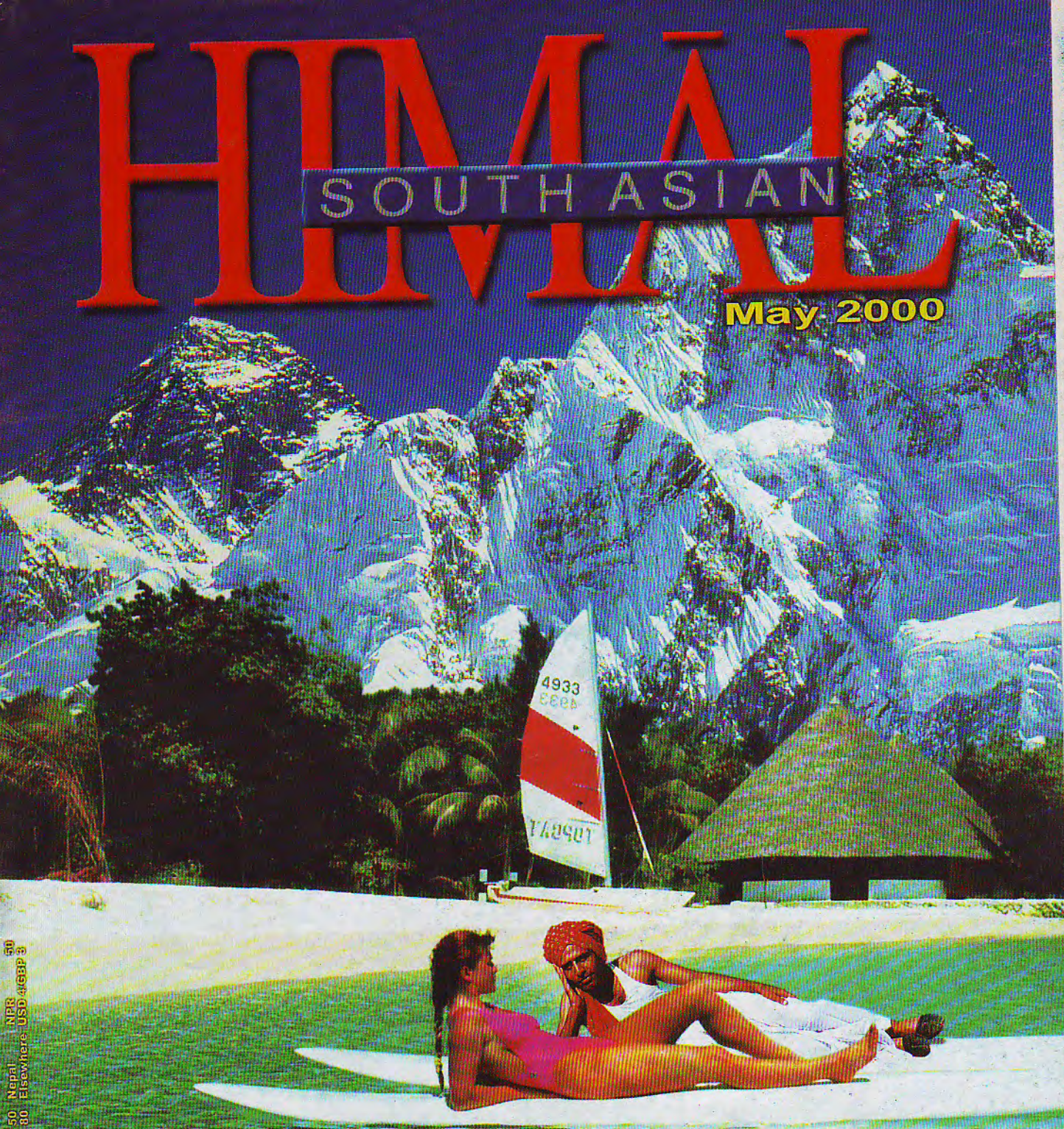
HIMAL SOUTHASIAN

May 2000



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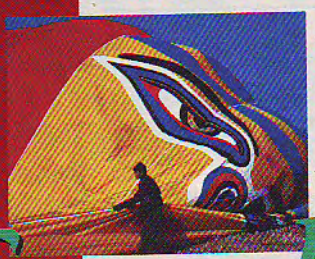

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Southern Comfort

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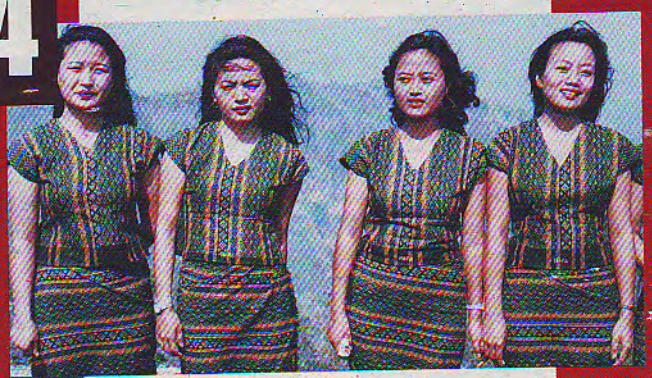

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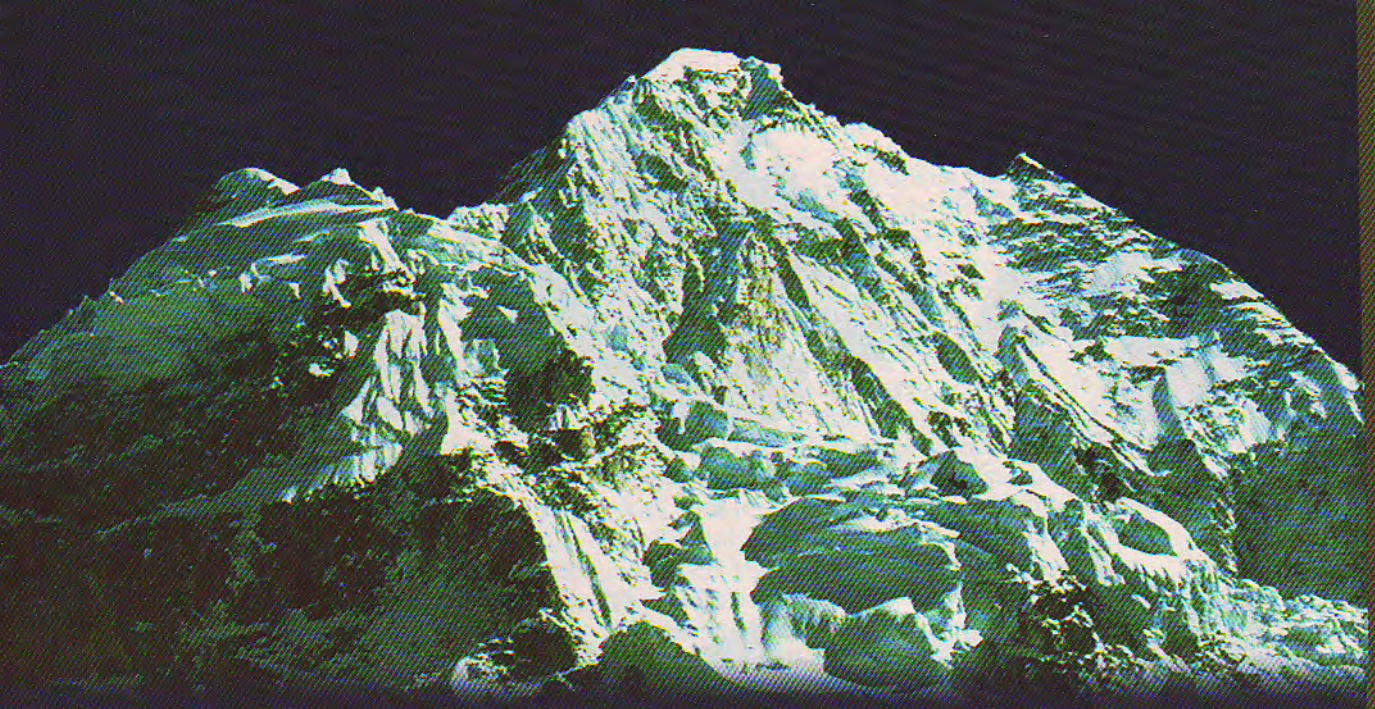
Cover collage by **Bilash Rai** shows the contrasting tourist landscapes of South Asia, from Chomolongma/Sagarmatha to the Maldivian atoll. Meanwhile, the South Asian sunbather eyes the region's tourism prospects.



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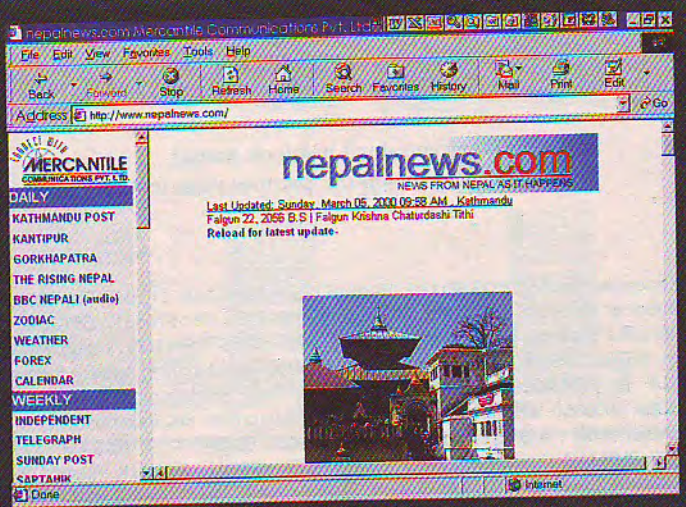

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BANGLADESH

THE LEAGUE *VS* THE BENCH

FOR ONCE, this is an issue in which the ruling party Awami League (AL) is not locked in battle with its diehard opponent, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This time around, the AL is tussling with Dhaka's senior judiciary over the issue of the latter's independence and accountability. The matter has come to a head with the delay in the review of the death sentence awarded to a number of people for the 1975 killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's first president, leader of the nationalist struggle and father of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed. In the process, the traditionally sacrosanct position of the judiciary in the Bangladeshi polity has been challenged like never before.

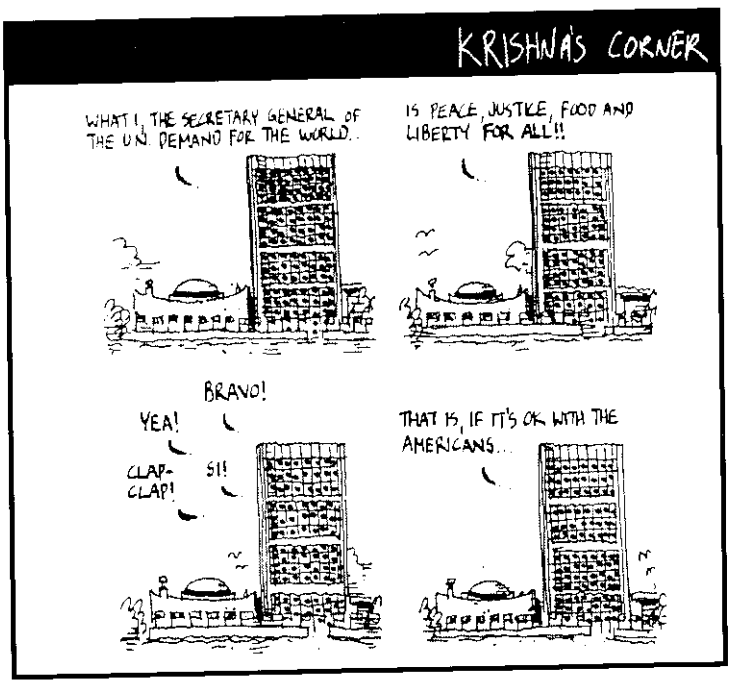
The League has let loose its shoguns against the judiciary, most prominently Home Minister Mohammed Nasim who does most of the thunderbolting on behalf of his party. He has spoken loudly that the judiciary should be answerable to the people and the legislature. He did so in the Sangsad, which has given him immunity from the ire of the justices. Sk. Hasina herself has had to meet President Shahabuddin Ahmed, himself a much-respected former chief justice, to explain a remark she made on the judiciary.

The bench, particularly at the apex, constituting the Supreme Court (High Court Division and Appellate Division), have always been considered to be beyond the purview of criticism. Its members, especially the previous chief justice, a renowned jurist and Islamic scholar, have been stout defenders of the Supreme Court's independence and self-accountability. The position they hold is that the judiciary should be accountable first to its conscience and then to the Constitution, and beyond that, to nothing and no one else.

Critics have an obvious problem with this reasoning, since it seems to place the judiciary above the law, a position not seen to be in line with an egalitarian state. More specifically, the AL government has taken offence at what it thinks has been the judiciary's lenient attitude towards accused criminals or under-trial prisoners, which it says has taken the punch out of its own anti-crime drives. Human rights groups support the rights of the arrested including political prisoners, while the AL leaders scoff at the practice of too-easy granting of bails.

And so we come to the "August 15 killers" as Sk. Mujib's murderers are known. Their fortunes have swung with whoever is in power, the AL or the BNP. In the 1980s, the BNP-dominated Sangsad gave them immunity after a special amendment was passed to that effect. When the AL took over in June 1996, it successfully challenged the amendment in court, and tried to haul in all those involved. The majority are now serving the death sentence, while the government continues to seek the extradition of a few who have moved to the United States and Canada.

The relationship between the courts and the ruling party soured considerably when the mandatory review of the death sentences on Sk. Mujib's killers reached the Supreme Court in November 1998. It evolved into a crisis when it appeared that given the backlog of cases, the review would take almost two years just to be heard. Rallies and processions followed, where the AL leaders aimed strong words and veiled threats. The unnerved justices went on to meet the president. Meanwhile, to add another twist, Mohammed Nasim, the son of Mansur Ali, the home minister in Sk. Mujib's cabinet who was killed inside the Dhaka Central Jail in 1975, took it upon himself to promise security to the judges and their families.



In all this, the stance of President Shahabuddin Ahmed has been positive as expected. The former chief justice headed a neutral caretaker government in December 1990, a role that helped defuse a constitutional crisis. The manner in which he conducted himself then earned Ahmed immense respect and credibility. He was later elected president by the Sangsad as the AL candidate. Ahmed has stood his own ground as president, not shirking to criticise inter-party conflicts. In the present context, he has steadfastly demanded that the Bangladesh judiciary be allowed to remain unfettered.

It is not that the judiciary has been squeaky clean. Indeed, corruption and influence-peddling are not absent among the justices, and more so in the lower rungs. So much so that the chief justice has made a public statement that all corrupt and incompetent judges from all levels would be weeded out of the system. However, the present charge against the courts does seem to be motivated by a partisan agenda, even though the origins of this agenda—the bringing to book of the killers of Sk. Mujib—may have positive elements.

The history of Bangladesh is replete with killings—constitutional, extra-constitutional, or of the plain street variety—of political leaders.

Meanwhile, the present controversy has been rendered even more knotty with the involvement—and how could it stay away?—of the opposition BNP. Its leader, Begum Khaleda Zia has said that before any other trial is conducted, there has to be proceedings against all those involved in the killing of some 300 of her party activists over the years. On the other hand, there are those who want re-trials of some cases decided by allegedly pliant judges during the Begum's husband Gen. Ziaur Rahman's rule; some even accuse the late general of involvement in the assassination of Sk. Mujib.

The history of Bangladesh is replete with killings—constitutional, extra-constitutional, or of the plain street variety—of political leaders. This trial will add another chapter to that long hunt for a proper process by which those culpable, belonging to whichever party, are kept within the reach of the law. For that, the judiciary will have to enjoy a free run, without interference from any quarter. It must be left to search its own soul and set its own accounta-bility standards. ▲

NEPAL

ARMED PEACE

IT IS sometimes said that peace depends on the ratio of coercive power held by the government compared to those who might be tempted to challenge it in a civil war. Secure peace is always armed, with its use strictly regulated by law and overseen by a strong 'civil society'.

A Maoist insurgency has been raging in about one-third of the country's administrative districts for over five years now. Nearly 1500 Nepali lives have already been lost. The necessity of using effectively the coercive power of the state, in addition to negotiations and other constructive engagements, is being acutely felt. Normal 'policing'—some of it indiscriminate—has not succeeded in controlling organised assaults by a motivated and armed group adopting the techniques of guerrilla warfare, and that too in a rugged terrain amidst a population plagued by acute poverty.

In the hill regions affected by insurgency, fear reigns supreme. Caught between a rock and a hard place—demanding Maoists and vindictive policemen—the people have started to lose faith in the government administration, which has been effectively confined to the district headquarters in more than one place. In certain pockets, there are what can only be called Maoist administrations in place. Clearly, the Nepali Congress government needs to resort to something drastic, and quite quickly too, if it is to retain credibility and live up to the promises it made to the larger populace in the general elections of a year ago.

The coercive power at the command of the Kathmandu government is of two types: the Nepal Police, the force which has 'handled' the Maoists for the past five years; and the Royal Nepal Army, which has remained firmly in the barracks till now. Nepal has nothing in between in the form of a paramilitary force.

During the Rana oligarchy which lasted till 1950, it was the army that oversaw law and order, with civil administrative officials routinely holding military position. The Nepal Police was raised only after the Ranas were overthrown, with leaders who had faced the fire of the soldiers during the first struggle for democracy committed to separating law-and-order and national security functions.

A relatively younger force, much closer to

the people and made to sway under the whims of the political leadership, the Nepal Police has the image of a poor cousin of the elitist army. In comparison to the soldiers, Nepali policemen are poorly paid, ill-equipped, inadequately armed, and consequently, less motivated. To make things worse, at the latest instance, the police was thoroughly politicised during the coalition government of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (Chand) and the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), when its feisty home minister Bam Dev Gautam went about dismantling the command hierarchy established over the years. No thanks to Mr. Gautam, among others, the Nepal Police has turned into a force that does the politician's bidding – hardly the ideal organisation to respond to the complexities of a Maoist 'people's war'.

The Royal Nepal Army, on the other hand, commands fearful respect in Nepali society, partly because it is associated with the name of the king (note the 'Royal' in the name, not given to the police), and partly because it has not yet had to prove its worth in a possibly messy internal security assignment. Still essentially commanded by the Chhetri elite of Nepal, the army has not had to fight an external war since 1858 (with Tibet, and a losing proposition at that), and uses its time protecting the king and the national parks, conducting ceremonial displays, and building the occasional highway. Nevertheless, in the minds of the people, the army remains the weapon of last resort if national society really begins to fall apart as a result of a wildfire insurgency that the political class of Kathmandu cannot contain.

Deploying the army is not a routine government decision, however. According to the 1990 Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, which in so many areas reflects points of compromise between the royal palace, the conservative classes and the democratic forces, the army can only be bought onto the streets by the king upon the recommendations of the National Security Council. The Council, which has never been activated over the decade of democracy, consists of three members – the prime minister, the defence minister and the commander-in-chief. With Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala himself holding the defence portfolio, the effective strength of the council is two, and judging by their public utterances, both Koirala and the C-in-C Prajwalla SJB Rana appear to be in favour of deploying the army to control the Maoists.

A third option has now been suggested by a commission set up by the previous government (of Krishna Prasad Bhattarai) to explore the possibility of establishing an armed police unit. Chaired by Khem Raj Regmi, a former home secretary, this commission has come up with the idea of a paramilitary unit at the direct disposal of the government, said to be modelled on India's CRPF. Tentatively named the Armed Security Force, initially the group would be composed of the existing riot police and the commando unit of the Nepal Police, and an equal number of trained personnel from the army.

Nepal Police chief Achyut Krishna Kharel (l) and the army C-in-C Prajwalla SJB Rana.

There may be questions about costs, composition and line of command, but eventually such a force may have to come into existence, especially if the police cannot be brought back to professional stature. The state does need a specialised unit to face the challenges of increasingly sophisticated insurgents who are not engaged in merely a political movement, but have actually declared 'people's war', and are acting according to its violent precepts. The government does need to have something to fall back upon when a situation is neither just a civilian law and order problem, nor an outright attack by an external enemy.

The army, itching to play a role, may be reluctant to return to the barracks once brought out ...

Even while the Regmi Commission's report was doing the rounds, Prime Minister Koirala set alarm bells ringing by wanting to 'activate' the National Security Council. The Kathmandu intelligentsia fears, perhaps with sound reasoning in the context of the less-than-respectful postures of the army brass towards the popularly elected government, that Koirala's action will let the military cat out of the bag. The army, itching to play a role, may be reluctant to return to the barracks once brought out, and it would also definitely claim a bigger share of the national revenue – it is well known that the generals and their paraphernalia come dearer than the inspector generals. But the counter to this argument is that the Maoist insurgency has spread as fast as it has, precisely

because the underground leadership knows that the army is not within the direct control of the government. In such a context, it needs to be said that any action by Prime Minister Koirala to take the final step of wresting the army from the ambiguous grasp of the royal palace and under fuller command of the elected government, can only lead to a further strengthening of Nepali democracy. If the politicians try to 'politicise' the army like they did the police, the army brass as well as media and the academia, as also the palace, should fight it.

While the debates on setting up of the paramilitary force and/or galvanising the NSC take their course, perhaps the government can try out a solution which would even render these two proposals defunct for the moment. The best course for now appears to be for Prime Minister Koirala to take firm steps to mobilise the army, but to keep it confined to a supportive role in the insurgency-affected regions. This would allow the police to face the heat with the confidence of a fall-back option, while at the same time saving the government from the embarrassment of having to make obvious use of the army to fight its own people. (For the moment, with the government still unsure of its authority, the suggestion of the RNA providing support to the police has the colonels coming back to the home minister with their calculators and asking for 'x' amount of rupees before the jawans come out.) Such an approach will necessitate the establishment of a civilian command to coordinate the efforts of the army and the police in the field, and in this context the (one more) idea of appointing regional governors does deserve serious attention.

Fighting battles is an unpleasant but essential task if the Kathmandu government is to re-establish authority and restore peace in all of the hinterland. No amount of political correctness amongst Kathmandu's intelligentsia—rarely known to do its homework—can cover this fact of public affairs in present-day Nepal. And if and when the government really comes up with the will to go to 'war' with the insurgents, rather than stay in holding pattern, the role of media and the larger civil society will be that much more crucial, to ensure that the innocent and deprived peasantry of Nepal are not caught in the crossfire. There is terror in the hills, and no credit is due for the violent ideology of the Maoist leadership nor the heavy-handed police action of the government in the years just past. ▲

- C. K. Lal

PAKISTAN ● INDIA

PEACE PIPELINE

THERE IS potential for a gas pipeline to achieve what bilateral diplomacy, international diplomacy and 'track two' diplomacy have not been able to achieve in the last 20 years; a first step towards indirect trade between what are now South Asia's nuclear neighbours. Pakistan has agreed to allow a pipeline carrying Iranian natural gas to traverse its soil to reach markets in India. This can be regarded by the imaginative as a fundamental development in regional politics, except that the media at large and India's in particular, has not given it the importance it would seem to deserve.

To begin with, the very consideration of this project is linked to a reviving Pakistan-Iran relationship, which had plummeted earlier due to the Taliban Afghanistan factor. The thaw began with General Pervez Musharraf's December visit to Tehran, with the Chief Executive particularly keen to discuss trade possibilities with Iran. Pakistan's trade deficit this year is expected to touch USD 1.6 billion, due some extent to the tripling of world oil prices. The unannounced conclusion of the men who run Islamabad was that cash-strapped Pakistan cannot afford the exclusive Afghan focus to define Pak-Iran relations.

While other arenas of trade will obviously pick up steam in the days ahead, the most significant outcome of Gen Musharraf's Tehran visit was actually a trade project where Pakistan only provides its territorial good offices. This was the long-mooted gas pipeline project to feed natural gas from the Iranian fields to the population centres and industries in North India. The Iranians have expressed pleasant surprise at how unusually efficient Islamabad's response has suddenly been.

Indeed, for a subject that is potentially such a minefield—for allowing India to benefit from a project that actually physically uses Pakistani space—there has been great speed and no dilly-dallying. The Iranians, at least, put this development to Gen Musharraf's personal interest in the project, which got the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Petroleum activated.

All this indicates a significant change in the mindset of Pakistani policy-makers for the moment not having to worry about what the 'opposition' might say. Indeed, the military men in the driving seat in Islamabad seem to be

viewing the pipeline project positively rather than reactively, and that is refreshing. And, while certainly, the project does not equal to opening up trade with either Iran or India, the fallout of goodwill vis-a-vis Iran and (more significantly) India can be unprecedented.

The pipeline was first proposed by Iran in 1993, to supply gas from the South Paras gas fields (in Khuzestan province, presently operated by a French company) through overland pipeline, to Delhi, probably via Multan. The exact route of the pipeline and the commercial aspects are yet to be worked out, because the all-important factor till now had been Pakistani acquiescence. On the technical side, the outlay of the project is said to be about USD three billion. In addition to the Australian firm BHP which has already expressed interest, other companies are expected to join an international consortium which will finance and build the project. Pakistan, meanwhile, is expected to earn USD 500 to 600 million annually as transit fee—a tidy bonus for agreeing to support the needs of a presently hostile neighbour.

Although both the Mian Nawaz Sharif and the earlier Benazir Bhutto governments had examined the Iranian pipeline proposal, they were unable to clear it for a number reasons. These included reservations within a section of the army, of the possible impact of the project on Pakistan's position on Kashmir, the stance on bilateral trade with India, and the fact that the sitting opposition could be expected to raise a controversy. Some within the Indian establishment, too, had rejected the idea of a pipeline which traversed Pakistan, instead proposing an off-shore pipeline. This, the Iranians maintained, was not financially viable.

At one point, responding to Pakistan's reservations on the Iran-India pipeline project, Tehran had proposed to work on an Iran-Pakistan pipeline. However, differences over the price of the gas to be supplied stalled that project. Other factors served to muddy the decision-making at that time, including the American company UNOCAL's proposal to bring down an oil and gas pipeline to Pakistan from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan. Ultimately, all discussion ceased as spiralling distrust enveloped Islamabad-Tehran relations, on the matter of the Taliban and sectarian violence within Pakistan.

With matters in military hands, the reservations within the GHQ of the Iran-India gasline through Pakistan disappeared. The project was then examined for its commercial considerations, and the prognosis was that it would be a win-win for all the three parties concerned, including Pakistan as the intermediary. And so in March, Pakistan's secretary of petroleum travelled to Tehran to convey Islamabad's agreement in principle to the proposed project. It was agreed that the Iranians would draw up a political Memorandum of Understanding to be signed by Iran, Pakistan and India.

Obviously, the concerns of both Pakistan and Indian have to be taken care of. New Delhi has every right to insist on a guaranteed continuous supply of the gas, which becomes a key issue in view of the perennial tensions between the two countries. On the Pakistani side, the insistence is that there will be no Indian manning of the pipeline, although Islamabad will allow neutral international monitoring of the section that passes through its territory.

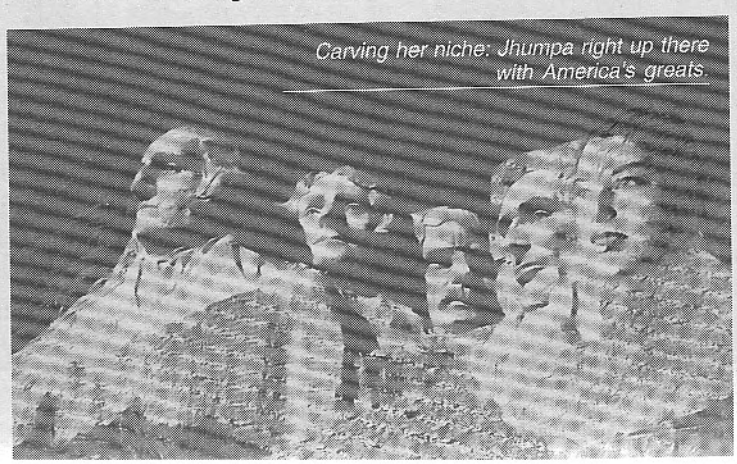
The Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, indeed seems to be all win-win. But it is important not to count chicken before they hatch, especially when the matter involves South Asian geopolitics. Suffice it to say that Islamabad has shown a degree of maturity, going beyond the rejectionist and self-damaging mindset vis-à-vis New Delhi. If New Delhi is willing to receive a gas line that is provided partly courtesy Islamabad, then that alone will serve as a harbinger for peace. The pipeline is a third-party project, but at a time when India and Pakistan are not talking direct trade, this is as good a beginning as any. ▲

- Nasim Zehra

DIASPORA

WANTED: LOCALISED CHRONICLERS

THERE IS a charming persistence to the chronicler Jhumpa Lahiri's writings. Her eye and interests rest on things and events that do not



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As sure as taking it there yourself

interest many writers, especially those from the Subcontinent. Admittedly, *Interpreter of Maladies* (Harper Collins, 1999) is languid, and stubbornly refuses to probe any of its characters in depth, but because it moves like a home video, slowly through the lives of the Sen and the Dixit families in downtown America, it fulfills the promise of readability.

The success of *Maladies* lies in providing the North American readers with a panoramic view of the life of two South Asian families, who have for more than two decades lived unobtrusively amidst them. Now that their prosperity can no longer be ignored—remember, even Bill Clinton made a pilgrimage to the Subcontinent—Americans have decided that they are now curious about all these engineers and academics who have suddenly burst into the scene, no longer slinking into a tenement in Jackson Heights, but commanding prime property in Summit, New Jersey. Who are these people—Ms Lahiri provides the readable guide, and this explains the Pulitzer.

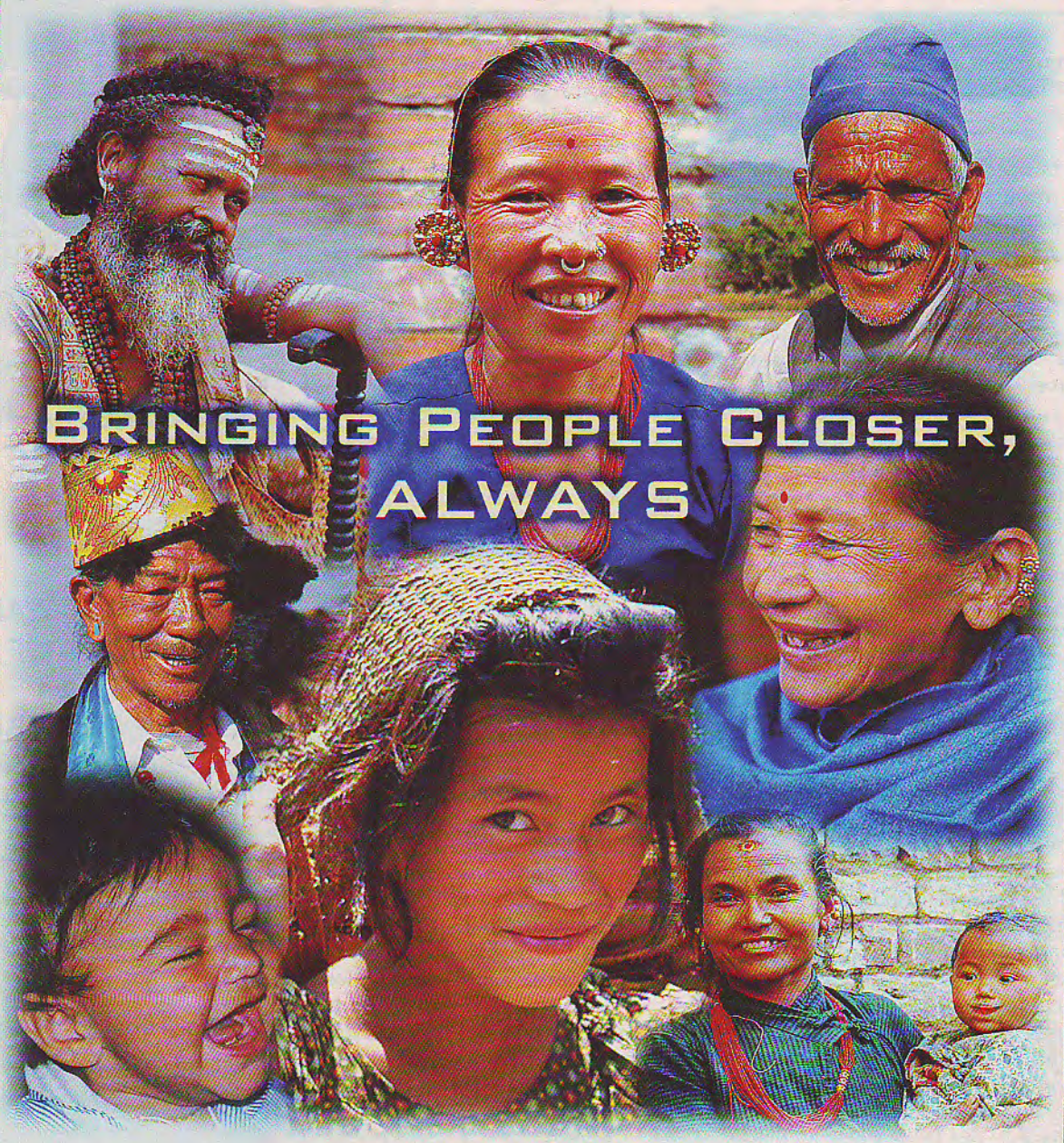
Lahiri has a unique advantage in that, although she was raised in an Indian family, she can write from the perspective of an American writer. Her eyes therefore catch nuances that escape both the India-born and the American writer. She unravels the lives of an Indian household from the perspective of an enlightened second generation, much like she might have done for her curious American friends in college. She tells stories that have quaint locations and settings, yet her main characters and their life problems are strikingly familiar to the American audience.

There is a lot to be learnt from Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. They are excellent chroniclers. They know the market they write for, and are not sidetracked. Most of all, they do not believe that all fiction should dazzle, and that words should leap off the page with clever alliterations and cleverer metaphors. Sometimes one wishes that the Subcontinent could produce such chroniclers too, to do for us what Ms Lahiri has done for her North American clientele. It would be good to have someone writing with a dogged eye and a capable pen, who could settle her/his gaze on different communities and cultures that are part of , say, South Asian metros. Someone who would write less about tortured childhood, or torn identity in a caste-based society, someone less self-involved, more willing to observe and take notes.

Will this mundane stuff, without angst and vivid pictures of tourist hot spots, sell? The answer is an unequivocal yes, and that it will sell in our South Asian cities without having first to receive an imprimatur from the Booker or the Pulitzer. It will sell because, like in America, there exists in our metros a large English-speaking readership, not even necessarily the class elite, which is unaware of the diversity of its city, which is removed from the reality of so many sectors and communities. This readership, too, like its American counterpart, likes to read, can buy a book, and is curious about its surroundings. It would like to know about the Bangladeshi immigrants living in trans-Jamuna colonies without having to make friends with them.

A writer does not need a crisis of identity to write like Lahiri; although longing for one's homeland helps to sell a book. One needs to have the maturity to look beyond the "troubled self". It's not easy, because the cities of the Subcontinent are more like a conglomeration of small towns built like fortresses, ready for war. An environment that breeds infatuation with the self, and leads to novels based on the narrow premise that a reader will be interested in the eternal verities that the main character spouts.

The chronicler's craft lies in the unerring eye, which manages to catch the essence of what it is to be human, by describing characters that do not fidget and obsess, and are beautifully real. R. K. Narayan created Malgudi. Today a writer does not have to aim that high. In truth, a writer, if he wants to sell, should not even try and recreate a world, all he needs is to observe patiently, and reproduce simply. Or she. ▲



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Tourism's Promise

The interest and the ability of people to travel make up the industry known as *tourism.* The term encompasses a large variety of travel, from pilgrimages by devotees of Lord Pashupatinath come to his abode in the Kathmandu Valley to worshippers of the sun who fly down to the Maldivian archipelago. Himal's interest in tourism arises not so much from the need to inform the potential tourist of the attractions and best 'deals' in South Asia, as the need to ensure that this industry lives up to its promise of spreading income amongst South Asia's people.

While keeping in mind the need to preserve the cultural and environmental attributes of the host countries and regions, tourism must be used to: a) deliver maximum income from high-value tourism; and b) ensure the optimum equity in distribution of the income among the people. South Asia is rich in its untapped tourism potential, much of which can be exploited only when there is true peace across this vast and varied region. Even within the variously existing situations, however, it is possible for South Asia to be earning much more from domestic as well as international tourism than it is presently. The challenges to doing this are as diverse as the peoples and cultures of South Asia – from the very ideology of the state in Pakistan, to the Indian government's unwillingness to go for 'open skies', to Nepal and Sri Lanka's entrapment in the morass of high volume, low value tourism.

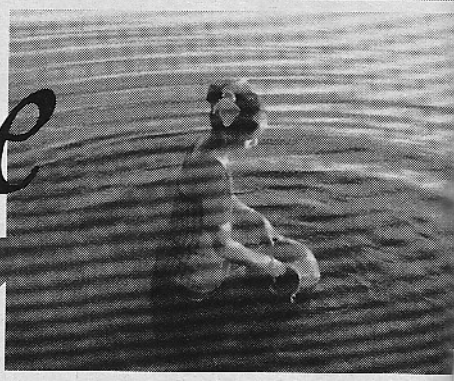
KANAK MANI DIXIT

Tourists target Makar Mela (Maghey Sakranti) bathers at a Benaras ghat.

There may be something to be learnt from the fact that the tiniest states of South Asia, Bhutan and the Maldives, have the most dynamic tourism policies in the entire region—which leads us to believe that tourism is managed best when it is left to the 'local' communities—with control resting, for example, in Kumaon instead of Lucknow, the Khumbu instead of Kathmandu, Ladakh instead of Srinagar, and Chitral instead of Islamabad.

South Asia tourism is a vast arena, and in this issue we have but nibbled at the edges, hoping to present readers with some interesting aspects. Always, we must remember that tourism must be embraced so that it can serve the people of South Asia, and not South Asia 'serve' the tourist.

Mangrove & Mud



Amar Sonar Bangla, alright, but where are the tourists?

by ***Afsan Chowdhury***

The no-frills Bangladesh Biman airlines come-on that announces the longest beach in the world, the mangrove forest that is the Sunderban, or the rivers lazing through the swampy land, gives ample sense of what the tourism managers believe are the country's attractions for the Western visitor. And the poster of Parjatan, the national tourism corporation, is properly philosophical when it says, "Visit Bangladesh before the tourists come". Waiting is a part of life

This is how the Parjatan brochure describes Sunderban: "A cluster of islands with an approximate area of 6000 sq km forming the largest block of littoral forests... Sunderban means beautiful forest and is the natural habitat of the world famous Royal Bengal Tiger, spotted deer, crocodiles, jungle fowl, wild boar, lizards, rhesus monkeys, and an innumerable variety of beautiful birds."

Pictures from a Biman ad, clockwise from above:

'The unspoiled nature'.

'The blue waters of The Bay of Bengal'.

'The Royal Bengal Tiger'.

'The colourful tribes'.

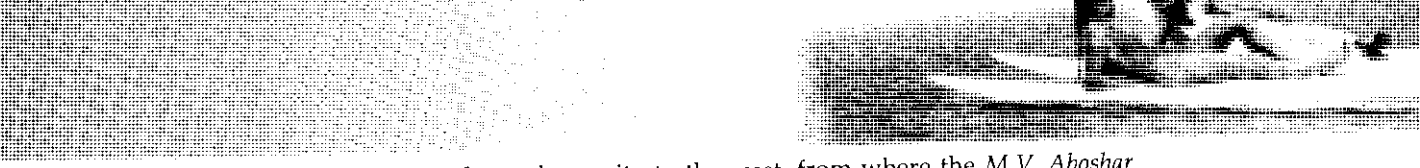
This "beautiful forest" lies in the southern extremities of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta. It is, indeed, the world's last and largest mangrove swamp, with most of it in Bangladesh and some of it in neighbouring West Bengal. But marketing has been poor, and the 'tourism infrastructure' poorer still. One gets there by flying to Jessore or driving to Khulna, and continuing on a river launch through the canals. Few pick up the courage to get off the boat and into the *ban* once there, however. Only an indigenous tribe of honey collectors dares walk inside the swampy jungle, offering meagre bribes to the *Ban-Bibi*, the jungle goddess. It is rarer to find tourists in the Sunderban than the Royal Bengal tiger, which may be seen swimming in one of the thousands of placid creeks that sustain the mangroves.

For the moment, the Sunderban interests only the naturalists and oil companies. Parjatan has yet to set up infrastructure that can pamper tourists because the tourist flow doesn't justify the investment. It is a bit like the chicken or the egg. To prove that it is not absolutely uncaring about the Sunderban, Parjatan does run a three-storied guesthouse at Hiron point, deep inside the jungle. There are also a couple of forest department bungalows, and boats are available for travelling through the creeks. In parts of the jungle stretching to the sea, trekking through grassy meadows attracts a few hardy types.

"With all the interest in saving the tiger and forests, how come nobody wants to visit Bangladesh?" asks a frustrated tour operator. However, he admits that swamps and mudflats have limited ability to attract tourists. Those few who just have to see the Sunderban get a better deal across the border in India, for there "you get to see a few other things as well".

Dark and long

So what are some of the other things Bangladesh can offer? Well, there is the longest beach



in the world, right? While it is not clear who has gone out with a tape to measure the various stretches of sand around the world, one may be forgiven for accepting the claim that the one which reaches down the eastern coast of Bangladesh at Cox's Bazar is the longest of them all. But fairest? The reason there are no lines of tourists sunning on the beach at Cox's, it is said, is because the sands here are dark-complexioned. These are local Bangali sands, and the fair-skinned tourists certainly have shown a preference for Goa, unmindful of the sheer stretch which is the supposed selling point here.

There are other reasons for the beach's lack of popularity. The area is more "Bangla friendly" than touristy. Booze is hard if not impossible to come by, and there are no casinos about. Till recently, it was home to the Rohingya refugees who lived in camps by the beach, and foreign intelligence agencies did their bit to sustain the local economy. And the other claim to fame—that of being the area where hundreds of thousands have died, hunted down by cyclones—is hardly the stuff to attract visitors by the droves.

There is no organised night-time entertainment—of any sort—in Cox's Bazar. Bangladeshis are used to a life without entertainment after dark, but for the tourist the fun cannot go down with the sun. Plus, and this is a factor for Parjatan to take good account of—tourists do not like it when the natives stare at ladies soaking in the sun.

Watching the catching

The river cruise out of Dhaka is the excursion of choice for the thousands of development professionals and diplomats who keep Dhaka's real estate market humming. With Dhaka wallowing ever-deeper in pollution and urban chaos, the popularity of the weekend getaway is catching on. Over the years, cruise management has developed as an organised activity, and a number of private operators as well as the state-owned Parjatan offer river trips.

Guide Tours Ltd., in its brochure, offers the following highlights of a river cruise: "Swimming, watching the catching of the famous Hilsa fish and breathing fresh air". The company prudently asks guests to bring their own towels, mosquito repellants, sun-burn lotion, swimming gear, and hard drinks if you need them as "we can not serve that". Guests will be picked up from Gulshan, Dhaka's poshest suburb, as well as from the two top hotels, the Sonargaon and the Sheraton. The voyagers will be driven to Narayanganj, an hour out of the city to the west, from where the *M.V. Aboshar* will sail through Shitalakkhya river, enter river Meghna, and anchor overnight. "If the weather is favourable, swimming will be an option before our barbecue dinner is served."

No particular activity is planned for the next day, with the focus remaining on serious unwinding. Swimming, visiting nearby villages, board games and lazing on the boat are suggested. After lunch, the boat will come to the confluence of the Padma (Brahmaputra) and Meghna for anchor. At this point, guests are allowed to watch the sunset, and dinner is served before hitting land for the road-trip back to Dhaka.

But then this deltaic region was never a tourist spot. Once, its jungles offered some of the best shoots, but the forests are gone and so is the game. This is mudland, and you can only watch so many hazy sunsets, and so many catchings of Hilsa fish. Because this is a floodplain where the marks of ancient civilizations have been washed away, and because Bangladesh is essentially made of silt and mud where there are few surviving ancient architecture, the country has almost no archaeology to grab touristic interest. It is not that there is no history in Bangladesh, it is just that there is so little standing to provide visual accompaniment.

It is not advertised enough, but Buddhism spread from the monastic communities that were rooted in present-day Bangladesh. The northern part of the country was once Pundrabhukti, the last frontier province of imperial India. During the Pala rule in the 9th century, it soared as the only Indian kingdom spiritually rooted in Vajrayana Buddhism. The Palas built some of the grandest Buddhist religious architectures in the world, located at Paharpur and Mahasthangarh. These monasteries are the architectural progenitors of the more famous cousins at Angkor Wat and Bourbadour but while these kingdoms flourished under the followers of Buddha, Bengal ceased to be a Buddhist land. The dust of neglect swallowed the terra cotta constructions and the link with the past was lost. They have reappeared today not as heritage sites but as archaeological digs. With no modern packaging techniques announcing "Ancient Buddhist Bengal", the tourists too are absent.

A large part of Bangladesh will disappear in a matter of few years, what with global warming. Perhaps the BPC poster should be saying, "Visit Bangladesh before Bangladesh disappears."

If Bangladesh is such an untouristic country, what were the 173,000 foreigners who visited the country in 1999 doing here? Well, according to people who should know, almost 60,000 of the total were Indians, while the second largest number, 20,000, came from the United Kingdom, the bulk of them would-be generation Bangladeshis, arriving from London and bypassing Dhaka altogether and flying straight to Sylhet, their hometown. More than 12,000 US citizens visited, as did nearly 8,000 Japanese and over 12,000 Pakistanis. Over 6000 Koreans visited, obviously bound for the Export Processing Zone factories. But what were the plus 5000 Nepalis doing? Mostly, going to medical school.

A country that sells itself, poorly

Nepal's travel-traders seem to know how to run every sector of tourism into the ground.

by **Kanak Mani Dixit**

The two biggest problems of Nepali tourism are over-supply and under-cutting. The market is saturated with 'vendors', and each tries to under-price the other—among lodges, hotels, airlines, travel agencies, trekking agencies, rafting agencies, wildlife safaris, and even porters and *riksa*-pullers. A five-star hotel in downtown Kathmandu will provide bed and breakfast for as little as 20 dollars, and nowhere in the world but in the Thamel tourist quarter can you have clean sheets and attached-bath for as low as two dollars a night.

In whichever sector, Nepal's tourism has always started at the high end, but then the 'service providers' proliferate and the asking price plummets. The country becomes a tourist heaven and tourism hell—enough to begin asking whether the industry is here to serve Nepal or vice versa.

The oversupply of 'capacity' itself is not a problem (and it does represent a more 'democratic' sharing of the pie). The issue is a terrible failure to market the country so as to fill all those extra beds. There are by today more than 300 trekking agencies in Nepal, vying for about 100,000 trekkers annually, many of whom actually prefer to walk un-organised. The hotels in Kathmandu are running at 36 percent occupancy—it has been years since the top hotels got top dollars. There was a time when high-end trekking used to go with ease for USD 150 a day, but the average now is about 20-25 dollars. White-water rafting, even till five years ago, was at USD 40 a day, but today the asking price is less than half of that.

It is true, as Edmund Hillary once told this writer, that even the "impecunious" have a right to travel, but the interest of the host country, Nepal, is to, first, maximise income from tourism, and, two, maximise spread of that income. The way things are today, Nepal seems to be focused exclusively on pandering to the impecunious, as a result of which there is precious little to share around. Last month, some European millionaires were revelling in the Everest region of Khumbu for USD 40 a day. When snow blocked their progress, they casually chartered a helicopter for USD 2000 an hour and toured the Everest Base Camp area, and then returned to rejoin their trek group.

No one can deny that Nepal's tourism has a lot going for it—a small country of South Asia blessed with great variety in culture, antiquity and geography. The Himalayan mountains are a permanent asset and the quality of service in Nepali tourism—warm and natural—is by all accounts one of the the best in Asia. When occasionally a policy goes right, the response is immediate—as with the surge in domestic civil aviation when it was deregulated in 1991-1992.

But when you speak of international aviation, that is where the problem begins. The government-run flag carrier Royal Nepal, despite having competent management, has been bled by the politicians and bureaucrats over the last decade, to such an extent that its fleet today is half the size of 12 years ago. The airline is in the doldrums, its international 'network' stretching laughably from Osaka to London, supported by two narrow-bodied Boeing 757s. The glut in supply in every sector of tourism would be taken care of if Royal Nepal were to be allowed to fly as a real airline, but travel operators have waited two decades for this to happen.

Besides Royal Nepal's incapacity, the other major lack is in marketing the country. Over the years, Nepal has essentially 'sold' itself, but today's traveller has discovered so many more 'exotic' places in the Orient—and not just Bhutan, Ladakh, Tibet and Mongolia. Nepal now needs marketing, which is why a couple of years ago the government hived off its Department of Tourism and created an autonomous Nepal Tourism Board. With two percent of the total turnover of the private industry dropping into its coffers, NTB was to be a dynamic agency 'selling' Nepal. Suffice it to say that it has not quite worked out that way, and Nepal's marketing is actually done gratis by films like the large-format IMAX presentation *Everest*, which led to a surge of arrivals to the Himalaya over the 1998-1999 seasons and is spilling over into 2000.

When it comes to holistic promotion, the NTB and private sector as a whole do precious little other than to hope for such promotional bonanzas like *Everest* to land on their laps. (The travel-traders do, of course, market their own busi-

nesses.) They lack commitment and creativity, as seen in the inability to adjust to Kathmandu Valley's changing cultural landscape. The holistic ambience of medieval urbanism has vanished over the last 15 years, sacrificed to pollution and cement-concrete, but the travel agencies are still trying to sell the Newar inner-cities as they did in 1980. The need now is to introduce 'micro-tourism', focusing on individual temples, monastic courtyards *(bahals)* and palaces, where Kathmandu's old-world charm can still be found.

Indeed, private industry has exhibited a remarkable capacity to squeeze tourism income out of each sector without evident concern for long-term sustainability. Thus, the industry kept quiet over the 1970s when the Valley lost much of its free-standing statuary to idol-theft; over the 1980s when the streetscape crumbled to the concrete onslaught; and over the 1990s when air and water pollution devasted Kathmandu's environment. All of these downturns affected tourism before anything else.

There are many ways in which Nepali tourism can innovate, but it requires creative savvy. Like the Himalaya, Lumbini as the birthplace of the Sakyamuni has an eternal potential to attract pilgrims and tourists. However, the East Asian tourists in particular seem to be staying away, perhaps because they realise the potential of Nepal's tourism mandarins to convert the place from a spiritual haven to a crass Disneyland.

Kathmandu's Thamel has evolved from a budget-traveller's refuge into a destination in its own right—probably the most cosmopolitan place in all South Asia, where Western 'cafe culture' can be enjoyed at middle-class prices. The place is a magnet not just for Western tourists, but also for English-speaking, travel-oriented, high-spending city elites from Dhaka, Karachi, Bombay or Bangalore, who would come to Thamel if they were told about it.

Like Lumbini or Thamel, so with casinos. Largely limited to the Punjabi weekender from New Delhi, the four casinos of Kathmandu have not been able to entice the other great gamblers of Asia, the Chinese who populate the east and the southeast. Trekking, the home-grown industry, has yet to 'upgrade' itself from a backpackers' delight to high-value tourism injecting better income into the villages.

True, there are some matters which are beyond the control of Nepal's tourism operators and government. For example, tourism is an industry that is extremely sensitive to bad news on the telly, and it does not help that Nepal is right in the middle of the volatile northern half of South Asia, a region described aptly by William Jefferson Clinton as "the most dangerous place in the world". Nepal's travel trade is therefore at the mercy of little wars and potential big wars, bomb blasts, nuclear tests and sectarian killings. Even if they happen hundreds of miles away, before you can say 'Chomolongma', the fax machine will be spewing a slew of cancellations.

The extended nature of the IC-814 hijack drama in December, the fact that the flight originated in Kathmandu, and that the Indian government chose to punitively and summarily cancel all Indian Airlines flights to Nepal, has affected tourism grievously. The summer tourist season in Nepal has been mostly filled by Indian tourists, many of them honeymooners, but the first quarter of 2000 saw a drop of 38 percent over the previous year of Indian tourists arriving by air.

The summer tourism season is by now a certified disaster, and so the need now to salvage at least the autumn season, which for Nepal is the peak. And therein lies the whispered prayer of all Nepali tour operators—that the violent Maoist insurgency of the past five years will once again spare tourism. But this year the prayer may not be answered. The long-dreaded US State Department 'travel advisory' went out on 21 April, stating that "the level of civil unrest and terrorist violence throughout Nepal has escalated in recent weeks and is expected to remain at heightened levels". It continues, "In a break from past practices, in three recent incidents, Maoist insurgents have targeted tourists or tourist facilities in different parts of Nepal... Although no injuries have been associated with these confrontations, the targeting of tourist groups and facilities indicates a heightened level of risk for travellers in Nepal."

Tourism will be devastated, and all the attendant impact visited upon Nepali society, if the underground Maoist leadership fails to understand that, even at its most inefficient, the industry does help the economy and the population. There is a lot of room for the government, the NTB and the private sector to improve their performance, but they will have no space to perform if the threat of violence, tragically, keeps tourists from the one-time and would-be Shangri-La that is Nepal. ▲

The impact of Indian Airlines' hijack and flight suspensions on air-tourist arrivals in Nepal; data for the first quarter of 1999 and 2000 (courtesy Immigration Office TIA and Nepal Tourism Board).

TOTAL TOURISTS

1999	2000	% change
94353	83561	-11.4%

(% change for same period in 1999 over 1998 was +5.4%)

THIRD COUNTRY TOURISTS

1999	2000	% change
68.238	67,376	-1.3%

(% change for same period in 1999 was +6.8%)

INDIAN TOURISTS

1999	2000	% change
26,115	16,185	-38%

(% change for same period in 1999 was +1.7 %)

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Compacta\NRM\09\03

Cooking to regain a lost paradise

by **Tharuka Dissanayake/Christine Jayasinghe**

To a Sri Lankan tour operator or hotelier, 'boom' is a dirty word. For, the LTTE's suicide bombers over the past 17 years, have eroded the emerald island's lustre as a prime South Asian destination, and other well-endowed tropical destinations have lured the tourists away.

Just when the tide seemed to have turned in 1999 with a 16-year high in tourist arrivals, the Tamil Tigers struck again...and again. Serial explosions rocked Colombo during the presidential poll campaign and the blasts continued well into 2000. No tourist was harmed, but the industry bled. The tourist season, which is supposed to peak between November through March, hobbled to a weak finish.

There was another reason for the relatively poor showing, according to some, and that was the expectations for the millennium winter arrivals from Europe having been notched too high. Prices climbed wildly in anticipation of a flood of bookings; but hotels and travel agents had reckoned without the Y2K scare, which had beach-lovers going to Brighton instead of Bentota. Colombo's five-star hotels were forced to slash prices by more than half during the Christmas-New Year season. Still, overall arrivals were up 15 per cent in 1999, recording a total of 436,440 and earning the industry SLR 18,518 million.

The relatively cheaper rates have always been a lure for the mostly low-spending tourists who come to the island; but this too threatens to become a thing of the past. A 12.5 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) comes into effect this April. Trade association heads had appealed for a rethink, with petitions going all the way up to the President Chandrika Kumaratunga, but in vain. The GST will straight away raise prices, and so the Sri Lankan tourism product must sell higher for companies to stay afloat.

Having already pared their rates down to the minimum, hotels will now struggle to make even marginal profits. "The GST will have a serious impact on this year's arrivals. It will be impossible to pass this on to clients," Michael Elias of Walkers Tours says. Another travel agent: "We are in a price-competitive market. Tour operators abroad will refuse to sell Sri Lanka, opting for cheaper destinations in the

More than the beach: Entrance to Sigiriya's massif.

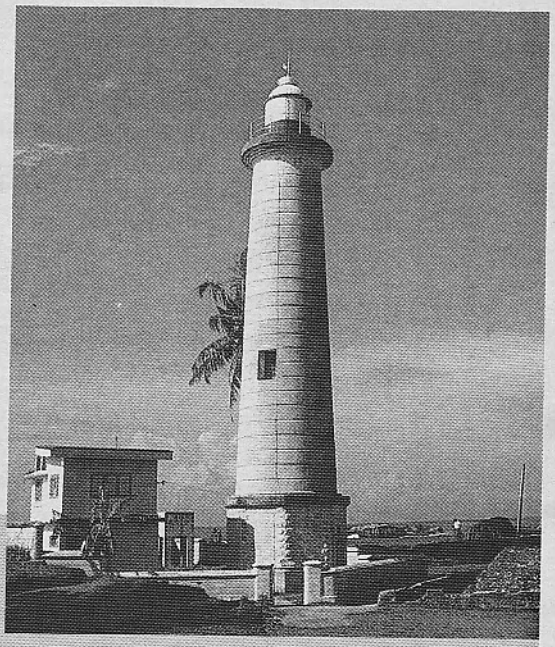
region. In general, it is the low-spending tourist who comes here, although you do have pockets of high-spenders."

Most package tour visitors who have paid up-front for food and board are chary of loosening their purse strings on what is essentially a cut-price holiday with very good facilities. "The problem is, we have two-star tourists staying in five-star hotels," said a Colombo five-star hotelier. The Sri Lankan Tourist Board says foreign holiday-makers spend an average of USD 55 a day.

The travel and tourism sector sees one chance of escaping the GST—its recognition as an export industry that would qualify it for tax and duty concessions. The industry has long been lobbying for this, its argument being that though tourism does not export a physical product, it ranks among the country's top five foreign exchange earners. But the cash-strapped government, which needs all the income it can try and squeeze, has not bought the argument.

Meanwhile, even as the industry whines and complains, the government and the Tourist Board have their chins up. The government has set a goal of 535,000 tourist arrivals this year. According to Charmari Maelge, the Board's director of marketing, its budget has been increased four-fold over the last year, up to SLR 350 million from SLR 88 million.

The bulk of the money will go on promotion, and in March the Board announced a USD 10 million (SLR 730 million) campaign to boost the country's image in key foreign markets. The



Postcard Lanka: Lighthouse at Galle.

After the terror, the tax

TOURISM IS the most volatile of industries, and it is bad policy to have a civil war on if you want to cash in on turo-dollars. For decades now, Sri Lankan tourism's marketeers have been fighting the civil war—the negative media reports it generates, and the 'travel advisories' it sparks off in the major markets from New York to Nagasaki.

The latest advisory, this one from the US State Department, issued in December 1999, says: "Although US citizens have not been specifically targeted, LTTE operations have been planned and executed with the knowledge that Americans and other foreigners may be killed or injured."

Says the Sri Lankan Tourist Board's director of marketing, Charmari Maelge, "We sometimes find these travel advisories exaggerating the situation. Then we bring it to the notice of the relevant authorities." The Board's website (www.lanka.net/ctb) has this to add: "While only the bad news makes it to the television screens, for the most part life in the majority of the island continues undisturbed and in a peaceful manner."

It is hard to hide the fact that the separatist war that has claimed more than 55,000 Sinhala and Tamil lives does often spill over to other parts of the country, especially Colombo. An LTTE attempt on President Chandrika Kumaratunga's life at her 18 December election rally, which killed 26 people and blinded her in one eye, turned back what was amounting to be a tide in tourist arrivals. In March, eight suicide bombers made a daring rush-hour attack on a major highway leading to Parliament in Rajagiriya with an as-yet-unnamed politician as the likely target.

It's not easy painting the image of a tropical paradise over the grim images on television. There was little the Board could do when the luxury passenger liner *Queen Elizabeth II* decided against making a scheduled 12-hour stopover in Colombo, seven days after an LTTE attack in the capital. The liner made its way to India instead. Similarly, the *MB Victoria* and the *MB Oriana* which dropped anchor in Colombo the day after the incident, refused to let their passengers disembark for the city tours. The tour agent, Mackinnon, lost USD 40,000 on the cancellations. The passengers, who were on leisurely round-the-world cruises, belonged to just that class of wealthy, dollar-laden visitor that Sri Lanka can least afford to lose.

Board is to provide half of the tab, and the industry must put in the rest. The industry, made up of travel agents, tour operators and hotels, says that it is more than willing to pitch in, but on the condition that the promotional campaign must be carried out professionally, so as to beat the competition, especially the Maldives, Thailand and Indonesia.

The truth is that over the years, the trade become more and more sceptical of the Board's ability to sell the island to tourists, and Parliament is looking at a new Act to change the nature of the Board and set up a Tourism Promotional Authority with private-sector involvement. But despite everything, hope runs high in the private sector, which claims it kept the trade afloat through the stormy years with little help from the government.

Bullish bent

Every month, private sector proposals for new hotels and tourist recreation facilities flood the Board office in Colombo. Investor interest is evident in the number of upmarket hotels that are coming up. Earl's Regency, the new five-star riverside resort in Kandy, 117 km from Colombo, is a USD 11-million investment by a Japanese businessman and a local jewellery magnate. In Wadduwa, 50 km from Colombo, an exclusive four-star beachside resort built with Swedish funds is ready for visitors. John Keells Hotels, a large chain of resort hotels in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, has two projects on the drawing board, one for a picturesque new golf links in Kandy and the other for a safari-type wildlife resort close to Yala, the country's largest national park. Uma Sharma, an Indian businessman, has just bought 98 percent of Colombo's Intercontinental Hotel and is spending USD 10 million to do it up.

Today, the industry pats itself on the back for surviving the tough times and continuing to persuade tourists to visit the island in the teeth of negative publicity of the civil war beamed around the world. The war stories and pictures have taken their toll, though. Countries that lagged far behind Sri Lanka in 1980 have grabbed large chunks of the tourism market segment where Colombo should have been leading. The Maldives, for instance, is today an upmarket beach resort. Seychelles and Mauritius too have geared themselves to a high-end clientele. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, has slashed and slashed its room rates, and today sells rooms at the same dollar rate as it did in 1982.

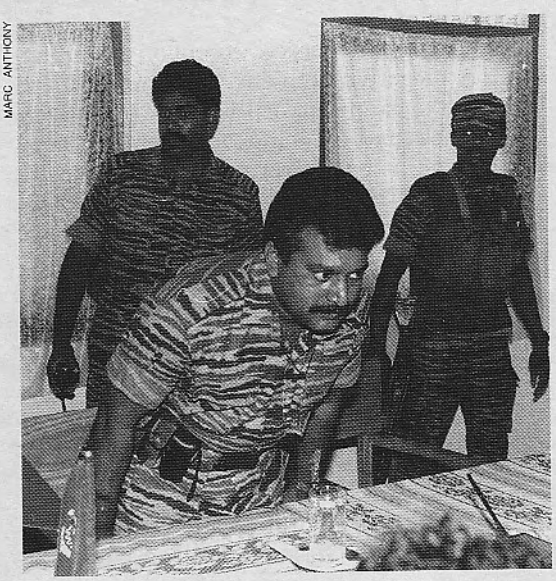
The country has not been able to polish up its image, and still attracts mostly low-spending package tourists. Many resorts adopt the all-inclusive concept imported from the Caribbean, where unlimited food, drinks, certain alcoholic beverages and entertainment are all thrown in at a set price. Officially, resort hotel rates vary between USD 25 and 50 a night, and Colombo room rates are USD 70. However, the actual selling prices are much lower.

There is a growing consensus within the industry that Sri Lanka should aim higher. Three years ago, the government declared a duty concession to help hotels and resorts to spruce up, and many did upgrade. The newer hotels have been wooing a higher class of tourist, offering luxury interiors, high-tech rooms and quaint ethnic touches. One such is "Ayurveda tourism", in which Europeans are treated for high blood pressure, stress, diabetes and arthritis through assorted herbal methods. Some entrepreneurs have gone the whole hog, setting up exclusive Ayurveda resorts where rooms cost USD 250 a night.

Fresh focus

Together with upgrading and going upscale, there is also agreement among the travel folk that it is time Sri Lanka stopped selling itself as a beach destination. "We cannot compete with the beach resorts in Thailand, the Maldives and Bali, so we must develop a different unique selling point," said a hotelier from Kandy, which lies inland.

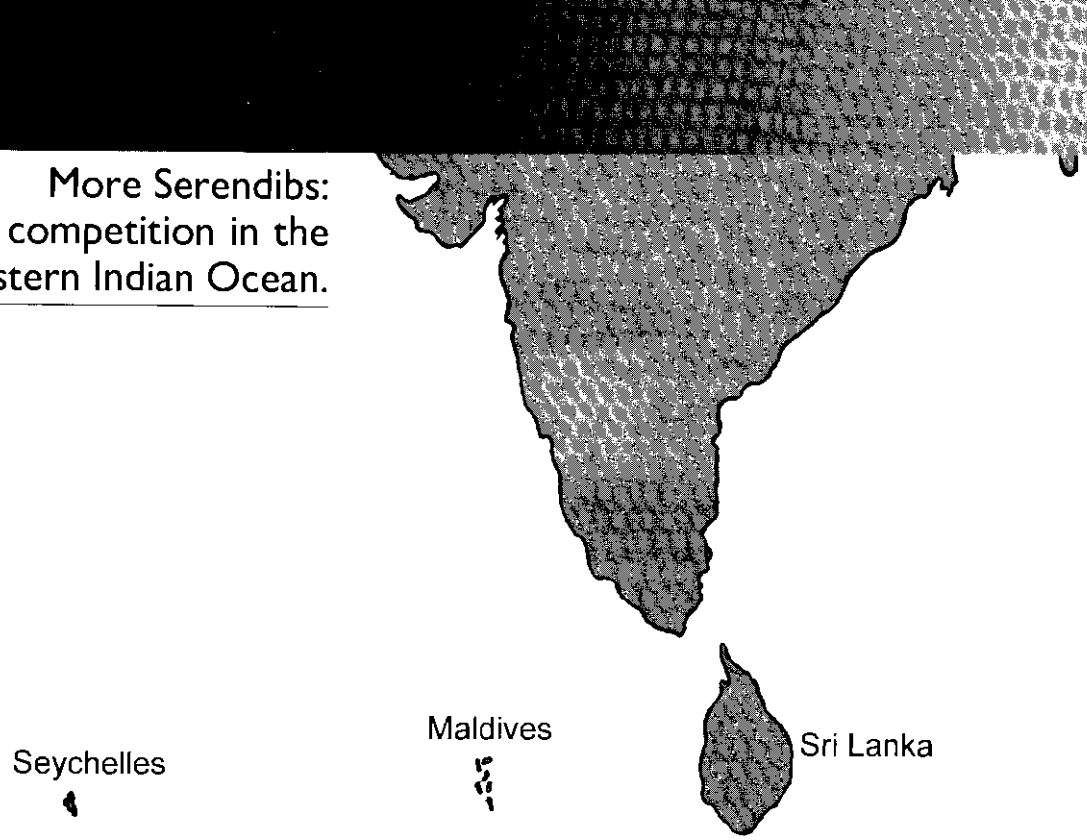
This shift in focus is evident in the recent promotional materials of the Tourist Board and the resurgent national carrier, Sri Lankan Airlines (formerly Air Lanka). The adverts and commercials now tout Sri Lanka's culture and history, its nature and wildlife, and the hill sta-



MARC ANTHONY

Prabhakaran is not in relaxation mode: the advance by the LTTE on the Jaffna peninsula in late April once again brought the war to the world's notice.

More Serendibs: competition in the Western Indian Ocean.



tions. The beach is present almost as an afterthought.

Sigiriya, a fortress capital built on a 600-foot rock massif in central Sri Lanka, is to be the hub of future promotions. The authorities have been plugging this fifth-century architectural marvel as "the eighth wonder of the world", and there are plans for a sound-and-light show and a large museum.

Inland-based adventure sports is also regarded as an arena for diversification, but it is still a fledgling with just three professional companies providing packages for white-water rafting, rock climbing, canoeing, mountain-biking and paragliding. But most travel agents do offer safaris, birdwatching, 'elephant trails' and tea garden visits.

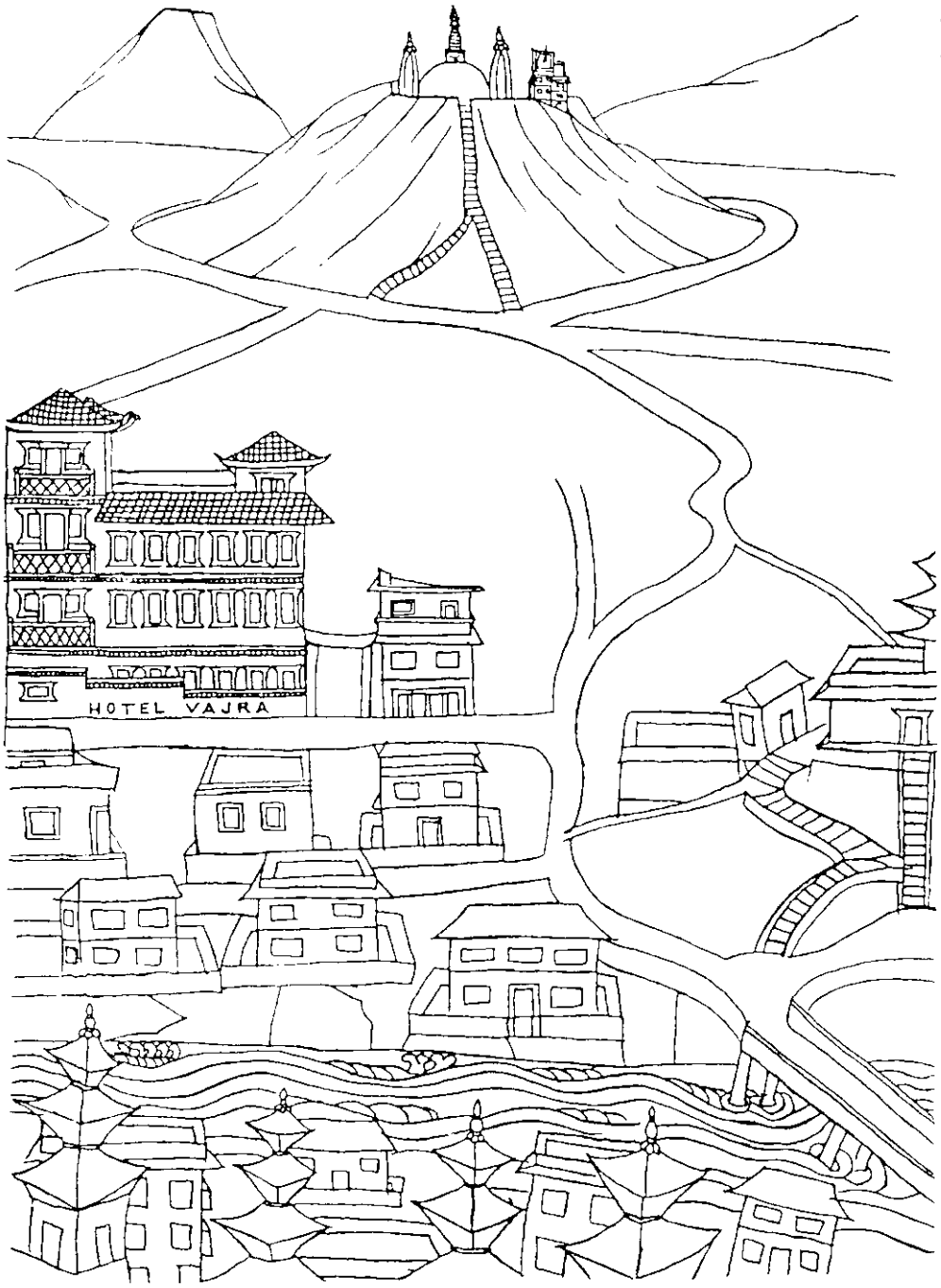
There is also a renewed accent on conferencing and 'incentives tourism'. The Tourist Board has a unit to handle MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) travel. This market, though, is overly sensitive to the security situation, particularly in Colombo, and will probably have to wait for a definitive advent of peace before it will fulfill its potential.

So near, so distant

About five years ago, the tourism entrepreneurs of Sri Lanka began looking north to India for their clientele. More and more middle-class Indians are travelling abroad on holiday, so why not lure them into Sri Lanka? But though large sums have been pumped into promotions in Indian metros, and the Tourist Board now has an office in New Delhi, the Indians are just not coming.

Several problems have been identified: Indian tourists like to shop, to gamble and maybe (just a few) to visit the resorts. Sri Lanka has failed to adequately meet these demands. Only the Taj Group's luxury beach hotel in Bentota, 70 km south of Colombo, gets a fair number of Indians. Another problem is that, unlike Nepal which attracts a fairly large number of tourists (it also has casinos), the Indian rupee is not exchangeable in Sri Lanka. Indians must bring dollars and pay dollar rates. That apart, the high-end Indian guest does not see Sri Lanka as a prestigious destination, and the Hindi film industry has done its bit to divert the spending Indian noveau riche to the Maldives and Mauritius. Additionally, there is a severe shortage of airline seats to and from India. Sri Lanka has been talking with Indian authorities to increase airline capacity, but without much success.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka Airlines, now managed by the Dubai-owned Emirates, has adopted an aggressive tourism policy. It began flying to Stockholm last November, trying to rekindle what was once Sri Lanka's best market in Scandinavia. The trade has also welcomed the airlines' new, direct thrice-weekly flight to Australia. The carrier now flies daily to London and has increased flights to Germany (Munich and Frankfurt) and Japan. It also runs tourism campaigns, each targeting a specific country. Whether all this will give "boom" a nice name, only time and the LTTE can tell. ▲



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 over looking, chaotic Kathmandu.

Time.

in Kathmandu, the Vajra

Swayambhu, Dallu Bijyaswori, PO Box 1084, Kathmandu
Phone: 977 1 271545, 272719 Fax: 977 1 271695 E-mail: vajra@mos.com.np

Actually getting rich

Maldives segregates the locals from the tourists, and sells sun, sand and coral.

by ***Tharuka Dissanayake***

In the late 1960s, a foreign advisor on foreign investment had struck tourism off the list of potential industries for Maldives. At the time, Male's airport had only a makeshift runway, and transport between islands was restricted to traditional *dhonis*. The economy was dependent on fish and almost everything else had to be imported. The expert could see no local funding to develop resorts in this necklace-shaped group of idyllic islands scattered southwest of India's southern tip, west of Sri Lanka. Certainly, he did not foresee any foreign investor pumping money into tourism in a country that at that time did not even have a bank to its name.

But the Maldives lure nevertheless managed to attract adventure seekers. The uninhabited islets, the perfect white beaches, the coral reefs and the deep blue of the Indian Ocean, turned out to be attraction enough. The adventure-tourists spread the word, and slowly investment trickled in for the setting up of resorts. At first, they were crude cabana-type hostels with makeshift toilets, and lacking even a freshwater supply. Gradually, the offerings improved. In the mid-1970s, the government finally shook off the legacy of that long-departed investment expert and decided to accord priority to tourism. It began to organise for future growth in a planned manner.

Today, a visitor to the Maldives finds a high level of luxury attached to the rustic ambience in the 80-odd resorts that cover the Maldives. The Hilton, Four Seasons and Banyan Tree each have an island for themselves, and the biggest yet, Sun Island, is an investment of USD 47 million, a project of local hotelier Quasim Ibrahim. Hotel groups from neighbouring Sri Lanka have also invested heavily in the Maldives.

The archipelago's tourism development is upheld today as a model for countries that still market stereotypical beach-holidays for low-end travellers. In addition, the Maldivian holiday has made it fashionable to go rustic while paying top-dollar. While developers elsewhere were still stuck on putting up ugly hotels by the beach—rooms piled upon each other, concrete and artificial lighting—the pioneers here dared to be different. They stayed with the single-storey cabana and outdoor concept. The success of the thatched-roof cabins—with the sea for a swimming pool—went far beyond their own estimation. Europeans loved it and no price was too dear to be locked away in a private island with the sea at the your frontdoor.

Maldivian tourism has maintained its high product price. Even when competing destinations were slashing their rates during the Asian financial crisis, the Maldives sailed on unperturbed. When other beach destinations were selling as low as USD 10 or 20, the Maldives resorts managed to maintain their prices at above USD 50. (The rates generally range from USD 65 to 500 for two, inclusive of meals.) In keeping prices high, Maldives tourism has developed a niche market—a segment that looks for quality and tranquillity. The government, too, has been keen on restricting the industry to the 'right kind of tourist' and is less than keen to merely pump up statistics by concentrating on quantity.

Tourism is a year-round business, but the best season is from October to April. Last year, arrivals to the Maldives topped 350,000. At over 75 percent, room occupancy was very high, and average stay per visitor was eight to

nine days, which is rather high for a country with beaches, corals and little else to show. Over 20 percent of arrivals are those who have enjoyed previous holidays in the Maldives.

Environment-conscious tourism, which is now all the rage, actually began almost inadvertently here. The earlier developers, out of necessity, kept things modest and incorporated their resorts into the island environment, using local materials as far as practicable. The clients loved this, and a whole new kind of beach tourism was born. Guests arriving at a resort see little beyond the tall coconut palms and thick ground vegetation—the rooms and restaurants are cleverly tucked away. Besides using natural materials in building, the government and private sector are both aware of the need to preserve the lagoon, coral and mangrove eco-systems, and to keep the beaches clean of garbage and sewage. These unwritten rules were being adhered to by hoteliers long before the government brought in regulations for eco-friendly tourism in the late 1980s.

Today, the Male government enforces a strict set of rules for developers. It allows a resort to build in only 14 percent of an island's land area. If hoteliers are building cabanas on stilts over the water, an equal area must be kept free inland. Every island must incinerate its waste. Plastics are discouraged and littering taboo. The Maldives does not have industries that spew effluent, nor large rivers that dump silt into the beaches, and so the lagoons remain clean and the waters clear.

Can you spot the hotel?

Gayoom's baby

Another aspect unique to Maldivian tourism is that, by governmental directive, tourism is confined to individual, otherwise-uninhabited, islands in several atolls. The tourists may visit the islands inhabited by locals to buy knick-knacks, but the resorts must themselves be isolated. Meanwhile, the one-resort-per-island rule allows the tourists maximum space, comfort and privacy—which is also why the industry is able to demand premium prices. As far as the government is concerned, the separation of the local and the tourism population protects the locals from cultural 'despoilation'. A positive aspect of this arrangement is that the problems of a beach culture transplanted in an unprepared society—prostitution, drugs and thuggery—rampant in neighbouring Sri Lanka, are avoided.

All of the Maldivian experience with tourism has happened while Maumoom Abdul Gayoom has been president, since 1978. A 10-year tourism plan was drawn up almost as soon as he came to power, and a bed tax was imposed to make the industry worthwhile for the state. A five-year tax holiday encourages investors to bring in foreign dollars. Airport procedures have been relaxed and now visitors can get visas upon arrival.

Proposals for resorts pile up at the Ministry of Tourism in Male, but not every one is approved. Nevertheless, 20 new resorts are presently under construction. In 1972, arrivals were at 1097, today they top 350,000. In 1982, tourism accounted for 20 percent of the GDP, today it is over 28 percent. Employment generation has been so huge that neighbouring India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh—and even far-away Nepal—have stepped in to meet the shortage in supply. While the Maldivians get rich and richer on tourism, it is perhaps not unfair that other South Asians at the very least make some employment out of this particular pot of gold.

The most proximate environmental danger to Maldivian tourism is the possible disappearance of the archipelago itself—if some scientists are to be believed, the ozone hole, CFCs and resultant global warming, will end up melting the polar icecaps and raising the sea level by just so many inches that the Maldives may be wiped off the southern Indian Ocean map. Given that most of the tourists who dip into the Maldives come from the very nations which create the environmental conditions for global warming, the Maldives does its bit to sensitise the tourists so that they carry back the message home. If global warming is a myth, then Maldives can hope to cash in on tourism into the distant future. If it is a scientific fact, then the government will have to start making plans. ▲

Tourism & Ideology

The history of the people of Pakistan is re-written while the history of the Pakistani landscape is allowed to disappear.

by ***Manzur Ejaz***

andhara art at Lahore museum.

The ideological orientation of the Pakistani state tends to obliterate the possibilities of social and economic advancement of the country in many areas. Tourism is one, an industry whose potential to provide income to a cash-starved nation remains largely untapped.

Pakistan is in many ways like Egypt, its landscape bristling with antiquity. This heritage goes right back to the Indus civilisation, whose silent testimony is to be found in the stones and seals of Harappa and Mohenjodaro on the Punjab plain. What is today Pakistan was also the centre of Buddhist learning, with Texila as just one such monastic centre.

Unfortunately, the rich historic and artistic heritage represented by the Gandharan Buddhistic art, which manifested itself on this soil, finds only the rare connoisseur among those who have inherited the land. From recent history, Pakistan has to show Nankana Sahib, birth place of Guru Nanak, one of the holiest places for the Sikh community. In Lahore, is the capital and fort of the great Sikh king Ranjit Singh. The mountainous northern region is considered rugged and exotic—Hunza, Chitral, Baltistan—the very kind of terrain that extracts tourist dollars by the millions elsewhere in the Himalaya-Hindu Kush, from Ladakh to Nepal, Darjeeling/Sikkim, and Bhutan.

Pakistan, thus, has the 'products' to attract visitors from the West, and from Southeast and East Asia. But there is too little of them, and the tourists who move around in Pakistan today are the domestic travellers, mostly the noveau riche from Punjab and elsewhere heading up

for the cool of the hills of Murree and further on.

Those who would develop Pakistani tourism must realise, however, that the challenge is greater than a simple strengthening up of the tourist department. The state ideology itself is in the way of tourism. To preserve the ancient artefacts and monuments—for their own sake and for tourism—requires a certain type of societal mindset and an open-minded socio-political environment. On the one hand, the elite as well as the public at large must develop in themselves a love for the ancient heritage of the land. On the other, they must have the desire to create a welcoming environment where the foreigners feel comfortable enough to experience the ecstasy of being in a land of antiquity. Despite its corrupt ruling elite, Egypt has managed to do this. Pakistan has not.

Certainly, Pakistan also lacks the kind of infrastructure that encourages tourism, including roads, railway, air facilities, hotels and the service ethos, which lies at the centre of tourism. The lawlessness is also a stumbling block, for who would want to vacation in a region where gun-touting extremists can at any time come around the corner, where religious sects go at each other with murderous intent, and where it is not extraordinary for dacoits to take hostages for ransom.

Much of these perceived threats to security can be resolved by strengthening law and order, but it is the ideological mindset of the Pakistani state that does not permit the preservation and propagation of history which would "legitimise" the very heritage which would be the centrepiece of Pakistan's ability to attract tourists. Through political orations, through schoolbooks and tomes of politically-correct history, generations of Pakistanis have been conditioned to negate this heritage, and taught instead to take pride in having roots in other parts of Asia. This includes the tendency among the elite to claim descend from migrants from the Arab-Persian shores.

Although most Pakistani Muslims are indigenous to South Asia and converted to Islam at a very late stage, the history and social studies books teach that history essentially started when Mohammad Bin Qasim made landfall on Sindh in the eighth century AD. The history of the medieval period is nothing more than simplistic idealisation of the Muslim rulers of India. Students are informed about the benevolence and ingenuity of the Turk, Afghan and Mughal rulers, and even casual invaders from the north such as Mahmood Ghaznvi and Ahmad Shah Abdali et al, are idealised.

In short, the history of the people is re-written while the history of the landscape is allowed to disappear. As a result, among those who define the ideology of the state, there is visceral anathema for the Indus civilisation and the great Buddhist era. Similarly, Guru Nanak is considered to be a religious leader of the enemy rather than the great reformist intellectual and poet he was. The cumulative result of this is that today the Pakistani public has no reverence for its past and no aspiration to preserve vestiges of its history. What it does not appreciate, it therefore feels no need to share with the rest of the world.

In the early 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and some left leaning intellectuals, particularly Major Mohammad Ishaque of the Mazdoor Kisan Party, did try to rehabilitate the historical linkages. However, that effort did not make any headway in face of the ideological onslaught of the state, which was at that time moving swiftly towards theocracy. In the latter years, the descendants of Bhutto and Gen Zia ul Haq and other elite plundered the national historical treasures and started shipping them abroad—the sale of a Buddha statue to the Smithsonian only one of the many examples. The corrupt elite, which knows better, has been blinded by greed. It cares nothing for preserving the greatest historical sites and preserving the remnants of the long-gone eras. Members of this elite, rather than seeking long-term income for the people through tourism, do not think twice of plundering ancient sites to export artefacts to Western collectors and antique shops.

A new ideological framework about history has to evolve, one which appreciates the non-Muslim heritage of present-day Pakistan even while remaining fully cognizant of the monumental contributions made by Muslims to the Indian civilisation. Like the Arabs, Iranian and other Muslim nations, we have to respect our history—all aspects of it. If Egypt can revel in and take economic advantage of its pre-Islamic past, so should Pakistan. However, if the Pakistani state remains prisoner to the present ideological parameters, and the economic elite limits itself to heartlessly allowing the plunder and destruction of ancient heritage, an industry like tourism will continue to lack space in Pakistan in the years to come.

The irony in all this is that, by default, present-day India has become the heir and custodian of the Indus Valley civilisation and the ancient Buddhist civilisation of South Asia—no matter that Harappa, Mohenjodaro and Texila happen to lie across the border. Pakistanis have no one else but themselves to blame.

Floating over Kath

On 9N-AFV, there is nothing between you and the Valley below and the Himalaya upfront.

by ***Rupa Joshi***

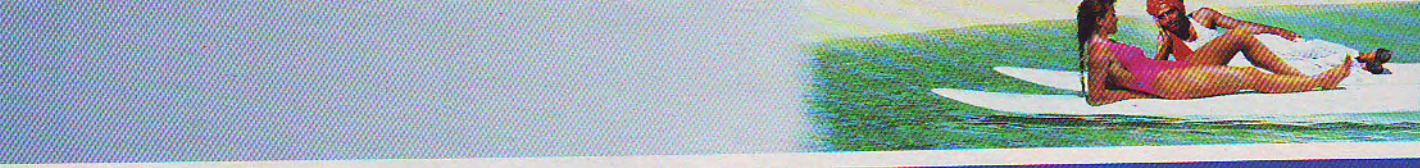
Silence... That is what hits you. Silence almost eerie as you hang from a hot-air balloon 5000 feet above the slightly misty landscape. Underneath, a Kathmandu Valley that is slowly waking up to a spring morning. Suddenly there is a roar from the propane gas burners and the VHF radio that communicates with the control tower crackles. But then it is back to floating quietude and calm.

Equally amazing as the silence is the stillness. Anyone with the 'wind-on-your-face' idea of a balloon ride will be taken by surprise at how calm it is. Because the balloon goes with the air flow, you do not feel movement. In fact, other than when the balloon is rising or descending, it almost seems as if the balloon is stationary. We seem to be stuck in one place, like an eagle frozen in mid-flight, no flapping of wings, no gliding in circles, no obvious movement at all. An unobtrusive eye in the sky.

And then the view. Unparalleled. So much to observe, and in so relaxed a manner. It actually takes some time to get used to the 360 degrees 'spherical' view of the Valley and surroundings. There is the Himalayan panorama to the north, the ancient city-centre and the modern sprawl of Kathmandu below, and hills that fold and unfold themselves into the horizon. There is something for everyone to see from up there—the mountain addict, the naturalist, the environmentalist, the sociologist, the geologist, the poet, the artist...

It is early in the morning in late March. The air is crisp and clear, just as mornings a day after the rains are supposed to be. As we arrived at the lift-off site at Gatthaghar, just east of Tribhuvan International Airport, the eastern sky was already glowing orange. Sprawled on the dew-laden field was the canopy of our craft, call-sign 9N-AFV. It is owned by Balloon Sunrise, Nepal's and South Asia's only commercial balloon operator, which pioneered this extraordinary early-morning floating tour over Kathmandu Valley.

As the passengers sipped on coffee, pilot Chris Shorten, an Australian from Alice Springs in the centre of the Outback, was trying to make contact with the air-traffic controller at TIA in order to prepare for lift-off. Meanwhile, his co-pilot Sunil N. S. Thapa, a Kathmandu *raithane* (local), was directing the ground crew to fan hot air from the gas burners into the 'sleeping' beauty. Slowly, the balloon with the signature Buddha-eyes unfolded, expanded and stood upright eight-storeys' tall, plump and ready to take flight.



The queen-size cane basket with standing-room space for nine-seven passengers and two crew—and with propane gas cylinders attached to the sides, is not a confidence-building sight at first. No rudders, no handles, no steering wheel. The only navigational aids on board are a tiny Global Positioning System meter, a VHF radio for contact with the tower, and a UHF radio to keep in touch with the ground crew and catch-up vehicles.

The only means to control this craft are the burners and vents, which allow vertical ascent and descent. Doubts nibble at the corner of the mind about the wisdom of suspending oneself half way to the heavens in this open basket.

mandu

But all doubts vanish with the receding ground. Says co-pilot Thapa. "Passengers worry as they get into the basket, but all apprehension wears off the moment we head for the skies!" Lifting off is memorable mainly because it is so imperceptible. The sights below gradually begin to shrink, accompanied by a simultaneous enlarging of the landscape.

As the 7-o'clock sun whitens the sky, the balloon levels at 9000 ft. The neat-rowed potato patches and the irrigated wheat fields below us have nearly blended themselves into general green expanse. The smoke coming from the numerous brick kilns billow westwards—as polluting as they are to the residents on the ground, they help the pilots monitor the wind direction.

"We're completely at the mercy of the winds for the direction we take," says Thapa. "The only control we have is on the elevation, and the rotation of the balloon. We have to constantly adapt our flight path to the direction of the air flow at each level." Shooting a burst of propane into the canopy, Capt. Shorten adds that flying in Kathmandu is a breeze as far as the wind is concerned. "There are very light winds, and virtually no ground winds, which makes for very smooth landings."

Himals across Nepal

For the passengers, the view is absolutely astounding. All across the northern horizon is the Himalayan range resplendent in the fresh powdering of yesterday's snow. They loom large and regal, above the navy blue hills. The Himals east of Phurbi Ghyachu can just be seen outlined against the white morning sunlight. The nose-up Chhoba Bhamare, the twin embrace of the Gauri Shanker, and Cho Oyu, Melungste and Everest with its signature plume of snow. It is the mountains directly to the north of the Valley, the reclining Langtang, the pyramidal Gangchempo, and the towering hump of Tibet's Shishapangma, that put their best face forward to the slanting sun. Over to the northwest, there is the conglomeration of the Ganesh Himal peaks, majestic Himalchuli and Manasulu a little further on, and across the Marsyangdi the crescent of the Annapurna Himal, wearing the 'topi' of the windswept massif of Annapurna II.

"The mountains never seem the same," says Thapa, as he democratically rotates the balloon to grant an unrestricted northern view to passengers who are facing south. "Every season, they have a different shading, sometimes dark and daring, and at other times dazzling with snow. From one harvest season to the next, the valley below metamorphoses from green to yellow to golden."

As we glide silently along, thousands of feet over the airport, we can make out the large number of aircraft queuing up by the side of the runway for the 'mountain flight'. As the planes take off one by one, the voices of the air traffic controller can be heard over the VHF, warning them to avoid the balloon at 9000 ft. Which they thankfully do. Royal Nepal's large white Boeing then takes off for Delhi, starting on the runway below us, but ending up high above in the sky by the time it leaves the Valley via Chandragiri Pass.

Increasing air traffic in the valley's skies, is one of the challenges that this sightseeing balloon faces. An average of 16 flights leave in a rush for the mountain flight towards Everest in the mornings, and then there is the other rush of STOL aircraft flying to Lukla and other mountain airstrips.

The small planes all circle and mostly fly

Balloon Sunrise eyes Ganesh Himal.

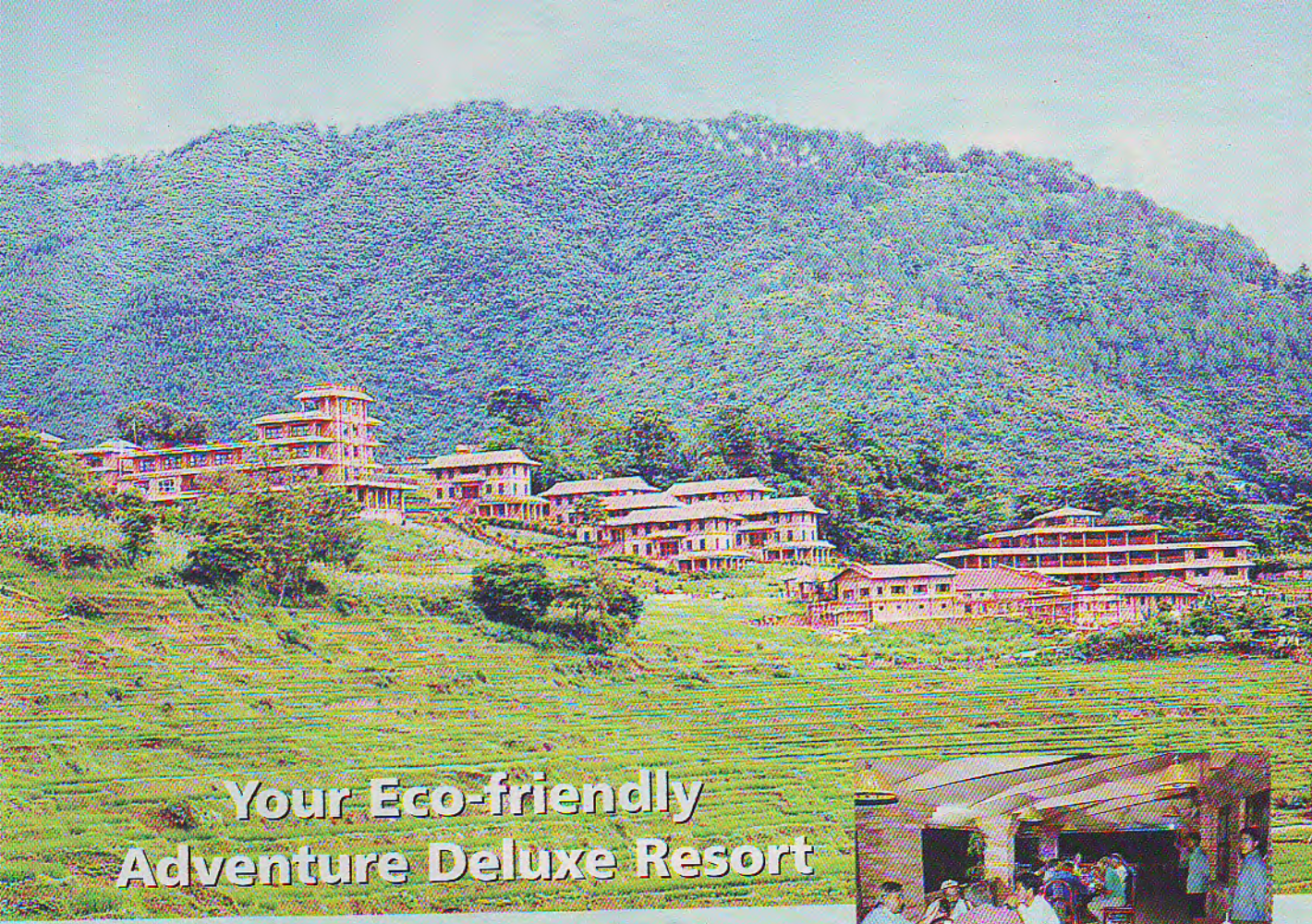
east, while we silently skim westward, over the shoulder-to-shoulder houses and temples of Kathmandu city. The clusters are only broken here and there by algaed ponds, some open grounds (too few), and dark meandering streams. With permission to descend a thousand feet, the balloon catches a swifter wind layer and we are soon heading towards the distinctive Swayambhu stupa, with the Nagarjun hill sprawling behind it like a great green dragon. We come close enough for Swayambhu's all-seeing Buddha eyes to take in the balloon's own unblinking eyes. All too soon, the encounter is over and we are past the stupa, and beginning our final descent.

The other distinct challenge to the pilot of Ballon Sunrise is making a landing in a rapidly urbanising Valley where power lines, concrete pylons, half-made buildings and boundary walls are sprouting everywhere, even in the remote *kaanth* (the rural areas). Capt. Shorten cautions, "Folks, we'll now have to keep a watch for power lines, and please don't hesitate to tell us if you see something we've not." He and co-pilot Thapa lean over the side of the basket to look out for power lines and other obstacles. The passengers enthusiastically join in the lookout.

The balloonists have to be equally careful about landing on farmlands and crops. If forced to land on fields, the company reimburses the farmers for the crop damaged. The crew says that, in this the fourth season of their operation in Kathmandu Valley, they have always had safe landings, with no untoward incident other than the slightly bumpy landing when they were blown over the hills into windy Panuati, one valley over to the east.

As the ground draws nearer, the sounds of the city pierce through the silence, firstly as a muffled roar of the Ring Road traffic, then by the barking dogs of the villages below, warning of the great looming orange bulb over their heads. Lower still, and the barks are overtaken by the chatter of the youngsters who have abandoned a nearby government school to swarm over the terraces following the balloon in its westward glide. There is also a sudden stream of maroon amongst the youngsters—these are pupils from the monasteries which dot this area behind Swayambhu.

The company jeeps have followed the balloon as far as the roads will allow, and thereafter the crew gives chase on foot and finally is able to grab the guy wire dropped by the pilots. The balloon is guided into a postage stamp patch of green next to a graveyard of old vehicles on one side and a small pond on the other. The touchdown is the gentlest ever, and after the passengers alight, the air is released and the balloon is slowly laid on its side. Its day's work done. ▲



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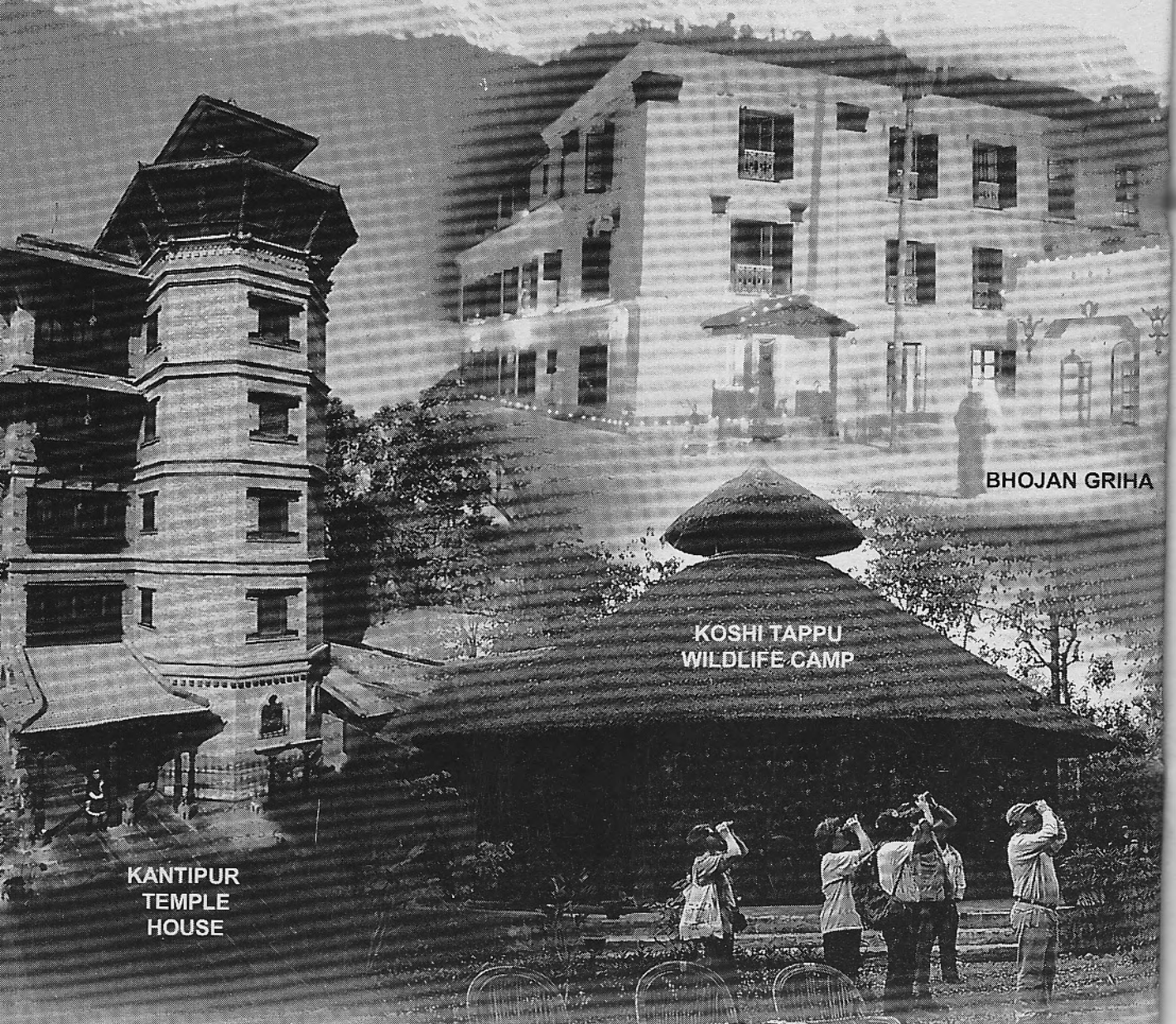

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INDIA'S TOURISM

"It is all in the Access"

Subhash Goyal is the president of the Indian Association of Tour Operators, besides being the chairman of STIC (Student Travel Information Centre) Group, and a long-time spokesman for the Indian tourism industry. What follows is his conversation with Contributing Editor Mitu Varma, taking in the critical aspects of the Indian travel industry.

What is the size of India's tourism industry, and what do you make of its potential?

The total inbound tourism to India is about 2.4 million. Maybe this year it will reach 2.5 or 2.6 million. The outbound tourism is about 4.6 million, about double of the inbound. Inbound tourism is very important for India—it generates foreign exchange, a lot of employment, and it is one industry with a minimum requirement in terms of investment..

Whatever a good tourist destination needs, India has. There is no other country in the world which is bigger and better in terms of tourist attraction. India is the greatest show on Planet Earth. It is the birthplace of four great religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism. The Sufism aspect of Islam was introduced here, and the most fascinating Sufi shrines like Ajmer Sharif and Allauddin Chishti are found here. Few other countries can point to a spot where one of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ, St. Thomas, is buried.

There is no other country in the world which has so much rhythm, music, so much cultural diversity. India is actually a continent of 25 or 26 'countries'. You can do them in one shot if you have the time, otherwise you have to come again and again. This is why the length of stay of tourists in India is the longest anywhere.

But are these attractions generating the number of tourists they should be?

The tourism volume is not there for some reasons, and the primary reason is air-seat capacity. Ninety-five percent or 98 percent of the people who come to India arrive by air. Now the total air seat capacity of India is around five and a half million—that is, five and a half going and five and a half coming, altogether 11 million seats. That is not enough to take care of tourist and non-tourist traveller to and from India.

So a foreign tour operator, if he were to really market India, he needs air fleets. For 50 years, we have had a very restrictive aviation policy which has suffocated the tourism industry. The result is that tour operators and travel agents are fighting for the same piece of cake. But one good thing this government has done in the last four months is that 13 bilateral agreements have been signed, and about 1 million seats have been arranged. The new airlines that will be coming in, in order to make their routes viable, will advertise India.

In air cargo we had a problem, our exports were not going out, so the government opened up the skies for cargo. Now our exports have shot up, and today we export more goods to America than we import from them. There is a boom in exports. Likewise, we have to open up our airways because you can not have tourism without civil aviation.

At one point, Air India marketed India and brought a lot of tourists; does it still play the same role?

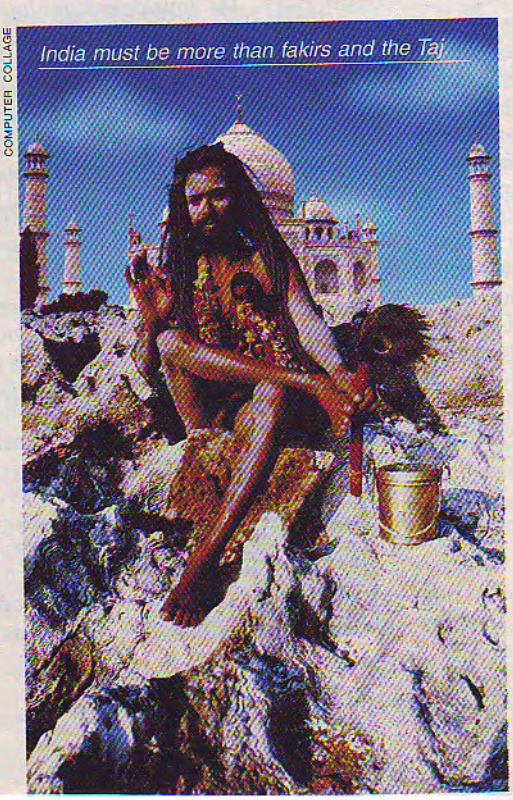
Every airline gets tourists, and Air India has a tourism department. But if you want Air India to continue to play an important role, you have to give its professional managers an independent hand. If the government and the Members of Parliament want to interfere in everything, then Air India will die a natural death.

What about the domestic airlines sector?

I feel that you cannot have halfway liberalisation. If you want to liberalise, you have to give a level playing field. You cannot say that for Sahara or Jet we have one standard of regulations and if Tata wants to come in, we have another standard. That is not healthy, it sends wrong signals. If the managers of Air India and Indian Airlines were to be made answerable to shareholders instead of parliamentary committees, they would be able to do a better job.

What about privatisation?

I am for privatisation, for globalisation. But on the one side we are allowing foreign collabora-



COMPUTER COLLAGE

India must be more than fakirs and the Taj

tions in Pepsi and Coke and Domino's Pizza, and on the other, in the case of Indian aviation where high sophistication, standardisation and global competition are needed, we are not allowing it. You know the whole aviation world is going towards strategic alliances, and if we do not become part of a global strategy, we will not be able to serve even our niche market. We want our national airlines to be global players. If both Air India and Indian Airlines were to be merged, there will be economies of scale and a lot of things can happen.

What about marketing India?

There's a defect in our marketing strategy. We have been marketing India as India, but India as itself doesn't mean anything, it does not provide a real mental picture. Take America, it doesn't have a ministry of tourism, and every state does its own marketing. Each of the 25 states of India has its own beauty and charm, but only three or four states are doing the proper marketing. Kerala is being marketed as God's own country—lush green pictorial forests, the back waters, and the elephants. Rajasthan is also marketing effectively—picturise maharajas and forts, palaces, desert and camel safaris. Kashmir *was* marketing itself, but it has been spoilt by militancy. Now Himachal is marketing itself, but unfortunately it does not have an airfield where big planes can land, so tourism is restricted. If tomorrow there's such an airfield, you will see that Himachal will beat Kashmir. Goa is also selling itself well, but the rest have not done their homework.

Incidentally, it makes no sense to have an international airport unless you grant traffic rights to foreign airlines. For example, Cochin has an international airport but we are not giving traffic rights, so it's meaningless.

What are the main source countries for tourism?

Number one is the UK, followed by Germany and the USA. Fourth is Sri Lanka. We get a lot of people from Sri Lanka.

Is domestic tourism just a poor cousin?

It is not a poor cousin, it is a very important cousin. But again, for it to have a multiplier effect on the economy, you need a particular segment of tourists who are willing to spend that much money. That segment is now growing. The total number of domestic tourists in the country is around 160 million, out of that about 100 million are going for religious purposes. The rest make up about 60 million, and it is a big chunk. Domestic tourism is much larger than international tourism, but the spending power of the domestic tourists is low. Except for about a million who stay in five star hotels and spend a lot—maybe it has grown to two million now.

There has been domestic tourism since time immemorial. You know Shankaracharya started the Chaar Dhaams. Right from the South there is a *dhaam* with Tirupati Temple, the Shobanath Temple in Gujarat then the Pashupati-nath temple in Kathmandu. All these *dhaams* were made so that people of the North could go south and vice versa. The objective was that people could see the whole country.

What are the expectations from mountain tourism, cultural tourism, beach tourism and so on?

I can't say that we can only depend upon adventure tourism, or on cultural tourism, or on sports or business tourism. In every marketing activity, there has to be a product mix, and tourism is no exception. If I were a tourist, I would be interested in everything.

What has happened to the tourists who used to go to Kashmir?

The other hill stations are getting the share. For example, if earlier I had wanted to go to the mountains, I would have gone to Kashmir, now I'm going to Kulu-Manali, to Nepal, to Bhutan, or to the hill stations of Mussoorie, Shimla, Nainital. All these places are getting a boost. Plus, a lot of people are going abroad. A person who has to go on a vacation will go on a vacation, he will not wait for terrorism to end. It is for the people of Kashmir not to allow these foreign infiltrators and terrorists to spoil their livelihoods.

Do you think the Himalaya is a wasted tourist resource?

No, it is not wasted. The Himalaya will continue to be there. Something that is wasted is something that finishes. It has been a lost opportunity these past years, but the Himalaya has the potential.

Is Northeast tourism affected by the need for special permits?

Yes, but they are quite liberal now. If we have international flights coming into Guwahati, that will be a big help. A foreign tourist has a week's holiday, and wants to go into the Northeast straight and spend the seven days there. Today this can't be done. You have to first go to Delhi, Bombay or Calcutta, wait for a day or two to take a flight. So it takes two to three days to reach Guwahati. Then you have to take a bus from Guwahati to wherever you want to go. By the time you reach your destination, three to four days are gone. What is happening in the Northeast is the sheer failure to capitalise on what god has given you.

Do tour operators have special plans for the Northeast?

Tour operators have a lot of plans, but then the Northeast has to be made accessible. That can only be done by the government. What the government has done now is that it has declared six more international airports, out of which Guwahati is one. But again, in order to make this opening viable, the government has to give up its stranglehold on traffic rights. They will have to allow foreign airlines to come in without having to pay compensation to Air India and Indian Airlines.

So it's political will that is lacking?

Yes, no! Political will is there. But what is lacking is political action. Implementation! We are very good at making policies on paper, but the real thing is to make them happen, in time-bound fashion.

Is not India's image still stuck on fakirs, snake-charmers and the Taj?

No, tour operators project everything. Frankly, the tourists who are coming to India today, sometimes have more knowledge of India than we have. You cannot fool them. And

of course, India is just not the Taj, there is much more to India than the Taj. There are many buildings as beautiful as the Taj if not more, they just have to be seen and appreciated. The Taj has become famous because it is close to Delhi, and everyone comes to Delhi.

Why is the Indian government so poor at marketing tourism?

The Ministry of Tourism works with its hands tied. What is needed is coordination and I feel there should be a combined ministry of tourism, civil aviation and transport. There has to be an integrated approach. That is why the industry has been asking for a tourism board where all the other ministries are involved. Now, we have formed the board but it has had just one meeting.

Today, the finance minister and everyone else is talking of information technology, but information technology is not going to solve the problem. It will give us billions of dollars for software development and all that, but it is only giving jobs to the people who are computer literate, whereas in other places there will be downsizing. So, for the uneducated youth in the villages there is no benefit. But tourism can help the uneducated youth too. If a tourist goes to a remote area, he buys local handicrafts, hires a coolie, and spreads the word. IT doesn't do that.

You think the private sector has done its bit in promoting tourism?

We are all doing our hit, but when there are no air seats, it becomes meaningless. The result is that the hotels and the tour operators start fighting with each other for the same piece of cake. The size of the cake needs to be enlarged.

Are there new places which could still be marketed or see a lot of tourists?

There are so many wonders that are hidden, of which the world is not aware of, which even we Indians are not aware of. Now look at Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh, it is one of the wonders of the world, but it is not marketed, and it is not accessible. All the 25 states must have international airports and they must have independent flights. Look at Europe. All of Europe can fit into two Indian states of UP and Bihar. But neither UP nor Bihar has an international airport! Europe has 300 international airports. Now *that* is being accessible. London alone has four international airports. We are a large country, a Subcontinent, we must have at least 25 gateway cities, and every state chief minister must try to market his state as a tourism destination.

The government has a stranglehold on the tourism industry, unless it loosens up and make India accessible, we cannot make tourism an instrument of economic change. There are some positive signs in the media and the public, and the demand is being created, which I think, will force the politicians to loosen their stranglehold, because ultimately tourism will create jobs. To create jobs, you have to develop a labour-intensive industry, and tourism is the largest labour-intensive industry in the world. One out of every nine new jobs being created in the world is created by a service industry. So if the politicians are honest about giving the people jobs, then they have to develop tourism. They have no other choice. ▲

Bongs, Will Travel

In domestic tourism, the Bengali was there first, before the Gujarati, the Punjabi, or the Maharashtran.

by **Rajshree Dasgupta**

You can't miss the lively family of grandmother, second cousin and toddler screaming and jumping over the rolling waves at the sea beach. You can spot the group of naturalists in the hills armed with monkey caps, flasks and white keds on the prowl for that rare butterfly. If not that, they will be found, monkey cap still firmly in place, playing gulley cricket in the hotel foyer back at the hill station. You can hear a distinctively cadenced chorus singing songs of nostalgia in the high *bugyal* meadows, or haggling over the price of a clay Shiva in some temple town by the sea.

The ubiquitous community of sightseers and holidaymakers can only be Bengali, for as passionate as they are about their homeland, the Bengalis are also keen connoisseurs of the wide world. They are the most mobile of South Asian communities, and the first to take to tourism, a behaviour pattern imbibed from the *shahibs* of the Raj with whom they were in closest proximity. Bongs, as they are endearingly addressed by other Indians, are cultured. And the yen to travel is an aspect of being cultured.

Welcome to the "land of Tagore, Ray and Teresa", proclaims the hoarding to visitors arriving at the airport at Dum Dum in Calcutta. Indeed, the Bong is equally conversant with Rabindranath's last poem, Satyajit Ray's soul-searching films and Mother's saintliness. But what is interesting is that the Bengali is also as knowledgeable about every nook and corner of the country that is India. At least two breaks a year, one short and the other long, are as essential components of life for the Bengali as fish is to rice in their diet. An extended weekend or the end of the school term, if he has nothing else, the Bengali will slip out of home with the proverbial *lota* and blanket. There is a world out there to discover.

There are all kinds of Bengali tourists, but essentially three categories, defined by class: the MNC executive and noveau riche, the genteel *bhadralog* traveller, and the packaged ones. The 'true tourists' of West Bengal are of this last package-tour kind. Gregarious, genial and generous, they take along their extended family of third-cousins-in-law and even their friends twice removed. They are the government and bank employees, and teachers – who would not be caught dead spending those two vacation breaks a year riding the Calcutta tramway. This category loves to sight-see, and is wont to break into a delirious Tagore song at the sight of 'natural beauty', or insist on buying a gift for the 'neighbour' who lives two full blocks down the road. Lyrics are devised for every mood and occasion.

If it is an extended weekend, such as during Easter, you could bet your last paisa that Calcuttans have transported themselves to the calm, shallow sea at Digha, one of the most popular spots in West Bengal. A little further out, Puri in Orissa is another favourite because it doubles up as a beach-cum-pilgrimage destination. Lord Jagannath, in his chariot, does not seem to mind this mix of piety and pleasure. Or the Bengali will have decided to beat the heat and made it up to Darjeeling, Queen of the Hills, to bask in the glory of Kanchenjunga.

The overnight train rides towards any of these favourite destinations do not require elaborate planning. All you need is a pack of playing cards to keep awake through the night in the unreserved train compartment, and piles of *puris* and *aludum* from the home kitchen. In fact, she who discovered that the easiest way to a man's heart is through his stomach must have interacted with a Bengali while coding that insight. The Bong's obsession with what he consumes is only surpassed by his devotion to discussing food. He lives from one meal to the next, in between relishing every morsel of culinary information – from the size of the cauliflower this season to the price of fish that morning. So vast is the Bengali gourmet's storehouse of knowledge that he can state with authority upon chewing one mouthful the exact river and *part of the river* where this Hilsa had its origins.

The passion for food is translated into a fetish, so much so that the most revered position in the package tour is that of cook. He is pampered, cajoled and his every whim taken care of. After all, he who provides the Bengali with

mustard fish in remote Rohtang Pass (Himachal Pradesh) or banana flower with grated coconut while on a train in the midnight leg between Lucknow and Delhi, must be well taken care of.

To divert briefly to the upper-most class Bengali travellers, they are the new rich mostly, some of them even dot.com-wallahs. This category sneers at the thought of a package tour. It demands 'readymade' service, with arrangements for pickup at the airport, transfer to three-star hotels with functioning geyser and cistern, 'good view', exotic cuisines, et al. The local guide should know the history of the dilapidated monuments so that Choto Baba's school project will have value-added. He must also be able to take the memsahib shopping for earrings. The aim of this new-breed Bengali traveller is to de-stress, swim in private beaches, and dine in exclusive forts, destinations where plebeians have no hope of treading.

It is actually difficult to call this type of traveller 'Bengali', given that he represents a generic upwardly-mobile Indian from any corner of the country. The craze of the uppah this year is for the sun-kissed beaches of the Maldives, right across the expanse of the Subcontinent and faraway in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Which brings us to the genteel bhadralog, old money who would prefer to do nothing else but to retreat to a forest bungalow with a Jhumpa Lahiri short story collection in hand.

LTA

Beyond the yen and the inquisitiveness, the reason that the Bengali middle class travels so is to be found in in all of three letters, LTA— the Leave Travel Allowance provided generously by the government. Travel agents are known to anguish over the mere thought of that horrendous day when Bengalis may enmasse decide not to avail of the LTA. However, it is unlikely that such a day will arrive, ever.

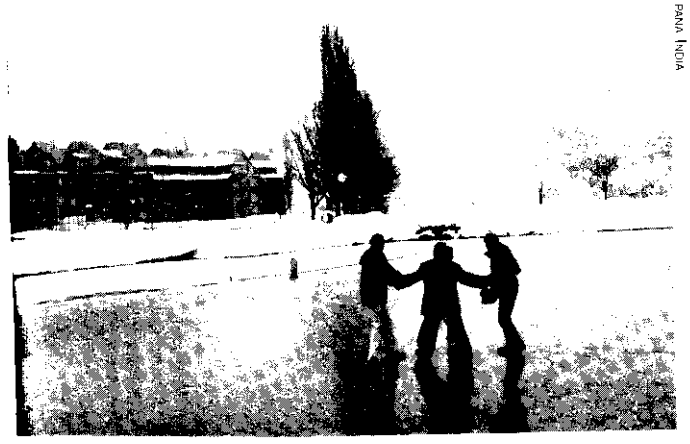
The LTA supports package tours of two to three weeks, and the Bengalis look for cheap accommodation without frills. The argument is, why pay for a sumptuous room if all you are going to do is to crash after a full day of sightseeing? But what the babu will insist on are clean bathrooms and bed sheets. Lodge-owners from Kalimpong to Mussoorie report being terrorised by Bengalis who shout in one refrain, "Why are you so stingy with the Phenol in the toilet?!"

The package tourist is content, therefore, if his simple demands for a view, food and solace for the soul are taken care of. For the redemption of the souls of the elderly *mashimas* and *pishimas*, the tour must touch the sacred ghats of Varanasi or Prayag. This is why the billboards outside both the Varanasi and Allahabad railway stations advertise "Bangaali" *dharamshallas*, which serve vegetarian.

There is the one additional factor of security, for most Bengalis suffer from eternal anxiety pangs that the coolie will run away with their luggage or that the train will stop unannounced in a dark forest. There is much muttering in the eerily silent railway bogeys when this happens. Being an educated and cultured race, Bengalis have creative imaginations, which come into their own on such occasions.

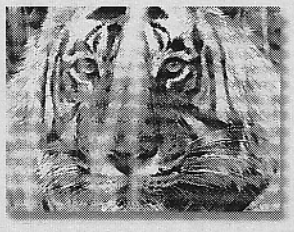
With Kashmir in trouble for more than a decade, Himachal Pradesh has emerged as the all-time favourite of the tourist Bong. "Kullu-Manali-Kangra-Valley!" he will blurt out if you ask him his favourite LTA destination. On the banks of the Beas, Kullu is the base for visits to various holy sites like the famous cave temple of Vaishno Devi and Bijli Mahadev. Manali during the summers is paradise and is close to the snows of Rohtang Pass. Famous for its hot springs and sulphur baths, the Bengalis love the green walks outside the crowded town. Kangra Valley is a recent discovery and Bengalis swear by its ability to refurbish the jaded sensibilities of the Calcutta commuter.

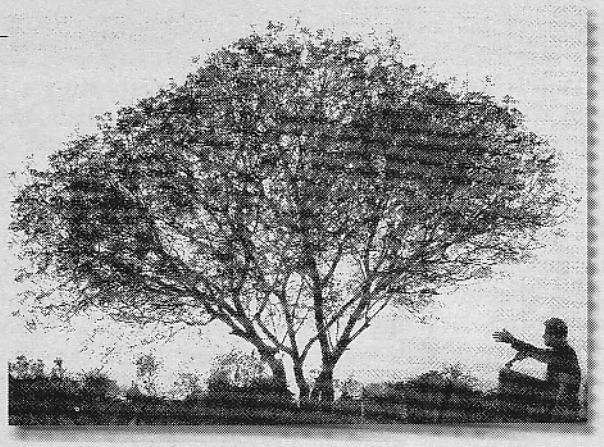
But life on the fast track seems to be catching up even with the committed Bengali package tourist. If the unadulterated love for travel and adventure had not become compromised, how is it then that you will these days find a Bong snoring through the most exciting bus ride along the most beautiful forest? Even five to seven years ago, the cameras would have been clicking, and yells of outright delight renting the air. Yet, if you should encounter a couple camping at 12,000 feet above sea level near the Tibet border for two weeks at a continuous stretch, you can bet a free metro ride in Calcutta that they are Bengalis. ▲



PANA INDIA

Those were the days: frolicking in Dal Lake's thin ice.





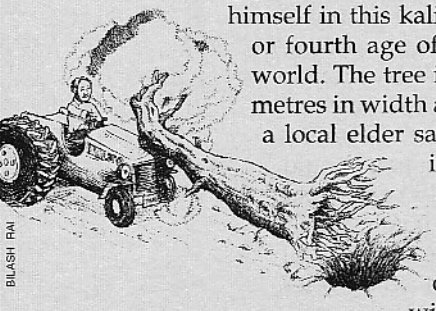
TWO GOOD pictures by Reuters referring back to Prez Clinton's trip to India in late March. One, a picture of Bill by the Taj, speaking on clean energy and environment. The tiger, meanwhile, is a male caught in the process of eyeing Bill from the bush in Bokola Ghat at the Ranthambhore National Park in Rajasthan. Wonder what was in his mind.

■

NEPAL'S NATIONAL news agency RSS (Rastriya Samachar Samiti, and not what you think) is obviously one for making wild claims. On 27 April, it reported that a resident of Bhimmapur village in Kailali district along with her son, who were bitten by a rabid dog, ate its liver in the belief that this was the cure. Then RSS goes on to state, with much conviction, "This is the first instance of someone eating a rabid dog's liver to stave off rabies." Such certitude! To think that since time embarked on its journey, no one anywhere, ever, has taken recourse to dog liver to counter rabies! That must have taken some research.

■

27 APRIL, again, and again an RSS despatch from Mohattari (another Tarai district of Nepal). "A pipal tree at Manara VDC which was knocked down by a gale in the month of Baisakh last year, has all of a sudden returned to its previous erect position. Religious devotees are thronging the tree to worship and pay their respects in the belief that it is the god Lord Bishu [?] who has manifested himself in this kaliyug or fourth age of the world. The tree is 30 metres in width and about 400 years old, a local elder said." Well, at least there is attribution. As a South Asian rationalist, however, Chhetria Patrakar would say that someone in Manara with a wicked mind has been active with a tractor and some ropes overnight.



BILASH RAI

■

A CORRESPONDENT to *The Bangladesh Observer* makes a good point, asking why the paper tends to favour the female sex during photo-coverage of book fairs, arts shows, gallery openings, and so on. "Quite paradoxically and for reasons unknown to us, we usually find that on such occasions your press photographer is interested to take snaps only of girl and female visitors and not of any male visitor. On these occasions, your press photographers appear to be influenced by gender instincts and impulses." I would tell Mr. N.H. Sufi of Dhaka that, in all such matters, the culprits are to be found not so much in the photographer's finger as in the editorial desk influenced by the marketing office.

■

IN AN editorial of (15-21 April), *Kuensel*'s editor makes the plea for open and frank discussion and public debate as Bhutanese society evolves and modernises. It seems written as a response to those in authority who react all too quickly to criticism. Traditionally, says the editorial, citizens have felt no hesitation in expressing their problems, doubts and views, and even farmers have had the opportunity to submit their views personally to the Bhutanese monarch. In what is a subtle but laudable appeal for more openness, the text goes on: "The government's emphasis on transparency today calls for more systems and fora for open discussion. How else would the government monitor its other priorities—efficiency and accountability? How else do we ensure appropriate standards in, say, the awarding of millions of Ngultrums in job contracts and purchases? One of the responsibilities of the media, anywhere, is to (enhance public awareness). But such discussions are possible, in the media or other fora, only if we perceive them in the broader perspective and not in a personalised context."

■

THE *DECCAN Herald* of 14 March carries this moving picture of a woman grieving at the grave of a victim of caste violence at Kambalapalli village in Kolar district.

■

I LIKE it that the 14th Dalai Lama is increasingly active in South Asian issues of society. (This is perhaps only natural, because culturally Tibet is much more a part of South Asia rather than of mainland China.) What I like even more is that the Dalai Lama is getting involved in the propagation of liberal values in India at a time when the ruling establishment in New Delhi in particular is going swiftly rightward. It is also right and proper that the Dharamsala handlers have started paying heed to the

neighbourhood rather than focusing only on garnering support in Western capitals for the 'Tibetan cause'. One example of this liberal and regional involvement of the Dalai Lama is the recent promotion of a daring series of documentary films that analysed what India had gained in 50 years of independence. In the middle of April, the Dalai Lama launched a website of the firebrand Indian policewoman Kiran Bedi (www.kiranbedi.com). Apart from profiling Ms Bedi and her 30-year career, the website is interactive and she can be sent mail regarding "a grievance or a legal doubt". Launching the site, Tenzin Gyatso said that this was an innovative way of using technology for the benefit of the people. Knowing perhaps Ms Bedi's disposition for a wee-bit of self-promotion, the wise lama did caution her against getting carried away with success. "In the service of people, one needs to always be humble. This will retain enthusiasm and inspire you to work harder." Touché'.

■

HARD TO believe, but there it is. Something posted in the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA) website: a new worldwide survey suggests that Indians follow the Americans as the 'happiest people on earth'. The Russians and Chinese came out as the world's glummest people, found the market research agency Roper Starch Worldwide, which surveyed 22 countries in five continents. While 46 percent Americans said they were satisfied with their lives, Indians came second at 37 percent, with the Chinese and Russians trailing at 9 and 3 percent. The respondents were quizzed about "relationship with family, self-confidence, the country's overall economy, and the role of religion in their lives". Two things I want to say: a) if that's where India is (which 'India' I am forced to wonder, and what methodology did Roper Starch use to cover the whole place?), then Pakistan, Bangladesh and the rest of us cannot be far behind. Happy, happy! And, b) where does the survey put Bhutan, particularly in relation to the Druk Gyalpo's Gross National Happiness index?

■

I LIKE Hafizur Rahman, columnist of Karachi's *Dawn*, who in his column *Of Mice and Men* of 22 March writes on the phenomenon of the "staff car"—which is the South Asian equivalent of having a 'corner window' in a multinational headquarters in New York City. It is obscene, this need for a conveyance to proves one's worth, and it goes way beyond the legitimate requirement of an officer to get around. It is also a problem that afflicts government offices in every capital and metropolis of South Asia. Writes Mr. Rahman: "I have often wondered what would happen if there were no staff cars for government officers. Would administrative efficiency, already at low ebb, become lower? No, I don't think so. Then why have staff cars at all... My case against staff cars is based purely on the absence of ethical justification. Staff cars are allocated to only those civil and military officers who usually have two private cars of their own, but are never given to those who sometimes can't even afford to buy and maintain the smallest Suzuki..."

■

I CANNOT make head or tail out of this "Crimson Tide" advertising in *Dawn* of 23 March. It seems to be put up by "MMTI Marketing Pakistan", showing Pakistan army regulars at full trot, and seems to be some sort of a super-nationalist come-on, albeit nicely packaged. But to what purpose? I better check out the website that is given www.mmtglobal.com/wp. And you do, too.

■

ON 16 April, readers of *The Times of India* got a jolt when they found the front page just an expanse of white space, other than the masthead and strapline along the top. This was a gimmick by a dot-com startup. Immediately, there was reaction against this extra-innovative step to keep up with the times by *The Times*. The newspaper has for some years been accused of pandering to market forces at the expense of editorial content, and the critics would have been expected to jump on this additional display of marketing savvy by the paper that Samir Jain runs. Vinod Mehta, of the weekly *Outlook*, said with some sanctimony, "I will never do such a thing, no matter what." But Dileep Padgaonkar, executive managing editor, retorted, "The diktats of technology driven competitive environment force one to go for innovative marketing strategies... sooner or later others (will) follow suit." Here, I tend to go with Mr. Padgaonkar.

- Chhetria Patrakar

RIP

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP)–South Asia's oldest English-language newspaper, *The Observer*, announced Friday it was suspending publication.

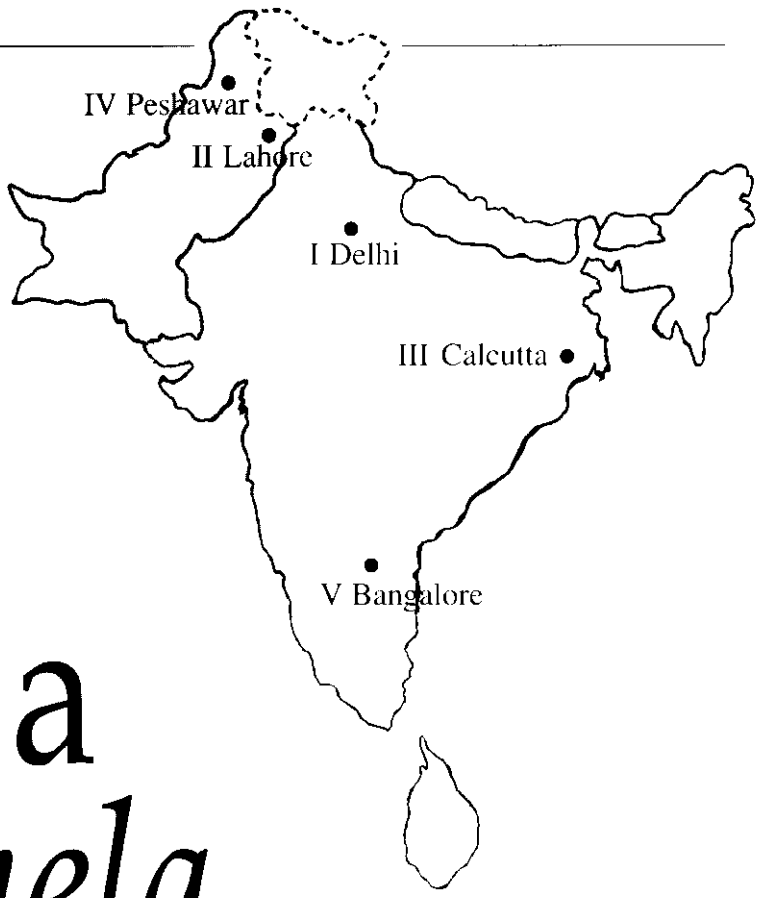
Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, the state holding company that owns the 166-year-old daily, wants to restructure its newspaper production. The 10,000-circulation *Observer* was its first victim, and will cease publication May 1.

"(*The Observer*) was running on a loss," said Leslie Dhanaike, a former editor at the newspaper. "It was being published for the sake of prestige."

Dhanaike, who worked at the paper for 30 years, said the paper had lost advertising in recent years.

The newspaper was founded as the *Ceylon Observer* on Feb. 4, 1834.

Rethinking strategies *for* the Pak-India Forum



Beyond a peace *mela*

At the fifth Joint Convention of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy, everyone's eye was on a young Karachi-based journalist, Nasir, his wife and two minor daughters, honorary child delegates to this gathering in Bangalore. When he had first sounded them out about going to India, 6-year-old Zoya had innocently piped up, "*Hamara India!*"...

by ***Rita Manchanda***

... Formal schooling had yet to make Zoya self-conscious about such an unpatriotic slip, and she was easily forgiven for parroting the refrain from an advertising jingle heard constantly on Zee's satellite transmissions. For, the Indian television channel's footprint takes in all of Pakistan.

What would Zoya remember of that week of April in Bangalore? Perhaps her childhood memories would include the sentimental cry of "*Ek Mata Do Santan*" (one mother, two children) rendered by some delegates. More likely, however, it would be the more imaginative articulation to be found in *Brothers of Chichibaba*, an anti-war children's storybook released at the Forum which Zoya took home. Written by scientist D P Sen Gupta, the tale is of right-handed Guruk and left-handed Turuk, two brothers from the land of Chichibaba. They have a falling out and become implacable enemies, raising armies against each other till both acquire bombs "so hot that the earth will melt like butter". The children of what has

become two countries, Chinchin and Chinchun, frightened of meltdown, push through a hole in the wall separating them. In the end, Guruk and Turuk are transformed, and vow to destroy all weapons and live in peace.

Of course, real-world India and real-world Pakistan will not as easily come to terms with each other, given the remarkable fit on both sides of state ideology based on hostile relations, the national security obsession, and popular acceptance of hate politics. Nevertheless, this fit will inexorably loosen up as long as the people-to-people dialogue continues to engage in ever-more complex arenas and goes beyond the hail-fellow-well-met phase. When that happens, and it is no longer a question of 'if', the people who talk of peace between India and Pakistan and in the South Asian region as a whole will be as successful as the daring children of Chinchin and Chinchun.

Subversive sentimentalism

A look around the conference chamber at the United Theosophical College in Bangalore was proof enough that the constituency for peace has widened considerably. Not here the establishmentarian individuals one finds in the so-called 'track-two' South Asian political and security conclaves. Instead, the discussions were enlivened and made down-to-earth by activists (sometimes derided by those in the mainstream media as 'romantics') from women's groups, environmental organisations, social and human rights coalitions, and labour unions, as well as professionals, scientists, academics, journalists, retired bureaucrats and military officers. The objective of the convention was to foster new broad-based coalitions capable of democratically reordering national and regional priorities.

Of course, in Bangalore there was no doing away with the groundswell of sentimentalism among delegates for "what might have been" between the two countries. This emotionalism is a natural outcome of contact between real people. The fact that it reinforces the superficial impression of the participants as unrealistic peace missionaries, committing themselves to wishful declarations, is a natural hazard. Besides, the facile dismissal of the delegates as "bleeding hearts" obscures the sinewy strength of the Forum as a potent idea, symbolising that there is nothing essentialist in India-Pakistan hostility as the state sponsored orthodoxy would have us believe. A 'hundred years war' is not inevitable. Former ministers, cabinet secretaries, admirals, major generals and thousands of concerned citizens from India and Pakistan, have discovered that even on the burning topic of Kashmir there are more areas to agree on than to disagree.

The Forum's strategy is simple though no less subversive for being that. By bringing together thousands of citizens of India and Pakistan, it undermines the very logic of the *shaitaan*-ising of the other side. "The more people talk to each other, the more they are exposed to each other's writings, and the process of demonising will come apart," the Forum's co-founder Nirmal Mukarji said at the historic first Joint Convention in Delhi in 1995. Six years and five conventions later, this unique breed of vocal and willing-to-stand-up-and-be-counted citizens have not only demonstrated the survivability of the idea of a regional thaw, but testified to the emergence and resilience of a cross-border peace constituency. A constituency, which setbacks like the Kargil war have been unable to crush, and chauvinistic governments and their media pools have been unable to deny.

Four-plus-one

The continuous war hysteria of the last year had made it urgent that the convention be held at all costs. The symbolic value of the meeting was lost on no one, given all that had happened over a year—Kargil, the military takeover in Pakistan, and loose talk of a 'winnable' limited war between the two nuclear powers.

This time, too, India's Ministry of External Affairs issued non-reporting (doing away with the requirement of Pakistanis to show up at police stations) and multiple-city visas to the 200 delegates from the other side of Wagah-Atari. While the Pakistani delegates had to cool their heels and wait for the twice-weekly Samjhauta Express (because they were not allowed to walk across the Wagah-Atari border point), in Bangalore the local organisers had their hands full. Several potential patrons had pulled back financial support, and there was the irritant of a court case filed against the convenor of the Karnataka chapter of the Forum, accusing him of fostering anti-national feeling. The case was dismissed.

The result of the bilateral tensions was unprecedented security, although it was unclear who was protecting whom—delegates suspected of being ISI agents or local anti-social fascist elements. For the first time since New Delhi, the Forum venue was swarming with police and intelligence agents. Delegates, who in Calcutta had had a free run in the city, now found themselves boxed in the conference venue. It virtually defeated one of the objectives of the people-to-people dialogue—letting people discover for themselves false myths and prejudices.

Undeterred, the Forum in Bangalore proceeded with the task of increasing the basis of bilateral understanding on the intertwined four-plus-one themes which must be tackled in order to resolve the India-Pakistan standoff —strengthening democracy within Kashmir, demilitarisation/denuclearisation, religious tolerance, governance, and globalisation/regional cooperation.

Bangalore checklist

As in earlier conventions, dozens of urgent proposals were discussed in Bangalore—about collaborative rewriting of history, student exchanges, summer residency programmes for scholars, development of a peace education curricu-

lum, and so on. On the newly added fifth theme of globalisation and regional cooperation, joint strategies on multilateral negotiations such as the WTO and plant breeder rights were discussed. Against a backdrop of a 28 percent increase in India's defence expenditure and the bilateral nuclear arms race, appeals were made to slash expenditures and roll back nuclearisation.

Granted the Bangalore declaration was an omnibus wish-list, but it was a declaration affirmed by a citizen's assembly. It serves as a checklist of all that can be done to improve the state of the Subcontinent if only one puts people's security at the centre. As the declaration stated, true security lies in good governance, which can undermine the reigning national security orthodoxy on both sides.

The Chattisingpura massacre had most grimly spotlighted the fact that violence only begets violence. A daring joint declaration was formulated on Kashmir, urging cessation of violence by all, and a move towards a process by which the people of Kashmir would be able to choose their own representatives for a dialogue. The discussion was a passionate one. Would the Forum accept it if, eventually, the Kashmiris democratically chose to secede? Co-chair of the Forum and former chief of the Indian Navy, Admiral Ramdas, did not flinch in his reply: "When Tilak fought for *swaraj*, he did not fight only for us. Why should we alone have the right?" The understanding of the Indian delegates was that democratic space in India cannot be safeguarded if democratic rights in J&K are suppressed.

Had the Kargil conflict shrunk the peace constituency? As I.A. Rehman, the standard-bearer for human rights in Pakistan, put it, "Have the problems of impoverishment, unemployment, intolerance and militarisation shrunk?" His point was that as long as these problems remain, those who were honest enough to strive for peace would remain energised. For, it is the personal experience of the cost of confrontation that inculcates in people the desire for peace.

The large presence of younger Pakistani and Indian delegates at Bangalore underscored the determination of this second post-Independence generation to reclaim the possibility of a future in which the two nuclear powers of the Subcontinent may actually be able to live in peace. After all, the very fact that this generation is willing to countenance a different 'truth' than that fed by the hate politics of the India-Pakistan divide, is reason enough to pursue peace further. The Karachi Joint Convention is planned for later this year.

Introspection time

The Forum's Joint Conventions are designed to act as catalysts, fostering offshoot coalitions. It was in the Lahore Joint Convention that representatives of Fishworkers Unions on both sides of the border met and worked out an informal system to assist and rescue fishermen caught in the wrong waters. A chance connection established in the Peshawar Convention led to the release of three Indian minor children locked up in a Pakistani jail. At the Calcutta Book Fair, the West Bengal chapter of the Forum put up a stall and hosted spin-off programmes with visiting Pakistani historians, feminists and cultural activists. An Indian delegate who seemed intent on pure tourism during the Peshawar meet of 1998, was again present at Bangalore in April 2000, but this time enthusiastically conferring with delegates from West Punjab about a joint meeting of the two Punjabs in East Punjab.

Regardless of these outcomes, the organisers have been conscious since the very beginning of the danger that the Joint Conventions, held with such *tamasha* alternatively in each country, may end up as ends in themselves. It is true that even though the rhetoric waxes eloquent, substantive achievements in the sectoral arenas have been disappointing.

Putting together the massive logistical requirements for the conventions requires hard work in organisation and local fund-raising. These overwhelming demands tend to leave the Forum with little by way of resources and energy for the continuous year-round activities, which are required to make the process genuinely 'people-to-people'. For many of the founder members of the Forum, the Bangalore Convention was a time for hard introspection. Was the Forum to remain just a jamboree, howsoever important and symbolic? Were we evolving as little more than travel and tour operators?

The answer, of course, is no. The Joint Conventions of the Forum are the minimum that is required to bring together the people of India and Pakistan. While they are certainly not enough, the meets will continue to provide a nucleus for additional activities in future. The meets are central to the vision of fostering a honeycomb of cross-border coalitions capable of democratically transforming the India-Pakistan relationship.

This essential goal of the Forum makes it different from the 'track two' efforts, which tend to be limited to select inter-elite communications. The Forum envisions a broad-based movement evolving in both India and Pakistan, involving the people at large, one which will ultimately be strong enough to force politicians and policy-makers to heed the voice of reason and peace.

As I.A. Rehman said in Bangalore, "We have to make the governments admit to the possibility of an alternative to the politics of hate and confrontation, the possibility of other possibilities." Were the governments listening? Before long, and once the people start making demands, they will...

He thought people were dangerous
But in their friendship, he found new safety

The one-horned rhinoceros. Asiatic lions. Tigers. The Ridley Sea Turtle. Flying Lizards...
They roam free, in all their glory. At home in the natural habitats created for them. Watched by thousands of tourists who travel long distances to marvel at Nature's many exotic creatures.

There are many rare species that are nurtured and protected in India's 81 National Parks and 441 Game Sanctuaries. With Tourism's focus on conservation, these Parks and Sanctuaries have proved to be a haven for endangered species. In the safety of their new homes, they have found a new freedom. Freedom from the fear of extinction.

Wildlife is conserved.
When people travel

Come, discover the tremendous potential of Tourism

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Millennium Year

Ministry of Tourism
Government of India
Transport Bhavan, Parliament Street, New Delhi - 110 001. INDIA
Visit us at : http://www.tourisminindia.com

The state, it is said, faces a pretty future.

Mizoram's turnaround can show the rest of India's Northeast what a cease-fire can do. But with peace here, progress must not take too long.

Peace Dividend in Mizoram

by ***Prabhu Ghate***

Ironies abound as we get off the Boeing at the airport that services Aizawl, the capital of the north-eastern Indian state of Mizoram. Accompanying us in the hold is the body of a Mizo soldier who had died in a bomb blast in faraway Srinagar. Stands have been erected for the crowds that had gathered to receive the body. The bagpipes strike up, a ceremonial guard presents arms, medals flash in the sun, and a mountain of wreaths soon pile up on the coffin. The first wreath is laid by the state's home minister, Tawnluia, the former commander-in-chief of the Mizo National Front (MNF) and veteran of the 20-year insurgency against 'India'. The MNF were in power only for a year after the 1986 accord that ended the insurgency, but were voted back in the November 1998 elections.

There is little flat land in Mizoram, and the airport is located a tortuous hour-and-half drive from Aizawl. The town suddenly comes into view on a ridge as a surprisingly extensive urban sprawl, housing almost a third of the state's population of around 800,000. Mizo settlements have always been located on hilltops, and many of them grew with the clustering of villages during the insurgency. The funeral procession wended its way through narrow streets to the soldier's home, with the crowds lined four deep. On benches in the drawing room overlooking the deep valley below, Chief Minister Zoramthanga, Laldenga's number two in the insurgency, sat shoulder-to-shoulder with the local army brass for a two-hour condolence meeting. The grieving mother, who had remained stoic and calm since the airport, finally broke down. Speeches were made, psalms sung, gongs struck, and one of the relatives who had accompanied the body thanked the army for looking after its own, saying it was an honour to die for one's country.

I asked Bualhranga, an influential former insurgent who now runs the Peace Bookstore on the noisy main street of Aizawl, with the ubiquitous Marutis careening up and down outside, whether he thought the long years in the jungle had been worth it. "Definitely," he replied, adding, "The Mizo community is today a fact. People should come here just to smell the fresh air of peace." He was referring to the neighbouring states of Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, which continue to be riven with insurgencies and ethnic strife.

The chief minister argues in a similar vein: "We decided on peace because the people said it was the honourable thing to do. You don't kill the patient to cure the disease. And I tell Advaniji (*L.K. Advani, the*

federal home minister), 'Every rupee you give me gets spent on development. Whereas, of every rupee you give Nagaland and Manipur, 50 percent goes to the underground, including half of the police director-general's salary'." Zoramthanga is big on the 'peace bonus'. He says he is often asked to intercede with the Nagas and others on behalf of peace, but that so far he has not complied. He is firm on what he believes: "They must be shown, not told, what peace can buy."

De-tribalisation

The Mizo insurgency had its roots in the economic hardship and political isolation inflicted by Partition, which cut off the Lushai Hills (then a district in Assam) from the trade route to the sea at Chittagong. The introduction of Assamese as the official language in 1960, and the perceived failure of the Assam state government to anticipate the famine caused by the periodic efflorescence of bamboo in 1959, resulting in an explosion of the rodent population which then destroyed the crop, were more proximate causes. The Mizo National Famine Front was set up in 1960 and gained huge popularity. It launched a daily paper edited by Laldenga, a former havildar-clerk in the army, and in 1962 emerged as a full-fledged political party, the MNF, dropping 'famine' from its name. The precipitating factor for the insurgency was the disbanding of a battalion of the Assam Regiment in 1964 following a charge of indiscipline. This was an additional blow to Mizo sensibility, but it also provided disaffected recruits for the Front. The MNF took over Aizawl by surprise on the night of 28 February 1966, declaring Mizoram independent.

Why did the accord that ended the migrants' insurgency succeed when so many other accords have fallen by the wayside and allowed the fighting to continue? Part of the explanation lay in the Mizos' sheer weariness with war. Partly, it was the creation of Bangladesh, which denied the MNF sanctuaries across the border. Beyond that, recalls Boulhranha, "There was just no way we could stand up to the Indian army all alone. The Chinese promised us modern arms, but we had no direct land access. Pakistan was not interested in our achieving independence, so they would not allow us free and open use of Chittagong port and allow arms to be shipped through East Pakistan. All they wanted was to use us to tie down the Indian army." Even after the creation of Bangladesh, about 700 insurgents held out for 14 more long years in the jungle, on the trijunction with Burma and Bangladesh, continuing their sporadic attacks on the Indian army. Finally, the accord was signed.

Reverend Thanzauva, one of the many Mizos who gave up careers in other parts of India to return to serve his people at home, thinks he has an understanding of the deeper societal reasons behind the return of peace. He had been researching how Christianity provided Mizos with the ideological basis for coping with change while at the same time co-opting and preserving much of Mizo culture. The Nagas tend to be guided more by emotion, whereas Mizos are quick to communicate and learn, are more 'rational' and oriented to consensus, he says. The reverend adds, "We are regarded as a bit dull, unlike the Nagas who are more cheerful—it must be the American influence! If you were to produce a play, the Naga would make the liveliest actor, the Khasi from Meghalaya the best orator, and the Mizo the best organiser—he would have to be made the producer."

As Reverend Thanzauva would agree, the deeper sociological explanation for the advent of peace perhaps lies in the homogeneity of Mizo society. Unlike in Nagaland, the advent of Christianity and education at the turn of the century led to the voluntary merging of many sub-tribes and cognate groups with the dominant Lushais. The development of a common language and of the first dictionary, as well as introduction of the Roman script by the missionaries, were crucial to the process of 'de-tribalisation', and the emergence of an evolved Mizo identity. While this identity led to nationalism and the insurgency, it also enabled the Mizos to speak with one voice when the time came to seek peace.

While splits did take place among the insurgents, and some intellectuals emerged above-ground before others, eventually a single leadership did prevail under Laldenga, who felt his backing robust enough to strike for peace. The other states of the Northeast have not been so fortunate. The Nagas, for instance, have about 12 tribes with different languages, and the insurgents seem eternally divided between the Isaac-Muivah and the Kaplang factions (both sets of leaders originating, incidentally, from outside Nagaland state—Manipur and Burma, respectively). What one Naga tribe agrees to, the other is almost compelled to oppose. As Zoramthanga says, "There is no one there to say 'Hey guys, enough is enough'."

Tlawmngaihna

The much-vaunted Mizo organisational skills were in display at the annual conference of the Young Mizo Association (YMA), held over the winter in Champhai, near the Burmese border. Thousands of YMA members from all over the state, and many Mizo role-models from outside, were housed and fed by the local inhabitants for three days. For those who could not trudge through the slush (caused by unseasonal heavy rain) to reach the huge tent where the convention was centred, the proceedings were fully televised on CNN (the Champhai Network News).

The speeches ranged from the need to improve the quality of education to how to move with the computer age, now that Mizoram had overtaken Kerala as the most literate state in India. Sermons on the importance of preserving Mizo cultural integrity were interspersed with songs by groups of smart men and

women in colourful western outfits tailored for the occasion. An attractive young woman came to the podium to humorously disparage people who dip their biscuits in tea, or talk too long over other people's phones. (In the same vein of self-improvement, the editorial in the local *Highlander* was devoted to the virtues of punctuality.)

In order that the conference could begin on time, hundreds of villagers had worked through the night before, helping clear a landslide that had blocked the road from Aizawl. This was all in the true spirit of *Tlawmngaihna*, the ancient tribal code of ethics that the YMA is seeking to keep alive. The code calls for self-sacrifice, endurance and serving the community without calling attention to oneself. I noticed the director of the state's Transport Department standing at the entrance in the slush, himself distributing a charter of rights for bus passengers. Out of respect for the non-political nature of the organisation and so as not to steal the limelight, the chief minister made it a point to sit patiently through the first morning's proceedings. When his turn finally came to speak, he was introduced in Mizo literally as a "Big Invitee". He began by saying that he was neither big (he is rather short) nor an invitee, but a local of Champhai, which is his home and constituency.

Zoramthanga is, after all, a politician and he had his reasons for attending the convention. He knows that that the YMA is more influential than even the church—virtually every Mizo belongs to it, whereas the church has been weakened by sheep-stealing and other inter-denominational conflicts. The YMA is said to be largely responsible for the fact that Mizoram has the cleanest elections in all India. Among other things, the Association has got all the parties to agree to ban feasts and refreshments during election time, and has come out with guidelines for voters on what qualities to look for in candidates.

The YMA is primarily a service and security organisation, regarding the entire societal arena as its stomping ground. It helps out with funerals and weddings, especially of the poor, rebuilds homes damaged by fire, sends out search parties for those missing in the jungle, and increasingly, with the spread of drug abuse, provides counselling services. In emphasising communitarian values, the Association may seem to be fighting the odds in a moderni-sing world, but it seems to be making headway. If anything, YMA activism can sometimes get out of hand, as when members invade the privacy of a home to search for drugs, or evict a stubborn tenant, or reform a "bad hat". Or when a family would prefer to mourn the loss of a loved one in privacy.

If you were to produce a play, the Naga would make the liveliest actor, the Khasi from Meghalaya the best orator, and the Mizo the best organiser.

The indigenous Jew

While Mizoram has a vibrant civil society, the society's weak underbelly is exposed when one considers that, economically, the state remains totally dependent on federal subsidies. Less than 10 percent of expenditures of the state are raised locally. Like in all the northeastern states, Mizoram's people do not pay central income tax, and the state sales tax has only just been introduced, amidst much grumbling. The easy money that came in during and after the insurgency created a get-rich-quick class of contractors and rentiers.

But along with the 'peace-bonus' to kick-start development, the MNF is making a populist virtue of self-sufficiency ("we can't be proud when we are hungry"). Zoramthanga has grand schemes to utilise the bamboo wealth of Mizoram, including the import of Taiwanese technology to heat and compress bamboo to increase its strength as building material, for export to other states. However, everyone is short on details of the project. Horticulture is also being encouraged, although teak cultivation is not being pushed as much as one would imagine. Apart from the long gestation period for this traditional forest product of the Northeast, the unspoken fear seems to be that if teak is promoted, it comes part and parcel with importation of labour to maintain the forests and harvest the wood.

This understandable concern for 'cultural purity' could, on the other hand, be keeping out a whole host of labour-intensive technologies. For, labour suppy is indeed short—Mizoram is still very sparsely populated and farmland is to be had for the asking from village councils. About 20,000 Chin, who are ethnically indistinguishable from the Mizo, are reported to be working as farm hands, maids and workers at the handloom 'factories' of Aizawl producing indigenous wear. Roadside contract labourers are mostly tribals from Bihar and Orissa, and skilled construction workers Bengalis from Assam.

The state government implements, and wants to retain, the Inner Line Permit (ILP) restrictions which have long been a defining feature of travel in the Northeast. Aizawl believes that the ILP helps maintain control over the presence of outside traders and import of labour. However, the ILP is no longer an obstacle for 'genuine' domestic tourists, defined informally as someone who can afford to come in on the thrice-weekly flights from Calcutta. The northeastern states are understandably ambivalent about mass tourism, although there is talk of encouraging 'adventure' tourism (i.e. trekking). Overseas tourists wanting to visit Mizoram still need the separate Restricted Area Permit (RAP) issued by the federal Home Ministry, although the state

can now issue one for 10 days, for Aizawl only, to organised groups of at least four.

One meets the occasional individual tourist such as the American-Israeli writer doing a story on the large number of Mizos (at least 10,000) who claim that they are one of the 12 lost tribes of Israel that headed east in AD 70. The claim is based on a traditional Mizo chant that refers to "We, the children of Menasseh" (also the name of one of the tribes) and a number of funerary, marriage, and other practices referred to in the Old Testament which resemble Mizo practices. I asked the writer what he made of the phenomenon, and although he said he was keeping an open mind, he thought it might be a case of "mass self-delusion". As a savvy young Mizo visiting from New York told me, "We are all Jews. It's just that we don't know it." Some Mizos on tourist visas to Israel do manage to get Israeli citizenship, but only after getting officially converted, mostly by Rabbi Avichail. He heads Amishav, an organisation that specialises in tracing the lost tribes.

Bangladesh and Burma

I also ran into a 30-person delegation from the Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, whose members sounded very enthusiastic about trading directly with Mizoram along the Karnaphuli river that flows down to Chittagong (through the reservoir of the Kaptai dam in the CHT). Setting up the trade route would require little investment, in the form of some motorised barges, and would save about 300 km of road travel by way of Assam. Bangladesh obviously sees a market for itself in the Northeast, and in Mizoram they recognise a stable state to form the commercial beachhead. From Mizoram, they would import bamboo, ginger and other spices. The Mizos, for their part, point out that the price of ginger rises from INR 3 in Mizoram to INR 18 by the time it reaches Silchar in Assam for export to Bangladesh. They blame the middlemen, and feel their state economy could do much better if they could export directly.

Trade with Burma is 'informal' but very significant—an estimated INR 5 billion a year. This trade is also very much visible, as you constantly pass heavily-laden trucks groaning up the hill from the border river that runs fast and clear in a beautiful valley near Champhai. The trucks carry consumer durables, many of them from China and Thailand, as well as used diesel engines, and rice. Most Mizo homes have TV sets and other gadgets that have come through Burma.

Going the other way across the frontier from India are pharmaceuticals, baby food, cattle penises (headed straight for the Chinese market). The only official crossing for overland trade between Burma and India is between Tamo and Moreh, over in Manipur. There has been talk for years of adding Champhai, by building a bridge over the river, but the Burmese are reported to be undecided on the alignment of the road to Mandalay. Just as likely, they are fearful of democratic influences spreading to the Chin state, as well as making it easier for the separatist Chin National Army to find refuge in Mizoram. (The unstated policy, despite talk of increasing Indo-Burmese cooperation to control insurgency, is to allow the Chins to cross over "as long as they bury their weapons and behave themselves").

While trade with Burma no doubt creates jobs for some porters and truckers, most of the traded goods from either side are of distant origin, with few linkages or advantages to the local economy. Trade with Bangladesh would be of much greater benefit to Mizoram, for the latter would not then feel 'used' merely as an entrepot. Goods would be traded exclusively between the state and Bangladesh.

Spaced out

Like the other northeastern states, Mizoram has a drug problem amongst its youth, but it would be wrong to link this with the Burma trade as in the case with Manipur. While some heroin does come in from across the border, and has led to the spread of AIDS through the use of infected needles, most of the 20,000-odd Mizo addicts inject concentrated doses of prescription drugs available legally. There is some debate as to whether lifting prohibition on narcotic drugs would provide a safer alternative, and the YMA itself no longer espouses prohibition, but part of the explanation for the young Mizos' turn to drugs may lie simply in the almost claustrophobic lack of space for sports and recreational activities in Aizawl, which would provide the young with an alternative to church and funeral-going.

Yet another explanation is one that is provided by Lalfakzuala, the president of the Women's Association. She says that while the Mizos are a virtually classless society, gender relations have a lot of catching up to do. Traditional macho attitudes persist ("a woman is like a bamboo fence, to be changed every year"). The Christian Marriage Act does not apply, for Mizo customary law is protected by the accord. Lalfakzuala feels that the drug problem is partly a consequence of the fact that while a father neglects the kids, the mother does not enjoy enough authority to take his place. Nevertheless, as Rev Thanzauva points out, the church has succeeded in curbing drug use among the better off, a success that he is hopeful will percolate down the class structure.

As with other social challenges that have emerged now that peace is here to stay, Mizoram's civil society is working on the problem of substance abuse. As always, once the political problems are solved, there is the need to deliver income, employment and quality of life. If the state of Mizoram is to stay well ahead of the rest of the country, it is the economy that now needs working on. If that is tackled successfully, Mizoram will be well on its way. ▲

Loss of branding

FOR A long time now, I have been unhappy about the "South Asia" fixation a lot of US-based Indians exhibit. For some reason, these people cannot conceive of anything "Indian"—it has to be "South Asian". I object to this on several grounds: a. loss of branding, b. catering to American prejudice, c. intellectual laziness.

First, the loss of a brand. Many companies have gone to great lengths to ensure that their brands remain viable—and there is tremendous goodwill associated with good brands. Remember the fuss we made over the 'basmati' brand? Nations, too, have capitalised on this. The best example is Japan—once, "Made in Japan" was a guarantee of poor quality; now, it is one of the best guarantees of high quality.

India has tremendous brand value going back millennia. In fact pretty much all of this region used to be called the "Indies": this name was sloppily associated with everything from India to Indonesia. There were many products that came from India: India-rubber, India-ink, etc. India has both a Subcontinent and an ocean named after it. Western media has already started calling it the "South Asian" Subcontinent to appease Pakistanis; perhaps it will become the "South Asian" ocean soon too. Similarly the "Indian elephant" and the "Indian lion" have become the "Asian elephant" and the "Asian lion". Why?

The ocean is interesting—on my trips to Indonesia, I have noticed their maps call it the "Indonesian Ocean"; also at one point a Chinese official fumed that just because the ocean is called the Indian Ocean, it doesn't belong to India. I laughed at this, because China believes that the South China Sea belongs to it—after all, it is named after China!

If there were a strong SAARC trading zone, it might make sense to give more credence to the "South Asia" moniker. After all, the ASEAN grouping has helped the smaller Southeast Asian nations to gain some visibility through banding together. But it is pretty clear that there will never be a strong SAARC zone because of Pakistan's intransigence. Even if SAARC were to gain prominence, I doubt if anyone will label their products "Made in South Asia". ASEAN nations don't do that—it still bears the brand of the individual country. So, there is not much point in promoting a "South Asia" brand.

There is, in fact, considerable downside to the "South Asia" brand. As we have seen, Clinton recently used the excuse of a "South Asia" trip, rather than an India trip, to include Pakistan in his itinerary—a major snub to India. American strategic (flawed) axioms are the following:

a. "South Asia" is a nuclear flashpoint
b. India and Pakistan are rivals in "South Asia"
c. India is a regional power in "South Asia"; so is Pakistan.

This completely devalues India's stand-alone weight as a nation of significance, whose GDP is in the top 10 in the world even in nominal dollars, and in the top five in the world in purchasing power parity. India is a colossus, a power in all of Asia; India is China's equal and counterweight, not Pakistan's. Pakistan is a tiny country one-seventh the size of India in population and GDP. It is a comparison between an elephant and a rabbit.

Granted, the perception of India is not great, but at least it is seen as a substantial country, albeit beset with problems. What is the world perception (and to some extent the reality) of the other South Asian countries we so eagerly embrace?

a. Pakistan—terrorist state, rogue nation, breeding ground for mercenaries
b. Bangladesh—basket case, but interesting for its newly-found natural gas reserves
c. Sri Lanka—lost paradise, beset with terrorism and separationism
d. Nepal—mystical, good place for 'tuning out'
e. Bhutan—unspoilt Buddhist Shangri-La
f. Maldives—island paradise in danger of being submerged by global warming

So exactly what does India get by being lumped in with this crew? Nothing. On the other hand, they all gain from the reflected glory of India. It would make sense for them to cosy up to India to gain this recognition. This is exactly what happens in regards to the Canadians—have you noticed how they always say, plaintively and diffidently, "North America", not "America", to include themselves as well? Americans don't say "North America". Unfortunately, 'progressive' Indians delight in talking about "South Asia" instead of India. Brand dilution, indeed.

The South-Asia-wallahs are happy to pile on to good things done by Indians. But when something bad happens to Indians in America, they beat a hasty retreat. Reddy Bali Lakireddy is not "South-Asian-American"—he's "Indian-American". The H1-B guys are "Indian programmers", not "South Asian programmers". Why this inconsistency? Fine fair weather friends they are, as suspected.

Look around at others in Asia—even though Americans generally think "Asian" means "yellow person", neither China nor Japan nor Korea has submerged its identify under a generic "East Asian" label. They remain nations in their own right.

The second reason for the preponderance of the term "South Asia" may well be a catering to American prejudice. I thought "South Asia" might be an invention of the Americans, but my erudite librarian friend Reeta Sinha found a reference that indicated this usage in an Australian journal in the 1850s or so. But I think it is the Americans who use this term the most. Americans have expropriated the word "Indian" to mean Native American. Look at the irony of this—a foolish Italian navigator, Cristoforo Columbo, arrives in the Americas, and thinks he has reached India! And therefore he names these people Indians. This leads to the imperialistic Americans usurping the name of a civilisation that has existed for thousands of years, and attributing it to their aboriginals!

I think Indians need to fight to get the name "In-

dian" back to mean "native of India". Of all the major US newspapers, only one so far as I know has decided to drop the use of the term "Indian" to mean "native American"—this is the *Los Angeles Times*. I think we need to pressure the media, and the US government, to stop using names like the "Bureau of Indian Affairs"—even the native Americans would prefer other names like Amerindians to describe them.

This linguistic imperialism is no more acceptable than the deplorable use of the racial term "coloured" versus "white"—as though "white" people were normal, and all others were an unfortunate aberration. In point of fact, "white" people are actually "pink", so they too are "coloured". Much better to use "non-white"; or for that matter "non-brown", depending on one's point of view.

You will also notice how American scholars use the word "Hindu" to denote ancient Indians. For instance, they will say "Hindu astronomers" when they mean Indian astronomers. The 'progressive', 'secular' people should object violently to this. The ancients were not all Hindus, many were Buddhist, Jain, etc. Here, at last, is something the 'progressive' 'seculars' and I can agree on: the naming of ancient Indians as Indians, not Hindus.

I mean, let us turn this around and refer to Americans consistently as "Yankees". This is in fact how a lot of Latin Americans refer to them. Do you think Americans will like this? Of course not. It is not appropriate for anybody to randomly assign names to another nation. It's nomenclature imperialism, just as the British mangled place names in India; only this is worse. So why should Indians cater to American prejudice? We can't let our very name be taken away; we have enough of a problem with self image (vaastuhara, we are) already.

Furthermore, there are these other horrible terms Americans use—"East Indian" and "Asian Indian". East Indian, like West Indian? And what are the East Indies? Indonesia, not India. I abhor the term East Indian, as it is a meaningless neologism. Asian Indian is a little more sensible, but why put in that qualification? Indian = native of India. That reminds me, the 2000 census of America has a new category, "Asian Indian". Are the non-Indian "South Asians" going to choose this category? Not likely.

The third reason to oppose "South Asia" is the presumption of commonality—an intellectual laziness if you will. There are all these mailing lists, South Asian Journalists Association, South Asian Literature, South Asian Women's Net, etc. Why couldn't these be "Indian" this or that? Because, they say, it will encourage participation by the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, etc.

This may be true, but that should be the concern of the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, etc. Indians are bending over backwards to create a comfortable environment for these other people. Why, I don't know. Why can't they have their own Pakistani Literature (such as its newsgroup? We are not bridging the real gap between Indians and Pakistanis by patronising them on some email alias.

This is a vacuous assumption made by 'progressive' Diaspora Indians, the Non-Resident Indians. The creators of all these mailing lists are, I suspect, labouring under the misconception that by their woolly acts of friendship they are making a difference. Hardly. Unilateral acts of kindness and magnanimity are of not much use if the recipients are not grateful. Remember the old Gujral Doctrine?

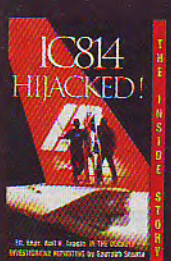
And then there is an assumption of some common culture. For instance, I look at the Pakistanis I have come across on the Net. I have absolutely nothing in common with them. There is nothing that makes me feel kinship with them, apart from the small matter of their sitting on the sites of the Indus-Sarasvati civilisation of my ancestors. But the Urdu-poetry-reciting Gujral-clone people, refugees from the Punjab, do go into paroxysms of wah-wah-ing. I am left cold by all this.

What exactly does the average Indian have in common with a Pakistani or a Bangladeshi or a Nepali or a Maldivian? Very little. I think we need to figure out what the Gangetic plains person has in common with the hill people of the Northeast—rather than trying to appease a bunch of foreigners. Especially Pakistan and Bangladesh—they split off from India in 1947. Let them eat cake now.

There is an inclusivist streak among Indians—I call this a wool-gathering lack of clarity. That's what is on display here. However, when Pakistan's entire raison d'etre is implacable hatred for India, it becomes inappropriate to 'include' them. "South Asia" is an illusion, other than as a trading forum. If at some point in the future, Pakistanis can get over their congenital hatred of "vegetarian Hindus" then maybe we can talk about South Asia. As of now, it makes much more sense to push the "Indian" brand forward. We lose by pushing "South Asia".

FROM "WHY I AM NOT A SOUTH ASIAN" BY RAJEEV SRINIVASAN IN <WWW.REDIFF.COM>

A survivor's story as instant history



IC814 Hijacked!
by Flt. Engr. Anil K. Jaggia and Saurabh Shukla
Lotus Books (Roli Books), 2000
ISBN 81 7436 109 x

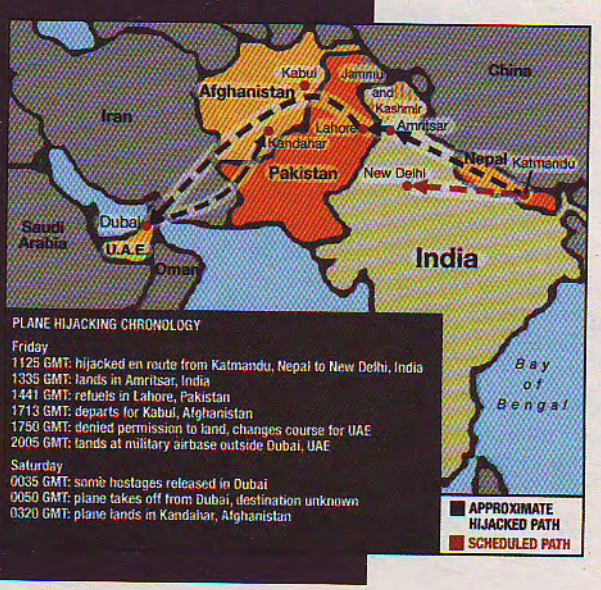
reviewed by **C. K. Lal**

IC-814 had many firsts to its credit. It was the first international flight to have been hijacked in over half a century of civil aviation history in Nepal (there was a hijacking of a small domestic aircraft in the Panchayat period). The taking of the Indian airlines Kathmandu-Delhi flight also became the first incident of its kind in the history of international aviation which led to the suspension of all flights by a commercial airline to the 'culpable' country.

IC-814's was also the first made-for-the-media hijack drama of the Subcontinent, and it was played long and loud—with many take offs and landings and then a lonely tarmac in Kandahar—much to the delight of the Indian satellite channels. Indeed, the purveyors of satellite media turned the ordeal into a commercial event akin to an extended Indo-Pakistan test series, and Zee News in particular transformed it into a soap opera. Even traditional media—leaflets and wall-posters—were brought into action to berate the country where the IC 814 originated.

With so many firsts to its credit, IC-814 badly deserved a book. And a chronicler to turn the eight-day drama into instant-history. It has found one in the twosome of Flight Engineer Anil K. Jaggia and self-professed 'investigative reporter' Saurabh Shukla.

The presentation begins promisingly enough, giving the inside view of the aircraft that was hijacked while all of us were watching it on TV from the outside. The first chapter opens with dramatic dialogue, and one settles down to read the book with healthy anticipation. But it does not take long to realise that this is no 'inside story'. The book is merely the ramblings of someone who happened to be inside. Investigative journalist Saurabh Shukla's academic achievements as presented in the dust jacket may be impressive, but it is difficult to trace their imprint in the text. In this collation of published newspaper reports, there is very little evidence of any investigative reporting, informed analyses or creative presentation.



The book ends up as nothing more than a racy mix of selective memory and regurgitated media reports. Of the two authors, the failure of the reporter is as eloquent as the success of the raconteur. The flight engineer's recollections of events at Raja Sansi Airport of Amritsar help put the blame for the extended nature of the hijack drama squarely on the shoulders of those at the helms of air-security in New Delhi. Unless Jaggia's experiences are grossly exaggerated, it appears that the Crisis Management Group (CMG) of the Indian government is an elephant that takes its own time to stand up, and the tail of the pachyderm—the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)—is incapable of flicking even a fly off its body.

Despite enough hints from American intelligence about something being afoot as the millennium turned, the Indian establishment seems to have failed to warn the airport security at Kathmandu, through the usual channels of course. Shukla, the reporter, should have raked the muck on those who were apparently sleeping on their jobs, or perhaps gambling at the local casino in Kathmandu, but he chooses to rely on the official explanations instead. As yet again proven by Shukla's lack of initiative-taking, the investigations by unprofessional media hacks in Delhi, when it comes to national security and foreign policy, stops at the doormat of South Block.

It still rankles Kathmandu's analysts that the whole hijacking incident was 'hijacked' by a commercial news-channel ('Z') recklessly chasing viewership to surge ahead of its competition ('Star'). By constantly airing the agonies of grieving relatives, it virtually closed the

options available to the government negotiators. The authors don't touch this can of worms either, although they do concede that even the CMG was relying on media reports rather than its own sources for up-to-date information on the hijacked flight.

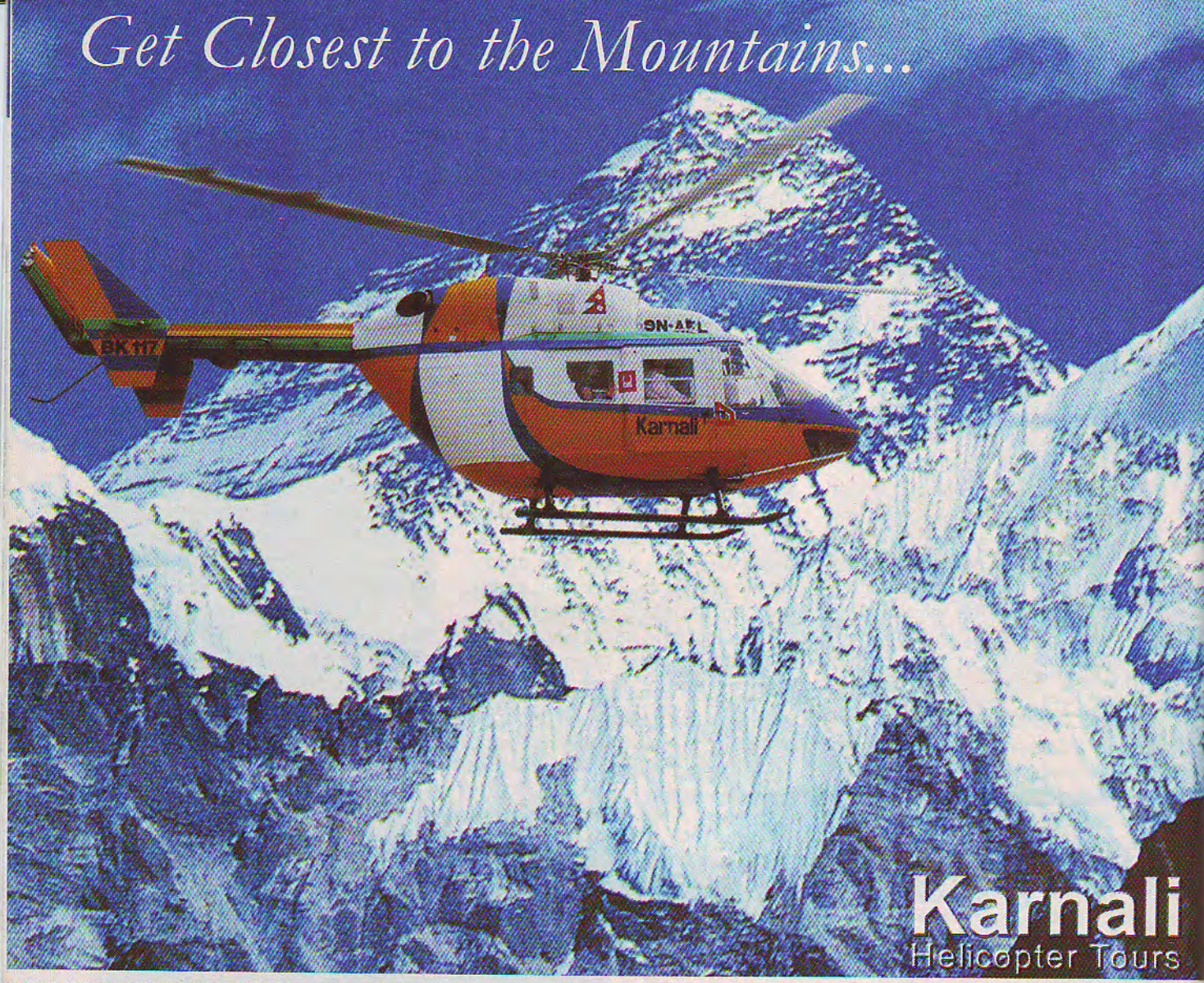
In an environment of increasingly insecure air travel, the question as to why "Indian Airlines has the dubious distinction of having had the most hijackings of its aircrafts in the world" does indeed cry for attention. Of course, the authors do not even come close to attempting an answer. The fact is that India is a large country, so the law of probabilities alone indicates more hijackings. Also, India is a country with numerous dissatisfied communities, among whom some misguided 'youths' are bound to at some point or the other think of a dramatic and media-attracting hijack.

It is only in the final chapter that *IC-614: Hijacked!* even attempts to dissect the 'Blunders Galore': "The IC-814 hijack... points to the need of re-examining the entire contingency plan [of the government] to avoid a bungle as costly as Amritsar that proved to be the turning point in the hijacking of the aircraft." But it is too much to expect analysis beyond this.

This book suffers from all the pitfalls of producing instant history, published as it was in a rush before the public memory of the hijack faded. While there is some description of the mood of the hostage-passengers inside that unfortunate Airbus fuselage, and of the tactics of the hijackers, there is minimal background information about the hijackers, their mission, or the significance of their demands. While it does attempt to explain the government's inaction, the authors do not seek to explain why the hijackers did what they did. There is no speculation about the impact the incident may have on the relationship between the countries involved—the relations with a widely reviled (in India) Nepal, or a Taliban Afghanistan with which New Delhi was forced into an embrace on the Kandahar tarmac.

The best way to tackle this book is to take it as drama. At that level, it is quite readable, with its simple language and dynamic presentation. This is a book of the television age for South Asia, pre-digested, which neither fires the imagination nor inspires contemplation. Shukla and Jaggia have produced a book that is the perfect reading for an airplane flight, hopefully one that will not be skyjacked. ▲

Get Closest to the Mountains...



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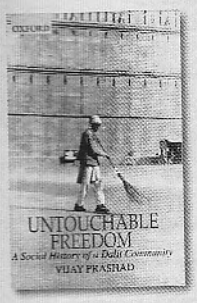
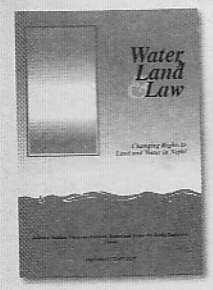


Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community

by Vijay Prashad
Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000
pp xx+176
ISBN 019565075
INR 395

Delhi's citizens revile the sanitation workers who clean their city, but they also rely on them. For a pittance, and without much technological support, these workers keep the city as clean as possible. The book traces the history of these Dalit workers—from the 1860s to the present. It offers a view of the work process that entraps these Dalits into the sanitation industry, although most worked as agricultural labour prior to the 20th century.



Water, Land & Law: Changing Rights to Land and Water in Nepal

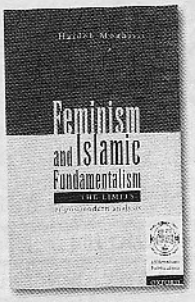
Edited by Rajendra Pradhan, Franz von Benda-Beckmann, Keebet von Benda-Beckmann
Legal Research and Development/ Wageningen Agricultural University/Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 2000
pp ix+278
ISBN 99933 16 01 6
Price not mentioned

The papers collected in the volume explore the changes in rights to water and land in Nepal; they deal with historical processes of shifts in power within irrigation systems and within the wider social, economic and political contexts. In particular, they focus on the role of law in the plural legal settings typical for small-scale irrigation in Nepal, in which customary law, the law of the state in its various historical manifestations, and religious law are intermingled. Many of the papers specifically deal with conflicts and conflict management at different levels of social and hydrological organisations: within the household, between users of an irrigation system and between systems.

Ten Week War in Kargil

Edited by Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Shahid Fiaz
South Asia Forum for Human Rights, Kathmandu, 2000
pp 116
Price not mentioned

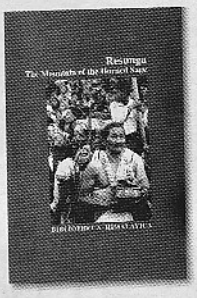
The publication, based on a selection of press reports published in Indian and Pakistani newspapers about the 10-week war in Kargil, shows how the states were able to entrap the mass media in the insidious game of patriotism. The uncritical acceptance of the official versions of the 'truth' by the media fed into the stereotype of the 'enemy' image. The selection of excerpts from the news files aims at presenting the myriad and often contradictory experience of the Kargil conflict; the selection has been informed by a conscious choice of identifying some of the major trends in reportage and commentary in both countries, with an eye to reflecting both the dominant discourse and the more nomadic narratives of the conflict.



Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis

by Haideh Moghissi
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1999
pp ix+166
ISBN 0 19 579369 2
Price not mentioned

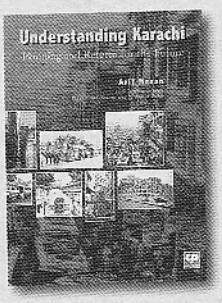
The work is a controversial intervention into the debate on post-modernism and feminism, and looks at what happens when these modes of analysis are jointly employed to illuminate the sexual politics of Islam. The author goes on to describe the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the West's response towards it. She argues that, regardless of the sophisticated argument of postmodernists and their suspicion of power, as an intellectual and political movement, postmodernism has put itself in the service of power and the status quo.



Resunga: The Mountain of the Horned Sage

(Bibliotheca Himalayica-Series III, Vol.17)
Edited by Philippe Ramirez
Himal Books, Kathmandu, 2000
pp x+304
ISBN 99933 13 041 (hardback)
NPR 600

The result of a pluridisciplinary research conducted by a French team from 1985 to 1993, in the Nepali districts of Gulmi and Argha-Khanci. It conveys the social and ecological complexity of the area, which was once six Hindu principalities before being annexed into the kingdom of Nepal in 1786. The studies presented underline the capacity of Nepali peasants to adapt and react to the changes imposed on them both by their natural environment and the global society. One of the noticeable features of these two districts is the numerical, cultural and political dominance of the Bahun-Chetri and their associated castes. These castes went on to mingle with another cultural stock represented mainly by Magar, who then were "Nepalised" leading to the loss of their language.



Understanding Karachi: Planning and Reform for the Future

by Arif Hasan
City Press, Karachi, 1999
pp 171
ISBN 969 8380 28 0
PNR 295

A detailed study of Karachi, Pakistan's only port, by an architect, basing it on over 30 years of research and practical work. The author gives the background to Karachi's present situation and describes the actors and factors—and their relationship to each other—that are determining the direction and nature of Karachi's development and hence shaping its social and physical environment. He also proposes practical solutions to the city's problems for the creation of a new and better system of governance.

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Seed Dispersal Patterns of the Dipterocarps of Sri Lanka

- short fiction by Neil Fernandopulle

SEED DISPERSAL Patterns of the Dipterocarps of Sri Lanka—this is the title of my research proposal.

A fruit with two wings—that's what the word means—any botanist would know that. "It's the calyces that become the wings. There are five but only two have become wings." I showed Christy the three undeveloped auricular projections on the brownish red fruit I picked up from the ground. "In some species, there are three wings; some have just one, some don't have any. But they are all Dipterocarps."

The wings had veins, like the wings of an overgrown cockroach. Christy was looking down very intently. I held the dry fruit in the palm of my hand. "These socks," she said still looking down and at the same time turning her foot at different angles. "The leeches don't go through them?"

"No," I said, looking up for the source of the fruit. It was a Dipterocarpus zeylanicus. Its crown was in the canopy; its girth was about my arm span, about one and a half metres, and its height on visual estimation, about 90 feet.

"Aren't you wearing one?" Bob asked pointing to my feet with a large shining machete.

"No," I smiled, after having quickly recovered from the shock of seeing the evil-looking silver blade. Bob looked like Neil Armstrong on the moon. Well, at least that is the first thought that came to my mind at the sight of him and all his gear.

"That's crazy," Bob shook his head and walked away, amazed, perhaps indifferent. The white leech-proof socks glared against his brownish-greenish, military-looking outfit.

I never wear shoes in the forest. It's just a habit. Well, not in the rainforest at least, because there are hardly any thorns and prickles on the ground. Instead, the thick carpet of decaying leaves feels like a cool, soft sponge.

"But the leeches will get at your feet," Christy tried to persuade me. After all, they had heard the most terrible things about leeches. "It has been found that leeches transmit diseases."

I smiled. "I'll put them on, if there are leeches." I patted the bag containing my shoes that hung from my shoulder. I can't afford to let them think I'm off-beat or a little eccentric.

It isn't easy to describe the feeling of bare feet on the soft, moist humus of the rainforest. Trying to describe it won't do any good to my prospects of getting my research proposal approved at Cambridge.

"We haven't even gone into the forest yet," I half laughed, hoping to lighten the mood. "Maybe the leeches have all gone away."

I told the tracker to lead the way. Our tracker was from the village on the fringes of the reserve forest. He was about my age, but had a wife and two children. Nobody asked him whether he needed leech-proof socks.

He wore a pair of blue rubber slippers and beach shorts with the word TITANIC printed on the broad hem on both legs.

Bob followed him, slashing anything that lay even an arm's length away from the path. The sharp edge of the new machete made clean cuts even of the woody Lantanas and Clidemias, and a pearly white latex exuded from the cut ends of the Macaranga saplings.

Christy walked ahead of me. I can see a bob of hair dangling through the opening over the strap at the back of her baseball cap. Her hair is brown, or is it blond? I could never really tell the difference. I haven't seen many of either anyway. I tried to see what colour Bob's hair was, but his cap was turned around.

"Lion king...isn't it strange?" Christy mused as she strode on, her gaze keenly fixed on the gravel path for leeches. " I was reading that there never was a lion or a king here. But it's called Sinharaja, the lion king. The forest of the lion king." She took a large sweeping look at the greenery above, almost thrilled at the sound of her own words, at the enigma of their meaning, the dual enigma of being some foreign language and at the same time meaningless.

"Sounds like a Walt Disney sequel," Bob added between two slashes of his machete. Christy laughed, and I laughed because it reminded me of that warthog and the little lizard-like creature in the movie. Hakuna matata....I wanted to say it out aloud. Hakuna matata! But I didn't.

The path narrowed and began to climb ruggedly. The vegetation changed from Osbekias and Bracken ferns to the medium-height forest fringe species. The undergrowth began to thin out, and the path turned sharply into a winding passage between the tree trunks.

The rainforest is a living creature, breathing a humid air, exuding its own leafy, earthy smells. Its own milky saps, heavy with the wetness of a never-ending season of rains, filled the air with a moist sensation of vitality, of fecundity. The innumerable moving things, from the unseen birds on the distant treetops to the hidden insects beneath the fallen leaves, all passionately asserted their presence with sounds.

"There never was a lion," I said, for some reason feeling that I had carried a vacuum with me up the slope. "It's a mythical lion. A mythical ancestor." "And what about the king?" Bob asked laughingly. "The lion is the king of the forest, even if he is a myth." I said, though it didn't seem to make much sense. But before I could rethink it, our tracker picked up a little greenish- yellow fruit from the ground. "Shorea," he said, pointing to the flecks of light in the canopy. But Christy was not looking up. She was looking hard at the tracker. "Yes, he knows a few botanical names," I put in quickly. "Must have caught it from some visiting professor." I riveted Christy's attention to me by showing her the small single-winged fruit. It's a Shorea stipularis. There are six endemic species of Shorea. Some of them are very large, mostly emergents. They can be identified by the leaves and the fruits."

Christy was looking down very keenly. "There!" She gasped, pointing to her shoe. She wore a pair of soft white Reeboks, unlike Bob's heavy Caterpillar boots. A small brown leech was shinning up her shoe, bending and stretching like a hysterical rubber band, desperately seeking to plant itself on Christy's pale skin. I used a dry leaf to sweep it off her shoe. By that time there were three more on my feet, which I flicked off with my fingers. Our tracker tells me to keep walking, to avoid the leeches. He tells me there is a small stream, where we can rest, without having to worry about the leeches.

As we reached the stream, Bob began to look back at me with a curious expression of panic and suspicion. He sat on a rock and removed one of his boots quickly. "Damn." He cursed at the sight of blood oozing out of the skin on his ankle. "Where is it?" He asked angrily, turning his socks in every direction. "It has crept out after having its fill," I said. Then I had to explain to him that the blood would continue to flow for some time, but there was no reason to panic. "But what do you do usually when this happens?" he asked. But our tracker was ready with the remedy. He had burnt a piece of paper on the dry surface of a rock, and had collected the ash in his hand. He put the ash on Bob's wound before either Bob could protest or I could explain. The ash absorbed the blood, and Bob looked at me helplessly. "Isn't there anything else we can do?"

"We have to wait till the bleeding stops," I said and walked into the shallow water. I sat on a mossy rock and let the water run over my feet.

Christy has settled down on another rock, and looked around at the vegetation. The best view of the forest is from the stream. It's a cross-sectional view, the whole aspect of the large trees can be seen from here, the canopy trees, the emergents, and at the same time the numerous levels of undergrowth: the little saplings, the half-sized juveniles of large trees, unable to grow any taller for the lack of sunlight, but waiting patiently for years till one of the large trees falls, and makes space.

"You know, when the British invaded the Kandyan kingdom, they found that the Kandyan king had all the leeches defending his territory," I said, above the sound of the water gurgling below the rocks. "The British feared the leeches more than they feared the Sinhalese soldiers." My audience had other occupations, perhaps caught up in the intricacy of trees that arched above the stream, or perhaps awed by the magnificence of the emergents. These tall, lean trees broke through the canopy of the forest, and stood above everything else, like the aristocratic heroes of a tragedy. The very height of the canopy only helps to accentuate the even greater height of the emergents that, like some Maname or Singhebahu, stood above all the other players.

"There are more plant species here in this forest than in all of England," Christy opened herself to her surroundings. "Actually, there are more species here than in all of North America." Her words were followed by the hum of the stream and the intermittent scraping-screaming of the insects in the trees.

"I've never been to America," I heard myself say. And the silence among us was again imbued with the primeval music of the unseen insects.

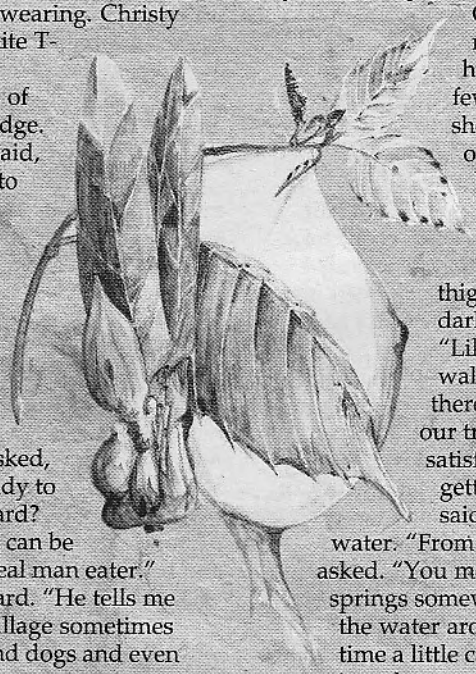
Bob had put his boot on. He responded to all this by producing his camera.

I know that Christy is an Ecologist, but I don't know what Bob is, or why he is with us. He is dressed up to explore. There are pockets and loops and penknives hanging out of everything that he is wearing. Christy wore only denim jeans and a thin white T-shirt through which I could see the outline of her bra against the redness of her heated body. She is from Cambridge.

"I haven't seen any snakes," Bob said, looking around, as though expecting to see them at his feet, in the undergrowth, on the tree trunks, in the canopy. "Do you have poisonous snakes here, vipers, cobras and that...that deadly chap," he clicks his fingers, "the krait, is it?"

"Snakes see you long before you see them," I said. I don't think he quite understood.

"What about the leopard?" Bob asked, very excited, clutching his camera, ready to aim and shoot. "You've seen the leopard? I've heard that the Sri Lankan leopard can be as big as the Bengali tiger. And it's a real man eater."



ANNOJE PRASAD

I asked our tracker about the leopard. "He tells me that the leopard comes down to the village sometimes and kills and carries away their cats and dogs and even their chickens."

Bob deflated angrily. "Don't you see any animals?" he asked after he spent some time looking around the vast embodiment of life that surrounded him. "No," I said pallidly. "They have too many places to hide." Christy giggled. It was the giggle of an Ecologist. Maybe she understood what I said even more than I did. "What are you expecting, elephants?" She laughed. Bob laughed too. The tracker then told me that he had seen animals so big that they could eat a cow in a single mouthful. And I translated it squarely to Christy and Bob, who stared back at me. "What?" Bob thundered. "Jurassic Park," the tracker smiled slyly, and showed me two fingers. "Jurassic Park II," I verified, much to Bob's annoyance. "How the hell did he see that, living in a place like this?" He threw his hand out at the forest.

It was time to continue. There was an initial mapping out of the areas where Christy would work the next several days. We marked the trees with yellow paint. I noticed Bob's interest in the forest was beginning to wane. Taking girth measurements of trees was not his idea of a trip to the rainforest. He was always looking around hoping, expecting to see something he knew, expecting something to leap on him from the branches or wrap around him from the lianas. Maybe someone would shoot a poison dart at him, curare! The rainforest! No 30-foot snakes, no faces and bodies with colourful war paint, no bare-breasted women frolicking by the water, waiting to carry him away as their god and nurse his wounds with potions made by the old medicine man.

He was glad to turn and head back to camp by mid-afternoon. Our camp is a small wood cabin in the forest reserve itself.

The first thing to do when one reaches camp at the end of the day is to remove one's clothes and check for leeches that may have got through despite all the precautions. As I removed my clothes and changed into my swimming trunks by the stream near our cabin, Christy called out to me. She had removed her jeans and her T-shirt hung loosely over her hips. I stopped a few feet away. "Look at this." She showed me her denims, turned inside out. There was a large, thick patch of blood. "A leech has got in," I said.

"Where?" she asked looking down her long white legs.

"There," I pointed to the back of her thigh, just above the knee. There was a dark maroon patch on her bleached skin. "Like you've been shot," I laughed, and walked back to the stream. Bob was there on the shore, still in full regalia, and our tracker was basking in the water like a satisfied otter. "Are you thinking of getting in there?" Bob asked. "Yes," I said, walking into the cool, running water. "From where does this water come?" he asked. "You mean the source, I don't know, from springs somewhere in the forest," I said, splashing the water around. "It is clean?" Bob asked, this time a little cautiously. "No," I said and dipped into the water. He had to wait till I rubbed off the water from my eyes and nose before I spoke again. "It starts somewhere in the forest, where there are no people. So it should be quite alright." "But there is a possibility of contracting Schiztosomiasis," he said after some thought. "What?" "Schiztosomiasis, from the water." I dipped into the water, and held my breath. I could hear deep rumblings as if I had pressed my ear on the belly of the Earth and listened with my eyes closed. Schiztosomiasis—the word hissed like a snake. Nowhere in the depths of the water could you hear that hiss. There was no room, no place here for anything that made that sound. I threw my head above the surface and spat out the water as I said the word under my breath. Schiztosomiasis.

"Is it cold?" Christy's voice broke through the tumult of sounds. I didn't answer. She stood there a few feet away from the water, in a swimsuit of different colours—bright luminous greens and yellows and pinks, and the rest of her was like snow. The curves and edges of her body stood out like someone had cut the scenery with a pair of scissors, puncturing the continuum of time and space with her colours, her shape, her very presence in this place. I didn't answer.

She walked into the stream, thrilled by the cool forceful prying of the water into her body. She giggled shrilly a few times and then dipped in.

Bob stood where he was, on the shore, in all his heavy, grimy clothes—a whole day's sweat and mud clinging onto him.

Later I sit on one of a circle of wooden benches in the small clearing in front of our cabin, and I watch darkness creep in between the multitude of sinews, melting them into one black screen around me. Our tracker has gone home, and will be back tomorrow. Christy is in brown T-shirt and gray shorts, and sits on the bench facing me. She wears a scent that pricks at the warm air, filled with the harshness of insects in their intermittent crescendo and the rasping of frogs. "Do you come here often?" Christy asked me after some time. I could only faintly see her face. "No," I said, looking away, "only three times before." I looked away into the blackness that was around us. "Why do you want to work here?" I looked at her, but I don't know whether she smiled at that or not. "Because I am an Ecologist," she affirmed, and then let the forest take over the silence between us.

An Ecologist, it is such a definitive word, it is so full, so real. I tried to give myself a definition like that. What am I then? Can I ever define myself like that in a single word? I dressed myself with several words, phrases. But they fitted like a coat and tie on a monsoonal afternoon.

"But why here, in this country, of all places?" I asked. In the blackness around me I could see Christy coming out of her little London flat, into the cool breeze of a sunny London morning, and walking gingerly on the cobblestones and the stone steps that led to the underground station.

"Because I'm interested in the rainforest," she said. I could see her walking down the clean, glaze-floored corridors leading to her office room.

"Why?" I asked. I could see her turn around, her heels stomping to a halt in the middle of the corridor. "Why?" She is astonished. "Look at all this!" She convulses her hands outwardly, expansively. "All this needs to be protected."

I can see her behind her desk in a cosy office overlooking a finely trimmed lawn. The air in the room comes through little aluminum vents near the ceiling.

"To protect it, you need to know it, you need to study it," she stated with catechistic confidence. "But why do you want to protect our forests? Our forests." She stood up behind her desk and walked up to her window and looked out. She drew in a deep breath, her shoulders expanding, her chest moving up as if she has taken a whole lungful of a fine after-dinner cigar. "Because it must be done. And we must do it because no one else can. It is our duty, our responsibility."

I tried to make out what she meant by 'we'. The smell of cigarette smoke broke into my thoughts and I looked around. Christy slapped her fingers on her thigh. "Mosquitoes." "Leeches in the daytime, mosquitoes in the evening, isn't it lovely?" Bob spoke amid a cloud of smoke that came out of his mouth and nostrils. "Like a beer?" He asked me pointing to what looked like a can, which stood beside him on the other bench. "It isn't cool though." "No," I said, after deciding that I wouldn't drink tepid beer. Bob stretched out on the bench, and breathed out, audibly. He seemed relaxed at last.

We talked desultorily, allowing the frogs and the insects to fill in most of the time. There was language in all that noise. There were words, rhythms that painted the most unbidden images in the mind. I closed my eyes. I wish I could block out the sound as well. I wish I could see the inside of Christy's office again—the white walls, the white sheets of paper on her desk, the gentle breath of air coming in from the aluminum vents. No frogs, no mosquitoes, no leeches, no sweat, no mud. I pressed my eyes shut.

Even as I lay on the thin mattress in one corner of the cabin, I closed my eyes to the darkness—the thick, heavy darkness of the rainforest. But I couldn't block out the sound, the sound of the rexine mattresses being pressed and pushed at the other end of the cabin. I could hear Bob's breath; long nasal hisses. I could hear Christy's short panting exhalation. They whisper, afraid that I would hear. They know I cannot see them, because they cannot see me. I can hear them breathe faster, I can hear Christy whisper desperately, as if her life depended on it. "Up, up," she says between clenched teeth. "Come up."

The words repeat themselves aimlessly in my mind long after they are quiet, long after Bob begins to snore. Come up. Come up.

The next thing I see is Christy standing over me, smiling. She is dressed in a fresh pair of denim jeans and a white T-shirt. "Aren't you getting up? The tracker is here and we are ready, " she giggled.

Today we will mark out the areas that Christy will study. We will choose the different ecological situations in the undisturbed forest. The tracker will show us the way, as soon as I describe the kind of conditions we are looking for.

The tracker went ahead with Bob while Christy and I discussed the ecosystems that we came across. Come up...come up...the words echo beneath everything she says. I look at her face, her eyes, as she talks. I want to see her in her room. I can see the white sheets of paper, the white walls, her white skin.

We mark the greenish grey lichenous tree trunks with thick yellow paint—smooth, wet paint on the roughness of the tree trunks. The paint gains a coarseness, the tree trunk a smoothness. One merges into the other. Christy's desperate whisper is louder in my ears than the screaming of the cicadas. I can see myself in my room in Cambridge— the white walls, the white sheets of paper....

"Oh God," Christy gasps suddenly. She is looking up. "Looks like rain." She said, as if she never expected it to rain in the rainforest. Bob and the tracker are nowhere to be seen, but they are not far away. "You've got an umbrella? I didn't bring mine." She begins to panic. "I've got this," I said and pulled out a sheet of polythene and spread it over my head and my bag. "May I join you?" Christy asked and crept in, under the sheet of plastic. She put her arms around my shoulder in order to get closer, to get more shelter. I held the edge of the sheet of plastic over her, but drops of water fell off the edges onto her head and down her hair onto her face.

Rain falls like mist in the rainforest. No drop of water reaches the ground before hitting something on its way and bursting into a spray of droplets. In the sunlight they look like showers of silver dust.

Christy moved in closer as the rain invaded more of her clothing. Her hair was over my face, my arms around her back. I could feel her breasts against my ribs. Drops of

water fell on the back of her neck and rolled down her smooth skin—her white, pale skin, like the white sheets of papers in her room, the white walls.

Maybe I too would have a room like that when I get to Cambridge—when I become one of them. One of them. I could feel the warmth of her breasts against my chest. Her perfume mixed with the smell of sweat and trees—the leafy smell of bitter saps, the musty heaviness of powdery lichens. Water dripped off the side of her cheek and hung at the end of her loose hairs—droplets, browned by the colour of her hair.

I would be one of them soon. In my own room, overlooking the finely trimmed lawn, breathing in the gently heated air that came down from near the ceiling.

I looked up at the silver sprinklings as they were caught in the flecks of sunlight. The tree under which we stand is a Dipterocarpus zeylanicus, a large emergent; its crown is hardly visible, beyond the canopy, closer to the sky than all those that surround it—the first to catch the sunlight, the first to touch the rain.

Dipteocarpus zeylanicus—I know this one. I know it well or I think I know it. It is an evergreen tree, up to 40 metres tall and 135 centimetres in diameter-at-breast-height with low, rounded buttresses when mature; that's what the book says. But if it didn't have a name, if they hadn't given it a name, would it still be here, in Sinharaja? Would it cease to exist, or would it never have existed
at all?

In shape, I have been told that its crown is hemispherical, tending to remain oblong and monopodial if isolated. Its bark is pale orange-brown, initially smooth, becoming thickly, patchily and irregularly flaky.

The leaves? Ah, yes, the leaves are sub-aggregate, thickly coriaceous, ovate to elliptic, with a broad tapering accumen, and the leaf base is obtuse to subcordate. The flower buds are fusiform, after all, I know my Dipterocarps well enough. That's why they are interested in me at Cambridge. The stamens, there are 15, the style and stylopodium are columnar, pubescent in the basal two-thirds. The calyx tube is subglobose, that means like half a globe, half a ball. I wonder whether the tree knows this. Could it have a different shape, a different height, could it be a different tree if they hadn't described it like this? I suppose the tree would never know.

Its ecology, ah, Christy would like to know that—it is endemic; that means it is found only in Sri Lanka, nowhere else. And in Sri Lanka it's found especially on riverbanks and well-drained alluvium, where it is often gregarious, forming a characteristic forest type. It flowers fairly regularly in February. It's an important timber tree. But it cannot be used for tea boxes because it exudes oil. The heartwood decoction is good for fever. Its oil is used for varnishing and for rheumatism.

That's how it has been described on half a page of a textbook. What was it before that? Before they came and saw it and defined it?

I held Christy closer to me as more rain fell. I looked up at the tree and let the rain beat my face. I had to decide.

I don't know. I don't want to be one of them. I don't want a room with white walls. I don't want to be defined. ▲

CLASSIFIEDS

COLLAGE BY MIKU

The president doesn't write to worms

"Dear Mr. Wickramatunge, I acknowledge your letter dated March 14, 2000, addressed to Her Excellency the President. I wish to inform you that this office forwards correspondence to Her Excellency the President only when it emanates from human beings and not from worms. We have therefore consigned your communication to the rubbish heap..."

Well, well, going by recent examples, that was a rather mild message from the high office of Sri Lanka's presidential secretariat—signed by a Senior Assistant Secretary—to the editor of *Sunday Leader*, a Colombo weekly. Before proceeding further into the whys, let us hear Editor Lasantha Wickramatunge's riposte in his columns. It is nice to know, he said, that although the secretariat does not *forward* correspondence from "worms" to the president, the secretariat itself did, however, correspond with "worms". Wickramatunge hoped that when his weekly published the story, the CID would not be sent to grill a "worm" because, "after all, a worm doesn't talk and is not a 'person' under the law".

The bad blood between the government and the weekly has been making waves since the elections of 1994. The latest exchange of barbs, regaling Sunday readers no end, began when Wickramatunge wrote to President Chandrika Kumaratunga, seeking clarification of her educational qualifications as they appeared in her official biodata.

Interestingly, Editor Wickramatunge was for a brief while the private secretary of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga's mother and prime minister, and had also contested a parliamentary seat on the party ticket. But he now makes no secret of the fact that he isn't a friend of the ruling People's Alliance—a sentiment that is fully reciprocated.

It will come as no surprise, therefore, that Wickramatunge is currently under indictment in the High Court of Colombo on charge of criminally defaming Kumaratunga. The editor, and not merely because he has been addressed as a worm, is only too well aware of the president's vitriolic powers; a whole nation has been seeing and hearing Sri Lanka's Chief Executive on national television lavishing choice epithets on media adversaries, calling them "venomous serpents" and "animals". In her mind, clearly, Lankan wildlife includes the species *Pressus columniticus*.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