25-28 June 1998	Erik de Maaker, Bert van den Hoek Balgopal Shrestha	



keepers of South Asia, Sri Lanka achieved very little out of the SAARC jamboree; neither the average person, nor certainly the government. On the other hand, Indian journalists and officials who descended upon Colombo swarmed the duty free shops in the airport looking for electronic items and booze. The duty-free merchants were pleased as punch: no rupees please, and to hell with SAARC!

Now to discuss for a moment the all-important summit itself. As we all know one of the handicaps of SAARC is that bilateral issues cannot be discussed; issues to be discussed must be important to all countries in the region, i.e. of "multilateral significance". That was the reason why the Indo-Pakistan nuclear thuggery was not discussed at the conference. It was bilateral. For instance, if some nut in the Indian or Pakistani nuclear establishment pressed the red button because he had had visions or a bad day, the mushroom cloud and the radiation poisoning would be a strictly bilateral affair. This is because in South Asia, unlike elsewhere, radiation poisoning strictly recognises state boundaries.

It was because bilateral issues cannot be discussed in SAARC that, as the host and the new chairman of the organisation, the Sri Lankan president suddenly became an apologist for the Indo-Pakistan nuclear rivalry.

There is only one way to bring the nuclear question into SAARC, and that is by getting every country which does not yet have the bomb to make one, so that we could finally notch this multilateral proliferation into the summit agenda. So, Colombo must now invent its own Buddhist bomb to match the capabilities of the Hindu and Muslim bombs of New Delhi and Islamabad. Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives too would have to build their own little atomic toys.

To be so close to the SAARC summit was a humiliating experience because, because one got to view at close quarters the dubious intellectual capabilities, skills and political positions of the individuals in whom the destiny of South Asia has been vested. And all this has been done using vestiges of democratic practices, such as elections. Purely on matters of aesthetics and finesse, the Indian prime minister was a scary sight. In the opening session, he made a rather unimpressive speech, reading haltingly from crumpled papers. Is this the leader of a country which touts itself as a regional (and now 'nuclear') superpower? Everyone clapped politely, except a Sri Lankan parliamentarian who was sound asleep in the audience.

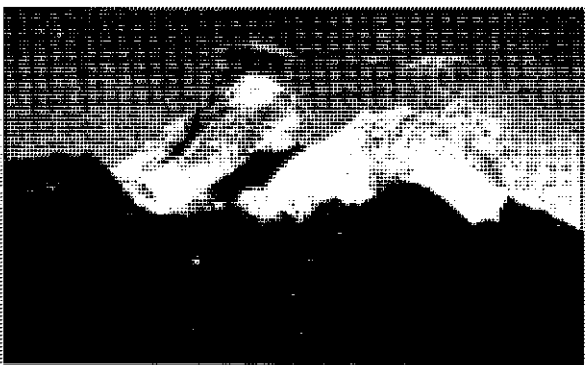
The parliamentarian was indicating his boredom with the exercise of annual or biannual summit meetings of an organisation which has its head buried firmly in the sand. Here was a regional organisation, the parliamentarian was saying if you read his snoring correctly, which has no credibility because it does not look at the most serious and contentious issues of South Asia.

Just as SAARC is nowhere in the picture when it comes to the Indo-Pakistan nuclear rivalry, it was inactive when India trained Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents to fight the Sri Lankan government, or when Pakistani intelligence trained Kashmiri rebels to fight the Indian forces.

Good at little else, SAARC at least excels in one thing, the creation of roadblocks and traffic jams. Fortunately, Colombo has already suffered this privilege and it is Kathmandu's turn next!

S. Perera teaches sociology at the University of Colombo.

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Hiroshima mon amour

BEENA SARWAR



Contributing editor Beena Sarwar comes back from Hiroshima with a stronger anti-nuclear resolve.

HIROSHIMA, 5 AUGUST 1998: the day before the 53rd anniversary of the world's first atomic bombing, which levelled the city and killed thousands of innocent men, women and children. Walking from the 15-storey high Sun Route Hotel across from the city's powerful Peace Museum near the hypocentre marked by the famous A-bomb Dome, one crosses the river. The water is low, exposing the sandy bank below. A crane stands serenely on one leg near the water's edge. Above, at road level, is a memorial to a school that was flattened on 6 August 1945.

The monument features women in relief on a huge stone slab, and is flanked by an iron pillar that proclaims in Japanese and English, "Let peace prevail on earth". Standing sentinel atop another pillar, is the image of a folded paper crane, outlined in iron.

In Japanese tradition, cranes signify peace, happiness, long life – a symbol that has come to mean "no more nukes". It is said that anyone who folds a thousand paper cranes will get cured – even of cancer. Today, garlands of paper cranes are vis-

ible everywhere in the city along with flower bouquets, banners, and placards. One can sense a momentum and urgency in the crowds come to commemorate Hiroshima Day, but there is only frenzy, no anger. Just intense determination of thousands to remember the past and make the future nuclear-free.

I'm running late for the discussion I'm to attend, on the Indian and Pakistan nuclear tests, part of the programme that comprises the 1998 World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, organised by Gensuikyo (the Japan Council against A&H Bombs, which has strong links to the Japan Communist Party and a highly political agenda). So I carry on, and make my way along the river bank to the venue of the discussion. I love this walk on the mud track along the river, shaded from the intense sunlight by a canopy of leafy trees, the orchestral, insistent hum of cicadas blocking out all other noise in this shady tunnel.

Hard to imagine the scene 53 years ago, when nothing was left alive in this area, the river gorged with dead bodies; people jumping in to escape

their agony, their skin peeling off like rags exposing blood-dripping flesh, eyeballs and inner organs torn out, eardrums perforated from the supersonic shock wave emitted by the explosion, the intense heat (3000-4000 degrees Celsius at ground zero) of the fireball, the 440 m per second winds (the fastest tornado is 70 m per second) flinging aside buildings, animals, human beings. Men, women, toddlers, children, pregnant women, old people – bloated, bleeding, many no longer bearing any resemblance to human beings.

No wonder that those who survived, the *hibakusha* (literally, "witness-survivor of the A-bomb"), are so fiercely anti-nuclear. Many, initially fired by hatred and the desire for revenge, have since channelled their anger into the peace movement centred around the idea that no one should have to suffer the way they or their loved ones did, and still do.

The insistent hum of the cicadas fades as I emerge from the canopy of trees to cross the road, and go through a neat concrete jungle of shops and apartments to enter the air-conditioned hotel where the meeting is going on.

The presence of Pakistanis and Indians has meant a lot to the Japanese participants in this conference, which has been an annual event since 1955. Although Indians have been participating every year, this year they are here in force, some 20 of them, mostly from left-wing trade unions. This is the first time in 20 years that Pakistanis have attended (there are three of us); the Bangladesh delegates did not arrive, Nepal was represented by a lone participant, and Sri Lanka by three Buddhist priests and a student leader.

"We thought everyone in India and Pakistan was for the tests, but it is encouraging to learn that there are anti-nuclear movements in your countries," was the common refrain. How does an anti-nuclear person already saturated in anti-nuclear mate-

rial convey what it means to be in Hiroshima on these days? The experience only reinforces the beliefs already held, first and foremost that there is no sanity in planning a future in the Subcontinent with nuclear weapons.

"We shall overcome," said former Indian Navy chief Admiral L. Ramdas, in one of his emails, some time before we met for the first time, over

breakfast in Hiroshima. We are on the 15th floor of our hotel, overlooking the A-Bomb Dome and the Peace Park. Something symbolic about all this – a retired Indian naval officer and a Pakistani journalist, meeting not to justify their countries' policies but to reaffirm a working relationship against the nuclear psyche. He is right. We shall, we must, overcome.

Exit editor

WHAT DOES A conscientious editor do when s/he no longer exercises control over editorial decisions? S/he calls it quits, of course. And so Matiur Rahman did on 15 July. The veteran journalist and editor of Bangladesh's widely-read *Bhorer Kagoj* Bangla daily, which played a critical role in the run up to the last general elections, joined the exalted ranks of those editors who had walked out of the newsroom instead of succumbing to pressure from the publishers.

Trouble for Rahman began once his publisher, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, was sworn into the Sheikh Hasina cabinet as a deputy minister last December. Other members of the *Bhorer Kagoj* staff had been perturbed about whether their newspaper would be able to function independently in the new scheme of things. By the first half of this year, they found out that their fears were not totally unfounded. The government began to make known its displeasure at many of the news items *Bhorer Kagoj* was carrying.

It did not help much that the daily was on a collision path with Bangladesh's most powerful business unit, Beximco. The enmity was earned when *Bhorer Kagoj* showed Beximco in a none too favourable light regarding its role in the 1996 Dhaka stock market crash. Over the last two years, the paper had reported extensively on manipulation of the stock market and about loan defaults, involving some of the most powerful business organisations of the country.

Things snowballed recently when *Bhorer Kagoj* carried an investigative report on the Sonali Bank in London becoming the sole guarantor of a million dollar loan to Shainpukur Ltd, a Beximco subsidiary. After the report was published, the Bangladesh Bank intervened and annulled the agreement. But those affected by the investigation were not ones to sit tight; it is alleged that they conveyed their displeasure to senior government officials. The officials themselves had reasons to be miffed with Rahman's paper as they had been its target for failing to prosecute loan defaulters despite sufficient evidence.

Their wrath was only compounded by *Bhorer Kagoj*'s recent coverage of the "Long March", taken out by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party to protest the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace treaty. The report said that activists of the ruling Awami League had disrupted the protest by placing cars and trucks at strategic locations to block the march.

Publisher Chowdhury now had to face the ire of the highest echelons of the Awami League government, as disclosed by a senior *Bhorer Kagoj* staff member. A government official is said to have told the publisher, "You know who the troublemakers are. You

can remove them." Rahman was asked to discontinue running the writings of five columnists known to be especially critical of government. It was only a matter of time before Rahman handed in his resignation.

What is unfortunate about this turn of events is that *Bhorer Kagoj*, in its six years in the market, had built a reputation as an objective, professionally run newspaper. In a country where almost all newspapers have a strong partisan affiliation, it had stood out by giving free vent to opposing ideologies and viewpoints. Its op-ed pages have seen writers of all hues enjoying their share of the space, while the editorial cartoons have made a unique contribution to Bangladeshi journalism.

Perhaps Rahman's most important contribution was in setting up an international network of exiled Bangladeshi writers. *Bhorer Kagoj* has been regularly printing Taslima Nasrin's travel writings, while another exile of religious fundamentalism, Daud Haider, has been frequently contributing from Germany. And none of this was token liberalism – *Bhorer Kagoj* was the first Dhaka paper to publish petitions and appeals

on behalf of jailed writers, persecuted intellectuals or minority communities, and under Rahman it stood firmly for secular principles in a country where many in the es-

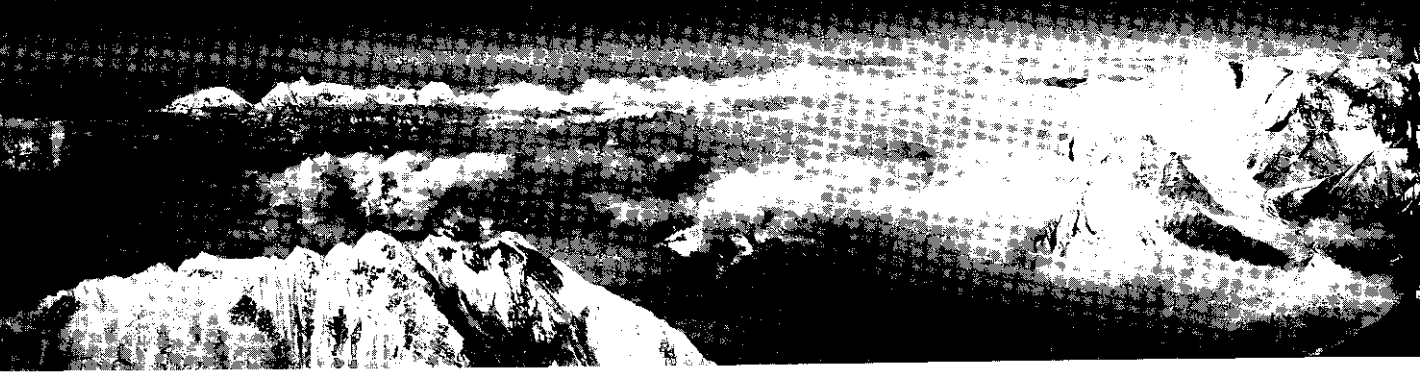
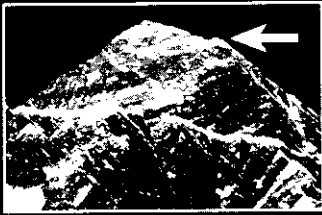
tablishment are under the thrall of conservative Islam.

When Matiur Rahman officially gave up office on 15 August, what he told *The Daily Star* by way of explanation is the stuff of journalism manifestos. The one-time Communist Party member said, "I believe in an independent media and in the independent role of the editor. This has been my cardinal principle in journalism. Partisan politics and independent journalism cannot function together."

- based on a report by Naeem Mohaiemen



PH: HAN UDIN/DBK



Basic instinct: An American

WHAT AMERICA WANTS, America gets. It may not come on a platter or in a hurry, but the necessary spadework is done to attain the ultimate end.

Now, however much they may play it down, America wants a military base in Bangladesh. So, how do they go about it, since there are any number of people in any country, perhaps more so in the Subcontinent, who will cry themselves hoarse about "national interest and sovereignty" at the slightest provocation?

America's diplomats set to work by seeking out the targeted country's Achilles' heel, and having once located it, proffer to heal it. In the case of Bangladesh, the weak point is the natural calamities that have been regularly visiting the country since before it was born. Hence was conceived in 1991 the wonderfully cryptical Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), with a Mother Teresa-esque code name, "Operation Sea Angel".

Under this interim contract, the American military helped Bangladesh tide over the ravages of the 1991 cyclone which had killed around 139,000 people. Then came the inevitable teaser: now that SOFA had worked so well, would Bangladesh mind making it permanent? But the

government in Dhaka was not willing to jump; signing a permanent deal, it said, would be against the "national interest". Of that first round that ended in a stalemate, the American Defence Attache for Bangladesh said, "We regret that our effort to conclude SOFA was not successful, because we thought it could best serve the interests of the US and Bangladesh."

Bangladesh's interest, we can understand – some helicopters to evacuate stranded delta-dwellers, for example. But what 'American interest' could there be?

American diplomacy is made of sterner stuff, however. It is not one to turn away at the first slight. They kept at it, and fully

seven years later, in early August 1998, a new improved military deal to combat natural disasters was struck. This one is worth five years, and called the Humanitarian Assistance Needs Assessment (HANA).

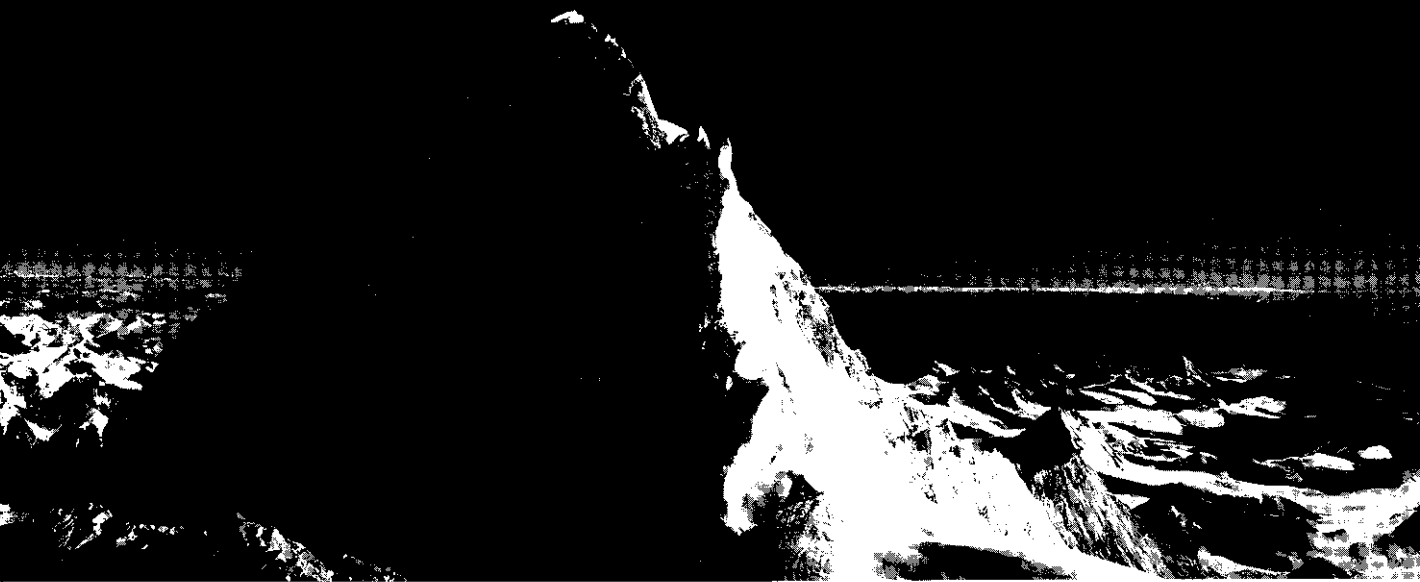
Newspapers quoted the visiting head of the US military team as saying that HANA is part of the US military's increased humanitarian activities in the post-Cold War phase. "We want to provide focussed attention to Bangladesh's humanitarian needs... We are trying to identify the tools and equipment to mitigate disasters," said the officer.

But then matters took on a turn of their own. The mass-circulation newspaper *Jankantha* reported For-



Boats tethered to houses during the recent floods.

ABIR ABULLAH/CRK



story

eign Minister Abdus Samad Azad as saying that he knew nothing about the deal announced by the US embassy. "I was not here and will tell you later about it," said the minister.

The State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Abul Hasan Chowdhury, told the press that there had been no MOU on HANA and that he had only authorised a visit by US defence officials. Over at the American embassy, the Defence Attache however was upbeat, telling the *Daily Star* reporter that eight training programmes have been planned for the coming months, "of which three have already been approved by the highest authorities of the Bangladesh government".

Bangladesh left-wing groups pounced on this opportunity to take a stand. And so they have been quick with their protest-speak, accusing the government of sellout and claiming, as one student's group did, that the agreement was a "far-reaching plan to set up a US military base in Bangladesh".

The American embassy in Dhaka has kept mum since. Over across the border in India, the media and defence analysts suddenly became very attentive to Bangladesh affairs. Meanwhile, the country experienced its worst flood in decades.

*The image of Mount Everest in the public mind is mostly the faraway view, taken from the north or the south. This unique 'close up' of the summit pyramid is taken from the South Summit (8751 m, see inset), which climbers pass on their way to the top via the standard southern 'yak route' to the top. This picture was taken by Australian climber **Roddy Mackenzie** with a wide angle lens which takes in, besides the summit pyramid, the Tibetan plateau to the north as well as the peaks that march 200 km westwards on both sides of the Nepal-Tibet/China border.*

Pipe dream

YOU HAVE TO hand it to Centgas of Unocal Inc, the American gas company. Even as the civil war in Afghanistan between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance seemed certain to drag on for some time to come, Centgas executives had been laying plans to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via the war-ridden country. Knowing what that takes, the consortium had embarked on negotiations with all the concerned parties, and that included the two warring groups.

Till even late July, it was thought that something real was on hand, the mood was gung-ho, and a deal was likely to be clinched. Centgas had arranged for a green signal for their project from any Afghan ruling combination – Taliban or not. But for all that organisation, they hadn't reckoned on the forces of anti-Americanism.

Thus, when the bomb blasts shook the US embassies in Dar es Salam and Nairobi, and the retaliatory cruise missiles winged their way over sea and desert in search of Osama bin Laden, the casualties included the doggedly pursued plans of Centgas. For the foreseeable future, and possibly until as long as the Taliban control Afghanistan, the multinational now stands little chance of getting the pipeline through Afghanistan.

For all the daring it represented, the consortium's original plan merits a second look: a nearly 1500 km-long pipeline, carrying 2 billion cubic feet gas every day, running from Turkmenistan through Herat in Afghanistan, to Quetta, finally reaching Multan in southern Punjab; all at a cost of USD 1.9 billion. The project was thought to be particularly important for Pakistan, whose own gas reserves in Balochistan are due to run out in a few years.

As they say, the best laid schemes of multinationals and men oft go awry!

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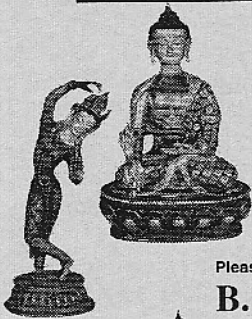
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A failed mountain book

There is no evidence that indicates mountains are unfairly disadvantaged when compared to adjacent plains.

by Nigel J.R. Allan

During this century, Switzerland has managed to develop that honourable mountain occupation, smuggling, into a profitable international enterprise better described today as clandestine banking. Consequently, they have abundant money to spend on topics of their choice.

And so we have here the Swiss-financed promised follow-up volume to *Agenda 21*, the 1992 Rio "Earth Summit" conference document on environment and development. *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority*, edited by Bruno Messerli and Jack D. Ives (Parthenon, London and New York, 1997), was published in time for the United Nations General Assembly's "Rio+5" exercise in June 1997 in New York City. There was an earlier companion volume to this book, *The State of the World's Mountains*, edited by Peter Stone, also bankrolled by the Swiss, and produced for the 1992 Rio Summit (and reviewed in this magazine, July/August 1992, pp 45-46).

The move towards the Rio conference had its origins in former West

German chancellor Willy Brandt's "North-South Report", which expressed the hope that economic growth would be based on policies that would sustain the environment as well as expand the resource base. In 1983, the UN General Assembly had called for a global agenda for change using this framework, later revealed in the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future*.

It was at this juncture that the now-hackneyed term 'sustainable development' became popular. Chapter 13 of the *Agenda 21* report, masterminded by scientists Bruno Messerli and Jack D. Ives, was entitled "Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development". The blueprint for implementing ideas in that chapter is now contained in this volume under review. It is unclear, however, whether this publication is an entirely academic enterprise with a firm commitment to enhancing the welfare of mountain habitats and societies, or if it is an effort on the part of the editors to promote

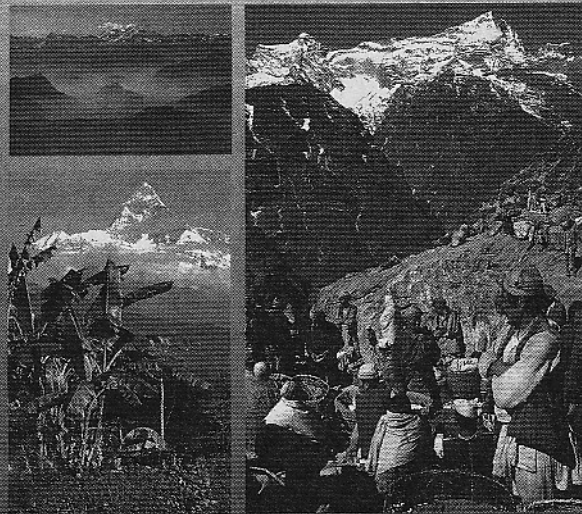
their own agenda.

The Swiss, and Messerli is one, often like to think of themselves as unique because of their mountainous habitat. This variety of environmental determinism is echoed in their writings about mountains and their inhabitants. *Mountains of the World* reflects this concept by asserting that mountain inhabitants need to be considered as a separate category (particularly by international funding agencies).

At the risk of alienating Messerli and Ives, what follows is an analysis and appraisal of their latest effort to command and control knowledge about mountains and their inhabitants. It is written from the perspective of a humble *shing kocha* (outsider – as the Kinnaura from Himachal Pradesh would have it), but hopefully will be useful to the people of the Hindukush-Himalaya by virtue of the fact that the people with money to spend on development projects in the mountains are bound to read the work being reviewed.

Mountains of the World

A Global Priority



Edited by B. Messerli and J. D. Ives

Verticality criteria

Under the assumption that all mountain areas are currently in dire straits, Messerli and Ives' principal aim is the formulation of policies towards achieving sustainable mountain development. A related aim was to produce documentary and theoretical material for the Rio+5 review process, and to add to contemporary mountain scholarship.

Mountains, according to the authors, have to be viewed as a separate natural region because their verticality warrants top priority ranking. "Steepness and slope and altitude" are the defining criteria. The authors claim that mismanagement of mountain resources is widespread and thus far "problems have not been correctly analysed" because "bilateral and international development agencies tended to treat mountains as unimportant two dimensional adjuncts to be accommodated as fringe attachments to the big development projects on the surrounding and much more densely populated plains."

In the UN mode, the book deals with the mountains of the world in their nation-states; consequently, all the data that is cited is gleaned from country sets of data. Nowhere in the book does one find any numbers that are not tabulated from descriptive national statistics. This pattern seriously distorts the information that is presented. How can Bhutan, for example, with a presumed one million population and part of the Himalaya, be compared to India, containing a part of the Himalaya but with a billion people distributed over a much larger area?

Meanwhile, there are only three non-European chapter authors or co-authors (all drawing salaries from Western sources) with a solitary woman listed as a co-author of a chapter.

Editorial amnesia

Both Messerli and Ives have connections with the Himalaya. Messerli directed a 12-year geomorphological research project in the Kakani area near Kathmandu with an outpost in Khumbu, in the Everest region, and another in the Punjab hills. Ives is noted for his 1970 *Canadian Geographical Journal* article he wrote af-

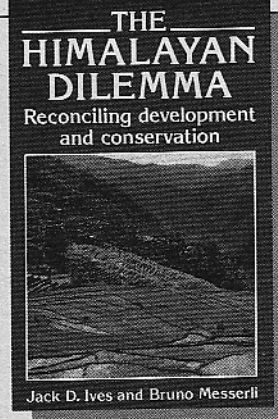
ter journeying up to Darjeeling in a bus with international conventioners in a monsoon downpour in 1968. Together, the two are better known as the organisers of a mountain conference in New York State in 1986 which enabled them to publish a book, *The Himalayan Dilemma: Reconciling Conservation and Development* (Routledge, 1989), which is essentially a synthesised and amplified version of the conference proceedings.

The "Mountain Agenda", as the Messerli-Ives-UNEP-associated development scenario is known, was originally thought up in the late 1980s by two expatriates in Switzerland – David Pitt and Peter Stone – who were concerned about mountain communities in the European Alps. Farmers were leaving the land for more remunerative occupations and outsiders were creating a new niche for temporary holidays and permanent residence in the mountains.

Unfortunately, the Alpine scenario, with its stultifying bureaucratic entrapment of regional planning, came to be applied to non-Western countries, which have a tradition of a highly mobile labour force such as one finds in the Himalaya. Since then, the original topic of the "Mountain Agenda" has been taken over and reformed into a global "Mountain Manifesto".

Like previous manifestos, such as the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Project-6 documents on mountains, *Mountains of the World*, for example, is also full of suggestions and proposals about what donor agencies and others should do, but is short on the nitty-gritty of what has been going on for several decades in the mountains and what constitutes the current situation, especially in the Himalaya, as it compares to the plains.

The Preface states that there is an "absolute lack of relevant information" about mountains. Both Switzerland and Canada, where the two editors come from, have spent a large amount of project money in Nepal, but little has been gleaned from these



past experiences. Also, now that the "Cruise Missile" digital terrain data is available for the Hindukush-Himalaya, there is enough information to evolve a comprehensive view of a mountain country via exploratory data analysis. Yet the editor-duo seems totally unaware of its existence. Selective amnesia about

past and present work detracts from the editorial fidelity of *Mountains of the World*.

Doom proponents

The book carries no indication of the cultural biases that exist in mountain studies. There are essentially two paradigms for looking at mountain environments. One is Germanic and has its roots in Haeckel's "ecology" derived from the German monist belief about the organic unity of the universe. The Messerli/Ives discussion about "mountain ecosystems" invariably includes the idea that mountain people are part of the ecosystem. Another typical Germanic notion related to the organic community relationship is "common property resources", as seen in Tonnie's *gemeinschaft* idea. A fetish with vegetation, critical to German thinking about mountains, is one of the hallmarks of this paradigm. Messerli and Ives themselves have long been proponents of "mountain geoecology", an idea derived from the work of a German biogeographer.

The second paradigm, derived from the political economy of David Hume and Adam Smith, believes that people will change their behaviour when they are given incentives to do so; freeing up the mountains in terms of their accessibility and allowing their inhabitants to respond to individual initiatives and free markets have long-term benefits for all.

It's the doomsayers versus the doomslayers. The first group cringes when a tree is felled in a 'fragile' ecosystem or 'harsh' environment, while the second sees some human comfort and satisfaction in the use of polythene sheeting or corrugated metal roofs which mitigate the effects

of the monsoon and rid the thatch of the rats.

Nowhere in any chapter has any consideration been given to comparing the benefits of the two paradigms. Chapter 5 by Peter Rieder and Jorg Wyder on the economic and political sustainability of mountain areas comes closest to this objective. To examine the concept of sustainability these authors invoke the Rio Declaration, thereby conveniently omitting any critical discussion of the notion itself. After working their way through five case studies, Bhutan, Peruvian Andes, Pay d'Enhaut in Switzerland, North Ossetia in the Caucasus, and Albania, the authors neglect to consider any linkages to the forelands that invariably have gateway towns for the development of mountain areas. This failure to acknowledge the external linkages between mountain areas and valley or plains areas is a critical omission in the chapter, as it is for the book as a whole.

Old myths, new bottle

Notwithstanding the feeble schematic focus of the book, its many implicit biases and Western cultural thrust, this international 'begging bowl' has some creditable chapters; those on sacred mountains, mining, and the human perception of hazards are noteworthy for the general reader. Other chapters are competent descriptive accounts of much of what has been written and are known about mountain environs.

The editors' premise is that development projects concerning mountains are failures because the donors use the same criteria to justify investing in mountain development programmes as they do for non-mountain areas. Throughout the volume the dominant theme is that mountains and their inhabitants are different from the plains; old shibboleths are given another airing.

In the opening chapter for example, Erwin Grötzbach and Christoph Stadel tell us that mountains are "refuge areas". But according to Oxford don, Mark Pagel in the *New Scientist*, the reason for great linguistic

diversity in the mountains, often cited as proof of a "refuge area", is linked to the diversity of habitats. "Human language is clearly influenced by its ecological context," he says. I would argue that mountain people living in a highly variable biophysical environment are in such a place.

If we examine a purported "refugee" group in a mountain environment, let us say a caste or an ethnic group, we would find them fewer in number than what we would expect to find in the neighbouring plains of commensurate size. Despite the ravages and incursions into the Gangetic plain, I doubt if the mountains are refuge areas for tiny groups of people. An examination of blood groups across the Hindukush, for example, shows no pockets of diversity; only a gradual cline from Central Asia to South Asia is perceived. Here and there we do see idiosyncratic communities like the Malana in Kulu district (Himachal Pradesh), the Dah Hanu in Kargil district (Jammu and Kashmir), and the Kalasha valleys in southern Chitral (North West Frontier Province), but no evidence appears that these are "refugee" populations.

Another old myth trundled out as fact is that mountains are barriers. A member of the Swiss Academy of Sciences in the final chapter of the book endorses this view. This mistaken notion hardly holds for the Himalaya. For example, a Yale University

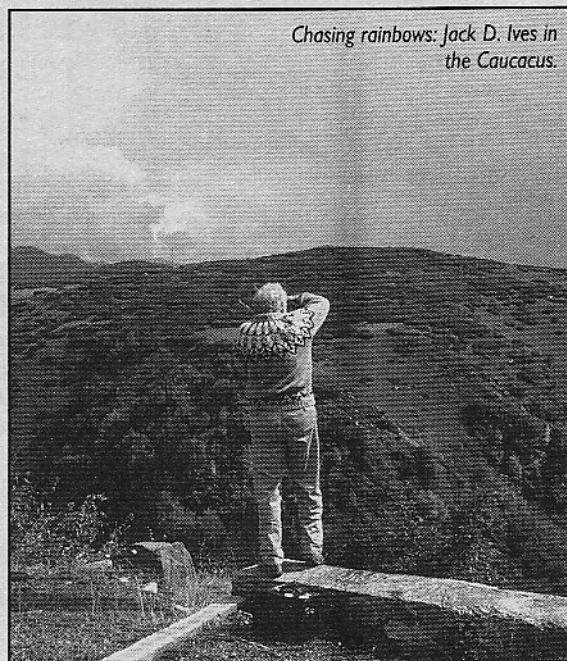
geographer, Ellsworth Huntington, counted 500 dead pack ponies on the Karakorum Pass in the late spring of 1905. Although malnutrition undoubtedly killed some, it was the dreaded *lardug* or high altitude pulmonary edema, that killed most; this omnipresent danger, did not deter the traders in Leh from traversing the "Five Passes" (each over 18,000 feet) route to the Tarim Basin in western China. Similarly, in the princely state of Bushair in the Indian Himalaya, *gur* was once exported up the Hindustan-Tibet road to China's Tarim Basin oases where it was processed into confectionery and then re-exported back to the plains of the Punjab for sale. Such was the profit to be made on the product.

I suggest that the "Barriers and Refugees" notion in the book is greatly overwrought. Take the contention that "traditional mountain peasant societies are adapted to their environments" and that there is "the prospect of economic and demographic collapse". No documentation in the form of numerical analysis is offered. On the "adaptation" notion, has the Swiss Messerli never heard of the mercenary Swiss Vatican guards, or of the Gurkhas? Has he never seen colonial-era photos of the Scottish Gordon Highlanders fighting the Afridis in the Khyber Pass? Mountain people around the world have been chronic migrants for centuries. Military service for others was always an

adaptation of mountain populations living in a marginal environment. Can we honestly say, as Messerli and Ives do, that mountain people are 'adapted' to their environments if there is a constant stream of migrants – excess population – from the mountains to the plains?

Life in the watershed

At the end of the book we are given the international bureaucrat's perspective on mountain development. El Hadji Sene and Douglas MacGuire, two UN/Food and Agriculture Organisation employees with expertise in watershed management, advo-



Chasing rainbows: Jack D. Ives in the Caucasus.

NIGEL, JR. ALLAN



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cate "integrated watershed management" and "generating and strengthening knowledge about the ecology and sustainable development of mountain ecosystems". These objectives are typical of the instrumentalist, mechanistic, Western view of other people's worlds.

Do people live in watersheds? Christian Kleinert's book on settlements in Nepal indicates that many people do not; they live on mountain ridges and not in the watershed valley portions. The ridges are the focal routes of human circulation. People live in places and the notion of a habitable place as defined by the locals exists in the minds of some Greater Himalayan residents but certainly not in the minds of all. At the western end, the notion of *manteqa*, a spatial cognition unit, is evident in the Hindukush because some residents such as the Kohistanis share irrigation water from communally supported canals and leats, or streams, but other nearby ethnic groups like Nuristanis or Pushtuns have no such concepts. For the latter two groups, the fidelity is not to a place, that is, *manteqa*, but to a code of honour or ethnic cohesion. Elsewhere in the Himalaya, similar divergences come to mind. Sutherland, in his Oxford dissertation research in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, found that "place" had nothing to do with a watershed because the cognitive living space of the local people was circumscribed by the local deities, the gods who were put on a palanquin and taken on a tour that circumnavigated several high passes and forded rivers. It was the indigenous regional networks of the local folk that bonded the *ghori* (community) and defined place, not some watershed.

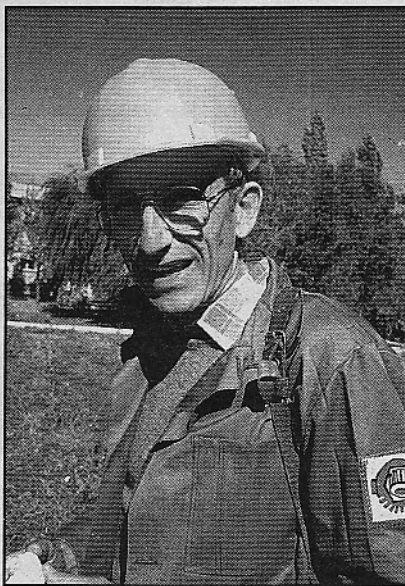
If there is going to be any "sustainable mountain development" then quite clearly it has to be rooted in the local context and not in some Western scientific notion of "integrated watershed management".

Shoddy research

The 19th and final chapter is the "Agenda for Sustainable Mountain Development", authored by Ives, Messerli and Robert Rhoades, an American anthropologist. Among the

seven objectives identified is "Mountain Knowledge and Research". Over the years, I have never seen any mention by these writers, all self-styled Himalayan experts, of existing libraries and bibliographies that concern the Himalaya.

A number of them exist: the CNRS Centre d'Etude Himalayennes library in suburban Paris has the best collection of documents (on-line later this year); Yoshimi Yakushi's *Catalogue of Himalayan Literature* has thousands of entries; Pfliederer, Bergner, and Greve's *A Bibliography on Himalayan Ethnography* is useful; and Jürgen Aschoff's huge *Tibet, Nepal, und der Kulturraum* is on the Web. In fact, no Web sources of mountain information are given in the (purported reference) book for any part of the world. Had the authors probed these bibliographies and sources they would have found out that the Himalaya, even the



Bruno Messerli

entire mountain world, is a greatly diverse place and few generalities, if any, apply in specific contexts. The editors' careless research fails even to mention, never mind discuss, the 1980 UNEP Report No 2 on mountain environments (*The Major Problems of Man and the Environment Interactions in Mountain Systems: A Review*). To his credit, IUCN parks man Jim Thorsell, alone of all the writers in the volume, cites it.

Rather than read the beginning and the end of the book, the reader

anxious to understand its conceptual thrust should immediately turn to Chapter 14 on mountain agriculture by Narpat Jodha. For at least a decade, Jodha has been articulating the condition of mountain environments. His chapter is conceptual in organisation, and puts forward the best argument for the formation of mountain development. In a series of tables he links what he calls "mountain specificities" with appropriate responses to these mountain conditions. Although his focus is on agriculture, its constraints and opportunities, his discussion of the specificities is laid out in a thoughtful manner. Jodha points out that the "five year period after the Earth Summit is too short a period to assess changes in the state of the world's mountains".

But he is an Indian and knows very well that abundant data for decades have been available on parts of the Indian Himalaya and adjacent plains districts. His citing all-India data distorts the situation in some hill areas. For example, the appalling statistic that only half of Indian females go to school and of that half, the average length of schooling is 14 months, is not true for the western Himalaya hill districts.

Gross aggregated national data has no place in comparing mountains and plains. Ives, in Chapter 4 concerning inequalities, provides tabular material on the entire area of India purporting to demonstrate literacy inequality between mountain and plains inhabitants. It is no service to the reader that Ives' tabular data, based on aggregated Unicef nation-state data, compares adult literacy in all of India (34 percent) with that of Nepal (13 percent). Hill districts and contiguous plains district data is available for both countries but no attempt has been seen to be made to analyse or even cite this existing material. Similarly, Jodha concocts categories of "mountain specificities" that are not supported by any data, certainly not from the South Asian mountain rimland.

Other chapters fail for the same reason; there is no evidence that indicates mountains are unfairly disadvantaged when compared to adjacent plains. One chapter, that on climate



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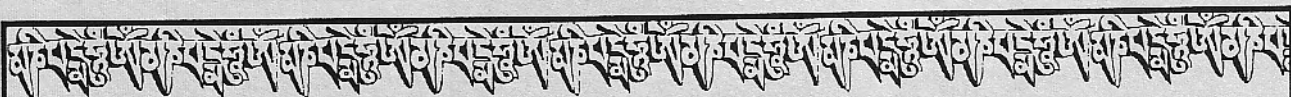
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change by Maurice Price and Roger Barry, is mostly a scenario. Nowhere in the chapter is there any graph that would tell us of an increase over time of any measure to a point that would justify ringing the alarm bell. At the end of their chapter, for example, there are two paragraphs about the possible impacts on human health but no evidence is given. We know from Paul Epstein of Harvard Medical School that the malaria line in the Kenya highlands has recently risen by 150 metres but this kind of measure and its possible implications for human welfare is not mentioned anywhere in this chapter. It is these kinds of "fingerprints" of climate change, as Epstein calls them, that need to be presented in a book like this.

Jan Jenik's chapter on biodiversity is full of alarm about the loss of species but he does not mention that the best count for loss of biodiversity in the world today is only one species per year. Inasmuch as I am surrounded by university and private biotech individuals and companies, world plant germplasm banks, and plant science genetic engineering nerds breeding new transgenic foods, I am not disturbed by this rate of biodiversity loss. I used to live in the Appalachian mountains in the eastern United States, where, during a 200-year period, when over 95 per cent of the original tree cover was removed, only three birds were extirpated from the mountains and the adjacent piedmont all the way to the Atlantic shore. Jenik's call for arms is hardly cause for despair. Like the other authors, he does not provide any documentation of what it was like earlier. There is simply no diachronic analysis.

Mountain mania

Reading the book is a chore. There are about 60 'boxes' – vignettes and anecdotal material by many additional writers – scattered throughout everyone else's chapters. Sometimes these boxes overwhelm the chapter contents. In one place, there are eleven pages of 'box' material of varying quality inserted into someone else's chapter. A box on Sunderlal Bahuguna and his past activities is welcome. Good intentions can get

distorted by excess, however, because we now have his son Rajeev, giving a press conference in Dehra Dun last year during his Kohima-to-Kashmir motorcycle ride, saying that the problems faced by people in various Himalayan States are similar, just as their climate, culture and lifestyle are. When I hear statements like this, I think mountain mania is abroad in the world.

Photographs, many of them taken by the editors are inserted into other author's chapters in inappropriate places. References that are not cited in the text appear in lists at the end of chapters. The deplorable Continental habit of not distinguishing "grey" literature from published literature is adopted throughout the book. As an intended reference text, the work is definitely substandard.

In the last chapter there is a plea for a new "science" of "montology". This word has been around for over a couple of decades and as much as I like and study mountains, I feel their study as a singular discipline is not compelling. Comparing, as the book does, mountain farmers in Swiss valleys who enjoy the highest farm subsidies in the world (according to *The Economist*) with some of the struggling people of the Himalaya simply does not make sense. The compositional variables that are produced in UN tabular material do not mesh with the contextual variables of people living in place. Despite Toni Hagen's 1960s appellation of Nepal as the Switzerland of Asia, and the lengthy attempts of the Swiss to get the Nepalis to eat Swiss cheese manufactured in the Nepali highlands, Switzerland is not Nepal.

Only one chapter, that by Edwin Bernbaum on sacred mountains, comes close to providing some of the cultural variation that is found in the mountain world. Other chapter authors, and writers of some of the 'box' material, are capable of much better work because they have exhibited talent in the past. There are a number of themes that play a critical role in the development of mountains that are nowhere to be found in this volume. Surely someone could be found to write about common property resources in mountains and how they

are utilised through *de jure* and *de facto* local practices.

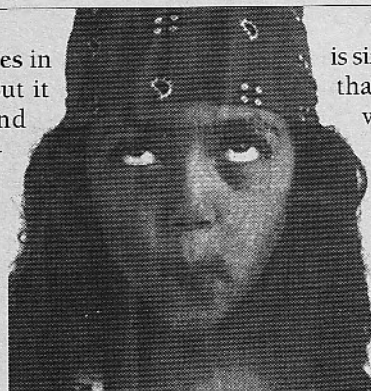
Conservation of mountain wildlife, now embellished with the sohrriquet, "charismatic megafauna", surely deserves a chapter. Gateway towns into the mountains are critical junctures for trade and commerce, which are the building blocks for development. Biratnagar and other Tarai towns are critical gateways into Nepal, as Donald Messerschmidt has written; Kalka and Haldwani, as Harjit Singh has demonstrated, were the gateway for trade to the Indian Himalaya and beyond; Leh was the break point for trade to Khotan as was the Peshawar-Kahul access across the Hindukush into Central Asia. After all, Switzerland itself grew wealthy by having towns as the brokers between northern and southern Europe.

How does one appraise a book that seeks to distinguish mountains and their inhabitants from lowland regions, but which, in 466 pages, does not provide a single graph comparing a mountainous area with an adjacent plains area for any variable. We have to take the editors' polemic about mountains being a global priority on faith.

A few years ago this reviewer published an edited book in which he suggested that the greatest risk to mountain habitat and society was not from any inherent mountain conditions but from international busybodies. *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority* realises my fear. Given this feeble attempt to justify the idea that mountains are in dire need of a priority for international attention by international funding agencies, I would advise the UN/FAO, the "Task Manager" for implementation of Chapter 13 of the 1992 Rio document, that this book – and its argument – fails. Sustainable mountain development is an agenda in search of a problem.

N.J.R. Allan travels and writes about Himalayan topics as a professor of geography at the University of California. His most recent book is Karakorum Himalaya: A Bibliography, Orchid Press, Bangkok, 1998.

Shrugging one's shoulder and rolling one's eyes in exasperation are not South Asian gestures. But it will soon be one, as satellite sitcoms and Westernised VJs push their way into our consciousness. Here is a little lady rolling eyes in an ad in the Indian papers by Teksons, maker of cooling systems. Now will there be more images like this in the ads and columns, as even the villagers of Bhind learn to roll their eyes and shrug their shoulders?



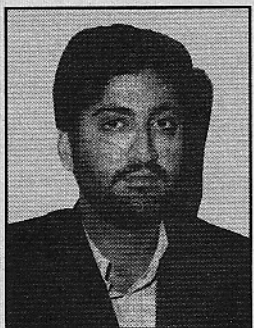
is sizeable, before taking a leak? Other than that, Section 4.3 of said Guidelines is where it should be.

PTI reports that Bagdogra airport in West Bengal will now be renamed "Saarc Airport". Why, pray tell? According to Indian Tourism Minister Madanlal Khurana, this is the way to promote tourism in the seven North-east states and Sikkim. Don't ask me how.

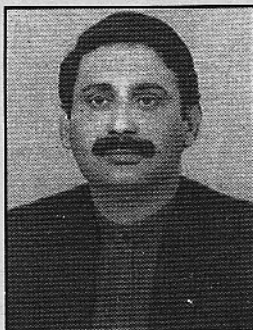
Nepal really is a country in the dumps, as far as its governmental face is concerned. From its international and regional profile these days, you would not know that this is a land full of history, culture, energy and ability. This was brought to mind yet again in reading a report in *The Hindu* of a South Asian Music and Dance Festival hosted in New Delhi in early August by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. The reviewer Leela Venkataraman devotes whole paragraphs to the repertoires of Bangladesh, Bhutan and India (Pakistan apparently was not there), whereas the lady dealt with Nepal's presentation in one dismissive line: "Hearing Nepali songs and seeing its dances, one cannot avoid the feeling that reverberations of our cinema with its music and romantic interludes, have found a kindred spirit in the people of Nepal." There is no doubt about it, the Nepali selection must have been made by Kathmandu politicians and bureaucrats.

Balochistan takes the First Prize for having the youngest and handsomest chief ministers of South Asia. First,

there was Akhtar Mengal, whose ministry fell in early August after losing support of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League. And now, we have as his successor another Baloch blue blood in the person of Capt (Retd) Jan Jamali, of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League. *The News* reports: "Like his other close relatives, he is also an Aitchesonian." Now I better look



around to see what that means!



Here are two directives contained in Section 4.3 of the Policy and Guidelines 1998 for Eco-Tourism in India, which I endorse: 1) "Kissing in public is disapproved of", and, 2) "Try to relieve yourself at least 30 metres away from water sources". I have only two concerns. One, that India might lose out on tens of thousands of amorous honeymooners who might be diverted to Pakistan, where, I am sure, Islamic law notwithstanding, such a rule is not yet in the books. Two, has anyone gone into the technical challenge and the time element involved, particularly on densely vegetated slopes, in scouring an area of 30 m radius, which

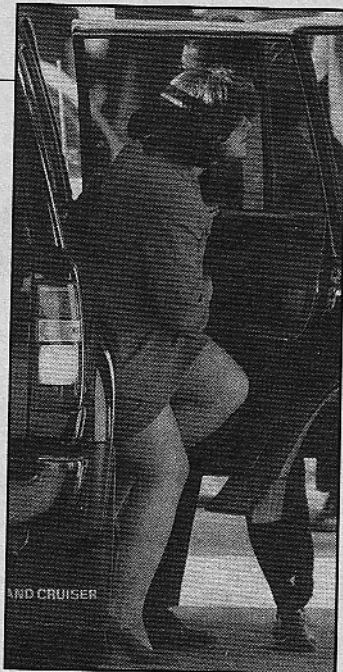
Here is the kind of writing I like. Seema Mustafa in her *The Asian Age* column of 29 August, reacting on the Indian government's reaction to the American cruise missile attack on Afghan territory: "For six Americans killed in the bomb blasts earlier, the Clinton administration has seen it fit to kill scores of civilians. All in the fitness of things. And the American argument seems to have convinced our Prime Minister and his men in South Block. Perhaps, perhaps, now we will be allowed to hit terrorist camps in Pakistan? Yes? NO. No? NO. And promptly India comes out with a strong attack against America and its double standards, which was not apparent to the PMO and the foreign office until Thomas Pickering made his statement."

There are still anti-nukers left in India, after the laddoostock ran out. Here is a poem printed in *The Times of India*, sent in by Nisheeth Saini of Jaipur.

*Two hundred kilotons
Explode over the city.
An incandescent white-hot oven
Now that's the city.
Asha vapourised.
Usman, the street hawker's
Got molten eyes.
Daily bleeds mother Fatima,
A womb atomised.
Arjun — that country urchin.
Carries now a cancerous gene.
All wrongs avenged,
Sweetly revenged.
Shame.
A Shame my victory,
A Scar on my psyche!*

Monica Lewinsky is the media property of the whole world, given the overload of information all of us billions now have about Oval Office trysts and dress stains. Hence, it is not out of place for a South Asian media columnist to pass comment on the topic. Pssst. Have you noticed how the television cameras and press photographs studiously focus on Ms Lewinsky's torso and leave her bottom half out of the frame? What does this say? It says that she is LARGE down under, and the voyeuristic demands of media require that the public be shown an attractive woman, which presumably was what hooked Bill in the first place. After weeks of perusing

the papers, as they say, I found a lone photograph showing Ms Lewinsky in full form, but that picture too does not do justice to her girth. On this one, the AFP photo editor, as you can see, went for the legs.



If it were an archaeological project to search for a long-dried-up riverbed in Rajasthan, I would be all for it. But what the BJP government wants to do is to prove the existence of the underground river Saraswati, which, as myth has it, joins the Ganga and Jamuna at their confluence in Allahabad. For this incredibly retrogressive and non-scientific project, Atalji's government plans to use, reports PTI, the expertise of the Central Water Commission, the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre and the Indian Space Research Organisation. Now I know these are organisations that have nothing better to do than to propose pouring charcoal dust over Himalayan glaciers to increase dry-season flows in the rivers, explode first-generation nuclear devices and claim technological superiority, and get messed up with Maldivian ladies.

Out of India, on the one hand, I am encouraged by this very positive news that the Small Industries Development Bank of India wants to promote – and if necessary fund in toto – an INR 200 crore project to establish a massive exhibition centre (like New Delhi's Pragati Maidan) to showcase and promote the products of the smaller industries of the regional countries. Such is its magnanimity that SIDBI does not have a problem “even if the trade centre is located outside India”. On the other hand, one hopes that the SAARC-wallahs did not miss this item in *The Hindu* of 23 August, which reports, “ISO 3720 checks for imports from SAARC nations likely”. India's Commerce Minister Ramakrishna Hegde has announced that the measure is meant to restrict entry of “sub-standard” goods from the neighbours into India. So, while the one hand seeks SAPTAS and SAFTAS, the other hand is getting ready to raise non-tariff barriers. There is a trade war looming, spearheaded by the bureaus of standard of each country: PSO in Pakistan restricting Indian goods, BSO in Bangladesh banning Sri Lankan goods, and so on.

Nepal is struggling through its own Visit Nepal Year 1998 programme, unable to compete in slickness with the Visit Maldives 1997 *tamasha*. Well, it now turns out that the

ballyhooed Visit Pakistan Year 1999 has fizzled out. *Dawn* reports that the “much-hyped programme has fallen flat on its face due to non-seriousness of the Minister”. The minister is Shaikh Rasheed Ahmad, from whom apparently one can expect very little. What we know is that though a logo for the campaign was approved, that was as far as it went. Nary a meeting was called of the 21-member Task Force constituted in June 1997 to chalk out a strategy. And now, a formal request has been made to the World Tourism Organisation to ‘redesignate’ the year. Oh well, the tourism receipts would have been low regardless, I guess, what with cruise missiles flying overhead at will on their way to Islamic targets.

When tinseltown discovers SAARC, that is when this organisation of seven South Asian states will really take off! Do I mean a Bollywood film in which Shah Rukh Khan plays a Pakistani fighter pilot who befriends Madhuri Dixit as a Sri Lankan mermaid who is the long lost sister of Rajesh Khanna as the turbaned Chief Minister of Punjab, whose attention has been diverted by a

well-built Bangladeshi vamp played by Jayalalitha? And does Kabir Bedi enter as an Australian double agent sent to destroy South Asian amity who ends up instead joining the crusade for South Asia as a Peace Zone and bringing about subcontinental reconciliation in the last scene, in which everyone – Pathan, Naga, Baloch, Punjabi, Sinhala, Bangla and Laloo Prasad Yadav – end up singing “Vande Mataram” with hands on their hearts American style? No, nothing so grand and gooey, just as long as you know that there is a SAARC Productions (Pvt) in Pakistan which has just come out with a



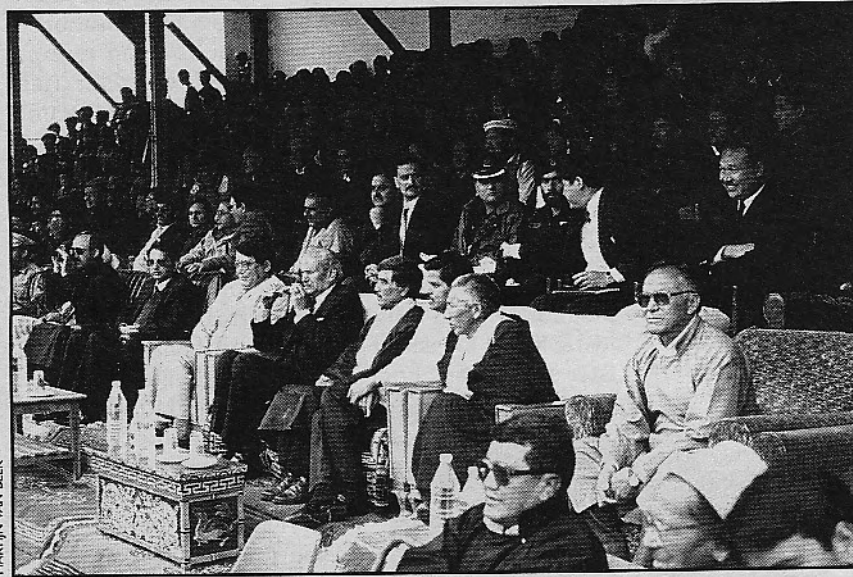
“cinemascope Urdu colour” film with the title *Nikah*. The subject seems to have to do with the entwining of two lovers. Hope springs eternal, perhaps the star-crossed lovers met at the latest India-Pakistan People's Forum meet in Calcutta and love blossomed across Wagah/Attari?!

I like it when we give robbers humanity, for they too, after all, are mortals with souls. Hence, a headline like this from *The News* of 2 August, datelined Islamabad, I fully do not mind:

Motorcyclists
deprive newsman's
wife of purse

-Chhetria Patrakar

Lessons from Ladakh



MARTIJN VAN BEEK

Happier days: Krishna Rao, Thubstan Chhewang, Thikse Rinpoche, P. Namgyal and others at the inauguration of the Hill Council.

Are autonomous hill councils the answer to highlanders' woes? Not necessarily, if the Ladakh Hill Council is taken as an example.

by Martijn van Beek

Sher-e-Kashmir Sheikh Abdullah will, I have no doubt, do whatever lies in his power to improve your lot... In Ladakh you are backward and unless you learn and train yourselves you cannot run the affairs of your country."

Thus spoke Jawaharlal Nehru on 8 July 1949, addressing a crowd in Leh during his first visit to the Ladakh region of India's Jammu and Kashmir state.

Ladakh's political leaders spent much of the next 40 years trying to convince the Centre that self-rule was not only possible, but necessary for the proper development of the region and the protection of its 'unique identity'. The arguments they used to support Ladakh's case included na-

tional security, patriotism, economic progress, and cultural preservation.

For decades, Ladakhis practised the art of representing themselves as victims of state governments and bureaucrats in Srinagar, at best disinterested and at worst out to destroy Ladakh. If only the Ladakhis were left to themselves, went the argument, their society would regain its course towards general prosperity, ecological balance, and cultural richness.

When, in September 1995, Ladakh's Leh district was finally granted a measure of 'independence' from Kashmir after decades of struggle, expectations were high among political leaders and the population at large (see *Himal*/vol 8 nos 2,

4 & 5). Modelled on a similar administrative arrangement for the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill District Development Council (LAHDC) was given far-reaching powers in nearly all aspects of local government except the judiciary.

At that time, the autonomous council formula was regarded by some as the most promising model for resolving the longstanding antagonisms between Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, the constituent regions of J&K. The National Conference party of Farooq Abdullah put an "autonomy" solution to the Kashmir problem high on its agenda, and two commissions continue to deliberate on a series of proposals. Some provisions of India's Panchayati Raj Act are to be incorporated into such a package of administrative reform.

The first Hill Council, dominated by the Congress party, is now halfway through its tenure and even the friendliest observer cannot fail to see the problems. The transition from 'agitation' to 'governance' has been a difficult one for the executives of LAHDC. Held responsible for everything from petrol shortages to inclement weather, the popularity of the hill councillors among the people of Leh has declined steadily since they took the oath of office three years ago. They, for their part, blame the state government for obstructing their work. Whoever is to blame, frustration is increasing among the population, whose alienation from state and local leaders is reaching a potentially dangerous level.

The spring of 1998 brought yet another election campaign to Ladakh, the fifth in less than three years. Months later than the rest of India, on 3 June, the "cold desert" region went to the polls to elect their Lok Sabha representative. The landslide victory of the National Conference candidate, Aga Syed Hussain of Kargil must be seen as a strong warning to the Council and the political establishment in Leh. Since elections were first held in Ladakh in 1962, the Lok Sabha seat had always gone to a Buddhist candidate from Leh, and never to the J&K National Conference. Only in 1989, at the height of the communal agitation for Union Territory status, was the seat captured by a Kargil Muslim, the independent Commander Ghulam Mohd. Hassan.

This year's campaign was unusual in that no less than four parties contested: the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party also joined the fray, apart from the 'traditional' antagonists, the National Conference and the Congress (I). Candidates of the new entrants ate into the support of the incumbent, P. Namgyal, the respected and experienced former Union Minister of State and the Congress party candidate. During the campaign, even the Congress campaigners were hard pressed to come up with examples of the Council's achievements, and preferred to highlight instead the personal qualities of Namgyal.

Indeed, the Council seems to have enough to answer for. Rather than taking Ladakh in new directions, adopting appropriate development strategies, protecting local farmers, the environment and Ladakh's 'identity', it in effect merely continued along established paths. "The signatures are different, that's all," says one disillusioned Leh-pa. Corruption is said to be rampant; the pace of illegal construction in Leh continues unabated; the education system remains in shambles; filth is piling up on the streets and stream beds; unemployment continues to rise; and prices are skyrocketing. Little wonder that people are disillusioned with their hard-won autonomous status.

Blaming Farooq

Before his election and induction into the Executive Council, candidate Rigzin Jora had said that "we will no longer have to blame outsiders, but only ourselves". However, old habits die hard, and the Srinagar government continues to be targeted by the Council and the Congress party. "The source of all evils", as the 1989 slogan had it, is accused of obstructing all initiatives taken by the Council.

The complaints are not entirely unwarranted. Due to the 'normalisation' of the law and order situation in the Kashmir Valley, the councillors soon found the sympathetic Governor K.V. Krishna Rao replaced by a 'popular' National Conference government headed by their old nemesis, Farooq Abdullah. According to Congress members, Farooq has done everything in his power to obstruct the Council. Indeed, under the Hill Council Act, reluctantly approved by the J&K Assembly in October 1997, the chief minister's power to do so is considerable. Practically all major decisions of the LAHDC, all plans, budgets and activities, have to be approved by the state government.

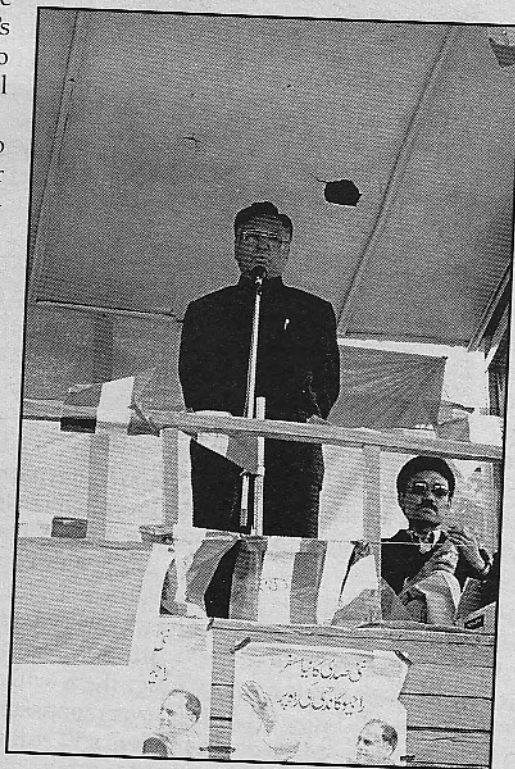
Chief Executive Councillor Thupstan Chhewang complains: "We have been having problems with func-

tioning because whatever proposals we have sent, whatever rules and regulations are to be enacted with the concurrence of the government, all these issues have been pending with them for months." Chhering Dorjay Lagrook, firebrand MLA for Leh, of the Buddhist Association Youth Wing, says, "Basically, they are anti-Ladakhi. They have never made any concession, whether it is ST [Scheduled Tribe status] or the Hill Council, with conviction, but only because they were compelled."

Thupstan Chhewang gives the example of the 1997-98 budget. The LAHDC had asked for INR 360 million. The state government unilaterally reduced the amount to INR 270 million, although later it did add an extra five. Kargil, by contrast, had asked for only INR 230 million and, says Lagrook, "The government gave them also 27 crore [270 million]. Why should Kargil and Leh be given the same resources in this case, but not when it comes to schools, Development Blocks, and so on?" (The Hill Council Act provides for hill councils for both of Ladakh's districts, Kargil and Leh, although only Leh has so far set up one and the Muslim-majority Kargil continues to be administered directly by Srinagar.)

But opponents of the LAHDC leadership point out that the Council has not even been able to spend the 320 million it did get in the last budget. This invites unwelcome comparisons with the old district administrations, which had exhibited the same inability to spend allocated sums. Chhewang complains, "The money was released late, in September when the season in Leh is practically over." Moreover, the Public Works Department was faced with an acute shortage of superintendent engineers to supervise several of the larger projects.

The formulation of a Master Plan for the development of Leh town and its immediate surroundings - what is known as the "Noti-



Congress candidate P. Namgyal campaigning during the last Lok Sabha elections

Prisoners of Shangri-La

THE RENOWNED Tibetologist, Donald Lopez Jr, recently published an excellent account of how Tibetan Buddhism in the West was decontextualised and sanitised. Lopez Jr, echoing a recent spate of similar warnings about the dangers of stereotyping Himalayan populations and their cultures, suggests that such images deny full humanity to Tibetans and in the long run do more harm than good. For Ladakh, a similar story applies.

This rose-tinted vision of the Himalaya and Tibetan Buddhism brings not only a significant number of tourists to the region, but also a generous flow of foreign aid. Ladakhis, never slow to cash in on a business opportunity, have been effectively marketing their situation to meet the expectations of Western donors, who more often than not tend to be badly infected with the Shangri-La bug.

In line with Western expectations which are commonly informed by Helena Norberg-Hodge's book, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* (Sierra Book Club, 1991), Ladakhis have successfully represented themselves as poor victims of Westernisation and what some call "industrial monoculture". At the same time, the population of Ladakh is deemed to possess the kind of social and economic characteristics and practices that are among the top criteria of contemporary sustainable development ideology: democratic decision making, environmental sensitivity, and little differentiation between rich and poor.

Ladakhi ngos have become adept at emphasising their 'ancient' traditions, incorporating the current development jargon, and successfully applying for funds. The success of groups such as the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), the Leh Nutrition Project (LNP), and, more recently, the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) in accessing a considerable amount of foreign funds over the past decade has led to a proliferation of ngos in Leh district. Almost every village, it seems, now has some non-profit school project, while more and more environmental, rural development, and public health-oriented organisations are putting up signboards in Leh town.

It could be argued, as some Ladakhis do, that it is only fair that the colonial powers repay some of the wealth they have extracted from the blood, sweat and tears of their former colonial subjects, although this is a problematic argument with respect to Ladakh (where the British were often seen and in some respects did act

as protectors of the interests of the locals against the usurpatory designs of the princely Dogra rulers).

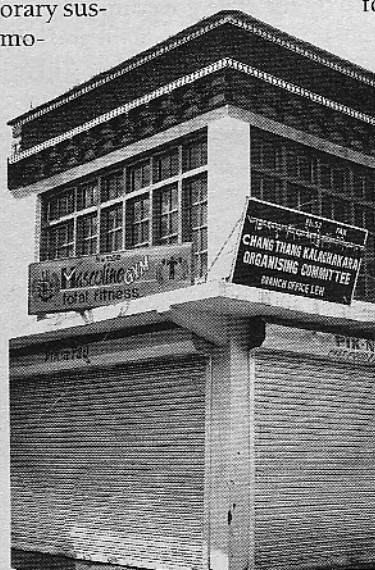
One famous Ladakhi ngo, which had been plodding along in what many locals and outsiders thought was an unproductive direction, suddenly in the late 1980s received a vast increase in its funds through the effective marketing of both Ladakh and the project in line with Western expectations and stereotypes about the region. This economic equivalent of steroids promoted the rapid growth of the organisation and reinforced the negative trends which soon became evident in its work. In spite of more than a decade of vehement local criticism and warnings about the direction the project was taking, foreign donors continue to line up to give money, partly encouraged by the reports of consultants equally blinded by the Shangri-La imagery.

Several other ngos have gone through similar developments, leading to great increases in staff, cars, and other "operating costs", while achieving little of substance in the field. In a few recent cases, some foreign donors have finally owned up to the years of mismanagement that they themselves had encouraged and funded. These donors have either cut back support or pulled out altogether. But as one ngo leader points out, for every donor that pulls out, there are many more willing to take its place.

The donors are keen to support projects which appear to meet the politically correct criteria of the day: community participation, uplifting the poor, protecting the environment, empowering women. And how nice if all this can be done in Shangri-La! Ladakh appears to have it all: a barren but picturesque landscape inhabited by photogenic, smiling villagers; a warm, fuzzy 2500-year-old philosophy made safe for 20th-century Western new-agers, with a built-in ecological ethic; an "evil threat" in the form of Westernisation and (bonus!) Islam; and articulate English-speaking leaders who are excellent spokesmen for fund-raising efforts.

Ladakhi ngos are the perfect 'counterpart' to the development industry, never mind whether all this money actually accomplishes very much. In any case, if the living conditions of the people in Ladakh continue to deteriorate, this merely indicates the need for more aid to the ngos.

Already, every Ladakhi, it seems, has a guest house, a taxi, an STD/ISD/PCO shop, and a German Bakery. Before long, there will be an ngo for every cause, every village, every monastery, every household. And the Western funders will still be clamouring for more.



Sign of the times.

MARTIN VAN BEEK

fied Area" of Leh – has also been obstructed by Farooq Abdullah's government, maintains Executive Councillor for Public Works Sonam Dawa. A draft plan was submitted to Srinagar suggesting changes, which were incorporated and a final version resubmitted. No action has been taken on it since, and so in the absence of the planned Leh Development Authority, unregulated development of the town continues.

"People are expecting us to perform, but how can this system function if the government does not let it," asks Thupstan Chhewang. "A proper atmosphere has to be created. But every time there are elections, relations get strained, and it takes time to get relations back to normal. And every time there are elections we lose two months because the election code of conduct means that we cannot sanction any plans."

Commissioner vs Councillor

The achievements of LAHDC have been few and far in between, even though it may seem to be a model of calm in comparison to the turbulence in other autonomous councils of India, such as Darjeeling and Jharkhand. While quite a few obstructions may indeed be attributed to ill will in Srinagar, it wouldn't be easy to absolve the Council of blame for its lack of performance.

A common complaint is that the councillors have been more concerned with their status according to J&K state protocol than with establishing a working relationship with the bureaucracy. "They have managed to antagonise the entire bureaucracy," points out Pinto Narboo. It seems undeniable that the councillors have lacked tact in dealing with the Indian Administrative Service officers as well as with local bureaucrats.

According to the Hill Council Act, the Deputy Commissioner serves as Chief Executive Officer of the Council, and presides over meetings. But real power is supposed to lie with the Chief Executive Councillor, who is elected by the members of the Council from among themselves. While the previous Deputy Commissioner assigned to Leh, P.K. Tripathi, was said to be very cooperative, his successor,

MARTIN VAN BEEK



Farooq Abdullah and Thikse Rinpoche at Leh's Gonpa Soma earlier this year.

claim the councillors, is creating severe obstacles. Allegedly obsessed with his own status and power – much like the councillors themselves, according to some – R.K. Goyal has been accused of incompetence and obstruction. Says Thupstan Chhewang, "They are posting very junior persons here. They have an ego problem because they cannot tolerate that a popularly elected official should be boss over them."

Apart from the slowdown in all administrative affairs, the feud between the Deputy Commissioner and the Chief Executive Councillor led to the enactment of a farce: on Republic Day last year, the two held separate, simultaneous flag-raising ceremonies as they could not reach agreement on whose prerogative this event should be. Meanwhile, the executive councillors repeatedly scoffed at Farooq Abdullah, refusing to receive or even meet with him during his several visits to Leh over the past two years.

Other than bickering with local and state bureaucrats, the apparently monolithic Congress-dominated Council has been diverted by internal revolts. As early as the time of their swearing in, the councillors from Changthang were reported to have accused their colleagues of regional bias and even corruption. This

winter, one of those involved in that episode, Councillor Rigzin Namgyal, defected to the National Conference, giving that party its first presence in the Council.

More serious was the resignation of Khanpo Rinpoche of Thikse monastery, soon after his induction into the Executive Council in September 1995. He said in an interview in May that he did so because he felt he could strengthen the Council through his rapport with Farooq Abdullah. The Rinpoche, with a career in Ladakhi politics going back 35 years, ended up joining Farooq's NC, and was 'given' a Rajya Sabha seat as reward.

Many are convinced that the Council's ineffectiveness has to do with the members' lack of political acumen and administrative experience. The one executive councillor who had both, Mohd. Akbar Ladakhi, unfortunately passed away in June 1996. "Those remaining are amateurs, part-time politicians," said one observer. Currently, the most senior councillor is Sonam Dawa, a former Chief Engineer of J&K, who is respected for his integrity but accused of being too bureaucratic. Sonam Dawa himself makes no secret of the fact that he does not like the job, and that he might seize the first opportunity to return to his previous position as Director of the Ladakh Ecological Development Group, a private organisation that has done much to promote sustainable development in the region.

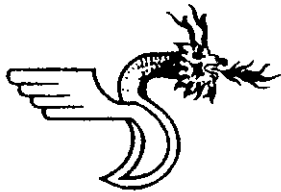
Fit to rule?

When one considers the history of Ladakhi politics in the past decades as well as the ways in which consecutive Kashmiri governments have dealt with the region, the developments since regional autonomy was achieved in 1995 should not cause too much surprise.

Among the first initiatives of the Council was the launching of a monthly newsletter, *Ladags Phonya*. This newsletter is supposed to serve, together with local radio, as the main public information instrument of the Council. Yet, there are councillors who do not even know of its existence, and its appearance is extremely irregular. Rumour and gossip remain

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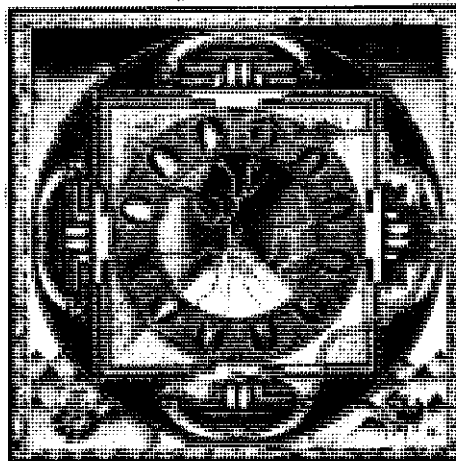
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the main source of information among the population. If the Council is to survive the coming restructuring of the State's administration – which will be done on the basis of the recommendations of the long-delayed reports of the autonomy commissions and the Panchayati Raj Act – the people need to be informed more regularly and in more depth about what the Council does, and can do.

There is little doubt that an abolition of Leh's Hill Council, as has been threatened by Farooq Abdullah, would trigger a fierce, possibly violent, response from sections of the population, especially the youth. Ladakh's representatives at the Central and State levels should work to-

gether with the Council in a major effort to generate popular support for the institution of the Hill Council and the principle of autonomy in general. The councillors are required to look beyond the immediate party-political interests of the Congress. Similarly, Ladakh's leading National Conference members, such as Thikse and Togdan Rinpoches and Tsetan Namgyal, as well as the newly elected Kargil-based MP Aga Syed Hussain, must prove that they represent Ladakh's interests rather than those of Farooq Abdullah's or some faction within Ladakh.

It is clear that 'independence' has not been enough. The present Council has a little more than two years

left to show that Ladakhis are not only able to rule themselves, but that autonomy serves the demands for peace, prosperity and stability in the region. The state government will have to realise that the proper functioning of the Council is also in its interest. It is time to forget personal feuds and political rivalries, and get on with the job that they were elected to do. The cost of failure would be enormous. Ask a Kashmiri.

M. van Beek teaches Ethnography and Social Anthropology at Aarhus University, Denmark, and is member of the permanent committee of the International Association for Ladakh Studies.

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V O I

PYGMIES, NOT STATESMEN

writes Shehzad Amjad in the Pakistani daily *The News* of 2 August, is the proper appellation for South Asia's leadership in the wake of the failed India-Pakistan talks in the recent Colombo SAARC Summit.

The South Asian Destiny is no longer the exclusive monopoly of the ruling elites of India and Pakistan. The people of Kashmir are today heroically laying down their lives in pursuit of freedom that shall, sooner or later, free the whole of South Asia.

Nawaz Sharif had the golden opportunity to take the lead and turn the tables on India by announcing a new peace initiative, designed purely in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir. Similarly, Vajpayee had an opportunity to change the course of history by recognising the democratic rights of Kashmiris to determine their own destiny. Both, in the ultimate analysis, turned out to be the spokesmen of Pakistani and Indian elites who have reduced Kashmir to a territorial fetish.

The nuclear powers of South Asia, in any case, have been rendered irrelevant by the very people they have been fighting for. Kashmir does not belong to India. Kashmir may not really belong to Pakistan. But Kashmir definitely belongs to the people of Kashmir. And as long as they continue to remain outsider to any diplomatic encounter between Pakistan and India, the Subcontinent shall continue to descend into the "dark ethos of nothingness". Time is crying out for statesmen, not pygmies. History is craving for a great moral vision. South Asia is yearning to define the 21st century. The question, however, is, "Who Shall rise to the occasion?"

An olive branch, anyone?

FIVE MINUTES OF FAME

Author Arundhati Roy comes to terms with her Booker reputation, in an impassioned article – "The end of imagination" – against the nuclear bomb written for India's newsmagazines *Outlook* and *Frontline* and the London-based *The Guardian*.

The fact that all this, this global dazzle – these lights in my eyes, the applause, the flowers, the photographers, the journalists feigning a deep interest in my life (yet struggling to get a single fact straight), the men in suits fawning over me, the shiny hotel bathrooms with endless towels – none of it was likely to happen again. Would I miss it? Had I grown to need it? Was I a fame-junkie? Would I have withdrawal symptoms?

The more I thought about it, the clearer it became to me that if fame was going to be my permanent condition

it would kill me. Club me to death with its good manners and hygiene. I'll admit that I've enjoyed my own five minutes of it immensely, but primarily because it was just five minutes. Because I knew (or thought I knew) that I could go home when I was bored and giggle about it. Grow old and irresponsible. Eat mangoes in the moonlight. Maybe write a couple of failed books – worstsellers – to see what it felt like. For a whole year I've cartwheeled across the world, anchored always to thoughts of home and the life I would go back to. Contrary to all the enquiries and predictions about my impending emigration, that was the well I dipped into. That was my sustenance. My strength.

TAKE CARE, YOUR MAJESTY

was the refrain of chimis from every dzongkhag of Bhutan at the recent session of the *Tshongdu* (National Assembly), reports Kuensel. The worry was over security risks to King Jigme from 'anti-nationals' as well as Bodo and ULFA militants during his travels in the countryside.

"We are relieved that, because of His Majesty's own good fortune and the loyalty of our security personnel no harm has come to His Majesty," the Paro chimi said. "However, we submit the plea to His Majesty not to visit high-risk areas but to delegate the concerned officers to carry out the necessary tasks."

The Punakha chimi said that, His Majesty being the protective shield for the nation, the source of *kidu* for the needy, a parent to every Bhutanese citizen, and the jewel of the Bhutanese system, the kingdom could not afford to take such a risk.

"Without His Majesty we will be lost," he said. "It is because of His Majesty that the ngolops and all the anti-national elements have failed in all their seditious attempts to undermine the security of the country." The chimi expressed the appreciation of the people to the service forces for their dedicated service in protecting His Majesty the King's personal safety and peace in the country.

The Haa chimi said that His Majesty should curtail visits to high risk areas. But when His Majesty, in his deep concern for the well-being of his people and his country, insisted on visiting these areas, the security forces must pay special attention to the important responsibility of providing the maximum level of security.

The Thimphu chimi reminded the Assembly that the kingdom of Bhutan had, so far, thrived because of the close unity between the King and his subjects. This relationship, a historical legacy since the time of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, derived its strength from the guardian

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deities of the nation.

"It is because of the blessings of the Buddha and the Sangha, His Majesty's own aura, and the good fortune of the people that Bhutan has preserved and strengthened its present sovereignty and achieved dramatic socio-economic progress," he said. "His Majesty has looked after the Bhutanese people like his own children much better than we look after our own children."

The chimi said that the clergy, civil servants, the security troops, the business community, the farming population, and the youth of Bhutan all treasured the love and affection that His Majesty bestowed on them. Meanwhile the clergy must continue to offer their prayers for the safety and well being of His Majesty while the people must serve His Majesty and the country with complete loyalty and dedication.

THE INDIAN IDENTITY. *Salman Khurshid, former Indian minister of state for external affairs, at a roundtable discussion conducted by Calcutta's The Telegraph.*

In parts of Jammu and Kashmir, again they would say "You are an Indian", sometimes innocently, as a description; sometimes with a political edge, which means that, "We reject you, you are somebody else, you are a foreigner."

I have spoken to people in the BJP and they say that 'being Indian' is part of a spiritual concept. It's not a geographical thing, it's a spiritual thing. It comes from within. And I've often asked, well, what happens when a line of control is drawn or a border is drawn, what happens to that spiritual concept? You draw a line over that as well?

The fact really is that there is a legal contract that we all make amongst ourselves, which we did in 1950 and said we are Indians because we all accept this document as something very, very important – the Constitution. And so long as you continue to accept it to be very important, the institutions that have been under that Constitution continue to be important and that gives you your *des*. Right? And whatever is outside that, is *pardes*.

The only problem is that for Shiv Sena I am outside that. For me, that thought, not Shiv Sena itself, is outside it. You see, this is the dichotomy that exists. Ultimately it is a question of feeling. I just feel Indian and doesn't matter where you are, you feel Indian. It's like being born with a certain family. You can consciously reject it, you can consciously strengthen your bonds with it, you can let the bonds lapse. But there's a perception that grows around you that I belong here. That's all. And I think feeling an Indian is having a perception that you belong to where

India is. And it doesn't have to be here. It can even be in parts of London, where you feel equally Indian and you're seen as equally Indian.

PLAINSPEAK THROUGHOUT.

Asma Jahangir of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, on last year's wrangle involving the president, the chief justice and the prime minister, which ended in the resignation of the former two.

It is said that our institutions are breaking up. But these institutions in my view were hollowed up a long time ago. They have only needed a push to come crumbling. We saw one instance of it last year. The judiciary did not break up then. It began doing that a long time ago – when it decided to hang an elected prime minister on the diktat of a martial law administrator. It further cracked when in 1981 the judges, whom we call "my lords" in the courts, agreed for the sake of their jobs to have their noses rubbed in the ground and to accept the bidding of a dictator to forget about their previous oaths of office and to take a new one if they wanted to stay on as judges.

There were two aspects of what happened last year and both were so weird that neither can be applauded. On the one side was a chief justice who kept running to the chief of army staff, had the decisions of his liking made in the President House, and carried sheafs of stay orders in his pocket to deliver on petitions that he always fixed before himself. On the other side were the other people on the judiciary agog for an opportunity for the high office for themselves.

There is talk of "Quetta conspiracy". It was not really that, for a conspiracy presumes a certain sense of guilt and the need to do things quietly, behind the walls. What happened here was a broad daylight affair – it was more a "Quetta coup". And this did not comprise of just one change. It was a whole package the rest of which will unravel as the time passes.

The establishment in our country, remember, does not put all its money on one horse. It always works by a larger design. When it decided that the chief justice of the time could not sufficiently deliver the goods it looked for and identified another who would.

The Quetta coup did not just consist in the removal of the chief justice and the president. It had also decided, for one, that the president would be Justice Tarar. Why? Because it had also been decided that a 'soft revolution', a so-called Islamic revolution, had to be ushered in. This would be an order manned by a sort of junior cousins of Taliban.

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John Collee
The London Observer



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Sex and marriage in Nepal

The Nepali Supreme Court's landmark decision against virginity tests is not any more progressive than it needs to be.

by *Shanta Basnet Dixit*

In the changing social context, to preserve virginity, or to indulge in sexual activities with the person of one's choice is an individual decision. Some people are open about their sex lives; others have secret relationships. Having a sexual relationship does not change a woman's legal status.

Some people first have a child and then decide to get married; others live as husband and wife for all practical purposes but never tie the nuptial knot.

Since society is modernising on all fronts, and individual freedom is being emphasised more and more, having sex alone cannot establish that a marriage has taken place. Neither

can parents absolve themselves of their responsibilities towards a daughter who has had sex.

Loss of virginity and marriage are not considered the same in legal terms. Loss of virginity cannot be construed to mean that marriage has taken place. A grown up woman having sex with a man has become common. In such cases, a child can be born, intentionally or otherwise. That is natural.

Only if a girl has been married in the traditional manner or has married in a simple ceremony or has registered her marriage according to law can a marriage be said to have taken place. (writer's translation)

The above was part of the landmark decision handed down on 29 July by a bench of Nepal Supreme Court made up of Justices Arbindanath Acharya and Rajendra Nath Nakkha in response to an appeal filed by petitioner Annapurna Rana against a lower court decision.

Annapurna Rana had filed a case in the Kathmandu District Court seeking "sustenance" from the family property administered by mother Ambika Rana and the 'legal heir' brother Gorakh Bahadur Rana (who last year married King Birendra's only daughter, Shruti). The respondents had claimed that the petitioner had already been married in Naini Tal, India, and had even borne a child, and was thus ineligible for "sustenance" (*mana chamal*), which the law provides only to unmarried daughters.

The mother and brother pleaded with the judge to order physical tests on Annapurna to confirm her marital status. These tests were to prove that: a) she was not a virgin; and b) she had given birth to a child. The district court acceded to the request and ordered a medical examination on Annapurna; a decision that was

confirmed by the appellate court. It was only on further appeal that the Supreme Court handed down what is seen to be a precedent-setting decision.

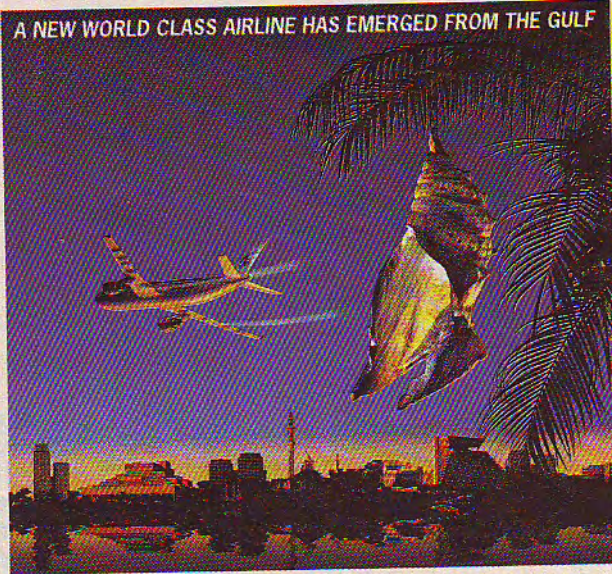
This progressive and forward-looking judgement by the Supreme Court, which has a public image of being composed of staid gentlemen (no women up there), must be seen as an attempt to establish new principles of social relations in a traditional society that is being buffeted by demographic and cultural changes. The judges sought to inject new mores into existing middle class morality, which assumes that anyone who is a mother has to be necessarily married.

There is no doubt that the Supreme Court has corrected the travesty of the lower courts' decision, both on a woman's right to privacy and on the principle of what constitutes 'marriage'. The judges were correct to stay with the legal definition of marriage, which requires either registration or a socially accepted ceremony (which in a society as diverse as Nepal's, changes from one ethnicity and caste group to another).

Quite expectedly, the judgement was lambasted and lampooned in the Kathmandu press for having sanctioned "Western-style promiscuity" in Nepali society. Media commentators asserted that the ruling would unleash rampant pre-marital promiscuity, and lead to insecurity among young women who give birth out of wedlock. Wrote a columnist, "The ruling has brought shame to every Nepali girl because she can go ahead and live with a man, have children and still not be married to him...A man can now have sex with a woman, have children and then abandon her."

These arguments, advanced by men, patronisingly ignore the obvious fact that women are also endowed with innate intelligence, and can make proper decisions for themselves. Women are not so vulnerable that they are unable to fend off the sexual advances of men. In fact, women are, by and large, careful about their sexuality and seek to protect its so-called 'market value'. They know fully well that sex without marriage is a tricky affair, and that in a society to live a good life and to bring up children, having a man in the house helps. The

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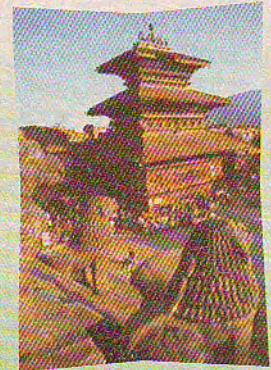
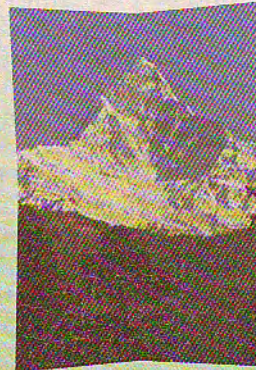
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verdict, that having a child does not constitute marriage, should ring as a strong warning bell to all women.

Should the verdict be well-publicised, men used to having their way with women may now find them less accommodating. It is likely that a woman will be more insistent on knowing the man's intentions before entering into sexual relations. By encouraging both sides to weigh the pros and cons of their actions, it makes the sexual act itself more meaningful, and if such a union can be idealised, 'sacred'. As for promiscuity, the licentious did not have to wait for a court verdict to carry on.

To reiterate, now that responsibility for individual action rests upon oneself, it becomes all the more important that every woman in Nepal get to know about this Supreme Court verdict, and all its nuances. The present case should become part of adult literacy classes as well as senior-level school textbooks.

The Annapurna Rana case is also significant in that it compels Nepali

society to take another look at parental/familial attitudes towards non-conformist individuals (read women). The dominant conservative forces are usually able to undermine individual rights in the name of 'tradition'; in this case the law was sought to be used to implement the yardstick of a set of norms that militates against the very concept of individual choice.

The issue of property rights for women, which has generated much debate in Nepal, is one area where the court decision could have far-reaching implications. The law at present provides only for unmarried daughters who have reached the age of 35 to be equal heir to parental property. The definition of marriage as laid out in the decision makes it possible for a woman in a live-in relationship to demand a share of parental property.

All told, the Nepali Supreme Court's decision is not any more forward-thinking than it needs to be, and will not necessarily force 'modernisation' on the Nepali population. In a real democracy, there is

room for people with contesting philosophies, opinions and lifestyles. We must realise that Nepal is a country with a multitude of ethnic groups that have very different norms and values regarding life's rites of passage. If there is polygamy among some groups, there is polyandry among others.

The Supreme Court decision, in being broad and progressive, emphasises and empowers these diverse streams. It reaffirms that as long as people are law-abiding citizens, it does not matter what their personal lifestyles are. A functioning democratic society does not allow for the undue advantage of one group at the cost of another. Blind and selective adherence to tradition, without a feel for the pulse of changing norms and values, will not help us determine our direction as a democratic nation.

S.B. Dixit is an educationist based in Kathmandu.



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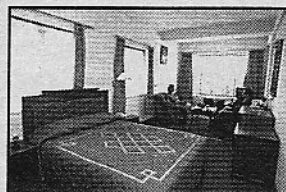
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Discovering a canon

If you didn't know about Pakistani writing in English, read this anthology.

When Himal asked me whether I would like to review an anthology of Pakistani writing in English (PWE), I agreed immediately. There was a comfortable feel to the term as it seemed to suffer from familiar baptismal problems; Indian writing in English is equally jaw-cracking. And the possibility of discovering new writers was more than exciting. After all, except for the high-profile Bapsi Sidhwa, Hanif Kureishi, Zulfikar Ghose and Sara Suleri, in India we hardly hear of other PWE.

For one thing, Pakistani books are impossible to get in India. Judging by the way the Pakistani Oxford University Press stall at the World Book Fair in Delhi earlier this year remained empty because customs would not release its books, the non-availability of Pakistani books is clearly more than a marketing oversight. It is hardly surprising, then, that we do not know much about the development profile of PWE.

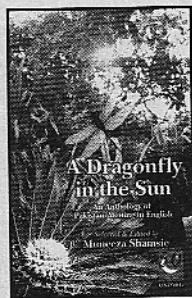
This is why Muneeza Shamsie's "Introduction" is so interesting. PWE, she points out, has been around for a long time but it has not been greatly encouraged. Rising costs and book piracy are among the reasons Pakistani publishers will not risk taking up PWE, which, in any case, has a limited readership. Meanwhile, American and British publishers cannot seem to find a slot for it in their own print programmes.

The 1970s spurt in PWE poetry was eclipsed at the end of the decade with the martial law regime trying to get rid of English. There were a few literary journals like *The Ravi*, *The Pakistan Quarterly* and *Vision*, that published some creative writing, but now,

except for *She*, Pakistani newspapers and magazines hardly publish any PWE. Until very recently, PWE was not even on the academic syllabi. Clearly, Indians are not the only Subcontinentals who are ignorant about PWE. Fortunately, precisely because PWE is relatively unknown, one can break the cardinal rule against reviewing anthologies and comment on the contents of *A Dragonfly in the Sun*.

Confrontations

My initial disappointment at seeing the NRP (non-resident Pakistanis) biggies in the collection quickly evaporated as I renewed my acquaint-



A Dragonfly in the Sun: An Anthology of Pakistani Writing in English

Selected and edited by
Muneeza Shamsie
Oxford University Press,
Karachi, 1997

hardback xxxi + 599 pages
PKR 900

reviewed by
Shobhana Bhattacharji

tance with Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* whose chapters on the Partition riots are included in this volume. As always, any account of these riots reduces one to helplessness: Why did they happen? What motivates communities to such inhuman orgies of cruelty?

Shamsie says that Sidhwa's novel is the only account of the riots in PWE so far. Which is amazing, and reminds one of the view of some that India still

has to produce the definitive novel on Partition. Let those who want to believe this continue to wait, but meanwhile they could have a shot at Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and the recent translations of Krishna Baldev Vaid's *Steps in Darkness* and *The Broken Mirror*. Sidhwa's book is in the same category. In any case, the definitive book about Partition would probably be a collection of fiction and non-fiction from both countries, and not any single volume on the subject by just one side.

This anthology has several pieces on confrontations: between West and East Pakistan, between Pakistan and emigrants to the west, between married partners, and so on. The most powerful are those about huge issues. For instance, Tariq Ali's *The Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, is a novel about the 16th-century confrontation between the Moors and the Christians in Granada which he wrote after seeing the world's abysmal ignorance about the Arabs during the Gulf War.

Though I am uncompromisingly committed to the necessity and power of history, the extract from this novel left me with mixed feelings. The cross-versus-crescent rhetoric broadcast by the West over the media, beginning around the time that Ayatollah Khomeini initiated the revolution in Iran and becoming almost hysterical during the Gulf War, had made several of us very angry. It all sounded as if we were back in the medieval Crusades. We wished that someone would educate the Christian West about their visceral and ignorant reactions. Still, what is it about our present which makes even a Marxist like Tariq Ali revert to a form of

“roots” and assert an aspect of Islamic history? Why are the most rational amongst us allowing ourselves to think in terms of hostile confrontations of religions? Isn't that exactly what religious fundamentalists would like to show – that all of us are motivated by religious identities?

Prose, lovely prose

Other prose works which I liked immensely include extracts from Ahmad Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, Zaib-un-Nissa's *The Bull and the She Devil*, Tariq Rahman's short story, *Bingo* (apparently Pakistani slang for Bengali), and Shamsie's own *Shahrazad's Golden*



Bapsi Sidhwa.

Leopard. These range in time from pre-Partition days to the present, and in content from politics to the complex and eventually murderous confusion of physical desire, to the always terrifying business of unequal treatment of siblings by a parent which is evident to the victim but not to anyone else who might be able to prevent the child from going mad. The prose is varied, inventive, moving, as is the language throughout the anthology. The editor's word limit prevents me from raving in like style about the poetry in *Dragonfly*.

Like Indian writing in English (IWE), PWE is low on drama. Shamsie has taken the trouble to include extracts by two dramatists who live overseas – Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Rukhsana Ahmad's feminist *Song for a Sanctuary*.

In contrast to a tight form like the sonnet's, an anthology has an awesome range of possibilities and is likely to displease many because it has necessarily to leave out someone's favourites. However, the relative unfamiliarity with PWE has made

Shamsie's task less likely to raise readers' hackles than, say, an anthology of Romantic poetry. This “essentially retrospective” selection covers, as Shamsie says, a wide range of “good, representative poetry, fiction and drama which has appeared or been accepted for publication”. It is, then, intended to give a *chaska* (taste) of PWE. And it succeeds.

A Dragonfly in the Sun is part of “The Jubilee Series” which, (email *zindabad!*) Shamsie explained, is a commissioned set of OUP Pakistan books on 50 years of Pakistan's history, sociology, literature and so on. Shamsie, understandably, concentrates on writers of the last 50 years but she has also included writers born before Partition. The history of India and Pakistan is inevitably linked. So how does she define ‘Pakistani’? Quite simply, as those who chose Pakistan after 1947 and those who are “Pakistani by marriage”!

Bangladesh is represented by several Bengali writers from pre-Partition, post-Partition and pre- and post-Bangladesh periods, and the trauma of 1971 is recorded in stories like “Bingo”. Among other good things in the book are headnotes about the authors (though Shamsie has omitted many birth dates), a glossary, no italics for non-English words, no standardisation of spellings for these (as a result the Hindi *Paatth Shala* or school becomes *Part Shala*, and *Hriday* or heart becomes *Riday* which is as it would sound to a non-Hindi speaker), a bibliography, and an index.

A nice addition to my vocabulary has been “literary journalist”, the professional description of Shamsie on the dust jacket. She told me that this is how the British Council introduced her about a year ago and she has decided to stick with it. The book is priced rather high by Indian standards. Nevertheless, once the scheduled paperback version is out, I hope it will be widely available. In India as well. ▲

S. Bhattacharji is Reader, *Jesus and Mary College, Delhi*, and Associate Fellow, *Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla*.

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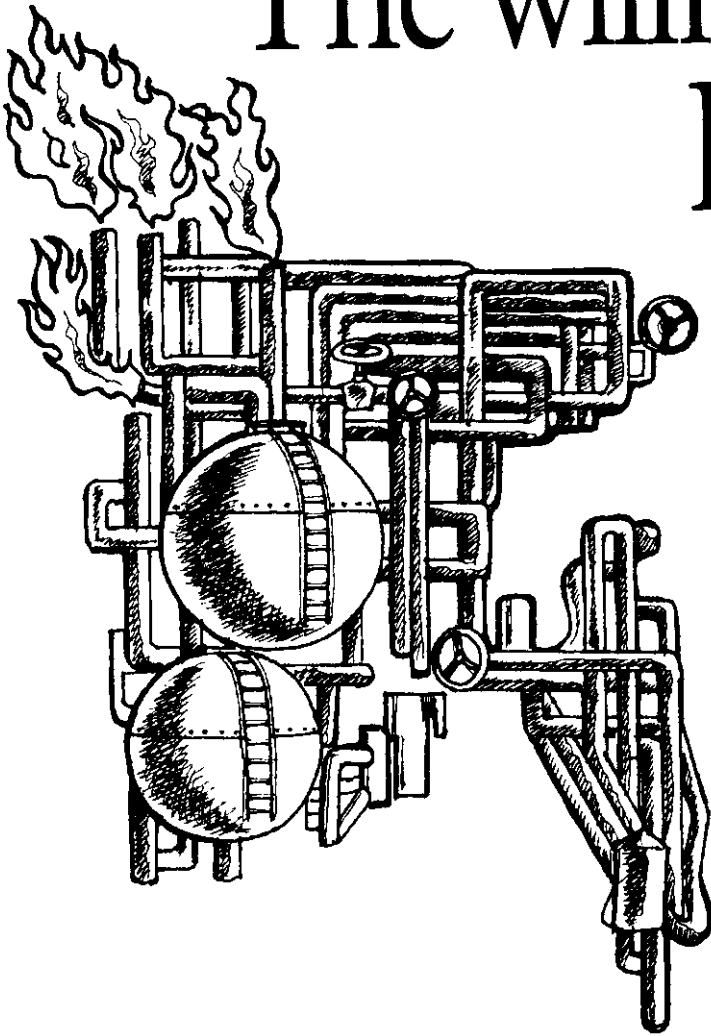
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The willing fields of Bangladesh



In American charm offensive is on with the discovery of natural gas reserves, but the Bangla state and civil society is hardly able to safeguard its long-term national interests.

by Quddus Mia

If he gets over his disenchantment with the nuclear daredevils of South Asia, Bill Clinton is slated to swing by Bangladesh, too, this October. Expect photo opportunities with cute street children, destitute women and select NGO barons. Expect unctuous statements about human rights, democracy, poverty alleviation, economic development and bilateral trade. But when it comes to the rub, expect the hottom line to be about energy, and the access of American corporations to the massive gas reserves that have been discovered under Bangla soil and sea.

The visit, some months back, by Bill Richardson, special envoy of the president and the US Ambassador to

the United Nations gave us a taste of things to come. As he came and went, the Dhaka media and intelligentsia cooed with appreciation and amity. As we all know, the task of mature journalism and pragmatic scholarship is to keep the truth beyond the reach of the general public.

Bangladesh claims to have a nominally free press, but Clinton's visit will demonstrate how much intellectual freedom and social responsibility is exhibited in the local media. With loan-defaulting, land-encroaching newspaper proprietors among those manoeuvring for their slice of the gas fields, it is unlikely that this part of the 'free press' will ever be any more autonomous than the print media op-

erating under the direct patronage of the state. More liberal, less unscrupulous editors will be too flattered by the thought of meeting the US president, too concerned about social standing; under such circumstances there will be no serious departure from mainstream ululations of welcome and cooperation. There will be long post-editorials by people invited to official functions who will pass off overheard reception banter as "intelligence" and "insight" on the state of bilateral relations.

Imperial tutelage

So, what will be missing? When Bill Clinton comes to Bangladesh, what will we *not* hear? We already know

about American interest in human rights, responsive governance, increased transparency, and the "commitment of up to USD 600,000 to projects in this area". To hear them say it, human rights and advancing democracy are subjects which will carry equal weight as energy at the forthcoming bilateral talks. However, truth he told, support for human rights and democracy is but the public relations counterpoint to the real business of energy.

After all, how would it look if Clinton came to Bangladesh to discuss *only* energy? The investment in human rights and democracy represents negligible sums, made to distract public attention from the hundreds of millions of dollars that American corporations stand to gain in the gas fields. It makes you look progressive. It serves to legitimise your presence. It's damn good business.

The United States of America has no substantial interest in advancing human rights or democracy in Bangladesh. Its main interest is to use its power to overwhelm Bangladesh with 'goodwill' and pressure so as to get at the hooty. In its strategy, the United States is using what they have learnt from that matron of all imperial powers, Great Britain.

Britain was extolling the virtues of free trade in the 1860s, the time of its imperial pre-eminence. The British global presence then was somewhat akin to that of the Americans today. All Britain had to do to fend off any military threats was to instigate proprietary laws in its vast colonies and to utilise appropriated resources. For example, the 1865 and 1878 Indian Forest Acts were used to exclude local people and give the British monopoly stakes in the teak forests of the Mysore Presidency; this teak was used to build warships to fight the Germans. These Acts were accompanied by far more progressive but lightweight forest *policies*, which spoke dreamily of local people's rights to access.

Note the parallels. The British promulgated proprietary forest laws to secure resources for themselves while offering the local people meaningless liberal forest *policies* that suggested

progress and change. The British got their teak but the people of South Asia didn't get their land back. The Americans today are lobbying to secure a deciding and lucrative gas-mining *contract* while offering token *project support* for human rights and democratic progress. Sounds like a fair swap.

Still, the Americans do not have the distinguished pedigree of gentrified theft and polite intimidation perfected by the British for over two centuries. To make up for these inadequacies, American administrations past and present have resorted to laughable moral arguments to defend their transgressions. These embarrassing, soft focus and holier-than-thou iterations about the greater good of mankind of course feature the USA in the role of Guardian. And why not? If you write the script, you can be the leading actor.

Goodbye democracy?

"The 20th century has been characterised by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy," says Australian social scientist Alex Carey.

The propaganda of foreign oil companies in Bangladesh has already begun. Half- and full-page advertisements over the past year in many of the national dailies testify to this. Democracy and market access are frequently clumped together with public statements from the Americans in a way that is confusing. The following is a guess as to what the actual relationship could be.

The concept of 'democracy', American-style, is understood to mean acceptance of market discipline favoured by Western transnationals. This 'democracy' is not locally generated and self-articulated, and is actually threatened if you or I feel concern for basic human

needs such as education, health, jobs and food for our children. This 'democracy' is about safeguarding economic rationality with its shops full of goods we cannot afford, profits flowing to Western investors and a detached, capitalist class of Bangladeshis happy with their jobs with transnationals because of status, good pay and offices that have air conditioners and Pentium computers.

Frontline of pillage

It may be too late. Even as Bangladesh struggles to establish a responsive democratic system of national and local government with literate elected representatives who value public service in the national interest, it just may be too late. The transformation of our economic and political system into one that serves the market, or rather serves those in the market with purchasing power, will make a profound impact on the worldview of the typical Bangladeshi.

This is a country still searching for its soul. There is little sense of nationhood, except for those exaggerated expressions we see on the memorial days of 16 December, 21 February and 26 March. Most Bangladeshis today, whether small entrepreneurs or day labourers, work alone. Those of us not

worried about where the next meal is coming from are at most concerned about our families. Thoughts about where the country is going leave us feeling numb and overwhelmed.

As actors in a market, we are dependent on our own initiatives on expanding the economy. Social capital – the resources of a community – is gradually being eroded as patterns of social organisation realign around economic imperatives. The country's celebrity loan-defaulters and frauds are just taking the quick way out of

The fragmentation of communities is being accomplished by the free market and its free riders, making society easier to govern and exploit.

this nexus.

As lifestyles change, we have little contact with other workers or with our neighbours in the representation

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of public interest. Our exposure to political or labour organisations is minimal, except at election time when candidates come knocking. We, as a people, have yet to make full use of our human resources and our disposition is weak when approaching or confronting the institutions of state. We are economically fragile and insecure. We also want jobs with transnationals because of status, good pay and offices that have air conditioners and Pentium computers.

The fragmentation of communities is being accomplished by the free market and its free riders, making society easier to govern and exploit. This is an end that past autocratic regimes in Bangladesh could only have fantasised about. Unless we are fully aware of what is happening, oil companies from America and elsewhere will loot Bangladesh. And we won't even know it is happening.

Some cynics will see this as part of a historical continuum, the latest link in a chain where Marwari, Brit-

ish, Pakistani and then our own elites have expropriated the resources of this country. Multinational energy companies have already set up shop, creating as a frontline a class of Bangladeshis, sophisticated and cosmopolitan, who will defend this potential pillage. Nowhere to date has there been a serious discussion on the redistributive potential of the wealth to be generated by these foreign investments.

Behind the diplomatic lies of political delegations and business representations, Bangladesh is at risk of falling apart, both culturally and politically. And this at a time when we are trying to deepen the roots of human rights and democracy. American promises are a meaningless distraction. This is simply not where their concerns are. That is why American oil companies complained to the US State Department after Madeleine Albright cancelled her visit to Bangladesh in November 1997, feeling it had harmed their interests in

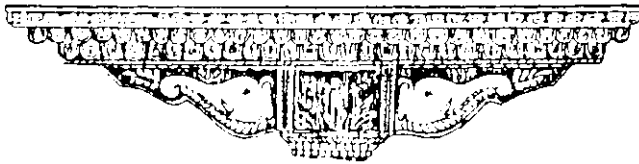
the country. That is why the US Energy Secretary planned a visit to Bangladesh this year.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is already a land of disconnected people less able to participate in the institutions of power. A majority of the urban cosmopolitan elite has little knowledge and no empathy with the rest of the country, except as a place where they can make money more easily than if they were in Britain or America. The cumulative impact of this is that we are unlikely to see any concerted challenge to the current ideology of the market and the will of transnational energy corporations in the near future.

So, there it is. Welcome to the Willing Fields of Bangladesh. What is mine is yours and what is yours is...yours.

Q. Mia is the pseudonym for a Bangladeshi who works in an aid agency.

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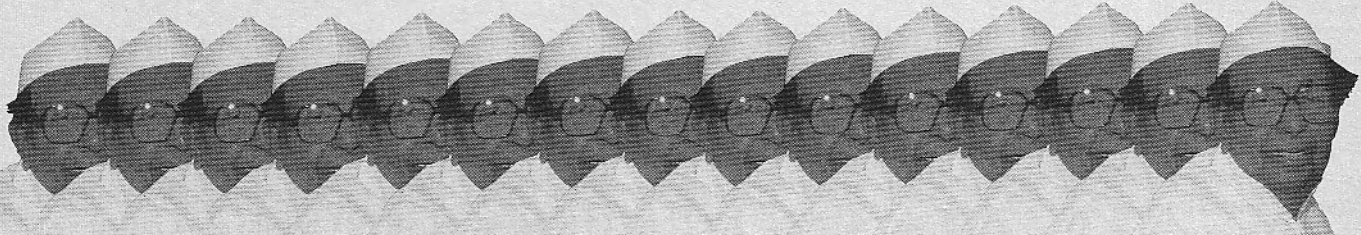
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Now that there are ways to clone our pets, the news turns the concept of reincarnation on its head. Here we were, firm in our belief that when the household goldfish breathes its last it will move up the karmic ladder to be a hamster, and when the hamster is no more, its soul will go into a cat, and at the cat's demise its spirit will occupy a puppy and so on. No more. Today, with advances in genetic engineering, it is possible to ensure that a goldfish in its afterlife will continue to be a goldfish. In a technique pioneered by the creators of Dolly the she-sheep, we are about to enter The Age of Immortal Pets.

No one has asked my dog Snot what he was in his previous incarnation, although my guess is that he was a broccoli. If he had a choice of afterlives, I'm sure Snot would file an application for something as immobile as possible, like a toadstool. Unlike other born-again dogs I know, Snot is the kind who's not really interested in a career progression in the hereafter to the higher vertebrates. Snot is a fatalist and his philosophy in his current passage through worldly existence is very simple: Take each minute as it comes. Don't plan anything. Don't expend more energy than is absolutely necessary. And, don't worry.

It is the same credo by which thousands of civil servants in the Subcontinent live and work. The dog would do very well as the office mascot for the Department of Livestock and Sports in any of our countries. Snot lives in what physicists would describe as a very Low Entropy Level. *One Day in the Life of Snot* would not be a very thick volume. In fact, the dog's daily log would read like this:

- 0600 Internal alarm clock rings. Wake up and yawn.
- 0601 Go back to sleep.

- 0614 Internal alarm clock rings again. Internal alarm clock irrevocably destroyed.
- 0615 Sleepwalk to cooler spot in corridor.
- 0618 Sit on hind legs with droopy eyelids. Scratch & sniff armpit, lick private parts.
- 0619 Yelp in sleep. Rapid Eye Movements.
- 0620 Think about going walkabout.
- 0820 After weighing pros and cons, decide that walkabout wouldn't be a bad idea at some point.
- 1020 Go walkabout: irrigate gladiolus, fertilise lawn, brisk olfactory inspection of lamppost.
- 1022 Finish walkabout, return to den.
- 1023 Chase away crow who mistakenly thinks dog is deceased. Resume siesta.
- 1750 Open eyes. ("Is this my next life, or am I still in my present life?")
- 1900 Semi-comatose.
- 1930 Bark like a maniac at no one in particular for 30 seconds.
- 2000 Feeding time, wag tail.
- 2030 Watch cable.
- 2130 Howl aimlessly at full moon in time-honoured tradition handed down from generation to generation of wolf ancestors.
- 2131 Abruptly call off howling as old shoes and curses are hurled from upper window.
- 2300 Call it a day.

Snot is now about 45 in human years, and his sedentary lifestyle is going to take a toll on his arteries. So the day will come when he will have to apply for his next posting in afterlife. There is a long waiting list for popular slots like a gnu, a jackass penguin or a tapeworm.

In the great scheme of things,

Snot hasn't excelled in any way, so he doesn't stand out among those who would, for instance, be reborn as Bill Gate's cat or Maneka Gandhi's goat. So what is an underdog to do? Fortunately, dog's best friend, man, has perfected a technique of artificially extracting the genetic material from a cell in Snot's saliva and fertilising an egg which incubates in a host ovary until birth and puppyhood.

The long and short of it is that although Snot's soul will henceforth be trapped in a dog's body, his owners will have the convenience of owning a pet that never actually dies. When Snot is no more, when he kicks the bucket, expires, is deceased, becomes an ex-dog, goes to his happy hunting grounds, not to worry – the late Snot will be reborn as a puppy identical in every respect to Uncle Snot including in barking like a maniac for no particular reason for 30 seconds every evening.

Although I, as Snot's owner, would be happy to have his surrogate offspring, the whole thing opens up vexing questions of ethics, intellectual property and inheritance laws.

For instance, would I want to sabotage Snot's legitimate chances of ultimately being reborn as Pete Sampras? OK, OK, maybe not immediately. But after a couple of improving cycles of death and rebirth?

And what if our politicians get hold of the technology and perpetuate themselves? Or worse, replicate themselves. What would a cabinet full of Sita Ram Kesri lookalikes look like? There is no doubt that genetic engineering must be kept as far away from politicians as possible. But I'd like to give Snot a shot.



.....and you thought you'd seen it all !



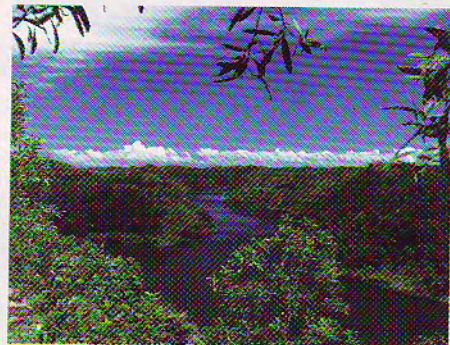
The Hanging Bridge at Rangamati



The blue waters of The Bay of Bengal



The colourful tribes



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