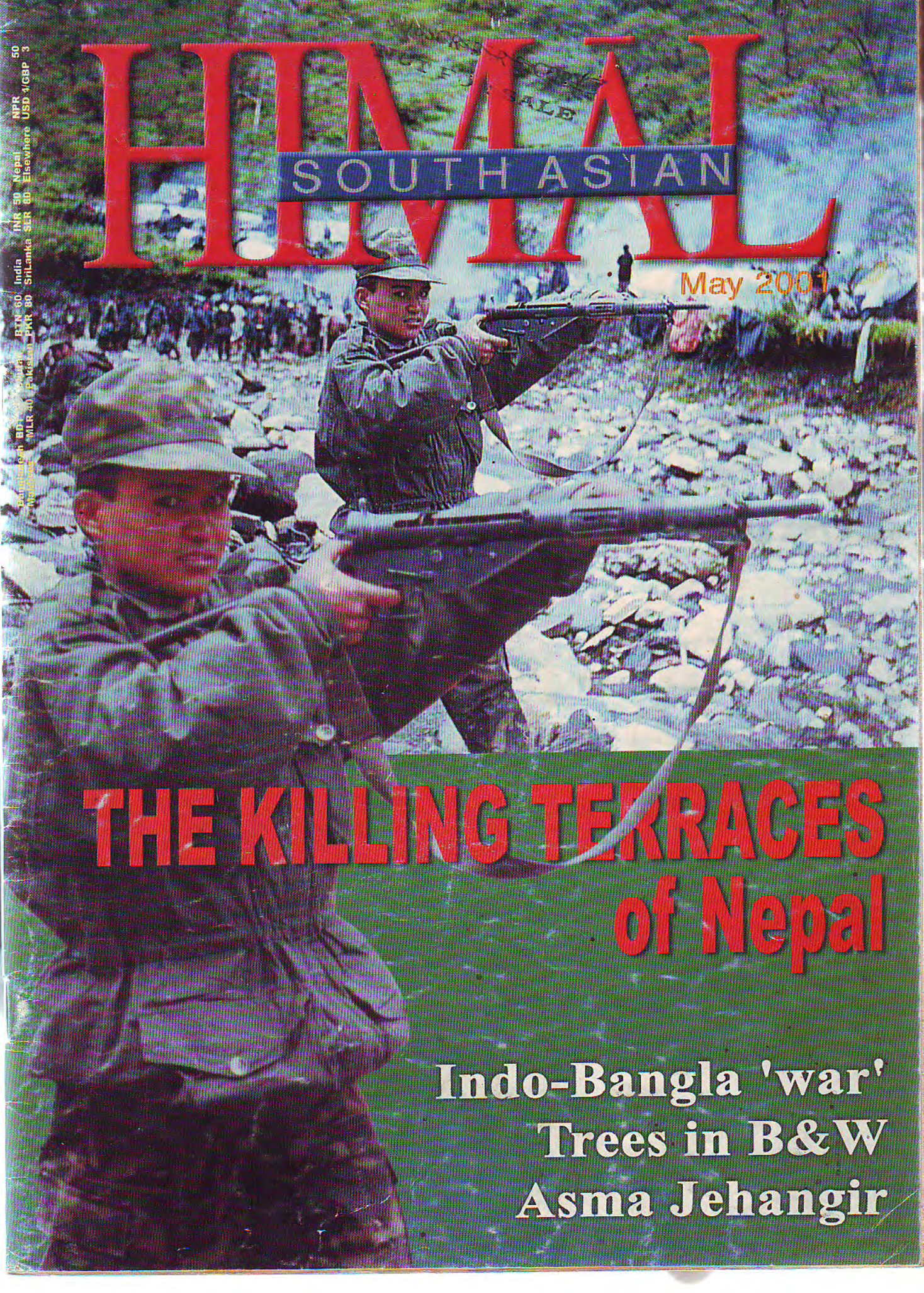


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May 2001



THE KILLING TERRACES of Nepal

Indo-Bangla 'war'
Trees in B&W
Asma Jehangir

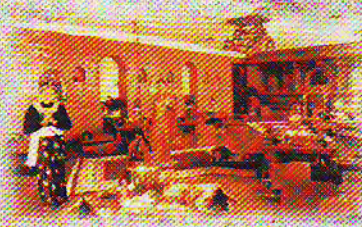
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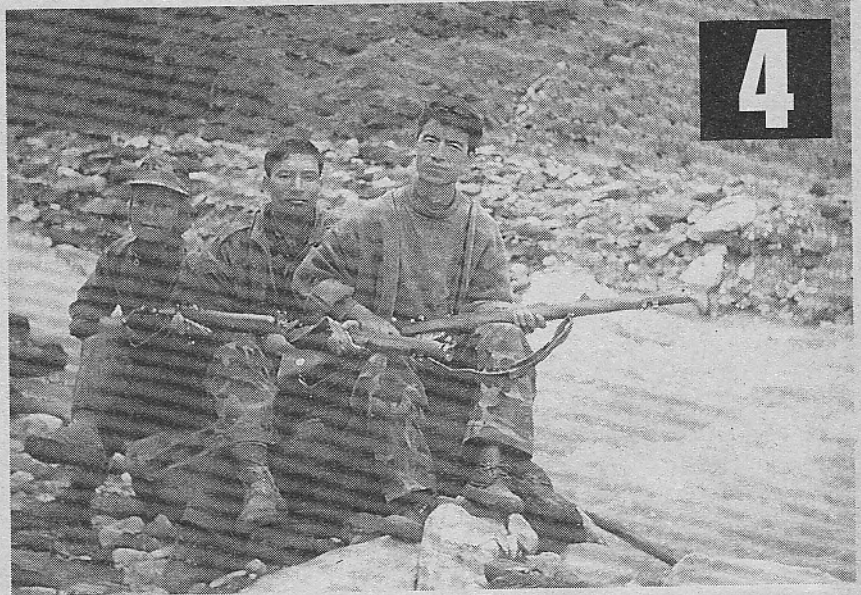
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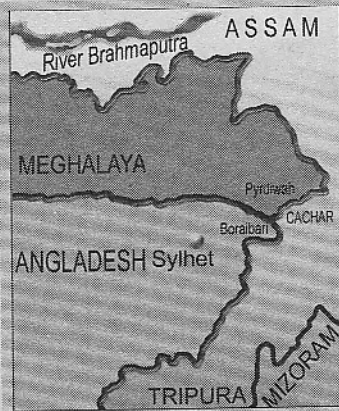
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Cover picture by **Sagar Budhathoki** shows a Maoist boy posing for the camera during the 'approach march' up the Bheri river gorge to attack Dunai, the district headquarters of Dolpa. The automatic weapon he carries is apparently one of the few held by the insurgents. Cover design by **Kamsingh Chepang**.

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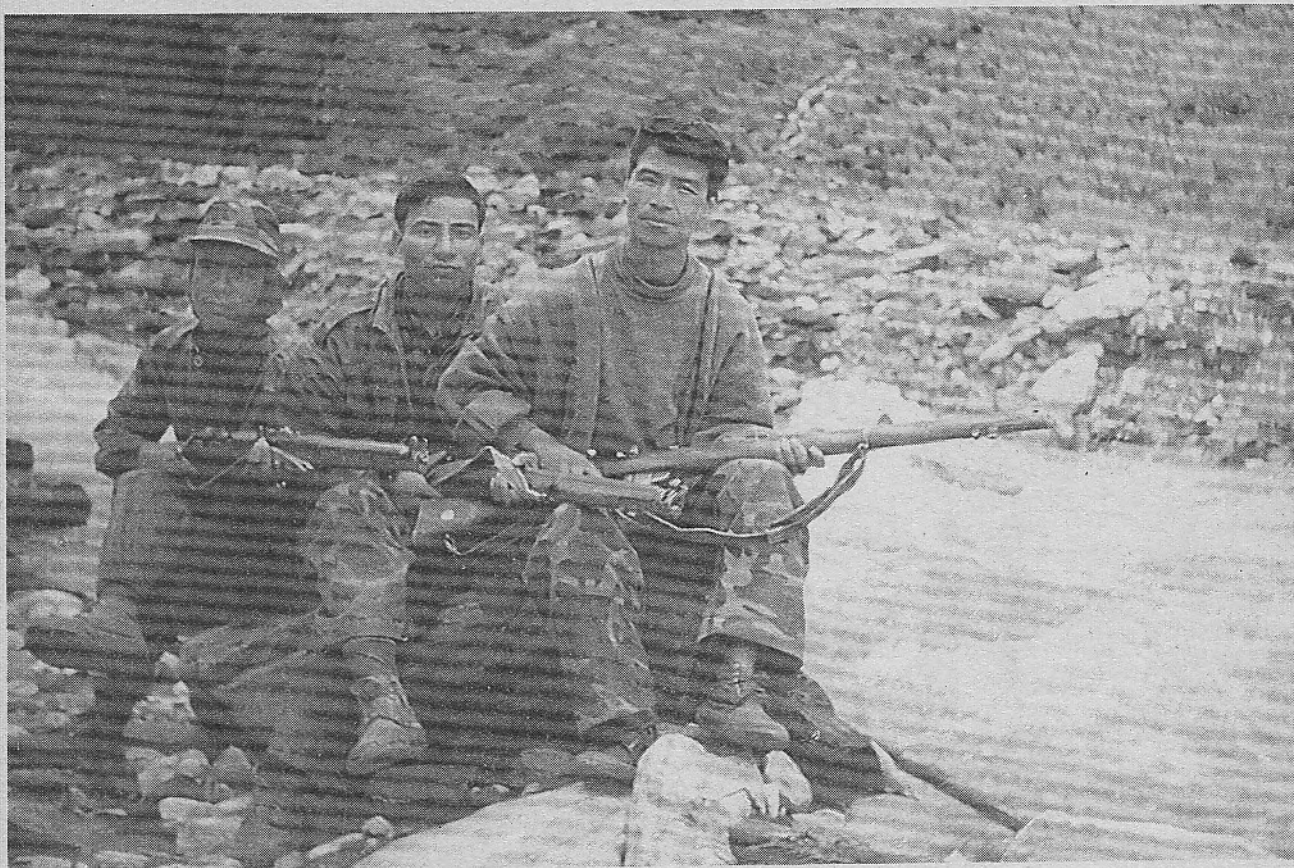
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Day of the M

SAGAR BUDHATHOKI



Six years into the Maoist People's War, the toll is 1700 Nepalis dead. The people are crying out for a settlement, and given the right combination of circumstances, that could yet happen. Despite the violence, the Maoists seem close enough to the surface—they could come above ground.

by *Deepak Thapa*

In the days leading up to 13 February earlier this year, a certain tension was palpable in Kathmandu Valley. That day would mark the fifth anniversary of the launch of the 'People's War' by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), and there was apprehension that the insurgents would celebrate the occasion with a big bang. After sunset, police road-

blocks went up on the capital's roads and there was random checking of vehicles. Rumours flew thick, and some even expected the Maoists to carry out an assault on the Valley itself, given that they were already present in the outlying districts. The political tabloids played on the fear of the inhabitants, heretofore protected from the wrath of the 'people's warriors',

aoist

who had mainly concentrated their fire to the hinterland till then.

As it turned out, nothing happened. But the paranoia did serve to underscore the extent to which the Maoist uprising has by now embedded itself in the national psyche. And with good reason too. The insurgency has affected almost all the 75 districts of the country (only a handful of remote mountain districts remain untouched). Five contiguous western Nepal districts are, for all practical purposes, under the control of the Maoists, with Kathmandu's role being limited to the district headquarters. Access to Maoist-held areas is strictly controlled by the insurgents themselves and prior permission from the commissars is required to enter. By December 2000, the rebels had even set up their own 'people's government' in these districts, complete with minor development works, 'people's courts' and not a little bit of social policing against alcoholism, usury and so on.

The Maoists' power is felt far beyond the areas under their control. In some eastern districts, they have taken up the role of cultural policemen, going so far as to decree what is 'proper' for girls to wear. They have set off explosions in the factories of at least two Indian multinationals in the Tarai. They charge village 'levies' from households even in districts that they are not really active in. All over Nepal, Maoist cadre make 'collections' from businesses small and large, armed with receipt books. Maoist agents, known for their civility, are active even in Kathmandu as they go about making their collections in broad daylight, and there are perhaps very few establishments in the country that have not paid up.

Even the Maoists' student wing has been able to flex its muscles with considerable impact. Last December, the students called for a week-long closure of all schools in the kingdom to protest the singing of the national anthem (which they say glorifies the king, and in fact it does) and the teaching of Sanskrit (considered disadvantageous to the many ethnic groups of the country). The fiat was complied to without visible protest and school children stayed home that week.

For a country that has not seen a real war

for nearly two centuries, the number of those killed in the course of the fighting has been numbing. The latest government figures show that nearly 1700 people have lost their lives to political violence in the last five years, sacrificed to the police and Maoist bullets increasingly. (In comparison, the 1990 People's Movement that did away with the monarchical Panchayat system succeeded with a loss of fewer than 50 lives.) By now there have been Maoist-related deaths in 52 of the country's 75 districts.

The insurgents have never been stronger in terms of strategy and fighting strength. The first indication of their fighting capability came in September 2000, when a Maoist contingent travelled for more than a week up the Bheri river gorge and launched an overnight attack on Dunai, the district headquarters of the western mountain district of Dolpa (see cover image). There they killed 14 policemen, while the civilian population cowered in terror. The death toll was to rise dramatically in April this year, when within a week Maoists guerillas stormed two police posts in west Nepal and left 70 policemen dead, some of them killed execution-style. By now, the data prepared by a human rights ngo in Kathmandu has begun to show more police deaths at the hands of Maoists than vice versa.

These military 'victories' in the hills of Nepal are significant accomplishments for a motley collection of village youth who followed a handful of firebrand leaders to begin their insurrection by bumping off 'class enemies' with rudimentary weapons and talking headily about setting up *aadhars* (*ilakas* ("base areas") in the remote regions. No one had imagined that the People's War would continue for so long or reach so far, and by all accounts, even the Maoists themselves, despite their claim to establish a proletarian dictatorship under a "New Democratic State", will have been surprised by their achievements so far. These are no longer romantic revolutionaries. They are battle-hardened fighters, and the only question remaining is whether their revolution will, or can, go anywhere.

The origins

For the general public in Nepal, the Maoists were quite an unknown entity until they burst into the scene in 1996. That is understandable in a country which has seen the communist groupings split, merge and split again so many times that only an acute observer will be able to navigate this history with ease. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) itself was no dif-

Magar youth of Rukum as armed Maoist fighters.

ferent and given that the left centre-stage since the restoration of democracy in 1990 had been dominated by the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), the Maoist party (and its earlier incarnations) was perceived as just one among the conglomeration of factions that spanned the political spectrum from the CPN-UMI. onward to the extreme left.

The origins of today's Maoists go back to the late 1960s. Following King Mahendra's seizure of state power in 1960 after arresting the cabinet and dissolving the elected parliament, all political parties were banned. Within the Communist Party of Nepal, there emerged two groups: one that preferred to work together with the king and the other that demanded the restoration of parliament. That difference of opinion was later formalised with a split that reflected the Sino-Soviet rift, with the pro-king faction allied to Moscow and the other to Peking. Despite the ban, like other political parties, the communist grouping opposed to the monarchy continued functioning, but given the prohibition in place, various local units had begun to operate independently.

In this situation, two of the communist leaders who had made a name as radicals within the party, Mohan Bikram Singh and Nirmal Lama (who died last year), set about creating a new party apparatus. In spite of differences with their contemporaries, including with the founder of the Communist Party of Nepal, Pushpa Lal Shrestha, they succeeded in holding what they called the communist party's Fourth Convention (*Chautho Mahadhiveshan*) in 1974 and named their new party the Communist Party of Nepal (Fourth Convention). Its basic divergence was that while Pushpa Lal had al-

ways maintained the need for the communists to join hands with all forces (read, the Nepali Congress) in their fight against absolute monarchy, the Fourth Convention opposed any such inclination. The Fourth Convention also demanded the election of a constituent assembly to write a constitution (as opposed to Pushpa Lal's stance which called for the restoration of parliament), and its strategy was to begin a people's movement which could at the opportune moment be converted into an armed revolt. The top leadership of today's Maoists comes from this school.

Meanwhile, quite unconnected with these happenings, an actual communist uprising took place in a corner of Nepal. This was in Jhapa, the southeastern-most district of the country and right across the border from the Naxalbari region in India. The Naxalite movement was well underway in West Bengal when, in April 1972, a group of young Nepali activists began a campaign to eliminate 'class enemies' in Jhapa. This turned out to be no more than a romantic adventure and was suppressed by the king's government in no time. A total of seven 'class enemies' were killed before the leaders were jailed and the movement ended. At its founding, the Fourth Convention came out vehemently against the Jhapa Movement, declaring: "While we support the spirit and sacrifice shown in the struggle against class enemies, the terrorist tactics adopted...cannot be called Marxism-Leninism. This is a form of semi-anarchy."

The Fourth Convention denounced the Jhapa uprising, yet it did represent the extreme left in Nepal, and until the mid-1980s it remained the major player among the communist factions. In 1983, Mohan Bikram broke away and formed the Communist Party of Nepal (Masal) (*masal* meaning torch in Nepali). (In 1984, Masal became one of the founding members of the Revolutionary International Movement/RIM, a grouping of Maoist parties worldwide. The present-day Maoists have since replaced Masal within RIM.) Two years later, Masal split further into CPN (Masal) and CPN (Mashal). These divisions led to an erosion of public support for the Fourth Convention, ironically to the benefit of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist),

In the days before going underground: Baburam Bhattarai (4th from right) leads a torch rally.



the party set up by the leaders of the Jhapa Movement.

It was in the Mashal party that Pushpa Kamal Dahal (the Maoist supremo who goes by the *nom de guerre* of Prachanda) appeared on the top rung of leadership for the first time, and later became its general secretary. The other well-known present-day Maoist leader, Baburam Bhattarai, remained with Mohan Bikram.

That was the situation until the launch of the 1990 People's Movement, which was undertaken by the Nepali Congress and a grouping of seven left parties, the United Left Front (ULF), against King Birendra's Panchayat system. Although the mother party, the Fourth Convention, became part of the ULF, neither Masal nor Mashal joined it. With other small leftist groups, they instead formed an alliance called the United National People's Movement, and only joined the People's Movement once the street protests had gathered momentum. The climactic moments of 6 April 1990, when police firing on the Kathmandu streets culminated in the capitulation of the old regime, is believed to have been the handiwork of this latter group – its having incited the demonstrators to try and storm the Narayanhiti Royal Palace.

Following the restoration of democracy, the hardline left parties pressed for an election to a constituent assembly as a means of delivering a genuine people's constitution rather than have a document handed down by the "establishment". (The formation of a constituent assembly was in fact promised by King Birendra's grandfather, Tribhuvan, as part of the so-called Delhi Agreement of 1951 which led to the downfall of the 104-year-old Rana oligarchy. The Nepali Congress party itself had agitated initially for elections for a constituent assembly and only later accepted the general election as offered by King Mahendra in 1959.) Instead of a constituent assembly, however, some selected representatives from the Nepali Congress, the left, the royal palace and some independents were given the task of drafting a new constitution, which was promulgated in November 1990. That same month, four parties, including the Fourth Convention, Masal and Mashal, merged to form the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre), with Prachanda as general secretary. The first general election was approaching at the time and there was pressure from within for the party to take part in it. Accordingly, the United People's Front (UPF) was floated as the political wing of the Unity Centre, and in the first parliament, the UPF



Maoist rally in Rolpa.

emerged as the third largest group (with nine seats) after the Nepali Congress (110 seats) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (69). (The latter, which remains today the all-powerful opposition party in Parliament, was a coming together of the Marxist-Leninists, which had become the largest leftist organisation by 1990, the remnants of Pushpa Lal's party and others of the left.)

The Unity Centre held its first conference a year later in which the proposal for a "protracted armed struggle on the route to a new democratic revolution" was discussed and accepted. It was also decided that the Unity Centre would go underground although, in practice, it remained semi-underground. By the time the 1994 mid-term elections had come around, Unity Centre had divided between a Unity Centre headed by Nirmal Lama and another under the same name led by Prachanda. The UPF also fell apart, reflecting that split, with the group that supported Prachanda being led by Baburam Bhattarai. Both factions of the UPF approached the Election Commission for recognition. The one which supported Nirmal Lama was given recognition. Baburam Bhattarai then called for a boycott of the elections, an action that at the time was perceived more as a face-saving measure.

In March 1995, Prachanda's Unity Centre held its 'Third Plenum', during which they fore-swore elections (it is believed at the insistence of RIM) and decided to take up arms. It was during that meeting that the Unity Centre was renamed the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). In September the same year, the party's central committee adopted a "Plan for the historical initiation of the people's war" which stated that the "protracted people's war [will be] based on strategy of encircling the city from the countryside according to the specificities of our

country. The Party once again reiterates its eternal commitment to the theory of people's war developed by Mao as the universal and invincible Marxist theory of war."

(As far as the RIM is concerned, before 1996, the Maoists of Nepal needed – for the sake of their standing within the country – to claim membership in RIM, howsoever marginal that organisation may have been to world politics. The document cited above talks about the CPN (Maoist)'s "serious responsibility to contribute towards the further development of Revolutionary Internationalist Movement/RIM, of which our party is a participating member..." However, Nepal's Maoists have become the vanguard flag-bearers of the revolutionary movement worldwide, and it seems that it is the RIM which needs association with the Nepali Maoists to provide its very *raison d'être*.)

This, then, was how things lay when on 4 February 1996, Baburam Bhattarai presented the Nepali Congress-led coalition government of Sher Bahadur Deuba with a list of 40 demands related to "nationalism, democracy and livelihood". These included abrogation of both the 1950 and the Mahakali treaties with India (one on "peace and friendship" and the other on the sharing of the water on the western frontier river); introducing work permits for foreign (i.e. Indian) workers in Nepal; curtailing all privileges of the royal family; drafting of a new constitution through a constituent assembly; nationalising the property of "comprador and bureaucratic capitalists"; declaring Nepal a secular nation; and also details such as providing villages with roads, drinking water and electricity; and complete guarantee of freedom of speech and publication. Incidentally, these demands were not much different from the points outlined in the 1991 election manifesto of the above-ground united UPF. Bhattarai's

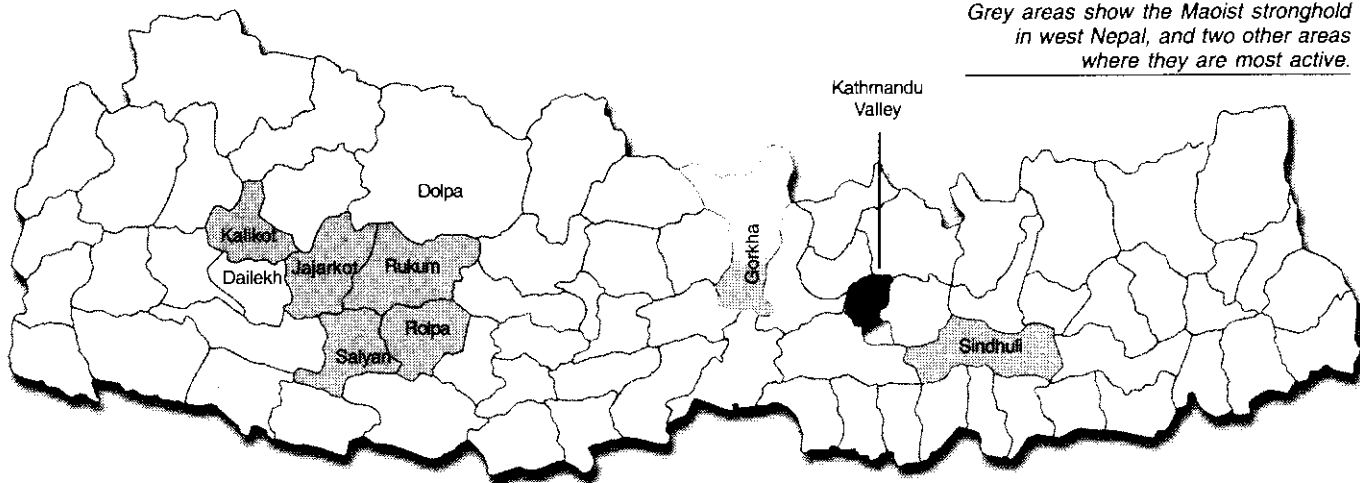
covering letter contained an ultimatum that unless the government initiated positive steps towards fulfilling those demands by 17 February 1996, "we will be forced to embark on an armed struggle against the existing state."

Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba was on a state visit to India when the Maoists struck in six districts on 13 February, four days before the deadline had even expired. (Even today, the mainstream left seeks to lay the blame for the Maoist problem squarely on the door of the Nepali Congress, since the fighting began when the latter was running the government. But, as the Congress spokesman and a minister at that time, Narahari Acharya, points out, Baburam Bhattarai's 40 demands contained just two points more than a similar list presented on 31 December 1994 to Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari, who was heading the minority government of the CPN-UML. Acharya's argument is also that, demands or no demands, the Maoists would have begun the uprising since that was the kind of violent political agenda they had opted for.)

The Congress factor

Although realignments in party positions provided the Maoists with a theoretical premise for beginning the People's War, the political situation on the ground too proved conducive for just such a move. This had mainly to do with the historical antagonism between the Nepali Congress and the left. Latter-day partners in the fight against absolute monarchy, the relationship turned acrimonious as the campaigning began for the first general elections in 1991. When the Nepali Congress won an outright majority in the Pratinidhi Sabha (parliament) and Girija Prasad Koirala became prime minister (his first of four tenures in the last 11 years), this distrust took an ugly turn as

Grey areas show the Maoist stronghold in west Nepal, and two other areas where they are most active.



The Bheri River winds its way through Maoist midhill Nepal in Rukum.



SUDHEER SHARMA

left activists in outlying districts began to face harassment at the hands of the local administration at the instigation of local Congress politicians.

Although such incidents occurred in many parts of Nepal, it was more pronounced in the area where the Maoists today hold sway—the western hills. This is a region characterised by extreme poverty and with an economy that has for long been sustained by remittances of males who have migrated to India for work, a fact recognised by the Nepal Human Development Report 1998, which lists all the hill and mountain districts of western Nepal as scraping the bottom of the socio-economic barrel. In addition, the society is semi-feudal in nature with the kind of exploitation that goes hand in hand with it. But unlike a certain fatalistic attitude that pervades the region even further west, there was a crucial difference in the adjoining districts of Rolpa and Rukum.

These two districts had been a stronghold for revolutionary communist activists since the late 1950s and throughout the autocratic Panchayat years. As far back as 1980, during the national plebiscite when people were asked to choose between a 'reformed' Panchayat and a multiparty system, the army had to be put on alert in Rolpa since the Fourth Convention had called for a boycott of the vote. The large village of Thawang, which had voted overwhelmingly communist in the first parliamentary

elections of 1959 at a time when the Nepali Congress had managed a landslide throughout the country, not only boycotted the referendum but also replaced the portraits of the king and queen that were mandatory in government offices with those of Marx and Lenin.

By the time of the 1991 (second) parliamentary election, their presence in Rolpa had become so strong that the United People's Front won both the seats from the district. In neighbouring Rukum, the UPF was there right behind the Nepali Congress. The Congress-UPF rivalry soon developed into a no-holds-barred fight, and each side gave as good as it got. The leftists began 'taking action' against those they considered exploiters, usurers and cheats. The victims generally tended to be from the Nepali Congress for the sole reason that the local influential who had originally been with the Panchayat system had mostly entered the ruling party.

The Congress people had the advantage of their party ruling at the Centre and many did not hesitate to use the state machinery against their opponents. Perhaps it was a personal failing of the prime minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, with his much-attributed antipathy for communists, that he did little to control such acts of harassment and even terror. The police arrested UPF supporters on trumped-up charges and, in some cases, tortured them. As the 1992 Human Rights Yearbook published by the

human rights organisation, INSEC, recorded, in Rolpa, "political workers, employees and teachers have been the victims of arrest and torture because of political revenge... There are many incidents that political parties with support from the ruling power had taken political revenge in this district."

A section from the 1993 Yearbook of the same organisation states: "In Libang [the headquarters] of Rolpa district regarded as a stronghold of United People's Front an armed force of 80 men including six inspectors and District Police Officers...launched a suppression campaign... Women were misbehaved, chickens and goats were slaughtered and eaten, and citizens were widely charged with false allegations." There was retaliation from the other side also, as this entry notes: "District Development Committee member Shahi Ram Dangi, a NC [Nepali Congress] supporter, was beaten by three persons... Both of his arms were broken."

The abuse of state power continued, meanwhile. Not to be cowed down, and in line with their stated aim of armed struggle, in 1995, the Maoists (and the UPF) began what has been called the Sija Campaign (after Sisne and Jaljala, the two main mountains of Rolpa and Rukum) to propagate the Maoist ideology. In the words of one of those who took part in it, as told to the *Revolutionary Worker*, the weekly newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist Party of USA, it consisted of a central training programme after which the cadre went back to practise what they had learnt. The purpose was "to arouse the masses and heighten political consciousness. These teams of leaders worked with the masses building roads and bridges, and farming..."

The Maoists continued to clash with the Nepali Congress workers, but also with the CPN-UML cadres. (Although the CPN-UML and the UPF had worked out seat adjustments for the 1991 elections, the strong showing by the UPF in the western hills seems have alarmed the CPN-UML into viewing the UPF as a potential competitor for left-minded party workers as well as voters.) Meanwhile, the response of the Nepali Congress government was a police operation codenamed Romeo (R for Rolpa) to "win the heart and minds" of the people. The home minister at that time was Khum Bahadur Khadka, elected from Dang District, neighbouring Rolpa to the south. Rolpa, Rukum and Dang all fall under Rapti Zone (zone being the larger administrative boundary than a district), and it is believed that Khadka perceived the spread of the extreme left in his home zone as

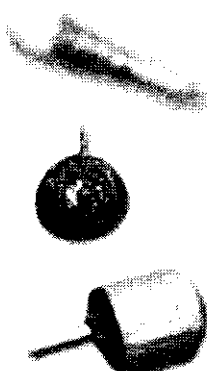
something of a personal slight, hence the ruthlessness with which Operation Romeo was conducted.

In a December 1995 interview with *The Independent* weekly, Baburam Bhattarai said that "around 1500 policemen, including a specially trained commando force sent from Kathmandu, have been deployed to let loose a reign of terror against the poor peasants... there has been indiscriminate ransacking and looting of properties of common people by the ruling party hoodlums under the protection of the police force. More than 10,000 rural youth, out of a population of 200,000 for the whole district, have been forced to flee their homes and take shelter in remote jungles."

The INSEC Human Rights Yearbook 1995 reports: "The government initiated...suppressive operations to a degree of state terror. Especially, the workers of United People's Front were brutally suppressed. Under the direct leadership of ruling party workers of the locality, police searched, tortured and arrested, without arrest warrants, in 11 villages of the district. Nearly 6000 locals had left the villages due to the police operation. One hundred and thirty-two people were arrested without serving any warrants. Among the arrested included elderly people above 75 years of age. All the detained were subjected to torture."

While all this was going on, the Nepali civil society, represented by the Kathmandu intelligentsia, the human rights activists, the mainstream media, among others, seemed more or less unaware of the extent of state repression. Had they been more alert and warned the government off, there was a possibility that the insurgency would never have acquired the intensity it did over the years. (And this was not to be last time the opinion-makers in Kathmandu Valley would fail their hill brethren.) In retrospect, with the elite classes in the capital looking the other way, the police operation succeeded in thoroughly alienating the local population of Rolpa. As one activist put it to the *Revolutionary Worker*, "Like Mao said, they picked up a rock to drop it on their own feet."

So, while on the one hand the political wing of the Maoists, the UPF, had had the door to electoral politics closed on its face through de-recognition by the Election Commission and they had adopted armed struggle as their programme, there was outright suppression going on at the hands of the state in these far-flung districts. Shyam Shrestha, a former member of the Unity Centre and now an editor of a leftist monthly, calls these the "push and pull factors" that led to the Maoist uprising.



Crude bombs used by the Maoists.

The militant project

In Lenin's view, the 'objective conditions' for a revolution consist of "the impossibility for the ruling classes to live and rule in the old way, the so-called crisis 'from above', and, on the other, the unrest of the oppressed classes which do not want to live in the old way, the crisis 'from below'; extreme aggravation of the poverty and suffering of the oppressed classes; and a considerable increase in the activity of the people."

Lenin's prescription for a classic uprising may not be obtaining in Nepal, a land of diverse geography and demography. That could explain why, apart from the short-lived Jhapa uprising, all of Nepal's communist parties had continued to defer revolution to a future time, and chosen 'mass struggle' as the way forward. So, what was it that led the Maoist leadership to decide that the time was ripe for an uprising and where did they garner their confidence for the project? And what of the Marxist 'subjective conditions' that "the revolutionary class must be ready and able to undertake revolutionary mass action which is sufficiently strong to overturn the old government"? Could the Maoists have interpreted the 1990 upheaval and the following years of uncertain politicking as having given way to a revolutionary situation in the kingdom?

The freedom that came with parliamentary democracy saw a babel of voices demanding a stake in the making and running of the state. Most notable among these were the ethnic groups. Constituting nearly 35 percent of the population, the ethnic communities have had a historic sense of marginalisation from the national centre of power, a grievance that goes right back to the century-long Rana era. In the changed circumstances after 1990, it was natural for ethnic assertion to come to the fore. As far back as 1992, British scholar Andrew Nickson had warned: "The future prospects of Maoism in Nepal will...depend largely on the extent to which the newly elected Nepali Congress government addresses the historic neglect and discrimination of the small rural communities which still make up the overwhelming bulk of the population of the country...[which] would mean a radical shake-up of the public administration system in order to make it both more representative of the ethnic diversity of the country and more responsive to the needs of peasant communities."

The state's reaction to the incipient ethnic movement was ingenuous at best. Apart from pro forma gestures such as allowing the broadcast of news over the national radio in regional



The People's Army in Hukum, a village of Rukum.

SAGAR BUDHATHOKI

languages and the establishment of the National Committee for the Development of Nationalities, it did nothing to recognise concerns relating to language rights, under-representation at the policy-making level, introduction of affirmative action, the "Hindu" nature of the state (as opposed to a secular one), and so on. Resentment continued to build up (and continues to simmer). In fact, in the first few years after 1990, there was, perhaps exaggerated, apprehension among the ruling classes that the greatest challenge to the viability of the Nepali nation-state came from a possible ethnic conflagration *a la* the erstwhile Yugoslavia.

Having decided to abandon the electoral path, and having had to revert to developing a 'ground level' power base, the Maoists were quick to identify their ethnic discontent and try to ride it to their purpose, taking advantage of the supposed correlation between ethnicity and poverty. They thus added ethnic demands as a flavour to their ideological programme of class struggle. In the leaflets distributed on the first days of the People's War, they declared: "To maintain the hegemony of one religion (i.e. Hinduism), language (i.e. Nepali), and nationality (i.e. Khas), this state has for centuries exercised discrimination, exploitation and oppression against other religions, languages and nationalities and has conspired to fragment the forces of national unity that is vital for proper development and security of the country."

This was also no doubt a tactically motivated insert, since the Maoist strongholds of Rolpa and Rukum contain a significant population of Magars, who form the largest ethnic group in the country. Interestingly, the Maoist leadership consists overwhelmingly of Bahuns (Nepal's hill Brahmins), the very group that ethnic activists hold responsible for their historical marginalisation. Whatever the motivation, the Maoist strategy seemed to have served its purpose in this region, for a large section of Magars of the central hills embraced the CPN (Maoist) enthusiastically. Meanwhile, after initially

flirting with the Maoists, the leaders of many ethnic groups have begun to argue that Nepali Maoism may not be the answer to the challenge of communal discrimination, for the state power will likely remain with the Bahuns no matter how the contest ends. In this reading, the Magars of the western hills, who have died in disproportionate numbers in the People's War, are no more than cannon fodder.

The fact that the Maoists have not been able to take advantage of the caste-ethnic divisions on a country-wide scale may actually point to the true class character of the struggle they champion. It is after all a 'class war' with ideological underpinnings and its roots can be traced to the general sense of discontent in the aftermath of the 1990 movement. As the parliamentary exercise proceeded, nothing significant happened in terms of improving the social and economic conditions of the people. Governance remained in shambles as political parties concentrated on trying to reach for and stay in power. The gap between the poor and the rich grew wider even as conspicuous consumption of a kind never before witnessed soared in the capital city. Writes Baburam Bhattarai in his 1998 monograph, *Politico-Economic Rationale of People's War in Nepal*: "Nepal has slid to the status of the second poorest country in the world in terms of physical and cultural developments; 71 percent of its population fall below absolute poverty level; 46.5 percent of national income is in the hands of 10 percent of the richest people..."

For all its flaws, the pre-1990 system had introduced certain developmental advances which, in the following decade, sparked significant social departures. For example, the network of highways championed by the Panchayat leadership made it easier for village youth to venture out to see the lights of Kathmandu, and literacy allowed them the access

to the tools to understand, compare and contrast their lives with those of people elsewhere. For many young Nepalis, politicised by literacy and the ability to read the newspapers and yet frustrated by poor and incredibly unresponsive education, the age-old route down the mountains to menial labour in the plains was no longer a path that could be trod unthinkingly. This labour migration to the plains was, after all, the historical safety valve which kept the lid on political upheaval over the decades. But now the pressures were being bottled up.

The sense of neglect of the young, without the lived experience of the Panchayat-era ennuï, became all the more acute when the parliamentary democracy achieved in 1990 failed to 'deliver'. French social scientist, Anne de Sales, who has studied the Magars of the central hills, writes that the villages are today full of individuals "who have had experience of realities other than those of the daily life of the village". She adds, "Whether their personal journeys have been in search of a better education or, more commonly, in search of work, whether they have gone to the flatlands of the Tarai, to the capital, or abroad, they have come into contact with a modernity which, even if it is not viewed as 100 percent positive, marks a Rubicon. The perception of rural areas like theirs as dead ends and going nowhere, forgotten by the rest of the world, discourages the young people, who are more inclined than in previous times to join a militant project for a society where they would have a more respected place and a better life."

de Sales was writing about the Magar youth of Rolpa, but she could as easily have been referring to the young anywhere in Nepal's hills. This disparity would not have been significant had it not been for the fact that after 1990 politics had become more participatory and political discourse more open and a larger number of people more politically conscious. And a politically aware youth population steeped in poverty and seeing no rescue from the direction of the mainstream party politicians was more likely to be swayed by Maoist rhetoric. Rhetoric which claimed, in classic ideological language, that "This state that does not manufacture even a needle in the name of self-reliant and national economy, has handed over the whole economy of the country to a dozen families of foreign compradors and bureaucratic capitalists."

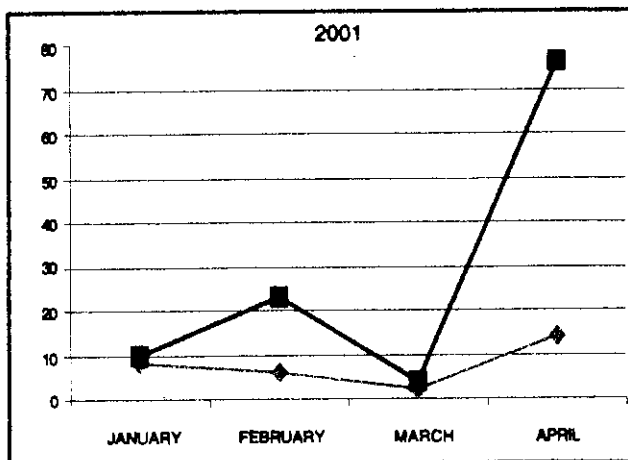
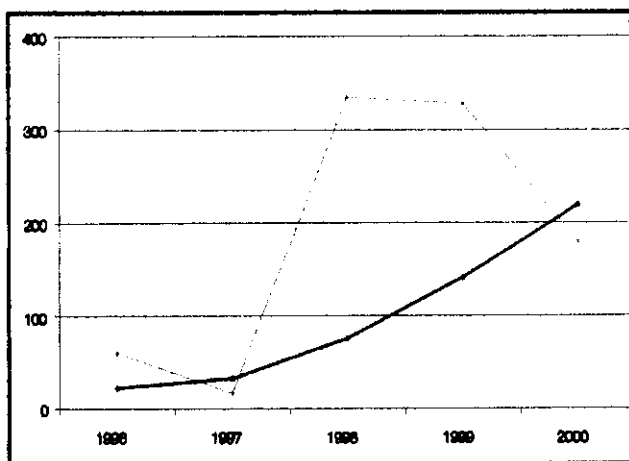
Kilo Sierra 2

Looking back at the last five years which have coincided with the People's War of the CPN

Rana Bahadur Singh of Jajarkot sits before the remains of his house destroyed by the Maoists in an attack on the police. Singh lost his wife and two children in the rubble.



SUDHDEEP SHARMA



Head count:
grey line
shows killings
by the police
and the black
by the Maoists.

(Maoist), and pondering over the state of the above-ground politics that the underground rebels were fighting, it becomes obvious why the latter increased their reach in quantum jumps. The 1994 elections had thrown up a hung parliament that gave the country one minority government and as many as five coalition ones. Everything, including the Maoist uprising, took a back seat as the parties in parliament tried out every previously-inconceivable ideological permutations in their joust for power.

When the attacks first began in the remote hills, there was a certain nonchalance apparent among the politicians in Kathmandu. Even as they denounced the violent methods of the Maoists and, for public consumption, some repeated *ad nauseum* calls for a "political settlement" to the problem, the fact is that the politicians of all hues preferred to view Nepali Maoism as a simple law-and-order problem that could be tackled by the police. Bhim Bahadur Tamang was law and justice minister at the time and he told a newspaper that since the Maoists were not waging an ideological battle, they would have to be put down by force. The home minister, Khum Bahadur Khadka, was being equally forthright when he said: "We are doing our best to bring them under control." If it was a problem to be 'controlled', it certainly was not done to perfection, as events that have played out since indicate.

If it was to be expected that the mainstream communists would view the Maoists kindly, that did not happen. In 1997, the mainstream communists formed a coalition government with the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, representing the discredited political force from the Panchayat era. It went one better than the Nepali Congress and tried to introduce a 'black law' that would have given the police wide-rang-

ing powers against 'terrorists' (the law was also trying to address a police complaint that the Maoists they caught were being released all-too-easily by the courts). Following widespread protests from the intelligentsia and human rights groups, and also from international organisations, the effort was aborted. Later, in 1998, the CPN (Marxist-Leninist) (a splinter from the CPN-UML) joined the Nepali Congress government as a junior partner barely two months after the infamous police action known as 'Kilo Sierra 2' operation had been launched.

Following in the violent footsteps of Operation Romeo, Kilo Sierra 2 was at once the result of several colluding factors: an undisciplined police force that had all-too-quickly been politicised beyond recognition; a political class of ruling and opposition parties that saw the Maoists as an aberration best liquidated; a national educated class that refused to demand performance from the politicians even while fashionably opposing the proposed 'black law'. (It is not entirely clear, but Kilo Sierra 2, i.e., KS2, is said to be an anagram of the radio code S2K, or Search to Kill.)

Operation Kilo Sierra 2 was undertaken by the Nepal Police in 18 districts of the country for over a year. Although the men in blue denied throughout the existence of such an operation, from mid-1998 onwards the killing of Maoists and their supporters escalated to reach the highest point ever in the last five years of the People's War. If Operation Romeo had concentrated its fire on a particular area in the western hills, Kilo Sierra 2 was spread out across the 'Maoist-affected' regions of the country.

The pain and suffering that the brutal police action left in its wake would have provide the long-lasting motive energy for the Maoist insurgency, and it is on the foundations of the

angered peasantry targeted by the police that the insurgents have been able to build the larger edifice of the People's War of today. This is borne out by the results of a recent opinion poll conducted by *Himal Khabarpatrika*, Kathmandu's Nepali-language fortnightly. In west Nepal, where the police actions have been most concentrated, 30 percent of the respondents attributed the rise of the Maoists to police high-handedness (The national average was 19 percent. On the other hand, 38 percent attributed it to poverty and unemployment, 17 percent to the Maoist ideology and 9 percent to fear of the Maoists).

In the end, all efforts of successive governments to bring the Maoists to heel with force failed. Sending in the police with a one-point brief to quell the insurgency without considering that its fallout was a mistake the political bosses in Kathmandu have possibly lived to regret. The other miscalculation was not realising the extent to which a police force trained to handle civilian law-and-order situations can take on what turned out to be a highly motivated group ready to kill and be killed.

The bravado of the government and the police can, to some extent, be attributed to the pitiful armoury that the Maoists fielded in the initial years of their insurgency. This consisted of a few .22 and 12-bore rifles looted from village bigwigs, but mostly ancient muzzle-loaders and country-made guns fashioned by blacksmiths. But the Maoist arsenal grew formidable with firearms and ammunition captured from the police during their mass attacks. Till the end of March 2001, the Maoists had taken nearly 600 'three-nought-three' rifles from the police along with a couple of hundred of other weapons. Similarly, the haul from the civilian population has also crossed 500. That is again classic Maoist strategy: "To replenish our

strength with all the arms... captured from the enemy."

Apart from guns, the Maoists have, with devastating results, fielded explosive booby-traps, pipe bombs and homemade 'grenades' against the police (these 'grenades' using the spring mechanism of cheap ball point pens to trigger the explosion within the the short length of the metal piping). Police sources say training in the use of explosives has been provided by Maoist groups based in India, namely the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) of Bihar and the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (People's War) in Andhra Pradesh. The Maoists have also lately begun sourcing weapons from the illegal arms bazaar of the neighbouring Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

They have the wherewithal. According to government figures, the Maoists have so far looted NPR 250 million from banks and other institutions. However, analysts in Kathmandu believe that with money extorted in the form of 'donations' and 'taxes', the Maoist treasury could be well over NPR 5 billion.

According to the police, captured militants have admitted that the Maoists have by now acquired automatic weapons, although these have not so far been used in the fighting (*see cover image*). Going by the pictures by journalists on "guided tours" of Maoist-held areas, the muzzle-loaders that were ubiquitous even till two years ago have disappeared from the scene. The Maoists now not only have motivation, they have the arms to fight a police force that has neither the will power nor the equipment and training to take on guerillas.

In sharp contrast to the insurgents' expanding arsenal, the Nepal Police is stuck with antiquated weaponry, in particular the 303s of World War II vintage that reportedly jam after a few rounds of firing. The police have for long complained that if they are to tackle the Maoists, they need to be equipped better. This demand, however, has not been acted upon as it involves bringing in the Royal Nepal Army, long since distrustful of the police and unwilling to let it handle modern arms. Indeed, supported by the royal palace, the army has been able to deny the Nepal Police the modern weapons it needs so desperately if it is to fight a declared 'war' by highly motivated insurgents.

Especially since the lost battle in Dunai, the headquarters of Dolpa district, the police have been on the defensive vis-à-vis the Maoists. This is reflected in the number of killings; in 2000, more people (mostly policemen) were killed by the Maoists than Maoists and their supporters killed by the police. The Maoist tactic is to hurl

The young widow of police constable Lokendra Giri of Rolpa killed in the Dailekh attack breaks down on his body.



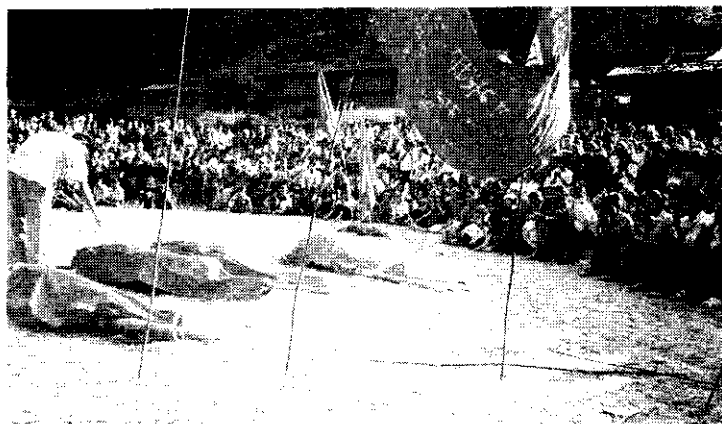
homemade bombs, detonate pressure-cookers packed with explosives, and with the cowering policemen in disarray, attack in a swarm of hundreds (human waves reminiscent of the Chinese during the Korean War) to take police outposts.

Meanwhile, the policemen have abandoned outlying posts in the districts that are highly affected by the insurgency, and concentrated forces in a few places. But even this type of strategic withdrawal did not prevent the Maoists from carrying out attacks such as the ones at Rukum and Dailekh in early April or the earlier one in the same region on a convoy carrying the chief justice of the Supreme Court, in which five were killed, including the registrar of the regional court.

As a consequence of all these factors, police morale is down. There have been mass resignations and desertions after the Rukum and Dailekh losses. It does not help matters that the system of posting policemen to Maoist areas is fraught with reverse favouritism and influence-peddling. Besides, unlike in the army, the policemen are not trained to fight as a loyal band, and the seniors rarely fight in the trenches with the rank and file. It is an indication of the times that, in a country with such high unemployment, the number of applicants for the once-coveted police jobs is down drastically.

War or peace

One of the constants since the People's War's beginning has been the repeated call that a "political solution" be sought to resolve the Maoist issue. At the political level, this has mainly emanated from the CPN-UML, and subsequently its breakaway CPN-ML. But apart from using the Maoists' rise as a stick to beat the Nepali Congress with and trying to lay responsibility for the conflict at its doorstep, the two major communist forces have done precious little to indicate the shape and focus of their proposed "political solution". Till now, their role has been to publicly nay-say any and all measures brought forward by the government, such as their resolute opposition to the use of the army option or the formation of a paramilitary police force. This resistance can be seen as an opportunistic one, since going by their past record, it can be conjectured that if it were in power, the mainstream left would quite likely use all available force at its disposal to subdue the Maoists. This for the sole reason that the latter's growth in popularity can only be at their own cost in terms of supporters and votes. This indicates, if anything, a cynical use of the situation by the main left opposition



Maoists pay homage to their fallen comrades at a public function.

parties in particular.

As things stand, the left parties have hardly stopped pontificating on what the government should or should not do in terms of running the country, but they have not come up with anything innovative on how to engage the Maoists apart from saying that they have to be brought to the negotiating table. Negotiations are of course one way forward, and the call for talks has grown louder over the last two years, mainly because the police seemed to be making no headway and also because, as the May 1999 elections gave the Nepali Congress a parliamentary majority, it was expected that the new government would get cracking on resolving this foremost national challenge.

And indeed, the new prime minister, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, set up a committee under Sher Bahadur Deuba (prime minister at the time the People's War was launched and the earlier Operation Romeo undertaken) to suggest ways to solve the Maoist problem. As part of that process, the government established contact with the Maoist leadership and received a positive response. In a letter to a government contact in February 2000, Prachanda listed three demands and wrote: "Should these minimum conditions be fulfilled, we are ready to send our representatives for high-level negotiations and we would like to inform you that we will cease all operations during the period of talks."

But in March 2000, Congress infighting led to the ouster of Bhattarai, and Girija Prasad Koirala took charge once again, listing among other things the former's failure to control the Maoist advance. One fallout of the toppling game was that Koirala's former protégé Deuba emerged as his main rival within the Congress. The Deuba committee's mandate was then held hostage to the political rivalry between the two leaders. It was clear the Koirala side would not be willing to give Deuba any leeway

Dramatis personae: (from left) King Birendra; army chief Prajwal Shumshere Rana; Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala; former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba; general secretary, CPN-UML, Madhav Kumar Nepal; general secretary, CPN-ML, Bamdev Gautam; Baburam Bhattarai; and Prachanda.



which could lead to some sort of breakthrough, while Deuba himself used this issue to jockey into position for the Koirala's job.

Meanwhile, Koirala's government made its own attempt at negotiation. With the help of Padma Ratna Tuladhar, a maverick human rights activist of the left, it got in touch with the Maoists. Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Ram Chandra Poudel even had a meeting with the Kathmandu 'area commander' of the CPN (Maoist). Things were looking bright when the government released Dinesh Sharma, a Maoist central committee member, in keeping with one of Prachanda's demands. However, it committed a blunder by first having Sharma renounce his party at a press conference. The Maoists cried foul and backed out immediately, and Padma Ratna Tuladhar was furious as he believes that the two sides had never been closer to talks.

Writing in a national daily soon after, Prachanda nevertheless seemed willing to talk: "If the government reveals the whereabouts of those under their custody without playing games, we are ready to talk." There has been no more contact between the two sides since. Nepali Congress sources claim, without elaboration, that various channels are being used to get in touch with the Maoists, and there is credible evidence to show that it is the Maoists who are presently playing hard to get. It is assumed that they believe that they are on a victorious phase in the hills, and see no reason to talk at the moment. Indeed, with the continuing disarray in Kathmandu, it would be natural for them to do so.

The Great Nepali helmsman

Then in late February this year, the Maoists surprised everyone with a statement issued after their Second National Conference in which they outlined their future course of action. Most prominent among the declarations was the elevation of Prachanda from general secretary to chairman (in place of the Great Helmsman) and

the adoption of 'Prachanda Path' as the guiding principle for the Maoists. (Path is used in the Nepali connotation, which also means "road". The similarity of this term to Peru's Shining Path, however, is believed to be purely coincidental) The February declaration called for a "mass armed struggle" to go together with the People's War. Significantly, the statement also called for a meeting of "all concerned parties" and the formation of an interim government that would draft a new constitution for the country.

Considering that the Maoists' September 1995 Central Committee document was clear that they would "never allow this struggle to become a mere instrument for introducing partial reforms in the condition of the people, or terminating in a simple compromise by exerting pressure on the reactionary classes", and one of the main hurdles during possible talks would be their demand for a constituent assembly, observers saw this new development as a climb-down from their earlier uncompromising stance. Analysts believe that the Prachanda Path declaration, even while confirming Pushpa Kamal Dahal's unquestioned helmsmanship within the Maoists hierarchy, indicates the willingness of the Maoists to eventually join mainstream.

After the Prachanda Path announcement there began a flurry of activity on the government side. On 6 March, the government complied with the long-standing Maoist demand that it reveal the whereabouts of their comrades in custody. A list containing more than 300 names of Maoist suspects was released and Deputy Prime Minister Ram Chandra Poudel said, "The name of every single person detained or serving a sentence in prison has been presented. They [the Maoists] now have to establish contact."

Human rights activists got moving as well and they named a team, including Padma Ratna Tuladhar, that would help facilitate talks. But it was all much ado about nothing. By



April, the Rukumkot and Dailekh killings had taken place. The Maoist leadership suggested rather ingenuously that these killings—of lowest rung policemen cowering in police posts and hardly the representative of state terror for the moment—were meant to goad the government towards talks. If that was so, the timing was unpropitious. The Girija Prasad Koirala government was under assault from all quarters. Even as the intra-Congress squabble continued unabated, the main opposition, CPN-UML, had boycotted parliament throughout the entire winter session demanding Koirala's resignation on an aircraft leasing scandal. Having wended his way carefully for months to get royal approval for an ordinance that would set up an armed police force, it was imperative for Koirala to get parliamentary approval for it to become law. The ordinance lapsed even without it being presented in parliament, which never met.

Even though King Birendra subsequently provided approval to the armed police ordinance submitted directly to him, it will still have to be endorsed by the parliament at its next sitting. Even if were to be thus endorsed, it will still be at least a year before the first para-military company will march out of the training barracks, hopefully trained to tackle violent insurgency the way the civilian police force never was. What is to be done in the interim is a dilemma for the government. Both former prime minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai and Girija Prasad Koirala (who at the time of going to press, was holding on to his post amidst a firestorm of opposition) have at various times threatened to use the army against the Maoists, but have never been able to go the whole distance, caught as they are in a web of intrigue spun by and around the royal palace.

In their statements, the Maoists have continuously taunted the government to try and use the army, claiming that they are ready to tackle the soldiers. That could be mere brave talk, for till now the Maoists have been scrupu-

lous in avoiding any skirmish with the men in green. In fact, up to some years ago, the main target of the Maoists were the telecommunication towers on isolated hilltops: not one has been attacked since the army was assigned to guard them. In Rukum District, where the military is building a road through areas the Maoists control, there is an unstated understanding under which the each side studiously ignores the other. In fact, the Maoists may pass a military camp on their way to attack a police post and return via the same trail, with nary a challenge. One of the biggest questions raised against the Royal Nepal Army was its disinclination to come to the aid of the beleaguered police force at Dunai when help was sought, as well as its reluctance to pursue the Maoists as they beat their retreat down the Bheri gorge.

It is possible that the deployment of the army alone, with threat of action, could itself prove a great deterrent to the Maoists activity and its spread. However, the biggest hurdle to any such move comes from the army brass itself. Speaking to a newspaper last year, Commander-in-Chief Prajwal Shumshere Rana said the army could be deployed only with a consensus among all the political parties. While on the one hand this can be seen as the army chief's wariness of the short-term games that political parties like to play, it was nevertheless a rather brazen act of challenging the elected government's authority over the army.

The controversy as to who actually controls the *Shahi Nepali Sena* (Royal Nepal Army) has continued and the "royal" in the name is indication enough to conservatives as to where it should be. The constitution provides for a National Security Council (in which the government ministers are in majority) to direct the army while the king has been named its Supreme Commander. Other than the statement by the Commander-in-Chief (and another one in similar vein made more recently by him, *see below*), the army has not so far openly questioned civilian authority. For example, it went along with

the partial deployment of soldiers in 16 district headquarters after the Dolpo attack. However, the army has successfully dragged its feet on each and every government initiative, beginning with its reluctance to equip the police with automatic rifles.

The latest instance of the army's trying to put a spanner in the works has to do with the Integrated Security and Development Plan (ISDP), a NPR 400 million (USD 5 million) undertaking that would carry out development works in the Maoist-affected districts under the authority of the civilian Central District Officers, with the soldiers providing back-up support. This carrot-and-stick approach to tackling the Maoists insurgency—delivering infrastructure and other development benefits while deploying the soldiers to keep the rebels from disrupting the projects—is said to have taken some convincing from Prime Minister Koirala before King Birendra approved of it. However, a week later, the army chief repeated his demand for consensus. "The Royal Nepal Army is not a party-affiliated mechanism but a national institution," he said, creating a minor crisis of confidence.

The role of the mainstream left vis-a-vis this matter of army deployment has also been cynical. While they are convinced about this need for civilian control of the soldiers, they have refused to support the government on this score because it would provide support to the 'enemy' in the form of Girija Prasad Koirala. Thus, when a crucial exercise was being carried out to test the constitutional standing of the Royal Nepal Army, they have pretended not to be looking.

Scorched earth

The success of the ISDP is in question by the controversy surrounding its very birth, as with the establishment of the armed police. In the

heartland when the police action and 'state terror' was at its worst, it is unlikely that the "carrot" of the ISDP will itself suffice to win over the populace. There is no indication that the Maoists are going to cease their operations and until that happens death will continue to stalk the sons and daughters of Nepali peasants, whether it is the Maoist guerrilla fighting for social equity or the police constable escaping poverty through government service. Sending in the armed police or the army will be only option available to the government if its overture for talks is not reciprocated. But there is actually no guarantee that the military will succeed where the police have so far failed. And the scenario is dire if the military's involvement and a possible scorched-earth policy leads to the explosion of a full-scale insurgency.

The hills of Nepal is perfect guerrilla country and the estimated 5-10,000 trained fighters could easily prove a match for any army. The most the troops may be able to do is contain the spread of the Maoists. In any case, soldiers let loose on the countryside are sure to be unleash much more bloodshed, including those of civilians caught in the crossfire. The waging of war by a military is somewhat different from that by a civilian police force, and, in a manner of speaking, the Maoists themselves may want to consider whether it was worth creating a situation where soldiers are let loose on the populace.

The situation is getting desperate in the hills of Nepal (the Maoists have not yet infiltrated the Tarai or the high mountains). Nearly 1700 Nepali lives have been lost in a war that has been characterised by extreme ruthlessness on both sides. The attack on the Chief Justice and the butchering of policemen in Rukum and Dailakh has shaken the complacent middle class out of its mistaken belief that the conflict cannot and will not affect them. But, sensibly perhaps, most want to see the fighting end through dialogue. In the *Himal Khabarpatrika* opinion poll taken two months ago, a majority (fully 76 percent) of Nepalis wants the issue resolved through talks (16 percent think an all-party government can do it, 13 percent want an amended constitution. Only 5 percent and 4 percent want mobilisation of the army and the armed police). This desire of the populace for talks indicate that it is still not too late for the Maoists and the national political class to pull back from the brink.

But what would the talks focus on? The government is clear that there can be no negotiating the "spirit enshrined in the preamble of the constitution", namely, constitutional monarchy

Maoist Central Committee member, Dinesh Sharma, renounces his party before the press. After his release, Sharma recanted his statement in circumstances that are still murky.



MIN. BAIRACHARYA

and parliamentary democracy. If that is the case, it would be plausible to ask what else is there to discuss with the rebels. However, going back to the February Prachanda Path declaration, would it be implausible to construe that the Maoists themselves are seeking a way out of the jungle and into the mainstream?

Let's consider the situation from Maoists' angle. They have succeeded in carving out 'base areas'. That was easily enough accomplished by chasing away the representatives of state power—the police—from hillsides which in any case are otherwise devoid of government presence. Consolidating that hold over time is a different proposition. The end of police terror may have been welcomed by the people and measures like outlawing gambling and usury and controlling alcohol may be momentarily effective but how sustainable can they be in the long run? Condemning 'class enemies' to forced labour through 'people's courts' may contain a sense of retributive justice in conditions that are still murky, and it may be uplifting to be part of large rallies in support of the Maoist movement. Ultimately, however, the question of social and economic progress arises. Development work has come to a near complete halt in the hills of Nepal, and even basic delivery programmes have been affected in large parts of the country.

Certainly, the Maoists have set up 'people's governments', but they must know that to achieve anything substantial and long-lasting countrywide they have to reach for power in Kathmandu, which is bound to require compromising on some of their adamant stands (unless, of course, they continue to believe that it can be achieved by fighting in the face of social, economic and geopolitical realities).

How viable are such base areas as have been created by the Maoists anyway? "In China, guerrilla war had become an objective necessity because of other factors such as the Japanese occupation. In Nepal, the so-called people's war has grown out of the party's 'subjective' judgement," says Shyam Shrestha. In Mao's case, warlordism was rampant in his country and he actually had to set up a country within a country. In Mao's own words: "China is a vast country; hence one need not worry about whether there is room enough to move around." That is not so with Nepal.

Also, the Maoist fighting force is getting larger by the day, but its ranks are increasingly filled more by frustrated and romanticised youth rather than by the ideologically commit-



NIN BAISACHARYA

ted senior cadre. These young men and women have by now been socialised into violence and the power of the gun, and the most difficult task yet for the Maoist leaders could be of keeping them on a leash. Hari Rokka, a senior activist of the Nepali left, says that one of the Maoists' biggest problems is the lack of a mid-level leadership since they are mostly either at the top of the hierarchy or fresh entrants. The fact that after the attack on the motorcade of the chief justice, the Maoist 'regional commander' (who is one of the MPs elected from Rolpa in 1991) stated that it was not intended, and the execution-style killing of many policemen during the Rukumkot attack seem to indicate a waywardness among the Maoist fighting force that is worrying. After all, it is not such a huge jump from insurgency to banditry, and already with the weakening of the police force the public at large is at the mercy of a law-and-orderless situation even beyond the Maoist controlled areas.

Then there is the very distinct possibility of a difference of opinion among the top leadership, the bane of communist parties in general (as proven again and again by Nepal's own left) and of underground movements in particular. Besides the regular purges carried out, reports of not everything being well between the top two leaders Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai themselves are regular staples of the Kathmandu rumour mill. An agriculture technician by training, Prachanda, the organisational brain behind the Maoists, is a home-grown politician, while Bhattarai, known to be the party ideologue, cut his political teeth as a student leader among Nepali emigres in India while acquiring a doctorate in architecture from Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University. Their styles are quite different, say those who have

Families like this one from Sindhupalchowk District, east of Kathmandu, have sought work and shelter from Maoist harassment in the village. The large number of internal refugees fleeing Maoism in the hills is said to be behind the real estate boom in the Valley.

associated with both. Prachanda is more comfortable with intrigue and reportedly not averse to making trade-offs to take his party (and himself) to Kathmandu's seat of power, while Bhattarai is said to be an idealist who would want to go the extra distance in the cold, if necessary.

It can also be asked if such a state as the Maoists propose is at all possible in Nepal. This is not a unitary country like, say China, from where Maoism sallied forth. With a variegated structure in ethnicity, language, regionalism and social systems, a state founded on the foundations of a 'class struggle' alone is not likely to carry very far in Nepal (although it is certainly astounding the distance the insurgents *have* managed to travel). Neither is it clear how the Maoists hope to tackle the Indian state once their activities become loud and violent enough for New Delhi to sit up and take notice.

Mainstreaming Maoism

It could be said that the Maoists of Nepal have come this far not because they have been extraordinary tacticians, but rather because the opposition has been so hapless. After all, they confront a newly democratic state run by a government that is saddled with: 1) an unmotivated bureaucracy, 2) a police force that is not trained to handle an insurgency, coupled with poor intelligence gathering, 3) infighting within the ruling party, 4) a belligerent opposition, 5) an uncooperative army, and 6) a king who, perhaps, holds his cards close to his chest. It is due to Nepal's relatively small size that the Maoists have been able to create such an impact so quickly. But again, by the same token, the matter could possibly be reversed as easily, if the various roadblocks were to be removed.

Most importantly, a true long-term understanding among the political parties on the need to proceed with strengthening the parliamentary system of government would go a long way in their coming to agreement on how to solve the Maoist problem. If that happens, it is likely that the Maoists would tire of the prospects of long years in the jungle and come more willingly to the table than they have till now. This similarity in the background and thought-process (not to mention caste) of the Maoists with the above-ground leadership of the left would buttress the argument that the Maoist leadership would indeed seek a 'safe landing' in Kathmandu tarmac, provided an avenue could be found for them to bring their cadre along.

Should the Maoists come overground, it is possible that they will find greater success than they would otherwise with years fighting in the bush. The evolution of political parties has been such over the years that there is actually a place ready for them in the political mainstream with the CPN-UML having moved towards the centre of the spectrum. It is clear that there is a sizeable constituency that would by now vote for the Maoists if they were to come above ground. After all, from a leftist faction on the extremist fringe they have managed to come centre-stage in five quick years, and now would perhaps be the time for them to cash in on their countrywide power and seek above-ground legitimacy via the ballot box. "They would not have done as much within such a short time if they had gone through normal political processes," Shridhar Khatri, professor of political science at Tribhuvan University, told the weekly *Nepali Times*. "They took the high-risk, quick rewards road."

Unlike the CPN (UML) in 1990 with most of its leaders having just surfaced in the public arena (and hence having had to bring in leaders from the 1950s era to provide public legitimacy), the Maoists would face no such problem. In terms of perception, leaders like Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai already occupy the political mainstream. They talk regularly to the people through the pages of the national dailies besides two of their 'in-house' weeklies and a number of magazines published by their proxies. Reactions to government moves are instantaneous, like one would expect from any regular political party, and the press has generally proved generous in granting a forum to the Maoists.

It is almost as if the very fact that the Maoists are so close to the surface give the lie to their ideological rigidity, and indicates their desire to come to play politics in the centre of power. Says Hari Rokka, "The past has shown that in Nepal, the radicals have ultimately ended up being the mainstream in the communist movement. After the first split in 1963, Pushpa Lal's faction became the mainstream. Next it was the Fourth Conference, and then the Marxist-Leninists. Maybe it is now the turn of the Maoists." The main difference, of course, is that the Maoists have picked up arms and amassed a power base that none of the earlier groups managed.

It is also open to conjecture whether it is long-term planning that has led the Maoist strategists to spare Kathmandu Valley in their attacks thus far. They have shown their capability to hit the capital, certainly, by carrying

out small token bombings, but they have thus far preferred not to target the real wielders of power within that state. While it can be argued that this is more because such action could lead to an instant unanimity in the capital for forceful retaliation through army, armed police or whatever, it could just as easily be seen as keeping the door itself clean of blood in case of a transition towards above-ground power-sharing.

Recent developments do provide some hope that the Maoists of Nepal are seeking a less bloody solution. Why would, otherwise, Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai be together meeting up with leaders of various left parties as well as King Birendra's unofficial representative in Parliament over the course of April 2001? (Clearly, the two are about in Kathmandu Valley, but such is the uniquely Nepali nature of the insurgency situation that even if it were possible, the authorities would most likely not want them nabbed for the political fallout it would have.)

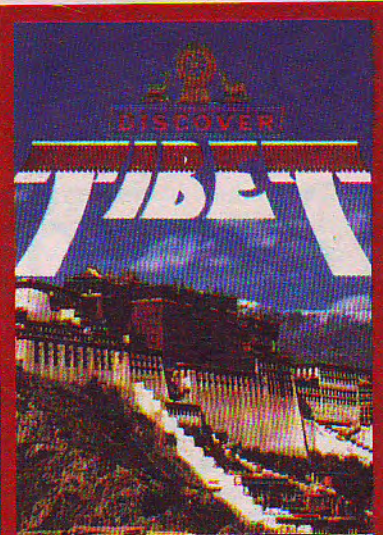
If Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai were to want to make a 'safe landing' in the field of above-ground politics, they would have to overcome two obstacles. The first is simply how they would explain to their charged-up young followers the compromises they would have to make with the political establishment. The second is reconciling their demands with the present constitutional dispensation. The Maoist proposal of an interim government or of a new constitution cannot be met within the existing constitution. Narahari Acharya of the Nepali Congress points out, "Unlike before 1990, when the constitution was whatever the king wanted, according to the present constitution the Nepali Congress alone cannot even amend it, let alone make a new constitution." It is possible that an extra-constitutional path as demanded by the Maoists would be charted only if the Maoists were to want to destabilise the entire country with all out People's War. There is no doubt that the Maoists would even be willing to take this path if they had the men and material. However, one would hope that the leadership would consider the price in death and mayhem too high a price, and accept a 'lesser' solution for the sake of the life of the people.

It will be up to the Maoists and the present polity to figure out what compromises can be made to bring the matter to a close, and relegate the violent People's War to a thing of the past. If it requires constitutional amendment, like the left parties have been demanding vociferously, it can only come about if they join hands with the Nepali Congress.

Whatever the case, it would seem that the Maoists have to be provided an honourable way out if they so desire. But they first have to have the desire to talk, which seems to wax and wane according to the 'victories' they are able to achieve on the field.

Radha Krishna Mainali was one of the leaders of the Jhapa Movement. Today, he is a gentrified Naxalite and part of the mainstream left who has also served as minister. He says, "Revolutions have never succeeded in a democracy. In a democracy, there are just too many ways to vent your grievances; violence is not the only one."

Perhaps, that is the kind of advice the Maoists are missing. And perhaps, this word from a one-time militant would help convince the Maoist leadership and cadre that Nepal is too precious a country to be converted into a series of killing terraces.



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Conspirator's Cauldron

According to one view, the new year's blasts in a Dhaka park and the killings of paramilitary along the Indo-Bangla border were part of a design to destabilise an allegedly pro-India government of Sheikh Hasina Wajed before the upcoming elections.

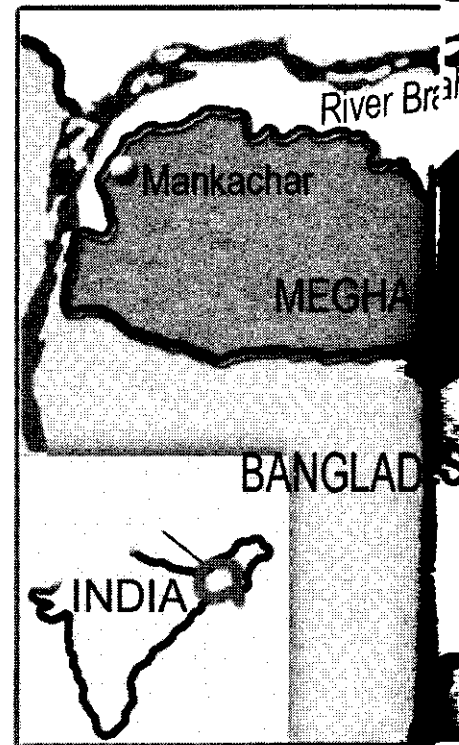
by **Subir Bhaumik**

Ominous intelligence reports about developments that seem to be linked to the recent border conflicts between the paramilitary forces of Bangladesh and India do not augur well for politics in this part of the Subcontinent. Western and Indian intelligence claim to have unearthed a plot by

former Bangla military officers—involvement in the coup of 1975—to assassinate Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed. They maintain that these officers have the backing of powerful allies in Bangladesh's army and paramilitary and have slowly edged Sheikh Hasina towards a trap. The developments

along the Indo-Bangla border, which culminated in the killing of more than a dozen Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldiers, are seen to be part of this elaborate snare to bring an end to Hasina's political career.

On 7 March this year, retired colonel Khondakar Abdur Rashid,



Perspective 2

The Boraibari bungle

The India-Bangladesh border is undefined, which regularly leads to skirmishes and death. When a large number of Indian jawans died, within Bangladeshi territory, India's press and television decided that they did not need to check the facts and nuances.

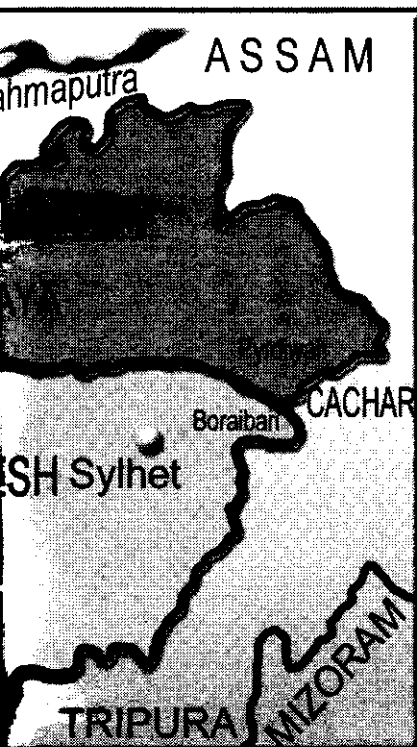
by **Afsan Chowdhury**

EARLIER THIS year, Bangladesh had a problem with Burmese authorities who had begun construction of a culvert at the Bangla-Burma border, an act which violated the existing border arrangement. There was exchange of fire at some point but the conflict was resolved after talks between the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and the Burmese border security outfit. The problem ended with the disputed construction being stopped.

Bangladesh's border with India is not like its bor-

der with Burma or the India-Pakistan Line of Control. It is almost a magic-realist border, with local people defining where each country ends or begins according to need, convenience, or whim. There is no Naf river as in the Bangla-Burmese frontier to give some natural fixity to it. In fact, the designated border existed only in the British minds of long ago that drew it.

It is the abstractness of this border that makes it, at once, both a locus of brisk economic activity and an area of continuous conflict which, for whatever reason,



seven of his comrades-in-arms in the 1975 coup as well as a Pakistani intelligence officer, reportedly met at Breda, 60 miles from Amsterdam. The venue was a restaurant owned by A.K.Mohiuddin, an absconding accused in the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assassination case. The would-be assassins have apparent-

rarely attracts concern. In fact, human rights organisations had to take to the streets of Dhaka on 27 April this year, demanding an end to the killing on the borders. They were not referring to the uniformed combatants on either side but to the civilians living in the border areas. Hundreds have died in the low intensity belligerence between the BDR and the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) that began soon after 1971. Such incidents, which are followed by routine announcements of BDR-BSF flag meetings to restore normalcy along the border, usually receive very little coverage in the newspapers. But the border has now suddenly come alive in the media after 30 summers (since 1971) because of the number of BSF and BDR soldiers who died in just one incident.

The recent tension all along the border, which escalated into an armed conflict at Boraibari in Bangladesh's Kurigram district that left at least 18 soldiers dead, was unexpected and certainly caught the Bangla government on the wrong foot. Since India is not perceived as an actively hostile country but more of a weight-thrower—and there is no particular compulsion to do so at

ly been quite dogged in the pursuit of their objective, as the following list of their various efforts testifies. Two years ago, they tried to hijack a Bangladesh Biman aircraft from Kolkata. When that attempt was foiled, they tried to hire a LTTE suicide squad to assassinate Sheikh Hasina, Mujib's surviving daughter. Sources in Bangladesh National Security and Intelligence (NSI) reveal that the deal with the LTTE fell through when Rashid failed to transfer the promised 10 million USD to a LTTE front in time. Thereafter, a bombing attempt against Sheikh Hasina at Kotalipara in her Gopalganj constituency was planned, but failed when police discovered 76 kg of explosives barely 300 yards from the podium where the prime minister was to address a rally.

It is believed that the Breda meeting was intended to revive the plot. A colonel of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, Shoiab Nasir, who attended this meeting reported back to his boss, Brigadier Riaz, Deputy Director General (Operations) and their telephone conversation was intercepted by Dutch intelligence. The Israeli Mossad and the Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) have major operations in Holland

to monitor the activities of West Asian and Kashmiri as well as North-east Indian rebel groups, which come to attend the meetings of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) based there. Both agencies picked up the details of the Dutch intercept and the Indians passed the information on to Bangladesh. According to sources, both agencies are convinced that the ISI is targeting Sheikh Hasina in close collaboration with the Mujib-killers, who have been on the run ever since a Dhaka court awarded death and life sentences to a number of them. The explosion at Dhaka's Ramna Maidan on the Bengali New Year's Day a few weeks ago, which killed seven innocent celebrants is seen by Mossad and RAW sources as a "dry run" to test the security alertness of Bangladesh agencies.

Plot, politics and border

Western and Indian diplomatic sources in Dhaka, meanwhile, also link the Ramna Maidan blast to the capture of Pyrdiwah (Padua in Bangladesh) by the Bangladesh Rifles. They believe that the blast is part of the same agenda that culminated in the border incident, one to destabilise the secular nationalist

the moment—the official rhetoric was also absent.

But the course of events still remains somewhat foggy. Aside from the routine skirmishes that periodically consume locals, there was nothing in the air to indicate the imminence of such a large-scale conflict. The area in question was part of East Pakistan but came under Indian control in 1971.

Most agree that the tension began when India started to build a road in the disputed Padua-Pyrdiwah area in the Sylhet-Meghalaya border. Protests had been lodged against this as a road should not have been built in the "no-man's land" near which a BSF outpost is located. In 1971, there had been a Mukti Bahini camp here and Bangladesh considers it to be part of its territory. India of course has another point of view.

On 16 April, the BDR overran the area. No military engagements occurred. Some Dhaka newspapers gave it headline status but many did not. To most, the incident at Padua was "another one of those things that happen in the border areas", not enough to bother switching channels. There was in fact no official

politics of Bangladesh. The border incident, in particular, has helped generate extreme tension with India, which is according to the plans of the conspirators. "This suits those elements in the Bangladesh military establishment who are said to be in league with the Mujib killers. Suddenly Sheikh Hasina is in a military trap she cannot break off," says an Indian diplomat. This view is also shared by some in Dhaka. According to a senior leader of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League: "The Prime Minister, who was totally unaware of the Padua adventure, is angry with Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) chief Major General Fazlur Rehman but cannot take him to task because he has achieved great popularity and the backing of the military establishment and opposition parties. The pro-Pakistani elements are trying to use Rehman to box Hasina into a corner."

According to one theory, a coterie of Pakistan-trained officers in Dhaka are using the ambitious Gen.

Rehman, a former liberation fighter, to create tensions with India. Bangladesh's chief of general staff, chief of military intelligence, chief of the civilian NSI, and four general officers commanding—of Mymensingh region, Chittagong, Rangpur and Jessore—are all known for their pronounced anti-Awami League and anti-Indian views. They prefer Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and believe her return to power is necessary to restore the influence of the army in Bangladesh's decision-making process. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Hasina is in a bind, unable to take the army head-on. According to a senior Indian intelligence official who knows well the civilian-military interface in Dhaka, "if she tries to control the military establishment sternly, she runs the risk of a coup".

One lobby within the army, quite decidedly 'anti-India' in its sensibility, has reasons to be unhappy. Sheikh Hasina, in her five-year tenure, has twice snubbed Paki-

stan's military strongman Pervez Musharaff by refusing a dialogue with him. In December 2000, her government expelled the Pakistani deputy high commissioner, Irfan Raja, for making adverse comments about the 1971 liberation war. Meanwhile, her initiatives to strengthen



reaction to the Padua incident and it was not something that created a furor. The only people who played it up were the fringe press and the Islamic fundamentalist lobby. On such matters, neither of them is taken too seriously.

Boraibari killings

Those who witnessed the events and those who visited the "hot zone", Boraibari, including the international media, say that on the early morning of 18 April, about three battalions of BSF members entered this area and queried villagers on the whereabouts of the BDR outpost. The villagers, who do interact with the forces on both sides, apparently pointed them in the wrong direction and after the BSF soldiers moved on, informed the BDR outpost where less than 15 soldiers—the standard outpost presence—were on duty. The men were not expecting any move from across the border, as Boraibari is not a disputed area.

By the time the BDR men took up position, the BSF was apparently still moving about and had reached an open area. To the villagers in the area, it appeared that the BSF did not know what to do next. The soldiers then suddenly torched a few huts. At this point the BDR began to fire from its secure positions.

Whether either contingent was aware of the other's numerical strength and firepower is not definite but the BSF was badly hit in the absence of cover. A large number of them were killed in the hail bullets, forcing the remaining soldiers to scatter. Some of them

headed back to the Indian border. Apparently, the villagers, provoked by the torching of their huts, also gathered in hundreds—this is a well populated area—and attacked whoever was left from the Indian contingent.

Soon after, the BSF commenced a heavy artillery barrage that went on for almost two days. All the while the corpses of the BSF soldiers remained where they were. During the short lulls in the firing some of the injured BSF men still in the field were "captured" and faced the wrath of the villagers. Once the firing ceased, the BDR asked the villagers to collect the bodies, which had by then decomposed. Some of the corpses were strung up and carried like trophies by the villagers. The Bangla media reported these scenes and because of the adverse reaction, the BDR was asked to ensure order in the area. The bodies were sent to Rangpur Medical College for post-mortem to verify how many had died from bullet wounds and how many at the hands of the villagers.

The BSF's relationship with local residents is poor as they come in the way of smuggling, a prime source of livelihood for villagers on both sides of the border. Besides, most families in that area are part of a single extended family, separated by a line on the map which is difficult to define. To them those guarding the 'border' are keeping families apart. The Indian side is certainly more vigilant in this matter and in the last five years almost a hundred villagers have died in

relations with India has led to some success in dealing with the Ganga water sharing problem and the insurrection in the hills above Chittagong.

So as the elections approach, most likely in October 2001, and Sheikh Hasina appears confident of

returning to power, these elements in the Bangladesh army and the political opposition outside it, so the theory goes, are trying to use other means to deny her a second term. The border skirmishes with India and the explosion at Ramna Maidan both were significantly dislocating events for Bangladesh, and signal the possible presence of a master plan that could yet destabilise the country completely.

Asamiya slogans, Bangla slogans

It is clear that the Bangladesh government was not aware of the Bangladesh Rifles' (BDR) move to take Pyrdiwah, a territory that Bangladesh claims was taken by India thirty years ago. After the BDR was forced to retreat, following Prime Minister's Sheikh Hasina's pressure on the BDR chief, the BSF infiltrated at Boroibari to avenge the incursion at Pyrdiwah. The BSF sent an assault group inside Bangladesh but ended up with heavy losses. The toll: 16 BSF soldiers and three

BDR jawans.

It is clear that the Pyrdiwah and its Boraibari fallout were part of a plan to cripple the Awami League government, and most importantly loosen Sheikh Hasina's personal hold on power. In the aftermath of the incidents, groupings on both sides of the border are seeking now to opportunistically extract maximum political mileage. Opposition parties like the BNP and the Jamaite-Islami have described the BDR withdrawal from Pyrdiwah village a "sellout" to India. Meanwhile, north of the border, Assam's ruling Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and its ally the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) too are looking to gain electoral dividends from the massacre of the 16 BSF members. The spectre of demographic invasion that is raked up before every election in Assam has returned with a vengeance to haunt the polity.

On each side of the border, respectively, the "big brother" and the "ugly Bangladeshi" are back on

BDR-BSF conflicts.

As far as the Boroibari killings were concerned

the death of so many Indian soldiers naturally woke up the media in India, which devoted a lot of time and space to publicising the deaths, airing revanchist views and linking the incident to the pressures of domestic politics in Bangladesh. Of them, Zee TV, which has a wide following in the cabled areas of the border, stood out for the extreme hard-line that it pursued.

By and large, the mainstream Indian media echoed the Ministry of External Affairs line without checking the facts. There was an absence of investigative reports, and the commentators on the electronic media, barring a few exceptions like Muchkund Dubey, the former foreign secretary, were unanimously shrill in seeking retribution. Liberal voices found little place on Indian air waves. The first story in *The Times of India*, that the incident could have been a "badly planned move which went badly wrong", was probably the only account that varied from the standard reportage.

Indian authorities confused the situation by trying to disassociate Sheikh Hasina from the BDR capture of Padua. This was surprisingly immature and showed a lack of understanding of Bangladesh's nuanced politics. Giving Hasina a clean chit while putting the blame on the BDR, which is under the control of the home minister made her look a very weak head-of-government. The net effect was to present a contrast between a soft

leader and a tough armed force. In Bangladesh, where the military has taken over many times, the political effect of this image could be catastrophic.

Predictably, this portrayal compelled the Awami League (AL) to pre-empt domestic criticism and Hasina was forced to 'harden' her line and commend "the patriotic armed forces". And Indian media's loose talk about Hasina's apology to Vajpayee only compounded the situation; so "politically insensitive" was it that the foreign secretary of Bangladesh found it necessary to openly challenge the report.

While the Indian media appeared to be satisfied with the official line handed out by South Block, in the Bangla media, by contrast, jingoism was unusually low. In fact, a few major columnists, including those considered to be "pro-government journalists", even upbraided the BDR for not exercising restraint. The Bangladeshi media in general took the line that unless the 1974 Indira-Mujib agreement on demarcating the borders was implemented, such unfortunate incidents would go on. The Dhaka editors, it is known, even held back reports which they thought would aggravate the situation. Local TV stations withdrew footage on the corpses, unlike Zee, which repeatedly telecast such visuals with accompanying statements about criminal adventurism by the Bangla forces.

The Indian media also found it necessary to give vent to its obsession with Pakistan. The chief of BDR, Major General Fazlur Rahman was targeted for being 'pro-Pakistani'. A question that Bangla media persons

stage as villains. In Bangladesh, where the "India factor" is resurrected by the anti-Awami League parties before every Jatiyo Sangsad (Parliament) election, the border skirmishes have become a handy weapon. The Bangladesh Rifles goes in to "liberate" Padua (Pyrdiwah) but pulls back under pressure. The opposition parties ask, "What better evidence of Hasina as an Indian stooge?"

The BNP and Jamait-e-Islami have already plastered the walls of Bangladesh's major cities with slogans such as: *Bharater dalal Hasina, Bharater dalal Awami League, aar noy, aar noy* (Indian stooge Hasina and Awami League, enough of you); *Hasina re Hasina, Tor kathay nachina, tor abbar kathay naiche, desh gecche bhaisye* (Hasina, we will not dance to your tune, the country sank by dancing to your father's tune); and, *Padua jite charle keno, jabab chai, jabab deop* (Answer, why leave Padua after winning it?). In Assam, the situation is not very different. "If Bang-

ladeshis, or sections of them, are paranoid about Indian machinations, people in the Northeast are paranoid about Bangladeshis," explains Samir Das, a scholar who has worked on the Assamese separatist movements. And at no time is it more evident than before elections. The new slogan on Guwahati walls is *Aamar BSFer hathyar prothisodh obopsyeyi lage* (Avenge the massacre of our BSF).

The media in Assam was not particularly restrained in reporting the so-called BDR brutalities. Indeed, on the border incidents, Indian media generally went on an immediate offensive without waiting to collect the facts. It has jumped to easy conclusions which put the onus on Bangladesh alone.

A dot com correspondent went as far as to claim that the BSF deputy commandant B.R Mondal had been tortured and executed in the presence of a senior Bangladeshi district official and parliamentarian. Like others, this reporting ig-

nored some obvious discrepancies. As one former Indian military officer said, if the BSF intelligence machinery did not even have an idea of the BDR buildup at the border, it surely could not have ferreted out graphic details of the circumstances in which Deputy Commandant Mondal died 30 kilometres inside Bangladesh.

While the attention of the 'national' media in both countries have been focussed on bilateral Indo-Bangla matters, the border incidents have had their own incendiary effect on the politics of an Assam going in for Vidhan Sabha (state legislature) polls on 10 May. Already, the atmosphere is heated, and the skirmishes along the border play straight into the hands of the Asom Gana Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party.

The BSF's wounded pride has led to fabrications, which the press has lapped up and which is now being used extensively by the BJP-AGP alliance in their joint campaign

frequently encountered was "Why hasn't Hasina taken action against a pro-Pakistani officer like him?" The fact is, Rahman, who is from the army, like all BDR chiefs, is a Hasina 'loyalist'. In a country that has seen so many years of military rule, the civilian leadership does not lightly confer important commands on those who are not proven friends.

Hartal Heritage

If the Indian media's coverage of the incident was motivated, its attempt to cull a political meaning out of it betrayed abysmal ignorance. The media saw in it an attempt by Bangla politicians to gain political mileage before the national election. The plain fact of the matter is that India presently is not a political issue in Bangladesh, not even an electoral one. It was so in the mid-1970s after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in the days of Farakka dispute and when India supported the Chittagon Hill Tracts (CHT) militants. In the run up to the last election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) campaigned intensively on these issues. But this time around it has not even held a single meeting on the border incidents. Nor has it gone beyond issuing a couple of press statements. Clearly, there are no dividends to be had here. The Ganges Water Treaty and the CHT Peace Treaty, whatever their problems, have eroded the scope for India bashing.

The current reality of Bangla politics is very different. The biggest issue wracking the polity is the "har-

tal heritage", which has had a disastrous impact on society and the economy. Hartals became a major political weapon in the mid-1980s during the anti-Ershad agitation. It gained momentum under successive regimes causing immense suffering to people everywhere. The business lobby, the only civil lobby that matters in Dhaka, has been badly hit while ordinary people have had to cope with a political process they have no control over, one which can shut down lives and cause serious violence. Things have reached such a pass that the president of Bangladesh has had to intervene to convince political parties to desist from calling hartals. The electoral base of both the AL and the BNP is around 35 percent each, a figure that has remained more or less constant. Between 10-15 percent of the vote belongs to former President Hussain Muhammad Ershad's Jatiyo Party (JP). The Jammata-e-Islami follows with less than 10 per cent. Since the two major parties' vote banks stay within a certain range, the JP has emerged as the 'king-maker'. Instead of slogans, therefore, parties have focussed on political arithmetic. As Ershad had joined a four-party alliance under BNP leadership and including the Jammata, the alliance had a very strong chance of forming the next government given the combined vote banks. But the government hauled Ershad into jail for his many corruption cases and this forced him to withdraw from the alliance. Always seeking the path of convenience, he extended support to Hasina, leaving the BNP with just the Jammata as its only sizeable ally. Given this configuration issues are not an issue in this

in Assam. The BJP's West Bengal Vice President P D Chitlangia asserted that two crore Bangladeshi Muslims have entered West Bengal and another 50 lakh had gone over into Assam. He also said that if returned to power, the BJP would scrap the controversial Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunals (IMDT) Act of 1983, a law which seeks to protect Asamiya Muslims in particular from wrongful identification as aliens from Bangladesh. The AGP supports this stance of the BJP as does the powerful All Assam Students Union.

"Assam has often witnessed ethnic polarisation, but on this occasion, the electorate is heading for religious polarisation. For the moment, Bangladesh is the whipping boy. But within a week, the guns will turn on the Bengali-speaking Muslims as the archetypal 'badboy' of Assam politics," says Samir Das. The 'Mia' is fast taking the place of the 'Bengal' as the political punching bag of Assam's political class,

and the border fighting will only give fillip to this trend, says Das.

The BJP-AGP alliance for the 10 May elections seems to be aimed at ensuring religious polarisation of the electorate in Assam. The BJP will pull in the Bengali Hindu votes, almost wholly second or third generation refugees from Bangladesh, and the AGP will pull in the caste Hindu Asamiya votes. As the BJP's former North-east coordinator Bansil Sonee claims, "Only a growth in Hindu consciousness can save Assam." And indeed Sonee is right: only a consolidation of the Asamiya and Bengali caste Hindu vote bank can upset the Congress applecart, which is based on the "Ali-Coolie" (Muslims and tea garden labourer) support.

Meanwhile, the AGP's honeymoon with the Left is over and Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta's party is back to its true moorings. "The AGP and BJP make natural allies but their problem is that both are targeting the same votebank. It

is like having two suns in one sky," says Jibakanta Barua, a researcher on electoral politics in Assam.

The answer to that problem is to have an imaginary dividing line to split the sky and vary the shine to suit the political storm that is in the making. If the AGP-BJP alliance comes to power and scraps the IMDT Act, which the minorities of Assam see as their only safeguard against arbitrary deportation, Assam is headed for a confrontation along purely religious lines for the first time since independence.

On the other side of the border, if Sheikh Hasina loses the elections, the opposition may undo the legislation (in spirit if not in letter) by which she has put an end to the humiliating Vested Properties Act that deprived Hindus of legitimate property for more than 35 years. For those who want India and Bangladesh to thrive in peace, it is time to see through the games.

Games that are played over dead bodies.

election. In the circumstances, attempts to link the border conflict with Bangla electoral politics do not make much sense.

The conflict along the border makes even less sense for trade. One group that has been very concerned by the Boraibari incident is the one involved in the overland trade between the two countries. They form a major pressure group and the possible loss of millions of dollars worth of business has reportedly been a factor in the quick reopening of the border trade after the incident. If events take a turn serious enough to lead to the closure of border, both sides would suffer. But the fact to note is that India exports much more than it imports. In fact, Bangladesh became a major trading area for India during the BNP era and trade has only improved under the present regime. Indian goods arrive more quickly and cheaply and this has little to do with AL politics. All this is not counting the informal trade which is larger in volume than what passes through the formal transit points at Hilly or Benapole. So what the authorities in India and the New Delhi television and press must understand is that a jingoistic coverage of Bangladesh only hurts Indian business.

Living with India

For most Bangladeshis, having India next door is like living with the tiger. In this, Bangladesh is not unlike Nepal. India is perceived as a patronising big brother at best and a serious bully at worst. Even more than in Kathmandu, however, there is a strong anti-India

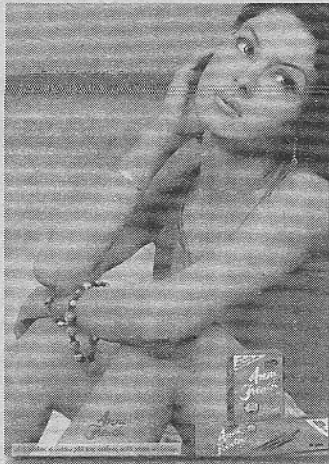
lobby in place in Dhaka, which for long had nothing to talk about. But now, the Boraibari incident has handed it a gift on a platter.

While many do not like the attitude of the Indian officialdom, it is accepted as an inevitable part of life and people are willing to live with it. Indians are also present in huge numbers in Bangladesh. They range from executive in the MNCs to TV companies selling programmes. And Indians are running many businesses in Dhaka as well along the border.

A week after the incident there are a few people raising questions about the efficacy of what is described as the "appeasement approach". Some traditionally anti-Indian newspapers and politicians are beginning to rail against the AL, and ultimately Hasina might be forced to pose as a hardliner in the face of an Indian hardline.

There are other implications, too, for Bangladesh. A year ago, Bangladesh bought nine Mig aircraft from Russia at a cost of USD 150 million. To this was added another 50 million for making them air-worthy by the Indians. This elicited strong protest and open anti-military activities were observed for the first time in Bangladesh. The money spent could have done wonders for Bangladesh's children, said some. It was argued that India would never attack Bangladesh and hence there was no justification for spending on such arms. That argument has for the present been silenced. Boraibari has become the best argument for higher defence investment in poor Bangladesh.

INTERESTING, A woman in shorts in a Pakistani press ad for hair-remover. Islamabad's military censor board is obviously less inclined to cultural policing than earlier democratic dispensations! Or, alternatively, is hair removal not thought to be Occidental-prurient enough by the blasphemy police. Whatever, we welcome the ability of the hair remover to advertise appropriately in the Land of the Pure.



I WOULDN'T want to go anywhere near a wedding where they don't serve—food. There will be many weddings happening in Pakistan everyday of course, but please do not invite Chhetria Patrakar to any. For I hear it is illegal for wedding party hosts to serve any kind of meal! But then how can it be a party without eats? Why this draconian kill-joy measure in a country where, even as we speak, hair removal is not frowned upon. What will be next, even as there is a ban on gaudy decorative lighting at weddings.

THERE'S NO one to beat Tamil poster artists in their art, and now that the assembly elections are coming up, the entire state of Tamil Nadu will be a glorious place to be. For TN is Poster Land, where there is not even a thin dividing line between cinema and politics and certainly not in the case of poster art. This one in the picture should be a semiotician's staple, and says most things about Tamil political culture. The hero of the vote is still the late M.G. Ramachandran who is young and as ferocious as the lions he keeps company with; he is the extraordinary ordinary man who can

heard the lion and play catchy flute, while his paramour, Jayalalitha, has only got to applaud the bravura of her man. The puny candidate himself (left of picture) is expected to get the votes merely because of the exalted company he keeps.

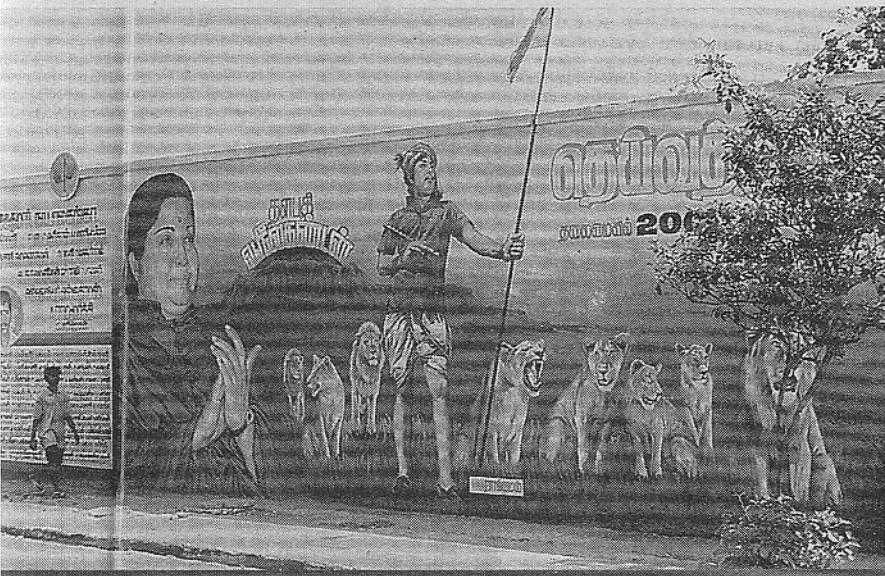
WITH CRICKET becoming a life-and-death matter of patriotism, I am now firmly against promoting the sport as a means to bring the people of South Asia together. Clearly, if the example set by India and Pakistan are any indicators, less cricket is better for peace in the Subcontinent. Why encourage bad blood in a region already so bloody? Which is why I am firmly against Bhutan, too, going the cricket way, and launching recently a formal body called the Bhutan Cricket Association. Besides, where is there enough flat space in Druk Yul anyway? Well, I say (stroking my chin, glint in my eye), there is all that space around all those refugee camps in Jhapa. Just perfect, for a government team versus refugee team one-day knockout, what say?

SOMETHING SOMEWHAT more salacious than Jayalalitha on a billboard is also happening in Tamil Nadu, on Tamil television to be precise. A 57-year-old gentleman, N. Mathrubhootham, by name, has got viewers all excited with his sex evangelist routine every Sunday night (10.30 IST) on Vijay TV. The show, called Puthira Punithama? (Mystery or Sanctity?), is the only one of its kind in all South Asia, and has made the good doctor popular indeed, almost as much as superstar Rajnikanth. Legendary as Tamil conservatism is, the doctor has broken in with his quick-witted replies



and sane advice on sex. Here's a sample: "Dear Sir, I am recently married. My weight is 80 kgs. My wife weighs 37 kgs. She is too small made. Consequently I am not having satisfactory sex. My wife complains that in this situation even one shift is tiring. So there is no scope for two shifts. What can I do?" Mathrubhootham's typically smart retort to that: "What is he complaining about? How his wife escaped being made into chutney baffles me! And what does he mean by 'shift'? Does he think he is running a factory..."

KISSING OBSCENE? Go tell that to the statues in Khajuraho and Konark! How can Indian Information and Broadcasting Minister Sushma



Swaraj detest kissing so, when lips doth touch lip in divine (and often sexual) bliss?! Don't ask me, ask it to the minister herself. The lady has access to governmental scissors, and has just banned a toothpaste ad which shows a policewoman schmoozing a man who is about



to face the firing squad. The wise minister: "I am not a cultural policeman. But kissing is obscene." Take it easy lady.

THE DHAKA Supreme Court, after its commendable ban on the fatwa, should seriously think of banning bandhs, that widely abused instrument of civil disobedience. Over the last month alone, among the various wheel-jams and processions and demonstrations, the deltaic nation saw at least three 72-hour general strikes called by the opposition. But if you read the Bangladeshi papers, other than the token disapproving editorial, no one seems to really care any more.

SOME THINGS never change, like the *Chandamama*, the magazine that millions of Indians grew up with. Founded by Nagi Reddi and Chakrapani, the monthly is now into its 31st year, and happily available in many other languages than English. Astoundingly, it continues to run the Vikram and Betal series. It warmed one's heart to see that the story still begins and ends the same way as it has always all these years: "Dark was the night and fearsome the atmosphere...Vikramaditya drew his sword and went after the vampire." Long live *Chandamama*!



I REFUSE to believe that letters in the Bangladeshi papers are, as is the case everywhere else in South Asia, churned out by the lowly subeditor at the desk? Why? For their sheer uniqueness and, often, banality, that's why! All kinds of letters make it into Bangladesh papers. This one, from *The Independent*,

was titled the "Meaning of life": "The objective of life is to...what? Is it to help others? Is it to help thyself? ...It is a serious dilemma."

LAST MONTH I talked about the Web poll for and against genetically modified rice. Now the news is that our own Sri Lanka has become the first Asian country to ban genetically engineered food items. This is a major decision all the more because the island nation is the biggest food importer in South Asia. While public health activists and the greens are happy about the decision, the importers, says an IPS report, are confused, and feel the government rushed into the legislation although "no clear evidence" has come out to show that indeed genetically modified food are injurious to health.

THE LAST sanctum sanctorum for worldly germs seems to be under siege. See here, an ad for "Bacteria Resistant Briefs".



IT'S CENSUS time in most of South Asia. While India has already begun the exercise, Nepal and Sri Lanka are to follow suit later this year. In the case of Sri Lanka, the population count is especially important because the last time it was carried out was two decades ago—constantly postponed due to the ever-raging ethnic conflict. Now all that the Sri Lankans have to do to get their name in, is to stay at home "between six p.m. and midnight" when the enumerators come visiting.

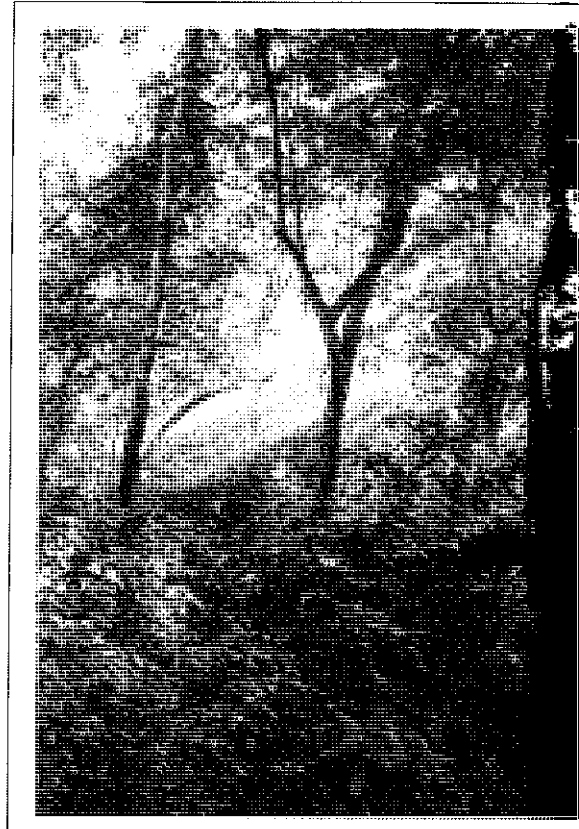
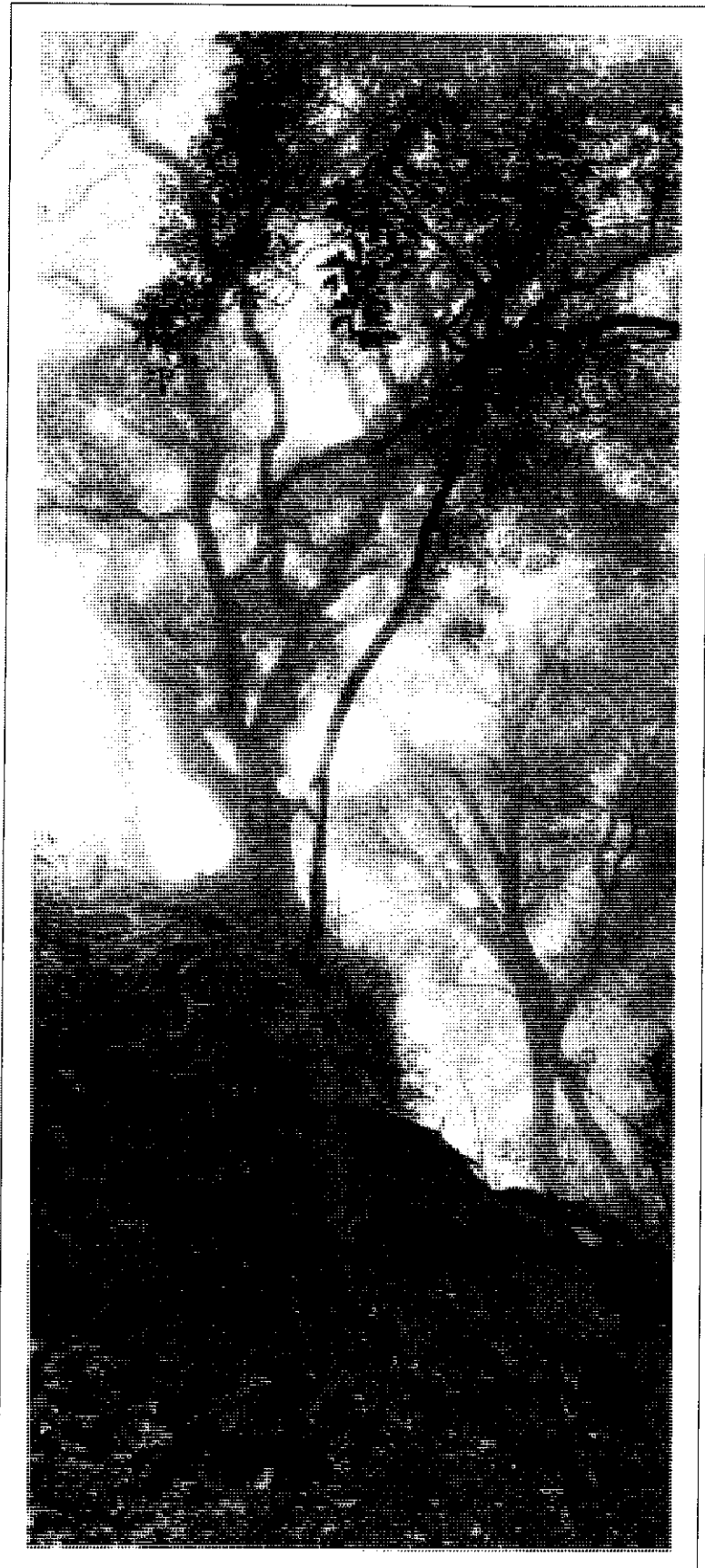
A beautiful poem sent by a friend from Pakistan:

*Such keh doon ai Brahman, gar tu bura na mane
Tere sanam karon ke buh ho gaye purane
Apnon se bair karna tu ne buhon se seekha
Jan-o-jadal sikhaya wa'az ko bhi Khuda ne
I tell the truth O Brahman, do not take offence
The idols of your prayer house are outdated
You have learnt discrimination against your own people, from your idols
And God has taught the Muslim preacher the ways of war
Tang aa ke main ne aakhir, dair o haram kko chhoda
Wa'az ka waaz chhoda, chhode tere fasane
Disgusted with all of this, I discard both mosque and temple
I shun the teachings of the Muslim preacher and your fables, O Brahman*

—Chhetria Patrakar

Photogra

Text and pictures by Ian Lockwood



Creation Light, Lawachara. Winter sunrise in Lawachara. However, the place is now threatened by poor management.

Devil's Kitchen Shola, Palni Hills, Tamil Nadu. Shola forests are montane evergreen tropical forest that are unique to the high altitude regions of the Western Ghats. Stunted by fierce wind, Sholas contain a wealth of plant and animal species. Together with native grasslands, this ecosystem plays a key role in absorbing monsoon rains and supplying the thirsty plains with a perennial source of water.

ography, Art and Nature

in Bangladesh and peninsular India

ood

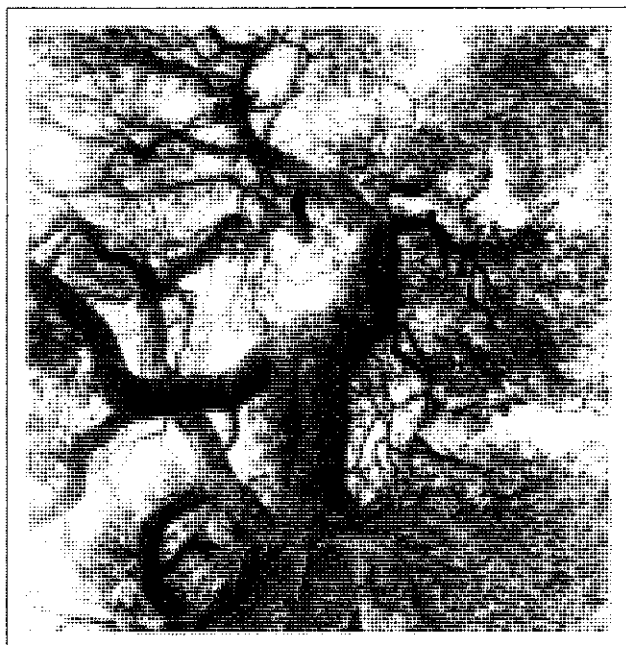


achar National Park, a small but beautiful protected area containing some of Bangladesh's last evergreen and semi-evergreen tropical forest. and is being exploited by woodcutters on its periphery and illegal logging that is cutting at its core.

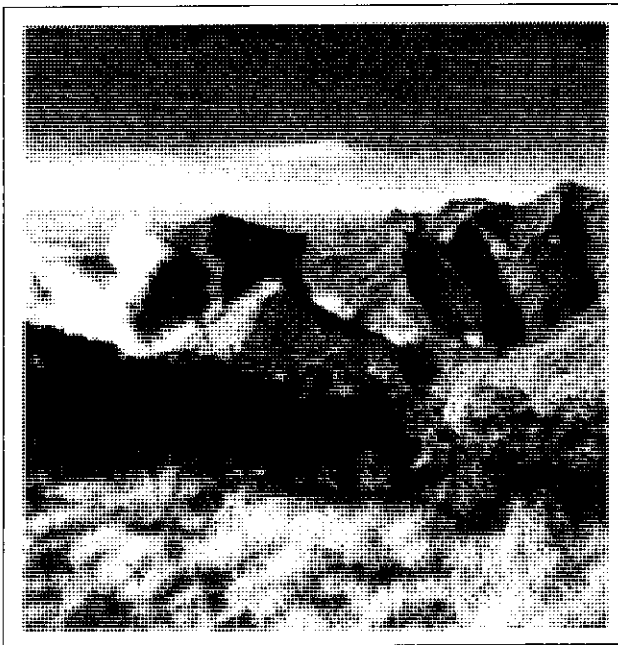
The pictures included here are from Bangladesh and the Western Ghats of southern India. They cover two exhibitions of mine in the last year. The first exhibition titled "Shadows & Sunlight" (*Aloo Chaiya*) was held at the DRIK Gallery in Dhaka, while the second exhibition, "The Western Ghats Potrait & Panorama", was held at the India International Centre in New Delhi. The subjects were geographically quite different: forests and sacred trees in Bangladesh and landscape images from the Western Ghats in southern India. However, there were the

common denominators of environmental content, the black and white medium and educational intent. In both exhibitions I was attempting to fuse together the often disparate worlds of art, conservation awareness and photography in a South Asian context.

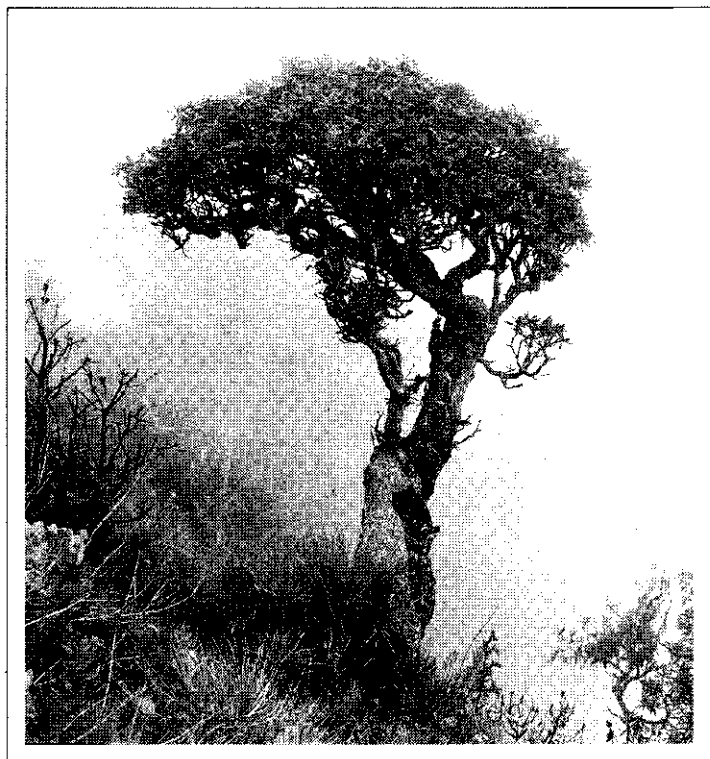
The choice of subjects is the product of deeply-felt personal experiences in a variety of South Asian natural habitats. Although originally from the East Coast of the United States, our extended family has been living in Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh for the last three generations. Bangladesh's forests and



Shola Tree on Precipice, Palni Hills, Tamil Nadu.



Kolukulmai View, Palni Hills, Tamil Nadu. Looking over a remnant patch of the grasslands/Shola ecosystem.



Rhododendron (*Rhododendron arboreum nilagiricum*), Palni Hills, Tamil Nadu. A fine example of the Himalayan migrant in the remote Palni Hills. The Western Ghats host many species that have Himalayan cousins. This suggests an ancient link between the Himalaya and the Western Ghats, one that has been severed by changing climate and geological upheavals.

the Western Ghats were places that I had the opportunity to live in as a child. Their trees, birds and animals helped instill in me a deep respect for all things old and natural. However, not all was well in these habitats and their degradation became an unfortunate part of my coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s. I witnessed the destruction of incredible beauty and this motivated me to document remnants of ecosystems and their unfolding tragedies. My interest in nature has been influenced by mentors like Zai and Rom Whitaker, Pippa Mukherjee, Valmik Thapar and other notable Indian conservationists. As a young university graduate I had the opportunity to work with the Palni Hills Conservation Council in Kodaikanal (Tamil Nadu) and BRAC in Bangladesh.

Photography has long served a dual purpose for me. It is primarily an artistic expression in which I take what I see around me, interpret it and present it in the form of published works or final prints in an exhibition. Equally important is the effectiveness of the photograph in communicating a message of ecological (or at times, architectural)



Earth Moving, Uttara Banyan. Banyan trees remain symbols of Bengali culture, enduring the assault of development. This particular tree is witnessing the slow removal of soil around its base. The earth is being moved to fill in low-lying areas in nearby Dhaka city.



Kalakad Tree, Kalakad Mudanthurai Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu. Another illustration of the dramatic scenery and vegetation of the Western Ghats. These are some of the first hills to rise from the plains near the tip of the Indian peninsula at Kanyakumari.

conservation. I make my living teaching Environmental Science and Photography. In my classes and through interactive field trips, I attempt to heighten students' awareness and appreciation for the natural history of South Asia. Working in Bangladesh, my classes focus on local issues and habitats, while taking in their larger global context. Thus my goals as an educator and artist are closely aligned.

I specifically work in black and white, and on a narrow selection of subjects. I prefer the black and white medium to colour as an expressive art form. I also try to be as much a part of the photographic process as possible; I take the film from exposure through to development, printing and final presentation.

The "Shadows & Sunlight" exhibition included a representative selection of pictures from Bangladesh's forest as well as a number of picture of sacred trees. I wanted to show the three major forest types and illustrate some of the threats to their existence. Images of monotonous exotic plantations juxtaposed with diverse forest scenes illustrated the dangerous trend that is seriously threatening South Asia's natural woodlands. The use of environmental portraits helped paint a picture of the important

human element in Bangladesh's natural ecosystems. The choice of banyan trees was important in that they represent a timeless aspect of Bengali culture, now threatened by the tenacious claws of urban development.

The second exhibition sought to paint a detailed and dramatic picture of the landscapes of southern India's critical mountain range. These often neglected highlands play a vital role in water regulation, and host a critical wealth of biodiversity. The exhibition emphasised their role as a rainmaker and biodiversity 'hotspot'. The choice of pictures were intended to draw attention to the incredible scenery as well as conservation issues. Hydroelectric dams, iron ore mines, exotic trees, and development have threatened these mountain habitats. The result has been less water for rivers in drier seasons and alarming declines in biodiversity.

Trying to balance art, photography and conservation awareness in one showing may have been overtly ambitious. But the response was good, and now I look forward to working on a portfolio of the Andaman Islands, early Islamic architecture in 'Bengal', the northern reaches of the Western Ghats as well as holy trees throughout the South Asian region. △

A conversation with

Meet Asma Jahangir, lawyer, human rights advocate and activist in the women's movement in Pakistan. Her first tilt at officialdom was at 18 when she filed a writ of habeas corpus for her father who had been arrested by General Yahya Khan in 1971, for being a member of the Awami League. Since then, Asma has been an active figure in Pakistani public life. A founder of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (1989), she is a partner in AGHS Legal Aid Cell in Lahore, which runs a shelter for women, called Dastak. She is also a founder member of the Women's Action Forum (Lahore) and serves as the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings. Awarded the Magsaysay (1995), Asma is the author of *Divine Sanction* and *Children of a Lesser God*. Following are the excerpts from a long conversation with New Delhi-based author Ritu Menon.

Ritu Menon: *Asma, was yours a family that moved to Pakistan in 1947 or have you always lived in Lahore?*

Asma Jahangir: My parents have always lived in Lahore, and I spent my childhood there. My mother's grandparents moved from Gaya, in UP, to Punjab. I lived in Lahore for most of my life. The first four years I lived in a city called Montgomery at that time, and now Sahiwal, and therefore my early memories are from there. If you want to connect how I think of India and Pakistan, my early memories are that we used to come every Sunday to Lahore. I must have been four or five years old—we moved from there when I was seven—and on the way there was a place called Lokada which had a textile mill owned by somebody called Mr. Dalmia, and we always stopped at Mr. Dalmia's place for lunch or tea. So one has been exposed in some ways to Hindu culture.

R: *This was post-Partition?*

A: I was born post-Partition. My mother used to travel very often to Amritsar. We had a Volkswagen, she used to put the kids in the boot, and her friends and she would set off to watch films in Amritsar! We would stay two nights at Dalmiaji's house, watch films, do some shopping and go back. So for us going to Amritsar was like a long weekend holiday.

R: *And it was easy enough in the early years...*

A: Oh, yes, just cross the Wagah border, you have your Volkswagen with your luggage on the top and kids in the boot, and everybody knew us by this time that these mad friends come with their kids...

R: *As an adult when did you start coming to India?*

A: My first trip was in 1977.

R: *This was after a gap of 20 years or so?*

A: Yes. I was married and we came to India again

because it was Mr. Dalmia's son's wedding. My husband had some good friends—two in Delhi and one in Bombay—so we came to Delhi. We had very fond memories of India when we went back.

R: *When did it become difficult for all of us to travel to each other's countries?*

A: After the 1965 war it became difficult, and I say that not only in terms of just Indians and Pakistanis travelling. Before 1965 there used to be a number of Indians who had businesses in Pakistan, after '65 that stopped. A lot of our Hindu friends, Hindu Paki-

stanis, when you ask them when they began to feel that they were being discriminated against, felt the tensions in society, they trace it back to the '65 war.

R: *So, for 16-17 years after independence, it was still possible for...*

A: It was bearable, and things could have improved. I remember once going with my father to the border to receive my mother, she was coming back from one of her usual trips, and one of her friends, Sheela, who had studied with her and was her best friend in India, came all the way from Delhi to Amritsar just to see my father and wave to him at the Wagah border. I remember how much my parents were touched by that.

R: *When you came here in May 2000 on the women's bus from Pakistan, you said that if the border at Wagah was thrown open, there would be queues for miles on either side. The question I want to ask you is: when states are locked in hostility but people are willing to have a dialogue, how does the two ever meet? As long as there is a secular India and a theocratic Pakistan, how can a dialogue take place?*

A: You see, this is the difficulty about the India-Pakistan relationship—and indeed about any movement that is started by civil society—that it can move to a certain point but beyond that, unless they do not at least convince their own states to keep public opinion in mind, there is a kind of obstacle which the states make for the people. I think that in both India and Pakistan, public opinion has to be made, and more so, perhaps, on our side. I actually have thought about it very deeply, having travelled in all South Asian countries, and seen that tensions are created and become stubborn and obstinate when the directions are very different.

Asma Jehangir

R: You mean political directions or social directions?

A: Political directions. If one wants to have a pluralistic society, and the other wants not to have a pluralistic society then it becomes difficult to come together. Now, I basically think that in Pakistan when you see things on the ground, it is possibly as pluralistic as India. There may be a difference of degree from time to time, one way or the other. Sometimes you may appear more rigid, sometimes we appear to be more rigid. During Zia-ul-Haq's time one couldn't say that, but during the last 10 years things have been building up, so you could say that on the ground, it is the same. You have your hardliners, we have our hardliners. The difference between your hardliners and our hardliners again is only a question of degree, of how well they are armed, on either side.

But what really does matter is how much your government supports them. The day your governments stop supporting them, those same hardliners who had a stake in your society will, to an extent, be marginalised. Hardliners have been there in our society, but the day the government began to support them they became empowered, emboldened, and all the liberal elements then either got marginalised or were co-opted into the system. So it is not simply the pronouncement of it, it is not simply saying India is secular, it is not simply saying Pakistan is theocratic—I think the direction has to be in the practice, rather than in the oratory, of it.

R: Do you see a distinction between public opinion and public sentiments?

A: You see, sentiment is short-term because, as I say, if you open the borders, the sentiment will be there and the curiosity to see what is on the other side. I know this for a fact. When I first came here and we went back from Amritsar, at least 30 people came to leave us at Wagah, people we had just met a day before. So that is sentiment, but sentiment is only evoked on occasions; opinion is something that is longer term.

R: We often think of the media as a major



Interview

opinion-maker, but of course there is no free flow of information between our countries. So do you think that the responsibility of making public opinion, lies more with ngo's, civil society groups, professionals?

A: Media plays an important part in forming opinion, but media has to report something. Where media has missed out is that they have no reporting to do, unfortunately. What are our political forces saying, both in India and Pakistan, about the relationship? It's all very well for me to write, but I'm not a leader of a political party. I have influence over a very small pocket of people. But what does, for example, Sonia Gandhi think about the relationship between India and Pakistan—I have not read a piece on this. What does Benazir think about it? I have read very short statements, but never a deep analysis of it. What has Nawaz Sharif written about it—he started the Lahore process, what were his thoughts about it? Did he come on television, educate people...

R: *But these are all politicians, they are part of the state...*

A: Yes, they may be a part of states, but their pronouncements and their statements that spell out the reasons, are something that the media builds up. If there is silence, then the media can only write an editorial—that is their opinion, and some people can write articles, but the media cannot report what the people who are supposed to be leaders of society, what their thinking is about the situation. I know that, privately, many of our leaders want to get on with things, and if they only said it aloud then a lot of people would begin to think that way, too. There is a misperception that Pakistan's politics should first address the question of India as an enemy. To undo the kind of propaganda that has gone on for 50 years you can't have just a few editors and a few ngo's talking about it. You really do need political leadership now.

R: *If you had to identify one major human rights abuse issue that is common to India and Pakistan, what would it be?*

A: Well, I think what is common to both—and this is relevant for all of South Asia—is the whole question of ethnic and religious minorities, because that really goes to the heart of the problem. To the whole problem of armed conflicts being faced by Pakistanis, Bangladeshis now, Sri Lanka and, to an extent, Nepal, although theirs is not rooted—mercifully—in religion or ethnicity, but in economic deprivation.

R: *But do you see ethnicity—identity politics—as a human rights issue or a political issue?*

A: I see it as both, and I don't really think that human rights issues are not political. They have to be political. And it's not that I'm looking at it only as a question of rights, but as rights that have to be linked somehow to politics. So I'm not simply saying okay, let's have a policy of peace and tolerance, I'm looking at how, politically, given the kind of diversity we have in South Asia—there is probably not a place in this Subcontinent where you won't find people of different races—how we can work towards a political system geared to it?

R: *But the rights discourse is a discourse of claims. To whom would we make a claim if we say that ethnicity is a rights issue, what claim would we make?*

A: To make the claim, what we have to do is to link it to politics. The political structures or the democratic structures—that you people have, we [in Pakistan] don't, but let's say, whenever we come back to it—should have strong mechanisms and make inroads into our legal system, where people of religious and ethnic minorities can actually ask for their rights not only from governments but from individuals, too.

R: *These would be community rights or individual rights?*

A: I am sorry, but I am a person who favours rights of individuals for many reasons. Rights as communities suppresses the underprivileged within that community.

R: *You have recently set up the South Asians for Human Rights group—how would you go about such an agenda?*

A: Well, the group has to identify. I would first of all like to see us take up one issue, which is a high priority issue, in a holistic manner, such as the question of constitution-making. How can an idealistic constitutional machinery work? Or we could think of setting up a charter for South Asia and forcing the governments to set up maybe, a South Asian Court at some point, but certainly a commission at the South Asian level, because I think that is another way it can become a melting pot and visions can begin to crystallise. That is one way of doing it, but on the other hand, having worked for many years among ngo's, there is always a desire and an expectation among people to see something happening on the ground. So while we are taking up larger issues, we also have to deal with some concrete, important, but smaller or more do-able issues—like prisoners, exchange of fishermen, trafficking of women—which really cannot be done by one organisation alone in one country. At an informal level we are always co-ordinating with organisations in Bangladesh, organisations in India—so if that could be done, then at least on the ground you are doing something and can satisfy yourself and others that something concrete has been done. Because changing ideas and changing mind-sets take years.

R: *Your idea about beginning with the constitution is an excellent one, but what about the question of national sovereignty? I mean, people will immediately be...*

A: Of course people will be up in arms, but then there should be enough people to realise that the whole question of national sovereignty with the new processes of globalisation, in any event, is not the same kind of sovereignty as we used to have earlier. I mean the whole notion of sovereignty has changed. National 'sovereignty' basically lies in how well you are able to perform within the country. Developing countries like ourselves, what we have to offer is maybe, tourism, well, you have technology, we may want something else, investment, but you really need peace for that, you need good governance for that, and all this is first and foremost based upon people living together in harmony. But if we are

fighting all the time inter-group or intra-group, we are hurting our economies anyway.

R: *After the nuclear implosions and Kargil, how do you see the relevance of initiatives like the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy, exchanges between women's groups and so on...*

A: It is difficult because it is more challenging. Earlier we didn't realise how conventional warfare, mixed with having gone nuclear can really get out of hand. Now the urgency is there, not only because of nuclearisation and Kargil but also because of the fact that we are losing out on that, too. So there's that urgency, and the realisation of what globalisation is doing to South Asia. We are just dragging each other down. It's all very well to say that, okay, India has progressed economically, but has anybody done an evaluation of how much it could have progressed had there not been these tensions? I feel, for example, that Pakistan's foreign, defence and security policies are still geared to the cold war! What now, now that the cold war is over? We had got too used to being a partner to the cold war during the Afghan issue and now there is a kind of panic: how are we going to survive economically? Their way of thinking is that you put security issues first, right up in front, and survival will come automatically. They haven't got out of that mind-set unfortunately. And I am beginning to feel, sadly, that the interests of the governments of South Asia are now beginning to clash with the interests of the people. When I say the interests of the governments, I mean there is always a class of people in South Asia that has a stake in any kind of political system that you devise—whether it is a democratic one or not, though undoubtedly democratic is better, I would hate to be reported as saying that democratic and non-democratic systems are alike—but they have also got hold of a class. Now where the democratic system has progressed, as in India, you are constantly trying to chip away at those vested interests...

R: *Certainly in India democracy is being eroded rapidly and there is actually going to be the severest abrogation of universal human rights.*

A: Perhaps because I have the mind-set of a lawyer, I always believe that these things have to be put into a structure. I mean, I want a right, I must have a way of claiming it, a system within which I can realise it. This is the admirable thing that Western democracies have done for themselves. They won't say, it is moral for me to have this, they will find a way to link the morality of it to the legality of it. We have not been able to do that. They have found a way to make the moral, legal, and the legal, moral. Look at their whole structure of human rights—it is moral pressure, and how does the moral pressure work? It doesn't happen in an unorganised way like it does in our countries, two protests one day... it's not disorganised, their moral pressure, it's not the way we work—we have demonstrations, then we exhaust ourselves—what they have is mechanisms, they will have a human rights commissioner, they will have special rapporteurs in the UN system who will put pressure on members, work slowly. I have watched



the system and I used to wonder whether these reports sit there gathering dust, but actually what they are gathering is public opinion. I was quite amazed at how it works, slowly but surely. This is what we need here as well.

R: *The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan is an ngo, and in India it is a government one. The point you are making is that the role of these organisations in making public opinion is critical...*

A: It is critical and yet limited. I often say to my friends in Pakistan that you can't replace a political party, no way, and don't even try and do it because you must put pressure on politicians, that is the responsibility. Whenever we give a statement, we urge political parties to say something, because they can't abdicate their responsibility to civil society. They can't take the easy way out.

R: *About the Samia Sarwar case in Pakistan and extra-judicial killings, would you say that religious 'right-wingism' strengthens patriarchy in a way that can be life-threatening for women?*

A: Certainly. We have seen it not only in Pakistan but in other parts of the world as well, and it can be any religion. It is strange, when it comes to confrontation, as it did in the Samia Sarwar case, religious leaders said that honour killings are not part of religion, but then they took the support of culture! When culture fails, they say these are our "values". Okay, if it is cultural, why is it only the religious extremists who are talking about culture, why not nationalists, because they are the ones who should be concerned about culture?

R: *When these multiple patriarchies collude, whether it is the state, or religion, or culture, or economic power, where is the space for women, because all institutional assistance, whether legal or otherwise, is patriarchal?*

A: Well, that's why you see a lot of women in civil society, because that's the only space they have. Most civil society organisations are probably headed by men,

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but their young professionals or activists are mostly women, because they are finding less and less congenial space for themselves. This is not something that's happening in our country alone, it's happening in the West, too. We have to somehow link our struggle to the overall struggles as well, yet show that without the participation of women there will be no economic prosperity. There is a very clear connection there.

R: Do you see this voice getting feebler or stronger?

A: In Pakistan it is [getting] stronger, despite all the hurdles. You know in 1983 we had our first procession, a women's procession against the military government, against Islamisation—it came out of our law office—and if you read the press clippings from that time, we were told we were promiscuous women, that our marriages should be dissolved, and ordinary educated women whom we met were scared to talk to us, because they were afraid they would get tarnished. We were considered disreputable women.

R: Although there was a public sort of admission against honour killings in Pakistan, there is no legal provision to deal with them, is there?

A: No. There is no legal provision to deal with them, and honour killings continue at the same level. I had a case in one of the sessions courts where the public prosecutor was the one who said that honour killings should be allowed. Now, he's the government, and if the government is serious about stopping the killings they need to get to the bottom of the legal system and to their agents, and tell them that this is not acceptable, whether it is the investigating officer, or the SP, or the public prosecutor, even the advocate general's office. But if the government itself supports it, how do you think you can influence the judges? Although there are a lot of empowered people who project "tradition", at the same time they also get so much done from the government that it does not have to please them on something like honour killings. They can give them factories and other things. But women's groups, minority groups, peasant groups, little liberal groups here and there—they are not asking for lands and property and licenses, all they want is justice. I am now looking at it from a purely political point of view. For example, in the honour killing case of Samia Sarwar, apart from Nawaz Sharif's party, every political party gave a statement saying that they oppose them, which is not a small thing, because they all have traditionalists in their parties.

R: But the fact is that nothing has changed on the ground...

A: Nothing will change on the ground, because in a political system which lacks legitimacy, and which is always being disrupted, the priority is to try and get legitimacy and deal with bigger issues. All these issues are considered soft issues and they take a back seat.

R: Asma, I want to ask you about the women's movement in Pakistan now...

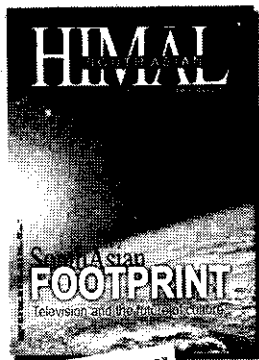
A: The women's movement has lost its focus, its intensity over the last few years. In a way the human rights movement has come to the forefront. You see, the women's movement in Pakistan was really part of the civil rights movement. A lot of the women who are in

women's groups were part of that movement and they were the ones who gave it a political colour. If you read the early WAF statements they were all non-political, there was a big fight between the political and the non-political women, and they were the true activists. Of course, the integrity of everybody was above board. I would even go so far as to say that the ones who were non-political had fewer agendas—actually their agenda was a very pure feminist agenda—whereas the people who came from the civil rights movement or the Left had their own agendas, and carried their own baggage. But they did give it that momentum, and once they went back to their own work, their mainstream work, the women's movement lost that pulse, that ability to look at things politically, of reacting politically. Even today I think that leadership comes from the human rights movements.

R: We often say here in India that the women's movement has become institutionalised, and perhaps because of this the activism is blunted...

A: You know, there are institutions and institutions. There is one kind of institutionalisation which is patterned on a bureaucratic, Western style of human rights work, but there is another kind that we have always had in the Subcontinent, which is activist-based—where did [Indian] Congress come from, for example, it was an ngo basically! And as we read it today, the whole Pakistan Movement was started by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's ngo's—so I think that institutionalising activist organisations is fine, but if that institutionalisation means research upon research, and researching the same thing over and over again and making the same recommendations to god knows whom, that, I am afraid, is not adding to the movement. And this is happening a lot. Look at the number of people in civil society in Pakistan who have been co-opted by the military today, that by itself shows you how skin deep their democratic convictions were. And again, by the way, you will not find one person who has been in the old civil rights movement who has been co-opted. That is the difference, because convictions don't simply come from reading a book, they come by living it, by suffering through it, and the more you suffer, the more convinced you get. I mean, every time there has been a confusion in people's minds, one has come out thinking, well, the collective stand of the Human Rights Commission was right from the first day, that those who said we are not a part of the military government were correct. That is why I find institutions very important, because in complicated situations if you don't bounce ideas off one other, if you don't have access to the collective wisdom around you, you won't be able to see things as clearly. It was group work which shaped my mind, shaped me as a human being, rounded off a lot of my rough edges. I'm really very grateful for having worked with all these older people who have struggled all their lives, spent years in jail, living modestly, they are our role models. That is really what makes you continue, the support you get from them. ▽

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A Restoration in the Time of Globalisation

The replacement of lost wood-work as part of the restoration of the Ratneswara Temple in Kathmandu using the skills of traditional Nepali craftsmen, in breach of the Eurocentric norms that govern the preservation of monuments, highlights the paradoxes of globalisation and the need to adopt indigenous, culture-specific norms in the conservation of heritage.

by A G Krishna Menon

One of globalisation's paradoxes is that even as it imposes trans-national values and processes on local cultures, it simultaneously gives them a 'presence' they never had before. The more globalisation disrupts and displaces local traditions, the more the significance of what is being lost stands out. The interdisciplinary and intercultural scholarship encouraged by globalisation has unearthed the existence and logic of hitherto obscure indigenous knowledge systems and practices. This scholarship creates provocative voices of dissent which question the very premises underlying globalisation, and provides the *raison d'être* to resist—or at least influence—its further progress. The Sulima strut story exemplifies this process.

This is the story of the restoration of the 13th century Ratneswara Temple in Sulima Tole of Patan town in Kathmandu Valley, undertaken by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT), an internationally funded group involved in architectural conservation. The issue is about the replacement of lost carved

timber elements as part of the restoration work. These replacements were carved by contemporary craftsmen on the tiered temple at Sulima Tole and purport to be "authentic" equivalents of the original.

Such a restoration challenges the hallowed principles of conservation, which prohibit any form of replication of lost architectural elements. The orthodoxy of conservation practice requires that ancient buildings be kept in roughly the same state that they were found, as stabilised ruins. In this view, "good" conservation procedure means minimal intervention to maintain the original integrity and authenticity of the remaining fabric of the building or ruin.

In the Ratneswara Temple project however, a ruin was completely restored to its 'original' state by the KVPT. There is little evidence of the "golden stain of time" or the possibility of distinguishing between the old and the new parts of the building in the restored monument. Indeed, much of what one sees is not "original", and John Ruskin, whose views were to significantly influence conservation practice, would certainly have reason to call the building "a lie". Nevertheless, the

heresy of the KVPT restoration project merits serious consideration, not only because it questions the authority of supposedly universal conventions in the context of Kathmandu Valley, but also because it provides compelling rationale to conserve a 'living tradition' that is facing extinction.

Venetian orthodoxy

The attitudes that govern the conservation of cultural heritage ought to be culture specific. But in practice this is not so, because the world over, "official" values governing conservation practice are imbued with the ideals established by Ruskin and colleagues in England during the last century and, consequently, reflect a thoroughly Eurocentric point of view. These ideals are disseminated through various charters of UNESCO, most notably the "The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites", otherwise known as the "Venetian Charter" (1964). The principles of conservation have, of course, broadened in more recent times to acknowledge other imperatives, including those of "living cultures", but the orthodoxy defined by the Venice Charter

nevertheless prevails and influences official conservation policies.

In many Third World countries, where traditional skills and practices still survive, the implications of this are profound, because the universalisation of conservation policy fails to account for the continuity of indigenous traditions. Eurocentric norms are inimical to indigenous practices of conserving (or not conserving) ancient buildings because they make the traditional craftsmen and their skills redundant. This impoverishes local cultures and destroys the organic bond that existed among traditional knowledge, traditional practices and the monument. The stabilised ruin idealised in European cultures, holds little meaning in traditional societies.

Yet, when these societies set about conserving their monuments, they tried to adopt Eurocentric norms. The need for international financial assistance to undertake conservation works and the aura surrounding the UNESCO stamp of approval, ensures the adoption of these norms even when viable traditional alternatives are still available. What UNESCO propagates represents the "modern" and "progressive" principles of conservation, and the desire to align with them is a potent force in the Third World. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the Archaeological Survey of India or the Department of Archaeology of His Majesty's Government of Nepal, or their counterparts elsewhere in the Third World, turning their backs on centuries-old traditions and diligently emulating the precepts enshrined in the Venice Charter. Its allure is the power of globalisation.

But globalisation contains its own critique. Within the homogenising influence of globalisation—indeed, often as a result of it—the efficacy of traditional local practices get highlighted. The critique of Eurocentric conservation comes from the very agents of these practices—foreign experts working in the field. Familiarity with local tradition exposes the limitations of universalist principles more clearly

to such experts, who are in a unique position to appreciate and articulate the difference. Thus, in places like Nepal, the outsider is both the agent of change and also the one who questions change.

The new visibility of traditional practices also ensures that they get reappropriated by the local society. This process of "going back to the future" can be seen at work in Patan as well as in Bhaktapur town where conservation work was initiated two decades earlier. These works undertaken by foreign experts, even as they stayed within the bounds of Eurocentric orthodoxy, tested its limits, as in the case of the complete reconstruction of the Cyasilin Mandap of Bhaktapur in 1987.

In the Ratneswara Temple however, the boundaries have been breached. Here it is outright apostasy. Considering the heritage value of the monument, this order and extent of restoration work would not have been "officially" permitted elsewhere. It is for this reason that the work is significant at one level and remains problematic at another.

Local, foreign and official

There is, of course, the dominant role of the foreign expert and the source of funding to consider while evaluating the polemic context of this and other significant conservation projects in Nepal. Why is it necessary to rely upon foreign expertise and funds in order to restore valuable traditional heritage? Has this heritage lost meaning in local society,

but gained meaning outside? Is 'sovereignty' an issue in the global marketplace of conservation?

In earlier times, a feudal elite constructed and maintained temples such as the Ratneswara. There was a concordance between the aspiration and activities of different classes in that society because the culture within which they operated was homogenous. The process of modernisation has long since eroded the organic relationship that had existed earlier among patrons, craftsmen and the pervasive socio-cultural ideals. The government bureaucrat has replaced the feudal patron in matters of heritage management. As a consequence, there is today a widespread indifference to conserving architectural heritage.

Traditional knowledge and skills are still available, but are not put to use. The state is unable to remedy this situation because it has neither the will nor the imagination to tackle the problem. Its agenda of urgent concerns does not include heritage, thus setting in motion the familiar pattern of attrition of ancient monuments. This leaves the field open for the entry of foreign expertise and funding. Though Nepal has undoubtedly benefited from such interventions, the role of an external agency with altruistic intent raises uncomfortable questions, especially from a post-colonial perspective. The focus of these questions gets sharper when the ideology of conservation is "subversive", as it is with the decision to replace the wood struts at Sulima.

The tiered temple of Sulima.



One must evaluate the role of the 'foreigner' in mediating local cultures—both 'official' and otherwise. In the Ratneswara project the 'foreign' and the 'local' have coalesced with a common purpose, not unlike the manner in which the 'foreign' and the 'official' invariably align in the process of modernisation and globalisation. However, there is an ethical distinction to be made between the two situations. By relying on local traditions and skills one enriches local cultures, while the other, by relying on Eurocentric norms of conservation, one does not. Both have the propensity to distort future developments because the 'local' lacks a voice. This is the problem with the conservation work undertaken by foreigners in Nepal.

The only safeguard to this propensity is a sensitivity of analysis and action on the part of the external agent, who must evaluate the relevance of both the Eurocentric as well as local traditions in conservation. The Nepali experience should not be used to extract local allegories of western theoretical preoccupations: this is the classical trap of Orientalism. On the other hand, it would be wrong to debunk all Western claims by harping on the uniqueness of Nepali culture: this is the trap of cultural essentialism. What is compelling in the Sulima strut story is the exemplary manner in which these issues have been mediated.

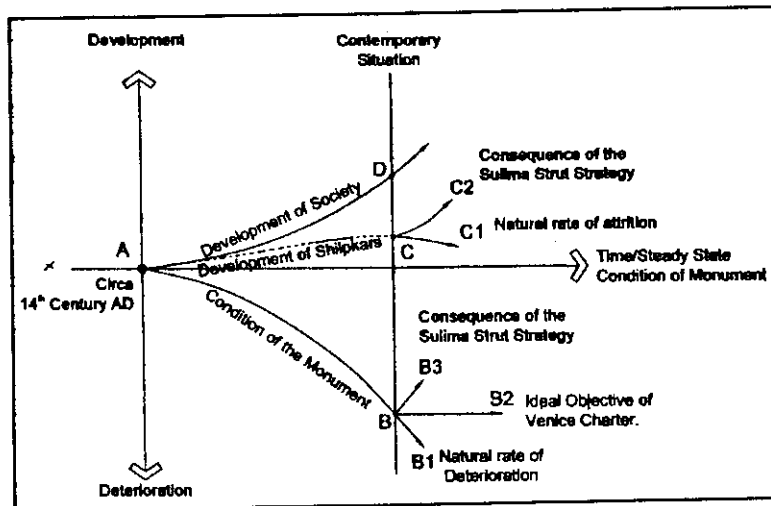
Rational choices

In order to understand this reading of the story, the issues must be considered in the context of contemporary Nepal. The possibilities can be represented in a diagrammatic form.

In this diagram, both society and the monument in question are, in the beginning, located at point A, sometime in the distant past. The

X-axis represents time. The Y-axis calibrates movement in two directions: upwards, to indicate the modernisation of society, and downwards, to indicate the deterioration of the monument. The X-axis also represents the idealised "steady-state" condition of the monument, had it not deteriorated over time, or if it had been continuously maintained and upgraded over the years. Obviously, this did not happen and in the diagram the ruined monument is located at point B, well below the "steady-state" condition.

When conservation is initiated, while the condition of the monument is at point B, the level of modernisation of society is at point



D. In a parallel trajectory, the condition of the skilled craftsman or shilpakar is at point C: still a living practice, but declining.

Given these conditions, the future of the monument at point B has three possibilities. If nothing is done, then it will move towards B₁, that is, continue its trajectory of deterioration. If one applies Eurocentric principles of conservation, then (as an ideal possibility) one would move towards B₂, roughly parallel to the X-axis but below it. The building would then be a stabilised ruin. It would also have little meaning in the local community. But the strategy employed in the restoration of the Ratneswara temple moves the monument to point B₃, closer to the X-axis, that is, closer to its original form.

The determining criterion should be the appropriateness of the strategy to the Nepali context, rather than its conformity with UNESCO guidelines. This will be influenced by whether the local constituency prefers to have a resurrected temple, a stabilised ruin or a deteriorating monument. The Sulima strut story hinges on the assumption that the local people prefer the resurrected temple.

In making the decision, the role of the *shilpakars* must also be brought into focus. If no initiative is taken to improve their prospects and social status, the gap between C and D will widen, and the *shilpakars* will drop to point C₁. However, the strategy to take the monument to B₃ introduces a contingent possibility of taking the *shilpakars* to point C₂, thereby reducing the gap between C and D. Many development professionals would agree that this is a worthwhile objective to pursue.

Eurocentric practices, focussing as they do on the monument rather than the *shilpakar*, foreclose this possibility. The distinction between

conserving the monument and conserving the skills that built them must be polemicalised into a critical culture of conservation wherever traditional practices still survive. The KVPT's complete restoration of the Sulima temple brings out these issues in forcefully.

This is the significance of the Sulima strut story, but there is also great irony in its message: such critical thinking would not have been possible without the outsider or foreign funds. When the implication of this message sinks in, we will find it salutary and tragic at the same time. Did the Western conservationists do right in completely restoring an ancient temple to its 'original' state?

Big Pharma and Us

Times have changed since the cold war, but not half as much as we might like to think. The cold war provided the perfect excuse for Western governments to plunder and exploit the Third World in the name of freedom; to rig its elections, bribe its politicians, appoint its tyrants and, by every sophisticated means of persuasion and interference, stunt the emergence of young democracies in the name of democracy.

And while they did this—whether in Southeast Asia, Central and South America or Africa—a ludicrous notion took root that we are saddled with, to this day. It is a notion beloved of conservatives and, in my country, New Labour alike. It makes Siamese twins of Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W Bush. It holds to its bosom the conviction that, whatever vast commercial corporations do in the short term, they are ultimately motivated by ethical concerns, and their influence upon the world is therefore beneficial. And anyone who thinks otherwise is a neo-Communist heretic.

In the name of this theory, we look on apparently helpless while rainforests are wrecked to the tune of millions of square miles every year, native agricultural communities are systematically deprived of their livelihoods, uprooted and made homeless, protesters are hanged and shot, the loveliest corners of the world are invaded and desecrated, and tropical paradises are turned into rotting wastelands with sprawling, disease-ridden megacities at their centre.

And of all these crimes of unbridled capitalism, it seemed to me, as I began to cast round for a story to illustrate this argument in my most recent novel, that the pharmaceutical industry offered me the most eloquent example. I might have gone

for the scandal of spiked tobacco, designed by Western manufacturers to cause addiction and incidentally cancer in Third World communities already plagued with AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and poverty on a scale few of us can imagine.

I might have gone for the oil companies, and the impunity with which Shell, for instance, triggered a vast human disaster in Nigeria, displacing tribes, polluting their land and causing an uprising that led to kangaroo courts and the shameful torture and execution of very brave

Following the two articles that HIMAL published on pharmaceutical patents (February) and primary health care (March), we reprint this unusual piece by the novelist John Le Carre in *The Nation*, the alternative opinion weekly from New York. This is to alert ourselves of the need to be on guard against multinational and regional commercialisation of medicine.

men by a wicked and corrupt totalitarian regime.

But the multinational pharmaceutical world, once I entered it, got me by the throat and wouldn't let me go. Big Pharma, as it is known, offered everything: the hopes and dreams we have of it; its vast, partly realised potential for good; and its pitch-dark underside, sustained by huge wealth, pathological secrecy, corruption and greed.

I learned, for instance, of how Big Pharma in the United States had persuaded the State Department to

threaten poor countries' governments with trade sanctions in order to prevent them from making their own cheap forms of the patented lifesaving drugs that could ease the agony of 35 million men, women and children in the Third World who are HIV-positive, 80 percent of them in sub-Saharan Africa. In pharma jargon, these patent-free copycat drugs are called generic. Big Pharma likes to trash them, insisting they are unsafe and carelessly administered. Practice shows that they are neither. They simply save the same lives that Big Pharma could save, but at a fraction of the cost.

Big Pharma did not invent these lifesaving drugs that they have patented and arbitrarily overpriced, incidentally. Anti-retrovirals were for the most part discovered by publicly funded US research projects into other diseases, and only later entrusted to pharmaceutical companies for marketing and exploitation. Once the pharmas had the patent, they charged whatever they thought an AIDS-desperate Western market would stand: USD 12,000 to USD 15,000 a year for compounds that cost a few hundred to run up. Thus a price tag was attached, and the Western world, by and large, fell for it. Nobody said it was a massive confidence trick. Nobody remarked that, while Africa has 80 percent of the world's AIDS patients, it comprises 1 percent of Big Pharma's market.

Do I hear you offering the drug companies' time-worn excuse that they need to make huge profits on one drug in order to finance the research and development of others? Then kindly tell me, please, how come they spend twice as much on marketing as they do on research and development?

I was also told about the dumping of inappropriate or out-of-date medicines by means of "charitable donations" in order to get rid of unsalable stock, avoid destruction costs and earn a tax break. And about the deliberate widening of a drug's specifications in order to broaden its sales base in the Third World. Thus, for instance, a drug that in Western Europe or the States would be

licensed only for extreme cancer pain might be sold in Nairobi as a simple headache cure—and at several times the cost of buying it in Paris or New York. And in all probability no contraindications would be provided.

And then of course there is the patent game itself. One compound can carry a dozen or more patents. You patent the manufacturing process. You patent the delivery system, pills, medicine or serum. You patent the dosage, now daily, now weekly, now twice weekly. You patent, if you can, every footling event in the drug's life from research lab to patient. And for every day that you fend off the generic manufacturer, you earn yourself another fortune, because markup, for as long as you own the patent, is astronomic.

But Big Pharma is also engaged in the deliberate seduction of the medical profession, country by country, worldwide. It is spending a fortune on influencing, hiring and purchasing academic judgment to a point where, in a few years' time, if Big Pharma continues unchecked on its present happy path, unbought medical opinion will be hard to find.

And consider what happens to supposedly impartial academic medical research when giant pharmaceutical companies donate whole biotech buildings and endow professorships at the universities and teaching hospitals where their products are tested and developed. There has been a steady flow of alarming cases in recent years where inconvenient scientific findings have been suppressed or rewritten, and those responsible for them hounded off their campuses with their professional and personal reputations systematically trashed by the machinations of public relations agencies in the pay of the pharmas.

The last bastion, you might reasonably hope, would be the 'objective' scientific journals. But here, too, alas, we need to be wary, just as they do. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, America's most prestigious, recently confessed to its chagrin that some of its contributors have turned out to have had undeclared connections with the

pharmaceutical industry. As to less august journals, who have neither the clout nor the resources to check on the hidden interests of their contributors, many have become little more than shop windows for pharmas peddling their wares. And more than one "opinion leader"—i.e., research professor—has been known to add his name to an article that has helpfully been written for him back at the shop.

The general press, by contrast, has started to serve the public a great deal better than it used to, particularly in the United States. Perhaps they are a little less worried about their advertisers. A *Washington Post* 11-month investigation last year into the malpractices of US and multinational pharmas in poor countries culminated in a series of devastating articles that should earn the writers a Pulitzer Prize, the thanks of all decent people and the naked loathing of the industry.

A recent, equally splendid article by Tina Rosenberg in *The New York Times Magazine* held up Brazil as the way forward, and showed us the limitations, in law, of the pharmaceutical companies' grip on their own patents. Brazil has put the survival of its own people above the huffing and puffing of Big Pharma. It has produced its own generic anti-retrovirals at a fraction of the cost of the patented equivalent and it is dishing them out to every Brazilian who needs them. At first, instead of rushing screaming to its lawyers and lobbyists and the US State Department, Big Pharma bit the bullet and dropped its prices to compete. But for how long? Under George W Bush, it is already preparing to put back the clock to day zero.

George W. Bush came to power on the back of a lot of very greedy people, not least Big Pharma, which poured millions into his campaign, more than twice the sums it gave the Democrats. Several of the godfathers and grandfathers who packaged and promoted George W. have more than close connections with the pharma industry. Clinton, by the end of his second term, had started to resist Big Pharma's draconian Washington lobby and was even timidly

advocating the release of generic AIDS drugs to people who were dying by the million for want of them. But a huge court case, brought by Big Pharma in South Africa and now imminent, proposes to entrench patent law at any price. The price, of course, is the lives of millions of the Third World's citizens.

Do governments run countries anymore? Do presidents run governments? In the cold war, the right side lost but the wrong side won, said a Berlin wit. For the blink of a star, back there in the early 1990s, something wonderful might have happened: a Marshall Plan, a generous reconciliation of old enemies, a remaking of alliances and, for the Third and Fourth Worlds, a commitment to take on the world's real enemies: starvation, plague, poverty, ecological devastation, despotism and colonialism by all its other names.

But that wishful dream supposed that enlightened nations spoke as enlightened nations, not as the hired mouthpieces of multibillion-dollar multinational corporations that view the exploitation of the world's sick and dying as a sacred duty to their shareholders.

Tina Rosenberg in her *New York Times* piece offers one of those very rare simple solutions that are, of course, too obvious and clearheaded to be acceptable to the health bureaucrats of the World community: Let the World Health Organisation treat global AIDS in the same way that UNICEF has treated global vaccination, which saves 3 million lives a year and prevents crippling diseases in tens of millions more. She calculates the cost at around USD 3 billion, which she suggests isn't too bad a number if you're heading off the collapse of a continent.

She might have added—and perhaps in her mind she did—that the sales of just one pharma giant, Pfizer, amounted last year to USD 29.6 billion and its profits to USD 3.7 billion. GlaxoSmithKline did even better, with lower sales of USD 27.5 billion and greater profits of USD 5.6 billion. And it's all for love of mankind.



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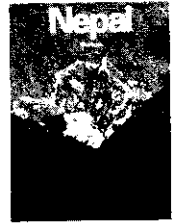
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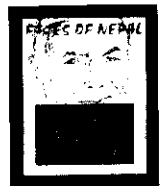
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What's wrong with Indian journalism?

THERE IS much irony about the Tehelka episode that has so rocked India. The irony lies in the Web site being commended for its "investigative journalism", whereas what is being celebrated is the sickness rather than the health of Indian journalism. Tehelka has dramatically, if unintentionally, shown the financial and intellectual impoverishment of the Indian media...

Yet, I remain skeptical—not about the guilt of those who have been named, but about the halo with which such journalism suddenly seems to have been conferred, by most of the English media itself. It is an uncomfortable truth that the media rarely judges itself with the zeal with which it is eager to judge others. Dr. Amartya Sen, Nobel laureate and seminal thinker, spoke barely two months ago in New Delhi on the importance of journalistic ethics and commitment. Reporting, he said, "is not just a matter of the honesty and objectivity of journalism (though they too can be importantly involved), but also one of initiative, imagination and special motivation which would be needed to break less travelled grounds". It is, he added, very easy to be forceful on very visible deprivations, such as a famine or severe unemployment, but "the importance of bringing less obvious adversities—such as non-extreme hunger or defective schooling arrangements—can also be very great".

Where then is the attention that less striking but important deprivations like endemic undernourishment, persistent illiteracy or inadequate health care deserve? These may not always be unearthed by cunningly mounted micro-cameras and wads of soiled currency notes and promises of further wads of the almighty dollar. They are unglamorous, tedious to pursue and rate a shade above the product of the exertions of a municipal reporter's drab beat.

That is why I cannot abide the gushing praise of Tehelka's actions which, in one columnist's view on OnlineJournalism.com, are a "testament to a new breed of investigative journalism that could only exist online". The writer, Ms. Beena Das, went on: "The Indian public and news organisations worldwide have hailed this brand of hard-hitting investigative reporting."...this new kind of Internet reporting is "posing a real challenge to traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and television". Such a view is worrisome. "Launched less than a year ago, the journalists at Tehelka have been gleaned from publications such as *India Today*, *Indian Express* and *Outlook*," Ms. Das continues, "which made investigative journalism glamorous and thrilling as opposed to just plain sordid and depressing."

I am being urged to applaud the Tehelka enterprise as "glamorous and thrilling" because, eventually, it pushed a government to the brink of political survival. It was, I am told, "this ballsy attitude" which is "sel-dom found in bigger news organisations" that tri-

umphed. That's the sort of attitude I would expect to find in a Bollywood film script, not from an organisation that has set out to do serious reporting.

Tarun Tejpal, editor-in-chief of Tehelka, is quoted as saying that, "Our job was to blow the whistle on corruption in India's defence procurement. We wanted to nail them down." Well said. But "nailing them down" in Tehelka fashion costs money. If we go along with one authoritative estimate that the equipment used in the exercise cost USD 5,000 or more, which at current rupee-dollar exchange rates is INR 232,000 (still the annual wage for an average householder in a city like Bombay), the total amount claimed seems small. Perhaps it was more. Even assuming an error of plus-or-minus 10 percent, such a sum to bankroll a story would not make it past the bean counters at even an establishment like the venerable *Indian Express*. For decades, the *Express* newspaper carried out its own brand of investigative journalism and built up a reputation for tough reporting that remains, in my opinion, still unmatched by any sort of Indian media. Yet now the *Express* is struggling for survival.

What then can one say of the aspirations of smaller English-language papers, and numerous vernacular papers, to do a Tehelka? Therein lies the gritty truth. Let us not deceive ourselves about best intentions, ability and resourcefulness. In my years as a reporter in India, I have seen more such qualities in what is often referred to, patronisingly, as the "language press" than I have in the moneyed, connected and well-groomed urban media. It is a divergence that is unfortunately not given the attention it warrants...

The images projected by the country's better-known media titles have little to do with the everyday challenge of living in an India that is being wracked by the pressures of globalisation. It is the easy route that is being taken. The example set by *The Times of India* has now been copied by other 'national' newspapers like *The Hindustan Times* and the Kolkata-based *Telegraph*. The broadsheets are full of ephemeral and mildly titillating trivia—theme restaurants, mix'n'match recipes, androgynous-fashion models and scantily-clad nubile teenagers in films or the theatre.

...It is again a measure of the deeply skewed media priorities that rule today, which affect a man like Mr. Chamantal Deusi. A tailor who lost his home in the January earthquake in Gujarat, he appeared in the English media only courtesy the visit of former US President Bill Clinton to Gujarat in the first week of April. Mr. Deusi didn't mince his words. "He'll give money, but who will get it," he asked the AP reporter. The tailor said he had received only INR 2,000 (USD 42) of the 50,000 (USD 1,070) the state has promised in rehabilitation money. "I want to know, where has that money gone?" Who is going to help him ask that question, which several thousand more are asking in Gujarat? If those funds have been siphoned away, that alone will amount to a sum vastly exceeding the piffling amount that brought about the downfall of Mr. Bangaru Laxman. But to the media, the political collapse of a party

honcho is far more interesting than the apparent cynical swindling of which Mr. Deusi may be a victim.

Tehelka's stated aim was "... to plunge into the murky depths and see if we could spot anything telling that could be dragged into the light." There is much that must be and can be dragged into the light. Yet what Tehelka has succeeded in doing is creating a dubious standard operating procedure—target the politicians and their ever-reliable greed, work in the metros, revel in the thrill of using shady contacts, operate exciting and expensive equipment, do all this in English, and leave it to the underpaid district stringer to find out what happened to Mr. Deusi's money. Doesn't that sort of thing always happen to the Deusis of India anyway?

FROM "INDIA'S NEW TECHNOJOURNALISTS, OR WHY TAILORS STILL DON'T MAKE HEADLINES" BY RAHUL GOSWAMI IN <WWW.THELKA.COM>

A liberal is a traitor

... IN Pakistan, the word 'liberal' has been taken by Urdu into the realm of 'haram'. 'Liberal' parents allow their daughters to go out at night and mix with men freely. 'Liberals' tend to look at India with favour, start talking about human rights when patriotism requires shutting up, and obey the fiats of the 'liberal' West rather than their own homeland. In one kind of Urdu discourse, 'liberal' is another name for 'traitor'. The PML may be viscerally conservative but some members on its fringes can be called liberal; the same is true of the PPP where the rank and file is far more right-wing than its founders intended. 'Liberalism' is definitely an attitude, not a creed...

'Cosmopolitan' was once a negative label with the Left revolutionaries. The cosmopolitans owed allegiance to no one; they formed an international elite, untouched by the revolutionary fervour of the masses. The Gujarati communities of Ismailis, Bohras, Memons and Parsis were once regarded as the 'cosmopolitan' fifth column of the British raj by the All-India Congress. Can this class save Pakistan from the so-called Talibanisation of Pakistan? If India and Iran and the pre-Revolution Russia are any examples to go by, this section of society actually did not fight the extremists; in fact its international status made it easy for it to flee the country and leave the intellectual space to the extremists.

... We know from the French Revolution that a majority of the moderates was defeated by the extremist minority through use of violence; we know that the bolsheviks were actually in minority and that they had to assault and capture a Duma in which they had failed to win a majority. In Iran, the majority following was with the left-wing mujahideen-e-khalq, till the clergy took over the Revolution because of its more extreme view. The Iranian cosmopolitan elite lost no time in fleeing the Revolution. The lesson that both Iran and Afghanistan have tilted to moderation after an initial period of extremism brings no solace to us. It simply means that we have to go through a sanguinary first phase to

qualify for the second phase.

If you look at the Urdu press you will find that it is not the ten million cosmopolitan-liberal-enlightened society which finds expression on its pages... The press publishes inflammatory statements from the Islamists of all stripes and it is very easy to glean from it a sense of impending doom. No one among these voices of 'revolution' says that they will not take over the state because its society is cosmopolitan. In these circumstances, is it not a bit unfair to vent one's spleen on the presumed 'liberal'? The truth of the matter is that all of us are worried about what might happen to Pakistan.

The fact is that Pakistanis are not only not investing in Pakistan they are also sending their sons abroad together with their money. One can rebut the argument... that this exodus is triggered by fear of Talibanisation, but it is equally untenable to insist that it is caused by something other than Talibanisation, since no scientific sampling exists to determine the case either way.

FROM "A REBUTTAL OF THE LIBERALS" BY KHALED AHMED IN THE FRIDAY TIMES.

Judicial dictatorship

"I, JAGDISH Prasar, with colleagues Shri Umed Singh and Rajender were going out from Supreme Court at 7.00 p.m and saw that Gate No.C was closed. We came out from the Supreme Court premises from other path and inquired why the gate is close. The were surrounded by Prasant Bhusan, Medha Patekar and Arundhanti Roy along with their companion and they told Supreme Court your father's property. On this we told them they could not sit on Dharna by closing the gate. The proper place of Dharna is parliament. In the mean time Prasant Bhusan said."You Jagdish Prasar are the tout of judiciary. Again medha said "SALE KO JAAN SE MAAR DO (kill him). Arundhanti Roy commanded the crow that Supreme Court of India is the thief and all these are this touts. Kill them, Prasant Bhusan pulled by having caught my haired and said that if you would be seen in the Supreme Court again he would get them killed. But they were shouting inspite of the presence of S.H.O and ACP Bhaskar Tilak marg. We ran away with great with great hardship otherwise their goonda might have done some mischief because of their drunken state. Therefore, it is requested to you that proper action may be taken after registering our complaint in order to save on lives and property. We complainants will be highly obliged.

FIR filed against anti-Narmada dam activists.

Arundhati Roy's affidavit: As a consequence of the Supreme Court judgement, it is these unfortunate citizens, who stand to lose their homes, their livelihoods, their gods and their histories. When they came calling on the Supreme Court on the morning of the 13th of December 2000, they were asking the Court to restore their dignity. To accuse them of lowering the dignity of the Court suggests that the dignity of the court and the dig-

nity of Indian citizens are incompatible, oppositional, adversarial things. That the dignity of one can only exist at the cost of the other. If this is so, it is a sad and shameful proposition.

In recent months this Court has issued judgements on several major public issues. For instance, the closure of polluting industries in Delhi, the conversion of public transport buses from diesel to CNG, and the judgement permitting the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to proceed. All of these have had far-reaching and often unanticipated impacts. They have materially affected, for better or for worse, the lives and livelihoods of millions of Indian citizens. Whatever the justice or injustice of these judgements, whatever their finer legal points, for the court to become intolerant of criticism or expressions of dissent would mark the beginning of the end of democracy.

An 'activist' judiciary, that intervenes in public matters to provide a corrective to a corrupt, dysfunctional executive, surely has to be *more*, not less accountable. To a society that is already convulsed by political bankruptcy, economic distress and religious and cultural intolerance, any form of judicial intolerance will come as a crippling blow. If the judiciary removes itself from public scrutiny and accountability, and severs its links with the society that it was set up to serve in the first place, it would mean that yet another pillar of Indian democracy will crumble. A judicial dictatorship is as fearsome a prospect as a military dictatorship or any other form of totalitarian rule.

On the grounds that judges of the Supreme Court were too busy, the Chief Justice of India refused to allow a sitting judge to head the judicial enquiry into the Tehelka scandal, even though it involves matters of national security and corruption in the highest places. Yet, when it comes to an absurd, despicable, entirely unsubstantiated petition in which all the three respondents happen to be people who have publicly though in markedly different ways questioned the policies of the government and severely criticised a recent judgement of the Supreme Court, the Court displays a disturbing willingness to issue notice.

It indicates a disquieting inclination on the part of the court to silence criticism and muzzle dissent, to harass and intimidate those who disagree with it. By entertaining a petition based on an FIR that even a local police station does not see fit to act upon, the Supreme Court is doing its own reputation and credibility considerable harm.

In conclusion, I wish to reaffirm that as a writer I have the right to state my opinions and beliefs. As a free citizen of India I have the right to be part of any peaceful dharna, demonstration or protest march. I have the right to criticise any judgement of any court that I believe to be unjust. I have the right to make common cause with those I agree with. I hope that each time I exercise these rights I will not dragged to court on false charges and forced to explain my actions.

The torture brigade

DEAR FRIENDS, I've just returned from a trip up north and east, and wanted to share some of my experiences with you so you'd know what kind of work I've been doing (some of it) and the people I work with. But don't read this if you don't like gore. This is messy stuff.

I have been very disturbed by my latest trip. As many of you know, I work with torture survivors and bomb blast victims. The ngo I work for, the Family Rehabilitation Centre, has offices in many areas of Sri Lanka, including the central province, eastern province, and north-eastern province. I have managed to visit all the outreach offices (nine of them) during my stay here, as I did last year. I go in and talk to the counsellors about clinical and professional issues, and attempt to support them in their work. I also check client files to ensure that counsellors are up to speed in keeping good intake and progress notes. Finally, the Colombo office has requested that I work directly with a few clients whenever I can, the so-called "severe trauma" cases. In the North and East these clients tend to be people who have experienced severe torture at the hands of the Sri Lankan Police/Army, and in the South they tend to be people who have been attacked by terrorists.

When I visited up north (Vavuniya and Mannar—the closest we can come to Jaffna, which is closed off to civilians as there is heavy conflict there) I couldn't take in the things I saw and read. In Vavuniya we saw about 300 people last year who were torture survivors; for this year, 55 people have already come in who have been severely tortured. Compared to last year, the severity and intensity, as well as the number of torture techniques seem to have increased. There is a lot more sexual torture (men's testicles and penis crushed against a drawer shut hard; bottles inserted into the anus; burning cigarettes on the penis; rape of women, inserting various objects into women's vaginas), in addition to the usual *falanga* (beating of the soles of the foot until they bleed raw, and the cushioning of the feet that act as shock absorbers are destroyed, causing intense and excruciating pain when the person attempts to walk), *telefono* (boxing on both ears together until the ears bleed, so that the person's hearing is severely impaired), "wet submarino" (petrol is placed in a bag and the person's head is forced in the bag, inducing asphyxia), "dry submarino" (chillie powder in the bag), placing a helmet on the head and beating hard on it, burning of limbs with cigarettes and burning plastic bags, *dharmachakka* (a unique method in Sri Lanka ironically based on a Buddhist emblem where the person's hands and feet are tied together onto a pole and the person is "rotated" as if on a spit; and each time one side of the person is made accessible to an army officer he beats on it), pulling off of nails and teeth without anaesthetic, and electric shocks to various parts of the body (including penis and vagina).

If this is shocking, think about the people to whom this is happening! Many of these people are arrested without any cause under the "Prevention of Terrorism"

act; they are detained and tortured, and then released b/c no evidence was found to implicate them. Their only crime is that they live in a high-conflict area and they are Tamils, therefore they are suspected terrorists!

The people who come to us are certainly no terrorists (some of them are over 65 years old—teachers, engineers, etc.); in fact if the people arrested were terrorists, they go back to the terrorist areas. These people have no idea why they were arrested, and most of them have completely lost trust in humanity. Sometimes a neighbour “gives them away”—a mother will do this in order to save her own son—she will point to someone else in the hopes that her son will be left alone. Many women are raped and threatened if they dare to reveal the true causes of the tearing/bleeding of their sexual organs when examined by a medical officer...

I have spoken to a 16-year-old boy who can't wait to join the terrorists, now that he was arrested and severely tortured continuously for 15 days (every evening; our clients dread the dusk) having committed no crimes; a 65-year-old man who wept when attempting to tell me about the atrocities the authorities committed against him, a man who had always helped others in the community, a man people respected and admired; a woman whose husband had been tortured, released, re-arrested and tortured again, resulting in his death—her eyes were swollen with weeping; a boy who witnessed, at the age of 3, his uncle being cut to pieces by the army and at the age of 14, his brother going through the exact same thing (he faints every time he tries to talk about it); and many many others. All I can do is listen to their story and attempt to give them some hope for the future (!). They do appear to get some solace from telling their story, and I try to use what metaphors I can to help them understand the power they have to heal—that they are torture survivors, not victims. Yet all I can give them is one session. One session to help them manage “severe torture”. It's ludicrous. The counsellor in every office is overwhelmed: how does one handle 55+ cases at a time?

Down South, the situation is no better. Every so often a small village is terrorised by the terrorists, who want the villagers to leave their homes so they can capture the village. Sometimes, the day before they are to enter the village they send word to the people, telling them to leave. But where are these people to go? If they leave, the terrorists will claim that land, and “expand their borders” (hence, these villages are called “border villages”), and they lose their home and become refugees in a place where the government cannot care for them. So some stay, some flee. Those who stay try to hide when the terrorists come, screaming and yelling and shooting, into their huts at 2 or 3 a.m. If they are found, the terrorists take machetes, axes, and other tools and begin hacking at the families—old men and women, young men, pregnant women, and children—yes, children.

All but one are killed in each family; one is left to tell the tale, to frighten others. One mother lost her four children this way, and ran behind the killers, pleading to be killed along with her family; she was left alive. Another little boy (13) also ran to the door, screaming to die, and a mother who was barely alive crawled to the door and pulled him back, just in time (she herself died soon after). Some are cut up, but left alive, b/c the terrorists cannot tell if they are dead or alive, there is so much blood.

These are the stories of the people in Sri Lanka. Please pray for them. Think about them. Do what you can—join Amnesty International and voice your opinion on what's happening. The people in Colombo are living with blinders on, not wanting to know. This is what some people are trying to call a “war for freedom”. These are not freedom fighters—they are butchers. The government is not a protecting force—they are murderers. And, as is usual in Sri Lanka and most other places, it is the poor and the powerless who suffer. And suffer. And suffer.

I'm sorry if I was too graphic. I just wanted you all to know the situation here. I work with not much understanding of what good I'm really doing, but I go through the motions, and I believe that some intervention is better than none. But as you can imagine, it's heart-rending and exhausting—there's only one other doctoral level clinical psychologist here, and six masters-level clinical psychologists and about five people who've done their B.A. in psychology (who are also working as clinical psychologists here, the need is so great). There are also some counsellors, but it's hard to tell how effective they are as most of them have had little or no training, some of it countertherapeutic. I'm looking forward to coming home soon and resting a little.

God bless,
Gaithri

FROM A WEB POSTING, “SRI LANKA - ISLE OF PARADISE?????”



Heart of darkness

Asia's largest slum is a testament of the state's failure to address the growth of Bombay city's expansive underbelly. It is also a grim reminder to the gracious people of how the underclass survives.

In the Introduction to her book, *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum*, Kalpana Sharma makes a brave admission: "Like many others in Mumbai, I too did not know precisely what and where was this 'slum' called Dharavi. I discovered it, so to speak, during the 1992-93 communal riots... As a journalist, I had to visit Dharavi frequently to report on the riots..." The rest of the book is a testament to just how precisely and thoroughly she then set about discovering what and where Dharavi is, and more importantly—if one may be permitted a little grammatical licence—why it is.

The 'where' of Dharavi can be established easily enough. Newcomers to Mumbai will probably have the place—'Asia's largest slum'—pointed out to them with a nudge and an uncomfortable chuckle as they drive out from the airport to the commercial centres of the 'island city', or make their first trip south on a 'local' commuter train. The 'what' and the 'why' are harder to locate and understand, and Sharma devotes the bulk of her work to these questions.

One of the strongest features of the book is its clarity about the many whys of Dharavi: why does such a place exist? Why does it exist in the precise location that it does (sandwiched between Bombay's two major north-south railway axes, more or less in the centre of Greater Bombay as the city is now developing)? Why does Bombay's middle-class—which includes the metro's planning and supervisory echelons—view Dharavi with a strange and almost schizophrenic mixture of interest, exasperation, fear, revulsion and curiosity, but almost never with understanding? And most of all, why does and must

Dharavi matter to us all? Sharma responds to these questions with answers that are informed by painstaking research, passion, warmth and a stern reminder that while enterprise in the midst of deprivation is to be admired, there is absolutely "nothing to celebrate about living in a cramped 150 sq. ft. house with no natural light or ventilation, without running water or sanitation".

Semantic 'recognition'

Ultimately, as Sharma lucidly argues, the growth of places like Dharavi is the direct and simple result of the state's refusal to acknowl-



Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum

by Kalpana Sharma;
Penguin Books India, 2000, New Delhi,
paperback, pp xxxviii + 209, INR 200.
ISBN: 014 1000 236

reviewed by Harini Narayanan

edge that urban centres like Bombay are, and in the foreseeable future will continue to be, magnets for those seeking employment. She writes that it always was the responsibility of the state to ensure that decent and affordable housing was made available to the job-seekers, and that at several points, especially in the early post-Independence years, such housing could easily have been initiated by the government on the large tracts of vacant land that were then readily available.

At least during the early boom

years, industrial houses could have been required by law to provide housing for permanent employees. The government as well as a few industrial units did indeed build some workers' housing (there was even a feeble effort to get textile-mill owners to contribute towards a fund that the government would then use to build *chawls* or residential settlements, for their workers), but in the absence of any compelling policy or legislation these initiatives soon petered out.

In sum, in Bombay, the state comprehensively abdicated its responsibilities in providing for the poor. Sharma says that what little urban planning and implementation get carried out in Bombay happen mainly by default and negligence. The "history and growth" of places like Dharavi, packing in a million people in a 175-hectare triangle of swampy, ill-served urban wasteland, illustrate the resulting problems graphically.

After many decades of sustained disregard of the common-sense conclusion that even the thinnest hope of urban employment is enough to impel the rural poor to the city, the government in Bombay took cognisance of the consequences of this inflow and it set about making its early development plans. In these plans, it explained what it would do with the city's burgeoning slums: remove them. Accordingly, the period between the late 1960s and the early 1980s was devoted to the tragic and wasteful act of tearing down 'illegal' housing and ordering the occupants to simply leave. No thinking middle-class citizen of Bombay can recall of the 1970s or 1980s without discomfort, the demolitions of the Emergency years, or those miserable monsoon days in mid-1981 when an entire settlement was destroyed, the occupants packed into buses and deposited on the outskirts of the city with the injunction to "go home".

As Sharma reminds us, demolition and eviction are still the most visible instruments the city government deploys whenever it needs to demonstrate that it can actually run the show. But at least at the policy-

making level, the futility of demolitions has been understood and replaced, serially, by programmes for slum 'improvement', 'upgradation' and most recently, 'redevelopment'. All these programmes follow a bizarre and semantically loaded ritual that is called 'recognition', i.e., the government 'recognises' that a particular slum and its inhabitants have been around so long that they are unlikely to vanish altogether, and so they might as well be offered rudimentary forms of civic services like sanitation and water. 'Recognition' is granted on the basis of a 'cut-off' date, which is a powerful political tool that is always available for negotiation and accommodation. Over the years, I have watched this 'cut-off' date lurch steadily forward, from 1976, to 1980, then 1985 and finally (for now), to 1995.

But, as Sharma knows, 'recognition' does not mean legality of tenure, and the state is free to demolish slums that it has itself set up whenever it feels it can make 'better' use of the land, typically by offering it to private builders. Thus, Dharavi and other Bombay slums are full of groups that have been evicted and relocated several times in the course of one lifetime. And, it is worth remembering, in every instance after the first dislocation, they have been summarily uprooted from land on which the government had itself located them. The landscape of Bombay bears witness to these successive evictions in its informal place-names. There are several *Kumbharwadās* (potters' colonies) in Bombay, though the most identifiable settlement of traditional *Kumbhars* in Mumbai is today to be found only in Dharavi. Most of the other so-called 'Kumbharwadās' simply designate those locations where migrant potters from Gujarat were once allowed to exist.

This fundamental illegality of residence that slum-dwellers in Mumbai have to live with, even in old and supposedly well-settled slums like Dharavi, does deface their entire being, their very existence, as far as the city's more fortunately located residents are concerned. It is

true, to some extent, that illegality of residential tenure reproduces other illegalities of transaction—for every time someone wants a piece of land to build a shack, get a water connection or a job in Dharavi, he or she must perforce employ means that are often necessarily extra-legal. But, as Sharma points out, on the flip side it is easier for crimes like murder and theft to be committed in isolated middle-class living areas than it is in a densely packed settlement like Dharavi. Up to 90 per cent of the residents often work close to where they live.

The slum economy

It is in the description of this crowded living that the author displays her impressive fieldwork. Sharma has clearly spent much time walking through Dharavi's bewildering (to the outsider) network of roads, lanes and alleys, separating out distinct groups of residents, putting together complex oral histories about their places of origin, their arrival in Mumbai, their dreams about the city of gold and their toils to get a piece of that gold. Migrants from all over the country jostle with each other for their own little inches of space in Dharavi, and many of them continue to pursue in Dharavi their calling of the past. And as Sharma points out with such understanding, their preoccupation with finding employment and improving their lives restrains Dharavi residents from being easily provoked into clashes with each other, contrary to anything that the uninformed outsider might believe.

"If you want to eat the best *gulab jamuns* in town, buy the best *chiki*, acquire an export-quality leather handbag, order World Health Organization (WHO) certified sutures for surgery, see the latest design in ready-made garments being manufactured for export, get a new suitcase or an old one repaired, taste food from the north and the south, see traditional South Indian gold jewellery—there are few better places in all of Bombay than Dharavi," writes Sharma. The book explains in painstaking detail just how and where each of these activities are

pursued in Dharavi's dark lofts and crowded sweatshops. In the process, she charts the course of many fascinating rags-to-riches stories—the kind that constantly inspire Hindi cinema plotlines and filter back to barren hinterlands, enticing yet more waves of migrants to Bombay's teeming slums.

The figures are not to be taken lightly. Cautioning that "estimates of the daily turnover of Dharavi can only be wild guesses as... much of the production here is illegal", Sharma puts forward a "back-of-the-envelope calculation" that adds up to between INR 1,500 crore and INR 2,000 crore a year. This amounts to around INR 11 crore per hectare per year. Even allowing for some exaggeration by Dharavi's residents, these figures are something that the city government must bear in mind when it next decides to tell these resident migrants to "go home". Many of Dharavi's younger residents have never seen a part of the world other than Greater Bombay.

The details about Dharavi's residents, their caste and regional profiles, their jobs, failures and success stories, are fascinating. But this is also the one section of the book where, perhaps, the editors have not served the author well enough. The mass of material was clearly so overwhelming that it was difficult to avoid making repetitive statements or offer sustained cross-referencing. Dharavi's 25 bakeries are discussed in at least four different places in the book. And each time, the information is presented as if for the first time. Similarly, the regional composition of Dharavi's residents is explained repeatedly, without the usual indicative phrases of prior or reiterative reference. But this in no way affects the fundamental rigour of analysis.

This is a book that professionals who grapple with the problems of Third World metros need to take seriously. But more importantly, it is a work that everyone who has ever driven past Dharavi and looked at it with a mixture of interest, revulsion and incomprehension needs to read and think about. ▽

The undiscriminated Jews

India's smallest and least known religious minority are the Jews, who number less than 10,000 in all. Once a significant community in terms of influence and power at the isolated local redoubts, the Jews of India are today approaching extinction, with the vast majority of the community having shifted to Israel and elsewhere after Independence. Much has actually been written on the Jews of India. This book, while covering familiar ground, offers new insights and perspectives on the life, history and customs of this fascinating community.

Katz, himself an authority on the subject, having already authored two previous books on the Indian Jews, explains that the Jews of the country are far from being a monolithic community. Differences of historical origin, tradition, ritual and custom all justify their being treated as separate communities, albeit united by their common Jewishness. Katz identifies three major Jewish groups in India: that of the Jews of Cochin, the Bene Israel of the Konkan coast and the Baghdadis of Bombay, Calcutta and some cities of North India. These communities adopted varying strategies to come to terms with being Jewish in an overwhelmingly Gentile society. But India, according to Katz, was one of the few countries where the Jews never experienced any form of anti-Semitism, except for a brief interlude at the hands of the Portuguese Catholics in Kerala.

The Jews of Cochin have had the longest recorded history—Katz provides an interesting account of their arrival on the Malabar coast almost 2000 years ago. The key to understanding the rise of the Cochin Jewry to considerable prosperity, even going so far as to establish a small kingdom of its own, he writes, lies in the advantages that the Jews brought for the local rulers. For, they served as soldiers, traders and middlemen, playing a major role in the flourishing commerce between Malabar and West Asia and beyond. The

Cochin Jews earned a high status for themselves, in a predominantly Hindu caste-based society, by emerging as a caste themselves, adopting several Hindu customs while remaining true to their Jewish faith.

Another fascinating instance of a Jewish group successfully maintaining its Jewishness while completely adapting itself to the local environment is that of the Shaniwar Telis or the Bene Israel of the Konkan coast. Scattered in villages along the Konkan, they took to oil pressing as their principal occupation, in effect becoming a caste



Who Are The Jews of India?

by Nathan Katz. The University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000 Pages: 207 Price: \$45 ISBN: 0-520-21323-8

reviewed by **Yoginder Sikand**

placed low in the social hierarchy.

Little seems to have distinguished the Jewish oil-pressers from the Hindu and Muslim counterparts but their Hebrew practice of taking rest from work on the Sabbath, Saturday (*shaniwar*), which is how they earned the title "Shaniwar Telis". In all other matters, they adopted local cultural practices and customs. According to Katz, it was only from the 18th century onwards, because of the influence of Christian missionaries, and contacts with Cochini, and later, Baghdadi Jews, that the Bene Israel began to consciously discard much of their traditional culture in favour of what they saw as normative Jewish traditions.

The Baghdadis were the latest Jewish arrivals in India, and have not been able to adapt themselves

to the Indian cultural environment in the way the others had. Descended from Jews of West Asian extraction, the Baghdadis were proud of their Arab-Jewish culture, and settled mainly in Bombay and Calcutta, and under the British, prospered greatly, producing some of the richest families in India.

The 1857 Mutiny, in which both Hindus and Muslims participated, forced the Baghdadis to stress closer ties with the British. While this may certainly have helped them in seeking a European identity for themselves, it meant a gradual erosion of their own culture, and also led to increasing dissension among the various Jewish communities. Katz tells us how the Baghdadis consistently looked down upon the Bene Israel for their Indian customs and habits, casting doubts about their racial purity and seeking to exclude them from the mainstream of the community.

Despite these rivalries that seem to have wracked the Jewish preserves in India, once the state of Israel came into being in 1948, all Indian Jews emigrated to the new state, almost en masse. Yet, even there, reports Katz, invidious caste distinctions remained among the Indian Jews. Bene Israel's Jewishness is still debated in the orthodox circles of Haifa and Jerusalem.

For a broad overview of Jewish life and history in India this book excels. The narrative stops at 1947, and unfortunately, there is little about the remaining Jews in India and about the Indian Jews in Israel today. Nor is there mention of isolated neo-Jewish groups, such as the Dalit families of Andhra Pradesh and some tribals in North-east India, who have claimed Jewish descent and have, on the basis of that, developed a new Jewish identity for themselves.

The author's own passionate advocacy of Israel as the fulfilment of the millennial hopes of the Jews will certainly strike a jarring note for some, but that should be no reason for ignoring what is probably one of the most interesting studies on the subject of India's Jewry. ▽

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Hell's Angels

There was once a man called Mahatma Gandhi. Among other things, he believed in cleaning his own toilet. But the land of his birth, Gujarat, still has thousands of 'scavengers'—an archaic Victorian term used mostly in India—who carry on their head night-soil, the sanitised euphemism for human excreta.

The film *Lesser Humans* is about them, the Bhangis, who occupy the lowest position in the caste hierarchy, outcastes even among outcastes. The 59-minute documentary shocks, even as it investigates the caste, gender, economic and political factors responsible for the perpetuation of this noxious practice. It exposes in gut-wrenching detail the fate of people doomed from birth to a lifetime of sweeping human dung from the hell-holes they work in.

The film, shot in 1997, the 50th year of Indian Independence, effectively hammers home the unremitting misery of the Bhangis' existence with the clever use of a sequence of dates that mark the innumerable promises of amelioration. Year after year, politicians and governments pledge relief and resolve to end manual scavenging. Commission after commission conducts enquiries, prepares reports and makes recommendations. But for the Bhangis, life does not change. Not even after the enactment of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993, which makes employment of scavengers, and the construction of dry (non-flush) latrines, a crime punishable by imprisonment up to a year and/or a fine of INR 2000. (Dry latrines most often are no more than a small room in which a small hole on the floor opens into a container in a compartment below. The cleaner

crawls into the compartment and empties out the container. In pit latrines, the faeces is usually collected in a jute bag, which is removed.)

In the rural areas of Gujarat where the film is shot, Bhangi women still carry baskets filled with 'night-soil' on their heads. Other than clearing latrines, a Bhangi's workload includes disposing of dead animals, carrying dead bodies for post-mortem, carrying the death notices (of the upper castes), and cleaning cowsheds. With 'inauspicious' jobs, a Bhangi woman or man is kept away from normal interaction with other members of society for fear of being 'polluted'.

One of the most moving images in the documentary is that of Bhangi schoolchildren being asked to sit apart in the classroom, and being abused and reviled. A young girl

LESSER HUMANS

59 minutes

directed by K. Stalin

produced by Drishii Media Collective

reviewed by

Mari Marcel Thekaekara

talks about her dream of becoming a doctor, and how she had to drop out of school and join her broom-wielding kin. There are no pretensions left when it is human excreta that earns somebody one roti a day or five rupees a month. There are 32,000 Bhangi families in the state of Gujarat.

Other than the Bhangis of Gujarat, Dalit manual scavengers exist under different names throughout India. They are called Chuhras in Punjab, Dumras in Rajasthan, Mehtar in Bihar, Bhuimalia in West Bengal, Pakhis in Andhra Pradesh and Thotis (also Sikkaliars) in Tamil Nadu. Their tools of work are a broom, a tin plate, a basket or a metal drum, in which they transport the



faeces to the dumping grounds. In urban areas, they also clear the gutters, and are lowered with ropes into manholes, usually without any protective gear. In cities like Bombay, Baroda and Ahmedabad, there have been cases of cleaners dying of carbon monoxide poisoning. For their pains they are paid between INR 30 and 50 a day, that too, if they are employed by civic bodies. Those working privately may earn INR five to 15 a month per house.

Must-see

The case of Gujarati Bhangis is a curious one. Although the state government came up with repeated bans—in 1969, 1991, 1994 and 1995—scavenging is carried out under the authority of the local government bodies, such as the village panchayats and municipalities. And even more curiously, Gujarat is the only state to have adopted the 1993 Act, which makes the employing of scavengers punishable.

The film is interspersed with interviews by Martin Macwan, the presenter of the film, who is also the director of Navsarjan Trust, a voluntary organisation that works for the Bhangis' cause. In Macwan's view, "Manual scavenging cannot be looked at in isolation as an occupation. It is built in the caste system and is getting worse. Fifty years ago there was no technology but today we have it. But things remain the same. Technology again is caste-based. If you are on the wrong side of the fence, you hardly get



Bhangis in action, and (centre) a still from the movie where a Bhangi man cleans an urban sewer and sends up the collected filth.

exposed to it."

Not surprisingly, the film has made a strong impact wherever it has been screened, and has won several awards. But the fact is, *Lesser Humans*, was not made to garner the awards. Its purpose was to make a definitive statement against the inhumanity of the manual scavenging profession, and by doing that, to get the authorities to seriously address the issue. The producers of

the documentary, Drishti Media Collective, consists of a group of young professionals working on issues of gender justice, human rights, and development in general. The director, K. Stalin, has to his credit other socially relevant documentaries like *Aftermath of the Cyclone in Kutch*, *Patta Patta Akshar Hoga* (on the literacy campaign in a Bihar village) and *The Self in Self-Rule* (on gender-sensitive governance).

Interestingly, *Lesser Humans* was not considered suitable for showing in the United States. While that certainly says something, of both the American audience and the profession of the Bhangi, the fact is that a film like this is made for, and should be seen by, South Asian audience everywhere. As long as the 'right' people see it and act upon it, there ought to be some hope for those whom society defiles everyday. ▽



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by G.P. Deshpande

RAHIMATPUR

Town along the Kamandalu

HERE ARE some basic facts. Of course, the facts about a town like Rahimatpur can only be basic. They are also historical. Very little of the present that is not history is worth narrating. A semi-urban place of about 14,000 people, 124 kilometres south-southwest of Pune in the state of Maharashtra. Tradition lists seven rivers of India to be the most sacred: Ganga, Sindhu, Sarasvati (now non-existent), Yamuna, Godavari, Narmada, Kaveri and Krishna. Our town belongs to the Krishna Valley. The river is about four kilometres from Rahimatpur. The first thing which strikes you about the township is that it is located as if it were at the bottom of a bowl. It is surrounded by hills. As you step out of the town in any direction you move up from the base towards the edge. As often happens in this part of Western India, you climb to the top of a hill, you find yourself not at the peak but rather on an enormous plateau, often most windy.

Rahimatpur (literally, the Town of His Mercy) was established sometime in the 16-17th century as a Revenue Post of the Adilshahi Sultanate (capital Bijapur, present-day Karnataka). It is located on a highway connecting Bijapur to Satara (another historic town of late medieval India). Once, Rahimatpur was a commercial centre known for its textile market. The Sultanate was not a big empire. And this was its tiny outpost in the far northwest.

You can even now see that the town was originally neat and well-planned. Two avenues, about half a kilometre long, cross each other in the middle of the town. The habitation is along this axis. Most small (and large) towns of historical interest are replete with narrow lanes (*galis*) that go hither and thither, giving character to the neighbourhood. The poet Zauq once said, *Kaun jayega Zauq, Dilli ki galiyan chhod kar?* (Why would anyone want to leave the lanes of Delhi?) However, Rahimatpur is not a town of *galis*. It is a town of avenues; broad avenues at that. Its cross-streets are broad too. You get the feeling that when the town was new, it must have looked a bit like Lutyens' Delhi does today, except that Rahimatpur is tiny and does not have imposing buildings. But the sense of space is the same, or at least comparable.

The town stands along a river, or rivulet. Three beautiful temples stand at two ends of the town along this watercourse. Once it was a river in its own right, a tiny tributary of the Krishna. It even had a name: Kamandalu, the water pot that sadhus carry. A metaphor had become a name. When I was a school-kid in the Town of His Mercy, there was a lot of water, clean, drinkable water in the Kamandalu. It was even possible to swim in the river. Now the water has become its pathetic Other: dirty, near-dry, totally undrinkable.

There have been other changes. There were huge, ancient tamarind trees along the stone wall on the far bank. Nobody seems to know what the stone wall, now broken and hardly in shape, was supposed to be. But it was there. We spent warm summer afternoons on the steps which went from the wall to the river. If asked to define nostalgia, I would say the tamarind trees and the swim in the village river. Both trees and wall are no more, leaving behind only some pathetic signs that modernity distinguishes itself with even here in Rahimatpur—water shortage, farming crisis, and near obscene greed of a populace which has lost its moorings with the past.

In the early decades of the 20th century, Maharashtra was marked by considerable inter-caste tensions. Almost idyllically, Rahimatpur was free of them. Back in 1906, a civil judge, one Mr Kanitkar, noted that Rahimatpur was a quiet town remarkably free of inter-communal tensions. It was founded by Muslim rulers, and today Muslims constitute about 10 percent of its population. But my home town has no history of Hindu-Muslim tensions. There are two major pockets of Muslim population. One across the river and away from the town in the southeast. The other at the western end of the east-west axis. It is possible that these two population-pockets represent two different caste groups which converted to Islam at two different times.

The *azaan*, the call for prayer, used to be clear and sonorous in Rahimatpur. We now have loud speakers fitted to the minarets, and the muezzin's call is loud and jarring. Theological lectures are held there in a hall, and the courtyard can hardly take a hundred people. And yet, a microphone is needed. That family

in whose house the lectures take place has been there since as long as I can remember. But noisy theology is new. Indeed, all religions in these times tend to believe in volubility rather than reflection. This is true no less of the Hindus, and lately also of the Jains in Rahimatpur as well. The town has become noisier.

Noise pollution in the name of religion is not only ignored but seems to be rather welcome. I long for the soft, sonorous azaan or a Bhakti rendition early in the morning. Subtleties of voice and the beauty of the religious call are lost, perhaps forever. Rahimatpur is now more the Town of Godly Cacophony than that of His Mercy.

Rahimatpur used to be a town of professionals. A *wada* was a typical late-medieval Maharashtra house. You entered a wada from a huge, usually decorative door and stepped into an open square courtyard with rooms and a covered walkway around the inside. Then another door, which led to another courtyard. In that secluded space, the fact that you stood in the centre of the town was forgotten. You were at the centre of personal wealth, in this case the wealth of those who dealt in textiles and, of course, the wealth of the absentee-landlords or their managers. The various neighbourhoods had their caste status. They also had a professional status. Indeed, there was a time when you went around Rahimatpur and understood the complexities of caste almost as a mode of production. Rahimatpur and its professional layout brought home to you the *jati-vyavastha* (caste system) as the principle of economic organisation.

Today, of course, the wadas are in a dilapidated state. They had started falling to disrepair already when I was in primary school (1944-47). Now, many have collapsed totally. What you now see are empty spaces giving some idea of their expanse and their one-time glory. You get to see a wall or two. The rest is an emptiness, proof of depressed agriculture in this region. The houses of small-time professionals who remain here are in a bad state. There used to be a number of ironsmiths in Rahimatpur. Now there is barely one. The oil-smith, and along with him, the delicious non-refined cooking oil are forgotten. What are they doing? And their children? Crowding the slums of Bombay, one imagines.

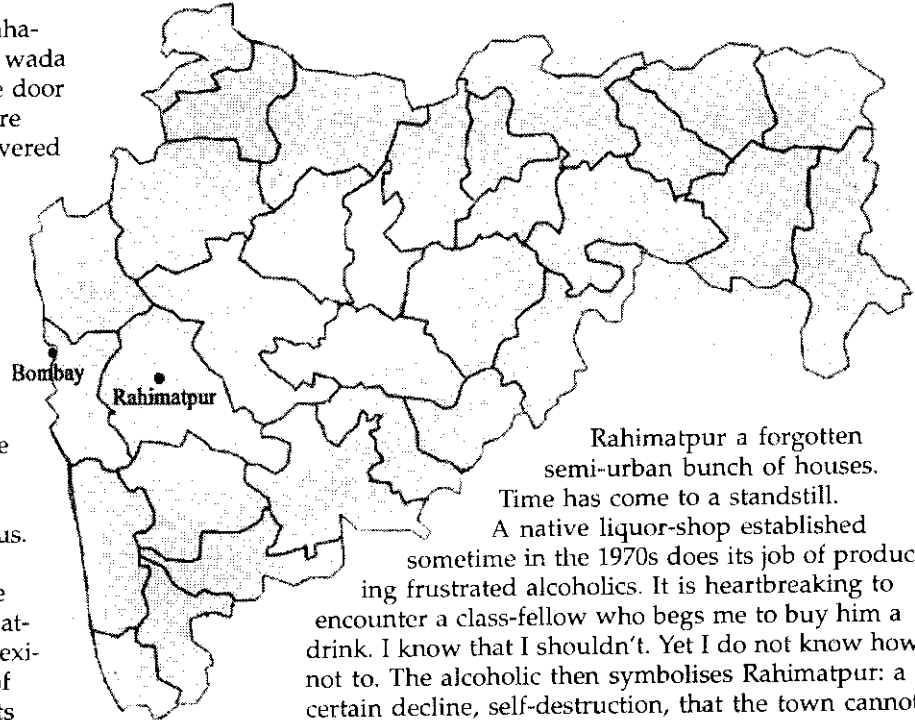
Rahimatpur is testimony to the decline and near-collapse of the village economy of this part of India.

The new industrial estates have not touched my town. When I left it in 1960, there was no electricity in the town. I studied not quite at the municipal light, but certainly in the meagre light of an oil-lamp. But I could read. I wanted to read. Young people in Rahimatpur still want to read and do read. The rest, however, is a story of destruction, almost a slow death. No industry, no employment, no rain, no productive agriculture.

Rahimatpur is a municipal town. Our municipality was established in 1853, the third one in the Marathi-speaking part of the then Bombay Presidency.

Rahimatpur Municipality is in fact older than Pune Municipality. Pune is now a corporation,

Maharashtra



Rahimatpur a forgotten semi-urban bunch of houses.

Time has come to a standstill.

A native liquor-shop established sometime in the 1970s does its job of producing frustrated alcoholics. It is heartbreaking to encounter a class-fellow who begs me to buy him a drink. I know that I shouldn't. Yet I do not know how not to. The alcoholic then symbolises Rahimatpur: a certain decline, self-destruction, that the town cannot avoid. Every time I go to Rahimatpur, the sadder I return.

In the midst of all this decline my father, who is 92, stoically looks at the futureless agrarian economy of Rahimatpur. He remembers his childhood and gets lost in it. The town was prosperous then, he tells us. A period of history comes alive as he recollects. For him and for us. The future then does not seem to matter. The still surviving and beautiful mosque of Rahimatpur and the *shikharas* (pagodas) of the temples stand above the decline around them. One looks at them.

Rahimatpur has very little of its present. It probably has no future. It is a town which only has a past. Just as well perhaps, because it would otherwise have wanted to repeat that history and almost certainly as a farce or perhaps even as a tragedy. Quiet submersion in the past is Rahimatpur's destiny. ▽

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The Asian Light Show

One American satellite that girdles the globe apparently does more than check out what other countries are hiding in their backyards. It actually, among other things, gives us a night-time picture of Asia, showing which parts are well-lit and which are not.

There are two reasons for darkness in the landmass. Either you have the absence of people, as in the Baloch and Afghan deserts and the Tibetan plateau. Or you have poverty—no power, no lights. The difference between South Korea's dazzling lights (next to even more dazzling Japan) and, up across the 38th parallel, the abject darkness of North Korea, is an indication of the misery of people in that dark nation. The same holds true for Burma. And Nepal, where other than the dot that shows Kathmandu, there is precious little to show for its 23 million people.

On the whole, the entire Subcontinental landmass seems rather brightly lit, enough to make out the exact contours of the coastline and where the lightless lower hills of the Himalaya-Hindukush take over. This could easily mislead one into thinking that the brightness of the Subcontinent is proof of relative affluence. In this case, however, the lights are merely an indicator of population density rather than development.

Up north, inside the great gloom that envelopes Tibet, a tiny point of light indicates Lhasa. Karachi and Lahore and the corridor of light along the route linking the two, with Multan on the way, are clearly visible. So are Bombay and the string of lights leading out southwards from it. The industrial belt

around Dhanbad, northwest of Calcutta, also stands out. The western coast of India seems continuously and prosperously lit, whereas the eastern side has large gaps in it—sections of the Andhra and Orissa coast. The road and rail links across the Subcontinent and the regions of industrial concentration can quite easily be traced on the image.

Down in the middle of the Indian ocean, southwest of Sri Lanka, the dot standing alone is Male. And up there, northeast of Assam, what could be that large blotch of white? That alone remains a mystery, for there is no city or urban corridor there.

Time for a hypothesis, at least in relation to South Asia. If, in this image, a populated region does not show bright lights, then it would seem that the conditions are ripe for popular disaffection ending in insurgency. Looking down on South Asia from this American satellite, there does seem to be such a correlation. Check out the lights along the western coast of Sri Lanka, around Colombo, and the rather gloomy north and east. That pinpoint could just be Jaffna, and that other one further down Trincomallee. Nothing else.

Search out Kashmir, the Indian Northeast, large parts of Andhra and Bihar, and there is darkness. But mainly, look at the burning hills of Nepal, nearly all of it in darkness.

Yes, lights equal prosperity, and only when the dark gaps are filled in will we see a true end to violence and destruction. That is what the Asian Lights show.

Kanah Prasad

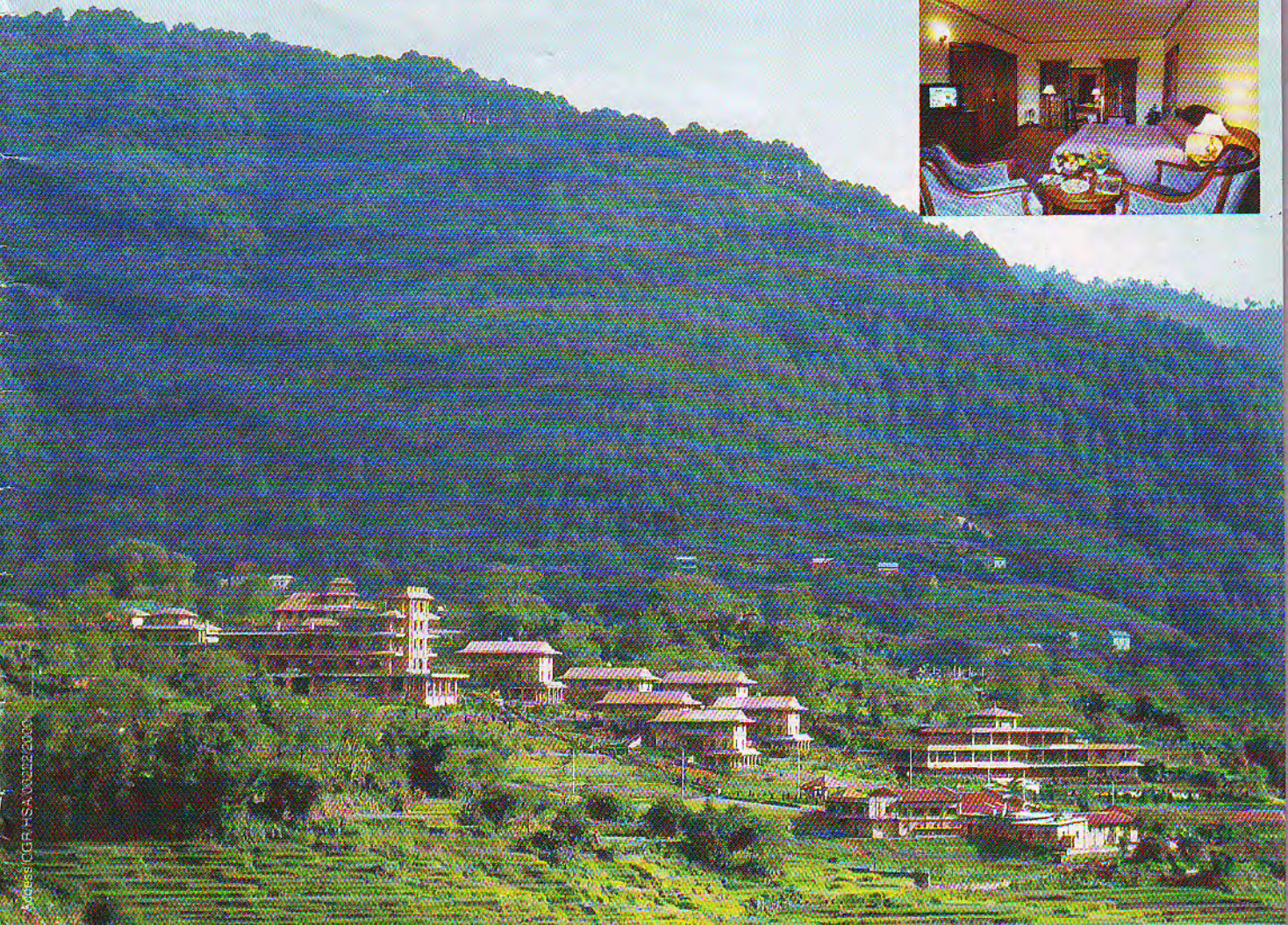
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