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Southasian Kiosk

August 29, 2000

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Political myth-making in postcolonial Assam

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India to start anti-Pakistan global media blitz
 (The News, Lahore)

Bengali, the new backward people
 The middle class, the nearly poor and the very poor-- Bangladeshis choose their migratory destination according to their class status and region of origin (page 1)

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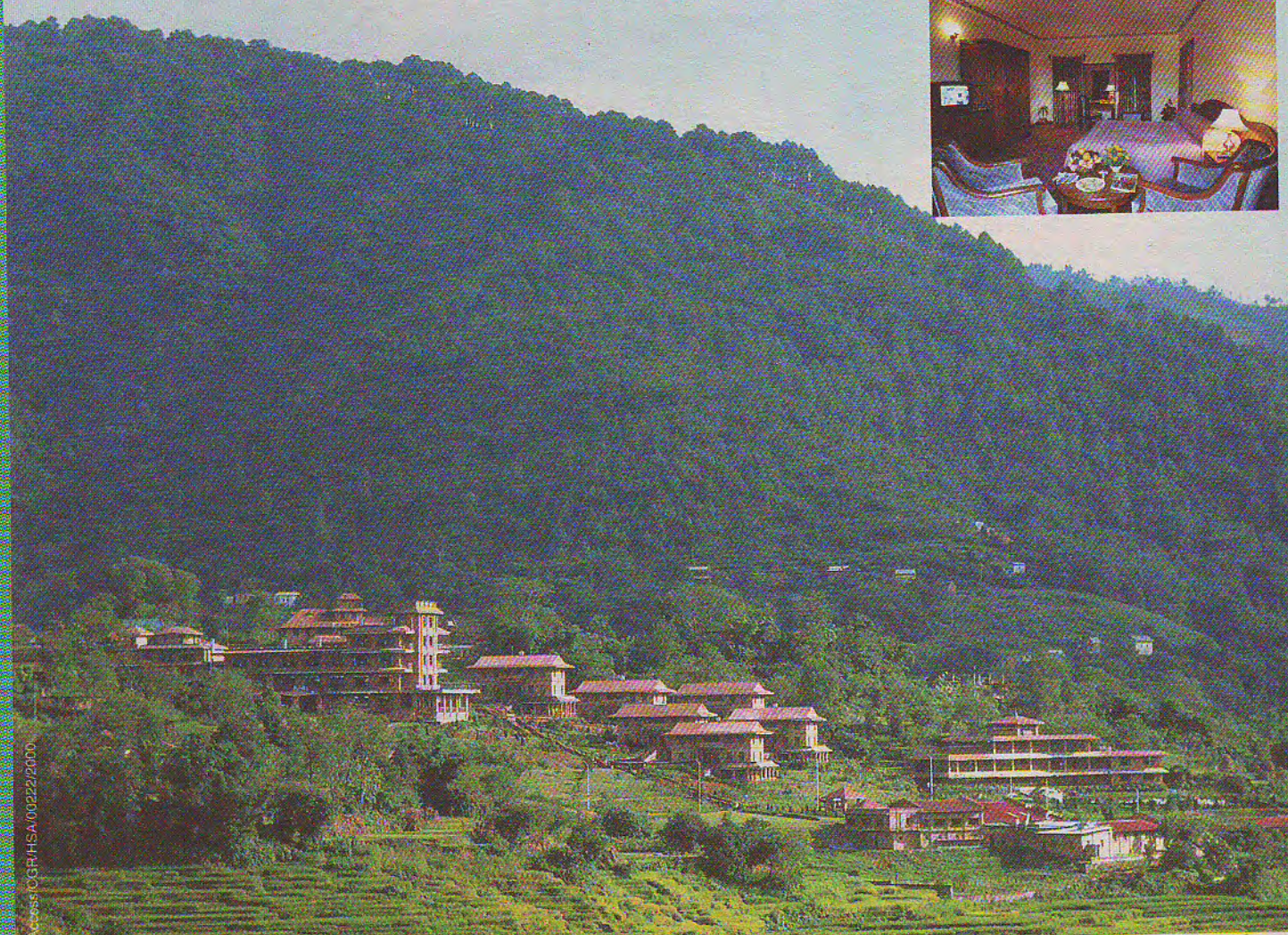
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HIMAL

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Reason over rhetoric

It was most appropriate of Himal to have published an exhaustively researched and brilliantly analysed cover story ("Political myth-making in postcolonial Assam" by Anindita Dasgupta) on the contentious issue of the illegal Bangladeshi migrants in Assam in its August 2000 issue, to coincide with the 15th anniversary of the Assam Accord.

It was all the more appropriate because the failure of the Assam Accord to resolve the issue has provided a certain political class the opportunity to resurrect the same fears which had led to the Assam Movement. Fears, which are imagined, and have to be dispelled by facts and dispassionate arguments to avoid a recurrence of the Movement which had forever tainted the liberal democratic credentials of Assam's polity and created fissures among its communities, are unlikely to disappear for a long time to come.

Reconciliation is difficult because the discourse on the issue from the very beginning has been dominated by a vociferous minority among the ethnic Assamese who would like everyone to believe that the native Assamese is being conclusively marginalised by the illegal Bangladeshi migrant. It has been more than two decades now, and the passion of Assamese chauvinism has certainly dissipated but even today the discourse is dominated by the rhetoric of this very vocal section who do not miss an opportunity at perpetuating the myth of the predominantly Hindu ethnic Assamese being overwhelmed by the Bengali Muslim illegal migrant from Bangladesh.

Throughout the Assam Movement, the 'other' voice, the voice of reason, was ruthlessly subdued if not totally silenced. Those who had the courage to exercise their right of democratic

dissent questioning this rhetoric and condemning the undemocratic methods of the Movement, had to pay the price, sometimes with their lives. My father (every bit an Hindu ethnic Assamese) had all along questioned the legitimacy of this rhetoric and categorically condemned the undemocratic, communal agenda of those who led the Movement, for which throughout those troubled years our family not only had to contend with social boycott but also with the very real prospect of violent retaliation by our own brethren who had branded my father a traitor. We have been among those lucky to have come out of this ordeal unscathed, at least physically, and today stand vindicated. Such intolerance

however, ensured that the liberal Assamese till today remained a silent majority. It is in this context that Anindita Dasgupta's article assumes greater significance.

But above all, the article is appreciated because it still requires a certain amount of courage to be the voice of reason speaking on the issue of the illegal Bangladeshi migrant in Assam. Every such effort is a reassurance that never ever shall an entire community be led astray by the emotive and ahistorical rhetoric of a few.

*Nilim Dutta
Guwahati*

Bhutan in Himal

I have been reading your magazine for quite some time and do find some articles pretty



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

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interesting. What I fail to understand is why do you love to hit on Bhutan so often. I am a subscriber to the *Kuensel*, and have also visited Bhutan numerous times as a tourist and have found it to be a beautiful place almost describing heaven. I have had the opportunity to meet some of the high government officials and have studied this problem Bhutan has been having.

What I fail to understand is now that the problem has died down and most issues resolved with the Bhutan-Nepal talks at a high level, why do you keep bringing it up in your magazine ("Bhutan and the impending gush of ego", August 2000)? My advice is to let sleeping dogs lie or else your magazine may be under a lot of bad impressions from the Western world. We had a meeting yesterday in my company and during tea break, the topic of Bhutan came up as it seems to be doing very well in preserving its culture and tradition—a quality we all admire. The next topic was why on earth is Himal firing on Bhutan for no reason? Clearly, all my friends were of the opinion that Himal is being very biased in concentrating on an issue long dealt with.

There is a saying in Australia, "If a man knocks at your door, you entertain him. If he knocks again, treat him well. If he keeps knocking for no reason, knock him on his head." I hope I got the message through.

"dorren nerrod"

<viewoftheworld2000@hotmail.com>

■ The article "Bhutan And The Impending Gush of Ego" by Vladimir Stehlik, was thought-provoking, although sometimes misleading a reader along the author's biased line of thought. There is a clear faultline in the article objective and indulges in his own biases more than once. And the fact that the magazine is published in Nepal doesn't seem

to help correct the aberration either, as the general attitude of the Nepali press is negative towards Bhutan.

Bhutan is expected to attain Buddhahood, Bhutan is expected to be egoless. The expectations are so high that Bhutan is judged on an altar of an unattainably perfect society, and anything short of that, it is going to burn at the stake. To the disappointment of the writer, well, Bhutan is not a Utopia. But which country is. In spite of little imperfections, Bhutan is a decent and respectable society by any standard—Oriental or Occidental. Stehlik seems to blow out of proportion Bhutan's small imperfections.

The article falls just short of directly accusing Bhutan of using donor agencies for political recognition of Bhutan as a nation. But I am wondering why while analysing donor agencies' presence in Bhutan in the light of political significance, should it have failed to understand the political significance of the national dress? The recent voting of the Bhutanese pavilion as the best out of 47 pavilions in Expo 2000 at Hanover in Germany shows that Bhutan is recognised, more than anything else, for its culture, architecture and dress.

I am hoping that in the future, articles in Himal will be more on substance and less on propaganda and prejudice. Any international magazine worth its salt should do that.

Kelzang Wangchuk
Manila, Philippines

■ For a Bhutanese who must rely solely on the government-controlled media for information, Vladimir Stehlik's dispassionate analysis in "Bhutan and the impending gush of ego" (August

2000) was refreshing, if alarming. Refreshing because I was able to read about the many issues that we tend to studiously ignore, and alarming because the prognosis cannot be similarly wished away.

Stehlik covers a lot of ground but only alludes to what I consider to be the crucial factor in our future, the "paucity of debate". It isn't just on Gross National Happiness that debate is missing in Bhutan (at least on this

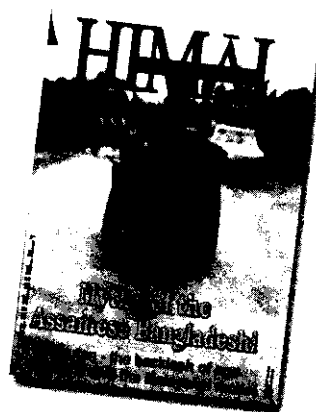
particular topic we have had some very, very unctuous and embarrassingly naïve public 'debates'); there simply are no discussions on any topic that is considered even remotely "sensitive". We are a nation that has taken self-censorship to the

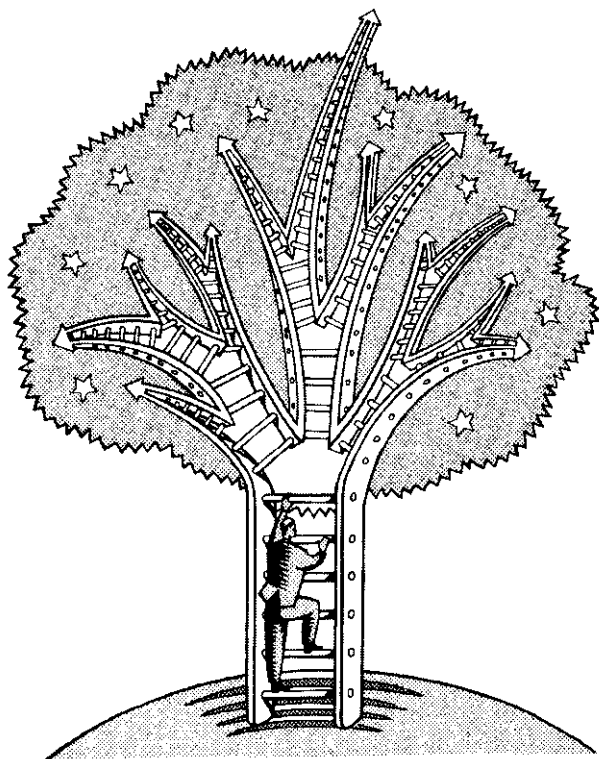
extreme. We neither ask uncomfortable questions nor question questionable decisions.

Stehlik is right when he says we have adjusted to modern ways and at the same time we have not changed. We are still so afraid of the system we cannot even argue about it in public. Of course, we should be proud of our achievements and the rapid strides we have made in such a short span of time. But times have changed. Stubborn refusal to see the value of public discourse can be self-defeating. Even in the 21st century, we are afraid of our own government. The tragedy is all the more great because many expatriates who could rise above our fear of authority, very rapidly have become "Bhutanese" themselves and tend to toe the line.

Sonam T.

(P.S. For all my brave words, it is only thanks to the anonymity of the Internet that I have been able to join this debate.)





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IF INDIA CAN'T, PAKISTAN MIGHT

THE OUTCOME of this one will be worth watching. Will Pakistan come to the Sri Lankan government's aid where India hesitates to tread? That might well happen given that recently, there has been a flurry of visits by senior military officials and diplomats from Colombo to New Delhi and Colombo to Islamabad and vice versa.

There are now strong indications that Sri Lanka is turning to Pakistan for military help against the LTTE after getting a less-than-enthusiastic response from India. The Lahore-based *Friday Times* says in a special report filed by its correspondent who was in Colombo late August, that he has been told by unidentified senior officials of the Sri Lankan Army that it were actually Pakistan Air Force pilots who helped the Sri Lankans neutralise a recent major Tiger offensive that had threatened to undo gains made by the military. Significantly, no official denial has been forthcoming from the Pakistani authorities on this report, thereby giving credence to the fact that the Pakistani army is indeed assisting the Chandrika Kumaratunga government in actual field operations, (which involve potential bodily risks to Pakistani military personnel), and not only in an advisory capacity. There have also been reports that Pakistan has been a regular supplier of small arms and ammunitions to Colombo for several years.

New Delhi, of course, will hardly be pleased that Colombo is looking towards Islamabad for help. When Sri Lankan army chief, Lt Gen Sirilal Weerasooriya, visited Islamabad in July, it was perhaps the strongest confirmation that Pakistan was indeed supplying military support to the strife-torn country.

The army chief was accompanied by Lakshman Jayakody, special envoy of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, and P. Balapatabendi, principal secretary to Kumaratunga. The trio held detailed talks with Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf. Weerasooriya has since retired, but significantly he has been made Colombo's new high commissioner to Islamabad.

Some analysts are of the opinion that Sri Lanka is playing on India's fears, and using

the Pakistan bait to lure India into a more supportive role. "My hunch is that the moment Delhi suspects Islamabad is practically getting into the Sri Lanka crisis, it will react by offering to help out Colombo," says a defence analyst in Islamabad.

Yet, a glance at the Indo-Lanka contacts over the last few months shows that India will find it very difficult to get involved, apart from proffering "humanitarian" assistance in the form of food and medicines, which it has been doing in any case. Besides political considerations (any move against the Tigers may not be acceptable to Tamils in India), New Delhi will be hard pressed to spare soldiers. "The Indian Army is spread out thin fighting insurgencies in Kashmir and the Northeast and guarding the borders post-Kargil. It is in no position to spare any soldiers for Sri Lanka," says a senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Islamabad.

Analysts interpret the recent dash of Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh to Colombo, as a step to preempt Sri Lanka from seeking Pakistan's help in its war against the Tigers. During the visit, Singh announced a USD 100 million credit line to Colombo to purchase food and medicines from India. Sources go so far as to claim that even the recent visit of the US Under Secretary of State, Thomas Pickering to New Delhi, Islamabad and Colombo, was in the context of sending a message to Islamabad that it should stay out of Lanka.

India now finds itself in a Catch-22 situation: if it gets involved, it will mean more pressure on its army, whereas if it declines to help the Lankan government, Colombo will actively seek Islamabad's intervention. General Musharraf was actually reported as "assuring" that Pakistan would "continue to help Sri Lanka in combating terrorism and in finding a lasting solution" to the conflict. "We will continue to support Sri Lanka," he told the Colombo-based *Daily News* newspaper in an interview last month.

The general, however, ruled out any similarity between the Kashmir conflict and the one in Sri Lanka. "You cannot equalise the struggle in Kashmir with that of the LTTE. There is no similarity at all," he said. "In Kashmir you find

India now finds itself in a Catch-22 situation: if it gets involved, it will mean more pressure on its army, whereas if it declines to help the Lankan government, Colombo will actively seek Islamabad's intervention.



Will the Pathan replace the Sardar? IPKF soldiers on their way back, 1991.

a clear dispute within the region, whereas the situation in Sri Lanka is quite different, which is purely an internal conflict. The Kashmir issue is before international fora such as the United Nations and also it has been identified by the international community, but the LTTE has no such international recognition. Even India supported the Sri Lankan military by sending troops where hundreds of Indian soldiers

lost their lives on Lankan soil. We did not go to that extent, but why cannot we support Sri Lanka, another brother nation."

Pakistan's Information and Media Development Minister and Adviser on National Affairs, Javed Jabbar, told the *Daily News* that Islamabad was willing to extend any support to Sri Lanka if asked. "It is purely an internal conflict. But it becomes a regional issue when it affects a member country of our region. We are closely watching the situation and ready to extend any support that Sri Lanka needs," said Minister Jabbar.

While it is somewhat clear that Pakistan wants to help out Sri Lanka, what is not clear is whether it has thought things out and kept the Indian experience in view. When New Delhi sent out its forces—Rajiv Gandhi's ill-fated Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to help the Lankans—it proved to be a disaster. The IPKF failed to quell the Tigers, and the island's Sinhalese majority grew to hate the foreign army trampling around on their soil. The Indians eventually had to withdraw in disgrace.

It took nearly a decade of quiet diplomacy to repair the damage that misadventure did to Indo-Lankan relations. And Gandhi paid the ultimate price: he was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber. Delhi obviously doesn't want a repeat of the IPKF debacle. Pakistan may be all too keen to try and succeed where India didn't. But beware.

—Adnan Rehmat

SRI LANKA

SINHALA TIGERS

SOON AFTER the government withdrew its draft constitution from Parliament on 8 August, the gaunt face of Hedigalle Vimalasara Thero appeared in a rash of posters. He staged a fast-unto-death during the mass protest campaign, which derailed the government's ambitious 17th amendment. The Bill sought to end a costly civil war and guarantee the rights of minority Tamils through a package of devolution.

Printed in Sinhala, the poster hailed the monk as a hero of the Sinhala Buddhist race who prevented the great tragedy that would have befallen on the Sinhala nation had the government pursued the reforms, which also needed two-thirds majority in Parliament to become law.

Saffron-robed men such as Wimalasara epitomise the virulent opposition that is mounting, not only against President Chandrika Kumaratunga's recent efforts to find a political solution for the country's ethnic tangle, but against any such attempt by governments that have been dominated by the southern Sinhalese.

In 1987, when the late president J.R. Jayawardene and Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi signed the Indo-Lanka peace accord to introduce a provincial system of government to end the country's raging ethnic conflict, there were mass protests spearheaded by thousands of Buddhist monks, including leading prelates. An armed rebellion by the revolutionary Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) erupted alongside, crippling the country and killing more than 60,000 people, including a number of Buddhist monks, in the counter-insurgency operations.

The spectre of diehard Sinhala nationalism has reared its head, time to time, during the last five decades, whenever the Sinhalese and the Tamil politicians agreed on some sort of constitutional arrangement to ease the post-Independent ethnic politics of the nation. It reached a crescendo during the 1950s when Tamil politicians began to explicitly reject the unitary state identifying it as the source of their woes, and stepped up a campaign for a federal system of government. Today, the struggle has evolved into a full-scale war, draining nearly SLR 50 billion (USD 1.03 billion) annually. Then the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchu (ITAK) or the Federal Party (FP) argued that the Sinha-

lese and the Tamils had two distinct worlds of culture and language. While stressing this polarity, they demanded that the constitutional framework should be altered to ensure self-rule for the Tamils. The federalists' campaign portrayed the minority Tamils as a servile race suppressed by the political will of the majority Sinhala-Buddhist state.

The search for harmony in this pluralist society began with the 1958 Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakem Pact. Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the father of president Chandrika Kumaratunge, and S.J.V Chelvanayakem, the leader of the Federal Party, signed the historic pact, better known as the B-C Pact. Buddhist monks opposed it by resorting to a satyagraha and pressured Bandaranaike to undo the accord. Wilting under the pressure of the Sangha, Bandaranaike unilaterally abrogated it, clearly showing that Buddhist monks could make or break any constitutional arrangements aimed at sharing state power with the minority Tamils.

During the anti-B-C Pact campaign, the monks were able to rouse up Sinhala passion with the slogan: "The Sinhala race is dead, and Buddhism is dead". They have always hedged criticism of their extremist religio-ethnic politics by citing Tamil communalism, and thus have been able to keep the ember of nationalism alive. This explains why The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main proponent of a separate homeland for the minority Tamils, have put the monks on their hit-list. When the Tamil politicians shifted their position from "cooperation with the majority for survival to separatism", the Buddhist monks became a force to reckon with.

Immediately after the 1983 pogrom, the LTTE overseas propaganda used terse lines such as "Sunday *sil* (Buddhist ritual), Monday kill" to indicate the sinister hand of the Buddhist priests in Sri Lanka's ethno-nationalism. Tamil separatists have always associated Buddhism with what they call the genocidal programme of the Sinhala state. And the monks have been branded as "prophets of violence". Tamil separatism, therefore, has to fight two battles: one with the armed forces of Chandrika Kumaratunga's government and the other with the Buddhist clergy who provide the ideological engine to the Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian-unitarian state.

The Buddhist monks, on their part, assert their legitimacy by harking back to the pre-colonial past. As custodians of the Dhamma, they claim to have had a political mandate when Sri Lanka was under monarchic rule. They

played the role of consultants to the monarch. With the arrival of the colonial powers, the religious and political clout of the monks eroded. However, after Independence, the politicians realised the political value of the monk. Thus we saw for the first time monks being reinstated and politicised under the catchy election slogan of prime minister Bandaranaike: "*Pancha Maha Balavegaya*" (the five great forces). He lists the Sangha—the monks—as the first great force that would determine the progress of the country.

The Buddhist clergy's mediation in interpreting the Sinhala race, Buddhism and the State, has provided the teeth to several other nationalist movements in the country. Since Kumaratunga's government came to power in 1994, at least three Sinhala nationalist movements have sprouted: The National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), the Veeravidhana, and the Sinhala Urumaya (which is now a registered political party). Much earlier, movements such as Bhumiputhra and Jathika Chinthanaya emerged carrying the baggage of extreme Sinhala nationalism. Despite being ridiculed and derided, they still linger on spreading their views through the local media.

Roughly, the Sinhala political ideology runs like this: the country's political order should ensure a Sinhala majoritarian rule; the nature of the state should be unitary; Buddhism should be officially recognised by the Constitution; the Buddhist clergy must be allowed to play a vital role in the running of the state; Sinhala language should enjoy primacy of place; and that Sri Lanka is not a pluralist society.

According to this, there is nothing called a Tamil ethnic problem, it is a hoax; Sri Lanka has only a terrorist problem created by the LTTE. The solution is a military campaign by the government. Historically, the argument goes, Sinhalese have suffered much more than the Tamils and the government should address their grievances first. Interestingly, when the Sinhala Urumaya had to select a party symbol out of four choices, they opted for the 'primitive' bow and arrow. The quip is that their political ideas are as primitive as their symbol.

These groups also echo the atavistic fear of losing the Sinhala nation to the Tamil invader—the 'traditional enemy' of the Sinhala race. Sinhalese, they say, have no other country, whereas Tamils have Tamil Nadu. And further, the Sin-

For some chauvinist Sinhala groups, the so-called Tamil ethnic problem is a hoax.

halese led by Buddhist monks protected Theravada Buddhism when it got wiped out in India, and though the Sinhala language derives from Sanskrit, it is only found in Sri Lanka; Tamils, therefore, are here in sufferance. Any talk of federalism, devolution or power-sharing are merely propaganda for Tamil Eelam, and every Tamil is an LTTE sympathiser. Thus any attempt by the government to re-do the unitary constitution should be stopped.

They say that there's a whole array of conspirators out to destroy the Sinhala Buddhist nation, which include the LTTE, the foreign missions in Sri Lanka, the Catholic church, UN organisations, NGOs, the World Bank, and the IMF. As for foreign mediation, the contention is that it is just a way of perpetuating neo-colonialism. Ironically, these groups have been reproducing the same old nationalistic logic despite several attempts in the past by majority Sinhala political parties to recognise Tamil grievances in the areas of franchise, citizenship, official language, education, employment, land development, colonisation, economic development, security, and even devolution.

The recent protest against the government's devolution proposal, which was presented to Parliament as a Bill clearly signifies the thorny path that has to be tread towards the goal of state-building in Sri Lanka. Except for one party, namely the EPDP (Eelam People's Democratic Party), all other Tamil political parties have rejected the draft constitution. The LTTE rejected the proposal outright, and the moderate TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) said it lacked a true federal structure and insisted on the involvement of the LTTE in the negotiation process.

While the Tamil political parties are trying to persuade the government to grant more concessions for the Tamils, the Sinhala nationalist groups are demanding that it should not budge from the position of a Sinhala-Buddhist unitary state. It is clear that the LTTE and the Sinhala nationalist movements led by the Buddhist clergy will remain the most crucial factors in the whole process of constitution-building in this island where an 18-year old war has killed more than 55,000 people.

—Brian Jeganathan

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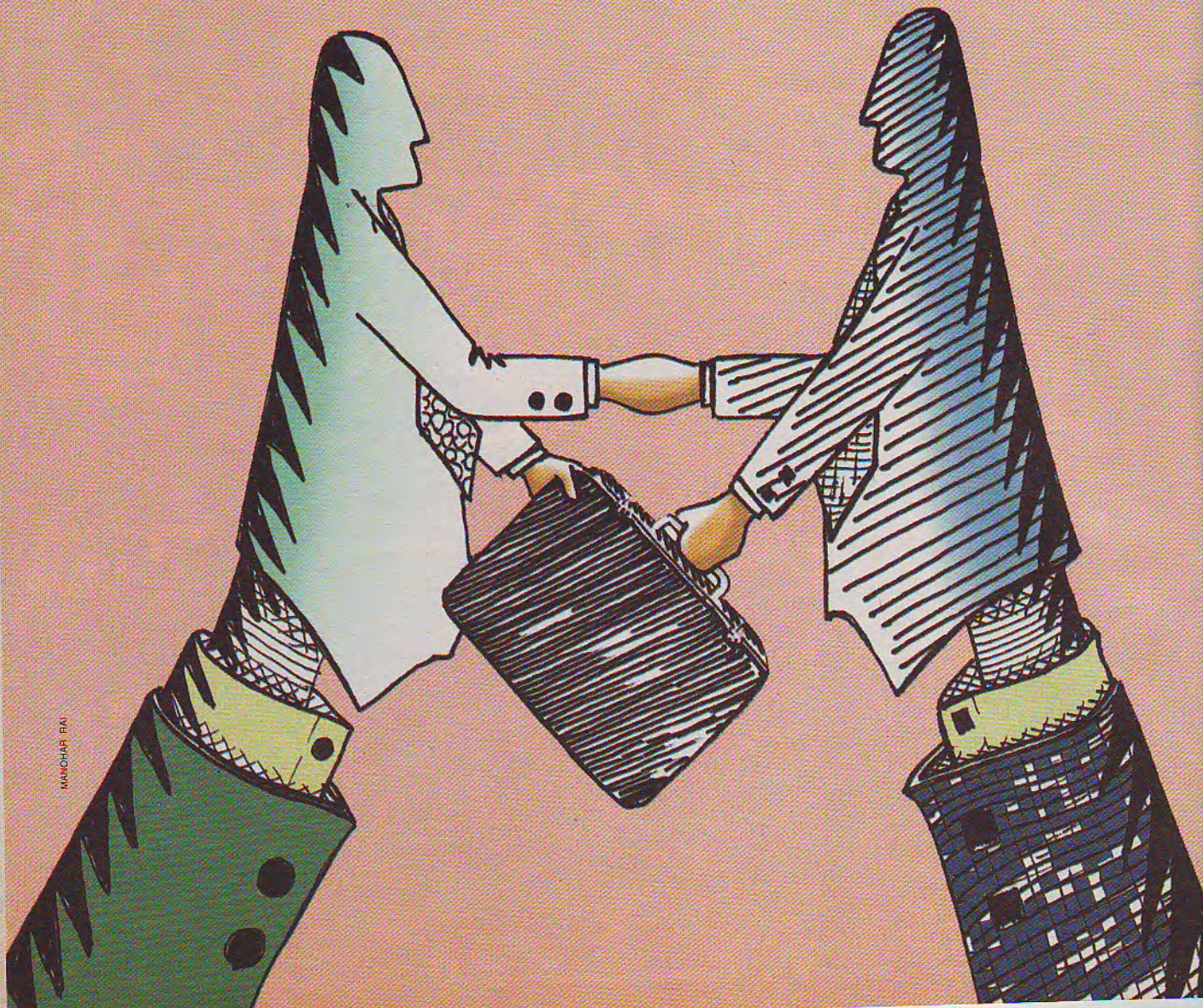


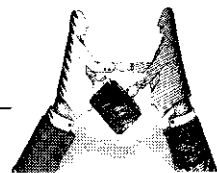
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Trade will bring us together

It is worth remembering that even as free trade makes the headlines, agreements by themselves are not likely to work the magic. For South Asia to unleash its long-suppressed economic potential, there has to be the backing of a far bolder political leadership than it has historically enjoyed.





In recent years, economic cooperation in South Asia has been seen mostly as a matter of lowering the high trade barriers that exist between India and its neighbours. In other words, while efforts to create a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) have been stymied by the Indo-Pak stalemate, India has been pursuing its own bilateral deals.

It is worth remembering though that even as free trade makes the headlines, agreements by themselves are likely to have limited impact. But combined with other initiatives they could play a significant role in unleashing the region's long-suppressed economic potential. This will, however, require far bolder political leadership than the region has historically enjoyed.

The desire to increase South Asia's trading capacity is not misplaced. Openness to trade correlates closely with economic growth in developing Asian countries, as Table 1 shows. Countries whose trade volumes were high relative to gross domestic product (GDP) by the mid-1980s enjoyed substantially higher rates of GDP growth over the next decade than did their trade-averse neighbours. As a group, the trade-to-GDP ratio of the five "tiger" economies of East and Southeast Asia was double that of South Asia in 1985-1987; over the next decade, the tiger economies' GDP growth rate was 60 percent higher than South Asia's. It is no coincidence that the Subcontinent's richest country, Sri Lanka, has long been the most open to trade.

And after years of dithering, India also seems to have gotten the message. The current government in New Delhi is making serious efforts—fiercely opposed by domestic producer lobbies—to shore up India's trading strength. By 1 April next year, it will have abolished quantitative restrictions on all imports (except, ironically, on tea and textiles covered by a "free trade" agreement with Sri Lanka). India's Commerce Minister Murasoli Maran has also announced ambitious plans to turn the country's moribund export-processing zones into Chinese-style "special economic zones", with more liberal rules for foreign investment and possibly more flexible labour laws.

Regional swadeshi

All this would appear to favour the creation of a more liberal trade regime the centrepiece strategy for economic cooperation among the SAARC member nations. All South Asian countries need to trade more. And what better place to start than at home, especially since there is scarcely any trade among the region's countries at present (Table 2a). Till now, most of

SAARC's limited energies on the economic front have been devoted to bringing about the current South Asian Preferential Tariff Arrangement (SAPTA), which has lowered tariffs within the region on a range of goods. Work has now begun on a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), with a draft treaty being scrutinised by ministries in all seven capitals.

But liberalised trade rules are not enough. A free-trade agreement must be set in the context of a wider commitment to regional economic development—a commitment which so far has been difficult to forge because of continued political tensions among the SAARC member nations. More disturbingly, intra-SAARC free trade is often conceived as a substitute for the more crucial goal of liberalising trade generally. Arguments for SAFTA often cite the foreign exchange savings that member nations would realise by importing goods from within the region rather than from outside. This argument conceptualises regional free trade not as a way of creating wealth but as a method of diverting trade from outside the region to within it. This amounts to little more than old-fashioned *swadeshi* writ within regional boundaries rather than national ones.

Some argue that this does not matter, that trade liberalisation must start somewhere and that the South Asian countries, late to the globalisation game, should liberalise trade among themselves as a first step to lowering trade barriers generally. But the evidence from elsewhere in the world suggests that it would make more sense for each country in the region to liberalise its trade rules generally, and work out a special regional trade deal later.

Free-trade agreements tend to follow trade flows, not create them. The established and emerging export powerhouses of East Asia—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China—don't belong to any free-trade club and have no prospects of doing so either. The ASEAN nations became big exporters long before they started talking about free trade—the ASEAN Free Trade Area will not take effect until 2010. South Asia's problem is that it does not trade enough with the rest of the world (Table 2b), and not that there is insufficient intra-regional trade. If all the South Asian countries independently pursued trade-friendly policies with the rest of the world, increased trade within the region would follow as a natural result, without the need for any preferential policies.

No complements

Closer economic cooperation within a region, whether of the free-trade variety or of any other

TABLE 1

Openness to trade vs. GDP growth

Country	Openness to trade	Avg GDP growth
	1985-87*	1986-95
Malaysia	88.5	9.4
South Korea	59.4	8.1
Thailand	42.1	9.4
Indonesia	35.2	6.7
Philippines	34.1	3.5
AVERAGE	51.9	7.4
Sri Lanka	52.8	3.9
Pakistan	26.1	5.1
Nepal	24.0	4.2
Bangladesh	17.8	4.3
India	11.5	5.9
AVERAGE	26.4	4.6

*Total merchandise trade divided by GDP

Sources: International Monetary Fund, SAARC, WTO

kind, arises in two sets of circumstances. First, in highly-developed regions where the individual economies have become so complex and intertwined that even modest trade and investment barriers pose a significant obstacle to continued growth, and where the necessity for greater economies of scale in turn creates a demand for a larger market. This is what happened in Europe with the creation first of the Common Market and later of the unified currency.

Second, closer economic ties can develop among neighbour countries that have complementary resources—usually, abundant capital in one country and a large pool of cheap labour in another. This was one of the driving forces behind the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and it has also been a key factor in the integration of East Asia, where Taiwan and Hong Kong have provided three-quarters of China's foreign direct investment over the past two decades, with their sophisticated manufacturers taking advantage of China's cheap and abundant land and labour. It is worth noting that trade in finished goods *within* the greater China region is not the chief goal of this activity: Hong Kong and Taiwanese factories in China export most of their production to third countries. Indeed, trade between China and Taiwan continues to be artificially depressed by Taiwan's draconian quantitative restrictions on Chinese products.

South Asia possesses neither of the above sets of characteristics. The seven countries are all more or less equally poor. All countries rely on an extremely narrow range of similar ex-

port goods—principally textiles and garments—for which the natural markets are not within the region but outside it (see Table 3). The only significant complementarity is one of size: giant India could offer its neighbours a large market if it chose to do so.

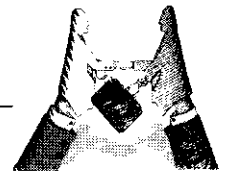
Patterns of informal cross-border trade among SAARC countries also suggest that there is little pent-up demand that could create sudden benefits following a free-trade treaty. This informal trade is an important part of the region's border-region economies: a 1995 study estimated that annual informal trade between India and Bangladesh was about INR 11650 million (USD 370 million at the exchange rate of the time), nearly as much as formal trade. Indirect trade between India and Pakistan, mostly via Dubai, is estimated at around USD 1 billion a year—seven times the official bilateral trade—and smuggling is also rife across the unfenced Rajasthan/Sindh border, though the value of these transactions is probably less.

But every effort to examine these informal trade networks has shown that they are dominated by purely opportunistic efforts to reap quick profits from price differences in basic commodities or very low value-added goods: cattle (India/Bangladesh), sugar (India/Pakistan) and gold (India/Nepal). The profits are rarely, if ever, invested in new productive capacity—that is, in factories that could form the basis of sustainable industry and employment. It is hard to see how a regional free-trade agreement could change this.

At any rate, progress on SAFTA is impossible in the current environment of Indo-Pak hostility. In the absence of a regional agreement, India is pursuing bilateral trade pacts with its neighbours. A very liberal Indo-Nepal trade agreement took effect in December 1996. A far more restrictive Indo-Sri Lanka pact became operational on 1 March of this year. And a limited trade liberalisation deal between India and Bangladesh could well be signed after the elections in Bangladesh later this year.

As with SAFTA, these bilateral deals is better than having none at all. But their effectiveness is limited by protectionist producer lobbies, which force these agreements to be hemmed in by restrictions and exceptions, and by the failure to complement them with improvements in local investment climates.

The history of the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement shows up clearly the conflicting pressures that make it difficult for trade agreements in the region to achieve substantial benefits. A broad agreement, granting reduced or zero-tariff status for 1350 Sri Lankan goods entering India,



and 300 Indian goods entering Sri Lanka, was initiated by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga in December 1998. But India's protectionist lobbies quickly leapt into action and forced New Delhi to exclude tea, rubber, textiles and coconut products—virtually all of Sri Lanka's top exports—from the deal. This surprise action made the pact unacceptable to Colombo.

After a year of haggling, Sri Lankan officials travelled to New Delhi in February and hammered out a compromise that put tea and textiles back into the treaty, but on a restricted basis: low-tariff imports of Sri Lankan tea are limited to 15 million kg a year, and garments to eight million pieces. The preferential duty on tea was initially set at 17.5 percent, or half the basic tariff rate for tea; two months later, as a sign of its determination to make the treaty more meaningful, New Delhi cut this preferential duty to 7.5 percent. The South Indian tea-growers' association, whose members are already being hurt by low prices and declining margins, protested. At the moment the Indian government seems intent on resisting the growers' pressure, but how long it can stand firm is an open question.

It is still too early to say how successful the Indo-Sri Lanka pact will be; the experience of the Indo-Nepal agreement suggests it may be limited. Under that agreement, any item manufactured in Nepal—except alcohol, tobacco and cosmetics—may be exported duty-free to India. (Indian products are still subject to tariffs when entering Nepal.) On the positive side, Nepali exports to India have nearly quadrupled since the treaty took effect in April 1997, from NPR 3.8 billion in 1996/97 to NPR 13.1 billion (US\$ 190 million) in 1998/99. Most of the new exports have been in low-end consumer goods: toothpaste, soap, detergent, instant noodles, vanaspati ghee. As a result, Nepal, alone of South Asian countries, has substantially reduced its reliance on a narrow range of export products (Table 3).

But the impact of the export boom on the wider Nepali economy has been limited, since it has not led to substantial new investment. In particular, it has not sparked significant investment by Indian manufacturers, as had been hoped. In the year before the treaty took effect, foreign investment in Nepal was USD 22.3 million. In the year after, it rose only slightly to USD 23.1 million; in the second year, it plummeted to USD 8.6 million.

One reason why this investment hasn't occurred is that, aside from the free-trade arrange-

TABLE 2

Bottom of the heap

A. Intra-regional exports as a % of member countries' total exports, 1996

European Union	61.5
NAFTA	47.5
ASEAN	23.2
Mercosur	22.8
SAARC	4.3

B. Share of world trade (%), 1996

European Union	40.1
NAFTA	19.3
ASEAN	6.9
Mercosur	1.6
SAARC	1.0

Sources: World Trade Organisation, IMF

ment, Nepal offers no particular advantages over locations in North India. Labour is only marginally cheaper than in India and less productive; it is no easier or cheaper to acquire land for a factory site; local currency financing is hard to come by; and Nepal's regulatory system remains underdeveloped, with red tape remaining the rule.

A better answer

In short, cutting tariff rates is fine, but what the region really needs is a far wider concept of economic cooperation, in which liberalised trade rules complement other efforts to spur economic development across national boundaries; that is, a joint programme for creating a "South Asian Growth Area". What forms might these efforts take? Any answer to that question must start with an identification of the region's basic economic problems. With the occasional exception of Sri Lanka, the South Asian economies share these characteristics:

- Low investment and even lower savings
- Low levels of government revenue
- Inefficient allocation of public-sector resources (too much money wasted on bureaucratic salaries and loss-making public enterprises)
- Low reliance on trade
- Low literacy and primary education rates
- Poor infrastructure

It is easy to see that any intra-regional free trade regime, even if it were magically to appear tomorrow, would solve none of these problems. The issues of government revenue, public sector waste and education are essentially matters of domestic policy, but it would cer-

TABLE 3
Percent share of top two
export categories in total exports

Fiscal years ending	1994	1998
Pakistan		
Cotton manufactures	55.5	56.2
Synthetic textiles	9.5	7.1
Total	65.0	63.3
Bangladesh		
Readymade garments	51.0	55.0
Knitwear	10.4	18.1
Total	61.4	73.1
Nepal		
Woollen carpets	49.4	30.9
Readymade garments	30.8	25.5
Total	80.2	56.4
Sri Lanka		
Garments and textiles	48.4	52.0
Tea	13.2	16.5
Total	61.6	68.5
India		
Garments and textiles	21.3	23.7
Gems and jewellery	18.0	15.1
Total	39.3	38.9

Source: IMF

tainly be fruitful for SAARC to sponsor region-wide conferences at which the best policy minds from all the member countries could share ideas about how to solve them. Research on how these problems have been dealt with in other developing economies, especially in Southeast Asia, would also be helpful.

In more concrete terms, probably the area in which regional cooperation could make the most difference is in infrastructure, including energy sales, water-sharing and transportation. To take transportation as an example, it is hard to talk about "free trade" in a region where movement between countries is still so unfree. Air routes between many of the countries are of recent vintage and limited capacity. Road links are poor. More important, no two countries in the region are connected by rail, so it is impossible to move cargo from the Calcutta or Haldia ports to eastern Bangladesh, or from Chittagong to Assam, or from Karachi to north-west India.

A regional approach to developing transportation infrastructure makes eminent sense, especially in the east where Nepal, Bangladesh, and India's eastern and northeast provinces form a natural economic region fragmented by arbitrary national frontiers. So far, efforts to improve transport in this region have focussed

more on legal rights than on building the infrastructure which would make those rights meaningful: India's 1997 decision to allow transit of Nepali goods from Bangladesh through West Bengal, and Bangladesh's offer earlier this year to allow a similar facility to Indian goods between West Bengal and the northeast. But these facilities remain moot partly because they remain hedged around by so many restrictions and partly because the dreadful state of roads makes large-scale cargo movements impossible. What is really needed is construction of new international road, rail and inland waterway networks that would link ports in eastern India and Bangladesh to their natural hinterland.

This was one of the thoughts that lay behind the now moribund "Growth Quadrangle" concept, but it has never been pursued with any vigour. The usual excuse is that none of the countries involved, including India, has the money to finance such spending. But donor agencies such as the World Bank, as well as private foreign investors, might well underwrite much of the cost if they felt there was a strong political will to create a regional growth zone.

And this is the heart of the matter. Meaningful economic cooperation is unlikely to occur in South Asia unless a strong political consensus emerges to put economic development at the top of the regional agenda, and national leaders jointly articulate a common vision of a "South Asian Growth Area", accompanied by specific goals in a wide range of areas: freer trade and investment, a regional transportation network, cross-border energy sales, and water-sharing agreements. This will require some imaginative leadership.

Up to now, India has tended to view its neighbours more as potential security threats than as economic partners. Electorates in neighbouring countries, cowed by India's sheer size, have tended to reward reflexive anti-Indianism in their political leaders. But a significant minority in India's bureaucracy now recognises that India's security would be best served by neighbours that are economically vibrant and hence politically more stable. Constituencies in most of the neighbour countries also exist for more open economic relationships with India. All that is now needed is a joint resolution by political leaders to face down domestic opposition and take a firm stand in favour of regional growth.

(This article was prepared by Analysis Asia under the direction of senior economist Daniel Gao. Analysis Asia is a research service, providing economic forecasting and analysis on the Asia-Pacific region.)

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Let's trade

The hope lies with the WTO and its capacity to act as a levelling factor.



MANOHAR RAI

by Mahendra P. Lama

The major focus of the economic liberalisation process South Asian countries have undertaken in the past decade or so has been trade. In a way, this is reflected in the three-fold increase (from USD 37.9 billion to USD 110 billion) and the four-fold rise (from USD 1.2 billion to USD 4.44 billion) in South Asia's global and intra-regional trade respectively over 1980-1996. The share of intra-regional trade as a share of South Asia's global trade has also recorded a marginal increase from 3.19 percent in 1980 to 4 percent in 1996. This is an encouraging sign because India's share in Pakistan's total trade is not even 1 percent, and till very recently, 78 percent of Nepal's trade used to be with countries outside South Asia, and Sri Lanka's (60 percent) and Bangladesh's (52 percent) major trading partners were located in industrial countries. All these defied the primary logic of trade based on lower transport cost.

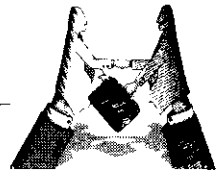
This significant increase in the share of intra-regional trade is adequately manifested by the multifold growth in India's bilateral trade with its neighbours in the last six to eight years. Since there has been a parallel and simultaneous process of trade liberalisation under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangements (SAPTA), one cannot actually pinpoint what really trig-

gered off this jump in intra-regional trade.

Given the slow, tardy and highly cumbersome process with which SAPTA has been moving since it was operationalised in December 1995, the overwhelming portion of this increase has been attributed to the general trade liberalisation in the region. But trade cooperation is still moving at snail's pace.

The low level of trade within the region can broadly be attributed to: i) politico-strategic-hegemonic impressions and fear emanating from India's sheer size and economic might based on its diverse industrial base; ii) extremely limited export basket and relatively inefficient and uncompetitive production structure in neighbouring countries; iii) destination diversification triggered by both domestic compulsions and foreign aid/investment binding arrangements; and, iv) trade barriers and the expanding informal/illegal trade across unmanned borders.

Since SAPTA provisions partially address only the fourth inhibiting factor, its outreach and efficacy has been expectedly dismal. Factors inhibiting trade are, in fact, more complex and intriguing in terms of variety and depth. The "frequently addressed" tariff and non-tariff barriers are simply the tip of the iceberg. The hope, therefore, lies in WTO and its capacity to act as a levelling factor.



Not Kashmir, but MNCs

There are many layers of trade players, and each has its own agenda. Many of them thrive on adverse situations and have tremendous ability to influence national and local institutions that deal with trade liberalisation. One can cite the example of multinationals in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Pakistan's share of 11 percent of the total world tea imports places it among the top three importers of tea. However, South Asia, despite its distinction of being the highest producer, exporter and consumer of tea in the world, contributes a mere 13 percent to Pakistan's tea imports (Sri Lanka 7.4, India 1.2 percent and Bangladesh 4.4 percent). Sixty percent of its tea comes from Kenya, and at a much higher price, causing a loss of USD 110 million (1992-94 estimates) to Pakistan.

This is despite the fact that Pakistan has placed tea at the top of the freely importable list of 608 items from India since 1988. The "Kashmir problem" is often blamed for this negligible import from India. However, a study by this writer based on extensive visits to Pakistan and all the tea-producing countries in the region, broadly concluded that it is the actions of multinationals like Lever Brothers which have led to this piquant situation.

After Brooke Bond and Lipton merged under the banner of Lever Brothers in 1997, this group gained control over 70 percent of the tea market in Pakistan. The company has a huge stakeholding in tea gardens in Kenya and hence they use Pakistan as a captive market. It is a case of captive market perpetuation and what Perroux calls the "domination effect"—where a large transnational enterprise exerts its influence on the economy through market operations or by more direct means, to serve its own purposes. The overwhelming dependence on Kenya has made Pakistan susceptible to fluctuations in production and prices of Kenyan tea, besides offering a poor choice in quality.

Again, Kashmir certainly does not explain Pakistan's steady decline in tea imports from Sri Lanka from 34.7 million kg in 1975 to 8.1 million kg in 1998. In fact, Sri Lanka has been the worst hit tea exporter as a consequence of the MNC consolidation in Pakistan in the last 25 years. Hasitha de Alwis, director at the Sri Lanka Tea Promotion Bureau, still believes that "Pakistan is one of our best hopes to get the market out of the present problems".

The recent withdrawal of India's National Dairy Development Board (the institution behind the successful Operation Flood programme) from Sri Lanka's "milk *kiriya*" project is also largely attributed to protests en-

gineered by another MNC, Nestle, which has had a monopoly on the highly import-intensive milk market of Sri Lanka.

As for the role of Kashmir, India-Pakistan trade is akin to the snake-and-ladder game, where the "Kashmir Problem" is dotted on square 99 as a snakehead. Unfortunately, since the dice has 1 written on all six sides, it not only takes a long time to reach 100, but when the counter reaches 99, it slides down the snake's tail and begins again. The question is how do we avoid 99 and how do we insert 1-6 numbers on the dice?

This is not to say that MNCs don't play a positive sum-game at all. The proposal to sell surplus power generated in Pakistan and the protracted deliberations on the gas supplies by Bangladesh to India, both have MNCs as strategic actors. If it is Hubco, Japan Power, Davis Energen and Rousch in Pakistan, it is Cairn, Rexwood-Okland, United Meridian and Occidental in Bangladesh. In fact, if these agreements take off, they could transform the entire export basket of these countries.

This could also be the single most vital confidence-building measure between India and Pakistan for this will represent a venture with positive stakeholding for the first time.

Trading places

A fast emerging dominant paradigm is bilateral free trade regimes. Even if India extends unilateral free trade regimes (like it has with Bhutan and Nepal) to all its South Asian neighbours, given the present structure, composition and quantum of intra-regional trade, India will lose about INR 1500 million (USD 33 million) in customs revenue, which is not even 1 percent of the total annual customs revenue it mobilises.

On the other hand, after India and Sri Lanka signed a free trade agreement in 1998, possibilities for more of these agreements exist in the region. Sri Lanka is already negotiating the same with Pakistan. However, free trade alone may not really boost regional trade. The core issue of limited items in the export basket of countries other than India, and thereby the staggering balance of trade deficit vis-s-vis India, remains intact.

Trade may also be beset by non-trade issues. For example, import of sugar from Pakistan and tea from Sri Lanka has been fiercely and unduly resisted by pressure groups in India. In

India-Pakistan trade is akin to the snake-and-ladder game, where the "Kashmir Problem" is dotted on square 99 as a snakehead.

fact, the economic lobbies have taken full advantage of a weak central government in India to oppose open trade.

There is also understandable apprehension among neighbouring countries that free trade through customs losses may eat into their fragile national revenue base. The provision of a regional compensatory fund as suggested by the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) of SAARC for countries in transition may cushion the impact initially. Equally vital is the size of the negative list in the free trade agreement. The bigger it is, the more farcical and restrictive free trade becomes.

Liberalisation should also entail institutional freedom. It is not the case at least in Pakistan, where the trading society finds it very difficult to take any independent collective action. To cite an example, in July 1997, the Punjab, Haryana and Delhi Chambers of Commerce and Industry signed a major agreement with the Pakistani Chamber of Commerce and Industry. But within days, the signatory from the Pakistani side withdrew unilaterally. When asked why he had to take such a decision, he said the Pakistan government and political leaders had asked him as to who had given him permission to sign such agreements.

Rules of Origin

There is another category of products primarily deflected by its character and content. Deflection could take place in both forms, diversion to another country while on transit and re-export without any appreciable

value added. Nepal's vanaspati export to India is a glowing example. Taking advantage of relatively higher tariff barriers in India, currency depreciation-led price slide in Malaysian exports and the clause related to free access to Indian market of manufactured products under the India-Nepal Trade Treaty of 1996, pariah entrepreneurs in Nepal cleverly resorted to importing huge quantities of vanaspati/palm oil from Malaysia and redirecting them to India. The adverse impact on the Indian mustard/rapeseed oil farmers was immediate.

This was only a repeat of the past "bonus voucher" and "export entitlement" schemes by the same players. Under these schemes, the exporters were allowed to retain an overwhelming portion of foreign exchange from their overseas exports which they could spend on the

import of goods of their choice. This brought so many products to Nepal which ultimately found way into India. The only difference being the product profile.

One way to look at it is to further dismantle the existing trade barriers in India as it is because of the inter-country discrepancy of these barriers that this type of deflection thrives. It is also true that regardless of a country's position, products will flow wherever there is a market.

The Rules of Origin, primarily used to identify the country of origin of internationally-traded goods is the most critical issue here. If these free trade agreements are to be effectively sustained, partner countries will have to work on the rules of origin more seriously. Otherwise, they will not be able to determine which goods should benefit from preferential trade agreements and how to discriminate products that originate in third countries. Other regional trading arrangements such as NAFTA, EU and MERCOSUR have all relatively more scientific and strict rules of origin criteria based on varieties of effective arrangements like change in tariff heading, substantial transformation, value added and specified process. This, in fact, minimises the negative aspects of discretionary powers at the hands of national authorities implementing these rules.

Given the extent of demand-supply gaps in the region, the increased internalisation of production, the nature of border management and the spread of cross-border stakeholders, the possibility of deflection and dumping of third-country goods will continue to remain very high—unless there is a sound and scientific basis for determining rules of origin. This could, and has, become a major bone of contention particularly if it enters the unwanted domain of trader-politician nexuses.

Most critically, who really benefits from such trade? Is it the consumers, traders or the national exchequers? The answer is obvious. It is the few merchant capitalists with linkages with powerbrokers, both within and outside the government, who have optimally gained from such trade practices. The consumers, supposed to be the main target beneficiary of free trade then become only the means of such rent-seeking conglomerates. In South Asia, interestingly, many of these stakeholders have cross-national identities with a magnificent capacity to transfer gains from trade to 'safe havens' thereby siphoning off the cream of development from one country to another.

This obviously is harmful for the importing country as it uproots the local industries, and

SAARC is still characterised by shallow regionalism. It hopes to have SAFTA by 2003, but there is no political will nor competence to fulfill this grand vision.

more so for the smaller entrepot countries where it literally pre-empts any meaningful industrial ventures. More importantly, if bilateral relations hit the trough because of such issues, it is the country and its innocent citizens which suffer and not these miniscule stakeholders. Any country regardless of size and system can fall prey to these merchant capitalist-led game theoretic. That is why there should be unbiased and effective implementation of commercial policies like quantitative import restriction, a safeguard action, or anti-dumping, or countervailing duties.

Humdrum

Fifteen years after it was established, SAARC is still characterised by shallow regionalism. The organisation hopes to have a South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in place by 2003, but there is no political will, interdependence culture, core competence and instruments to fulfill this magnificent vision. Extreme bureaucratisation has only politicised a pure economic exchange like trade. Had it not been for the active participation of the SAARC Chambers of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), trade liberalisation under SAARC would have remained far away from the reality and humdrum of trade matrices.

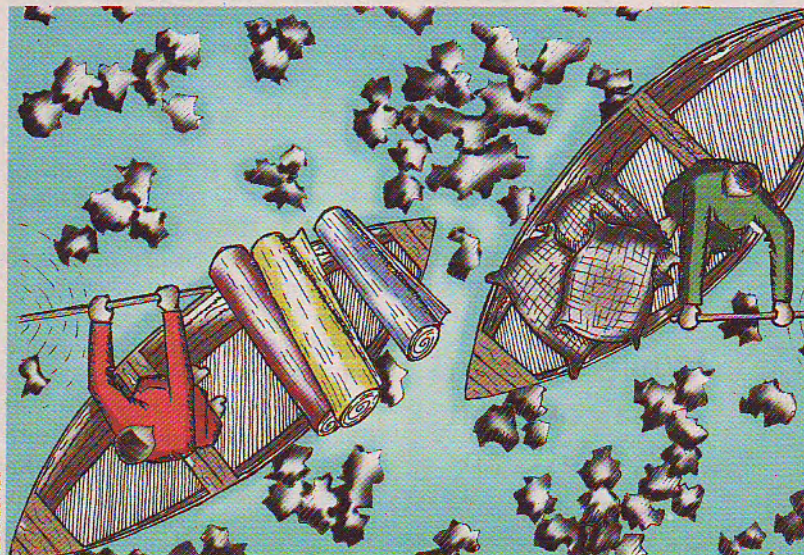
Hope still lies in strengthening and pushing forward the SAARC process, which is the only regional mechanism where even seemingly incompatible nation-states tend to shed their differences. What is required at this critical juncture is for member countries to agree on instruments of negotiation like the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) as adopted by ASEAN, and its strict time-bound implementation. In the layers of official teams viz., Inter-Governmental Group, Inter Governmental Expert Group, Group on Customs Cooperation and Committee of Participants for trade liberalisation, there should be adequate space for the SCCI and other stakeholders to interact with the SAARC machinery. The vast amount of independent research studies undertaken in different countries in this field should also be intensively used to determine the future course of action.

Policy measures that clearly link investment and trade are vital. This is what sustains regional trade. Without it, even if some countries have no comparative advantage in their exports, they will be forced to import from the region, leading to a skewed distribution of gains and burden of trade benefits and deficits. The first step should be to automatically exempt products of regional joint ventures from any duties within the region, and to let them

enjoy the benefits of free trade environment without having to wait for SAFTA.

Rehman Sobhan, a Bangladeshi member of the EPG, emphatically states that "since the production base of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka remains narrow, the scope for deriving significant benefits from SAPTA remains limited. However, a trade regime which provides for unrestricted access to the Indian market for all goods produced in these respective countries will enable domestic, regional and international investors targetting these two countries to make their investment decisions on the assumption that they have free access not just to the local market but to the entire India market."

"To try to resist such restructuring on the plea that our industries will be swamped by Indian goods is counter productive," says S.M. Naseem, a leading Pakistani economist. Since there is no option to liberalisation, South Asian countries need to rapidly reposition themselves



to face the extreme competitiveness.

This has to be done by strengthening the activities under the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) of SAARC which includes areas like energy, agriculture, science and technology, tourism etc, by promoting regional investments and harmonising the intra-regional financial and monetary policies, including the consolidation of export financing and payments arrangement measures and strengthening the regional physical infrastructures. The challenges are multiple, so the strategies should also be multi-pronged. ▽

Collective calling

SAARC needs to prepare for the agenda of the Millennium Round.

by Bibek Debroy

It is often argued that the reason South Asian countries have historically often been marginalised in trade negotiations, is the lack of domestic reforms. This is because both unilateral domestic reforms and liberalisation through the GATT/WTO system represent movements in the same direction. In other words, the perspective towards multilateral liberalisation is partly a function of whether domestic economic reforms are introduced or not.

Either as a unilateral measure or due to stabilisation and structural adjustment conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), most countries in South Asia began introducing reform measures in the 1980s and the 1990s. There is therefore not much point in tracking responses to multilateral liberalisation in the pre-Uruguay Round (1986-94) period. The focus should be instead on the Uruguay Round agreements and the agenda for the forthcoming Millennium Round.

All seven countries are classified as developing countries under the UN system. In addition, four—Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal—are least developed countries (LDCs). This has a bearing on multilateral agreements as, under the special and differential treatment dispensation, developing countries can be exempted from some multilateral disciplines, or can be granted

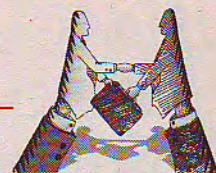
longer time frames for adherence. Least developed economies can be exempted from even more multilateral disciplines, or can be granted even longer time frames for adherence.

One must not presume that the seven countries are in any sense homogeneous, as considerable heterogeneity exists, regardless of the criteria used. As the table (*page 27*) illustrates, export profiles also differ. The table is self-explanatory, with "X" indicating an export interest in that particular product group. It indicates that, subject to problems of generalisation, the export sectors which tend to cut across all seven countries are leather and manufactures, textiles and garments and carpets. Thus, responses to multilateral trade liberalisation, especially on market access, are at present often conditioned by what is likely to happen to these product groups.

We now have to look into South Asia's response or lack of it, towards the Uruguay Round agreements. In addition, some issues have cropped up in the post-Uruguay Round period and these will recur at the Millennium Round. Among these might be listed—i) competition policy; ii) electronic commerce; iii) environmental measures; and iv) labour standards.

On the first two, South Asia probably doesn't have a position, as the contours of what is likely to happen at the WTO are yet uncertain. The only caveat about electronic commerce is reservations based on lack of IT (information technology) infrastructure within South Asia. On environmental measures, the essential concern is that these should not amount to NTBs (non-tariff barriers), and domestic laws on protecting the environment should not transcend national boundaries and impinge on what

While the idea of a common SAARC approach is laudable, it does not work across the board. Instead, there should be an attempt to look for consensus on selected issues.



other countries have the right to do. The protectionist argument is even stronger for labour standards. Hence the argument that these concerns are best voiced and addressed through the ILO (International Labour Organisation) and not the WTO.

This argument is bolstered by the Bangladesh experience. In 1995, the Harkin Bill (Child Labour Deterrence Act) was proposed in the United States to prohibit the import of goods produced with child labour. The Harkin Bill never became legislation and was bypassed by an attempt to insert a social clause at the WTO negotiations. There have been similar prohibition movements in Germany and in the European Commission in Brussels. Within the export sector, the threat of external sanctions often drives child labour into other less desirable activities like prostitution. There is some evidence of this having happened in Bangladesh. Fifty thousand child workers were laid off in Bangladesh, following the threat of the Harkin Bill. Most of them did not go back to school, but ended up at stone crushing, street work or prostitution. Bans on child labour can therefore backfire.

Arguably, there was no collective response on the part of South Asia to the Uruguay Round negotiations, with the exception of some coordinated response by India and Pakistan in the area of textiles and garments. Perhaps a coordinated response is difficult. The interests of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are somewhat similar, although Bangladesh happens to be classified as a least developed country. Nepal's interests are somewhat different and, by extrapolation, the same can be said of Bhutan.

In terms of negotiating postures, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are closer together, while Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan belong to a different category. The Maldives happens to be in a category of its own. The bargaining clout of individual countries would be enhanced if collective positions were possible. At present, however, perhaps because of the formation of SAPTA and some progress towards SAFTA, there seems to be more of a coordinated response to the proposed Millennium Round. The following quote is symptomatic (Joint Statement by the SAARC Commerce Ministers before the Third WTO Ministerial Conference (Seattle), Bandos Island, Maldives, on 9 August 1999:

There is a move to further overload the WTO agenda with 'new issues' such as social clauses, environment,

'governance', labour standards, etc. Since these are not trade related, they should be kept out of the multilateral trading system. The SAARC region should strongly emphasise that expeditious action be taken for the full and fair implementation of existing agreements and commitments made thereon, with special reference to the impact on developing and least developed countries, and that imbalances and asymmetries in these agreements be addressed as a clear priority. This would enhance the credibility of the multilateral trading system among developing and least developed countries. There is a need to deepen and broaden concessions already provided under S&D (special and differential treatment) clauses in favour of developing and least developed countries...

The Uruguay Round negotiations did not result in greater market access for the exports of developing and least developed countries as was expected, due to the existence of 'tariff peaks', the phenomenon of tariff escalation, and the use of non-tariff barriers, in respect of products of export interest to the developing and least developed countries.... There is a need for meaningful integration of the textile and clothing sector under GATT. Measures which would result in increased market access for textile and clothing items need to be considered. These would include, inter-alia, adequate and faster coverage of items for meaningful integration, regular monitoring of the process of integration by the Textile Monitoring Body, disallowing unilateral modification of rules of origin to the detriment of developing and least developed countries, avoidance of arbitrary anti-dumping, anti-subsidy or safeguard measures by devel-



MANOHAR RAM

WIPO & TRIPS

BANGLADESH, INDIA, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are members of the WTO. Bhutan and Nepal are not, although Nepal's membership of WTO is imminent.

Trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS) now form part of WTO's agenda. Therefore, it is pertinent to mention that the Maldives is the only one among the seven that is not yet a member of the World Intellectual Property Rights Organisation (WIPO). Bangladesh has been a member of WIPO since May 1985, and is also a signatory to the Paris Convention on industrial property and the Berne Union on copyright and related rights. Bhutan became a member of WIPO in March 1994, although it has not yet signed the Paris Convention or the Berne Union treaty. India joined WIPO in May 1975, and is a signatory to both the Paris Convention and the Berne Union. Nepal became part of WIPO in February 1997, although it has not yet signed the Paris Convention or the Berne Union treaty. Pakistan joined WIPO in January 1977, and has signed the Berne Union treaty, but is yet to join the Paris Convention. Sri Lanka joined WIPO in September 1978, and is a signatory to both the Paris Convention and the Berne Union. ▽

oped countries and full and effective compliance with the special and differential treatment provisions.

Increased commitment should be sought from developed countries with regard to market access in services... There is a need to prevent piracy of traditional knowledge built around biodiversity and to seek the harmonisation of the TRIPS Agreement with the UN Convention on Biological Diversity so as to ensure appropriate returns to traditional communities. It would be desirable to join forces with other developed and developing countries for the grant of higher levels of protection by way of geographical indication to products apart from wines and spirits so that products of export interest to the region could benefit. The relevant provisions of the TRIPS Agreement relating to meaningful transfer and dissemination of technology to developing and least developed countries should be effectively operationalised.... Greater flexibility in the TRIPS Agreement for developing countries is important to enable them to pursue their developmental objectives.

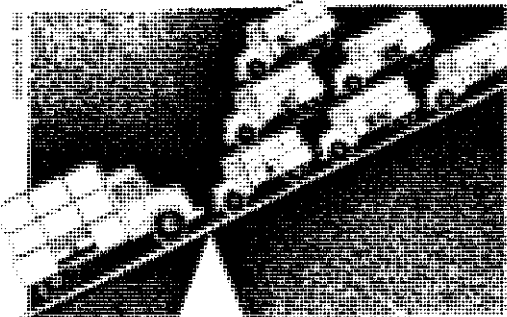
Least developed country applicants for WTO membership should be allowed to accede on a fast-track basis with obligations commensurate with their stage of development.... LDCs should be granted duty-free access on an

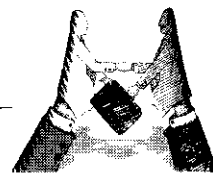
autonomous basis for their exports. These should be exempt from anti-dumping duties, safeguard actions and non-tariff barriers.... Export subsidies should be exempt from competitiveness thresholds and non-actionable categories of subsidies expanded to include subsidies for development, diversification and upgrading of industries.... The proposed legal advisory centre and a special cell for LDCs in WTO should be established as soon as possible. Technical assistance should be regarded as a right for LDCs and adequate resources should be made available under the WTO regular budget. Developed countries should give priority to the concessional transfer of technology to LDCs. The use of unilateral trade measures inconsistent with international law, WTO Agreements and the basic tenets of a multilateral trading system should be rejected.

This is collective response and partly reflects public posturing. But public posturing apart, where does this leave us in terms of a possible united front? Is it possible to work out a common position on WTO negotiations among SAARC member countries? The principle makes sense, because it can increase the collective bargaining clout of countries that are relatively insignificant at an individual level. But this is easier said than done. As was mentioned earlier, five countries are members of WTO—Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Nepal applied for accession to GATT in 1989, an application later transferred to WTO and the first round of trade negotiations for Nepal's entry have taken place. Bhutan is not a member of WTO, nor is an application for membership pending.

Yet another complication is that three of the SAARC countries are developing countries, while the rest are LDCs. Consequently, perceptions and negotiating approaches differ between LDCs and others. For instance, Bangladesh has adopted the mantle of leadership of the 48 LDCs. There are differing perceptions on agriculture, as also textiles and garments. Differing perceptions on agriculture are understandable, as liberalisation and an expected hike in global

agro prices do not impact net food importing countries in the same way as net food exporting countries. The textiles and garments perception depend on views about MFA quotas. If foreign direct investments have come in





to circumvent MFA quotas, Bangladesh and Nepal being examples, there is no particular reason to press for quicker removal of these quotas.

In a similar vein, attitudes towards intellectual property rights and services vary between India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka on one side and the remaining countries on the other. Perhaps this argument can also be extrapolated to investment measures, although all SAARC countries do agree that cross-border labour movements must be freed further.

So while the idea of a common SAARC approach is laudable, it does not seem workable across the board. Instead, one should perhaps look for a consensus on selected issues and there are indeed issues where such a consensus is possible. The entire rules area is a case in point—anti-dumping, subsidies and countervailing measures, dispute resolution, safeguards. The consensus also spills over into other NTBs in developed countries, such as those that surface through the sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures or technical barriers to trade (TBT) agreements. Similarly, there is partial agreement on industrial tariffs—specific duties, peak tariffs and tariff escalation in developed countries must be brought down. However, if industrial tariffs are negotiated, bindings in developing countries will also be

extended and bound tariffs perhaps brought down. On this, there is lack of consensus. Or perhaps there is consensus that tariffs in developing countries must not be brought down.

There also seems to be agreement, for what it is worth, that there ought not to be a Millennium Round. Implementation issues must be discussed first, before overloading the WTO agenda with new issues. This is a difficult argument to understand, this separation of implementation issues from the Millennium Round. If one is unhappy with back-loading of textiles and garments liberalisation or tariff peaks (such as in garments) in developed countries, the question to ask is whether developed countries are violating the law of any of the Uruguay Round agreements. (Whether they are violating the spirit of liberalisation is irrelevant.) The answer clearly is that the law is not being violated. Ditto for anti-dumping investigations. Therefore, the agreements need re-negotiation. Therefore, we should want the Millennium Round.

Perhaps the response is not to the Millennium Round, but to the Millennium Round's agenda, such as labour and environmental standards or competition policy. Even in these instances, the argument is difficult to understand. Whether one likes it or not, environmental issues have already been included, through

Export baskets

Product group	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Tea & coffee	x		x				x
Spices		x	x				
Timber products		x					
Agro products			x		x		x
Fruits & vegetables		x	x				
Jute & manufactures	x		x		x		
Leather & manufactures	x		x		x	x	
Carpets	x		x		x	x	
Textiles & garments	x		x	x	x	x	x
Marine products	x		x	x		x	x
Minerals		x	x				x
Electric energy		x					
Cement		x					
Paper & board		x					
Liquor		x					
Sports goods			x			x	
Gems & jewellery			x				x
Chemicals & pharmaceuticals			x			x	
Machinery & instruments			x			x	
Manufactures of metals			x				
Project goods			x				
Software			x				

the SPS and TBT agreements, and through disputes like the one on shrimps and turtles. Under the circumstances, is it better to have multi-lateral agreements, or is it better to open oneself up to unilateral action? Similarly, on labour standards, the agenda can be extended to beyond child labour issues. Because of opposition to the Millennium Round, SAARC is probably allowing the Round's agenda to be dictated by developed countries.

Competition policy is yet another example. Distortions in developed countries are caused by private enterprise. Distortions in developing countries are still caused by government intervention. That is the reason developed countries single out government procurement, which by the way, is an agreement that all SAARC countries seem to be opposed to. But by the same token, developing countries ought to focus on unfair and restrictive business practices and transfer pricing, the province of competition policy. However, throughout SAARC, there is a general resistance to inclusion of a competition policy.

The Bandos Island communiqué is illumi-


nating because it is symptomatic of the inherent problems in hammering out a consensus. There are two clear parts in this joint communiqué. Caricaturing a bit, the first half is a WTO kind of document (the developing country agenda), while the second half is the standard UNCTAD line (the LDC agenda). If SAARC as a collective body is to make an impact on negotiations, there must be progress beyond Bandos Island. This will not happen unless one accepts the proposition that consensus across the board is impossible. One can instead, single out areas where consensus is possible and forget the rest. But for this to happen, the SAARC process itself must make some headway.

Although one is extremely sceptical about a common SAARC negotiating position, it ought to be possible in the rules area and in protectionism surfacing through newer issues like labour and environmental standards. For the rest, common positions are possible between India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka on the one hand and Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan on the other. All that is needed is collective will. ▽

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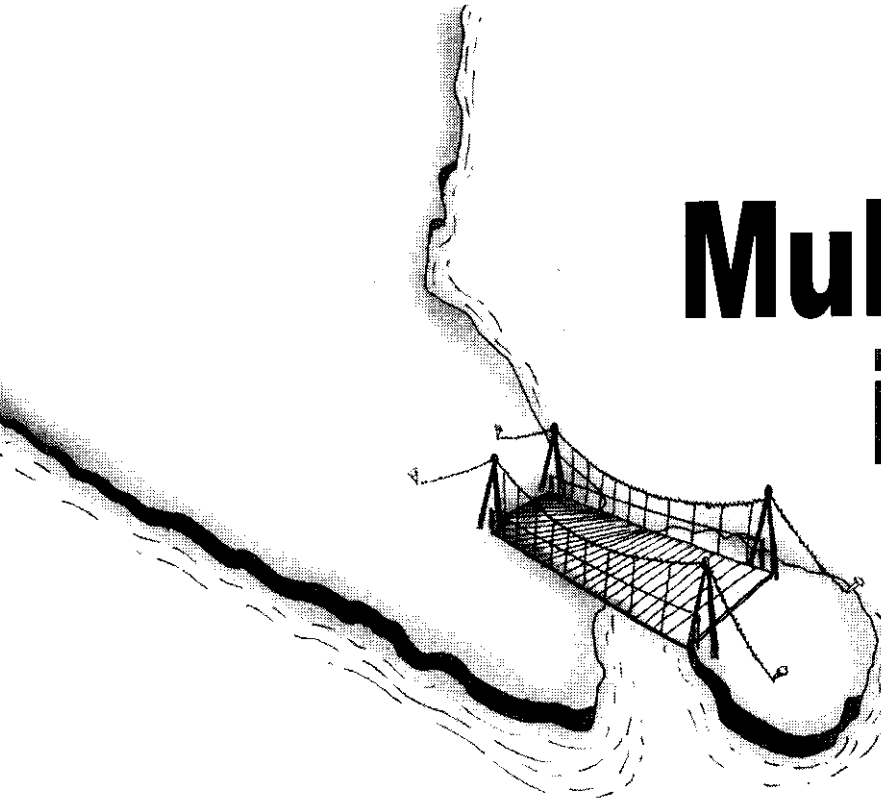
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Multilateral is better than bilateral

There is a clear danger of alienating the spirit of consensus on which the success of a larger South Asian free trade area will depend.

by Dushni Weerakoon

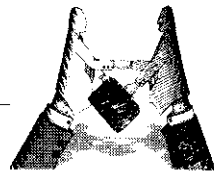
It is no surprise that in a supposedly globalising economy—underpinned by the rhetoric of free trade—regional trade arrangements are proliferating as never before. It is widely argued that the protracted nature of negotiations under the Uruguay Round gave fresh momentum to the formation of regional blocs, increasing their number from a mere 25 in 1990, to more than 80 arrangements of one sort or another by the middle of the 1990s. And, as international commerce becomes more intricate, so have the arguments for and against regional trade groupings. Many economists continue to hold that these lead to inefficiency through trade diversionary effects, rather than promote trade amongst the signatories. But even as the debate remains unresolved, South Asia is marching towards integration into the world economy with its own regionalism.

The commitment of South Asian governments to accelerate the process of regional economic integration is now over a decade old. It began with the intention of establishing a SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) through continuous negotiations, to eventually lead to the formation of a South

Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). But SAPTA—in operation since December 1995—has proved to be an arduous tool to negotiate. Similarly, SAFTA, initially proposed to come into force in 2001, is now unlikely to see the light of day anytime before the year 2008.

Given the strained ties between the two largest economies in South Asia, the political constraints to freeing trade within the framework of a regional arrangement has always been formidable. A consequence of such intransigence has been a slow shift towards bilateral trade agreements amongst the member countries of SAARC. So far, India has signed such agreements with Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, and is contemplating similar pacts with Bangladesh and the Maldives. Sri Lanka is also contemplating the extension of free trade pacts with Pakistan and Bangladesh at a not-too-distant future. Such agreements are defended on the grounds that they are a means of permitting 'fast-track' liberalisation, but by the very nature of their exclusivity, there is a danger of alienating the spirit of consensus on which the success of a larger South Asian free trade area will depend.

In the case of Sri Lanka, for example, the



relative importance of SAFTA has receded to an extent because its primary reason for supporting SAFTA was to obtain access to the Indian market. Under the Indo-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (FTA), India agreed to remove tariffs on about 1000 products, immediately after the treaty came into force. However, both countries agreed to maintain negative lists to safeguard the domestic industry, agriculture and fisheries. India also agreed to phase out prevailing tariffs on the remaining items over the course of three years—50 percent reduction of Indian customs duties in the first year, 75 percent in the second year and 100 percent the third year. Sri Lanka will, therefore, be able to have duty-free access to the Indian market three years after the FTA becomes operative.

In return, Sri Lanka undertook to grant immediate duty-free access to around 300 Indian products. In addition, duty on a further 600 items are to be phased out over a three-year period. The duty on the balance items (excluding those that do not fall within Sri Lanka's negative list) are expected to be phased out over an eight-year period—35 percent of the existing duty level by the end of the first three of the eight years; 70 percent by the end of the sixth year; and 100 percent removal of duties by the end of the eighth year.

Under the FTA, products with a domestic value addition of 35 percent will qualify for preferential market access. In the case of Sri Lanka, exports with a minimum 10 percent content of inputs originating from India will also qualify under a reduced total domestic value addition of 25 percent.

Trading charges

The FTA has an equal number of supporters and detractors. Those in favour view the vast Indian consumer market as an entry point to generate export growth in Sri Lanka. The most common argument is that the Accord allows Sri Lankan exporters to take advantage of being the 'first-mover' into the Indian market before other potential competitors. While there is some merit to this claim, the perceived advantages will depend entirely on the pace of tariff reforms instituted by India over the next couple of years. India is already scheduled to remove its existing non-tariff barriers by 2001 in accordance with its commitments to the WTO. If such a move is complemented by an accelerated reduction in import tariffs, the benefits of an 'early-mover' advantage for Sri Lanka will clearly be diluted.

Even otherwise, the potential for generating a substantial increase in trade between the

two countries is somewhat doubtful. In fact, with the liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy in the late 1970s, its share of exports to India declined from 3.5 percent of total exports in 1980 to stagnate at around 1 percent in the late 1990s. This was largely due to the emergence of new industrial exports geared to markets in North America and Europe. In turn, India's exports to Sri Lanka account for an insignificant share of less than 0.1 percent of its total exports. However, in terms of Sri Lanka's total imports, India has increased its share from around 5 percent in 1980 to around 10 percent in the late 1990s, making it the single largest source of imports. There has been a persistent balance of trade in favour of India which is likely to widen further with the FTA.

For Sri Lanka, the immediate benefits of economic cooperation with India have been—and will continue to be—in terms of increased consumer welfare through cheaper imports. Given the low volume of bilateral export trade between the two countries, the enthusiasm of the architects of the FTA to view it as a means of generating trade dynamism, appears to be over-optimistic. For the most part, the Indian consumer market is portrayed as a market of 300 million middle-class consumers. The vital issue, however, is whether Sri Lanka has the necessary export surplus to meet such a voluminous demand, and whether the middle-class Indian consumer in fact wants the kind of goods Sri Lanka produces. With exposure to the global market, consumer tastes are becoming more sophisticated. Goods produced in the developed world are more likely to appeal to middle-class consumers as incomes rise.

While some Sri Lankan exports (such as rubber slippers, ceramic products and leather goods) that cater to particular niche markets in India enjoy a comparative advantage, and may benefit from tariff liberalisation, the implications on products of small and medium industrial enterprises is less clear. India, for example, has the advantages of a relatively solid industrial and agricultural base and of economy of scale vis-à-vis Sri Lanka. Some of Sri Lanka's emerging industries, particularly in the light manufacturing sector, will find themselves unable to compete with cheaper imports from Indian companies which have the built-in advantage of technological know-how.

Even for the most important of Sri Lanka's export items—tea and garments—the FTA has built-in constraints to free trade. When the FTA was signed, the understanding was that India would permit the entry of Sri Lankan tea to India at a preferential duty reduction of 50 per-

cent. However, in response to significant opposition from tea producers in India, the final agreement arrived at, allows Sri Lanka to export only 15 million kg of tea per annum at the concessional duty rate.

The FTA also places quota restrictions on the export of garments, permitting Sri Lanka to export only 8 million pieces of garments at half the existing duty rate. However, 6 million of the allotted quota must have fabric of Indian origin. At present, only about 6 percent of total fabrics imported into Sri Lanka originate from India. The benefits, in terms of net export earnings, are again likely to be fairly limited.

Also, changes in trade policy alone do not necessarily imply that bureaucratic obstacles are immediately addressed. India, for example, has one of the most non-transparent, highly complex and bureaucratic-ridden trade policy regimes in South Asia. It will undoubtedly need more than mere policy changes at the top to facilitate easy access to the Indian market. This has already become apparent in the application of the FTA. Tea exporters argue that the movement of tea into India has been slower than

anticipated, primarily due to the fact that the ports assigned by India to take receipt of tea exports under the FTA—Cochin and Calcutta—are located in tea producing areas in India, and likely to be unfavourable to tea imports. In another instance, a consignment of chewing gum exported under the FTA was rejected on medical grounds.

Given that the potential benefits of the FTA appear to be somewhat limited, its utility can be questioned. Bilateral agreements between SAARC member states will in time undermine their commitment to a greater South Asian identity. For the smaller South Asian economies, there is always the danger that by negotiating on a one-to-one basis with their larger neighbours, they will inevitably be negotiating from a weaker position. It is time for SAARC to clearly determine the future path of economic integration in South Asia. Inaction within the SAARC framework can only mean the proliferation of further bilateral trade agreements that will ultimately render the SAPTA process obsolete. ▽



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The Social Science Research Council is pleased to announce the *Fellowships on Conflict, Peace, & Social Transformations* designed to advance training and innovative research on underlying causes and conditions of conflict and insecurity. The fellowships will be awarded to scholars, doctoral students, and practitioners (such as non governmental and multilateral organization professionals, journalists, lawyers, activists, and other professionals). Applicants should be currently working on issues bearing on security such as human rights, gender inequality, religious revivalism, unequal access to goods and services, military affairs, weapons proliferation and arms control, peace-building, environmental sustainability, economic inequality migration, food supply, global finance, ethnicity, or nationalism. Through these fellowships the SSRC seeks to nurture innovative research and collaboration across geographic regions and between the worlds of academics and practitioners. The fellowships will be for a period of 1-2 years.

Deadline: January 12, 2001

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Deadline: February 1, 2001

There are no citizenship, residency, or nationality requirements.



For more information please contact:

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Winter School in Quantitative Economics

The Standing Committee for India and South Asia of the Econometric Society and the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIMC), are organizing a winter school in Quantitative Economics between *January 1-7, 2001* at IIMC Campus. The winter school will have two components. The first component will consist of expository lectures on recent developments in specific areas by Elhanan Helpman (Harvard University), Paul David Klempner (Nuffield College, Oxford University) and Stephen Pudney (University of Leicester), and faculty members from IIMC and other Institutes in India. The final component of the program will be a two-day workshop. Papers submitted by the participants will be screened and about 12 papers will be selected for presentation. Each paper will also be sent to one of the invited speakers, who will be requested to act as a discussant for the paper.

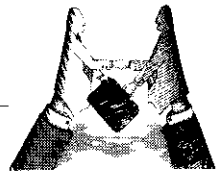
Anyone interested in participating in the winter school is requested to write to:

Prof. Anindya Sen,

Indian Institute of Management, Joka, Diamond Harbour Road,
Post Box No. 16757, Alipore Post Office, Calcutta 700 027.

Applications should include a copy of the curriculum vitae and research papers if available, and must be submitted by **September 30, 2000**. Preference will be given to young faculty members with some evidence of published work and Ph.D. students who have made some progress in their dissertation. Students should also enclose a recommendation letter from their supervisors. Anyone who is interested in presenting a paper in the Workshop must submit a full-length paper by the due date. Abstracts will not be considered.

IIMC will provide accommodation and meals to all participants. Participants from within India may also request travel grants if their host institutions do not provide any financial assistance.



Investing in investments

Less rhetoric; more political will.

by *Waqar A Sheikh*

For the past decade, South Asia has been one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. Yet, the Subcontinent remains one of the world's poorest, with about 40 percent of its population living below the poverty line.

The acceleration of economic growth in the past 10 years is attributable primarily to sweeping reforms in economic policies. After decades of inward-looking policies, South Asian countries began reducing tariffs, removing trade barriers, and dismantling restriction on domestic and foreign private investment. This has helped stimulate growth, raise per capita income and reduce poverty.

Ever since its founding in 1985, SAARC has failed to achieve palpable results, especially in issues relating to regional trade and investment. As regards the preferential arrangement for SAARC trade, SAPTA came into force in late 1995 with the intention to substantially increase intra-regional trade. Three rounds of negotiation under SAPTA have listed almost 5400 items for trade but lack of political will, understanding of inherent benefits in larger trade, and historical enmities among major partners, are proving impediments to intra-regional trade.

Moreover, Intra-SAARC investment is low and discouraging. Intra-regional investment can play a vital role in the development of the region, especially for the least developed countries like Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Past experience of other regional arrangements in East Asia has proved that the poorest countries have been more successful in attracting FDI when they targeted co-developing countries of the region. For instance, in the early 1990s, 65 percent of all FDI inflow to China, 40 percent to Malaysia and almost 30 percent to Indonesia had their origins in the East Asian region.

In the case of SAARC countries, cross-border investment flows haven't achieved much,

except to a certain extent in the Indian case. India has invested some USD 84 million in the form of joint ventures within the region, with Nepal and Sri Lanka hosting the largest amounts of Indian investment—USD 34 million and USD 32 million respectively, while Bangladesh shows USD 16 million in Indian investments.

Intra-SAARC investment, to state the obvious, has enormous potential. Listed below are some concrete steps that have to be undertaken before intra-regional investments takes off:

- Specific legal and regulatory frameworks are needed to attract investment for major projects in South Asia, which means regional investment agreement for the promotion and protection of investments.
- A reason to promote regional investment is to remove bottlenecks in the flow of intra-regional trade. As SAARC regional trade rises in the presence of regional investment agreements, the potential for international business disputes will also arise. In such a scenario, a SAARC Arbitration Council will be needed to support the rising level of business transaction among member countries.
- Avoidance of double taxation is an issue of prime importance. At present, bilateral agreement for avoidance of double taxation are in effect among some countries such as India-Nepal, Pakistan-Bangladesh, Pakistan-Sri Lanka, etc, but these are not enough to boost regional trade. An agreement regarding avoidance of double taxation is required either at the regional level or on a bilateral basis among the seven nations of the SAARC region.
- National governments have to support a multi-motor vehicular agreement in the region, which will lead to free mobility of transport.

- Establishment of a SAARC common market is likely to have a significant impact on the region's policy environment, thereby facilitating intra-SAARC investment.
- Lack of information about investment policies is a major impediment to intra-regional investments. To overcome this, all federations and chambers of commerce in the region should initiate a process of private sector awareness regarding possible joint ventures with regional partners.
- National governments haven't given much attention to the role the private sector can play in the closer integration of the region. South Asia's private sector is a major player in the region's economy. "Fortune 500" includes nine companies from this region. In view of this situation, it is all the more important to promote strategic partnership between governments and the private sector.
- Formation of a SAARC Investment or Development Bank would help tap regional investments, which will divert resources from the developed sector to the underdeveloped region or sector.

Growth quadrangles or triangles are not new for SAARC, but it is imperative now to highlight the importance and viability of such

growth zones to improve cross-border inflows of investment. This will help investment flows at a sub-regional level. Such growth zones are viable in: i) the northeastern sub-region consisting parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan; ii) southern sub-region consisting parts of India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka; and iii) northwestern sub-region consisting of parts of India and Pakistan.

There are many sectors in which investment, trade and production complementarities exist in different growth zones. For instance, Nepal has one of the world's largest water resources. This can be converted into electricity with Indian investment. Collaboration of Nepal's natural water resources with Indian finances and technological know-how can meet the shortage of electricity not only in the partner country but also in Bangladesh. Similarly, in the northeastern sub-region of SAARC, resources-based joint ventures could be launched in the mineral industry, wood-based products, pulp and paper products, pharmaceutical and herbal medicines, etc.

No doubt there are enormous prospects for intra-regional investments in South Asia. It only needs for the governments to move away from the usual rhetoric, and show some political will.



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Note: Only short listed candidates will be called in for an interview during 15th-30th November 2000

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An International Philanthropic Foundation wishes to recruit dynamic young professionals as Program Associates to work in its grantmaking and development programs in India.

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No later than **October 15, 2000.**

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The positions are expected to be filled by

January 15, 2001

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बदल गई
अवधि की
वे शामें

INDIA TODAY publishes several editions in the 'vernacular', and some are said to be better than others. Recently got to compare an Hindi issue with the original English, and found the following key differences: There is more gra-uitous Occidental

'skin' delivered to the Hindi audience (bad), a short story (good), a photo-montaging on an article titled "The Changed Evenings of Avadh" (see picture) not found in the English edition, and the use of more gruesome pictures of a murder/suicide in the Hindi version. The rest were faithful translations of the original delivered to the English-speaking classes, including a 'people' piece of a certain Amrita Jhaveri of whom it is reported in *Vanity Reports* that she made off to India with the controversial ex-chief of the Christies auction house. Well, well..



picture captioned, "A view of Indian atrocities in Held Kashmir".

SPEAKING OF photo selection, we all know of the editorial biases on Kashmir—the Pakistani press prints pictures of Indian security men beating up Kashmiris just as often as the Indian press refrains from doing so. Both are so wrong. Things must not be overdone. As in the case of this article on the costs of doing trade with India printed in *The Nation* of Islamabad, which carries a

THE INTERNATIONAL Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is a Kathmandu-based organisation which covers the Himalaya-Hindu Kush region, and even at one time it was meant to do justice to all the world's mountains. Just received the organisation's newsletter, which boasts of its Training Centre, a trial and demonstration site. I am happy to hear of this, but unhappy that the organisation considers it necessary to indicate its proximity to the Himalayan ranges by bringing the distant snows to the training centre's doorsteps, through computer manipulation.

Headlines like this, from *The Kathmandu Post*, I sincerely hope that South Asia-savvy editors will 'eschew' (a favourite term of South Asian columnists that, have you no-

ticed?). Too many deaths coming out of the emerald isles for me to take consolation upon reading ahead that this was the death of the one and only lioness of Nepal's Central Zoo.

QUITE A few air crashes doing the rounds lately, what with the Air Alliance in Patna, a Royal Nepal Twin Otter in West Nepal and the Concorde in Paris. But in all these cases, one can be reasonably



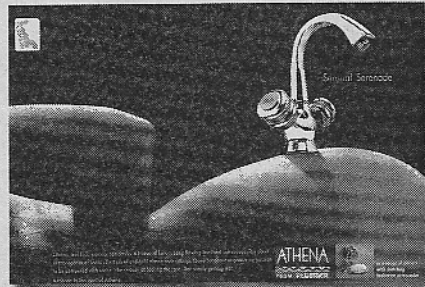
sure that, for the crash to happen, the aircraft definitively lost height. We did not need the official to say this to us, in this instance regarding the Boeing crash in Patna, the paper being *The Hindu*.

BACK TO the Patna crash site. Picture shows Indian Minister of Civil Aviation Sharad Yadav visiting one of the few survivors of the crash at a hospital in the city. Does the minister think he is doing the injured and the families a favour by his



visit? Why do newspapers and magazines allow photo opportunities such as this to politicians, who are more voyeuristic than the rest of us in rushing to the scene of the crash and then being photographed with the wounded? All over South Asia, let editors and photo-editors be more careful before allowing politicians such a free run out of the tragedy of others.

CHHETRIA PATRAKAR must be really 'out of it' as no one but him seems overly perturbed by this advert, in the Indian architecture and décor magazine, *Inside Outside*, which shows a water spout titled "Sensual Serenade" balanced-on/emerging-from the lower region of an unclad female model. One more example of how advertising has arrived before the sensibility to define the social arena—globalisation, this is it.



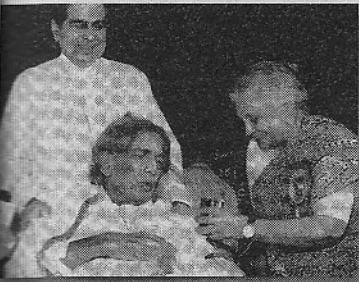
WRITES 'KARACHIAN' in his column about his city in *Dawn*: the three pre-monsoon months brings to the streets of Karachi *sattoo*-sellers who at other times of the year

Chandrika is no more

By a Post Reporter
KATHMANDU, July 16—The rise and fall of the only lioness in Nepal, Chandrika, died at the Central Zoo early morning today.
Chandrika had been undergoing medical treatment since the last few months. Her illness was attributed to old age.
She was fighting and suffering from excruciating pain, said Hari Chandrika K.C., guard at the Zoo, who rushed to the site and remained by her death bed.
This voracious lioness used to consume 40 kg meat each day. But due to the old age her consumption had reduced to just 2 kg.
In 1974, she then Sri Lanka government persuaded a lion and a lioness in Nepal as a token of goodwill. Chandrika was 24 years old when she came to Nepal. Her sister, Singha had died of gout in 1992.

sell lemonade or *rabri*. During the hot months, they sell *sattoo*, "a predominantly Punjabi drink, made of barley and sweetened with *gur*, to keep you from the blistering loo". This drink has become a hot (cool!) favourite among the Karachi urbanite of late, writes Karachian. Which gets me thinking—such a drink is not found on the streets of Delhi, which is mostly a Punjabi city. Another legacy of a closed border, for even *sattoo* drinks travel to adjoining cities slower when there is less and less cultural interaction. The fact that a cool remedy for the loo which has been tried and tested in Karachi does not travel to Delhi or Amritsar, in a way, indicates the cultural divide that is all too real in South Asia.

KAIFI AZMI, the ageing Urdu believer, was happy that through the lobbying efforts of actor Dilip Kumar, the Delhi state government of Sheila Dixit decided to recognise Urdu as the second official language of the capital. What he said at the occasion is noteworthy for the narrow-minded on both sides of the Urdu-Hindi divide, in India and Pakistan: "Urdu is a secular language and this is an



award for secularism."

THE CHIEF Executive of Pakistan has said that his view of the future of Pakistan is as a country which is "Islamic, forward looking, dynamic and progressive". Now how to bring this about? Through improving the quality of education, increasing literacy, bringing 'religious nurseries' into the mainstream and stress on vocational training in schools. As far as the madrasas are concerned, Pervez Musharraf said that ("in some of them") focus is on rituals, and not enough on scientific education. Then, warming the cockles of Chhetria Patrakar's heart, he said that the important subject of geography has been completely neglected for quite some time. The CE was speaking extempore, and my recognition goes to any head of state/government who can bring "progressive" into a speech.



Fireworks in city to celebrate the Test status — independent photo

Bangladesh, how long to wait for a Test victory?

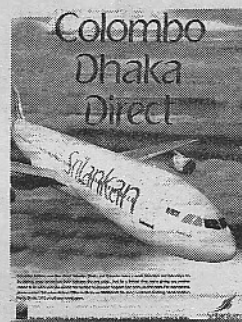
THE EARLIER criteria to be a nation-state was: territory, population, sovereignty. Add to that Test status. For, that is what Bangladeshis obviously believe, from the fireworks and jubilation which greeted the decision of the International Cricket Council to grant the country full membership. Writes *The Independent*, "Bangladesh became an associate member of ICC in 1977, ap-

plied for full membership and won the one-day status in the same year." The expectation of becoming a full member got heightened after Bangladesh's ICC Trophy victory in Malaysia, and hence their qualification for the World Cup. So, with Bangladesh in, who's next from South Asia? Nepal? Dare we expect?

CREDIT REQUIRED to be given to the Pakistan Tobacco Company and the Lakson Tobacco Company for this ad in *The News*, with the message: "STOP! We do not sell cigarettes to youth under 18. As responsible corporate citizens, PTC and LTC, firmly believe that smoking is an informed adult choice. We remain committed to preventing underage smoking throughout Pakistan. In line with

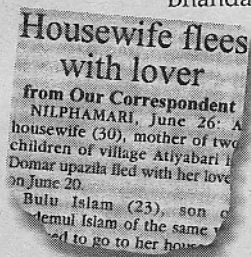


this commitment, we have launched a retail education campaign and introduced on-pack inscription to prevent underage smoking."



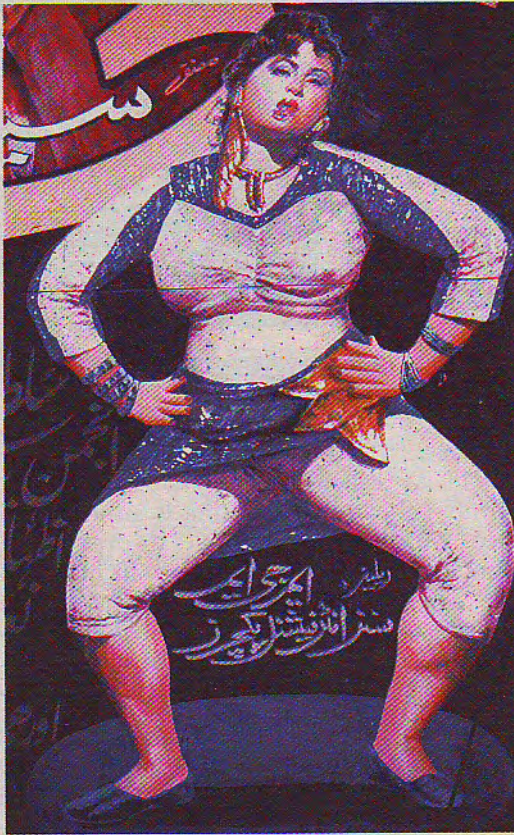
WE ALL need to welcome the fact that there is an additional linkage between two South Asian capitals. Colombo and Dhaka are now connected by a twice-weekly flight (Monday and Saturday) of Sri Lanka (formerly Air Lanka). Now only if that Dhaka flight could be extended to Kathmandu...

SOMEONE IS faking in the name of Mr. Dadabhoj D Sethna's letter to *The News*, which must have something to do with some intra-Parsi fighting in Karachi. Writes Mr. Sethna in the letter column of the newspaper of 5 June, "There are only 2,300 Parsis in Pakistan and from the copy for the director of Zoroastrians in Pakistan, it is clear that I am the only Dadaboy D Sethna in Pakistan. The letter thus published on 29 May has been engineered by the miniscule Cowasjee/Bhandara group, who are against Mr. Byram D Avari, as I did not write that letter." Of course, I will not illuminate you as to the details of the misdoings of the Cowasjee/Bhandara group as it relates to Mr. Byram D Avari.



DOES THE fact that a housewife fled with her lover in Nilphamari in Bangladesh deserve even two column-inches in *The Independent* of Dhaka? I think not.

— Chhetria Patrakar



The dutiful wife, the caring mother, the immoral vamp, the fast one...

It is generally accepted that the media plays a vital role in disseminating information and in forming public opinion. However, given that "information" exists within the ambit of ideas, this service is never benign—it is closely bound up with the ways in which those who finance or produce the mediatic message see or would like the consumers to see the world.

—“Re-Inventing Women: Representation of Women in the Media During the Zia Years”, *The Simorgh Collective, Lahore, 1985.*

by Beena Sarwar

This comment from a report based on a study of images of women in the media during the Zia years summarises the importance of the media in shaping ideas. The study, undertaken during General Zia-ul Haq’s so-called Islamisation programme, retains its relevance because the ideas instilled at the time have been internalised, and are propagated today. The process has had a negative impact on society and thinking, especially with regard to women, since Zia targetted the woman’s persona as a means of political control. Let’s take a look at how women are represented in the Pakistani media:

Advertisements: As consumers of household products, beauty and medical aids, women are the major target group of television commercials. The Simorgh study found that 75 percent of television commercials are aimed at women. However, even

in the 25 percent of advertised products conceived purely for male consumption, like automobiles, shaving, and agricultural products, almost half of them depicted only women, and that too in servile, supporting roles. Mostly, they are shown as the dutiful wife and mother, the healer, the soother.

Mamta (motherhood) is stressed in various campaigns. For example, a milkpowder ad shows a mother bringing up her young son, and she is tearful as he grows up to graduate from college (her youthful face offset by streaks of grey in her hair).

The women in advertisements are beautiful, shown through soft-focus lens that makes them look unreal and ‘ultra-feminine’. There is little representation of women in the work that they actually do in society, whether in the fields as unskilled labour (the rural woman in Punjab works an average of 16

hours a day), or in factories, offices, laboratories and hospitals.

Films: In this world even further removed from reality than ads, the woman is either a vamp or a saint. The stereotypically “fast”, “Westernised” creature in tight trousers, cigarette between painted lips, with no trace of maternal feelings. The dutiful wife, sacrificing self for husband and children. The emotional mother with bloodshot eyes, who urges her son to avenge injustice. A fantastically dressed heroine breaking into a vulgar dance to attract the hero’s attention, behaviour far removed from what is considered appropriate in society. Once she has been ‘owned’ by the hero, however, she settles into a demure wifely state of being.

Not only do all the heroes take the law in their own hands, films do not even bother about the laws of the land. A film about a second

marriage does not even refer to the law which disallows a second marriage without the permission of the first wife. The more vulgar a film and the deeper into the world of (male) fantasy the filmmakers delve, the more chances of its popularity at the box office.

Television: Television dramas appear to represent women more realistically, but in fact reinforce stereotypes. What is stressed in women's characters is emotionalism (as opposed to the rationalism of the male), dependence, traditionalism and domestication. If a woman is shown as a working professional, she is not at the workplace due to ambition or ability, but out of economic necessity.

Television news tends to ignore crimes against women. Thoughtfully presented television serials or talk shows remain exceptions, and there have been some good attempts. But such programmes are presented in a vacuum, and make no significant difference.

Press: Although the English language press is generally more 'sympathetic' to women and women's issues (perhaps because there are more women attuned to these issues in editorial positions), here too there are deplorable lapses. The Urdu press is far more prone to sensationalise crimes against women; for example, in the rare cases of violence by women, great attention is paid to details like the woman's "moral" character—she is denounced as "heartless", "savage mother" and "monster". There are no comments on the character of the man who may have driven her to the crime, for example, by extreme cruelty.

Sensationalising crimes against women shifts the emphasis from the crime/criminal to the victim and reinforces existing attitudes—rape is considered "not so bad" if the woman is married, widowed, or of a "dubious character". The emphasis shifts from the crime/criminal to the character or marital status of the woman.

The perception that rape is a sex

PTV women

SINCE THE Zia years (1977-88) the state's active focus on women as symbols of culture and society, has reinforced existing prejudices against women in Pakistan. Zia's restrictive media policy required female announcers on Pakistan Television (PTV) to cover their heads, and in television plays, a man and a woman could not be shown alone together on the screen—a third person had to be present in the background. When leaving the room, the actor and actress had to take different exits.

There was a brief respite during Benazir Bhutto's first tenure. But with the next government, Nawaz Sharif's first, we were back to the process of accelerated indoctrination and reinforcement of the *dupatta* policy. Although television policy under the present government is again more relaxed vis-a-vis women, it can be tightened any day under pressure from religious extremists and political opportunists. ▽

crime rather than a crime of violence and power was reinforced by the Hudood Ordinances of 1979, which make little distinction between *zina* (adultery) and *zina bil jabr* (rape), and which make adultery a crime against the state. Because rape is seen as a sexual act, secrecy is considered paramount to protect the family honour. Those brave enough to break the silence are viewed as a curiosity, and in some cases, newspapers go out of their way to delve into their background to 'dig up the dirt'.

The Urdu Press often solicits the opinion of religious leaders about such incidents. The view projected is a blinkered one. 'Good' women

are traditional, self-sacrificing and pure. Women who assert themselves are portrayed negatively, seen as "Westernised" and of suspicious character.

Take the case of the Indian women's Peace Bus trip to Pakistan in April. While the event itself was reported in very superficial terms, particularly in the Urdu press, the song-and-dance element was emphasised. One newspaper even gleefully focused on an activist who had lit a cigarette, highlighting her act in the caption.

Textbooks: It is not only the media that creates stereotypes. Schoolbooks also marginalise the contribution of women in all spheres of society. Text and illustrations feature girls almost exclusively in domestic roles. Although several studies have been carried out on gender discrimination in school texts, no government has actively tried to redress this problem. (This, despite the fact that enrolment of girls in Karachi and Lahore's universities is almost at par with boys and their performance in the exams almost always far better than that of their male counterparts.)

The bottom line is that women are not only important to the media, and are in fact crucial to the economics of making money, but not as part of making news. They do make news, but it is largely news about sex. ▽





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New moon outlaw

Is he a poacher, smuggler, Robin Hood, plain thug, or a Tamil politician-in-the-making? Will the real Veerappan please emerge out of the jungle?

by *Deepak Kumar Kacholia*

It has been a distinguished story of crime for Veerappan since 1955, when he first killed a tusker at the age of 10, and was recognised for his talent by another poacher, Se Vair Gounder, who recruited him as an understudy. Koose Muniswamy Veerappan, a resident of Gopinatham village in Tamil Nadu, has been unleashing his reign of terror since 1984. He has murdered 158 people and over 2000 elephants, netting him over INR 1000 million (USD 22 million).

But the kidnapping of Rajkumar, the Kannada matinee idol, has added a totally new dimension to this poacher's life. Someone might make a blockbuster out of this one

of these days—a Tamil villain kidnaps a Kannada hero and all hell breaks loose between Tamilians and Kannadigas. Indeed, the violence that erupted after the sensational incident threatened to remind Bangaloreans of the Cauvery riots over water sharing in 1991. Fortunately, the violence didn't assume alarming proportions for the minority Tamils in Karnataka, although the last has not been heard yet.

Perhaps, one reason is that Rajkumar is as dear to the Tamils residing in Karnataka as to the Kannadigas themselves. The rallies taken out by several Tamil organisations in Bangalore and elsewhere in the city seeking the release

of their hero, seems to indicate the measure of affection. But the tale got its twist when the government emissary, Gopal, quoted Veerappan as saying that he is fighting for 60 million Tamils.

It is now beyond doubt that the brigand has a nexus with two ultra-Left Tamil extremist groups, the Tamil National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Tamil National Retrieval Force (TNRF). The four demands that Veerappan made besides the earlier 10, seem to indicate that these external forces are pushing him. Some of these demands include Tamil being made the medium of instruction up to the tenth standard in Tamil Nadu schools, and



OUTLOOK

that the five TNLA men who are in prison in Tamil Nadu be released. While there is talk that the outlaw is merely expressing his social concerns, the other side is that he is being manipulated by the TNLA and the TNRA.

According to Gopal, who has been making forays into the jungle to meet Veerappan and Rajkumar, Veerappan was in total control of the gang, and there were nine other armed extremists with him. Gopal, who has made a name for himself as one of the few outsiders who have been able to meet the larger-than-life figure, says Veerappan is no longer the same person. First, unlike before, he refused to meet Gopal, and said that abductors never allowed anybody to meet those whom they had abducted.

Veerappan's choice for the latest abduction was, if anything, canny: a superstar who has acted in about 200 films, with a cult following of millions. The abductor knew that the move would bring the state machineries of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu down to its knees, given the popularity of the captive and the political importance of the man.

The abduction itself had all the cautious trappings of a Veerappan operation. He was aware that Rajkumar did not have police protection while visiting his native village, and it was a new moon night. It was on another new moon that Veerappan had abducted the then Tamil Nadu deputy superintendent of police V. Chidambaranathan and two others in December 1993, nine Karnataka Forest Department personnel in July 1997 and six men in October 1997.

Over the course of these kidnappings, Veerappan has, among other things, shown a willingness to surrender, demanded amnesty, or pardon for all the crimes committed in a gory career. This is how Walter I. Dawaram, former Tamil Nadu director-general of police, who was in the forefront in the hunt for Veerappan, recalls of the first kidnap: "Before his first abduction on 3 December 3 1994, he offered to sur-

render and sent a cassette to me. He wanted me to come for final talks. Then he ran away."

When he abducted the DGP, his outrageous demands included INR 10000 million (USD 2.2 billion) to rehabilitate the families of his gang members killed by the police, grant of a 100-year lease to quarry blue metal in the Malai Mahadeshwara Hills near Mysore, withdrawal of all cases against him anywhere in India, and action against all erring officials. And after the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam headed by Karunanidhi returned to power in Tamil Nadu in May 1996, Veerappan renewed his offer of surrender, but the government ignored it. He made a similar offer to the Karnataka government, which too was ignored.

He followed this up with the abduction of nine Karnataka Forest Department employees in July 1997. The demand then was that he should be slapped only a two-year sentence, and that too without having to stand trial, with the assurance that he would be provided proper facilities in the jail. He also wanted the state to compensate the deaths of his associates at the hands of the police, by granting the bereaved families INR 5 million (USD .11 million) each. Further, he renewed his offer of surrender, but insisted on amnesty. Gopal went twice into the forests and obtained the release of all the men. But Veerappan went back on the surrender offer.

The fourth abduction took place on 7 October 1997. The victims were: naturalists-cum-wildlife photographers Senani Hegde and S. Krupakar; a scientist from the Indian Horticulture Institute, Dr. Satyabrata Maiti, and three Karnataka Forest Department employees. This time around, Veerappan sought pardon, and agreed to be in jail for two years.

Tamil showman

A topic of great interest is whether Veerappan is now being manipulated by the TNLA and the TNRF to meet their own agenda. The police

believe that it is impossible that Veerappan would have made the latest demands on his own. Mediator Gopal insists that someone was manipulating him, and it was true that extremists were with him. "There were nine extremists with him," Gopal said. "But Veerappan demonstrated that he and only he alone was the leader." Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K. Karunanidhi is also convinced: "Somebody is tutoring him," he told a press gathering.

Earlier, in October 1999, the arrest of one Sarvanamurthy in Talavadi forests in October 1999, had revealed Veerappan's connection with extremists. Sarvanamurthy was carrying 15 pairs of olive green uniforms and a country-made weapon, to be delivered to Veerappan. During interrogation, he reportedly confessed that he had been trained by one of the splinter groups of the TNRT, and had later spent a month with Veerappan's gang. He also mentioned the names of a few others who had been sent by the TNRT/TNLA to 'assist' Veerappan.

But Veerappan's apparent Tamil nationalistic talk or his political ambitions does not come as anything new. Not so long ago, *Nakeeran* had carried the brigand's outpourings against the alleged atrocities committed by the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) against the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the alleged looting of Tamils' properties in Karnataka during riots over the issue of Cauvery waters.

But to completely buy the theory that Veerappan is a Tamil saviour flies in the face of his record—he has killed more Tamils than Kannadigas. The police think that Veerappan is too uninformed on worldly matters, and say that he is not even aware that communities other than Tamils and Kannadigas live in India. "A person who has demanded INR 10000 million obviously has no idea of money, and one can imagine what his intellectual levels are," says a police official. But the follies of underestimating the man are there for all to see. ▽

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Bye Bye Mrs. B

Like the Nehrus in India, ruling Sri Lanka has been the family business of the Bandaranaiques.

by Manik de Silva



It was curtains for Sri Lanka's mother-daughter political act when Sirima Bandaranaike who had been the 'token' prime minister of her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) government since 1994, was made to step down from office to make way for a younger successor able to contribute towards the reelection of the PA at the 10 October general election.

The 84-year-old matriarch, near crippled by arthritis, had not been able to function for much of her last lap in office. Confined to a wheelchair and unable to communicate effectively, Mrs. B, as she is popularly known in political circles, was unable to even marginally take part in governance. Although the office is without real power under Sri Lanka's Constitution where a directly elected executive president is both head of state and head of government, the prime ministry remains the number two slot hierarchically.

The first holder of that office under the presidential system, Ranasinghe Premadasa, who became prime minister under J.R. Jayewardene, effectively demonstrated that the office could be used to reach out for the ultimate prize. Premadasa made his presence felt as the leader of the government party in Parliament and its chief defender or attacker in the legislature. It was also a useful tool to project himself as the successor to the presidency despite the challenge by two younger colleagues, Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake. Sadly, all three—Athulathmudali, Premadasa and Dissanayake—in that order were to die at the hands of assassins.

Keeping her mother as prime minister despite her very visible disabilities proved useful to Chandrika. That way she could keep other aspirants at bay without antagonising some by choosing another. Also, given the role that Mrs. B had played in Sri Lanka's politics

over a 40-year period, nobody would publicly ask "why is this lady clinging on in her condition?" Elder daughter Sun-ethra, the only Bandaranaike not in politics, said as much in a recent interview.

"I didn't want her (Mrs. B) to be embarrassed by people saying, 'What is the meaning of this? This old lady should know when to go. Why is she hanging on like this?'" But an MP from the opposition United National Party (UNP) did say so two or three years ago, Sunethra remembered. But the irony of politics is such that the very MP crossed over to the government and was rewarded with a ministry by Chandrika. And he was pictured smiling behind Mrs. B when the cabinet called on her to bid goodbye.

But with the elections approaching and Chandrika in trouble with a new constitution that she was determined to push through at the fag end of the 10th parliament, realpolitik demanded that whatever shine there was in the prime minis-

try be exploited. So mum had to go. Sunethra says that she was delighted that her mother took the "initiative" to resign. "If she had not, I would presume next time round she would have been dropped from the national list (30 places in the 225-member Parliament are filled through this device with unelected persons). This I saw as a better way to bow out of the political arena."

But Anura Bandaranaike, Mrs. B's only son, tells a different story. He called the resignation "sudden" and says he was perplexed by it. "I don't see any logic in it," he said. "My mother was planning to resign at the end of the election campaign. I met her twice after the resignation and I strongly feel that she was forced to leave. She is so weak that she has little to say on anything." Anura alleged that the letter of resignation was prepared and sent for Mrs. B to sign.

Sunethra defends her sister saying that Anura "sees everything in a contrary light". Having failed to win the leadership of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), founded by their father, prime minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 1959, Anura now belongs to the UNP which his father left sensing that the prime ministry was going to be dynastically handed over by (then) Ceylon's first prime minister, Don Stephen Senanayake, to his son, Dudley. Bandaranaike Sr. was right. But he did succeed in sweeping the UNP out of office in a nationalist wave in 1956.

Like his father, Anura switched sides after losing the succession battle to Chandrika in 1993. He often jests that the Bandaranaiques of Sri Lanka, like the Bhuttos of Pakistan, are always feuding. For high stakes, it must be added.

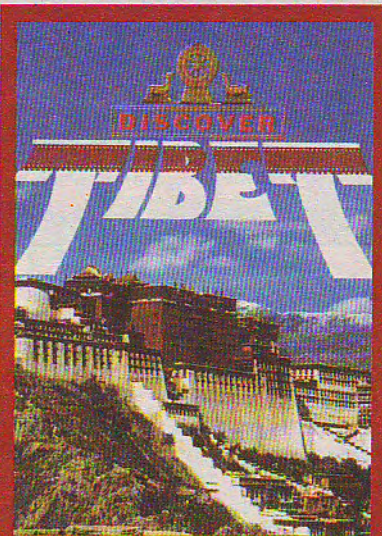
Many Lankans believe Anura's version of his mother's exit. The circumstantial evidence points strongly in that direction. Mrs. B's dearest wish appears to have been a reconciliation between son and daughter, and Anura stepping into her prime ministerial shoes. But that

was not to be.

Like the Nehrus in India, ruling the country has long been the family business of the Bandaranaiques. Mrs. B was swept to office in 1960 to become the world's first woman prime minister following her husband's assassination. Then a shy housewife, she was virtually railroaded into politics when the SLFP failed to win the first general election called after Bandaranaike's assassination. But with a hung parliament, prime minister Dudley Senanayake chose to recommend dissolution after he had been defeated in the first throne speech presented by his March 1960 government. Mrs. B, cast as a weeping widow in white, won the election that followed in July the same year.

She learnt her ropes from the Senate, the Upper House of the then bicameral legislature. She matured as a politician when she became the leader of the opposition in the Lower House from 1965-1970. The political savvy she acquired during these five years was remarkable. Her major triumph was her resounding victory in 1970 to become the head of a United Front government that included Sri Lanka's old Left, the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party. The way she handled a youth insurrection in 1971 won her the accolade of being "the only man in the cabinet" from Sir John Kotelawela, a bluntly outspoken soldier who served as prime minister from 1952-56.

Chandrika's opponents say that she would like to keep the seat warm for one of her two children. Daughter Yasodhara is studying medicine at Cambridge and son Vimukthi is due to train as a veterinarian also in England. Though their mother, who is a captive of security in the light of the continuing assassination threat by the Liberation Tigers, has publicly said that her children hate politics (their father too was assassinated like their grandfather) and dislikes her being in it, the comparison with the Nehrus is hard to avoid. ▽



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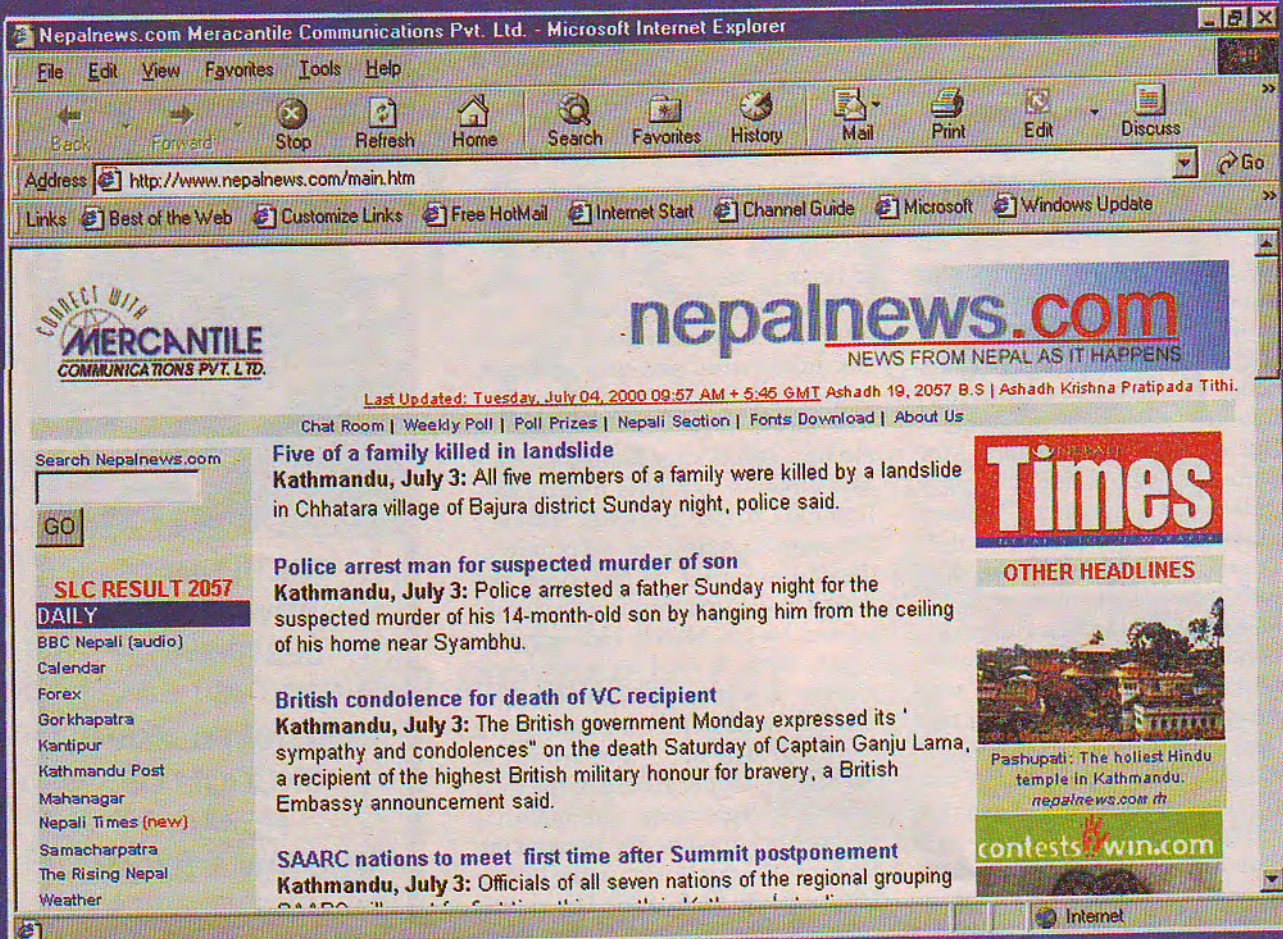
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The Concorde and the nuclear reactor

If you construct something foolproof, there will always be a fool greater than the proof.

—Edward Teller, speaking at the Nuclear Energy Forum, San Luis, Obispo, California, 17 October 1975.

by *M.V. Ramana*

On 25 July 2000, an Air France Concorde bound for New York crashed in flames shortly after takeoff from Charles de Gaulle Airport outside Paris killing all its passengers. Officials were quick to point out that the crash was the first of a Concorde since the supersonic plane went into commercial operation in 1976. But the Concorde has been flown much less than, say, the Boeing 747. Further, there have been quite a few troubles with the Concorde in the past. For example, between 1979 and 1981, on four separate occasions, tyres blew out as the planes were taking off. Due to the high stresses from supersonic flight, on several occasions sections of the tail have fallen off. Over the last 15 years, there have been at least four emergency landings.

A week prior to that, on 17 July, a Boeing 737 belonging to Alliance Air crashed in flames into an apartment block near Patna airport. Though tragic, this crash doesn't come as a big surprise given the poor record of air safety India has. In the 1990s alone, there were at least three major civilian air crashes. India's Comptroller and Auditor General

reported in 1997 that there had been 187 accidents and 2729 incidents involving Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft between April 1991 and March 1997, resulting in the loss of 147 airplanes and 63 pilots.

Such aircraft accidents have obviously prompted increased attention to safety, leading to design improvements and safety features. Nevertheless, accidents have continued. In studying the safety of airplanes and other hazardous technologies, several sociologists and organisation theorists have come to a pessimistic conclusion: serious accidents are inevitable with complex, high-technology systems.

Charles Perrow of Yale University, who coined the term "normal accidents" to describe such accidents, identifies two structural features of many hazardous technologies—"interactive complexity" and "tight coupling"—which make them highly accident-prone regardless of the intent of their operators. According to Perrow, "complex interactions are those of unfamiliar sequences, or unplanned and unexpected consequences, and either not visible or not immediately comprehensible". Tight coupling means

that "there is no slack or buffer or give between two items; what happens in one directly affects what happens in the other".

In addition to these structural factors, normal accident theorists also point to conflicting interests both within organisations and between organisations and the broader political community, which make accidents more probable while making it unlikely that organisations will learn the appropriate lessons from accidents.

Normal accident theory has been put to severe tests and has generally been successful. Scott Sagan of Stanford University, in an important and wide-ranging study of nuclear weapon systems in the United States, identified a number of close calls, and concluded that while on any given day, the risk of a serious nuclear weapons accident may be low, in the long run, such an accident is extremely likely.

Analysing the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle in January 1986, Diane Vaughan of Boston College pointed out that while the disaster was the result of a mistake, what is important to remember is not

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that individuals in organisations make mistakes, but that mistakes themselves are "socially organised and systematically produced". The origins of the accident "were in routine and taken-for-granted aspects of organisational life that created a way of seeing that was simultaneously a way of not seeing".

Inherently unsafe

Perhaps the best illustration of a hazardous technology that displays the structural and political problems that normal accident theorists point to is the nuclear reactor. The technology is highly complex, with different components interacting in non-linear, unfamiliar ways. The time scales involved in different processes are very short; operations can quickly spin out of control. Compounding the problem is the secrecy and control maintained by the institutions that construct and operate these reactors.

Even so, the nuclear establishments of the world have persisted in claiming that the probability of reactor accidents is very low. South Asia's authorities are no exception. Last year following the Tokaimura accident in Japan, India's Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) chairman claimed: "There is no possibility of any nuclear accident in the near or distant future in India. We have 150 reactor years of safe operation."

It is worth contrasting this with earlier similar pronouncements. Just three years before the Chernobyl accident, writing in the *Bulletin of the International Atomic Energy Agency* (Vol. 25, June 1983), the head of IAEA's safety division claimed: "The design feature of having more than 1000 individual primary circuits increases the safety of the reactor system—a serious loss of coolant accident is practically impossible...the safety of nuclear power plants in the Soviet Union is assured by a very wide spectrum of measures..." But on 26 April 1986, Unit 4 of the Chernobyl reactor went critical and exploded, releasing an immense amount of ra-

dioactivity into the atmosphere. Practically, every country in the northern hemisphere received some radioactive fallout. Between 100,000 and 150,000 hectares of agricultural land had to be abandoned. Estimates of worldwide deaths resulting from the radioactive contamination vary from a few hundreds to tens of thousands.

What makes the assurance offered by the Indian AEC chairman even more absurd is that at the time of the Chernobyl accident, the Soviet Union had over 1000 reactor years of experience. The confidence is also misplaced because there *have been* several accidents over the course of India's nuclear history—examples include the fire at Narora, multiple heavy water leaks at Kalpakkam, the collapse of the containment at Kaiga and flooding of the pumps at Kakrapar. It was only sheer luck that none of these resulted in major catastrophes.

With secrecy written into its mandate through the 1962 Atomic Energy Act, the Indian Department of Atomic Energy has been able to hide unpleasant facts from public scrutiny to a greater extent than most countries. In part, the secrecy reflects the close connection between nuclear power production and nuclear weapons development. But it also serves to cover accidents, safety violations and poor performance.

India is not alone in continuing the expansion of nuclear power even in the face of these risks. In South Asia, Pakistan is also following the same path. And Bangladesh has recently announced its intention to start a nuclear power programme.

In Pakistan, the one-power reactor that has been in operation near Karachi has had a poor track record. During the period 1972-97, on an average, the plant has been shut down for about 55 days each year due to equipment failure or "human error". More dangerous is the reactor coming up at Chashma.

Pakistani physicists Zia Mian and A.H. Nayyar identify three con-

cerns with the Chashma reactor. First, Chashma is located in a seismically-active zone. Second, the reactor is a replica of the Chinese Qinshan reactor that suffered an accident in 1998. Third, this is the first time that China is indigenously manufacturing various reactor components. Pakistan, in other words, will be the guinea pig for this design and its components. Mian and Nayyar estimate that given the high population density of South Asia, an accident would cause somewhere between 5,000 and 33,000 deaths. Efforts to delay, if not prevent the start-up of Chashma have so far not succeeded.

Nuclear reactor designs have, of course, been modified to incorporate lessons from the Chernobyl accident, and earlier accidents. Nevertheless, no reactor, not even the so-called "inherently safe" reactor, is wholly risk free. A 1990 study by the Union of Concerned Scientists concluded: "As a general proposition, there is nothing 'inherently' safe about a reactor. Regardless of the attention to design, construction, operation, and management of nuclear reactors, there is always something that could be done (or not done) to render the reactor dangerous. The *degree* to which this is true varies from design to design, but we believe that our general conclusion is correct."

The risk of accidents does not necessarily mean that we should abandon a technology but it should certainly cause concern and lead to the exploration of safer alternatives. Prior to this, however, is the requirement that the pursuit of nuclear power, or any other hazardous technology, should be done democratically with the informed consent of the potentially affected populations. The first step towards a democratic debate is an honest assessment of the risks involved. Unfortunately, with nuclear establishments, as with the purveyors of other hazardous technologies, that step seems the hardest. ▲

Madrasa to madness Revenge of the Pashtuns

How did a ragtag bunch of madrasa students, largely reared in Pakistan, come to dominate over 80 percent of Afghanistan and essentially create the world's most bizarre, brutal and backward Islamic state? Ahmed Rashid, who has covered Afghanistan for over 20 years, expertly recounts just how the Talibs, or religious students, were catapulted into the Afghan void of ethnic cleansing and religious persecution—and quickly proceeded to carry out their own ethnic cleansing and religious persecution.

With their one strategic victory after another, largely backed by Pakistan's ISI (Inter Services Intelligence), the Taliban set about establishing a state that to date has none of the trappings of a state. Rashid illustrates how the Taliban, largely ignorant of Islamic and Afghan history, knowledge of the Sharia, the Quran or the modern Islamic world, are "caught between a tribal society which they try to ignore and the need for a state structure which they refuse to establish".

We learn, for example, that Afghanistan's treasury is run out of tin trunks which the supreme leader, Mullah Omar, apparently keeps under his bed. The Taliban's capture of Kabul, punctuated by the violent humiliation, castration and execution of the former puppet president Najibullah, led to the rapid transformation of the large, multi-ethnic city into an underdeveloped terrorised village. By replacing the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara bureaucrats with mostly unqualified Pashtuns, Rashid notes how government ministries largely ceased to function. Meanwhile, the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, under a variety of charismatic and equally brutal commanders, continued to forge, break and re-forge alliances against the Taliban. As the battleground

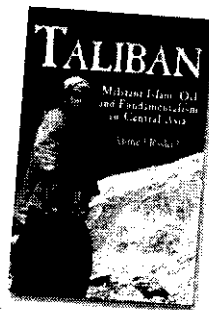
shifted to Mazar-e-Sharif in 1997, then to Bamiyan in the ensuing years, the grisly details of battle, and the slaughter of soldiers and innocent civilians alike are retold in harrowing detail.

The ongoing chaos came to symbolise the Taliban's largely "secretive, dictatorial and inaccessible" decision-making process. Aside from recounting the seemingly endless public amputations, executions, and beatings, Rashid reproduces a number of Taliban decrees, particularly those relating to women, and other cultural issues. The Department of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, at the centre of this misogynist regime, not only

group of visiting Pakistani football players was subjected to public humiliation and the shaving of their heads for the odious crime of wearing shorts at the game!

In retrospect, Mullah Omar's rare public appearance in Kandahar in April 1996, where he appeared wrapped in the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed (an obscene gesture to many Muslims), seemed to firmly cement his position as Commander of the Ignorant. Nor, given 20 years of civil war in Afghanistan, did it come as a surprise to learn that several of the leading Talibs were young, crippled, inexperienced and dumb. Or that they could break all previous records for carnage, particularly when attacking the inhabitants of Mazar-e-Sharif and the Hazarat. The Taliban additionally proved themselves iconoclasts extraordinaire when they blew apart parts of the colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan in 1998, reducing 2000 years of Afghan heritage largely to rubble. The Sharia, it seemed, could explain everything, even why hashish (consumed domestically) must be forbidden, but why opium (consumed abroad by unbelievers) could rightfully become their most valuable cash crop.

Rashid, also the author of the acclaimed *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* has much to say about the Central Asian players, the multinational oil conglomerates, and the roles of the United States and Russia. For, the stability of the entire region, from war-ravished Chechnya to Tajikistan, from Iran to Pakistan, hinges upon Afghanistan. The Shiite Hazara, the Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostom, the Tajik Northern Alliance Commander Ahmad Shah Masud as well as the other Muslim jihadists and the wily Osama Bin Laden, are seen promoting their own self-interests, all of course in



Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia

by Ahmed Rashid
Yale University Press, US & UK, 2000
ISBN 0-300-08340-8
USD 27.95

reviewed by **Douglas Kremer**

forces women to cover themselves up from head to toe in the burqa and to remain indoors, but literally removed any remaining scrap of dignity from their miserable lives. It banned all forms of entertainment, including singing and dancing at weddings, flying of kites, and hanging of paintings, portraits or photographs in homes. Most recently, a

the name of Islam.

Indeed, the chapters on dictators and oil companies chronicle how the quest for pipeline routes led to Afghanistan becoming "the fulcrum of the first battle of the new Great Game", and reveal fascinating minutiae about the players, Unocal and Bridas, which adroitly manipulated governments on their own behalf, yet ultimately failed to construct the pipelines due to the continuing civil war. Oh yes, and the annoying fact that Western media eventually exposed the thuggish Taliban's twisted and inhumane treatment of women, which in turn finally sparked US government concern.

Rashid neatly summarises the distinct phases of US policy (or lack thereof) towards the Taliban, characterised, not surprisingly, by lack of focus and coherence. Meanwhile, as Pakistan grew more unstable, General Zia-ul Haq's great dream of a "Pakistan-led bloc of nations" in Central Asia instead meta-

morphosed into a military dictatorship abutted by Pashtun pockets of Taliban-like repression in the NWFP and Balochistan—with cinemas being burnt and satellite dishes smashed in Quetta. Rashid's comprehensive analysis and extraordinary level of access to officials in Pakistan make it clear that, with its lethargic economy and complicated ethnic and religious mix, Pakistan too seems ripe "for a Taliban-style Islamic revolution".

Now that the Taliban's current summer offensive against the Northern Alliance is well underway, Russia and the United States, at the time of writing, have called for new sanctions. Will the flow of arms into Afghanistan ever cease? While journalists, high-ranking UN emissaries, diplomats and oil barons continue to observe the endless forays, the malnourished wretches of Afghanistan suffer anew, with little hope of receiving desperately-needed food relief before winter.

Much of the country's impossible geography prevents distribution of supplies during the snowy season, and so the next few months are critical to the survival of both the last vestiges of resistance, and the population under the Northern Alliance.

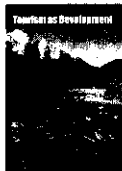
Lack of humanitarian relief, largely hindered by the Taliban, has reduced most women in urban areas to veiled beggars, little more than black shifting shapes perpetually roaming the streets in search of food. Although the miserable statistics on education, hunger, and infant mortality are too depressing to print here, at least one can congratulate the Taliban for cracking down on highway robbery; after all, it is far better to live in terror and possess nothing than to live in terror and fear that something may be stolen. The stakes in Afghanistan are so great, the players are so numerous, that it seems hardly likely that stability will come to the region any time soon. ▽



Everything you wanted to know about the two central Nepal districts of Gulmi and Arghakhanchi. This book is history, geography, ethnography and cultural studies all rolled into one. The result of a nine-year-long research by a team of French social scientists—perhaps the first study of its kind in Nepal.

Resunga: The Mountain of the Horned Sage
edited by Philippe Ramirez
(2000, pp. x+304)

A Bibliotheca Himalayica book



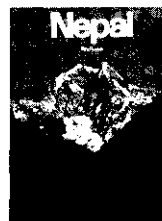
Ever wondered why Pokhara's Phewa Lake area has become such an eyesore? Or, how the opening of Upper Mustang has benefitted the locals there? This book has the answers, and more, as it looks at three other tourist destinations in the Himalaya and highlights the essential interrelationship between tourism and local progress.

Tourism as Development: Case Studies from the Himalaya
edited by Pitamber Sharma
(2000, pp. xiii+179)



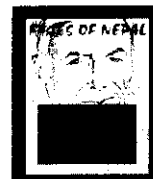
When Toni Hagen first set foot in Nepal in 1950, he came as a development expert. Over the nine years that he walked 14,000 km across the length and breadth of Nepal, conducting its first reconnaissance survey, he grew to become a valued friend of the country. This is the original book that introduced Nepal, both to Nepalis and outsiders. This fourth edition of this classic includes the original reports and photographs even as it brings the reader up-to-date with the changes Hagen has seen over the course of a half-century.

Toni Hagen's
Nepal: The Kingdom in the Himalaya
revised and updated with Deepak Thapa
(1999, pp. xviii+251)



The second and completely revised edition of this acclaimed picture book-cum-ethnography study by a British artist and a Nepali scholar. The new edition deals with three additional population groups and comes with more colour plates and sketches, and an additional linguistic map of Nepal.

Faces of Nepal
by Jan Salter and Harka Gurung
(1999, pp. vi+99)



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Virginity test

THE SAANSI panchayat [Alipura, Tonk, Rajasthan] is in frenetic motion. Eighteen-year-old Kalu has just been summoned after having flunked her virginity test, or *kukri ki rasm* as it is known in this medieval belt. Standing by her side are her head-bent parents who will have to endure an *agni pariksha* to prove their daughter's innocence. Agni pariksha being walking with burning embers on their hands for 100 yards or staying under water while the groom's side walks a predetermined distance. When Ramu and Kanhaiyiya, Kalu's relatives, burnt their palms in the process, she was condemned to being *awaara* and Rs. 25,000 (USD 554) was demanded from her father if she were to stay with her in-laws, or in society.

Kalu is one of each and every Saansi girl who has to undergo this humiliation. The degrading *kukri-ki-rasm* is a still-prevalent primitive practice among the Saansis in which a white thread is placed on the marriage bed on the girl's conjugal night. If the thread is stained with blood in the morning, the girl is deemed untouched, otherwise her in-laws summon a panchayat where the bride is made to either confess and pay up or see her parents undergo the humiliation and the pain of torturous and impossible modes of punishment. There are several others like Kalu who have and are still undergoing this degradation in this 21st century. "*Dulha Ram nahi hai par dulhan Sita chahiye,*" Gyan Singh, a *patwari* and resident of Alipore, says.

Gyan Singh's cousin Darpan is the latest victim of this practice and is bearing the cross even though her parents contend she is innocent. Married at the age of 21, Darpan failed the test on her wedding night. But her family being semi-literate, insisted that she was untouched and the groom's family was just plotting the whole thing with the aim of extracting money from them. Amid heightened tension and even police intervention, the family summoned a modern-day medical board to examine their daughter. The board, which sat in June 1999, declared that Darpan was "untampered" and her hymen was ruptured after her marriage.

However, the community refused to accept this "outsider" report and sent her to her parent's place after her family refused to pay compensation and stood by the contention that their daughter had committed no misdemeanour.

These *baagis* are not looked kindly upon. Tension ripples in the air as opposition is brimming even within the family. "*Ladkin mein hi kharabi thhi,*" Nayantara, a resident of Aryanil, where Mewar was wed, says. Mewar was yet another village belle who "failed" the rasm and was asked to pay Rs. 65,000 (USD 1440). As Mewar's widowed mother could not arrange for this amount, she and her daughter were excommunicated. Both live in faraway Chhabda village in penury. But the Saansis haven't had their full revenge. Whenever a *baraat* comes from Mewar's village, it is subjected to humiliation. Sometimes the tension snowballs into a major lathi fight. "There was one such fight on 25 April

as the marriage party started referring to the Mewarkaand. The situation was brought under control after the police came and arrested the troublemakers," Jagdish, a resident of Alipura, says.

Surprisingly, the dreaded *kukri* has survived and been nurtured by the women themselves. Like the now ageing Nayantara, there are several others who believe that girls are girls and the only way to protect them from "playing around" is by having them to live under the fear of this test. "*Yeh ladki ko baandh ke raktha hai,*" Nayantara says from behind her veil.

Though Gyan Singh claims that only 25 percent of the Saansi community now believes in this custom, he is hard-pressed to explain why no case goes to the police. "Today, it is all a ploy to get money. Mostly the Umlavat Gotra holds these panchayats in which they demand compensation," he tells you, adding that it is the lack of any constitutional rights which gives a free hand to these money-hungry vultures. "The only way to deal with them is to book them under the NSA," Gyan Singh says. But till the time the wheel turns, the Saansi girl would continue to pay with her dignity if she is to have a family all of her own.

FROM "THE HY-MEN ATROCITY" BY MANDIRA BANERJEE IN
THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI.

Sleeping dictionaries

DR. JOHN Shortt, [East India] Company surgeon at Madras during the latter half of the 19th century, was charmed by the grace and beauty of Telugu girls. He recorded, "I have seen several of these girls in my professional capacity, while they lived as mistresses with European officers, and have been greatly surprised at their ladylike manner, modesty and gentleness. Such beautiful small hands and little taper fingers, the ankles neatly turned, as to meet the admiration of the greatest connoisseur... This is not to be wondered at that these girls are preferred to their own country women." There was an army colonel who even consented to be circumcised in order to get possession of a beautiful Muslim woman who imposed this condition before becoming his *bibi*. It sounds amusing to find that an English Editor of a local paper advised *sahibs* in 1783, to sleep with Indian women to keep themselves cool in the beastly summer of Calcutta. In fact, the Portuguese obtained a *firman* from the Mughal emperor, Shahjahan, to keep Bengali women during summer to protect themselves from the heat of the Delta.

Resorting to *bibis* and mistresses was not only a piece of erotic expediency, but these "sleeping dictionaries" helped the *sahibs* to learn about the lifestyle, customs and manners, besides languages, of India. The *bibi* identified herself with the interests of her protector. She was an efficient house-keeper and a devoted nurse to her man when he fell ill. There was no stigma attached to these liaisons. At times, their mutual love and respect was touching. The *bibi* of a *sahib* was highly respected in society. Emma Roberts writes that "Indian women, Hindu or Muslim, when they are attached to

Englishmen confine themselves with singular dignity to the *Zenana* of their protectors as if the marriage had taken place according to their own customs and ceremonies. They never go out of their houses and behave like a lawful wife of Muslim or Hindu of rank." The *bibikhana* or "ladyhouse" in a corner of the compound, separate from the main house, was an accepted feature of many a European bungalow.

FROM *THE HINDU LITERARY SUPPLEMENT*; EXCERPTS FROM *BEYOND THE VEIL, INDIAN WOMEN IN THE RAJ* (PRAN NEVILLE, NEVILLE BOOKS, NEW DELHI, 2000, PP.141).

North-South divide

LOTS OF South Indians get upset when fellow-citizens from up North refer to them blandly as "Madrasi". No, they say, we are all different; these North Indians know nothing! But actually it is a two-way traffic. There are, I'm sure, thousands of Malayalees who believe that West Bengal is somewhere in Uttar Pradesh and Orissa is walking distance from Delhi.

I certainly know one well-meaning person who was under the impression that Ayodhya was located in Delhi because he thought that only in Delhi big events took place. When I told him that poor Ayodhya was a few hundred kilometres away from Delhi, he couldn't, for the life of him, understand what all the fuss was about, then. The fact is, all of us are still in the process of getting to know our nation intimately. There must be lots of people who do not know that Mahe or Mayyazhi, situated bang in the heart of northern coastal Kerala, is part of Pondichery in Tamil Nadu, a union territory about 500 kms away on the Bay of Bengal coast...

Pondichery is a four-piece unit, each piece separated from one another by hundreds of kilometres, and by three adamant languages, i.e., Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu. And, French, which still has a following. But, it is a happy family, not to say nothing about the Pondichery government, which is one of the most contentedly and starkly, corrupt puppet *sarkars* in India. The Pondichery Lt. Governor must be one of the luckiest because he/she has four nice bungalows to luxuriate in, all on different beaches! Of course, considering that most Indian governors need *ayahs*, crutches and guide-dogs, it doesn't make any difference...

Malayalees love Mahe. We get our booze in Mahe at union territory rates, which is about a hundred rupees less per bottle on an average. You can either get drunk and crawl back to Kerala—if you are a he-man, swim back via the Arabian sea—or carry the bottles and bribe the check-post police—in which case it will add up again to Kerala rates. But the silver-lining is that there's a fifty-fifty chance that it won't be as spurious as in Kerala—

which is a good bargain considering that in Kerala only the bottle is not spurious.

FROM "WE'RE ALL NOT JUST MADRASIS" BY PAUL ZACHARIA IN WWW.THELKA.COM

Hijacker in elections

A SRI Lankan man jailed for hijacking an Italian passenger airliner is seeking election to parliament under the aeroplane symbol of a nationalist party, officials said... Legislator-hopeful Sepala Ekanayake took 261 passengers on an Alitalia jet hostage and threatened to blow up the aircraft in June 1982 at Bangkok airport. He was demanding Italian authorities hand over 300,000 dollars and an Italian visa so he could join his Italian wife and only son.

Officials said Ekanayake aimed to contest the 10 October parliamentary elections as a member of the hard-line SMBP, or Bhumiputhra Party, the symbol of which is a single-engine aeroplane.

Political sources said the SMBP's desire to contest the poll under their own symbol has derailed plans to form an alliance with another newly-formed nationalist party, the Sihala Urumaya which has a bow and arrow as its party symbol.

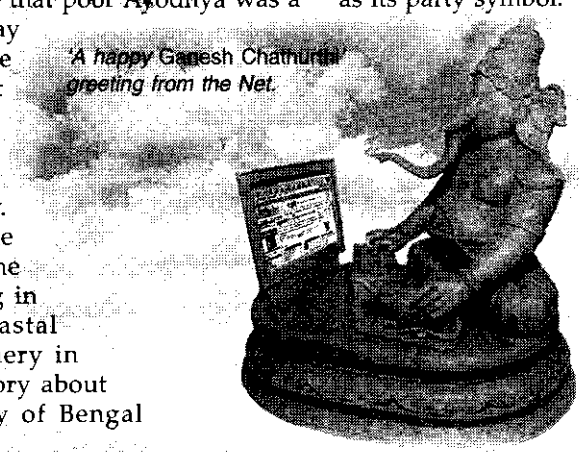
Ekanayake was persuaded to end the hostage drama and was returned to the Sri Lankan capital where he was immediately arrested and the ransom money taken away from him. The Sri Lankan government drafted anti-hijacking laws with retrospective effect to try Ekanayake, who was given a life sentence. Later the sentence was reduced to five years.

His wife and son returned to Sri Lanka while Ekanayake was kept in remand custody, although following an estrangement with the Italian woman, father and son only were reunited 16 years later, in February 1998.

The hardline SMBP which he has joined is the party formed by naval rating Vijithamuni Rohana de Silva, who tried to assassinate former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi while he inspected an honour guard in Sri Lanka. The Bhumiputras, or Sons of the Soil, received 35,854 votes at the 1999 presidential elections, won by Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The sailor was sentenced to six years in jail but paroled when president Ranasinghe Premadasa came to power in 1989. He took up a musical career and used the photograph of himself attacking Gandhi on the cover of his cassette to sell his music. However, his music failed to sell and he started a political career with, thus far, a similar amount of success.

FROM "FORMER SRI LANKAN HIJACKER SEEKS ELECTION— WITH AIRCRAFT AS SYMBOL", AFP.



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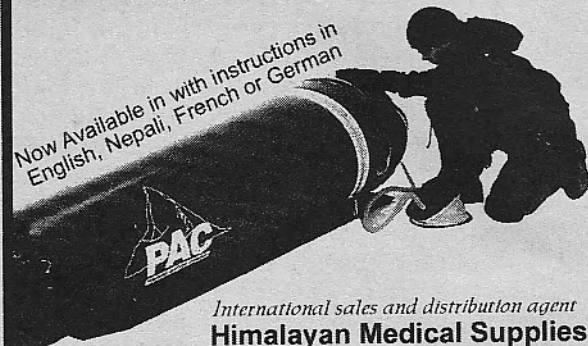
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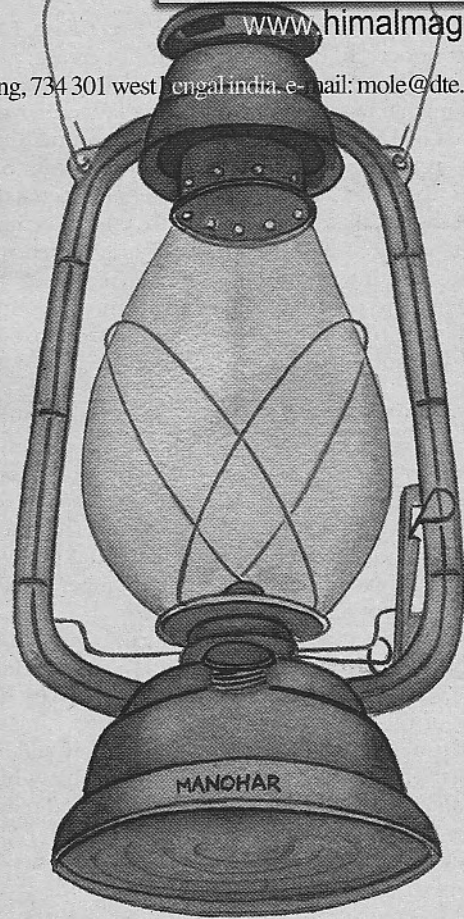
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THE
ISSUE

balaji venkateswaran
- the temple singer



The Temple Singer

a short story by balaji venkateswaran
illustrated by manohar rai

For two hours, the man did not so much as pause. His voice did not crack, his forehead did not crease; nor was there a hint of his fervour slackening. His palms were pressed together in supplication, his eyes lay transfixed on the image of Lord Muruga. People gathered around him, their heads swaying gently to and fro with an inaudible prayer on their lips. They stood silently on aching feet. And when they left they walked away so quietly that it seemed that neither the rustle of their veshtis and saris stirred the air from its unswerving attention. The children watched the man in awe. The peacock came out from its resting place in the dark corner of the temple and stood close to him, unafraid but subdued, its feathers bunched up with humility.

It was not every day that a devotee came to sing in the temple. The cool sea breeze had set in, the street lights flickered on one by one. The priest lit the earthen oil lamps placed all around the courtyard. Ah, such devotion in his voice, how could Shiva be unmoved by his pleas? The priest felt elated. He did not see any need for the usual prayers and offerings for the evening; this mysterious singer's voice more than made up for a lifetime of prayers.

When at last the man stopped singing, after the resonance of his voice between the pillars of the temple had damped, there was a worshipful silence only broken by the soft crackling of oil-lamps. The man prostrated himself before the sanctum with outstretched hands and lay still for a few moments. Then he got up, lightly dusting his white veshti, and walked away as though his presence had made no difference at all that evening. Outside, under the streetlights, beggars loitered and flower sellers sat hunched behind baskets of marigold and jasmine garlands from where a sweet fragrance rose into the night air. They could see his throat still throbbing with fatigue, and his dark, wrinkled face was wet. The white towel on his shoulder lay unused. As he walked away towards the street-corner, the beggars retracted their begging bowls and the stray dogs stepped aside.

"You have a divine voice," the priest said to the singer the following Tuesday.

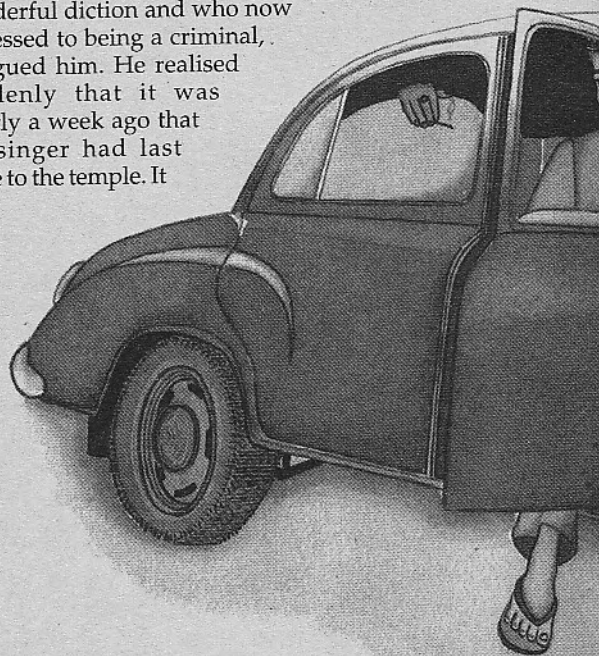
The man smiled in embarrassment. "No, vaadhyare, divinity is all Muruga's. I am only a common criminal."

The man's description of himself as a criminal startled the priest and he tried his best to suppress the excitement brimming inside his head. Someone had stolen exactly fifty rupees from the temple office only a few days ago. There had been over five hundred rupees there, and he wondered why the pilferer took only fifty.

They were sitting in the temple courtyard watching people come inside, tolling the bell, circumambulating and making offerings of fruits and flowers. The priest had also inferred—from the man's speech—that he was not a brahmin. He touched the sacred thread slung across his bare torso and moved away a little. A few beggars pursuing a clutch of well-dressed people crossed over the threshold into the courtyard. As they ran after the worshippers, they extended their arms, casting furtive glances at the priest. The priest got up and yelled at the beggars, gesticulating angrily. "Get out, all of you! How many times have I to tell you not to come inside and bother people? Leave them in peace at least when they're praying. Don't you have any shame?" The tuft on his pate had come undone. As he returned to the porch retying it, he remarked to the singer irritatedly, "Cheh, cheh, cheh, cheh! They're always here like a swarm of flies. Always annoying you, never letting you pray in peace."

Then folding his legs he sat on the porch, leaning comfortably against a pillar. The singer said softly, "What can they do? They have to eat too, don't they?"

The priest was startled and said nothing for several moments. He closely observed the singer. This non-brahmin, who sang with such wonderful diction and who now confessed to being a criminal, intrigued him. He realised suddenly that it was exactly a week ago that the singer had last come to the temple. It





was exactly a week ago too that he had discovered that the money was missing. He leant forward, examining the creases on the man's face, as though trying to divine a story inscribed in them. At long last he said, "Who taught you music?"

The man shook his head. "No one. But my last employer, a government officer, had a wonderful voice. Early in the mornings, before my duties as his driver began, I used to stand outside, squeezed between a hibiscus bush and the wall below his prayer-room listening to him sing to the gods. He prayed every day. Devotional songs sprang to his lips as easily as the sweet consideration he showed everybody. I never understood the lyrics because they were in Sanskrit, but I knew they must mean something very sublime and powerful."

The man's eyes glazed, the thin wisp of a grey moustache turned upwards in remembrance. "It is only recently that I learnt to sing. After all, when you're a mere driver, being kicked from one employer to another as casually as changing a shirt, and when you have a family to provide for, how can you indulge in luxuries like music and devotion? I'm retired now, I have nothing to do, and I come here to escape the constant bickering of the wife who dotes on her daughter-in-law but only spits venom on the son." He smiled wryly at the irony of his own words.

From the way the man's eyes narrowed into a reflective look the priest knew he was going to tell him more about himself; there was no need to prod him.

"I used to be unemployed half the time," the man continued. "But then the fault was entirely mine. I was neither very responsible as a young man nor very bright. Whilst the friends I used to loaf about all day somehow grew into men responsible enough to learn to lay electrical wires or make furniture or learn some such skill, I remained a loafer, uneducated and unskilled, never worrying about the future and totally unprepared for it. My friends left the

neighbourhood one by one in search of jobs and came back in bright shirts and pants. But I continued spending lazy afternoons outside our little home, lying on a coir cot, staring at the sky and waiting for my mother to shout when the next meal was ready. My poor father laboured all day, came home and berated me with regularity, but I remained unconcerned. Even after I got married, the only thing that changed was that instead of my mother it was my wife who drew kolams in front of the house every morning and came out demurely at meal-times to call me in to eat. My father continued to slave and feed us, his anger at my irresponsibility unabated."

The man stopped. "But I mustn't bore you with my reminiscences. When a man gets old, he tends to ramble."

The priest, who had been listening intently, said hastily, "No, no, not at all. Please go on. I have nothing else to do anyway."

He really wanted to ask, "You said you were a criminal. What about it?" But he realised it was best to hear the story at the man's pace and not rush it.

The man smiled, "I have an audience, at last," he said and continued...

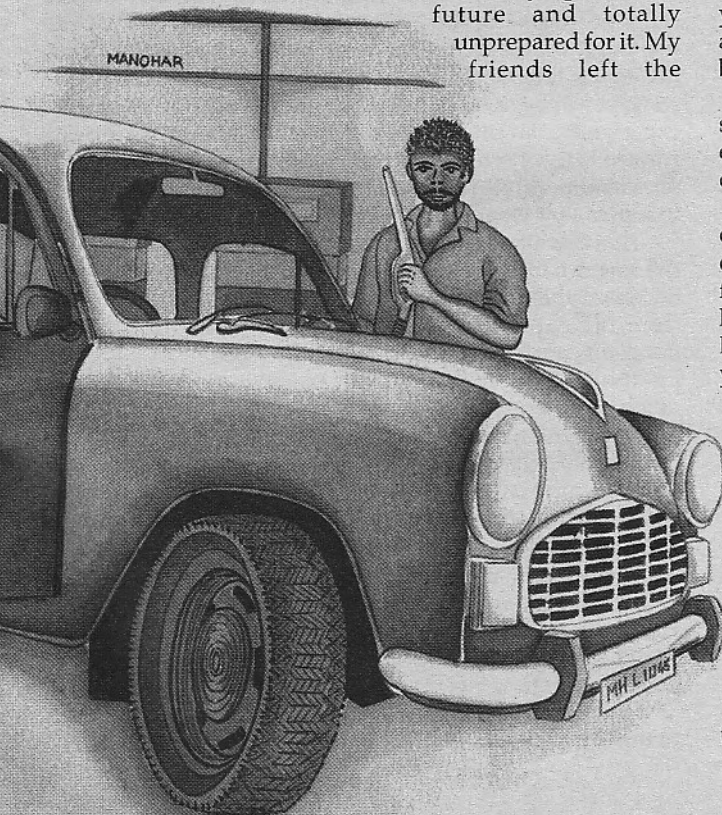
It was only his father's sudden death that jolted him out of his complacency. The rough hands of poverty now had them in its grip. For months he knocked on doors looking for employment. But he knew very little and had no skills. He suddenly found himself tossed into a world where they asked him difficult questions, ones for which he was totally unprepared.

"Can you type and take down notes in short-hand?" a man calling himself an employment agent asked him, looking at him with self-importance. "Can you repair motorcars? Have you sold toothpaste and soap? Can you cook meals for a hundred people everyday? Can you go inspect manholes and unclog sewage drains? Can you at least talk? How do you expect me to find you a job if you stand out there staring at me without saying a word? At least close your mouth boy, you look stupid like that!"

He cycled many miles every day during those hot summer months, racing against time to meet as many employers as possible and coming home after sunset, delirious from the heat.

"For over seven months I did not earn a regular income other than the few annas people dropped in my hands out of pity when I helped them carry their luggage or hauled furniture. At nights I would sit outside our little shack for hours, leaning against the lamp-post that I had never seen lit, watching the mosquitoes and flies feast on my skin. My young wife saw all this. When I picked up those tiny beedi stubs from the road to smoke them in order to forget my despair, she would be ashamed and coax me to come indoors. 'What will people think?' she'd whisper from behind the door. 'That my husband is crazy?' When I'd snap back at her like a rabid dog she would shrink back in fright and never reappear until dawn. She used to be a timid one, my wife.

"When I did finally get the job of a peon in an office in one of those huge stone buildings by the sea-shore, I was still not happy. The money wasn't enough, I complained. While I went scurrying about the endless halls of the office carrying those enormous files and ledgers it seemed to me that they were laden with rocks just to teach peons like me





a lesson. Carrying for the clerks and officers from the vendor at the street-corner, I used to curse my employers for breaking my back and for not paying me enough to feed my wife and the child growing within her. Oh, the arrogance of youth! One learns gratitude only with age."

The priest nodded, accepting this piece of wisdom without question. The man paused and called out to a beggar child who had been staring at the two men from the entrance. The girl walked towards them gingerly holding out a hand normally poised for a rapacious lunge at passers-by. She had large roving eyes, sharp as an eagle's, sharp enough to spot a large hearted worshipper from any distance. Her hair was the colour of jute fibre, her torn frock precariously clung to her body, a layer of dirt drew out the contours of her feet. Normally the priest would have told him not to encourage beggars to come in, no matter how young they were, but today he was distracted by the serene expression on the singer's face.

"Take this to your grandmother," the singer said and dropped a few coins into the girl's hand. At the entrance to the temple, her grandmother, bent over in a dirty sari and holding a gnarled stick taller than her, smiled toothlessly and lifted her hand in the air in gratitude. The girl scowl broke to a big grin. She clutched the coins tightly in her palm and skipped all the way out of the temple.

The man got up. "I should be off now, otherwise the wife will start shrieking." He smiled. "I'm glad to have had the opportunity to talk to you."

"You must tell me more," the priest responded, anxious that he might not see the man again. "I'm here everyday. Come any time."

The man smiled. "I'm sure we will meet here again Muruga willing." So saying he walked away humming a devotional song in raga kalyani.

The priest wanted to run after him and force him to continue. But from the blissful way in which the man hummed the song he instinctively knew that the man would be back in the temple, that they would fold up their veshtis and sit cross-legged on the porch again.

He went behind the temple into the small office, looking around as he unlocked the door. Shutting the window tight he opened the cash-box and counted the money there. When he was satisfied that nothing more was missing, he locked the box and put it back into the cupboard. As he emerged from the office he exclaimed softly with relief, "Muruga!"

• • •

"Pests!" the priest muttered angrily as he returned to the sanctum having shooed the beggars out once more. The singer was sitting on the porch waiting for him. "Why can't the corporation do anything about them?" he demanded of the singer.

"What can the corporation do?" responded the singer. "The beggars are here because they don't have any other means of livelihood. Do you think they enjoy begging?"

The priest did not know how to respond to that.

"At times, I myself wasn't in much better shape than those beggars," the singer continued. "After I lost my first job I did this and that for several months till a friend of mine asked me to go with him to Bombay because there were better prospects there. I was sceptical at first, and I didn't have the heart to leave my wife alone with our baby. But eventually we did go, not with hope, but full of cynicism.

So we travelled ticketless to Bombay."

"So was *that* your crime?" the priest asked, hoping to be disappointed by an affirmative.

The singer chuckled. "Is ticketless travel considered a crime any more?"

He paused. The priest waited patiently for him to continue. He observed that the wrinkles on the man's face darkened in the sun. The singer hummed a few notes before continuing.

"I did find employment in Bombay but only off and on. I was once the substitute sweeper in a school, then a peon in a private company, a waiter in an Udipi restaurant and for a few months, even a porter at the Dadar railway station. I never held a steady job till I worked for the government officer. And in between, long gaps of unemployment. Those were the days when I would sit smoking outside my shack by the gutter, staring at the sky, oblivious of the cries of my hungry children, thinking of the days when my father came home and beat me up for having loafed all day.

"In the meantime my wife started working as an ayah to bring in some extra money. Even though she did not make much she held a steady job. With employment, she discovered a new voice and an acid tongue. So she started to taunt me. 'Look at Vel: like you, he came here without a paisa just a few years ago, and now he's ready to move out of this dump to a chawl.' Or, 'If you're going to sit on your behind smoking beedis all day you think someone is going to come here to offer you a job?' Or, worse, 'Why don't you become an ayah like me?'

"I usually endured her barbs silently. But sometimes, when it got too much, we quarrelled, screaming at each other till the neighbours came and separated us. But what could I do? It wasn't as though I didn't want to work. It is all written in one's fate."

The beggar girl was staring at them again. The singer called her over, dropped a few coins into her hand and wiped the sweat off his face. Flies were now swarming towards the sticky temple floor where water spilt from a broken coconut was beginning to dry. The priest looked at the singer expectantly, but the latter didn't seem to notice. The priest wanted to ask: perhaps you want to sing now? But the singer remained pensive. It was clear that he was troubled by the thoughts that went through his mind.

That evening the priest headed for the temple office after the singer had left. He was deep in thought. Involuntarily he bolted the door behind him and took out the cash-box from the cupboard. He held it in his hands for a few moments, unable to decide what to do. Then he sighed and put the box back into the cupboard without opening it.

• • •

"It's good that you come every Tuesday," the priest said. "I've informed everyone in the neighbourhood that you'll be singing today."

"Why, vaadhyare?" the singer asked modestly. "Why make a big show of it?"

The beggar child now approached them and sat on the ground in front of them. The singer lifted her onto his lap, and she sat still, secretly thrilled. The priest flinched and edged away a little. He wanted to tell the singer to put her down, but didn't.

"It was in Bombay that I learned to drive," he resumed, as though his narration had only been interrupted briefly.



The week that had passed didn't seem to have made any impression on him. "I managed to sneak in a few hours with a friend who drove a taxi, learnt everything there was to it by just watching him. Now a days I see these big-big driving schools for rich people and wonder why they have to spend so much money to pick up such a simple skill. The first time I ever sat at the steering wheel of his taxi I drove like one of those expert car-racers who drive from Delhi into the Himalaya. There really was nothing to it, and I was so thrilled that I went home that evening with a new sari for my wife and clothes for my children, all of which I bought on credit. I was unemployed then and did not have a paisa with me. But I felt reckless. A strange new sense of confidence was surging through me; I thought I was invincible, a master of both machine and road.

"My friend knew someone in a trucking company that was looking for a driver. He bribed someone, got me a heavy licence and also landed me the job by pretending that I knew everything about lorries. The truth was that I had never even sat in one, but he assured me that driving a lorry was no different from driving a taxi."

The singer stopped. He put the girl down, and said to her, "Here, little one, take this and go back to your grandmother. Listening to elders' talk is not good for you."

The girl had scampered away and the priest felt more comfortable. "When I sat in that lorry for the first time, I was nervous. A lorry is nothing like a car. The monstrous steering wheel has something unreal about it; if you move it slightly, the lorry hardly responds. The gears are so tough that you cannot shift them without using force. When the lorry moves, the whole cabin shudders like in an earthquake. And then the helpless feeling you get when you're perched on that seat like a bird so high up above the ground that it seems as though you're floating in mid-air.

"I was transporting logs to a construction site in a suburb that first day. By the time I eased the vehicle into the road I did not have a good feeling about the whole thing. The vehicle seemed to lurch forward and sideways as though it had a will of its own and I used the horn so often that people on the road started yelling at me and gesticulating as though I was a madman. I clutched the steering wheel as though my life depended on it, and I leaned forward as far as I could so as to be able to, keeping an eye peeled. Then outside the city, at a narrow, less crowded intersection, a small boy on a cycle suddenly appeared from an alley and stopped in panic directly in front of me. I too panicked and stood on the brakes with all my strength."

The singer stopped and seemed to be struggling to breathe. He let out a deep, lung-shrivelling cough and sat still with his head hanging limply. The priest looked concerned and slapped him gently on the back.

A moment later, when the singer had regained his breath, he smiled wanly and said, "I sometimes lose my breath when I think about that incident. At that time I did not realise that it was the accelerator that my foot was on and not the brake."

He took a deep breath and muttered, "Muruga! You can guess what happened next. The boy was under the lorry in no time. I did not hear a sound from him, only the crunch of his bones and the grating of the cycle frame against the oil sump. A momentary insanity overtook me and I continued accelerating, dragging the boy's body and cycle further

down the road. I kept swerving to the right and then to the left like a drunk until I hit a pole. The logs cut themselves loose and fell on the road. Then the lorry fell into a ditch. When I got out of the lorry intending to flee along the ditch into the marshlands ahead, I noticed that the logs had buried a vegetable-seller sitting on the side of the road.

"The bystanders were too shocked to realise what had happened, so I was able to run before anybody even thought of coming after me. I fled into the tall grass through mountains of garbage, and within no time I was out of sight. If I had stopped to find out what had happened to my victims, I would have certainly been lynched. In that moment of panic, I could only think of my wife and children. Nothing else mattered. Neither the dead boy, nor that woman.

"I crept home that evening under cover of darkness, and within an hour we were ready to leave the city with all our belongings. We did not tell anybody, not even my friend next door. I fled the city like a rat that night."

Dusk was falling upon them. People had begun to stream into the temple. They sat on the floor waiting. The priest lit the lamps, placed fresh flowers in a brass bowl in front of the idol and washed the sanctum clean as if in preparation for a festival. He looked at the singer expectantly. The singer got up and stood in front of the sanctum with his eyes closed. After a few moments of complete silence, the melody grew from his lips, full-throated like the cries of birds after the first rain. A few beggars entered the temple grounds hesitantly and stood silently against the gate, listening to the singer. The priest saw them come in but continued gazing at the singer and smiling. Like everyone else he was mesmerised.

A woman in a crumpled sari, sitting cross-legged, close to the railing around the sanctum, closed her eyes. Her head began swaying to and fro in such a wide arc that the priest who had begun the arati, feared she would hit the railing. She clasped her hands tightly together under her chin. A lone gold bangle on her forearm was pulled as far back as it would go. Her thin grey hair was tied in a bun behind her head and the end lay limply like a wispy little tail on her back. She seemed completely immersed in the melody. As the singer's voice became louder her head swayed in wider arcs, knocking the railing every now and then.

She seemed oblivious even of the song itself for she sat swaying after the singer had stopped and the priest had begun moving his brass lamp in slow circles in front of the deity, ringing a bell with his left hand. People began to notice her now. As the bell's clatter rose to a feverish tempo the woman began to rant, half-muttering and half-singing unintelligible words. Then she began clapping and shouting. She shook her head vigorously till her bun became undone and her hair fell on her shoulders in an untidy flurry of black and grey strands.

"Muruga!" she shouted. "You are the sole protector."

The priest continued ringing his bell and chanting his prayers over the woman's voice. A few people came and rang the big bell that hung from the ceiling, its booming noise ricocheting off the pillars and merging with the woman's garbled words. Some people just gaped at her.

"She's possessed," whispered a young woman to her husband and shuddered.

"No," he hissed back. "She's mesmerised by the Lord." Her eyes were still closed and her expression changed



frantically every moment as though unable to decide on a mood. It went through piety to stupor to ecstasy to fear, and now dark belligerence, as though her dormant wrath had been suddenly aroused.

"I caused their death!" she shouted. "Rakshasi that I am! The power that I have to burn people with just a fiery look! My Third Eye! I can burn the whole world, why only that old hag and her good-for-nothing husband? Or my husband and now my child? I forebode ill-tidings for them all. I brought them bad luck from the day I came to their house as a fairy bride. It is etched in my fate—I cannot change it. I was destined to suck their blood. Everybody, listen to me: I caused their death!"

She clapped her hands loudly and screamed. People shrank back in fear. The priest transfixed at the feet of the deity and tried hard not to listen to her. The singer approached her and placed his hand on her forehead. Slowly as he tightened his grip the swaying subsided, calmed magically by his touch like a balm on her agitation. Her voice became quieter, her expression changed yet again into a sort of resignation. She still did not open her eyes.

"Why do they do this to me?" she cried. "What have I done to deserve this? Why am I the ill-fated one? Lord, why did you take my child away?"

The singer released some of the pressure from her head. The woman was crying, but her body was not jerking any more. The sweat on her forehead ran down her face in small rivulets along the folds of her ancient skin. Some people stepped forward cautiously. They stared at the singer as though they could see a magical field emanating from his hand.

Then someone shouted. "Dai! Do you know her?"

A rickshaw driver ran up and looked at her. "Yes. I know where she lives. Help me carry her to my rickshaw. I'll take her home."

They heaved her into the rickshaw where she sat slumped inert, her eyes closed as though in a deep slumber, her face as calm as the water in the lotus-filled tank behind the temple. They muttered, "Poor woman. Gone crazy."

"See!" the young woman said to her husband triumphantly as they hurried out of the temple. "I told you she's crazy."

The singer stood for a long time after the rickshaw had turned the corner, staring at the point where it had disappeared from sight. After the crowd had dispersed, chattering excitedly about the woman's fate, he turned to the priest and said in a quiet voice, as though seeing something that everybody else wasn't.

"She's not crazy, you know. It's the world that's probably crazy. Who can tell who's crazy and who's sane?"

As the priest walked back to the temple a beggar jumped aside fearfully, as though expecting the priest's wrath. But the priest did not even notice the beggar.

"My next employer after the accident was the Government official for whom I worked till I retired," the singer said. "That was the only job that I held for years. I was his driver, as I said. Such is fate. When I went to him seeking a job he probably knew that I did not know how to drive. Yet he employed me, perhaps recognising the abject fear and desperation in my eyes. For one whole week he drove everywhere and asked me to observe the way he handled the car, saying that it was a special car and needed

to be handled in a special way. But I suspected that he was actually telling me to watch and learn.

"I often ask myself why I did that. Taking up the job of a lorry-driver and running away the very next day as I did. With hindsight, I can say that I did something terrible, that I committed a crime. But then I don't have hungry mouths to feed and two daughters to marry off now. I am not young anymore with only a lifetime of uncertainty ahead of me; nor do I have the impatience of my younger days. So it is easy for me to censure myself and claim that I would react differently under the same circumstances now. You know, one does not have control over these things, often not even on one's own actions. If I hadn't run away, I would have been beaten to death, or if by some miracle I had escaped that ignominy, I would have ended up in jail. Either punishment would have been futile. Had I killed the boy knowingly? It would have only meant that my family would have become destitute. How can you punish someone who's so hungry that he cannot make the distinction between stealing and begging?"

"Years later when I wanted to get my eldest daughter married off, prospective families wanted watches and scooters as a part of the dowry. I had saved all my life, smoking *beedi* and cigarette stubs lying on the road and eating the leftovers of my children so that I could buy my daughters at least one good sari and a gold chain to wear for their weddings. How could I have done all this if I had done the honourable thing and refused my last job? It is another matter that my eldest daughter finally ran away with our Christian neighbour because she feared I could not afford to marry her off properly. But can you do the right thing if it means not being able to provide for your wife and children?"

"My last employer used to say, 'Who are we to judge our own actions and pretend we are God?' I think he's right. Who are we indeed?"

The men sat in silence for some minutes. The priest could see that the singer was tired and very sad, and that despite having so easily rationalised his actions, he was still seething with doubts and regret.

"I learnt the *kandasashti kavasam* by listening to my last employer. Ever since, I've been visiting temples regularly, fasting frequently—sometimes two-three times a week—and singing this song to Muruga. Perhaps this is my penance and I'll continue to do this till I find redemption."

The peacock came out of its corner and stood in the open space in front of the temple. In the unusually bright moonlight its fanned-out plumage soaked the temple with ethereal colours. In slow stately steps it danced and swayed, circumambulating the temple like a penitent.

The priest got up and went to the sanctum. A woman had offered a vat full of pongal to the temple that day. The priest scooped the pongal into several cups made of leaves. He then called out to the beggars who were standing at the gate. At first they were hesitant to come in, especially into the sanctum. But when the priest gestured again they stepped forward, astonished but grateful.

"Come, take the *prasadam*," the priest said and gave each of them a cup. Then he opened the temple hundi and distributed the money amongst them.



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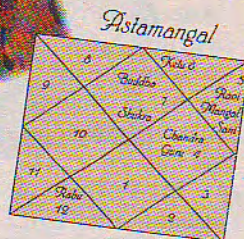
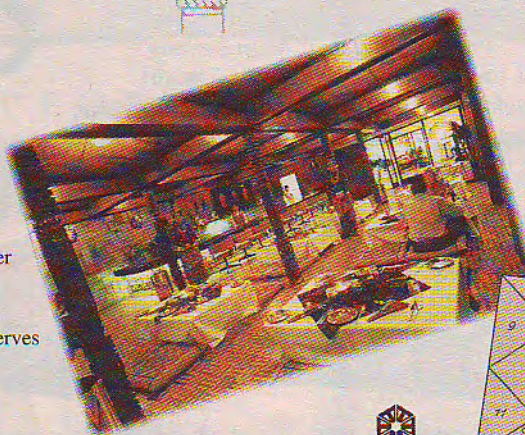
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CROREPATI

It was bound to happen. After gorging himself on all the GK books available in the plush jungle flora and getting some from Bangalore, Koose ("hernia", in one dialect) Muniswamy Veerappan's call (made from the sandalwood booth) finally got through to the Kaun Banega Crorepati show. The ultimate showdown then took place: Big B meets Big B, Hero vs Villain, Icon confronts Con, and vice versa.

Amitabh Bachchan: Welcome to our show, Mr Veerappan. We've heard so much about you, you are a legend.

Veerappan: Thanks anna.

Mr B: Now to the first question. Which animal has tusks: a) Bill Clinton b) Elephant c) Tamil Tiger d) Forest Officer.

Mr V: That's an easy one anna, it's of course the elephant, although I have heard about Clinton anna's tusk force.

Mr B: Are you sure about the answer? Confident?

Mr V: Completely, I swear on all the elephants that I have martyred.

Mr B: Yes, you've got it right. Interesting profession yours, Mr Veerappan.

Mr V: You bet anna, what's the next question, I am in a hurry, that old man Rajkumar is waiting.

Mr B: Who among these is a bandit: a) Jayalalitha b) Phoolan Devi c) Benazir Bhutto d) Chandrika Kumaratunga

Mr V: That's a tough one, Jaya *amma* most definitely is one, but she is not in my league. Who are these last two, never heard their name, I shall go for Phoolan Devi.

Mr B: Computerji lock kiya jae.

Mr V: What are you doing anna, why are you talking to that machine?

Mr B: This is called a computer and you have to talk to it otherwise it won't work.

Mr V: Oh don't give me that, during my routine trips to Bangalore, the Silly Valley, and sending emails to my distinguished outlaw friends in the world, I never had to talk to the computer.

Mr B (*embar-rassed*): The STAR TV guys told me so, I shall check with them.

Mr V: Anyway, is my answer correct?

Mr B: Please excuse me, we'll tell you that after a small break.

(Veerappan, mustachio bristling reaches out for the gun.)

Mr B: No please don't do that, if we don't have this break, we will not have any crore to pay you.

Mr V: Ok anna, it's just that I get impatient.

Break-time: The Moustache is sipping tea with the Baritone.

Mr V: Anna, why don't Hindi movie heroines like to kiss moustaches? Our Tamil girls feed daily on oiled handlebars.

Mr B: Ever thought of getting into the movies, why don't you play the villain in my next one?

Mr V: No anna, that wouldn't be exciting, I am hero material. Why don't you play the villain, you are now just too old to run around with the girls. Anyway, Hindi movie heroes are all so boring, mama's boys smooching girls who pretend to like it. But the villains are classy, and have a sense of justice. Most of the time they turn rapists just because the heroines are spending time with such useless men.

Mr B: Now we have a deal here.

Mr V: And I want Rekha as my heroine.

Mr B: The secret with Rekha is that unlike other Tamil girls, she doesn't like moustaches.

Mr V (*caressing his oiled twirls*): Anything for her, anything...

End of break. Veerappan has had a shave, his first after birth (ad copy: "The blade that shaved Veerappan"). Bacchan looks taller and ever more like India's uncle.

Mr B: Welcome back, and yes Mr Veerappan, you are absolutely correct, it's Phoolan Devi.

Mr V: I knew, we could have been the made-for-each-other couple. But who's Chandrika and Benazir?

Mr B: Benazir is the queen of Pakistan, while Chandrika is a Sri Lankan film actress.

Mr V: Anna you know so much.

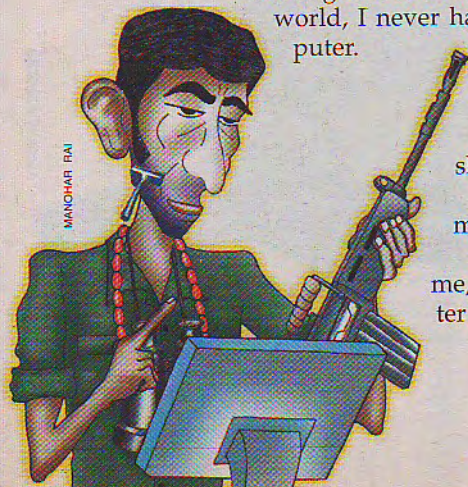
Mr B: Now to the next question: Who is the father of India? a) Mahatma Gandhi b) Mohammed Ali Jinnah c) Lord Rama d) None of the above

Mr V: Oh this one I really don't know. Please give me a hint anna, if you can tell me the mother's name, maybe I shall be able to tell.

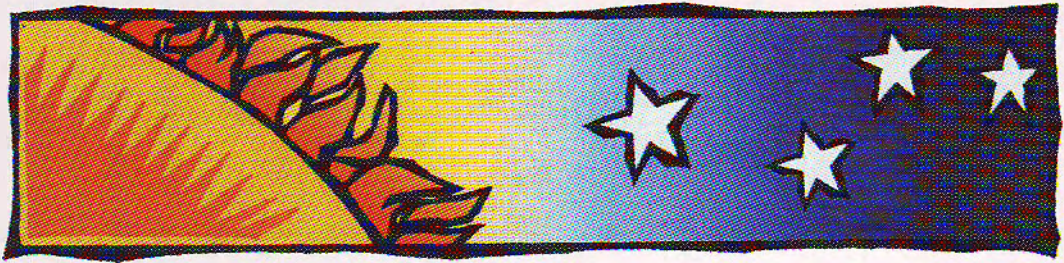
Mr B: Uh, er, that's not possible. Do you want to use your "lifeline"?

Mr V: The gun you mean? I shall be only too happy to. Sorry anna, you are kidnapped. (*Veerappan trains his gun on a sweating Bachchan*) Sorry folks, end of show. Veerappan Ban Gaya Crorepati!

—Shanuj V.C.



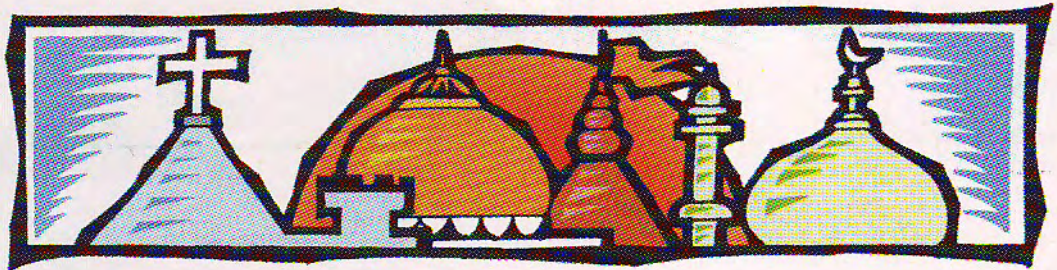
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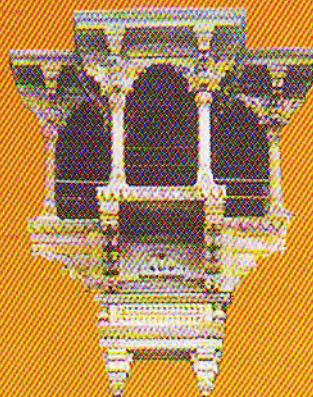
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