

HIMALAYAS

SOUTH ASIAN

April 2000

India's
diminished
politics

- Shiv Visvanathan

4/4/03

TALIBAN AFGHANISTAN

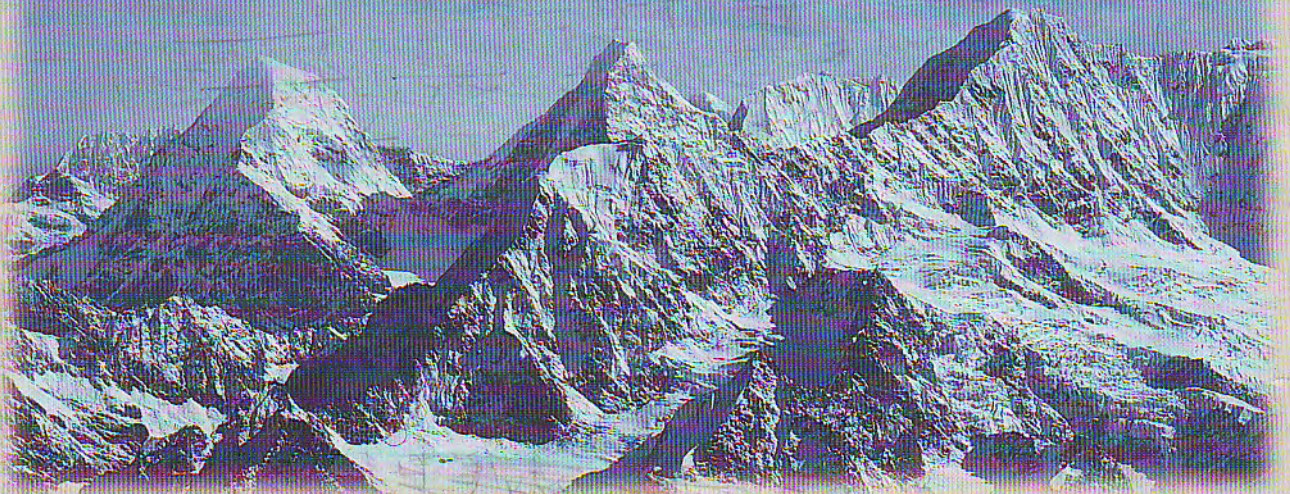
A question
of image
and governance

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NECON AIR

On the side of local angels

Nigel Allen's review (Himal, January 2000) of Chetan Singh's excellent book, *Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya 1800-1950*, makes the case for programmes that are designed to be specific to the context of place. He, however, goes on to note incorrectly that international ngos such as The Mountain Institute (TMI) and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) "...would have us believe that there are universal problems in mountain areas, which can be remedied by universal solutions from universal bureaucratic organisations like the UN or the bilateral agencies. They seek similarities in the construction of problems or universal 'mountain specificities' when the lesson to be learnt from this book is the conditions of mountain environments is firmly rooted in the context of place."

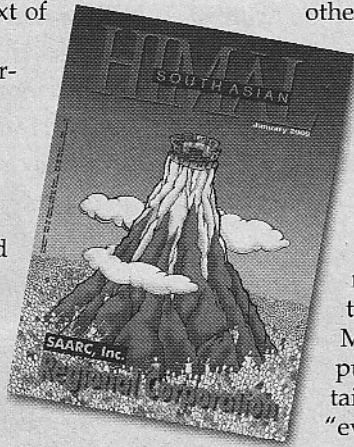
We are, in fact, in entire agreement with Singh's and Allan's point that the conditions of mountain environments are firmly rooted in the context of place. That is what we mean by "mountain specificities", whereby local particularities guide locally-designed development programmes. We take pride in the fact that reflection of local context is a hallmark of TMI projects and programmes—something we work to achieve by beginning each project with participatory involvement of stakeholders at all levels. The Appreciative Participatory Learning and Action (APPA) methodology we have developed for this purpose is proving effective in a number of different cultural contexts. However, the programmes that result are all

deeply reflective of local particularities.

While there can be no 'universal' solutions to development issues, this certainly does not, and should not, preclude the benefits to be gained from mountain communities learning from each other's experience and best practice. That is why we also believe in sharing the learning even though it does come from markedly differing contexts of place. One of the two major conclusions of the most recent Mountain Forum publication on mountain forests, states that "every strategy for ensuring that mountain people derive sustainable livelihoods from their forests and trees must be tailor-made for the local physical, biological, cultural and political environment—and ways of responding to change must always be included". This principle, indeed, is one of the most fundamental lessons to be learnt from TMI's field work with the mountain communities

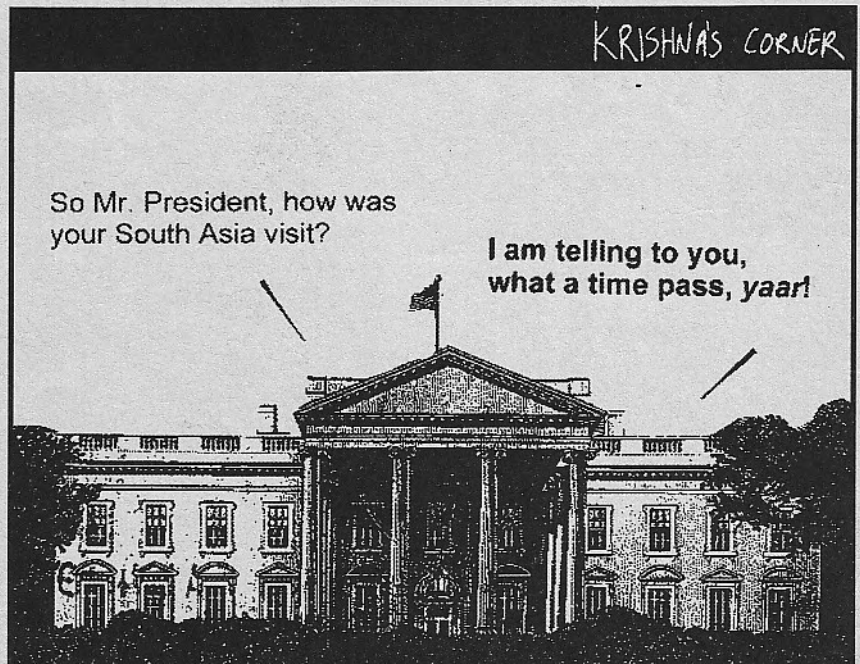
around the world. It is good to find ourselves in this case "on the side of the angels".

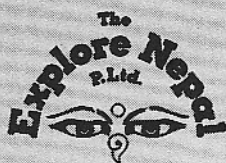
*D. Jane Pratt
President, TMI
Franklin, West Virginia,
USA*



Job at Jabbar

In the "Mediafile" section of the March issue, Chhetria Patrakar writes that Javed Jabbar, Pakistan's Information and Media Development advisor, is "on the right track". But she seems to be ignorant of the fact that the same advisor-saheb was the first one to submit application for a private cable television channel, and is the most likely to get permission for one. Apparently, his daughter, Mehreen Jabbar, is at the helm of affairs. It is certain that the advisor-saheb will use his influence to get this job done, as in the past he has not been above currying favours from those in power. Most recently, he did everything within his means to get the advisor's post, including resigning as Secretary of Information of the Milat Party, and writing puff-pieces in favour of the military regime. And to think that the likes of him had gained their

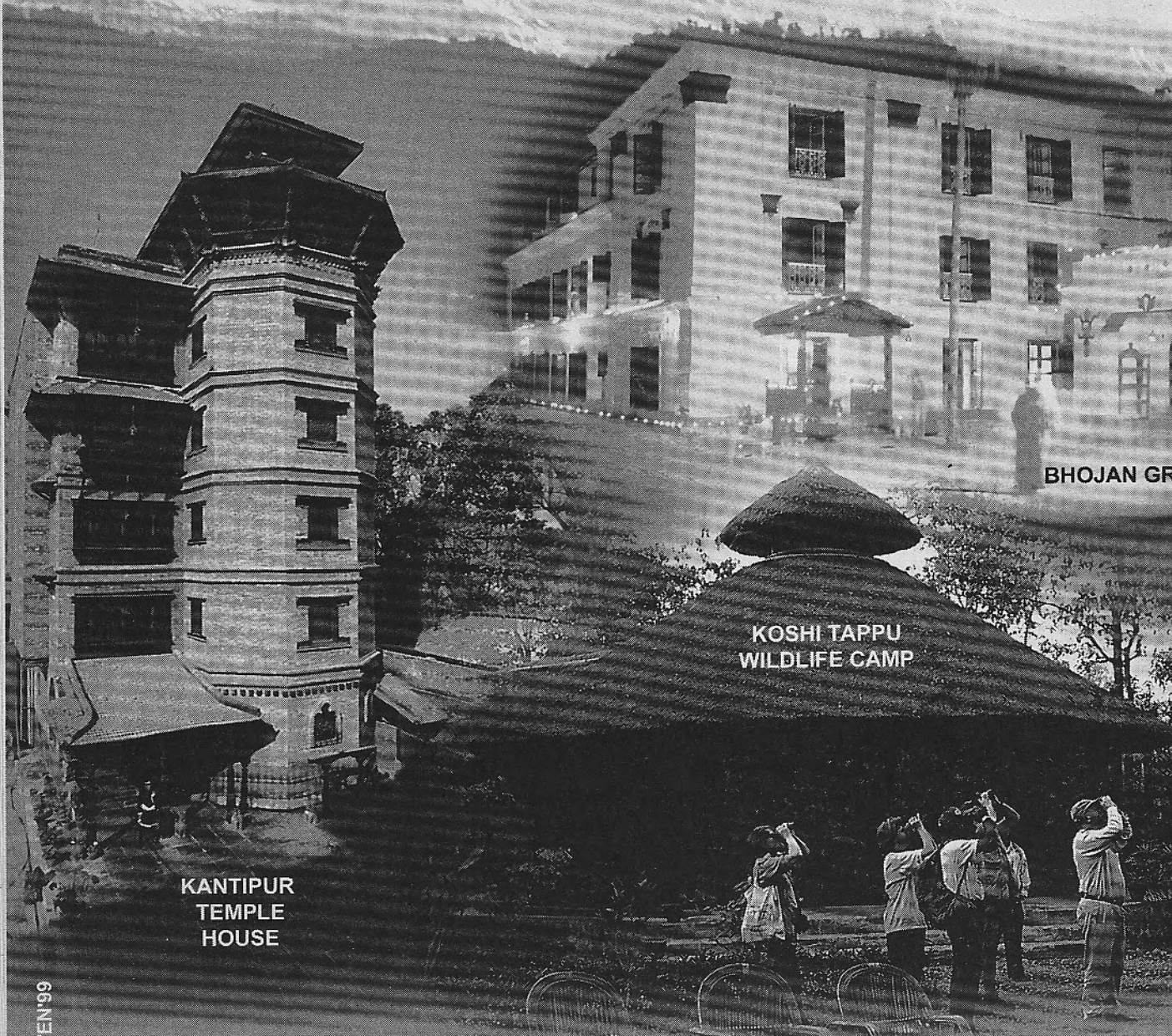




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Mustafa Nazir Ahmad
Pakistan

Caravan: A rejoinder

We disagree with Kanak Mani Dixit's unconditional praise for the Eric Valli film, *Caravan* (March 2000). We do agree that *Caravan* is stunningly beautiful, professionally produced, and most important of all, a great success. However, based on involved conversations with friends and colleagues who have either worked in Dolpo or are themselves Dolpopa, it is clear that as with any multi-layered contemporary



film, there are more complex issues lingering beneath *Caravan's* critically acclaimed veneer.

The first element strangely missing from Dixit's review is of any reference to the storm which is brewing concerning the proceeds from the film. The fact that local people in Dolpo, together with activists representing their cause, see *Caravan* as being in part their intellectual property, and thus see themselves as partly entitled to any resulting profit, is an important ethno-political development.

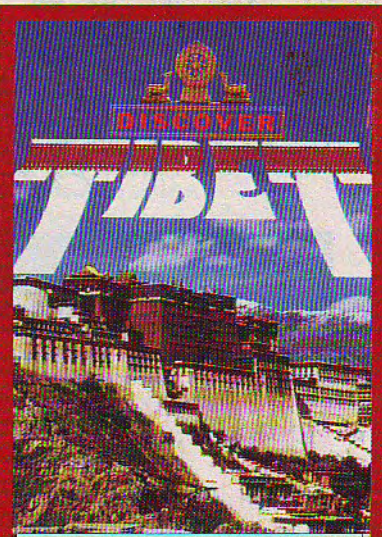
Dixit informs us that "Director Eric Valli has said that the life of the Dolpopa does not have to be romanticised, and so he does not pander to the overseas viewer by hyping the romance of high plateau". On one level, this support for the director's much-publicised position is fair: the film shows the back-breaking difficulty of eking out an existence in Dolpo against all climatic odds. At a more profound level, however, a genuinely 'unromantic' picture of Dolpo would have had to include election posters, Maoist disturbances, wrist watches, radios, Wai Wai noodles, green Chinese army

shoes, plane-loads of trekking groups, and other trappings of the modern world. And what about the psychological issues such as disaffection with traditional life and the desire of young people to head for the cities? The careful viewer is sure to notice that not a single one of these elements is addressed in the film. We cannot go along with Valli's claim that he is portraying an 'unromantic' reality.

Whilst the West is endlessly fascinated with the mythical Tibetosphere, Himalayan social scientists are working to pop the Shangri-La bubble and to inject a little social realism into the flat, one-dimensional images of smiling, peace-loving Tibetans. The greatest irony of all is that whilst this perspective is slowly penetrating the Western consciousness, it has yet to make serious inroads into middle-class Nepali perception. Judging by the reactions of the Nepali audience during the showing of *Caravan* in Kathmandu, very few had a realistic image of life in the high Himalayas, and perhaps even less so after seeing the film. Even more than in the West, the urban middle classes of Nepal have a tendency to exoticise and rarefy their fellow countrymen from remote mountainous districts, a prejudice that *Caravan* will do little to change.

Any piece of art should be appraised according to its stated objective. *Caravan* is a beautiful fable, a metaphor of Himalayan life frozen in time, and this is how it should be viewed and enjoyed. But as an 'unromanticised' picture of contemporary reality in Dolpo, as both Valli and Dixit claim it to be, the film is fundamentally flawed.

Mark Turin,
Sara Shneiderman
Kathmandu



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NEPAL

OLD HAT

GIRIJA PRASAD Koirala is back in the saddle at Singha Darbar. This is his fourth stint in the hot seat that have seen ten turns and six occupants since democracy was restored a decade ago. But it had better not be business as usual this time around, since Koirala has taken charge after ousting the person he himself had installed about a year ago.

Back then, it was hailed as a master stroke. Koirala's Nepali Congress was heading a coalition with the Nepal Communist Party (UML) when he called for mid-term elections "to rid the country of political instability". The Nepali Congress, while a divided house, was still in one piece even as its main rivals—both the NCP (UML) as well as the conservative Rastriya Prajatantra Party—had split formally. To check dissent and control rebel candidates within his party, Koirala announced that if his party gained an absolute majority, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai would be the next prime minister.

It is unclear whether it was the ceaseless campaigning and direct leadership of Koirala that worked, or the magic of Bhattarai's name, but the Congress managed a comfortable majority. Koirala, as head of the victorious party, kept to his pre-election promise and had Bhattarai installed as the prime minister. It was a decision that he was to regret from day one, as Bhattarai went on to form a cabinet that was a queer mix of his old cronies and suspected wheeler-dealers.

The Bhattarai government was guided by the principle that those who do nothing can do no wrong. It would have worked, if it were not for some feats of his faithfuls. Yog Prasad Upadhyay, the prime minister's Man Friday, stirred a hornet's nest as education minister by his whimsical decision to grant tenure to thousands of temporary school teachers even as the result of a competitive examination for those very posts was pending. Bal Bahadur KC, another Bhattarai favourite, gained notoriety when a local daily had him scaling a compound wall in the capital.

Things worsened as Bhattarai's age and ineptitude started to show. His offhand remarks after the hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight IC 814 was considered hasty and inappropriate, for he seemed to be accepting blame even before an investigation was complete. Though he backtracked later, his

interview to a foreign news agency rattled the palace when he aired apprehensions about a risk to Nepali democracy from the king. The resignation of finance minister Mahesh Acharya over the appointment of the Governor of the Nepal Rastra Bank, the central depository, also seemed to indicate Bhattarai's uncaring attitude.

Bhattarai's increasing recklessness was matched by Koirala's growing restlessness. Koirala believed he had promises to keep to those who had given his party a majority, while Bhattarai thought that his being and continuing in the chair was in itself an unparalleled achievement. Things came to a head after Koirala made a tour of the hinterland and concluded that the Maoist insurgency was getting out of hand, and that Bhattarai was doing nothing to curb it.

Once Koirala decided to oust Bhattarai, the latter's formal exit became only a question of timing. Under the threat of a no-confidence motion from MPs of his own party, Bhattarai bid an emotional farewell from the podium of the House and resigned. As a parting shot, he fired several salvos at Koirala, and pointedly expressed the wish that a "yuba peedi" (younger generation) would take over the reins of government after him.

In retrospect, Bhattarai's source of power was not numbers, but the respect that he commanded due to his absolute integrity. While he remains untainted even now, the same cannot be said about the coterie that surrounded him. For the capital's intellectual elite, however, his repeated breach of decorum stuck at the craw. His light-hearted comments about petty corruption, the bloated national army and his own indispensability, finally saw him lose this mainstay of his support once he started to ridicule its very value system. The elite could not indulge any more the ineptitude of an old man and forgive the incompetence of this historic figure.

Koirala is more feared than respected. Reputed to be a man of action rather than contemplation, he inspires either fierce loyalty or intense hatred, the latter especially from the mainstream left. Should Koirala fail to deliver on the variety of challenges facing the country, he himself has shown the way the party should deal with him by engineering the Bhattarai ouster. History can no longer bail him out, and



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nobody knows that better than Koirala. His announcement that 60 years of his active political life was at stake is an acceptance of reality rather than bravery.

The priorities set for his government by Koirala appear to be well thought out politically. Controlling the Maoist insurgency, restoring faith in the administration, and checking rampant corruption are some of the immediate worries. The insurgency, however, is foremost in everyone's mind. Poor Nepalis—rebel, peasant and police jawan—are dying to the gun and bomb like never before, and the resolution of this problem will probably make or break the new prime minister.

Even beyond the Maoist problem, however, Koirala faces complex issues where quick and visible results are difficult to deliver. Restoring normalcy to strained Indo-Nepal relations, pulling the SAARC process back on track by prevailing upon New Delhi to come back to the postponed Kathmandu Summit, and courting belligerent aid donors, are some of the other critical issues that will test Koirala's diplomatic mettle.

Unfortunately, other than a few exceptions such as the re-installed Finance Minister Mahesh Acharya, Koirala's team of tainted faces of the past does not inspire much confidence. Cooperation of the civil service is suspect because its top echelons consist of the very people Koirala had expelled during his first term as prime minister and who owe their present positions to a court directive invalidating that decision. To complicate matters further, Koirala will have to contend

with both the left and its traditional animus against him, and ambitious parliamentary party colleagues expecting their pound of flesh for aiding and abetting the ouster of Bhattarai.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala is said to be resolute, and he will need that quality in good measure to meet the challenges that he himself has set. Time is certainly not on the side of the septuagenarian. The first few months in office will determine whether this will be a grand finale or a curtain of disgrace for the evergreen Young Turk of the Nepali Congress. Now that he has taken charge, there is no looking back. It is either perform or perish. ▲

- C.K. Lal

SRI LANKA

NO STOPPING THE TIGERS

THE PEACE initiative in Sri Lanka was dealt a deathly blow on 10 March, when the Tamil Tigers launched an explosive attack on the ceremonial state drive leading to Parliament in Colombo. As frightening as the results were—the blast cost no less than 29 lives and many wounded—it could have been worse.

The target was a motorcade returning to Colombo from Parliament after the passing of the defence votes in this year's budget and the monthly renewal of the state of emergency that has been in force for several years. The Tigers had assembled a killer squad of at least six

THE PRESIDENT'S VISION

SRI LANKAN President Chandrika Kumaratunga has the distinction of being the only South Asian head of state/government who has faced the bomber's wrath and survived. A bomb went off on 18 December 1999, and she sustained grievous facial injuries which are obvious to this day. In what is perhaps a case of showing unusual sensitivity to something that is both personal and a disfiguring injury, the Colombo press has not reported extensively on it and the South Asia intelligentsia remains unaware of what the president has had to go through.

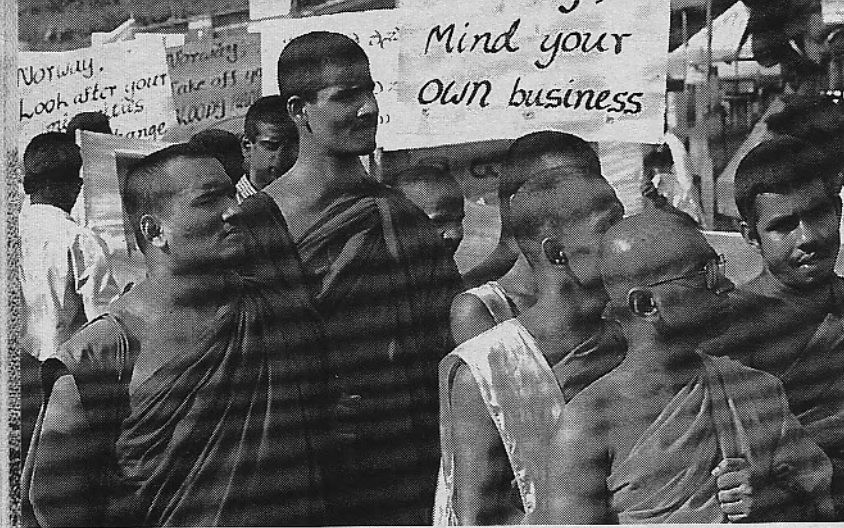
Though the details are not clear, those in the know in Colombo maintain that the president has lost use of her right eye, although it is hoped that sight will be restored in time. Kumaratunga now wears glasses and is not as photogenic as she used to be without them.

Recently, the president is said to have been irked when a local photographer accompanying a freelance Indian journalist went to see her in connection with an interview for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*—she said that photographers were angling for ungainly pictures of her, and asked the journalist to get a stock picture from the presidential media unit.

Kumaratunga has begun to wear glasses, but this robs her of the old charisma that she exuded. Accompanied by her eye surgeon, she was due to leave the country in early April, possibly for some reconstructive surgery.



SENA VIDANAGAMA



Strident stance:
Saying 'No' to
Norway, in
Colombo.

suicide bombers and an arsenal that included general-purpose and multi-purpose machine guns, light anti-tank weapons, 40-millimetre grenade launchers and as many as six claymore mines. Had they succeeded in hitting the VIP motorcade, the victims could have included cabinet ministers, officers of the armed forces, police chiefs and many more. As one newspaper columnist put it, they would surely have stunned the nation and shocked the world.

But god smiled down on the VIPs, though not on lesser mortals who were victims of the carnage. It all began when the occupant of a tumbledown overgrown lot overlooking the state drive alerted the police upon spotting some activity by persons he thought were drug addicts. Three policemen who arrived to check out the place were gunned down by the militants who were thus forced to prematurely unleash their attack. While the targeted VIPs, including Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte who runs the war for the Colombo government, lived to tell the tale, the authorities were left to mull over the reality that the Tigers had been able to smuggle in enough men and material that would have successfully broken through the defence cordons of almost any of the vital installations in Colombo.

As one of the country's well-known LTTE watchers put it: "The Tiger plan on that day was uniquely unprecedented... The wholesale destruction of the upper echelons of the defence establishment was the objective..."

Indeed, if the intended carnage of the VIPs had happened, the warming up for peace that began with Norway's willingness to play broker, would have perhaps instantly fizzled out. President Chandrika Kumaratunga, however, was firm that the 10 March attack would not derail her peace process. Despite the violent pressure being maintained by the Tigers, she said that she believes the rebels are "softening towards talks", and that she hopes to have a peace deal worked out in six months.

The Norwegians, meanwhile, think "it may take years". One reason, actually, may be that the chief Norwegian negotiator Knut Vollebaek (see *Commentary*, March 2000) lost his job with the collapse of the Oslo government on the same day of the Colombo ambush, making way for Labour Party rule. While this may not change the mediation equation, matters may be stalled for a while.

What the 10 March assault has surely done is to further steel the belief of the hardliners among the majority Sinhalese community, including the influential Buddhist clergy, that there can be no negotiated peace with the Tigers. The four chief monks of the major Buddhist sects have written to the president saying that "what prevails in the country is Tamil racist terrorism and not an 'ethnic' problem". They have said that in such a situation, "the only solution is to use the power of the State to crush terrorism and firmly establish the writ of the government and law and order throughout the country".

This is also the view that the army holds, with the commander, Lt. General Srilal Weerasooriya, firmly on record that there can be no peace without "crushing the Tigers". In a communiqué issued through the defence ministry a week after the most recent LTTE terror, he said that the "sole impediment to final victory is the shortage of soldiers", and appealed to parents to encourage their sons to join the army.

This then is the ambiguous position of Sri Lanka: while its president is striving toward a political consensus for peace with the Tigers, her army is moving might and main to enlist more soldiers for a "final victory". Meanwhile, the war continues to extract its human toll. ▲

NEPAL • INDIA

LET THE FLIGHTS BEGIN

IT HAS been more than three months since Indian Airlines suspended its flights to Kathmandu at the insistence of the Indian government, and the recent failure of bilateral talks regarding security arrangements at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport means that the resumption of flights is still in limbo. Meanwhile, Nepal's India-dependent summer tourism has been gravely affected, and Indian Airlines itself loses INR 25.5 lakh a day as a result of the suspensions.

The calling off of flights to Kathmandu from New Delhi, Varanasi and Calcutta, was decreed even as the hijacked Airbus 310 was circling Amritsar in the very first leg of the extended episode. It was a novel tool of regional diplomacy, this punitive banning of flights to a neighbouring country. India's response to a very real security lapse at the Tribhuvan International Airport was a singular sanction that is both unprecedented and extravagant.

Ironically, Indian Airlines has been as much a scapegoat in this matter as has the Nepali economy. It was the air carrier that introduced civil aviation to Nepal in the 1950s and helped in the country's opening-up. Not so many years ago, the Indian government had decided to stop IA from flying its brand new Airbus 320 aircraft following a crash in Bangalore—a political decision taken to blame an airplane which is today the mainstay of the airlines' fleet. That ban on an aircraft, and this ban on flights to an entire country—even while all international carriers continue their Kathmandu services—could be considered embarrassing, if the Indian public and media were listening.

But there is also the fact that, in this time of crisis, even Nepali scholars, journalists and business elites, have proved themselves incapable of raising a voice loud enough to be heard in New Delhi. The quiet wait for bilateral talks to take place shows a fatalistic sense of incapability. However, this does not negate the fact that a sense of alienation, completely needless, has grown in Kathmandu from the feeling of having been unfairly singled out. Rightly or wrongly, Nepalis are reminded of the 15-month economic embargo instituted by Rajiv Gandhi in 1988 against landlocked Nepal for, among other things, daring to import military supplies from China.

While both sides are tight-lipped on the failure of the talks, matters seem to rest at the exact nature of upgraded security at Kathmandu airport. While the Indian side seems to have painted itself into a corner by slapping the ban, the Nepali side seems to be suffering from an exaggerated sense of 'sovereignitis', for the main bone of contention has to do with what kind of security Indian Airlines will be allowed to introduce on its own at the airport terminal or tarmac.

What is significant for the long term, however, is not the resumption of IA flights (which will have to happen in due course) as much as an analysis of why the peremptory suspension of flights in the first place. The answer lies in the low esteem that those at the

helm of affairs in India apparently hold Nepal at this time. To the extent that it could be rapped over the knuckles like an errant schoolboy, almost as if the Nepali government were a co-conspirator to the hijacking.

Kathmandu's political scientists, meanwhile, might mull over why the stock of Nepal has fallen so low in the New Delhi



IA Airbus in Kandahar: Hijacked and suspended.

corridors of power that it can be subject to unreasonable penalties. In the meantime, the flights must begin, to support Nepal's tourism industry, to reinvigorate the image of India in impressionable Nepali minds, and to invigorate Indian Airlines, the most 'regional' of South Asian airlines. ▲

(A version of this opinion appeared in the Outlook weekly of 17 April.)

PAKISTAN

IRONIES CATCH UP WITH NAWAZ

THE LIFE sentence for Nawaz Sharif on charges of hijacking and terrorism, was accompanied by the surprise acquittal by the anti-terrorism court in Karachi of the other six accused. When the judgement came on 6 April, the irony, of course, was that the court itself was established by Sharif as prime minister, who had pushed it through despite vehement opposition from political parties and human rights groups.

The irony would have been starker if the former prime minister had been sentenced to hang, as was expected by many. The special anti-terrorism court judge, Rehmat Hussain Jaffri, said in his verdict by way of explanation: "The offence was committed at the spur of the moment and in the heat of passion when the then prime minister of Pakistan, who was also the defence minister, came to know that his authority was eroded by some army soldiers."

Pakistan International flight PK 805, flying into Karachi from Colombo on 12 October 1999, was carrying the army chief General Pervez Musharraf returning from a ceremonial visit and some rounds of golf in Sri Lanka. The bizarre nature of the entire episode is highlighted by the fact that this is probably the first time anywhere that people on the ground (rather than those inside the plane) – that too a sitting prime minister – was convicted as the primary conspirator in a ‘hijacking’.

In preventing Gen Musharraf’s plane from landing at Karachi, the ATC judge held that Sharif had conspired with the then-civil aviation chief, Aminullah Chaudhury. The former prime minister was found guilty under Section 402-B (hijacking) and Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act (again, a piece of legislation rammed through the then-still-functioning Parliament by Sharif). Sharif received life imprisonment on both counts, of 25 years each. All his extensive property has been attached by the court, which also fined him INR 10 lakhs, besides directing him to pay INR 20 lakhs as cumulative compensation to the 198 passengers on board. The ex-PM has recourse to appeal in the Sindh High Court and the Supreme Court.

The ‘hijacking’ episode itself was quite extraordinary. Gen Musharraf had been divested of his Chief of Army Staff (COAS) position by the prime minister while he was still in the air, and it was thought best by Sharif and his coterie in an emergency confabulation that the general ought to be somewhere else than land on Pakistani soil.

The PIA pilot had already begun descent over the Arabian Sea in its approach to Karachi when he was refused permission to gear-down. According to the pilot, when he asked for an alternative airfield, he was told to take the plane to Ahmedabad in the Indian state of Gujarat. When he refused, on the ground that he was carrying the COAS who could hardly be taken to “enemy” territory, he was directed to proceed to Nawabshah, just north-east of Karachi. He was turning the aircraft in that direction when the tower again radioed to say that it was okay to land at Karachi – by this time, the COAS’ loyalists had managed to wrest control of the airport.

While the 6 April sentence bars Sharif from active politics for the foreseeable future, it came as a relief to many who were expecting the death sentence. As *The Indian Express* across the border put it in a headline, “No noose is good news”. Besides the hijack-order having been spur-of-moment, as the sentencing judge pointed out, the death penalty also seems to



ANIS-HAMIDORI

have been deflected by international pressure, not least by US President Bill Clinton’s appeal for clemency during his fleeting stopover in Pakistan. Meanwhile, Sharif’s conviction has thrown his erstwhile majority party in the suspended Parliament, Pakistan Muslim League (PML), into open disarray. Not only have there been no major protests against the lifer, party leaders are visibly disgruntled at the role being played by Kulsoom Nawaz, the party president’s hitherto secluded wife, who has since his arrest unexpectedly come forth to address public rallies and make press statements. The PML seems to be heading for a split, with at least one faction, in true dynastic fashion, supporting Kulsoom, and others rooting for various PML presidential hopefuls.

The ATC sentence can be commuted by the president, but again Sharif’s past actions are catching up with him. Today, Pakistan’s president has become toothless and bereft of most powers, thanks to the PML-dominated Parliament voting against the Eighth Amendment brought into place by Sharif’s mentor General Ziaul Haq, as a means of providing presidential checks on the office of the prime minister. Ironically again, it was the removal of these checks that contributed to Sharif’s increasingly despotic tendencies, which eroded democratic practices, and which finally led to his downfall. In the absence of such a monitoring, the only institution capable of stopping Sharif from becoming a “Mughal emperor” – as critics put it – was the army.

And that is what happened. When a power-giddy prime minister tried to tamper with this last remaining institution by dismissing (albeit legally) the COAS, he was sealing his own fate. This does not, of course, make Gen. Musharraf’s takeover kosher, but it pretty much sums up the dilemma that Pakistan currently faces. ▲

The Nawaz verdict: Good news for Karachi hawkers.

White House recap

The world's most powerful the world's most dangerous

SOUTH ASIA

THE COMING OF BILL CLINTON

US PRESIDENTS had graced the People's Republic of China five times with state visits between 1971 and now, whereas the one earlier time India was accorded the privilege was when Jimmy Carter sipped *chai* with Morarji Desai in 1978 (Richard Nixon visited Rawalpindi in 1969). This tidbit is interesting as we proceed to analyse the coming and going of President Bill Clinton in the Subcontinent.

There were a couple of reasons why a lame duck president finally decided to pay us a visit. The first was economic. The monolithic might of undemocratic Red China has always stood as a proximate economic challenge to the US, whereas diverse and much more democratic South Asia has taken much longer to evolve as an economic powerhouse (well, at least in IT). The home-grown billionaires of Bangalore and Bombay can now no longer be ignored, and even Bangladesh is no longer Henry Kissinger's "basket case" – all set as it is to export gas, to India, if American multinationals have their way.

The second reason is, and we are in full agreement with the president, that South Asia is presently the "most dangerous place" on Earth. How can it be otherwise, when the tom-tomming of using the ultimate weapon is accompanied by the powder keg called Kashmir? Add to that the nationalist jingoism being orchestrated by unthinking satellite and print media...

But so far as the economic rationale behind the trip is concerned, let us understand that President Bill did not come over to be nice to Indians, Bangladeshis or Pakistanis. He was here to ensure that the larger slice of the South Asian market and productivity remains within

the grasp of US business, be it in software production or natural gas. As long as this is understood, certainly, there is no harm in exploring how the economies of South Asia may themselves take advantage of the US economic juggernaut, whose boomtime just seems to go on and on and on.

On the issue of security, we find ourselves in disagreement with most editorialists of South Asia, and curiously in agreement with President Bill. Extreme embrace of nationalism and sovereignty can blind one to the fact that the Subcontinent does not deserve to be made more dangerous than it already is. After all, the majority of South Asians are poor, and what they need is food in the belly and not warhead on the missile.

So, why should we make a fuss if the Grand Duke of Duchy, let alone the president of the United States, were to come forward to offer good offices to resolve the India-Pakistan tangle. It is the insecure and the under-confident, after all, who are given to harping endlessly on sovereign status and who make it a matter of macho pride to reject mediation. Kashmir has been a flashpoint for decades, and it is even more so now with the nuclear posture of the two sides. The Kashmir problem has therefore to be tackled, with mediation or without it, and if this particular cat is bell'd, we suspect everyone will be surprised with the result.

Boom-time 'Amrika' holds all us South Asians in thrall – it is the real Shangri La with nary a competition in the uni-polar world. A world to be intellectually derided, even while our cousins, nephews and nieces desperately vie for green cards and naturalisation. Look at how the Indian foreign ministry and its political masters lobbied to get the president to bypass Islamabad. This loss of perspective can only be explained by the overwhelming importance accorded to the US in the minds of the Indian establishment – the endless re-runs and post-mortems on Indian satellite television after President Bill was long

Powerful man in a perilous place

gone is proof enough.

And so onward and ahead with a liberalised, globalised South Asia. Let us become more corporate, more savvy, and more friendly with the United States. But while doing so, let us not forget that for every Bangalore IT dollar-billionaire, there are at least a hundred million paupers who are caught in a bind in this poverty-stricken, nuclear Subcontinent. ▲

BANGLADESH

BILLBHAI AND BIN LADEN

DESPITE ALL the saccharine laded by Bill Clinton, his day-long visit to Dhaka constituted a most awesome display of American power, with Bangladesh forced once again into its straitjacket of poor but can-do country.

Bangladeshis wear nationalist sensitivity on their lapels, and so decided to be offended when the White House cancelled two high-profile appointments. One was a trip to the National Memorial, where laying a wreath in memory of the martyrs of 1971 is considered a matter of grave and obligatory protocol. Also scratched out was a 20-minute helicopter ride to Joypara, a hamlet where the mega-ngos, BRAC and Grameen, are both active.

Dhaka veterans were bemused. Someone seemed to believe in a clear-and-present security threat, in a country where political violence stops at the two major political parties getting at each other. True, it was after many a summer that the Bangla leftists had found a cause that promised them some visibility, but their smallish processions were easily smothered by the stout hand of the law. But then, 'sources' said that the real fear was not of washed-up communists but "Islamic terrorists". The Afghan supporters of Osama Bin Laden were supposedly planning to cause

Clinton grief in Bangladesh, and White House security managers decided to gamble with offending the hosts instead. To make up for his no-shows, Clinton made some needlessly placatory noises about Bangladesh's "Islamic heritage, tolerance and unique culture". But something seemed make believe.

It was clear that the Americans could have planned the first-ever visit by their president to Sonar Bangla better, and made it look less a token jaunt than it did. It did not help that for days after, Bangladeshis, glued to their television screens, saw Clinton and his daughter moving relatively freely across India.

If the hosts were indeed offended, did they receive anything for their troubles? Not much. An offer to write off over USD 750 million worth of debt was not forthcoming, nor was a pledge to consider favourably the case of illegal Bangla migrants in the States, who number in the tens of thousands. Sheikh Hasina Wajed had hoped that the US president would indicate an intention to extradite some of the killers of her father who are holed up in the US, but the president promised the prime minister nothing. He did not even refer to her father, Sheikh Mujib, as "father of the nation".

Clinton announced a grant of USD 50 million to combat global warming, but it was actually money meant for all of South Asia. Bangladesh did become the first country that will start converting its dollar debt into forest cover, but the problems here are in the form of floods and cyclones, not forest loss.

Despite the genuflection towards micro-credit and environment, it was fairly obvious that the real focus of the day-long dash from Delhi was all in two sets of three letters 'g-a-s' and 'o-i-l'. Bangladesh's recently confirmed reserves are primed up and ready to be exploited, and US investment has shot up from USD 40 million to USD 750 million in the last four years. The suddenly significant US corporate lobby in Bangladesh has declared enticingly that the figure may jump to USD 3-4 billion if the "right decisions" are made.

Those decisions refer to allowing prospecting companies to sell the surplus gas to India, which is where the market lies. Sk. Hasina told the press after meeting Clinton that she would allow export only after confirming domestic supply for the next half-century. Being seen to help Indian consumers and industry is not a priority for Bangladeshi politicians, and so no major contracts were signed.

US companies have warned that they will pull out if exports are prohibited, which is

especially worrying for Dhaka's rich with their fingers already deep in the pie. But it is a little too early to believe the bluster. For the multinationals know, and the Dhaka elites know that they know, that a day will come when exports will have to begin.

Perhaps this is why Clinton did not press the point. The gas will be in the pipeline, sooner or later, with the US multinationals as hand-maidens. ▲

PAKISTAN

CLINTONSAAB'S OLD FLAME

BILL CLINTON courted India with the ardour of a smitten suitor, while the treatment he reserved for Pakistan can be likened to that meted out to an old girlfriend. An old flame who had to be told that it's all over. However, the telling-off had to be done diplomatically, given her trouble-making potential and the intensity of the former relationship.

The seven-hour stopover in Islamabad was anti-climatic, given the all-out diplomatic efforts that went into ensuring that Clinton did make it to Pakistan. The only cause for celebration in Islamabad was that New Delhi had tried everything in the book to keep Clinton from visiting. The US president's 15-minute live televised address to the Pakistani people was unprecedented, and reportedly a pre-condition for the stopover. Clinton was unequivocal if polite on the most important matter of Kashmir: "There is no military solution to Kashmir. No matter how great the grievance, it is wrong to support attacks against civilians across the Line of Control."

In other words, Clinton had accepted the Indian contention that the Pakistan government has been exporting terrorism/militancy across the border. This is the widely-held view, even though the Pakistan government may go blue in the face denying it. General Pervez Musharraf's think tank must recognise this perception even if the reality may be a bit more complex—it was the Americans who, with the Saudis first funded the *jihadis* during the bad old commie-Afghanistan days. They must therefore try and understand that Islamabad's writ may not necessarily run all over the mujahideen fold.

However, even if the Chief Executive's military-civilian government is not actively directing transgressions across the border, it is

also true that its inaction against the religious-political parties who are training fighters and sending them across, is tantamount to supporting those parties. This, therefore, makes the Pakistan government a party to violations of the LoC.

A recent report in *The Independent* (London) by Robert Fisk, based on his visit to Maulana Samiul Haq's Al-Haq College in Akora Khattak in the north of Pakistan, documents what just one institution has been up to on that count. Talking to Samiul Haq's son Rashed, Fisk discovers various points of convergence between the right-wing and the military establishment. Both pledge to end corruption and bring about 'real' democracy, and both view Pakistan's nuclear bomb as "a symbol of pride that is here to stay". Fisk's point is that because there is a fair degree of common ground, why would Pakistan heed Washington's demands. Besides, Pervez Musharraf may be the most secular minded of men, but it is doubtful if he has the wherewithal to take on the thousands of armed ideologically-motivated fighters that the hundreds of madrassas in Pakistan have produced.

In his televised address to the Pakistani nation, Clinton also upheld the Indian refusal for third-party mediation in the disputed territory: "We (the USA) cannot and will not mediate or resolve the dispute in Kashmir. Only you and India can do that through dialogue." But how this bilateral approach will work, when all such efforts have been stalemated over the past 50 years, goes unanswered. As one analyst bluntly put it, "...Pakistan cannot force the issue on its own. And the world will not intervene."

In an interview to ABC television on 22 March, the US president also said, "I believe there are elements within the Pakistan government that have supported those who engaged in violence in Kashmir." Which is as good as saying that the perpetrator of the tension between Indian and Pakistan is squarely the latter. In Islamabad, there is now the conviction that New Delhi's posture on bilateral matters can only harden in the days ahead, now that its position has been largely endorsed by the world policeman. This may only heighten Pakistan's insecurity as a smaller nation.

If India becomes more intransigent on the Kashmir issue and Pakistan becomes more friendless and unstable, it is debatable whether Bill Clinton's visit to the "world's most dangerous place" will not have actually left this "place" more dangerous than he found it. ▲

INDIA

CLINTONJI AS FIRST TOURIST

ONCE UPON a troubled time of guided missiles and nuclear bombs, the King of the Uni-polar World decided he should visit the King of the Jungle in his natural habitat, the Most Dangerous Place in the World, home to a fifth of the human race.

That the MDPW had within its expanse the breathtaking Taj Mahal was a bonus. Nearing the end of his reign, the youthful but aging ruler figured he couldn't bow out as one of those pitiable few who had never seen the Taj. As he himself was later to tell the hosts' Parliament, "The world is divided into two kinds of people — those who've seen it, and by golly those who haven't."

So, the First Daughter, First Mother-in-Law, First Dog and a massive First Entourage packed themselves into 77 planes and crossed the seven seas. Even before they landed, 200 unsmiling secret service agents had conducted a determined recce of New Delhi's sewers. The citizenry watched goggle-eyed, mightily impressed by the diligent panache with which the sleuths confronted close encounters of the odoriferous kind. They, for one, *really* took in the sights and smells of India.

"*Jai America!*" shouted the otherwise dour men who run the BJP-combine which runs India. Meanwhile, the global headman-turned-First Tourist did the regulars — Rajghat in Delhi, the Taj in Agra, Amer Fort in Jaipur, and the Ranthambore wild-life sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh.

He found peace and forgiveness at Rajghat, looking properly contrite at the Mahatma Memorial, only that he did not know the proper Hindu way of offering flowers, and so ended up flailing his arms about as if he were treading on water. Subsequently, the First Hand planted a magnolia sapling, which if it survives the upcoming dry season, will grow to be a crowd-puller in its own right.

The ancient Taj did all right by Shah'n Shah Bill. Not since Emperor Shah Jahan built his labour of love had so much been spent at one go on the monument — INR 80 lakh for a full body treatment including special chemical wash, new plantings and trimmings, polished doors and new benches. On the way in, potholes had been filled, and dirty walls whitewashed. The clamour and colour of real Uttar Pradesh was carefully screened

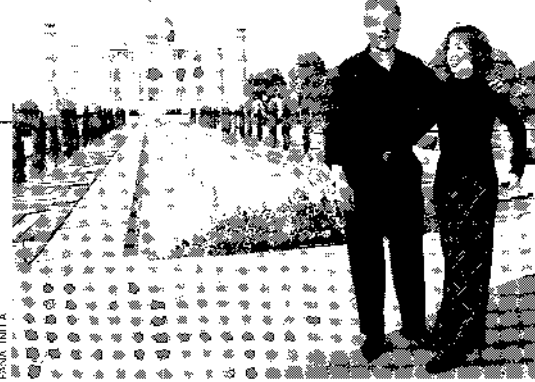
from the First Eyes. But earthy India did cock an impudent snook at this massive cover-up in the form of a string of multi-coloured underpants and towels hanging out to dry from the Saheli Burj just outside Taj's main gate. The Super President could not have missed it.

After the regulatory photo-op before the reflecting pool, the prez of the most environmentally unsustainable economy in the globe by far lectured India on greenhouse gases and global warming. India's endorsement of every word emanating from Bill's lips came in the form of the hit title track *Tu Mera, Tu Mera, Tu Mera, Tu Mera, Tu Mera, Tu Mera, Hero Number One!* Someone had hit the play button right after the speech ended.

Onwards, then, to Jaipur, city of myths and maharajas, where the president while inspecting the regal Amer fort came face to face with his nemesis — oh no! — the elephant. Someone genetically predisposed to sabotage the meeting of the largest and the second largest democracy had lined up a whole row of gaily caparisoned elephants, trying to pass these beasts as native to the Subcontinent and worthy of a ride by Clintonji. Of course, the president could not ride the Republican party mascot in an election year, that too with his wife confronting Rudy Giuliani in New York. And the Indians were quite unwilling to produce an ass, the Democratic choice, for it would be a retrograde step back into the Third World ghetto that we are working so hard to slither out of.

So if not the domesticated elephant and ass, why not the king of the jungle, the Royal Bengal Tiger of Madhya Pradesh? But before that, a word on the culinary trail — *raans, kebabs, dal makhni, sizzling gobhi, phirni* out of clay pots and *kulfis* — all washed down with wondrous Diet Coke. And then a picnic lunch was packed for the jeep safari.

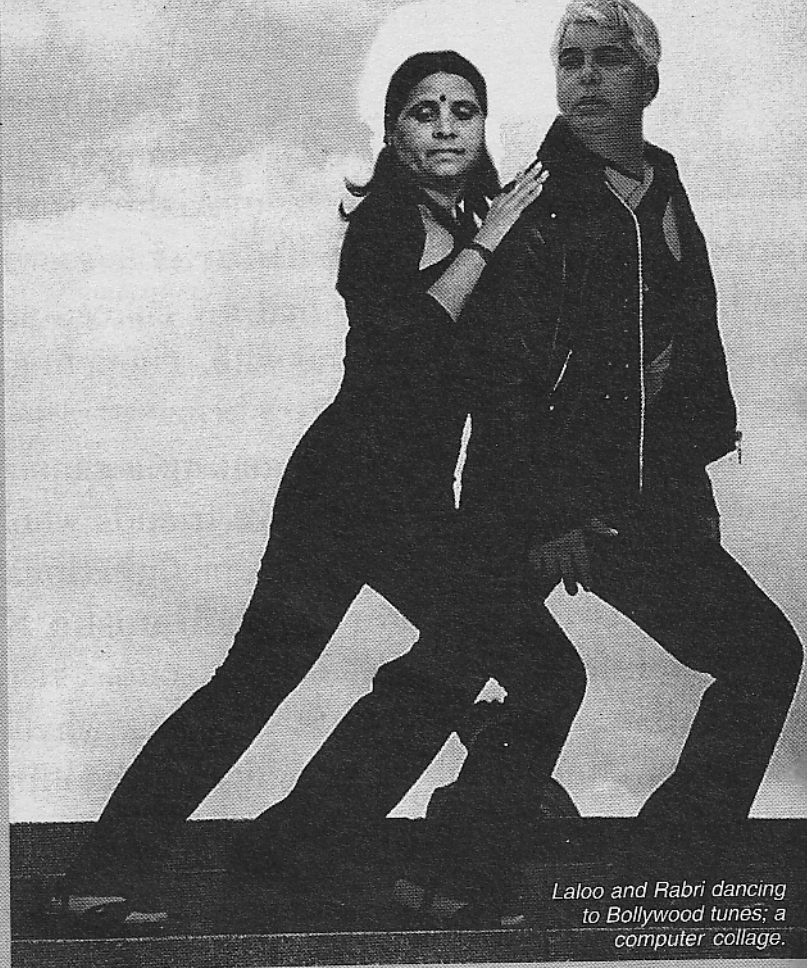
The jeep crept along the rugged terrain of the Ranthambore forest in search of the elusive feline. The expedition almost ended in failure, but one was finally spotted, inspecting the cavalcade closely from behind some tall grass. The big cat soon got bored. S/he started grooming, then looked at the president, and yawned. We may not yet be a tiger economy, but we sure do have the real thing, was the message. Move along, then. ▲



Doin' the Taj.

Opinion

The failure of political imagination is what is most distressing about today's India. It is a failure of both the left and the right, at the local as well as the global arena, and it is a failing all the more ironic because it comes hidden behind the celebration of Indian democracy. Perhaps the tragedy actually begins there...



Laloo and Rabri dancing to Bollywood tunes; a computer collage.

The Diminishing of Indian Politics

by Shiv Visvanathan

...**At one** time, politics was one of the most open of India's clubs — more accessible than the bureaucracy, the educational system, or even the market. Politics allowed new groups and new imaginations to enact their aspirations in a hopeful landscape. This same political domain had a tremendous ability to absorb disorder, confident that disorder was the beginning of a new equilibrium. In fact, the cycle from disorder to new

order added to the democratic imagination, which was how a Laldenga of the Mizo underground could surface as a chief minister through a democratic electoral process.

Indeed, the politics of those initial years turned the American journalist Selig Harrison and his book *India, the Most Dangerous Decades* (1960) into laughing stocks. Harrison had failed to realise that the new entrants and their demands did not consti-

tute noise, or even unwelcome music. Rather, they were voices demanding representation in the festival of politics. Instead of a Cartesian exercise, a binary of either-ors, Indian politics as represented then by the Congress party was a mosaic of adjustable pieces. Besides, in the early days, identity was not a problem in India. One could live in a forest of individualities and still believe in the garden of citizenship. There was also an overall consensus about nation, state, unity, socialism, rights, and even non-alignment.

Back then, Indians would take pride in defence minister Krishna Menon's performance at the United Nations and the cosmopolitan confidence he exuded. We also knew he was the founder of the Penguin series. One remembers Menon telling an American, "Don't tell me about my English. I learnt it, you just picked it up." The celebration was short-lived, however, and soon enough the wrapping of confidence broke. This happened for several reasons.

The 1962 Chinese attack in the North-east and Ladakh was the harbinger. It showed that our seeming self-assurance was not an endocarp but a veneer. The Emergency years which came more than a decade later—and still under-studied and repressed within—showed that Indira Gandhi on her part had indeed internalised the Selig Harrison Syndrome. The Emergency was more than a period of temporary dictatorship, it was a solvent which ate into our institutions. Banks, universities, trade unions, the judiciary, parliament, bureaucracy, all tumbled like nine pins and we have still not been able to put our institutions together again.

We interpreted the pathology of that time in a personalised way, psychoanalysing the Nehru dynasty, reading dystopias into the original utopia. But no one understood that the Emergency had institutionalised itself. India was no longer a command economy of dictatorship, but represented a Keynesian plurality where Bihar, the Northeast, Kashmir, Punjab, all offered a variety of everyday totalitarianisms.

And now, there are no dearth of indicators to tell us where we are at the end of more than five decades of Independence. Firstly, our glorious development projects became quietly ethnocidal, to the extent that India created over 40 million refugees from development projects. This is more refugees from the *pax* of development than from all

the wars fought after Independence. Secondly, India has over one million paramilitary troops dedicated for internal order and control. All awards for gallantry the Indian army got between the 1972 war and the unfortunate Sri Lankan encounter are said to be for action against our own people. To these indicators, we can add the following: the Law Commission reports that there are over 90 million cases pending in Indian courts. Assuming two families per case, one in five Indians alive is today involved in litigation.

Faced with such data, how do we still call ourselves the world's largest democracy? Like cloth that shrinks, obviously we have shrunk the concept of democracy. To use another metaphor, India's democracy was once like the coconut. One cannot define a coconut "as a palm tree that gives oil". That is too monocultural, too illiterate a definition to embrace what is after all the tree of life. But that is precisely what we did to democracy, reducing it to mean nothing more than elections and electoral politics. With the help of the mass media and its attention span of "five unendurable minutes", politics has got reduced to facile terms such as the "incumbency effect", "swing factor", a few graphs, and some adolescents pontificating around it. The violence, the negotiations, the ideologies, the struggles of politics never figure.

Several factors aided this decline of the institution of politics. To begin with, the Congress itself declined. It had started out as the glue or enzyme of India's polity, something more than a rainbow coalition, for it allowed colours to mix and produce new hues. The Congress, like some strange Periodic table, at one time incorporated every category of Indian politics—Muslim, Dalit, Brahmin, tribal, ethnical, secular, non-secular, socialist, capitalist. It was truly multi-ethnic, multi-economic, multi-cultural. A bit like Hinduism, it was both invertebrate and yet distinctive and protean. The decline of the Congress was devastating, for everyone in its rainbow stripes held the makings of another party. And so the Janata took other backward classes, the Bahujan Samaj Party gobbled the Dalits, the Muslims moved away.

Even as the Congress failed, politics got criminalised. Once, the gangster and the politician were distinct, but today in large parts of India they are bonding into one. Over one-third MLAs and MPs in Bihar and

The Emergency was more than a period of temporary dictatorship, it was a solvent which ate into our institutions. Banks, universities, trade unions, the judiciary, parliament, bureaucracy, all tumbled like nine pins and we have still not been able to put our institutions together again.

To the list of traditional marginals—tribals, landless peasants, women, Dalits—we must now add displaced groups, slum-dwellers, old people, and all those rendered obsolescent by the development process.

Uttar Pradesh have criminal records, including many charged with rape and murder. These gangsters wear their records as epaulettes, operating from jails with mobile phones. As the CBI reported after the Bombay blast of 1993, the underworld dons, Dawood Ibrahim and Haji Mastan, would both have won elections hands down.

The diminishing idea of politics is reinforced in the lethally antiseptic confines of foundations and international agencies. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and even well-meaning groups such as the United Nations' specialised agencies, have developed what may be called the "Goodboy Theory of Democracy" (GBT). Using an indicators technique, the GBT's speciality is to reduce the wider web of democracy into single strands. Thus, human rights is reduced to child labour. Anticipating the manna of grants, hundreds of ngos suddenly turned advocates against child labour. There is no one left to understand the complexities of issues, and so on.

The GBT demands that all treaties must be honoured no matter how iniquitous they may be. So, whether it is the CTBT, or the WTO, or even the whole slew of human rights treaties that US has forgotten to sign, India must be a dutiful signatory. The GBT also argues that rights are a complement to the market and that what sustains the democracy is the market. The marketisation of democracy commodifies rights and destroys the commons that sustain the life-world of so many marginal groups.

The Goodboy Theory of Democracy is accompanied by a homogenisation of Indian citizenship. In the debates within the Constituent Assembly half a century ago, citizenship was seen as an enabling device to allow the individual to participate in wider economic and cultural processes. But the static notion of citizenship that has evolved blinds one to the variety of margins and marginals, which are seen to be outside the pale of citizenship. To the list of traditional marginals—tribals, landless peasants, women, Dalits—we must now add displaced groups, slum-dwellers, old people, and all those rendered obsolescent by the development process.

The proliferation of marginalities in India is accompanied by the privileging of two forms of citizenship, the middle class and the non-resident Indian. Today, India boasts of a well-to-do middle class that is the size of Europe's population. Besides the fact that

this middle class must be 'making it' at someone else's cost, its emergence raises paradoxes of democracy that the psephologists and political theorists have not yet tackled. As the late C.V. Seshadri, the eminent scientist, used to say, "I hate politicians who can't count, whose rhetoric says every Indian should be literate. Good intentions." Seshadri would add the paradox that if all Indians could read, there would not be a single tree left in the country. These Zen paradoxes of democracy remain to be resolved.

Beyond the obviousness of the middle class as consumer citizens, one must also take note that, demographically, besides the large proportion of the elderly, most of India is under 30. Even advertisement agencies do not quite know what this category needs. But one thing is clear, they will be chased by the ghosts of unemployment even as they dream of Nike shoes and Benneton colours.

The NRI as the extra-territorial citizen has taken up a considerable part of the Indian imagination. Even Hindi movies now cater to NRI nostalgia, with hybrid blends of hamburgers, conjeevarams and the Silicon Valley. This imagination of the diasporic Indian needs careful study, for its lobbies work more effectively in India than abroad. It enacts the imaginary of Khalistan more ably in Canada and the grape farms of California than in Punjab itself. But what is bloodless and virtual in one place, becomes bloody and terroristic in the other. Unlike their remittances, the violence of the NRI is not accountable.

Neither the political economy nor the displaced dreams of the diaspora has been fully understood. The NRIs' global success and their need to transform local politics or economics warrant a wider scrutiny and debate. Meanwhile, the NRI involvement in Indian politics reminds one of a wry rejoinder that M.N. Srinivas, the doyen of Indian sociology, made years ago to Kathleen Gough, a 'revolutionary' anthropologist. "We shall shed blood and make a revolution," said Gough. Srinivas, silent till then, drawled in his Oxford-Kannada English, "Yess Katha leen, our blood, your revolution."

So how do the pundits, and the polity as a whole, respond to these issues? The fact is political analyses in India is in a terribly distressing state. Not one issue is followed to the full, while simultaneously

we have joined the global celebration of democracy inaugurated by groups like National Endowment for Democracy. The psephologists crow that democracy = elections + social movements, an equation that can be considered as illiterate as Soviets + electrification = communism. What the illiteracy of the first forgets is institution-building, the issue of governance, the decline of the commons, and the reduction of the democratic imagination to matters of security and individual rights.

There is another kind of impoverishment here, the impoverishment of the global ideas of democracy, which have become homogenised. The Lowest Common Multiple Theory of Democracy fails to realise that transitions to democratic rule in Nigeria or South Africa, the possible transitions to normalcy in Sri Lanka, the return to democracy in Eastern Europe or Nepal, the threats to democracy in India or Indonesia — are all different stories. The mechanical indicator approach de-sensitises the observer to the real problems of these countries. It blinds us to the new globalisation of evil as evidenced in low intensity warfare, the new terrorism *a la* the LTTE, or even to the irresponsibility of finance capital.

Our democracy experts sometimes fail to read even their own data. For instance, electoral surveys indicate that the Indian people make a clear-cut distinction between elections and governance. They celebrate elections as a festival of freedom in itself, but the public is at least clear about the fact that a vote in elections is no guarantee of governance. Secondly, the voters have understood that local parties respond better to local problems than the national groupings, and it is in this context that we have to view the new arrival in our midst — coalitionalism.

Firstly, coalitionalism is not the politics of instability. It may instead be likened to one of those recent, and very successful, multi-starrer Hindi potboilers. The Amir Khans, the Shahrukh Khans might dominate but the Anupam Khers, the Nana Patekars, the Gulshan Grovers and even the Johny Levers have crucial roles in the script. The Congress might have declined but the Congress model has been reborn as an overarching model of coalition politics. Certainly, this coalition model is noisy, like the Congress model preceding it, but the din hides a certain basic stability.

Thus, today, India operates in terms of a

multiplicity of two-party systems. No national party can survive without local alliances, yet each state has a clear-cut two-party system: Akali Dal-Congress in Punjab, Marxists-Congress in Kerala, Shiv Sena-BJP vs. Congress in Maharashtra, Congress-BJP in Gujarat. What we have here is not instability but a decentralisation that India's federal system has long been seeking but has not been able to achieve. Coalitionalism has created more innovative possibilities for decentralisation than a dozen administrative reform reports.



The shakha and the Mahatma; a computer collage.

While democracy is thus here to stay, snug as a second-skin on the body politic, the tensions are real. Our notions of justice, marginality, community, secularism, security and development need a spring cleaning, if not a desperate exorcism. Mere agitationist politics around any one of these issues will not do, nor will ngo alliances created to seduce funds from Western foundations desperate for political correctness before anything else.

Look at the range of political actors and the limits to political imagination. The left parties have long exhibited signs of autism, as seen in their extraordinary inability to respond to the events of Eastern Europe. There has also been an image change which comes from a transition in leadership. Instead of the dignified honesty of an A.K. Gopalan or E.M.S. Namboodripad, the party is entangled in the middleman dealings of H.K. Surjeet. Radicalism has escaped the party and the trade unions, and now, if it

exists anywhere, it is among the ngos, where left radicals have added to the democratic imagination and the human rights movement. The left today has little to say on globalisation, and Vandana Shiva and Suman Sahai perform better on gene piracy, or at Seattle.

The Marxist imagination, like the museumised Gandhian imagination, needs to rework itself around concrete issues. These could be entitlement to water, the protection of workers in industries closed for polluting, or around unorganised groups like construction workers and fisherfolk. But red is colour-blind to green, and the desperately-needed marriage of political economy

mentary incarnation is like playing out the virtual fantasies of Vajpayee as a roseless Nehru, and Advani as a still-potential Sardar Patel. It allows one to play out inane Vajpayee vs. RSS scripts. There is no real contradiction here, for at the structural level the BJP is not a Janus-faced entity but a four-headed one. There is the BJP itself as the parliamentary phase, the RSS as ideological wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad as the cultural police for the diasporic NRI, and the Bajrang Dal making up the lumpen wing—a potential fascist mob.

The level of support for the BJP goes far beyond its own party members, and includes a wide penumbra of middle class and even tribal support. The party plays on every kind of fear, from the historical to the futuristic. It promises to defeat the Moghuls all over again, even while loudly tackling the inanities of Deepa Mehta. But the crucial point is that this BJP quartet always initiates and sets the discourse. And it has an actor for every occasion.

The RSS cadres cut deep into the countryside—they were among the heroes of the Andhra and the Orissa cyclones. The organisation caters to the lumpenism of unemployed youth on the one hand, and on the other, it plays the opera of Pokhran-II—with such stunning brilliance that it collectively stiffens the middle class penis into orgiastic joy. It is slick in its debates not because it has the argument but because it has an unerring sense of its opponents' weakness. Both the left and secular forces find themselves tongue-tied, even though the RSS is more illiterate than them.

The RSS historians are no match for the Thapars, Habibs or Sumit Sarkars but instead of debating history, they are drawn into a maze of files, procedural details, account books, audits, time-tables, little to do with the quality of thinking. When attacked by a BJP sympathiser at a conference in Canada, a left-leaning historian went into a tortured explanation as to how the left academics were merely "erratically nepotistic", whereas those of the RSS were "consistently nepotistic". True, but if the historian had half the street-sharpness of a Govindacharya or an Arun Shourie, he would, rather than apologise for the pseudo-secularism of the left, have attacked the pseudo-*swadeshism* of the RSS-BJP-VHP composite. In this manner, time and again, the left-seculars have let the debate be determined by the BJP and allowed it to



Buffaloes and designer shoes; a digital manipulation.

and ecology has begun in divorce.

For its part, the Congress is a national party determined to live in nostalgia. It lacks strategy, yes; but most of all, it is paralysed by the grand emptiness of Sonia. If the left is autistic, the Congress suffers from aphasia. And neither the Congress nor the left even knows how to harness the secular imagination. Someone does, and unfortunately it is Laloo Prasad Yadav. He can use secularism without blushing, he can bellow secularism. He loves doing it, and the populist imagination dances to his call.

But the real dangers of Indian democracy lie in its two most powerful forces—populism and communalism. The latter is represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party, but it is naive to treat the BJP as a singular entity. In fact, treating the party as a parlia-

appropriate terms like "nationalist" and "patriotic".

The right, like Ronald Reagan earlier in another democracy, creates its own soap opera of righteousness, while the left has to work overtime confessing to errors. But beyond its RSS ideology—to call it "culture" would be to give it too much credit—the BJP has few ideas of its own. It is an appropriator of discourses that others have invented. Its swadeshism would have turned Gandhi violent, but it is precisely to a diasporic nationalism that it appeals to. It creates an ersatz nationalism, a machismo that strengthens every supine middle class spirit convincing them that the subaltern has struck back.

The foreign policy of the BJP is invented by the Congress, its sense of coalitions by the Janata—only the BJP is able to package them better. Whether it is the vitriol of Uma Bharati, or the realism of Advani, or the think-tank chutzpah of Govindacharya, or the suaveness of Arun Jaitley, it has it all. As a result, the BJP has helped the RSS to burrow itself deep into the capillaries of our society, into media, teaching, social work and business. In all this, the supreme irony—and tragedy—is that neither the Congress nor the left, sticking blindly to their mechanistic secularism, realise that their real ally is religion. Hinduism can easily defeat Hindutva, armed with a programme of reform. But where are the secularists when they are needed to come up with innovative answers?

The other soap opera of depoliticisation in India is to be found in the post-Mandal politics of Laloo Prasad Yadav's Bihar. There is an elite trend among the "Fab-India socialists" (after their designer kurtas) who see Laloo Prasad as spearheading a democratic imagination. They see him as epitomising Mandalism, the ideology of the other-backward-classes, rising phoenix-like out of the movement led by the socialist Jai Prakash Narayan. He also embodies a "folk socialism", according to these aficionadas of "electoral politics". He is secular, he is shrewd, he challenges Delhi, he is news. But Laloo represents the de-institutionalisation of democratic politics. He represents the limits of Mandalism, which beyond populism and corruption, has no theory of distributive justice.

If the BJP captures ersatz nationalism to create Indian pride, Laloo Prasad harnesses a similar sense of pride—dignity for Bihar

and the downtrodden. There is deep cynicism here, in the feeling that since no politician fulfills the promise of development, Laloo Prasad at least creates the participatory soap opera of local pride. The problem is, the former chief minister offers little else. He is anti-women, anti-tribal, and incarnates the politics of casteism at its worst. Mandalism, rather than becoming a search for equality, becomes a casteist nightmare. If Sanjay Gandhi represented the other extremity of his grandfather's Nehruvianism, Laloo Prasad is the end of JP's socialist dreams.

A lot has been said of the Marxist politician and the Congress functionary, but the socialist has not received the same attention. It is necessary to engage with the nature of the socialist personality and his/her politics. There is a link between the bloated ego of individual socialists and the populism they represent. They are fascinated by politics but represent at best a version of politicking. They love the grammar of factionalism and eventually have the least to offer, individually or collectively. One needs a deeper psychoanalytical portrait here to understand the limits of the Mandal imagination. Some have called it, Toffler-like, as the third wave of politics. But it is important to study whether it is a "creative" wave of Mandalism or a truncated bully-boy version of politics. For there would be cause for genuine sadness and erosion of hope if the real choice were to be between Laloo Prasad and the RSS.

Where then do the possibilities lie in terms of politicians, movements, currents? What are the future dangers? The response can be couched once again in terms of the failure of the political.

India has recently suffered a spate of natural disasters—floods, earthquakes and cyclones. We have repeatedly celebrated Amartya Sen's homilies that famines cannot exist for long in a democracy, that the power of democracy is such that famines and cyclones, like truth, will out. Of late, one has begun to wonder if there are not certain dents in the popular reading of Sen. The floods in Bihar wiped out innumerable villages, which have disappeared both physically and from the imagination. Beyond the demands of disaster tourism, the cyclone in Orissa has by now been forgotten. Popular anger dismissed the Gomang government, but it was all a political waste as the issues of continuing survival and re-

The Congress is a national party determined to live in nostalgia. It lacks strategy, yes; but most of all, it is paralysed by the grand emptiness of Sonia.

Laloo Prasad is anti-women, anti-tribal, and incarnates the politics of casteism at its worst. Mandalism, rather than becoming a search for equality, becomes a casteist nightmare.

habilitation never came up. Orissa will soon be as forgotten as Bhopal.

There is then the politics of displacement around Narmada and other development projects, where the displaced realise that they have no means of articulation within electoral politics. Certainly, the defeated and the marginal exude ethical power when it is magnified by the likes of Baba Amte and Medha Patkar, but this alone is unable to get them redress. Clearly, what we need to do now is recast Gandhian politics to present times, for its ability to so effectively combine ethics and politics.

Then we have the depoliticisation of debate on the major treaties and laws, which will willy-nilly affect the people. Whether it is the bill for privatisation of insurance before Parliament, the CTBT, or the WTO, they all share one weakness in common. They have been the subjects of expert committees and NGO campaigns, but have all singularly failed to permeate the popular imagination.

There is a thundering silence on defence and war. National security appears a zone of silence that our dissenting peace groups have been unable to penetrate. The nuclearisation of India and Pakistan, the very nature of terror and low-intensity warfare, all demand a range of political responses, but this is where Indian democracy is at its weakest. There is failure of the imagination on a crucial aspect—the more India decentralises, the stronger will be its sense of unity and centre. But this understanding will be remote as long as even the seemingly-committed movements continue to treat issues of war and violence with forceps.

Finally, while the average Indian mind is both curious and cosmopolitan, it tends to be empty of empathy when it comes to the regional neighbourhood. The notion of neighbour, so crucial to a globalising democracy, is just not there. As a polity, as state, as civil society, our role in enhancing the democratic possibilities of South Asia has been negligible. We believe we are a superpower but we still operate with the mind—the pettiness and arrogance—of a *Patwari*. Imagine, if we could replay the politics of water with Nepal, dream a new ecological collaboration with Bangladesh, create a university in exile for refugees from Burma, or even create negotiable spaces for Sri Lanka. Indian democracy as an imagination cannot grow amidst a stereotyping

of the neighbourhood.

But the biggest failure of India lies in its inability to meet, on behalf of its one billion people, the onslaught of globalisation. Often serving as an ngo to the powers-that-be, the Indian state has been absent-minded about its power. The rhetorical outbursts of politicians and bureaucrats fail to hide the fact that the homework which the WTO and other negotiations demand have not been done. But an even larger failure in this arena is that of academe and the ngos themselves. It is a failure to understand the institutional demands of this globalisation process.

There is the usual noise about the budget when it is announced, and Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha is graded like a not-too-intelligent student, as someone who has to survive a round of “guess questions”. But what one misses is a real sense of what makes up the country’s political economy: the dynamics of the parallel economies, the pressures on the domestic economy, the devastation of the commons, the problem of the biomass economy, and finally, the notion of economics itself which has no language to gauge the issues of suffering or displacement.

Indeed, globalisation has caught an entire generation of radicals flatfooted. Dissent has become difficult and co-option easy. Hundreds of ngos now function as extension counters of the global regime. Their behaviour as a phenomenon has no sense of irony. It is thus that a senior activist can study the impact of foreign funding on the Indian economy and society—with foreign money. But if you look out at the academic and activist landscape, there is little critique of unemployment, and little sense that the cost of education, energy, health and transport will all increase. There is no demand for a social audit of globalisation, and no feel for the institutional stresses it is going to create.

The universities are being told to privatise, but what this mean in real terms is the marginalisation and immiseration of the social sciences and the humanities. The turfs for dissent and plurality are being systematically uprooted, in the federally-funded Indian Council for Historical Research, the Indian Council for Social Science Research and the Indian Council for Philosophical Research. All this is being justified as a result of it being the right’s turn to misbehave, but there is a fundamental destruction of institutions underway,

institutions which have a critical role to play in the study of Indian society of the past and the future.

What we need is a third force, a web of resistance that can reformulate the Indian problematic, re-energise the imagination of Indian democracy. Where then do the possibilities lie? There are little crystal seeds of innovation all over. There is the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and its struggle to create transparency by demanding the right to information from the state in Rajasthan. There is Chandrababu Naidu's efforts to render cyberspace democratic. One must also mention his gallant efforts to rescue neighbouring Orissa after the cyclone struck, moving quickly to restore the possibility of governance in Bhubaneswar. There is Digvijay Singh seeking to institutionalise *panchayati raj* local government in Madhya Pradesh. There is the Central Pollution Control Board and the Delhi Pollution Control Committee attempting to create a less-polluted Delhi even if it has to still balance the

tensions of ecology and justice.

We require a means to link together this rumour of possibilities, this gossip of alternatives. Dissent and dreaming have to be re-kindled. There has to be a new vision of the political—beyond the aridity of the RSS with its quack *swadeshi* and the lazy crudities of socialism. The possibilities lie in connecting the varieties of decency, honesty, inventiveness, the search for alternatives, and the networks of little radicalisms into a new web of politics. For the sake of India's billion population, we have to reinvent the political like Gandhi did. Every thinking woman and man must turn scientist, politician, activist, philosopher, not as the Marxist dream of a leisure-time, but as a prelude to the new dreams of democracy.

India is one of the great compost heaps for the renewal of ideas. As a civilization, as a nation, it has been one of the greatest clearinghouses for ideas and inventions. We have to reinvent ourselves to renew our democracy. ▲

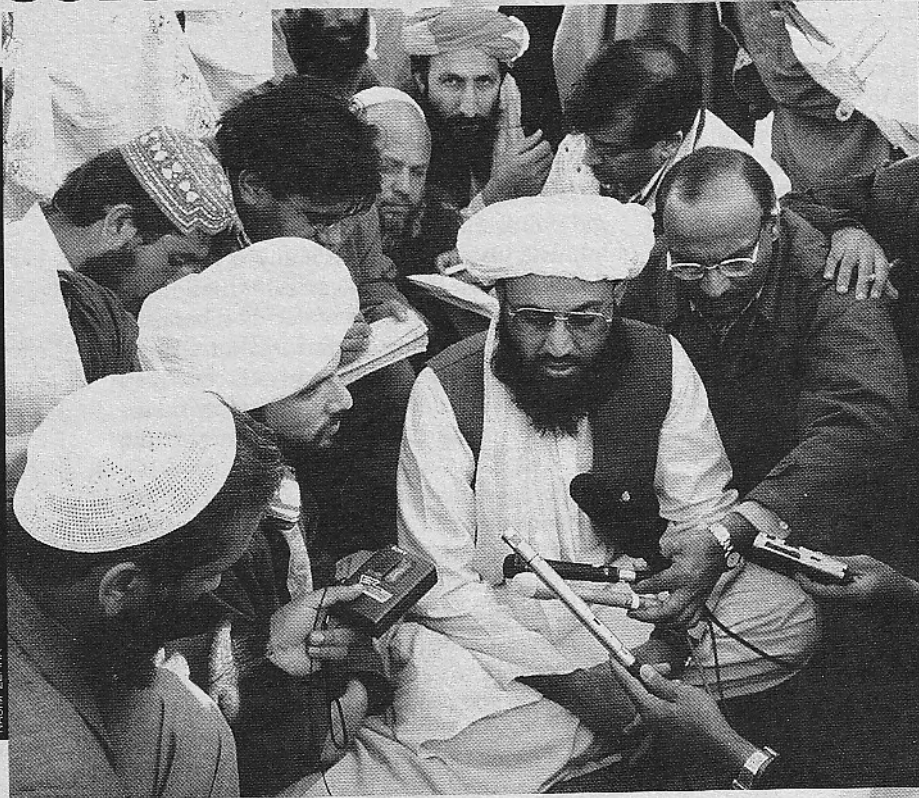
WISCOMP Summer Symposium

Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) invites applications for its Summer Symposium on Human Security in the New Millennium to be held in New Delhi, India, from 21-26 August 2000. The programme is intended for young to mid-career professionals, especially women, from varied backgrounds including academia, social movements, gender studies, peace, diplomacy, human rights, foreign affairs, defence and media, from the South Asian region. It provides a unique opportunity to examine issues of human security, conflict and peace from a gender perspective. For further information, please write to:

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Cover

Foreign Minister
Abdul Wakil
Muttawakil talking
to the press.

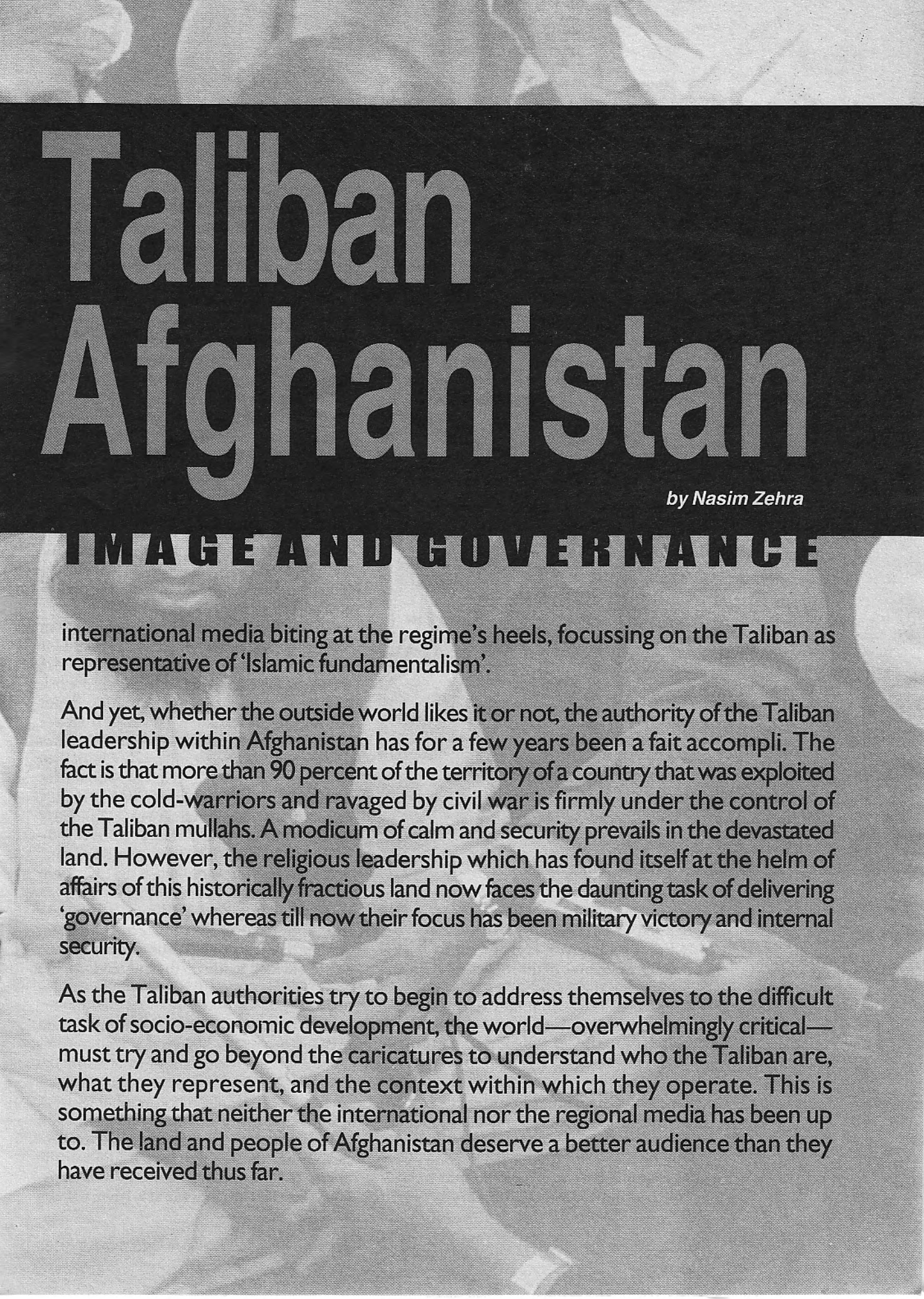


MASIM ZEHRRA

On 8 April, the United Nations Security Council condemned the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan for a whole host of misdemeanours—for continuing its military offensives in the country's north with Ahmad Shah Massoud, for not handing over Osama bin Laden to the United States, for the deteriorating humanitarian situation within the country, for promoting drug cultivation and trafficking, for its “unacceptable” human rights record, and in particular the “continuing grave violations” of the rights of Afghan women and children.

Sitting in New York, the Security Council threatened more sanctions against Kabul, in addition to the freezing of Taliban assets and the embargo on the national airline Ariana, which were imposed in November. The current President of the Council, the Canadian foreign minister, went so far as to call the Taliban a “criminal gang”.

If more proof was required to confirm Afghanistan's pariah status beyond the fact that the Taliban government is recognised by all of three countries, this action by the world's most powerful security body was it. Propelled by American displeasure over the refuge provided to bin Laden, who stands accused by the US for the bombing of two of its embassies, the Taliban regime does indeed have an image problem. This problem is intensified by an



Taliban Afghanistan

by Nasim Zehra

IMAGE AND GOVERNANCE

international media biting at the regime's heels, focussing on the Taliban as representative of 'Islamic fundamentalism'.

And yet, whether the outside world likes it or not, the authority of the Taliban leadership within Afghanistan has for a few years been a fait accompli. The fact is that more than 90 percent of the territory of a country that was exploited by the cold-warriors and ravaged by civil war is firmly under the control of the Taliban mullahs. A modicum of calm and security prevails in the devastated land. However, the religious leadership which has found itself at the helm of affairs of this historically fractious land now faces the daunting task of delivering 'governance' whereas till now their focus has been military victory and internal security.

As the Taliban authorities try to begin to address themselves to the difficult task of socio-economic development, the world—overwhelmingly critical—must try and go beyond the caricatures to understand who the Taliban are, what they represent, and the context within which they operate. This is something that neither the international nor the regional media has been up to. The land and people of Afghanistan deserve a better audience than they have received thus far.

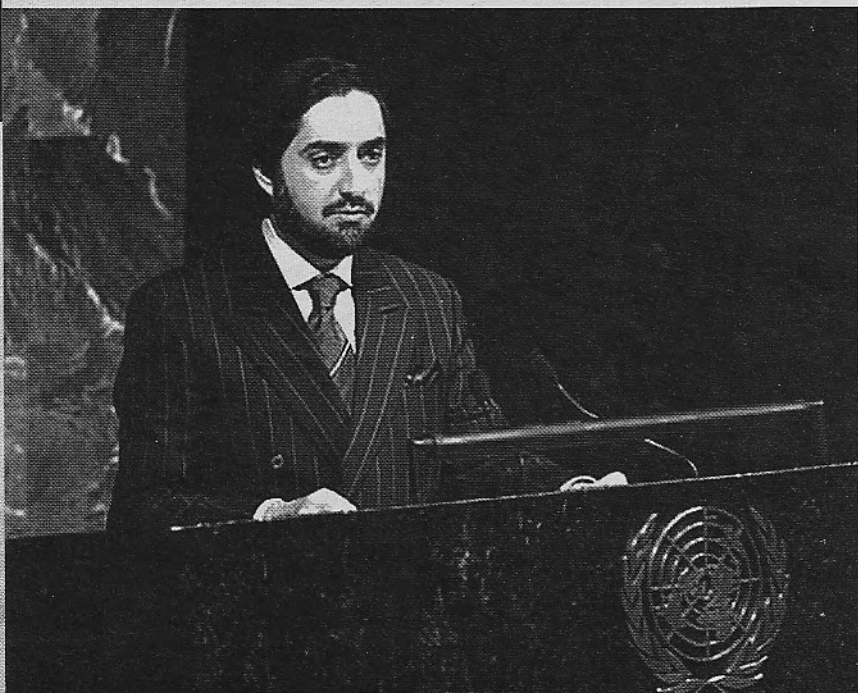
Like most realities, the Taliban phenomenon manifests the complex with the simple, the positive with the negative. Hidden behind the veil of censure of numerous governments, human rights organisations and sections of the international media, who the Taliban are and how they rule is mostly an untold story. Having created, in its earlier days, a generally harsh and inhospitable environment for visitors and having adopted the policy of banning television, among other things, the Taliban's posture amounted to self-imposed isolation. Matters have since improved. Yet inevitably, extremely negative perceptions remain. Meanwhile, in the

recall. Back in the 1980s, prompted by a mix of blatant power-play compulsions, inorganic ideological considerations and geo-strategic calculations, the Soviet Union and the United States dedicated full attention and immense resources to various anti-Kabul groups. Pakistan, too, placed itself in the triple role of the beneficiary of US military and economic support, the benefactor of the Afghan mujahideen groups fighting Kabul, and the host for millions of Afghan refugees. In the 1990s, an unravelling began.

Defeated, the Soviets exited from Afghanistan and their beneficiary, Dr Najibullah, too made his departure after ruling Kabul from 1989 to 1992. (When the Taliban finally stormed the city in 1996, the communist Najib was dragged from his UN refuge and publicly hanged from an electric utility pole.) The fall of Najib's government in 1992 was marked by a phase of destruction, devastation, social anarchy and inter-mujahideen betrayal which wreaked havoc on the Afghan people. If the 1979 Soviet invasion had triggered defiance among the Afghans, now there was only revulsion.

While spoils were being fought over in Kabul, the Taliban were consolidating their presence in the Kandahar region to the south. In their first major mission in 1994, they captured an arms-ammunition depot belonging to Hezb-i-Islami chieftain Gulbadin Hekmatyar, at Spin Boldak, a town near the Pakistani town Chama. In November of the same year near Kandahar, the Taliban again made news when they released a Central Asia-bound Pakistani convoy from the grasp of local warlords. By 5 November, they had taken over Kandahar. The Taliban were now charting their own territory, different from the other mujahideen factions along with whom they had fought the Soviet-backed Kabul governments. Among the fractious political-cum-military clusters which made up the mujahideen, the Taliban constituted the one united grouping.

The fact that the Taliban were welcomed in many provinces, by locals as well as commanders, points to an estrangement from the mujahideen rulers. Such was the psychological impact of the Taliban's easy advance from Kandahar towards Paktia, Gardez, Logar, Sarobi and Kabul, that some people believed that these fighters of Islam had the ability to bodily deflect bullets. In other areas, like Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif, the



UNITED NATIONS DPI

The dapper minister addressing the UN doesn't represent the Taliban in Kabul, nor 90 percent of his country's territory.

war of air-waves, a voluntary walkover is handed to the critics.

Today's internal Afghan reality is a cumulative outcome of that of yesterday's. Undoubtedly, the 1979 Soviet invasion triggered all that was to follow to this day, but many others contributed to the process of making a political pariah out of Afghanistan. Most of those who contributed to this have, of course, walked away — some to the safety of distant shores or to that world we know nothing about. Some are busy making Afghanistan more misunderstood still, but the rest — and this means the bulk of the Afghan people — yearn for normal times.

The country's recent history needs no

Taliban gained control through both fighting and defection of opposition commanders.

The current post-Soviet, post-mujahideen phase has left only two effective political forces in Afghanistan: the Taliban and the forces of Ahmad Shah Massoud. While both generally enjoy people's goodwill, they are vastly unequal. Besides the seat of power in Kabul, the Taliban controls up to 90 percent of Afghan territory, whereas Massoud has retreated to the Panjshir Valley, controlling about 10 percent of the countryside. He remains a force to consider mainly due to his skills as a guerrilla commander, the backing of locals, and external military and economic support.

Massoud was unable to maintain his ethnic combine called the Northern Alliance, and he has lost disenchanted commanders to the Taliban. On the other hand, there have been only minor dissensions in the Taliban ranks since they started out from Kandahar. Despite the domination of Kandaharis within the Taliban leadership, in the provinces it has managed an ethnic collage that has enabled it to extend and retain influence in even the far-flung non-Pushtun provinces.

Absurdly, the United Nations continues to recognise the Jamiat-i-Islami leader Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani as the president of Afghanistan. A search would locate Rabbani today in Tajikistan, Iran, or his hometown of Faizabad in the Tajik-speaking Afghan province of Badakhshan, bordering Pakistan.

Whatever the international community's stance on who should be ruling Afghanistan, it is the Mullah Umar-led Taliban government that controls and administers the country. The exasperation of Kabul's rulers with the international community's refusal to recognise their legitimacy is reflected in the outburst of Mullah Jaleel Akhund, Afghanistan's deputy foreign minister and an influential member of the Kabul *shura* by which major decisions are made. He says: "I think the world's faulty understanding of Afghanistan and its inability to fully understand our problems is perhaps the biggest factor that is preventing the government of Afghanistan from solving the problems of the people. Does the world not know that the government of Afghanistan controls 95 percent of the territory and the capital Kabul is also with us? How then can 5 percent

people, the opposition, be confronting us?"

Acceptable behaviour

The Taliban government faces the tough task of administering a state that has rarely, beyond four or five provinces, boasted of a Western-style state structure. Instead, the Afghans have always lived with central administrations which delivered minimal social services but guaranteed peace and stability. Authority and legitimacy of this organic system has derived from tribal traditions and practices.

The present-day government, too, has earned its staying power from this particular Afghan context, which is buttressed by five factors. They are: the continuing hold of tradition; the exit of the majority of Western-educated elite; a largely-destroyed physical infrastructure; an invasion and war-triggered reactive socio-political mindset of the overwhelming majority of the Afghans; and, an economic situation that has virtually no institutional link to international capital and structures. For these reasons also, it has been possible for the Afghanistan regime to remain outside the internationally-certified norms of 'acceptable' state behaviour. The absence of an aid-dependent mindset allows the Afghan leadership the freedom of not linking key decisions to donor receipts and goodwill. At the same time, this inward-looking attitude keeps the government from generating some succour for a cash-starved, poverty-struck people.

It is true that the men who control about 90 percent of Afghanistan today seem to be largely content with the fundamentals of their own traditional and madrassa-tutored worldview and with the kind of government they have given the population. This worldview is not acceptable even to Afghanistan's Islamic neighbours, who regard the banning of women from the workplace and from educational institutions as un-Islamic. As for much of the West and the Afghan expatriates living overseas, the Taliban may as well be cave-men.

However, the fact is that the Taliban authorities have changed their conduct in certain areas and have indicated that they are not as violently fixated on extreme social conservatism as has been made out by world media. The adjustments that have been made are those which do not violate the Taliban's interpretation of underlying Afghan traditions and Islam. These

"I think the world's faulty understanding of Afghanistan and its inability to fully understand our problems is perhaps the biggest factor that is preventing the government of Afghanistan from solving the problems of the people."

“If Osama goes to any other country he can do whatever he wants, but here we have stopped all his activities and he can carry out no operations.”

changes, while provoked by necessity, have also been presented with some backing of logic.

For example, the move away from the position of banning television is presented as “starting television in Afghanistan when enough good quality programmes can be produced”. Despite reports of extreme rigidity, there has been movement in the very gradual easing of controls on women, the granting of diplomatic immunity to UN staff, permission for head-to-toe *burqa*-clad women to drive cars, acceding to the UN demand for placing human rights monitors in Afghanistan, and in the replacing of antagonistic rhetoric against the countries hostile towards it with a proclaimed readiness for dialogue and peace.

Being in government, it could not have been otherwise that the Taliban’s views and practices would become gradually moderated. And more opening up is inevitable, due first and foremost to the internally secure situation and also to external influences. The only factor that would put Afghan society once again in reverse gear is another major military or political upheaval.

On the move

The Taliban seem now to be actively seeking constructive engagement with the world. Although not as ‘Government of Afghanistan’, the Taliban do sign and honour agreements with UN agencies for humanitarian work. They have been regularly sending ministerial-level delegations to various countries, conferring with the representatives of international aid agencies inside and outside Pakistan, and are also beginning to open up to the international media. According to the external information cell in the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the last 12 months, 330 journalists visited the country. Says a foreign office official, “We go and tell them of our present reality and hope that they will understand us better.”

For a group that is considered reticent and xenophobic, Afghan officials have been on the move, attending an increasing number of seminars and conferences away from home. The Chief Justice recently went to Budapest for a 19-day conference on organised crime, while officials of the Ministry of Water and Power went to the United States for meetings with the UNOCAL consortium (Union Oil Company of California).

In March, the Deputy Minister for Public Health, Mullah Abbas Stanakzai, went to Nepal for a conference on public health. Mullah Rabbani, the president of the Council of Ministers, recently visited the Gulf states, while the minister and his deputy in the Foreign Ministry have visited numerous European as well as regional countries including China. While international travel need not itself be an indicator of more openness, in the case of Taliban Afghanistan, it is.

Complex question

The Taliban authorities maintain that their willingness to engage critics extends to even the most complex of questions. They mean, obviously, the “Osama” matter, for the presence of the belligerent Saudi, Osama bin Laden, in a hideout in Afghanistan has seen unprecedented and unrelenting media interest over the past few years. And it is not as if the Afghans have their head in the sand—more than half a dozen direct talks have been held in Pakistan (mostly in Islamabad) between the Americans and the Taliban on the Osama issue over the last four years. There has been at least one visit to Afghanistan by a US Congressman.

The Taliban have asked the Americans for evidence against Osama, upon receipt of which they have given the undertaking of having him tried in their shariah court. No breakthrough is presently imminent, because the Taliban government will never accede to the one-point American demand that Osama be surrendered to Washington. It is unlikely that any government in Kabul—let alone Taliban—will give in to such a demand given the extra premium that Afghan tradition places on ‘hospitality’ and ‘loyalty’. Says Mawlawi Abdul Raqeeb, Minister for Repatriation, Martyrs and Disabled, “It is not a personal matter, it is a matter of our principles—religion, faith, *jihad* and hospitality. No one dare violate any of these.”

The Afghans realise, of course, that there is a price tag attached to their position on Osama. According to Deedar, a prominent Taliban commander and a former captain in the army of the late Sardar Mohammad Daud (king Zahir Shah’s cousin and brother-in-law, who deposed him in a bloodless coup in 1973), the Osama problem has been of no help to them, leading to American sanctions as it did. But he nevertheless defends the government’s position: “We told the US that

Osama will not create any problem against the Americans but the US has not understood what is to their own advantage. If Osama goes to any other country he can do whatever he wants, but here we have stopped all his activities and he can carry out no operations."

Mullah Jaleel, the deputy foreign minister, had more things to say on the Osama matter: "Osama is, I guess, here. Osama's whereabouts were known to Saudi Arabia and America all along. We made a commitment to the world that from our territory Osama will never undertake any terrorist act. Today he is under our complete control. He has no wireless system, he has no telephone and has therefore no communication with the outside world. He is a helpless, harmless man. The US should be thankful to us. They had themselves encouraged and practically helped him to engage in jihad."

On the US demand that the Taliban simply hand over Osama, the minister is categorical, "The Americans have unilaterally declared him a criminal and so cannot give him a just trial. Handing over Osama to the Americans goes against our tradition, religion and spirit of hospitality."

Mullah Jaleel then gives the argument a twist: "I ask the West what justice is it that they have kept a *saitaan* in their own country, made him their special guest and turned him into a hero for his crime of blasphemy." Bending forward, the minister says, "You know, I am talking about Salman Rushdie."

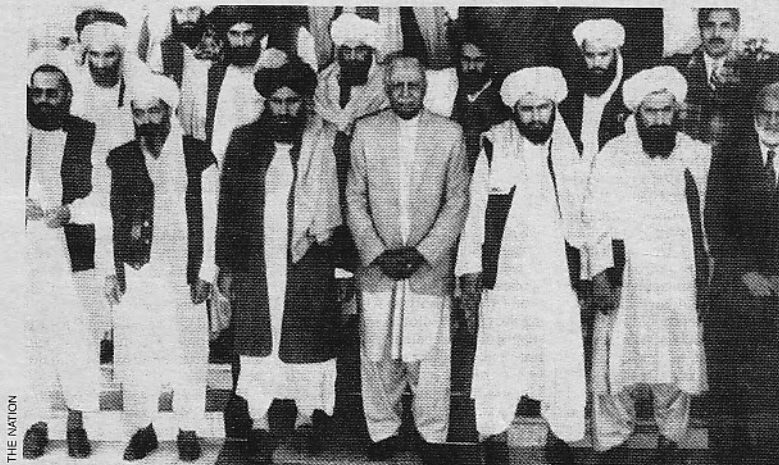
Public support

When outsiders superficially accuse the Taliban of imposing alien ways on the Afghan public, especially religious extremism and ethnic exclusions, they fail to realise that it is the Taliban's very ability to understand, accept and assimilate the organic ways of administering Afghanistan that has made them such a sustained success. The Taliban's influence and control over a majority of the provinces is directly linked to their ability to keep the population and especially the tribal leadership satisfied. The success has been in maintaining peace and security, and providing livelihood opportunities to the population (in agriculture), without disturbing the tradition-bound practices.

The significance of social peace and security for the Afghans must be understood against the backdrop of the 20-year war. Outsiders fail to fathom what it means to

the average Afghani that their country has a semblance of stability after so many years of mayhem and terror.

It is also important to note that the Taliban leadership has demonstrated an ability to correct its mistakes in matters both large and small. For example, in February, under great public pressure, the governor of Paktia province (southeast of Kabul, bordering Pakistan) Abdullah Aga Kandhari was replaced by Mullah Shafiq, another Kandahari. Abdullah Aga had failed to appreciate the local traditions including the power of the *jirgas* (tribal councils) and their *khans* (chieftains), and had started distributing state land in Khost to outsiders. Intelligence reports were despatched by representatives of the Ministry of Interior to Kandahar, and Aga was removed. He now heads the Afghan Red Crescent Society.



THE NATION

It is true that the traditional consideration shown to women was replaced in many instances by the exploitative attitude of some mujahideen fighters, but there are also examples of correctives applied by the authorities. When a widow refused to allow a mujahid fighter marry her young daughter, he did so forcibly, saying, "We fought a 11-year jihad for your safety and you won't let me have your daughter!" He married her, only to leave her after a week. Three years later, the mother got permission from the local Taliban leader to remarry her daughter, a decision that an outsider would not normally ascribe to those who rule Kabul today.

Ministers and soldiers

Having managed over the last three years to bring relative calm to the countryside and security to the people, the Taliban authori-

"We don't like pictures!"
Mullah Rabbani, the
president of the Council
of Ministers, and his
colleagues with the
governor of Pakistan's
NWFP.

The Taliban government is made up of a rag-tag army of devoted madrassa-educated Talibs, led by men who are in ministerial chairs one day and in battle-front-bound Hilux trucks the next.

ties are now confronted with the challenge of long-term governance. The population requires the government deliver on multiple fronts: rehabilitation of the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced refugees; reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed during the years of warfare; rehabilitation of the agricultural system; revival of whatever minimal industry possible; and, the provision of basic amenities like food, water and health services.

There are also a vocal few who are calling for the introduction of quality contemporary education. They want an end of the government-dictated curriculum and restoration of higher studies. Although girls up to the age of eight can avail of education, it remains generally banned for women, and the 2000 women sent packing from the Kabul University by the victorious Taliban want to return.

There are also subdued voices making the forceful case that the authorities need to focus on objectives more consequential than the size of a man's beard and the strict enforcement of the full-length burqa as opposed to the head-covering *chador*. Although some women working in the health sector have been allowed to return to a segregated work environment, many working women still sit at home receiving a percentage of their previous salaries.

The public's expectation, combined with the context within which the Taliban government is now operating, pose a four-dimensional challenge to the government. There is the ongoing land battle with Ahmad Shah Massoud in the north; the need for social, economic and political reconstruction of state and society; the need to confront international demands and pressures; and, finally, to entice the skilled and resourceful Afghans who have gone into Western exile to return. These challenges require a skilled and sophisticated response, and the big question is whether the Taliban government has it in itself to respond.

To seek an answer, it helps to recall that the Taliban government is made up of a rag-tag army of devoted madrassa-educated Talibs, led by men who are in ministerial chairs one day and in battle-front-bound Hilux trucks the next. It is difficult to imagine these battle-hardened men having the skills to govern the country in the long run, in peacetime. To provide perspective, it amounts to the same as getting a few hundred people, completely unexposed to ei-

ther the world of governance or television, from a remote village of North West Frontier Province or Balochistan, and asking them to run Pakistan. At the very least, Pakistan would have a bureaucratic system that is not war-ravaged as is the one in Afghanistan. The fact is the Taliban leadership has no experience in managing modern institutions, nor in engaging with hard-core economic and social development issues, or foreign policy.

It was during the Soviet invasion that these (at that time-) young men of Afghanistan began streaming into madrassas in Pakistan, in cities like Karachi, Akora Khattak, Faisalabad, Multan and various parts of the NWFP. This was made possible as a result of a conscious decision by General Zia-ul-Haq, who guided the establishment of even more madrassas so that more religiously-motivated men would emerge to fight the jihad against the Russians. The madrassa syllabus included learning the *Quran* by rote, interpretation of the Quranic scripture, Islamic jurisprudence, life of Prophet Mohammed, philosophy, mathematics and a weak smattering of modern subjects.

All the madrassa graduates sport long beards and wear shalwar-kameez. (None speak English, and the interviews with the leaders for the purpose of this article were done in Urdu and Pushtu.) They have virtually no experience in interacting with women outside the immediate family. They have been taught that the dictates of Islamic morality and social peace require the shariah to be enforced and *sunnah*, the way of the Prophet, be followed. Photography is un-Islamic and photographers are *haraam*, which is why the camera-based world of television and movies are to be strictly avoided. So also for music. They believe that it is the state's responsibility to enforce *hadd* punishments for theft, adultery and killing. *Riba* (the interest or usury forbidden in shariah), too, must be banned. Above everything, however, the Taliban believe that the state must provide for the poor and the destitute in society. All this broadly constitute the worldview of the Taliban – forged as it was in what the Taliban see as the moral decline and suffering that accompanied the mujahideen resistance against the Soviets.

Afghan anecdotes

Many among the Taliban leadership are unable to contextualise 'power' using conven-

tional measures: they comprehend it simply with reference to their level of personal courage and determination to engage an adversary. In keeping with their own exposure, they have a curiously straightforward and uni-dimensional view of politics and people, issues and events. For example, in August 1998 when the danger of an Iranian military offensive died down, a Taliban commander Amin Qudrat was heard to exclaim, "Thank God, He saved the Iranians from our wrath!" Such a sentiment, of course, was completely oblivious to the reality on the ground: Iranian forces were heavily massed along the Iran-Afghan border from Nimroz to Herat, in response to which the Taliban had to transfer 30,000 soldiers then engaged on the frontline with Ahmad Shah Massoud.

The ingenuousness of the Taliban fighter was also illustrated at the height of the Pakistan-US problem over the delivery of F-16 fighter-bombers, which had been held back due to sanctions. An earnest Talib leader told a Pakistani diplomat that Islamabad had been extremely patient: "Look, America had taken so much money from you and still you have not got your planes. If they had done this with us we would have attacked them by now." It was clear that he had no comprehension of what his suggestion entailed – not even of the physical distance between his country and North America.

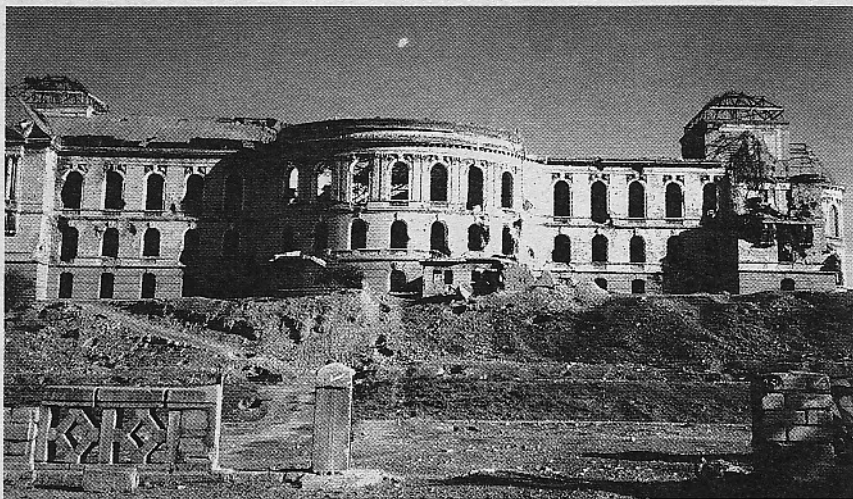
When the US fired guided missiles over Pakistani territory, aimed at Osama bin Laden's retreat in Afghanistan, a Pakistani diplomat in Jalalabad went to inform Maulvi Abdul Qabeer, the acting president, that the missiles had landed near Khost. The bewildered maulvi responded, not understanding that the missiles had been meant for Osama, "What does America want from me?" Deciding to retire for the night, he added, "Anyway I will think about it in the morning, I must sleep now."

The lack of exposure to worldly matters was obvious in a decision taken by the governor of Jalalabad, Maulvi Kabeer. When he took over the town, he asked someone what went on at the engineering university in Jalalabad. Upon being told that it was "Engineer Hikmatyar's place", he decided that it must be producing his followers and so ordered the place to be shut down. It was only when he later learnt about the university's educational priorities that the maulvi ordered its re-opening.

Another anecdote has a Pakistani offi-

cial telling a Talib leader that the world had congratulated Islamabad for its nuclear tests, but there had been nary a word from Kabul. To which the Talib leader responded, "We do not believe in empty congratulations. You tell us when you are going to liberate Kashmir and you will find us marching ahead of your forces".

In Delhi or Washington DC, such verbal aggressiveness may become the basis for academic and policy conclusions that the Taliban are fighting the Kashmiri jihad, or even a global anti-Western jihad. But that would be analytical overkill, for the Talib leader, like so many of his colleagues, is informed by sentimentality, loyalty, a sense of injustice, and even unsullied anger. Before reading excessive motivation into their statements, outside analysts would do well to understand that the Taliban world is largely defined by their need to respond to Afghanistan's internal social and political



Harking back to feudal yet more peaceful times: the destroyed palace of King Amanullah in Kabul.

crises. In power, the obsession of the Taliban leadership is nationalism and reconstruction, not the CIA-ISI tutored global jihad. If the world continues to demonise the Afghan rulers as perpetrators of political, diplomatic and economic aggression, then it may well become party to bringing about that reality – of the Taliban living up to that image, and dangerously.

The kathak dancers

And so the world watches agog as news reports emerge from Afghanistan of street-level Talibs producing diplomats at police stations for being clean-shaven, objecting to women occupying the front seat in UN vehicles, confiscating newspapers carrying imagery, or removing cassettes from cars and

unwinding them around the nearest poplar trunk.

But the fact is that the caricature of the Taliban is often true. In Kabul, certainly, there is some amount of compulsion at work in the harshness of the dictates, apparently used to demonstrate government control in the seat of power—a firmness required to keep the battle ranks intact. The Talib authorities feel the need to maintain religious fervour as a pre-requisite to keep alive the zest for martyrdom among the young Talibs who battle against Massoud in the trenches.

But behind this apparently harsh morality, there is also the traditionally fun-loving, quintessentially rural individual, whose personality is lost in the caricature. The guards stationed outside an embassy in Kabul regularly play the flute. In a small suitcase parked in the guardroom are stored Indian song cassettes, and videos of Nagma, the famous Afghan crooner. Recently, when some visitors wanted to see the movie *Titanic*, it was the Taliban guard who produced the video! At another location, after dinner time, a couple of Taliban guards were entertaining themselves performing the Kathak dance! Upon being discovered, they dashed behind a nearby bush. During our journey south from Kabul to Logar district, a government official urged us to play the cassette recorder lest we conclude there was no music in Afghanistan.

Shades of leniency have begun to extend into the public arena. When I walked about with a video camera, the people did not frown, but smiled. Most were more than willing to be filmed. Most ministers smiled when requested to pose for photographs, even though this was clearly against the orders of the Ministry of Vice and Virtue. The ministry's representative at the Kabul Police Department allowed the photographing of police officials. Elsewhere, when a female reporter walked along the street with a young woman, the people barely noticed. While it would be ludicrous in other societies to try and give a sense of relative normalcy with examples such as these, such is the image of a 'Talibanised' Afghanistan that they do serve a purpose to deny the simplicity of the standard image.

The average Afghan, meanwhile, lives a life and awaits a better day. Driving from Jalalabad towards Kabul, incongruous scenes flash past—Kalashnikov-wielding Taliban soldiers rest by the wheat and poppy fields, while the village men,

women, little boys and girls bend their back weeding.

Holy book as constitution

The struggle for Afghanistan remains a three-party dispute: the Taliban occupies centre-stage; Massoud is at the margins; and expatriate Afghans reside, a little loud, at the outer limits. In power now for five years, the Taliban leadership has to manage the dual task of keeping the Talibs flowing to the war front while at the same time administering the country as a whole. Mullah Umar, the Ameer-ul-Mumineen (Leader of the Faithful) of the Taliban, directs an elaborate government machinery with the help of two of his most trusted men, Abdul Wakil Muttawakil, the foreign minister, and Mullah Jaleel Akhund, his deputy. Sitting in Kandahar, he controls the area under the regime through the intermediary of his nominees. They variously occupy positions in a number of bodies: a six-member Kandahar-based shura, a six-member Kabul-based shura, a 23-member national Council of Ministers, around 40 deputy ministers, 27 governors for the provinces, and six corps commanders.

The *Holy Quran* is the Constitution of Afghanistan. Assisted by his Kandahar and Kabul-based shuras, Mullah Umar takes all the major decisions related to policy, administration and war matters. His *farmans* are the equivalent of presidential ordinances and are promptly implemented. All postings and transfers, from ministers down to director-general level, are ordered by Mullah Umar. Ministers whose performance is considered unsatisfactory, based on Mullah Umar's information sources, are demoted to deputy minister or director-general. In military matters, too, based on advice from his commanders, Mullah Umar takes the final decision on strategic moves. All advances and retreats are based on his orders relayed to the front.

Given this system of governance under Mullah Umar, it can be said that, in its essence, the mode and structure of government operations in Afghanistan have not changed since earlier regimes. If earlier it were the kings or the Soviet-Union backed presidents whose diktats were the law, it is now Mullah Umar assisted by his shuras who exercise the authoritarian prerogative. While ministerial orders may be overlooked by local commanders, Mullah Umar's word is law.

Despite all the destruction that it has suffered, and a partial and seasonal state of war, the Afghan state is a functioning one. There is a structure, and there are the line ministries, some of which certainly work better than the others. Three categories of staff run the government: at the top are the Taliban leaders, the middle are mostly the bureaucratic leftovers from the communist era, and at the third and lowest rung are the support staff. The Council of Ministers is said to meet weekly, and routine performance checks are conducted on functioning service outlets like health centres and primary schools by ministers and director-generals themselves. Decisions taken are relayed through the passing of orders known as *tehreerat*.

If the collection of duties on imports is seen as a sign of an active state, then the Taliban government collects duties at the centre as well as in the provinces. Passports are issued by the Ministry of Interior, and driving licenses by the traffic police headquarters—obvious enough for any country but deserving mention in the case of Afghanistan. Kabul's highly-organised traffic system is manned by policemen in pants and shirts. The Ministry of Interior manages the police as well as a highly efficient intelligence network.

To enable state functionaries and the Taliban leadership to move around in Kabul during the curfew hours, a new password is issued every night by the Ministry of Interior. There are numerous Taliban-manned check posts and toll-tax booths along the road from the Khybher Pass via Torkham to Kabul. Meanwhile, efforts, though slow, are underway to inject academic life into the war-ravaged Kabul University. The main problem seems to be an acute lack of money.

The state continues to be the largest employer in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Education employs around 32,000, while the Ministry of Works and that for Communication have 12,000 and 4000 employees, respectively. With little in the form of income, the government salaries are very low, with the payscale ranging from as low as 100 to 3000 Pakistani rupees monthly. The obvious result is an unmotivated bureaucracy. As one mid-level official in the Ministry of Education says, "Can anyone survive on this? How will we feed our children, our families?"

But whether it is at the Education Min-

istry, *The Kabul Times* newspaper, the Kabul University or the Kabul Police department, the atmosphere is thoroughly unprofessional. According to one aid agency representative who regularly interacts with the government, the ministries are working only at "5 percent efficiency". Part of the reason is that the ministers and deputy ministers have to spend a significant amount of time up at the front.

There is clearly some realisation among those in power that demands of administration and public service are not being met. In order to address these problems, much of which emanate from the lack of funds, the obvious advance has to be in terms of more openness towards the donor community. Prompted by pragmatism, in this area at least, the change of attitude is abundantly visible. The Taliban now regularly invite representatives of international agencies to business luncheon meetings at the Kabul Inter-Continental—quite a departure from the old days when the same individuals would maintain that foreign agencies and



MASIM ZEHRA

ngos were not at all required. Some of the ministers have even gone so far as to receive women delegates from foreign donor agencies. Even the more reluctant ones such as the Deputy President of Council of Ministers, Mullah Hasan, have been convinced by his deputies in the Ministry of Repatriation and Planning to meet with the lady director of the agency CARE, who came by recently. In agreeing with the entreaties, Mullah Hasan laid the condition that there would be no other exception to the rule.

The Kabul government's decision to celebrate 8 March 2000 as International Women's Day illustrates the Taliban's resolve to adjust to new realities so that at

Kandahar bread for the rest of the nation.

least they will be able to engage the donor community. The order that women may not leave their homes on their own is no longer operative. The men from the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, now keep a low profile compared to the past when they would regularly check, and beat men with short beards and harass women without the appropriate burqa or the dark-coloured socks. Meanwhile, to protect female chastity, Taliban guards sit armed in small vans monitoring male movements in the women-packed bazaars around Kabul's Bagh-i-Omoomi.

International relations

Only three countries have recognised the Taliban government—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. But it is only with Pakistan that the Kabul government has anything close to normal relations. However, Islamabad's ability to support them is circumscribed by its own bleak economic situation and increasing political isolation. Some military support from Pakistan must also be going to the Taliban, but the fact that they have not yet been able to defeat the Massoud forces indicates the extent of this support. There are around two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan (another one million in Iran), and thousands of Afghans have by now been assimilated into the Pakistani economy.

As for Taliban's equation with India, relations can be described in three letters: n-i-l. India, like the UN, recognises the deposed president Rabbani, while the former president Najibullah's family is believed to be living in India. The Taliban leadership believes that India militarily supports their rivals like Massoud and Uzbek Commander General Rashid Dostum. For a brief moment, during the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight and the extended standoff at Kandahar, there was some indication that India might engage diplomatically with the Taliban. However, it is clear that that expectation has not carried through.

The old private sector Afghan-India trade ties continue, but at a much depleted level. A Delhi-based Indian who was waiting for some papers at Kabul's Foreign Ministry said he continues to import dry fruit from Afghanistan via Pakistan and Dubai. "Of the two to three hundred licensed Indian traders, I am the only one left. Others got scared and withdrew," he says. He notes that the Taliban government did not cancel the trade licenses when it came to power,

and that UN sanctions forbidding the national airline Ariana from flying abroad made the trade extremely difficult.

Overall, the Indian government seems to believe that the Taliban may not have the staying power, which is why it is not engaging the Kabul government. At the same time, it could also be that New Delhi will not be able to sustain its allegations of Islamic terrorism, which the strategists in New Delhi use, if there were a rapprochement with Kabul.

Transient phenomenon

The Taliban's onward journey as the government of Afghanistan is bound to be a precarious one. Faced with the unfinished battle with Massoud, political skirmishes and minor uprisings, acts of attempted sabotage in Kabul, and an unabating propaganda war in the international press, the Taliban leadership has not been able to open up its top ranks to the skilled expatriate Afghans whom it so desperately requires for the skills they have.

The wave of migration to the West began with the ouster of Najibullah in 1992 and the subsequent closure of educational institutions. While the mass of destitute refugees are holed up in camps in Pakistan and Iran, skilled Afghans have found easy sanctuary in the West, with the US and Germany having been particularly generous in granting asylum. According to an official with the UNHCR, the refugee agency, at least 200 Afghans continue to fly out every week from Karachi and Islamabad in their onward journey to the West. The first problem in returning for this capable category of expatriate Afghan professional is political, but it is compounded by the problems of social conservatism and lack of economic incentive.

There is, then, the critical battle-front with Massoud. He has refused the Taliban's offer of a cabinet position if he accepts Mullah Umar as the head of government. Massoud gets his military support from Russia, Iran, India and also minimally from Tajikistan. He also gets some help from the Tajiks in the Panjsher area. Meanwhile, the support of ethnic groups like the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras for the Taliban is limited.

The challenges before the Taliban government—of social progress, economic development and fighting a war—are daunting. However, perhaps because of their reli-

gion-fronted zeal, a sense of pessimism or frustration is absent, and the officials appear zealous in tackling the colossal tasks of reconstruction and rehabilitation. As one minister told a UN Special Rapporteur, "We had our own priority, our country was to be divided into various parts, and our first priority was to ensure our country's unity. Now we will work in other areas."

Principally, the Taliban are now engaged in a security maintenance operation. But on the more complex task of governance, of delivering basic amenities to the people and ensuring an environment within which they can earn a livelihood, the government is crippled because of lack of funds and skilled hands. The support being provided through the humanitarian UN agencies and foreign ngos is extremely limited in comparison to what is required.

The state functions at a rudimentary level, mainly because the modern institu-

tions of higher education, of science and technology, of business and commerce, of judiciary, and so on, have been destroyed. In the area of judiciary or basic trade, some institutions continue to work along traditional lines, capable of undertaking simple and uncomplicated tasks like holding jirgas, implementing shariah edicts—or importing cars from Japan.

Given the sociological upbringing of the Taliban, their adjustment to the world of governance will be nothing short of radical. But, for the Taliban government to truly evolve, the external pressure upon it has to ease, even as the Taliban themselves have to streamline and loosen their orthodox systems. The Taliban are necessarily a transient phenomenon; they are as relevant for today's Afghanistan as they will be irrelevant to a future rehabilitated Afghanistan. At least in their present form and texture. ▲

Travelling Film South Asia update

The Travelling Film South Asia is taking place concurrently in South Asia and North America. The 15 films selected from the 52 shown at the Film South Asia documentary festival in September-October 1999 are now being appreciated by diverse audiences in far reaches of the globe. Below is the list of films which are travelling, as well as the confirmed schedule. Groups which want to host TFSA in their communities over the summer and fall of 2000 may contact the Director of Film South Asia at <fisa@mos.com.np>. For further details, visit FSA Website at www.himalmag.com/fsa.

- Don't Pass Me By**—Eclectic profiles of 'macho' locals, and tourists who come to blow their minds and muscles at the Nepali resort town of Pokhara. Sarah Kapoor, Christina Lamey and Kristi Vuorinen. 1999. 40 min. Nepal.
- Duhshomoy (A Mother's Lament)**—Recreation of events surrounding the pick-up of a 16-year-old garment factory worker by the Dhaka police, who is allegedly gang raped and sent to prison for 'safe custody', where she dies under mysterious circumstances. Yasmine Kabir. 1999. 26 min. Bangladesh.
- Fishers of Men**—Adivasis of the Chhottanagpur plateau have been converting into Christianity for over a century but of late Hindu activists have launched campaigns to bring them 'back'. Ranjan Kamath and Padmavathi Rao. 1997. 117 min. Madhya Pradesh/India.
- The Forgotten Army**—An expedition with some veterans of Subash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army to retrace their historic march and the events that took place between 1942 and 1945. Winner of Grand Jury Prize at FSA '99. Kabir Khan. 1997. 105 min. Pre-1947 India.
- Jibon (Life)**—In Guwahati, a mother perseveres as her 12-year-old school-going son comes down with Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy, which has no cure. An impossible situation confronted with unflinching hope. Altaf Mazid. 1998. 56 min. Assam/India.
- A Letter to Samten**—Narrated through a 'personal letter' to the main protagonist by the filmmaker in an attempt to understand Bhutanese life left behind by history in India. Alex Gabbay. 1999. 25 min. Darjeeling District/India.
- Listening to Shadows**—An exploration of the worlds of the sighted and the blind, a dialogue between the filmmaker and his visually impaired friend. Koushik Sarkar. 1998. 26 min. Gujarat/India.
- Muktir Kotha (Words of Freedom)**—Bangladeshi villagers recall the liberation war of 1971, their memories jogged by a documentary on the war, Mukthir Gaan. Tareque and Catherine Masud. 1999. 80 min. Bangladesh.

TFSA Spring Schedule

17-20 Jan:	National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad
27-30 Jan:	MS University, Baroda
23-27 Feb:	IIT, Guwahati
3-21 March:	YMCA, Bangalore
1-8 April:	Max Mueller Bhawan, Mumbai
3-5 March:	Sanjivani University, Bangalore
7-11 March:	Victoria, Canada
18-11, 17-18 March:	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
13-18 March:	Toronto, Canada
31 March-3 April:	HRCP, Lahore
3-5 April:	Wheaton College, Wheaton, USA
7-9 April:	Binghamton University, New York
7-9 April:	Vancouver, Canada
13-15 April:	Asia Study Group, Islamabad
20-22 April:	Princeton University, Princeton, USA
21-23 April:	India Vidyapeeth College, Karachi
28-30 April:	Calgary, Canada
28-30 April:	Namital, India
26 April-3 May:	University of Chicago, Chicago
1-3 May:	Chittagong, Bangladesh
5-7 May:	University of Washington, Seattle
11-13 May:	Max Mueller Bhawan, Dhaka
12-14 May:	Winnipeg, Canada
15-18 May:	India International Centre, Delhi

- No One Believes the Professor**—A surreal voyage with Orpheus Augustus Marcks, a.k.a. Professor Sahib: a Lahori poet, actor, philosopher, athlete, who walks the fine line between genius and divine madness. Joint Winner of the Best Film Award in FSA '99. Farjad Nabi. 1999. 25 min. Punjab/Pakistan.
- Pure Chutney**—A US-based Indian writer interacts with the South Asian diaspora in Trinidad, its "preoccupation with India" and explores that complex matter of identity. Joint Winner of the Second Best Film Award at FSA '99. Sanjeev Chatterjee. 1998. 42 min. Trinidad and Tobago.

11. Ragi: Kana: Ko Bonga Buru (Buddha Weeps in Jadugoda)—The state needs uranium to be mined, but the consequences of negligence are tragic for a vulnerable rural population in the Bihar plateau. Winner of the Third Best Film Award at FSA '99. Shriprakash. 1999. 76 min. Bihar/India.

12. Skin Deep—With six first-person narratives, the film traces the eternal search for ideal femininity and how it permeates the self-image of contemporary Indian women. Reena Mohan. 1998. 83 min. India.

13. Thin Air—With humour and compassion, sometimes darkly comic and unsettling, three Bombay magicians are shown as they desperately try to make an imprint on the world. Joint Winner of the Best Film Award at FSA '99. Ashim Ahluwalia. 1998. 42 min. Maharashtra/India.

14. Three Women and a Camera—One retired and two working women photographers seek to contextualise their work as photographers, as women, and products of their times. Joint Winner of the Second Best Film Award at FSA '99. Sabeena Gadhihake. 1998. 56 min. India.

- Voices of Dissent: A Dance of Passion**—Dancing in Pakistan means different things to a classically trained female dancer, a male Kathak dancer, a popular film actress and a mullah. NoorKhan S. Bawa. 1999. 22 min. Pakistan.

PHOTOJOURNALISTS IN all our countries do not respond to events as they happen unplanned and impromptu, because the cameras are just not there. We are therefore fed a whole lot of images that are the result of pre-planned photo-ops. Event photography is the bane of South Asian photojournalism, and I am



tired of pictures of assorted suns setting over India Gate (Delhi), Shahid Minar (Lahore), mountainsides (Kathmandu), bucolic, pre-flooding *godhuli* hours (Dhaka). Hence I perk up whenever I see event-photography suddenly turn into actual news photography, as when opposition MLAs of the Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha (State Assembly) in Lucknow started pelting Governor Suraj Bhan with paper balls (one is seen in mid-flight) and the marshals strove with upraised hands to block the missiles. Well, at least they did not bring in bricks to the *sadan*.

A PRESS note from Unicef in Geneva alerts me to the need for toilets for people. The fact is that 2.4 billion people, nearly half of humanity, do not have proper sanitation facilities, and I suspect that at least half of that is right here in the subcontinental neighbourhood. Inadequate sanitation facilities, says Unicef's head for water, environment and sanitation, hits young and adolescent girls before anyone else. We know well, as he says, that "lack of adequate latrines forces girls and women to wait till dark to use a field". Even in urban areas, the proportion of male urinals to female toilets is a fine indicator of gender imbalance.

WHILE STILL on the topic of hygiene, another Unicef report, this one for Nepal, presents an additional bit of sobering data. A survey in the district of Kavre, just east of Kathmandu Valley, indicated that fully 12 percent of 'Kavrelis' do not wash their hands after defecation. No wonder, as *The Rising Nepal* writes in an editorial, given also that 68 percent of the district's population do not have toilets (not even pit latrines), 60 percent of the children there suffer from water-and-sanitation related diseases. "Kavre is not a lone exception in latrine

coverage... For throughout Nepal similar or much worse facts and figures remain true."

CHHETRIA PATRAKAR has on occasion railed against the invasion of South Asia by Valentine's Day, which was aided by the advent of FM teeny-bopper radio and 10+2 schooling all over. And he was reminded again of the matter by a letter from "Typist Md. Nurul Islam" in *The Bangladesh Observer*: "Are (we) losing the romance of secret love? Do they now want to start the Westernised process of living together ignoring the age-old concept of family structures and religion? Are our next generations going to behave like beasts at least in respect of sexual behaviour? Oh the time, Oh the manner!" With that bit of conservative wisdom, I have decided to go the other way and change my views on V-Day, and welcome it to the extent that it actually allows a release for boys to meet girls and vice-versa. Over time, doubtless, this very Western import will be infused with South Asian mores, values and traditions and then we can truly call it our own. Till then, better that there be some legitimacy for open if kitschy boy-meets-girl situations than clandestine venues, which can be so much more dangerous.

FINE AND creative advertising copy needs to be appreciated and talked about. I like the full-column-length ad that appeared on page 9 of the 20 February *Deccan Herald*, proclaiming "Traditional South Indian sambhar...for busy North Indians." Besides the simplicity of the copy and use of all-too-rare white space, I liked this piece because of its alertness to the geographical and mental separation of North South Asia and South South Asia, and an appeal to the busy professional. All in all, a pleasing effort for a thoughtful, intelligent ad copy, which was the product of the ad agency Trikaya Grey.

Traditional
South Indian
sambhar.



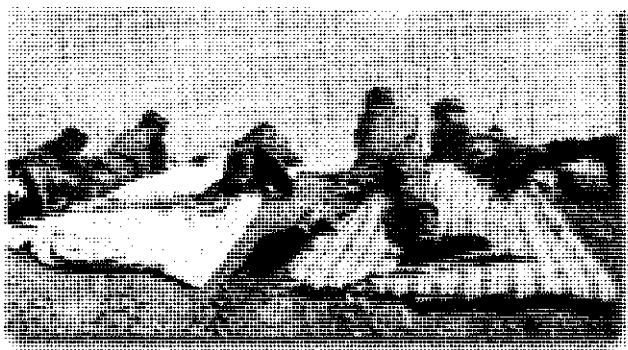
For busy
North Indians

THIS LETTER from Nishat in *The News* of Islamabad is so fine in terms of its rational sensibility, it deserves to be quoted in full:

"The official insignia of the government of Pakistan depicts two boughs of flower and leaves, encompassing a shield, which is divided into four parts. On these four areas we find images of cotton pods, tea leaves, jute plants and a bundle of wheat. The base consists of three scrolls over which unity, faith and discipline are written in the Naskh script. On top of it are a crescent and a star. Jute and tea are inappropriate as national symbols since East Pakistan has become Bangladesh. The cotton sector, at the moment is also in a state of crisis. We are also not self-sufficient in wheat production. As

far as the three slogans are concerned, the lesser said the better. Isn't it high time we revise this insignia to suit the strains of the present times? How about replacing all these obsolete symbols, with two crossed swords, a star and a crescent?"

■
A BELATED congratulation to Bangladesh for its international lobbying capabilities, which had the Bangla language day of Ekushey being recognised by Unesco as "the international day of mother languages". All South Asia, home to so many languages, should rejoice on this, even Pakistan, whose Urdu domination was what had the Bangalees back then on 21 February (Ekushey) to take to the streets and attain martyrdom.



■
FIGHTING MILITANCY and/or terrorism has never been easy, but there are small blessings, depending on the neighbourhood. And so when these Indian army-men decided that they needed some home comforts as they staked out a mujahideen placement, they quickly brought over cotton futons from the willing (or perhaps unwilling) neighbours. This was a stylish stakeout, at the very least. Wonder if the militants/terrorists were similarly blessed.

■
THE LEGITIMISATION of sex workers in Bangladesh moves on apace, as a group of them, reports *The Bangladesh Observer*, "paid homage for the first time to the martyrs of the historic language movement...by placing a floral wreath at the Central Shaheed Minar." After placing the wreath, writes the paper, "they left the Shaheed Minar in a mourning procession but none could understand their profession and identification." The speakers on the occasion, which included Baby Begum, Mamtaz Begum and Shahnewaj Begum, said that sex workers were an integral part of society and had every right to observe all important days of the nation.

■
THE INDIAN government establishment is dropping dark hints everywhere that the Pakistan Inter Services Intelligence is active everywhere, smuggling in RDX, infiltrating secessionist groups, using porous borders all over to foment trouble in Bharat. While the infamous, previously American-funded ISI should be stopped

wherever it tries to create mischief, particularly when it uses the conduits of Nepal and Bangladesh as is being claimed by Delhi, I have always wondered at the ease with which the ISI bogey is trotted as internal problems (and they are huge) overtake India. Fortunately, the editor of *The Asian Age*, M.J. Akbar, in a column (27 March) tries out an angle which I find worthy of note, though he was not on to the same topic. He writes: "Ever wondered why there are no good spy stories from India despite a huge fiction market and five decades of war, with nothing cold about this war either? Because we do not know how to paint the shadows of ambiguity and duplicity. We cannot keep a secret. Is our tendency to create larger-than-life enemies of other nations' spooks a reaction to our own failings? Are we so eager to discover conspiracy everywhere because we are such poor conspirators ourselves?"

■
LET'S IMPLEMENT our sense of humour, Pakistanis and Indians both, and appreciate this note from ShamyI, printed in *The Nation* (Islamabad):

An insect falls into a mug of coffee!

Englishman: throws the mug away and walks out.

American: takes the insect out and drinks the coffee.

Chinese: eats the insect and throws the coffee away.

Pakistani: accuses the Indian of throwing the insect into his coffee and vows to reply in kind.

Indian: accuses Pakistan of helping the insect to infiltrate into the mug, supplying it with nourishment to continue swimming in the coffee, blames it as a long-term ISI operation, terms the insect as an Islamic militant, then an Afghan mercenary, then a Pakistan army regular and presents identity card of the bug to prove that it indeed is a Pakistan army person in an undercover operation to change the status of LoC, and vows to defend every inch of the mug and every drop of coffee.

■
AAAARGGG! HUNIYA Javed of Islamabad said this to a reporter, as reported in *The Nation*: Working women will not face any harassment from their male colleagues "if their own conduct is right". She said that "women themselves must have the right behaviour and create a congenial and friendly atmosphere wherever they work and male counterparts will respect them. But if women themselves try to create an obnoxious atmosphere, things get worse and so problems occur." Ms Javed is an "American-qualified beauty consultant" who either has her head in the sands of Sindh, or she is living in a planet that does not have a South Asia. But I read on, and got a sense of where the lady beautician is coming from. Back to *The Nation*: "When asked how she was given the permission to work and let even males visit her, she said that her father sits next door and knows who is coming in and going out." Aaaaarggg.

—Chhetria Patrakar

Indian Women Pakistan Diary

by Shobhana Bhattacharji

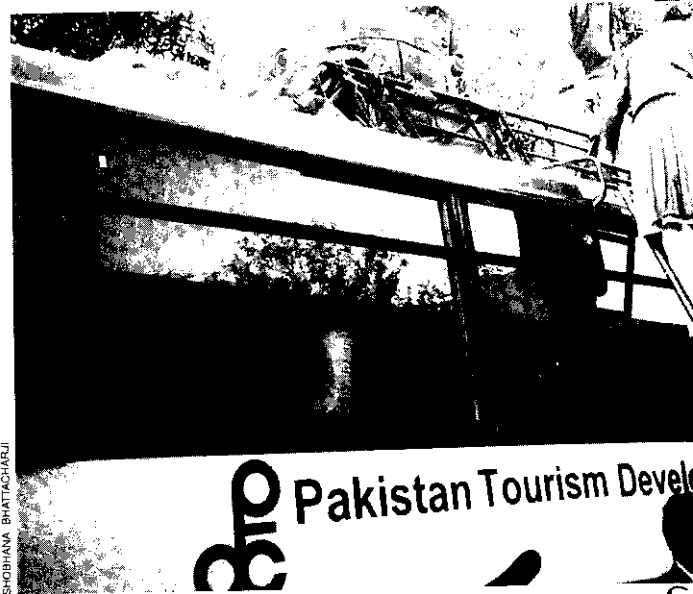
Forty women from India were in Lahore and Islamabad from 25 to the 31 of March, on a peace mission. Thirty-six of us gathered at Delhi's Ambedkar Stadium bus stop at 4:30 in the morning. Lots of security checks followed. Hair dryers and irons had to be plugged in and shown to be other than bombs. Batteries from cameras were to be removed, but we were let off after one despairing policeman told another that these women were all carrying cameras.

Trying to keep so many excited women within the timetable was like trying to control drops of mercury. Everyone shooting off in different directions. Running behind schedule. But the staff manning the Pakistan Tourism bus were patient and courteous. In his green blazer and tie, our driver looked like an executive from a private firm. On the return journey, he had on a shalwar-kurta and a silver spangled Sindhi cap. Only his resemblance to a young Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan indicated that it was the same gentleman.

As we traversed, we rehearsed songs by Kamala Bhasin, Syeda Hamid and others to Neelima's *daffi*. Tunes were invented on the spot. And we inflicted our singing indiscriminately on policemen, reporters and restaurant staff. Biological functions were well taken care

Shobhana Bhattacharji, a Delhi-based educationist, visits Lahore and Islamabad with a group of Indian women interested in peace with Pakistan. This was the first crossing of so-called peace groups after the Kargil disaster and the coup in Pakistan, and it was followed a week later by a meeting of the India-Pakistan Peoples' Forum, which brought 200 Pakistanis to the southern Indian city of Bangalore. At a time when opportunities for discussion seem to have been replaced by verbal belligerence, we believe that informal 'track-II' contacts between Indian and Pakistanis is good for all South Asians. Needless to say, we do not agree with commentators like Swapan Dasgupta writing in the 17 April Indian Today, who terms the ladies who crossed over from Lahore romantic peaceniks who became "pawns" of General Pervez Musharraf. The fact that 35 Sikhs were massacred in Chitisingh Pora, and that there were 500 Indian soldiers who died in the Kargil war, which Mr. Dasgupta puts forth as the very reason not to have met the General, is for us the very reason why contacts between the two countries is essential, so that each side humanises rather than demonises the other.

- Editors



SHOBHANA BHATTACHARJI

of with frequent, as someone named them, tea-pee stops. The police escort was doubled in parts of Punjab but even so, we maintained a reasonable pace throughout so that we were not very late getting to the border.

"Ladies, we are about to arrive at Attari, please comb your hair!" Mohini Giri's command was repeated at Wagah, after the crossing, and at Lahore. The famous Punjabi hospitality was evident at Attari where Shri Harcharan Singh of the Indian Customs spared us the meticulous search that we had gone through at Delhi. He had arranged for tea as well, and when we got to the other side, we found that Harcharan Singh had primed Choudhry Abdus Sattar of Pakistan Customs about the "lady *jaththa*" that was about to invade. There, too, we were saved a laborious search, and delicious egg sandwiches and tea awaited. On the return leg, Choudhry Sahib had crates of apples and *kinoo* for me. "What have you done to deserve this?" someone asked. "Married a guy in the Customs 30 years ago," I replied.

At this point I have to say that if the governments of Pakistan and India had not started this bus, and had visas not been given with "no police check required" stamped on, we would not have been on this trip. Nor was this all. Azra Kidwai, who flew to Lahore a day earlier, left without two vital papers. At Lahore airport she was told that people like her are ordinarily deported

but because she belonged to this peace group, a short confabulation with her relatives was all it took for Pakistan immigration to clear her.

In Lahore by late evening. Most of us stayed with families, two to a home. Our hosts seem to have put everything on hold as they drove us around, attended meetings with us, and even accompanied us to Islamabad and back. Early on the 26th we left in two coasters for Islamabad by the motorway. Very efficient. Very impressive. Yet we missed driving through villages and towns, seeing people, reading road signs and so on. But one sign was terrific: "Dr. Hamida was available in a shack on the roadside"! We also passed what looked like a Christian village with a fair-sized mud-walled church.

Arrived very late in Islamabad where the Foreign Ministry hosted lunch. Met the singer Malika Pukhraj's beautiful daughter who is a teacher and a gender trainer. Strawberries grow in Pakistan now like passion fruit in Himachal. Deserts are fresh strawberries with ice-cream. Fatima has a strawberry farm. We suggested that she might market strawberries as cosmetics since one of us had just used them in Gwalior to bleach freckles. An old Regency beauty tip picked up from a Georgette Heyer romance.

Some of us then went to visit the Chief Executive in his home and told him of our three-fold mission: "*goli nahin boli*" (dialogue, not guns), a nuclear-free Subcontinent, and a reduction in defence expenditure by both countries so that money could be spent on development. Since this meeting has been well covered in the Indian and Pakistani media, I need say no more here. From the Chief Executive's, the next stop was the famous Islamabad Sunday Bazaar where we experienced first-hand the warmth of Pakistanis meeting Indians: "You are our guests, how can we accept money?"

Fatima took Kumkum Chadha and some others to Pindi to search for Kumkum's maternal grandparents' home. Her uncle had drawn a map for her. A shopkeeper spent two hours or more with us, poring over the map, talking to neighbours, and roping his son in for the search. Eventually we found the place nearby, but the old house had been pulled down to make way for an amusement and wedding hall. Some Pathans who run the place said that the old well was still in the basement, and so it was, supplying water with the help of booster pumps. The owner called us to his home, where he showed us some artifacts he had saved from the old house. He has used the wrought iron railing as a decorative fence on his boundary wall.

Tea with the Indian High Commissioner. Then dinner at the Marriott was hosted by the Islamabad chap-

ter of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy, which was itself preparing for its next big meeting in Bangalore just a few days hence. I had mentioned to Fatima that I had to contact my cousin Sonu Rehman in Lahore, whereupon she said, "In that case you have a cousin here as well." And so I met a relative I have met only once before. In Lahore I met two others. With our simplified subcontinental system of identifying family relationships, one of these two, the painter Laila Rehman, has made me grandmother of twins. How easy it is to transcend the tightest international border!

Taxila via Punja Sahib in Hasanabdal next day. Tirpat Kaur, widowed in the 1965 Indo-Pak war, has worked since then for cessation of war. She was the only Sikh in our group but all of us went in, many "maththa tekoed" (bowed before the Granth Sahib), and all of us made offerings of money. This was where, said Tirpat Ji, Guru Nanak blocked a rock thrown at him by an annoyed pir — there is the imprint of the Guru's up-raised palm (*punja*) on the rock. The water that flows around the Punja Sahib gurudwara is clean and clear.

On the night we returned to Lahore from Islamabad, exhausted, it was the Lahore chapter of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum that invited us to dinner at the Gymkhana Club. A treat awaited us. Nadira Babbar had trimmed her play, *Sakku Bai*, to some 40 minutes. Sarita Joshi, the remarkable Gujarati actress who had performed the otherwise two-and-half-hour-long solo play in Bombay, was also with us. Nadira and Sarita moved a few chairs about and pitched us into a mesmerising performance about Everywoman. Sakku Bai is a maid servant in a middleclass home in Bombay who tells the story of her life from the time she lived happily with her family in a village to her having to move to the city because of economic pressures. As she washes dishes, sweeps and tidies, she conveys the stories of other women, her mother, her mistress, the master of the house and his affair with another woman, the educated sales girl in tight clothes. Without any heavy-handed "message" thrown at us, Nadira and Sarita used the merest hints to convey a great deal, moving us to laughter and tears.

It was so well done that a longer version was performed at the Human Rights auditorium on the 30th. The place was packed. People sat in the aisles and propped up on the walls. There was a standing ovation. And after it was over, Uzma Butt, veteran actress and sister of Zohra Sehgal, went up tearfully to congratulate Sarita.

The next day, in Lahore, a meeting with the Pakistan Human Rights Commission, which is chaired by lawyer and human rights activist Hina Jilani. All of us introduced ourselves with a small account of our feelings about Pakistan and India. Many of us had relatives in the other country. I had that very morning spoken to my 85-year-old maternal uncle in Karachi and though I am not the weepy type, I had broken down. Many of us had grown up on stories and memories of



the elders in our families, of how it was on the 'other side'. There wasn't a dry eye by the end.

But it wasn't all sentimentality. One woman said that the Indian media's portrayal of Pakistan was sometimes such that she had heard her son saying he hated India. Since there is no hate talk in her home this shocked her, but the more serious point was to try and change these sources of hate. We were to hear a similar feeling from a Lahore school student. But there and elsewhere, other students immediately said that Pakistan also demonised India. Another lady's grandchild had asked her, "India is our enemy isn't it?" His school teacher had told him it is.

A wonderful dinner that night at Asma Jehangir's beautiful home. Vidya Rao sang *thumris* while some others discussed what they would say the next day, the 29th, at a seminar hosted by *The News* of Pakistan.

It turned out to be a great meeting with eminent speakers — Asma Jehangir, Tahira Mazhar Ali, Jugnu Mohsin, Devaki Jain, Nirmala Deshpande and many others whom I had read about, but was hearing for the first time. The meeting was memorable for the way it steered clear of Kashmir and CTBT for most

of the time and focussed on the real issues of the region, which are poverty, illiteracy, the status of women, human rights. None of us in the Subcontinent can afford to be pessimistic, and this meeting gave us grounds for hope. We were



Indo-Pak bhanga in Lahore.

described as "*deewanas*" (the mad) but *deewanas* have been known to change history.

The teaching of fundamentalism through curricula and textbooks, and the role of the media in maintaining the levels of hostility, were also discussed. Much of the enmity was due to the negative portrayal of India in the Pakistani media and of Pakistan in the Indian media. But there was also widespread ignorance about each other's countries because there is no free access to information. We could not read each other's newspapers, could not get each other's books. This situation had to be rectified. Jugnu Mohsin of *The Friday Times* said the news that did get televised was incomprehensible. Persianised Urdu and Sanskritised Hindi simply added to the media blackout, she said. A Pakistani student pointed out that though the news was difficult to follow, Bombay films were quite easy to understand, so why couldn't that language be used for news. Meanwhile, many Bombay films were simply conveying unpleasant propaganda.

Possibly. But Hindi films are popular in Pakistan.

We were shown them on the bus. They are reviewed in *The Herald* (with an aside on how the beauty of a film is ruined in pirated cassettes). A student asked why we didn't send Aishwarya Rai to them. Film songs, Daler Mehndi, and Hindustani classical music (called "eastern music" in Pakistan as far as I was able to gather in our rushed visits to shops), from India are freely available. So are other Indian goods like Dabur Vatika hair oil. Except for some music, I have not seen Pakistani goods in New Delhi shops, and we have no news about their films.

As for media distortions, at the very least my interview to the Urdu *Nawa-i-Waqt* was faithfully reported, though the young lady reporter did not carry my reference to an Indian Muslim fundamentalist injunction on Muslim women students that they were to wear *burqas*.

Some of us were invited to Lahore College of Arts and Science (LACAS) to speak with their A-level students. About 70 boys and girls, packed into their library, fired questions at us — Kashmir, the media, and so on. Towards the end of the long session, they asked Vidya Rao to sing for them. Vidya chose the song that Begum Akhtar had sung on her first visit to Pakistan after Partition. The words are something like "Beloved please visit me, why don't you visit me? Once you are with me here, all our differences will be resolved." It was a magical moment of togetherness. We understood the music, the words and the point.

My mother-in-law had studied at Kinnaird College, Lahore, before Partition. She had instructed me to visit the place and "to deliver a lecture there". A chance conversation with Nina Zubair in Islamabad led me to her sister Kauser Sheikh who teaches English at Kinnaird. Kauser asked whether I would speak to her MA students on Coleridge (our colonial legacy has its uses). So I did.

Before we knew it, it was time to take the Pakistan Tourism bus back to Attari and on to Delhi. Was the Peace Mission of any use? Sure, we made friends at a personal level and experienced the warmth of Pakistan, but it surely went beyond that. The very fact that General Musharraf agreed to meet us, at a moment of such tension between our countries, was gesture enough. We had received messages of greeting from the former prime minister of India, I.K. Gujral and his wife Sheila Gujral, and also from India's External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh. It seemed to me that our group of ladies from India and our gracious Pakistani hosts together conveyed the underlying feeling of the people — the yearning for peace. It seems to me that it is not only a bunch of *deewanis* who want things to change, and seek a way out of the bind of hostility we have got into.

Kauser, the teacher at Kinnaird College had arranged for me to bring back a plant for my mother-in-law. Mohini Giri says it must be nurtured as a symbol of friendship between Pakistan and India.

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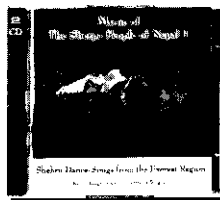
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Serial blasts

COLOMBO - AN explosion in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo on Friday [10 March] which hospital officials said killed at least 14 people and wounded 45 was the latest in a long series of political attacks in Sri Lanka. The following is a chronology of some of the most violent attacks. They have been blamed on Tamil rebels.

- 3 May 1986 - Bomb explodes on Air Lanka plane at Colombo airport, killing 16 people.
- 21 April 1987 - Car bomb explodes at Colombo central bus stand, killing 113 people and wounding scores.
- 19 April 1989 - Car bomb explodes in eastern Trincomalee, killing 51 people shopping for traditional new year.
- 2 March 1991 - Car bomb explosion kills Deputy Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne.
- 1 May 1993 - President Ranasinghe Premadasa killed in a blast during a May Day rally.
- 24 November 1994 - Presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake and 51 others killed in a bomb blast during an election rally.
- 7 August 1995 - Suicide bomber explodes bomb hidden in a coconut cart in Colombo, killing 24 and wounding 40.
- 20 October 1995 - Two oil depots near capital Colombo blown up. More than 20 security personnel killed.
- 11 November 1995 - Fifteen people killed during an unsuccessful attack on army headquarters in Colombo.
- 31 January 1996 - A truck filled with explosives rams into the Central Bank building in Colombo. The explosion kills up to 100 people and wounds some 1,400.
- 24 July 1996 - Two bomb blasts on a rush-hour commuter train kill 57 people and wound at least 257.
- 15 October 1997 - A huge explosion rocks Colombo's business district, killing 18 people, wounding more than 100 and severely damaging several buildings.
- 28 December 1997 - Three people killed when truck bomb explodes in southern Galle.
- 25 January 1998 - A truck bomb explodes in central Kandy killing 16 people and damaging Sri Lanka's holiest Buddhist shrine.
- 6 February 1998 - A woman suicide bomber triggers an explosion in Colombo, killing nine people.
- 5 March 1998 - A bus bomb explodes at a busy Colombo junction, killing 36 people and wounding more than 250.
- 16 July 1998 - Member of Parliament S. Shanmuganathan, his son and three police bodyguards, travelling in a van, are killed by a mine explosion.
- 11 September 1998 - A bomb explodes in the northern town of Jaffna, killing 12 people including

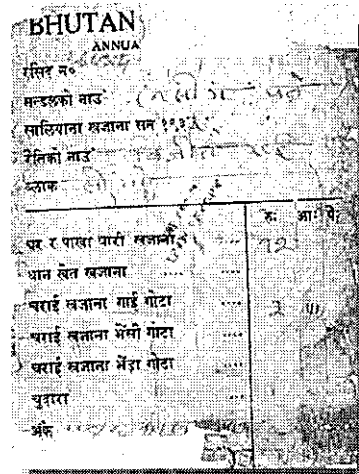
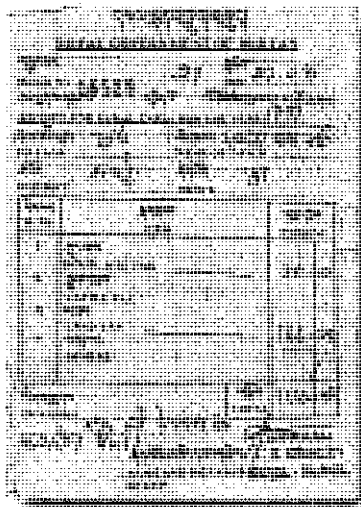
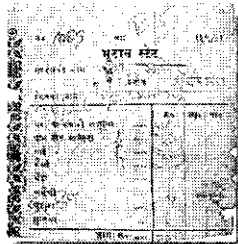
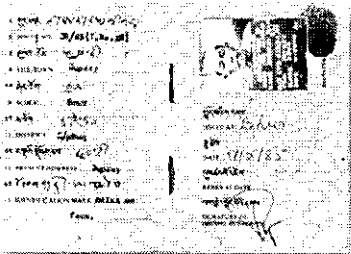
the local mayor and an army commander.

- 29 July 1999 - A moderate Tamil lawmaker, Neelan Thiruchelvam, is killed by a suicide bomber who jumps on his car when it is stuck in a traffic jam in a fashionable Colombo suburb.
- 24 September 1999 - Explosives are detonated in the roof of a shop near the town of Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka, killing 18 soldiers.
- 21 November 1999 - Military sources say Tamil Tiger rebels fire mortars near a 400-year-old Catholic church in the northern Wanni region, killing 32 people.
- 18 December 1999 - Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is wounded in an attempted assassination by a suicide bomber; at least 34 people are killed in two explosions.
- 5 January 2000 - 13 people are killed when a suicide bomber blows herself up in front of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's office. The premier was not in her office at the time.
- 27 January 2000 - At least eight people are killed and 73 wounded by a bomb explosion in a mail box in Vavuniya.
- 10 March 2000 - Hospital officials say that at least 14 people were killed and 45 wounded when a truck bomb explodes in the Borella district.

FROM "CHRONOLOGY—SRI LANKA PLAGUED BY POLITICAL ATTACKS", REUTERS.

Druk theocratic ideology

AS FAR as the government (the monarchy and the bureaucracy) is concerned, ideological influence coming from abroad is an interesting subject to consider. One should first notice that global political concepts like socialism or liberalism are totally irrelevant to Bhutanese politics. The fact that Bhutan is in contact with these concepts through new channels of communication like embassies and programmes of co-operation, has not changed anything. Political behaviours in the kingdom have always been difficult to relate to predetermined patterns. Because the Buddhist theocratic tradition prevailing before the establishment of monarchy, provided little ideological support to the new regime other than religious principles, there has been no apparent dominant political ideology in modern Bhutan. This does not mean however that ideological considerations cannot be used to describe new political behaviours. The monarchy, under the leadership of the present King has developed a very articulated policy based on decentralisation and protection of national identity. In some respect, this policy has been theorised through the concept of Gross National Happiness, the proclaimed objectives of which are the preservation of cultural heritage and natural environment, the development of human resources, and the nation's financial self sufficiency. This policy is inspired by traditional principles like conciliation, pragmatism and compas-



Digital refugees

WHEN IT comes to the repatriation of the Lhotshampa refugees from Bhutan who have been living for the last decade in Nepal (a population of 96,617 in the refugee camps alone, as of June 1999), the point made with great forcefulness by the Thimphu government has been that these are mostly non-Bhutanese from elsewhere in Nepal and India. Diplomats and journalists who have no time to visit the hot plains of Jhapa and Morang to actually meet the refugees have tended to accept this contention. The only way for refugee representatives to prove the origin of the refugees as having their origins in Bhutan, has been the papers that they hold—tax receipts, land records, citizenship papers—which indicate that at least until the late 1980s, the Bhutanese government did regard them as citizens, or at the very least residents. The refugee group Association of Human Rights Activists, Bhutan (AHURA) has now made it easy to access these entitlement papers by putting them all in a compact disk—the *Digitalised Database of Bhutanese Refugees - Part 1*. The database contains documentation of 4553 refugee households, making up 48,909 individuals—a little over half of those registered in the UNHCR-managed camps.

The images above were from the possession of one household head, the late Bhaktiman Rai, who at the age of 78 with his wife Ran Maya Rai (also deceased in exile) and eight other family members, left Bhutan on 25 March 1992, and arrived four days later on 29 March in Nepal. He was from house no. JR/55, tharm no. 29, block Bhur, village Jhupray, district Sarbhong in southern Bhutan. His citizenship card No. is 0055647, and Bhutanese government land tax receipts, are part of the *Digitalised Database*, which is to be shared in the currently running session of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

sion. The welfare of the public is a modern version of Buddhist doctrines (fundamental need for harmony in human relations). If not ideological in a Western sense, such approach is providing a coherent political basis to the regime, which is rather new to Bhutan.

Although there is a certain degree of incompatibility between the Western derived rhetoric relating to politicisation and Bhutanese practice, since the former may be irrelevant to the latter, we can assume that the development of a (look-alike) nationalist ideology in Bhutan is the first step of a broader politicisation process which will have influence in all sectors of the society. Such a process will probably generate its pros and cons. Education has already introduced major changes, particularly among young Bhutanese who are absorbed into both the national system and the international

mainstream. While the ancient elite had been socialised under traditional cultural principles, a growing number of young Bhutanese are educated abroad. The impact among young generations of Western influence, even minor, could be a challenge to the national ideology that need to be addressed on the political level. The creation of opposition political parties in exile, even limited to an ethnic context, has also to be addressed. The introduction of a new government system is the occasion to encourage and prepare the people, especially youngsters, to participate in the decision making process in order to enlarge the base of government.

FROM "BHUTAN: POLITICAL REFORM IN A BUDDHIST MONARCHY" BY THIERRY MATHOU IN *JOURNAL OF BHUTAN STUDIES* (1999, THE CENTRE FOR BHUTAN STUDIES)

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In this issue, the ambit of literary south asia, already distinguished by its indeterminate boundaries, is extended to include Jaishri Abhichandani's photographs of performance artist, danceuse and yoga practitioner Sharmila Desai. Section 3, if that relic the Indian Evidence Act of 1872, a colonial dinosaur that still wanders about the land, is anything to go by, "document" means any matter expressed or described upon any substance by means of letters, figures or marks, or by more than one of those means, intended, to be used or which may be used, for the purpose of recording that matter.

The figures of Jaishri Abhichandani on photographic paper leave no room for doubt that we are in possession here of a document

recording moments from Desai's 1998 piece put together for the Asian Arts Initiative programme, "Art as Resistance to Violence". For the performance, the syncretic Desai's vocabulary draws on a number of sources, from the martial art forms of Kalarippattu of Kerala in South India and the Afro-Brazilian Capocira to Ashtanga Yoga and classical/folk/tribal Indian dance traditions. Her two-part performance piece, such as the one performed at CGBG's in New York in November 1998, contained contemporary and historical themes of woman both as victim and as epic-warrior.

Sharmila Desai has been involved in a number of festivals, benefits, workshops and programmes since 1997, including "Performing on the Edge", Columbia University, and "Crossing Over: 30th Commemorative of the Third World Strike" in Berkley, California. She has taught street children at the Vatsalya Centre, Bombay.

sharmila desai
- document
revathy gopal
- two poems

THIS ISSUE



YASHODHARA-I

SHARMILA
D E S A I

Already she feels herself
recede in his consciousness,
as if she were an idea
to which he had once
paid lip-service,
or a distant place
he had once visited
and could
no longer recall.

She has ceased to exist.

In her dream,
light crackles like fire
around his head.
Trees shrivel at his approach,
and thorns tear at the scabs
of untended wounds.

Her head aches with unshed tears.

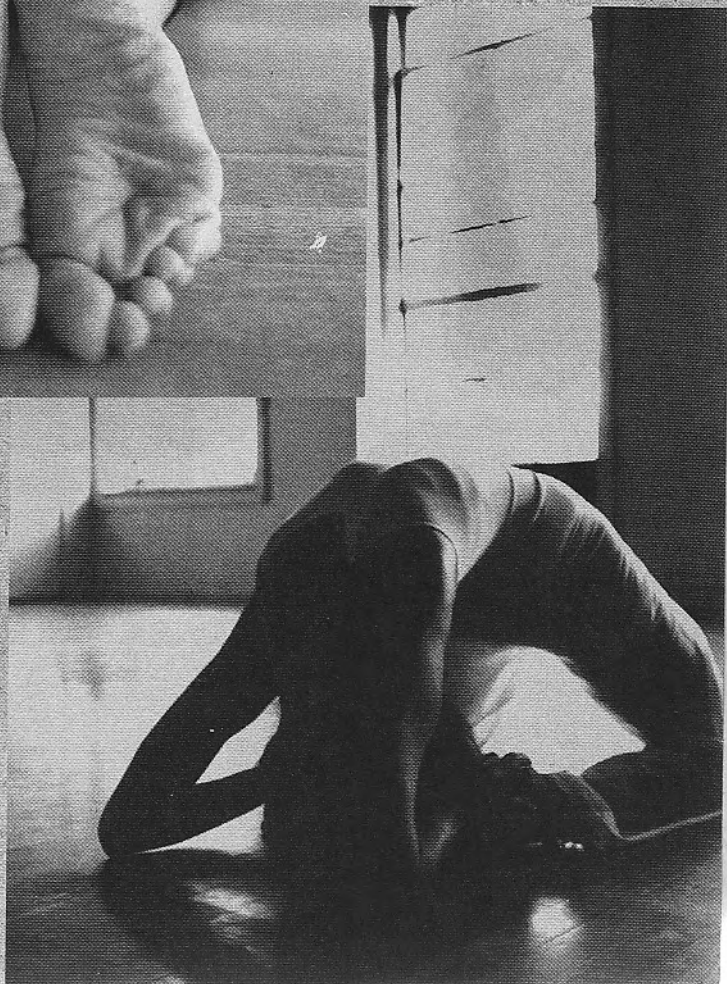
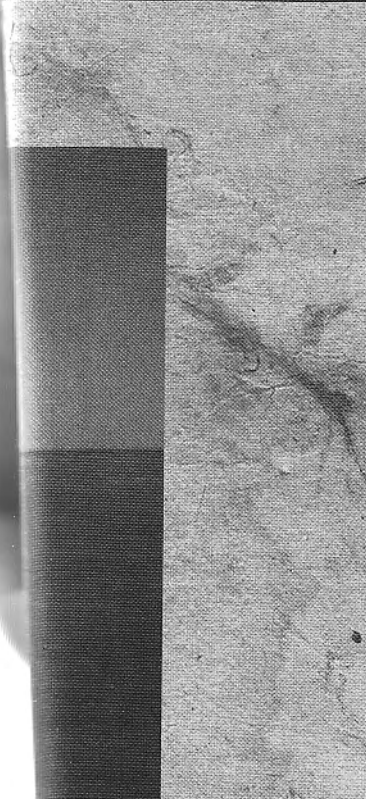
Not a look, not a word,
not a backward glance.
Did it all then droy,
as too-sweet fruit must,
with just that faint
hint of corruption?

Moths blunder in
and out
of the night;
hurl themselves
at the flickering
lamplight.

She must now put away
their time together,
wrap it in fine silk,
preserve it with sweet herbs
and bitter neem.

- Revathy Gopal





SHARMILA
DESAI

YASHODHARA-II

In the palace, no one speaks above a whisper. The women avoid each other's eye as they walk past the musicians who sit beside their instruments awaiting an order that will never come. Outside the fruit trees droop, the flowers listless, the fountains still. Young girls no longer frolic in the pleasure gardens. From the inner rooms, a child cries incessantly... an agitated maid rushes out calling for a wet-nurse...



I could have told you then,
If you had asked,
(but you never did)
what most women know
without seeking to know.

We prefer the pain
of being human,
the bonds of attachment
that you flee.
We prefer the endless cycle
of birth and death
to your inhuman
and unavailing quest.

What was it then,
the usual male revulsion
at what you had wrought,
gross consequence
of a moment's pleasure?

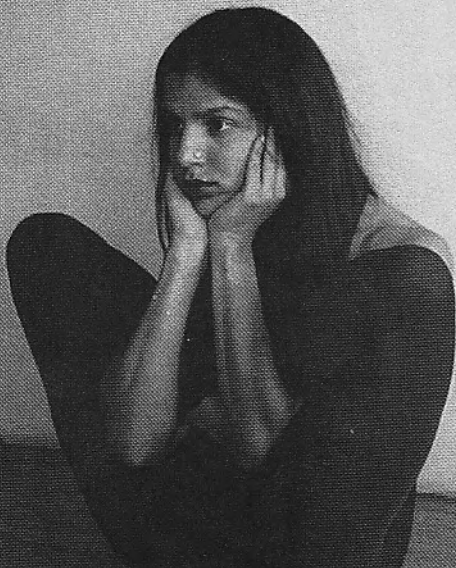
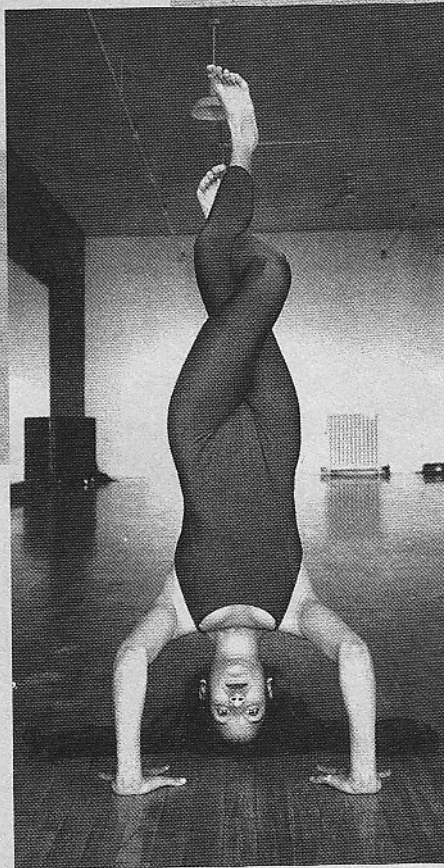
You loved me then,
when I was slim,
and could ride with you,
and shoot with you,
and lie with you.

What was it then,
amplitude of flesh,
or my nerve-shredding cry
or the child's pitiful wail?

My breasts are dry,
there is no answer to that.

They call this delivery
but not deliverance.
Deliverance from what?
What else is there
but to be human?

- Revathy Gopal





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

Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside.

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

John Collee
The London Observer.

Vajra, a serene assembly of brick buildings, grassy courtyards, ivycovered walls and Hindu statuary is a calm oasis overlooking, chaotic Kathmandu.

Time



in Kathmandu, the Vajra

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Not quite made in Tibet

by Daniel B Haber

It is a Lhasa shop-front, with bins full of t-shirts meant for tourists. Many of these are embroidered with the likeness of the Potala, the traditional palace of the Dalai Lama. A man is untying a sack containing a new consignment of t-shirts, and these bear the message "Yak, Yak, Yak, Yak, Tibet" over four embroidered yaks.

The name of the Nepali-speaking merchant is Amar Bajracharya, also known by his Tibetan name, Tsering. He starts untying the bundle. The labels all read "Made in Tibet", but the shipment has just arrived by truck on a three-day overland journey across the Himalaya from Kathmandu. There, the cotton t-shirts were embroidered by Indian hands from Bihar, who have never seen a yak in their life.

Outside Amar's shop, directly facing the Jokhang, Tibet's holiest shrine, are stalls selling souvenirs, knick-knacks, clothing and other items. Two Chinese couples from Shanghai, on holiday in 'exotic' Tibet, examine the t-shirts, 'Tibetan' prayer-wheels, 'yak-bone' jewellery, and end up buying one of the shirts for 30 RMB, bargained down from 35 (a bit over USD 4.00).

The camera-toting Chinese tourists, like the hundreds of others who join the colourful Tibetan pilgrims circumambulating the Jokhang route known as the Barkhor Circuit, are blissfully unaware that most of the so-called 'Tibetan' trinkets are not made in the high plateau, which has little manufacturing and few cottage industries. Most come from Nepal or India. The prayer-wheels are crafted in Kathmandu, and the yak-bone jewelry actually has its origins in the lowland water-buffalo.

Some savvy Japanese backpackers pass by the t-shirts, which they know can be bought in Kathmandu's touristy Thamel for only 150 Nepali rupees (USD 2.00). However, one of them pauses to consider buying a set

of wooden prayer beads (made in India), while the lady behind the stall barks "20 yuan—no bargaining!" The same beads, of course, can be bought in Kathmandu for about NRs 50 (about 70 cents).

"Most tourists just want it cheap," grumbles Ratna Tuladhar, proprietor of Syamakapu, a Nepali family-run business that has been importing statuettes from workshops in Kathmandu Valley's Patan. This, at least, is a traditional enterprise, for Patan's Newar-Buddhists have been casting the bronze statues for generations and exporting them to Lhasa—just as Buddhism itself travelled up here from Nepal.

"Most of our old customers are Tibetans," says Tuladhar, "and they don't mind paying seven to eight thousand yuan for something that they know has been made in Nepal by master craftsmen. But the new tourists are mostly newly-rich Chinese and foreign-package tourists. They snap up the cheap imitations." Although tourism is said to have increased in Lhasa, vendors and merchants like Tuladhar complain that business is slow. Tourist season in Tibet runs from April through November, peaking in July-September.

Tourists looking for truly Tibetan t-shirts—decorated with designs of the Potala Palace or a pair of dancing yaks, or the Tibetan greeting "Tashi Delek"—usually have to wait till after dusk, when the regular stalls close and street vendors lay out their goods on the footpath. The locally made polyester t-shirts that sell for 5-8 RMB (less than a dollar) are clearly of inferior quality and are picked up mostly by poor locals. "They fall apart after only one washing," warns Amar. But how to tell the local t-shirts from the embroidered upmarket ones from Nepal? "That's easy," says Amar with a knowing smile. The Tibetan ones (only embroidered in Chengdu, in neighbouring Sichuan Province), carry labels that say "Made in Panama". ▲