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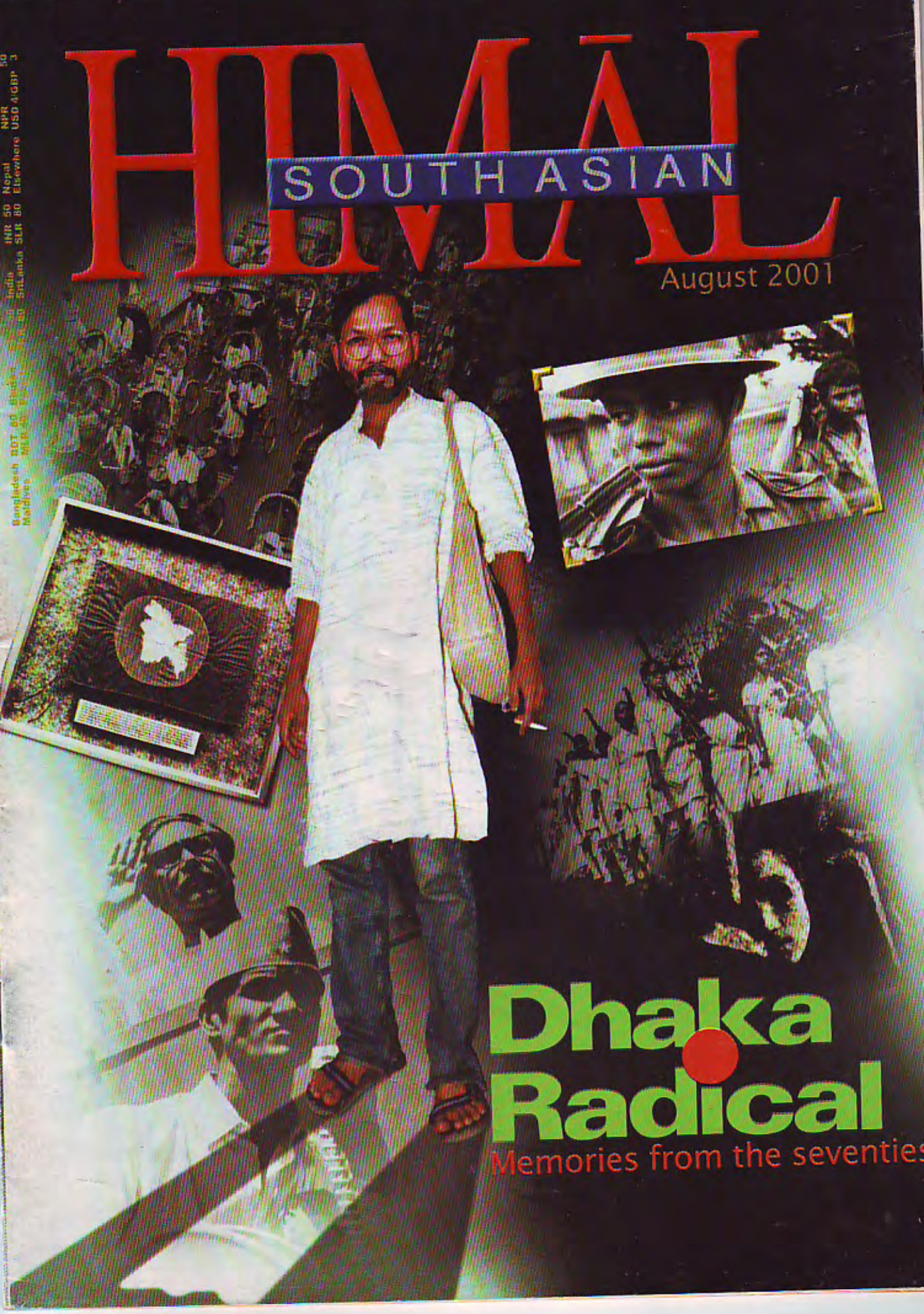

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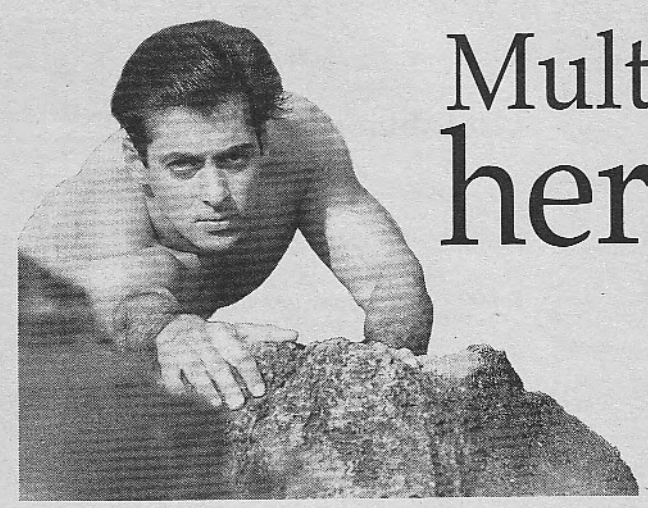

Multiplex heroes

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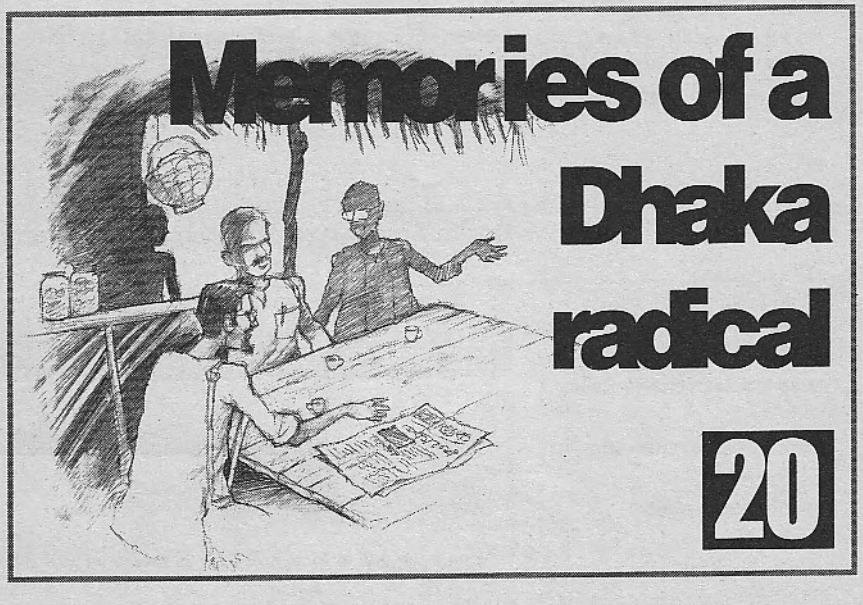

Memories of a Dhaka radical

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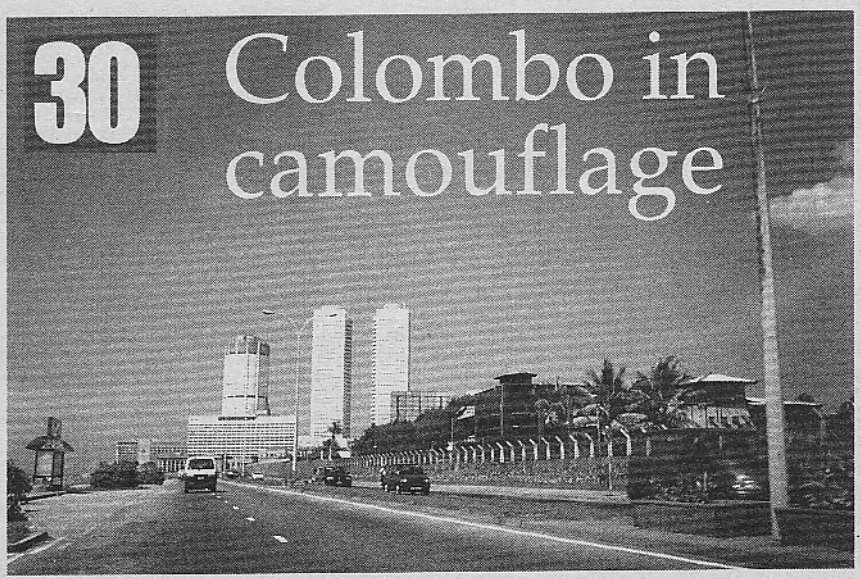

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Colombo in camouflage

HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

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Administration
Anil Shrestha
Roshan Shrestha

Marketing Office, Dhaka
Abu Shams Ahmed
Tel: +880-2-812 954
Fax: 911 5044
shams@drik.net

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Contributors to this issue

Narendra Pradhan is an architect specialising in the Himalayan region.

Ranabir Samaddar is a Calcutta academic who presently runs a peace-studies programme from Kathmandu.

Ranjit Rauniyar is a corporate executive based in New York.

Sanjoy Bagchi, from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, was executive director of the International Textiles and Clothing Bureau, Geneva.

Sasanka Perera is professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo.

Sudhanva Deshpande is an actor and director with the New Delhi-based theatre group, Jana Natya Manch, and edits for LeftWord Books.

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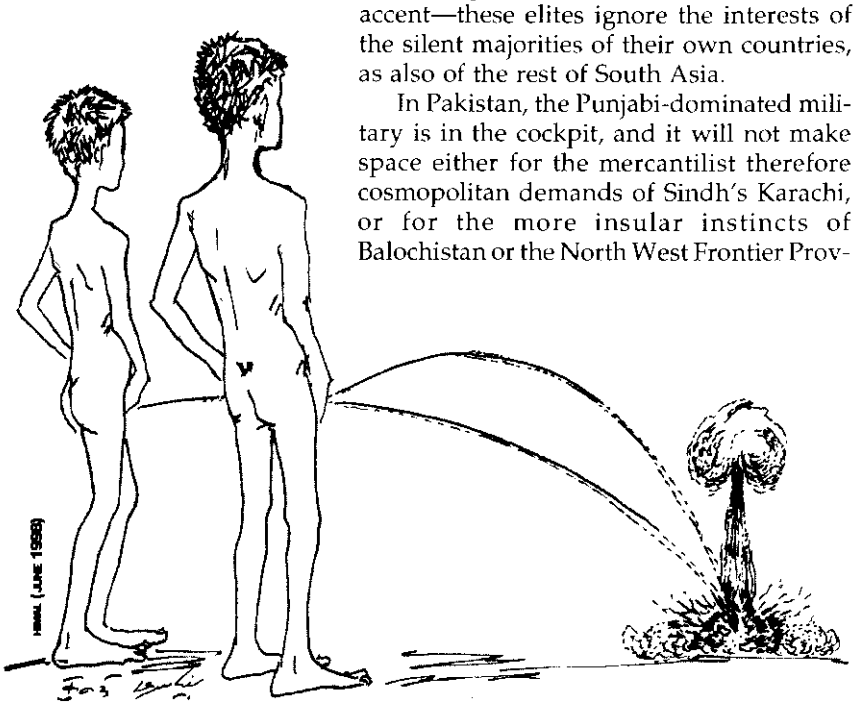
INDIA • PAKISTAN

SOUTH ASIA AND THE SUMMITEERS

WHEN THE Indian prime minister and the Pakistani generalissimo met to talk in Agra, the leaders, spin-managers and commentators on both sides forgot one critical point: that both countries are nuclear-tipped nation-states just a trigger-pull away from Subcontinental Armageddon. The failsafe mechanism hangs by a telephone hotline between the two capitals, and other than this, there is no "confidence-building measure" should there be a rapidly spiralling crisis. South Asia is a very dangerous place indeed, and de-nuclearisation might have been the right place to begin the talks.

Instead, at Pakistan's insistence, Kashmir held everything else at bay. Pervez Musharraf was unwilling to call off the *mujahid* infiltrators and Atal Behari Vajpayee would not acknowledge the militarisation that keeps the Valley sullen but subdued. As always, the Agra summit was guided by the politico-bureaucratic elite (India) and politico-military establishment (Pakistan). With similar worldviews and psycho-social upbringing—they even speak English with the identical northern accent—these elites ignore the interests of the silent majorities of their own countries, as also of the rest of South Asia.

In Pakistan, the Punjabi-dominated military is in the cockpit, and it will not make space either for the mercantilist therefore cosmopolitan demands of Sindh's Karachi, or for the more insular instincts of Balochistan or the North West Frontier Province. In India, the Delhi-centricism of the power structure speaks firstly for the Hindi belt, and it is worth considering whether there would have been more flexibility shown on Kashmir had the summit been held, say, in Calcutta or Madras rather than Agra-on-Jamuna.



Even more than Pakistan with its handful of provinces, however, India tends to forget its own physical size and demographic diversity. The powerful of New Delhi fail to realise that India's continent-sized territory and myriad identities can hardly be moulded with the American-style schlock patriotism now sold on satellite programming that everyone watches from Quetta to Kathmandu. Whereas some of the other smaller countries of South Asia may find their national unit-of-governance to be functional, India is a different cup of *chai* altogether. It is many "regions" masquerading as a "country" ruled from New Delhi centre, and the historical "Indianness" is actually a heritage of the surrounding nation-states as well.

It is the inability to accept this conception of South Asia that makes it so hard for some to accept Kashmir's semi-detached identity, that Kashmir is already deemed to be "different" by Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, or that a concession to Kashmiriat would not break up the Union. At the same time, Kashmir provides an opportunity, as the place where the 'Centre' would begin the process of genuine devolution to smaller units. This would also hold true for Pakistan as well, for it is not possible for either country to remain this tightly centralised forever, denying the cultural diversity within and the overarching linkages without. Porous borders rather than fencing and barbed wire are the only kind of frontier that will work for South Asia, to make it once again a loose cultural region with numerous internal eddies. Indeed, cultural affinity—visible in language, accent, rituals, thinking, and the very gestures and mannerisms—will overcome all kinds of religious and geo-political divides. Lahore and Amritsar will benefit from porous borders the way the comfortably powerful of Islamabad and New Delhi will find hard to concede.

There will come a time when South Asian summiteers—either at bilateral meetings or at SAARC conclaves—will realise that the Subcontinent was never meant to be this jigsaw of sharp-edged nation-states. It evolved

as a penumbra of identities extending in one continuous, but ever-changing, stretch from Balochistan to Manipur, and from Skardu to Kanyakumari. The national boundaries, the hallowed capitals and their bureaucratic paraphernalia, and a measure of central rule will of course have to remain. But within these nation-states and between them (for example the two Punjabs and the two Bengals) we must allow more give for civilisational identity. Only with the release of the cultural genius of the people will there be the regionwide social and economic surge that we have waited for in vain for over half a century.

If this nature of the South Asian historicity were better understood, there would be more flexibility in negotiations all over. Upcoming summits would see India wholeheartedly agreeing to Kashmir as a "problem" rather than an "issue", and Pakistan would be shamed into blocking the cross-border infiltration by *jehadis*. Once the negotiators accept the true shape of the South Asian future, they will find it easier to agree to disagree on Kashmir, and move on with the numerous other tasks pending.

Just for starters, they would immediately begin work on getting the Iranian gas pipeline to reach the Indian heartland via Multan. If anything can help usher peace in a stroke, it will be when Delhi households begin to get cheap piped gas, the way they do in Lahore and Dhaka. With Islamabad required to provide iron-clad guarantees for the pipeline's safety, the economic gains from the advent of Iranian gas would become the greatest incentive not to go to war over Kashmir. The economic advantage of such a bilateral thaw may not impact on the Indian economy as a whole, but consider the gains for the people of the Pakistan-proximate regions of Punjab, Haryana, Western UP and Delhi—the very repositories of distrust against Pakistan.

At their next meeting, be it in New York at the General Assembly sidelines, at the SAARC summit in Kathmandu, or in the reciprocal visit by the Indian prime minister to Islamabad, the two sides must of course agree to de-terrorise and de-militarise the Valley. At the same time, they must proceed with the work of future-building in South Asia. For example, convert the killing glaciers of Siachen into an international peace park as proposed by Bombay mountaineer Harish Kapadia, who stands by his vision even after his soldier son fell to the *jehadi*'s bullet in Kashmir last year. Or, come to an honourable agreement not to use the ISI-RAW bogey to cover up for respective inadequacies. Or, persuade cinema producers not to demonise the other country in a way that distorts one's own domestic politics. Or, most critically, begin to de-escalate their preparations for nuclear war.

As Eqbal Ahmad, the late South Asian statesman from Islamabad said not so long ago, "To become prosperous and normal peoples, we must make peace where there is hostility, build bridges where there are chasms..." These sentiments must be the guiding spirit of the diplomatic "sherpas" planning the upcoming summits, that is if they want us South Asians to emerge as "normal peoples".

SRI LANKA

SAD COUNTRY

BEAUTIFUL BUT tragic places make for good poetry. This is Ondaatje country in Colombo's Welawatte neighbourhood, where a small river meets the sea, where Pablo Neruda stayed for a while during his journey across the world as a young Chilean diplomat, and where he wrote the saddest lines. Re-reading the verse, there is a near-Latin American sense of tragic drama in Sri Lanka these days.

Flying in at midnight on one of the first few flights into Colombo after the daring airport raid of 24 July, the plane came to a stop on the taxiway and the pilot shut off the engines. Passengers rushed to the windows to look at the wreckage of dead planes outside. In the ghostly yellow light, the Airbuses looked like whales that had been slaughtered on a beach. The planes' fuselages were twisted and charred. Their broken wings were still pointing at the sky while the dismembered tail fins with their stylised peacocks had collapsed on the tarmac. The pilot came in to ask everyone to return to their seats: the plane still had to be towed to the parking slot near the terminal.

Even in a country that has been numbed by the carnage of an unending war, terrorist attacks and the murder of moderates, the airport raid was the psychological equivalent of a hard blow in the stomach. It was designed to kill hope and sustain the fatalistic rage that has kept this war going for

The world has got used to this war, so the media networks have moved to other theatres like Macedonia and Mindanao.

the past 12 years at a cost of 60,000 lives. The world has got used to this war, so the media networks have moved to other theatres like Macedonia and Mindanao. And they only take notice when dramatic footage of burning airliners can be flashed across the world. Even then, the interest dies out in a few days. In Colombo itself, within a few days of the event the headlines are back to the dissolution of parliament and the political skirmishes over President Chandrika Kumaratunga's call for a referendum.

The airport attack came in the week of the second anniversary of the assassination of the visionary Tamil politician, Neelan Tiruchelvam, by a Tiger suicide bomber on the streets of Colombo. In a tribute to Neelan, his Indian friend and colleague Ashish Nandy wrote: "War reverses the normal order of things, instead of the young burying the old, the old bury the young. Perhaps we in South Asia will have to get used to the idea of living in a state of perpetual war". The region is sinking into this heart of darkness, from Afghanistan to Kashmir, from Nepal to Tripura, and in other flashpoints of extremism across the Subcontinent. Minority rights are trampled, the underprivileged are not allowed to rise, grievances are allowed to pile up by callous and apathetic rulers. Victims, as the Indian social-psychologist Ashish Nandy says, make excellent killers. The centre does not hold, and those, like Neelan, who try to resolve conflict are eliminated one by one, often by their own people, who think restraint is treachery. Those who span ethnic, political and cultural divides, who can understand the madness of their own assassins, who show compassion for both sides, have to be eliminated because they stand against compromise and the dead-ended winner-takes-all ideology that propels these violent movements.

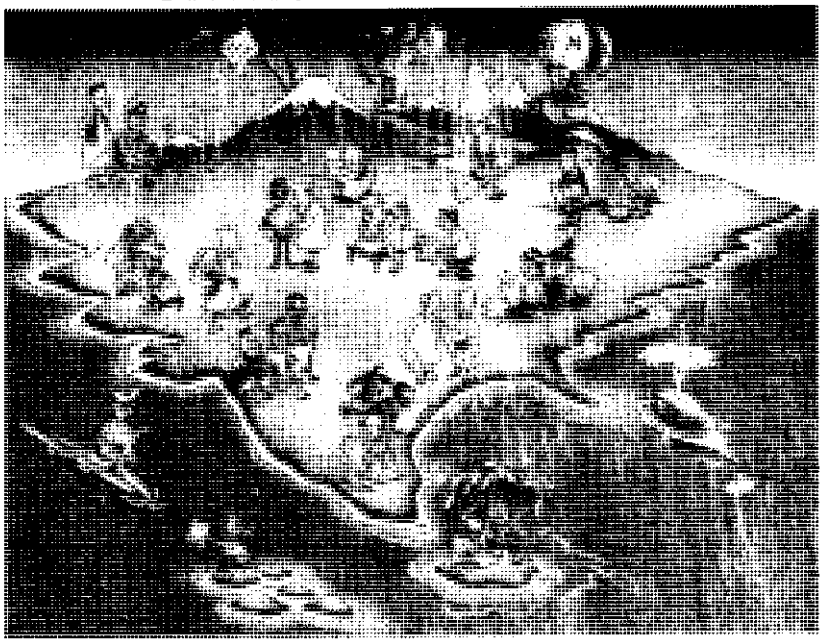
"War reverses the normal order of things, instead of the young burying the old, the old bury the young."

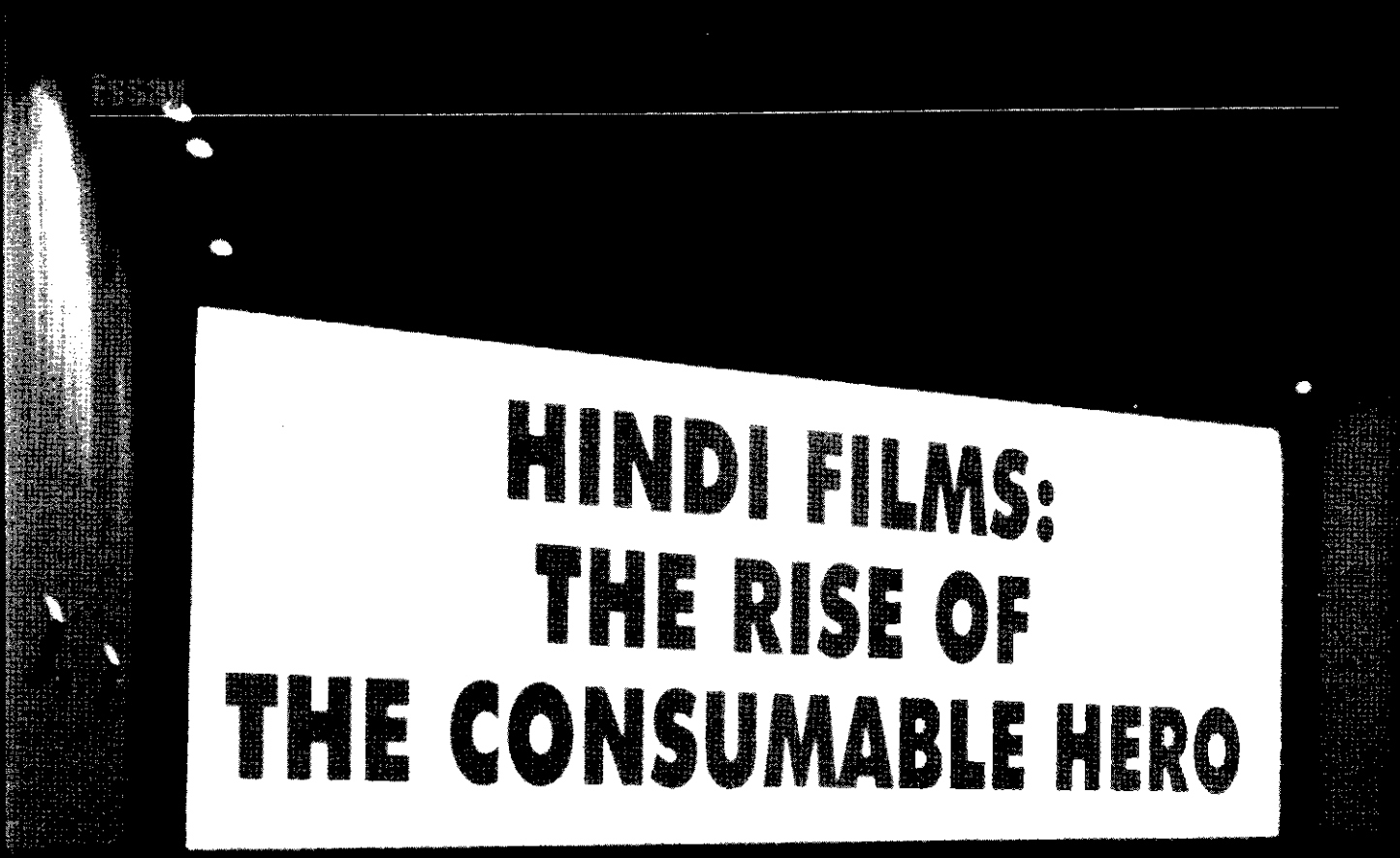
The airport attack was timed for another anniversary: the horrific anti-Tamil pogroms by organised death squads belonging to Sinhala extremist groups. These were the massacres that gave birth to this terrible war, but the real seeds were planted soon after Sri Lanka's Independence when the majority community passed successive laws to take it all. Others will go even further back to trace the origins of this conflict to the British colonial rulers' favouritism towards the minority community. Today, half-a-century later, it almost does not matter what the root cause was. There has been so much bad blood that there will be no peace as long as people look back at avenging historical wrongs. Any peace process must look to the future. The only thing to do with history is not to repeat it.

Malaysia and Singapore are two other countries in the world with sizeable Tamil minorities and similar ethno-cultural polarisations. The lesson from their success is to find strength in diversity, to respect this richness in spirit and deed, provide a level playing field for all communities—and never to let grievances pile up. And looking out at the rest of South Asia from the perspective of this tear-drop island, the moral of the story is clear: it is never too late to stop a war, but it is a much better idea to nurture and protect an existing peace. △

All this we traded for power and wealth
from the eight compass points of vengeance
from the two levels of envy Michael Ondaatje

Scene after the airport attack on 24 July.





HINDI FILMS: THE RISE OF THE CONSUMABLE HERO

The economics of Hindi cinema was turned on its head while we were not watching, and scripts, sets, locations, language, heroes and heroines are all no longer what they were. That is because the demograpic profile of the audience has changed and with it a reorientation of values which makes Bombay cinema less and less representative of the people as a whole.

by ***Sudhanva Deshpande***

The more things remain the same, the more they change. Hindi cinema is no longer what some of us grew up on. The last ten years, the decade of economic liberalisation, has transformed Hindi cinema quite thoroughly, though not beyond recognition. As a result, what seems to us to be the same old fare, merely suitably repackaged for our globalised times, is actually quite new stuff. So what has changed?

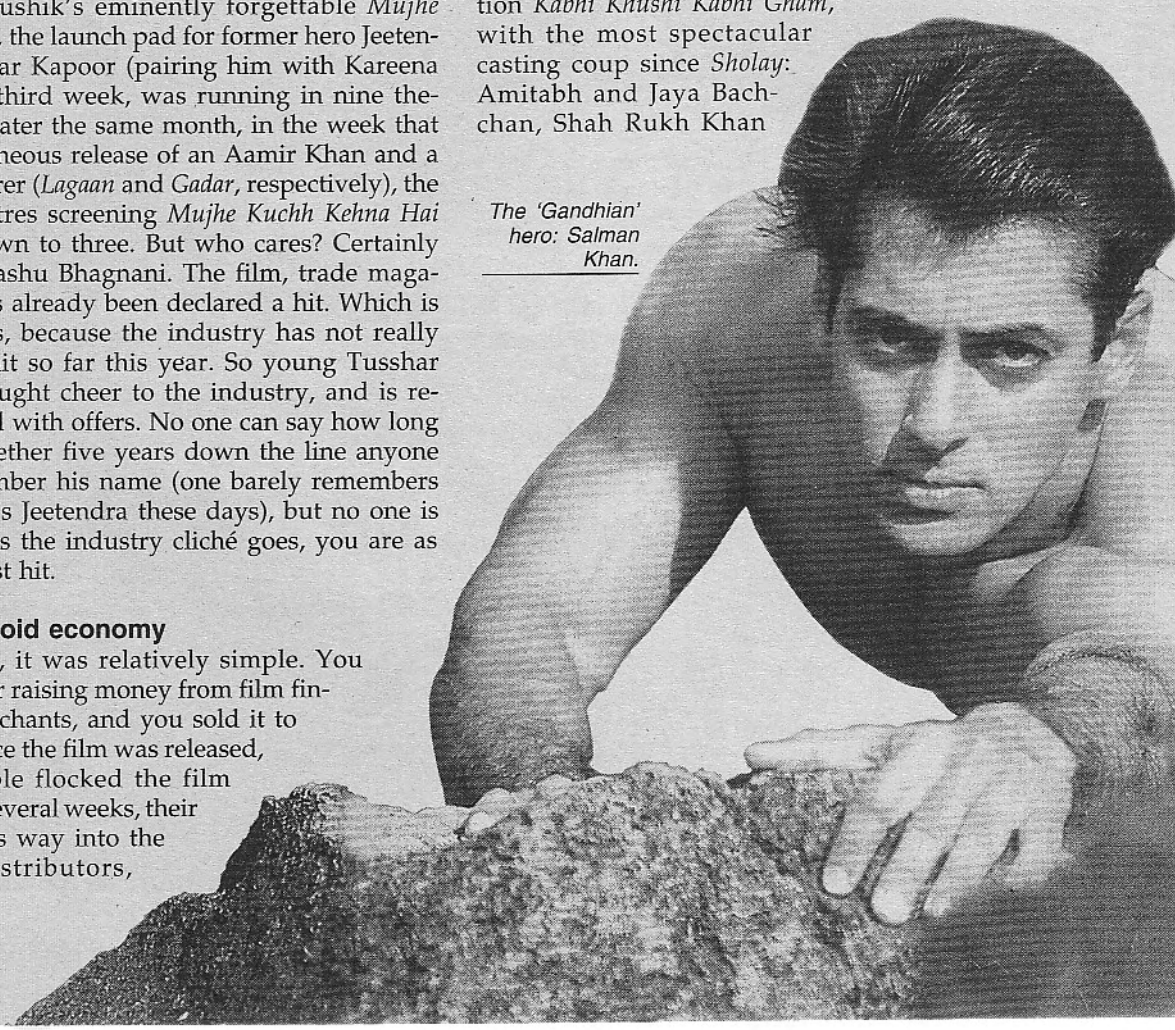
The financial foundations of the film industry, for one. Consider this: in the 1960s, Rajendra Kumar, star of films like *Mere Mehboob, Arzoo, Goonj Uthi Shehnai, Dil Ek Mandir*, etc, was called Jubilee Kumar. The legend goes that several of his films did a silver jubilee run—25 consecutive weeks—while some went on to a golden jubilee (50), and a few platinum (75). Old timers talk of films like *Awaara, Mughal-e-Azam*, or *Mother India*, all with incredible runs. About one such film, it was said the touts who sold tickets in black outside the theatres could save enough for their daughters' or sisters' dowry. That may be hyperbole, but one based on some element of truth. I remember, quite distinctly, as a boy of eight or 10, when I saw *Sholay* for the first time, the film was already in its 23rd week, and was simultaneously running in half a dozen or more theatres in Bombay.

You do not get those sorts of runs any more. Now, posters are put out to celebrate a film's run of 100 *days*. That is just two days over 14 weeks. In fact, in June this year, Satish Kaushik's eminently forgettable *Mujhe Kuchh Kehna Hai*, the launch pad for former hero Jeetendra's son Tusshar Kapoor (pairing him with Kareena Kapoor), in its third week, was running in nine theatres in Delhi. Later the same month, in the week that saw the simultaneous release of an Aamir Khan and a Sunny Deol starrer (*Lagaan* and *Gadar*, respectively), the number of theatres screening *Mujhe Kuchh Kehna Hai* was already down to three. But who cares? Certainly not producer Vashu Bhagnani. The film, trade magazines tell us, has already been declared a hit. Which is very good news, because the industry has not really seen a proper hit so far this year. So young Tusshar Kapoor has brought cheer to the industry, and is reportedly flooded with offers. No one can say how long he will last, whether five years down the line anyone will even remember his name (one barely remembers even yesteryear's Jeetendra these days), but no one is asking either. As the industry cliché goes, you are as good as your last hit.

The new celluloid economy

In the old days, it was relatively simple. You made a film after raising money from film financiers and merchants, and you sold it to distributors. Once the film was released, masses of people flocked the film halls, and over several weeks, their money found its way into the pockets of distributors, producers, and sundry other elements. Or it did not, and led to lost empires, nervous breakdowns, alcoholism, even suicides. The financially disastrous performance of *Kagaz ke Phool* reportedly drove Guru Dutt to suicide. The essential point, however, is that the success or failure of a film was directly dependent upon how many people bought tickets in cinema halls. In other words, numbers mattered.

Numbers still matter, of course. But not of people who buy tickets. You can, and do, have films that would have been considered flops by earlier yardsticks, actually raking in profits, sometimes of huge magnitude. Or even more bizarrely, films today can start making profits even before the shooting begins. Here are some examples. J.P. Dutta's *Refugee*, which launched star kids Abhishek Bachchan and Kareena Kapoor, reportedly grossed much less through ticket sales in India than the 90 million Indian rupees that went into its making. Dutta was unruffled. He bundled the film with his earlier hit *Border*, and sold their telecast rights for INR 100 million. Or take super-showman Subhash Ghai's forthcoming *Yaadein*, with the hottest young stars going, Hrithik Roshan and Kareena Kapoor. The film, long before its release, is reported to have grossed upwards of INR 200 million. Ghai is also said to have sold limited telecast rights for eight of his earlier films and earned a cool INR 140 million in the bargain. Even more amazing is the case with Karan Johar's still-under-production *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, with the most spectacular casting coup since *Sholay*: Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan



The 'Gandhian' hero: Salman Khan.

and Kajol, Hrithik Roshan and (you guessed it) Kareena Kapoor. The film, through the sale of its music rights, overseas distribution rights, and telecast rights, had mopped up a staggering Rs 35 crore even before a single shot was canned.

The equations have changed dramatically. According to producer Tutu Sharma, the overseas distribution rights for a big budget film are roughly *double* that for the largest Indian 'territory', Bombay. In other words, if a distributor forks out INR 35 million to buy the rights for the Bombay territory, he will pay about INR 70 million for the overseas market. In a case like this, the price for all-India rights (including Bombay) will be about 120 million; that is, the financial returns to the producer from distribution in an overseas market of about 20 million people is roughly 60 percent of the volume realised from distribution in the entire Indian market of one billion people. Just music rights alone are big business. Yash Chopra sold the music rights of his son's *Mohabattein* to HMV for INR 75 million, while Sanjay Leela Bhansali has given his *Devdas*, which is still under production, to Universal for INR 95 million. It was not always so. In the mid-1990s, music rights of a big film could be had for a mere INR 10 million. Today, there are the additional revenues to be had from the sale of DVD and telecast rights.

Then there is the more recent trend of selling advertising space in the movie. Remember Daler Mehndi and Amitabh Bachchan dancing in front of Liberty shoes billboard in the latter's comeback flop *Mrityudaata*? The logic of corporate sponsorship for films was taken to a new level a few years later by Shah Rukh Khan. When Dreamz Unlimited (a company he floated along with Juhi Chawla and Azeez Mirza) produced *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (with the first two starring and the third directing), the company raised a fair amount of money from corporations, which in the bargain got entire scenes devoted to their products. So Shah Rukh Khan woos Juhi Chawla in front of a Swatch kiosk and drives around in a Santro car, and so on. This takeover of space by corporations is called 'synergy' between industry and entertainment. While such synergy is still in fairly

Benegal's Zubeida, *and her bigamous hero.*

low key compared to Hollywood, where entire films have been produced by corporations (*You've Got Mail* is a recent example), it seems set to grow in Bombay.

Aggregate the revenues from all these sources and the returns from the domestic viewing public (which we always think of as the primary market) as a proportion of total revenues shrink pretty drastically. According to one estimate, only about 35 percent of the revenue earned by a film is from the sale of tickets in the domestic market. Little wonder that producers are buoyant. "Raising money is not an issue any more," exults Subhash Ghai. The CEO of Reliance Entertainment is even more forthright: "We are talking big money. Traditional cinema is in its terminal stage".

What is big only gets bigger. Arthur Andersen's study on the entertainment industry commissioned by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry comes up with figures sure to gladden the hearts of those with stakes in the film business. The study cites a figure of INR 13 billion for the total yearly business conducted by the film industry in 2000, which is expected to grow to 40 billion by 2005. Ghai's figures are even more dramatic: INR 60 billion in 1999, which will go up to 330 billion by 2003.

The chavanni audience

If you thought that the money dished out by the rickshaw puller, the industrial worker, the vegetable vendor, the domestic servant, the urban unemployed, is what accounts for the turnover of the Hindi film industry, you could not be more wrong. "What matters today are 'A' grade centres—about 15–20 big cities—and the overseas centres," points out director Azeez Mirza. "Who cares about the rest? Even Pune is now a 'B' grade centre. When the overseas centres gross 15–16 crores (150-160 million), why would a town like Bathinda be important? The time is past when people made films for the *chavanni* (25 paise) audience." Hindi cinema is funded today in overwhelmingly large proportions by the rich, whether in India or abroad.

The rise of multiplexes is part of this development. Multiplexes have numerous benefits for the few: exhibitors and distributors earn more per film because of higher ticket prices; by breaking the one-film-per-week model, and shuffling the number and timings of shows of particular films, investment is made to yield the highest possible revenue; a certain kind of niche film (such as *Hyderabad Blues*) now becomes commercially viable; by exhibiting six or seven films per week, the chances of a flop resulting in a big loss to individual exhibitors is minimised; and socially, by targetting and catering to a niche audience, the multiplex becomes an extension of the home theatre, where the rich can watch films in the company of their own class.

This pattern of financing leaves its imprint on the content of the film. Ghai, whose *Pardes* was a big hit abroad, plans to premiere *Yaadein* in London: "*Yaadein* targets an NRI audience and as the film is about NRIs in London, they'll be able to connect [with it] better". In other words, the gracious people who wear Nike sneakers, sip Coke, and stay connected via trendy cell phones and smart PCs, are the very people who consume Hrithik Roshan and Kareena Kapoor. Or, to rephrase it: the consumers who matter are the gracious people; the rest of us are voyeurs.

It is a party of the rich, and we are invited to watch, from a distance. The trajectory of these big-budget, high-profile, large-revenue films aimed at the hyper-consumerist audience is very different from that of the more modest productions, made by the residual segment of the industry, which are geared towards a "lesser audience" with limited disposable incomes. The Hindi film industry has never been one homogeneous entity, with 'A' grade, 'B' grade, 'C' grade, and even 'D' grade films, each category having its own class defined market, and hence its own aesthetic assumptions—or to put it the other way, the varying degrees of the lack of aesthetics in all these follow from somewhat different commercial compulsions.

One way to capture this difference is to chart the career of Mithun Chakraborty. He started out with director Mrinal Sen (*Mrigaya*), and then came to Bombay. Here, he became a star with a large following among the lower middle class and the urban poor. This was in the 1980s, when he had assumed a screen persona that was a mix of Amitabh Bachchan, James Bond and John Travolta. In the late 1980s he starred in a few Amitabh Bachchan films as well (*Agnipath, Ganga Jamuna Saraswati*). By now, however, his days of glory were over, or so everyone thought. Mithun Chakraborty thought otherwise, and all through the early to mid-1990s, he became more prolific than ever. Between 1990 and 1995, he starred in at least 51 films—8.5 films a year, or a film every 42 days! None of these, however, was a hit in the way we know it. But even today he is among the more prolific heroes going.

Without a single hit, how has Mithun Chakraborty managed to get so many films over so long a period? Very simply, he shifted to Ooty, and built a hotel in the southern hillstation. So, if you are a producer, you go to Ooty, stay with your crew in his hotel at concessional rates, shoot a film with him and an aspiring or failed starlet, finish shooting in three weeks, do post-production in Bombay over the next fortnight or so, and inside two months, a film is ready with six songs, fight sequences, one rape, fiery dialogues, and a weepy mother. Release the film in the less classy theatres in the big cities and in smaller centres like Patna, Indore, Benaras and Bathinda. The actor's loyal front-stall fan following will ensure a decent run for a couple of weeks. Low investment, short gestation, moderate returns, and guaranteed break-even is what it is all about.

In a sense, Mithun Chakraborty is the most popular star of the 1990s, more popular than the big B, the three Khans, Sanjay Dutt, Sunny Deol, Govinda, Akshay Kumar, or anyone else. The combined audience of all

Mithun films would outstrip the viewership commanded by any one of the others. And lest one appear disparaging, let it also be said that, on average, Mithun Chakraborty does one non-commercial film a year. One such, Budhadev Dasgupta's *Tahader Katha*, won him the National Award for acting in 1992.

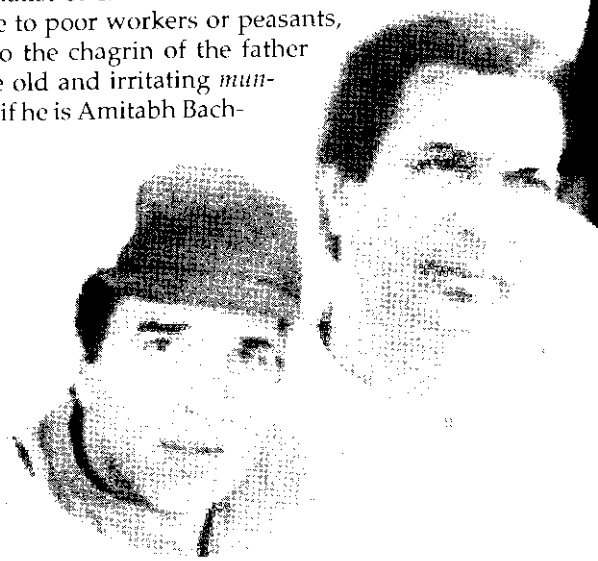
Punjabi class

Economics behind us, it is possible now to offer a few stray observations, not necessarily tied together with the string of theory, on the new hero of contemporary films. For those of us who grew up in the 1970s and 80s, the natural, though not exclusive, point of reference in a comparative exercise are the films of those decades. And, to the extent that Amitabh Bachchan dominated those decades, his towering angry-young-man presence is the one which naturally comes to mind as the contrast to the new 'consumable' hero who has taken over.

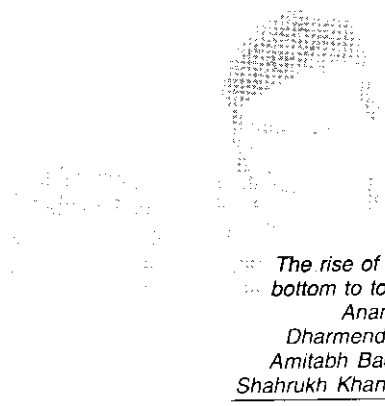
Typically, this new hero in the Hindi film tends to be Punjabi, rich and conformist. It was not so earlier. Erstwhile heroes were rarely given an explicit regional and linguistic affiliation. Even if the actors were not all Hindu, their roles were implicitly so, and one could guess that they were not Dalit, but beyond that the film did not tell you much. Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar, Rajendra Kumar, Dharmendra, they all spent a lifetime playing characters who got introduced, a trifle ludicrously, as 'Mr Amar', or 'Mr Anand', or 'Mr Raj'. Even Amitabh Bachchan was normally just Vijay, or, if he was a UP kayasth, then perhaps he would be Vijay Kumar Shrivastava. But this fact was never really stressed. True, in some films he played the Muslim, or at least carried a Muslim name: *Mukkadar ka Sikandar* and *Coolie* spring to mind. His famous Christian role is of course the appealing street-smart guy in *Amar Akbar Anthony*. Carrying the logic of this hit further, Manmohan Desai, in *Naseeb*, gave him simultaneously three names, Hindu, Muslim, Christian: John Jaani Janardan. But the context in such cases is clearly benign.

No more. The 'Rahuls' and 'Prems' of the 1990s are very much Malhotra and Khanna, and the Anjalis and the Simrans they fall for are Oberoi and Grewal. Earlier heroes were either poor and had the rich girl fall for them—*Lawaaris*—or were rich and fell for the poor girl—*Sharabi*. Or, sometimes, they were poor, and unsuccessfully coveted the rich girl—*Mukkadar ka Sikandar*. In any case, usually there was a threat—or promise, depending on how you look at it—of violating or transgressing social and economic boundaries. Not that such boundaries were really transgressed. Far from it. A variety of tricks were devised for this purpose. Either the hero just died, as in *Mukkadar ka Sikandar*, or it was revealed (to the hero, that is; the audience knew all along) that he is in fact the long-lost son of a rich man, as in *Lawaaris*. This made matters simple—through the film, you could have the poor hero mouthing populist rhetoric against wealth, and in the end, when it really mattered, he ended up with oodles of it.

Even when the hero was not poor himself, he needed to identify with the poor in a variety of ways. There are several films of earlier times (particularly of the 1950s and 1960s) where the hero is a qualified professional, an engineer or a doctor, who fights, or at least speaks, for the poor. Or if he is rich, then he often has a poor friend who he looks upon as a brother. Sometimes, he is the son of a rich industrialist or landlord who doles out largesse to poor workers or peasants, much to the chagrin of the father and the old and irritating *munshi*. Or, if he is Amitabh Bachchan, he realises utopia by simply leading the poor into the rich man's house and asking them to occupy it—*Lawaaris* and *Coolie*.

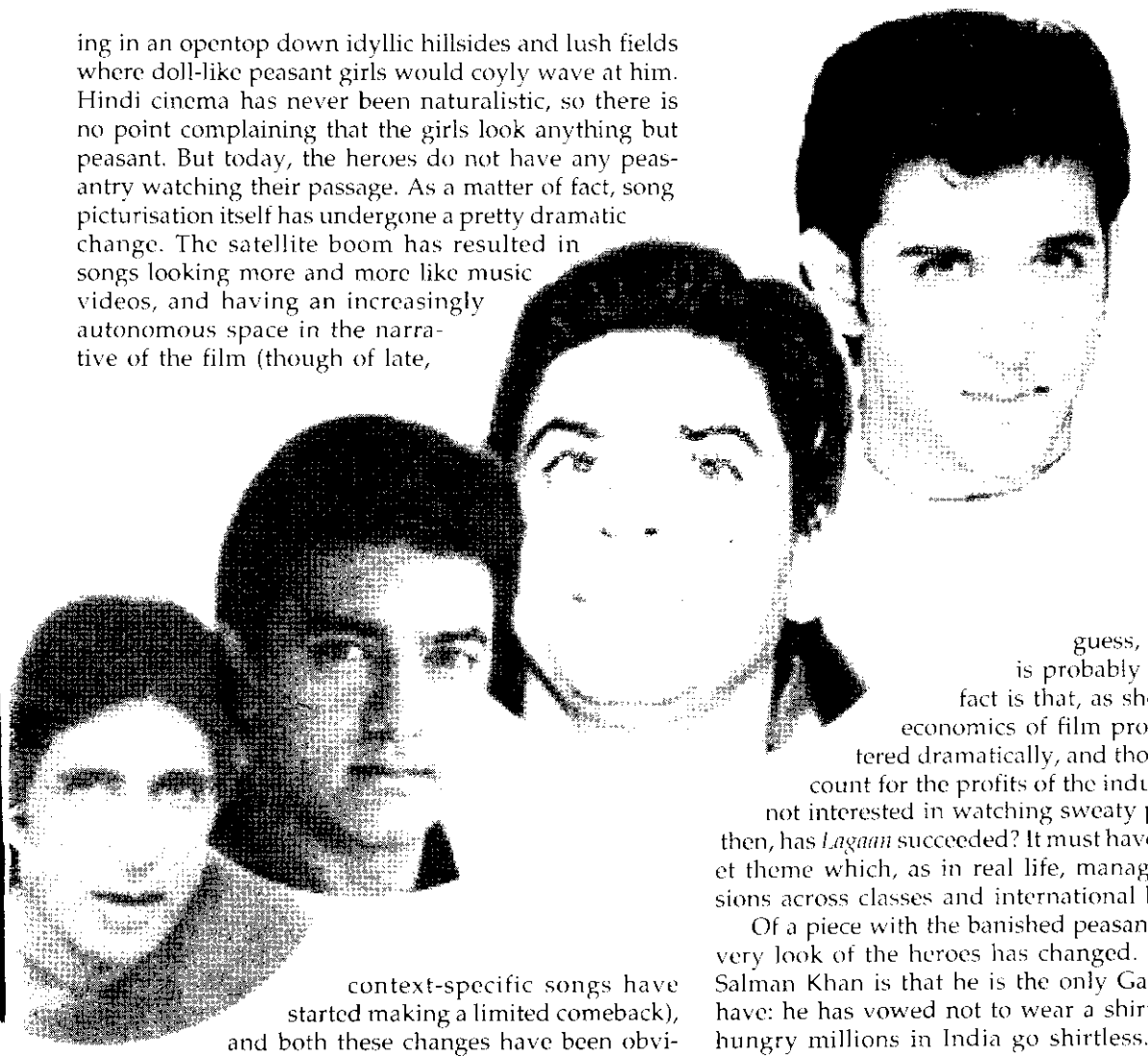


This need to identify with the masses was most endearingly encapsulated in a now-extinct convention of the Hindi film: the male solo number early in the film which introduced the hero. Typically, the song would establish the hero as a hopeless romantic, on the lookout for the right one to give his heart to, and one would see a Shammi Kapoor or a Rajesh Khanna driv-



The rise of the new hero. From bottom to top: Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Shammi Kapoor, Dharmendra, Rajesh Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan, Amir Khan, Shahrukh Khan and Hritik Roshan.

ing in an opentop down idyllic hillsides and lush fields where doll-like peasant girls would coyly wave at him. Hindi cinema has never been naturalistic, so there is no point complaining that the girls look anything but peasant. But today, the heroes do not have any peasantry watching their passage. As a matter of fact, song picturisation itself has undergone a pretty dramatic change. The satellite boom has resulted in songs looking more and more like music videos, and having an increasingly autonomous space in the narrative of the film (though of late, context-specific songs have started making a limited comeback), and both these changes have been obvious to most film-goers.



But along with these, another, less noted change has taken place. Of the films from an earlier time, from *Ramaiya Vasta Vaiya* to *Khaike Paan Banaras Wallah*, anybody would be able to come up with a ready list of hit songs that have rural or urban labouring classes dancing and singing with the hero(ine). Of the films of the 1990s, you will notice that films have banished labouring classes from song picturisations altogether. Forget about the rich boy teeny-bopper romance films of Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan, this is even true of Aamir Khan films like *Rangeela*, *Ghulam* and *Raja Hindustani*, where he plays the poor boy. The exception has perhaps been Govinda, the only truly comic hero since Kishore Kumar: in *Coolie No. 1*, he is, well, a coolie. But after the delightful *Dulhe Raja*, where he is the intransigent youth who refuses to move his roadside *dhaba* from in front of Kader Khan's five-star hotel, even Govinda seems to have pretty much shed his proletarian image.

This is why Aamir Khan's home production, *Lagaan*, is so refreshing. But does the film mark the return of the peasant to the Hindi screen? It is difficult to hazard a guess, but the answer is probably no. The simple fact is that, as shown above, the economics of film production has altered dramatically, and those who now account for the profits of the industry are simply not interested in watching sweaty peasantry. Why then, has *Lagaan* succeeded? It must have been the cricket theme which, as in real life, manage to unite passions across classes and international borders.

Of a piece with the banished peasant is the way the very look of the heroes has changed. The joke about Salman Khan is that he is the only Gandhian star we have: he has vowed not to wear a shirt so long as the hungry millions in India go shirtless. Indian heroes have not had physiques like his. Remember Dilip Kumar, Shammi Kapoor, or Rajesh Khanna? Or even angry young man Amitabh Bachchan? You had to be a real washout, like Dara Singh, if you had to survive by showing off your muscles. No more. If Jackie Shroff and Sunny Deol compensated for their limited acting talent with macho looks in the 1980s, Sanjay Dutt discarded drugs and his mother's delicate looks to reinvent himself as a hunk in the early 1990s. Just in time, too. For the 1990s was the decade of the biceps—Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, Sunil Shetty, Akshay Khanna and the many others who came and went. Even Aamir Khan, the best *actor* amongst the 90s stars, has a good enough physique to look a convincing small-time boxer in *Ghulam*.

The exceptions to this macho brigade, of course, are Shah Rukh Khan and Govinda, the one wiry and the other, thank god, paunchy. But even they are feeling the pressure, and in films like *Duplicate* and *Badshah*, Shah Rukh Khan shows more muscle than one thought he had. And the new century has brought forth Hrithik Roshan, with a physique so perfect it seems plastic.


Rich man's theatre: a multiplex in New Delhi.

Welcome to the age of the consumable hero who does what Helen did earlier—he dances like a dream, and his body itself, rather than his persona, is the object of consumption, much to the delight of the advertising world. It is only fitting, then, that this new, consumable hero wears Gap shirts and Nike sneakers, and when he dances, it is in front of McDonald's outlets in white man's land, or Hollywood studios, or swanky trains, and has white girls dancing with him.

Much, then, has changed. Some of it has been noted and commented upon, such as the celebration of the Hindu undivided family. *Hum Apke Hain Kaun (HAHK)* is of course the best and the most analysed example. Anyone who has been watching films in the second half of the 1990s will have become impatient with those countless marriage sequences full of suited and turbaned men, and heavily bejewelled and made-up women, not to mention the mandatory *karva chauth* sequence. But the point of the formula that *HAHK* put in place went beyond mere repetition of marriage sequences and songs. It was almost as if the family—often expatriate—*becomes* a family only through the observance of ritual. And once filmmakers ran out of ritual from the real world, they began inventing their own. A recent example is the Abhishek Bachchan–Aishwarya Rai film *Dhai Akshar Prem Ka*. The hero, mistakenly assumed to be the heroine's husband by her family (and why neither of them speaks up to dispel this confusion is not considered necessary to discuss) is made to go through the ritual of being turbaned while a priest chants incoherently. This ritual, which takes place sometime after their presumed marriage, marks his entry into the family. No sociologist and other experts approached by this writer have been able to identify such a ritual anywhere in India.

While the various evolutionary trends in Hindi films are merely the interesting upshot of audience demography, the increasing 'communalisation' of the Hindi film is a dangerous new direction that has been taken. The most obvious index of this is the change in the depiction of the Muslim: from being the hero's friend, the Muslim metamorphosised in the late 1980s and early 90s, to serve as the villain in an increasing number of productions. This happened, of course, as the Ram Janambhoomi movement gathered strength, and the Shiv Sena became stronger not just in the city of Bombay, but also in the film industry. *Tezaab* (famous for the scintillating *Ek do teen* number by Madhuri Dixit) was an early film that depicted the Muslim as villain. Since then, there have been many. In *Ghatak*, Sunny Deol, a Brahman from Benaras, appropriately named Kashi, takes on and defeats a very Muslim-looking villain and his many brothers. *Shool* has a Thakur-Brahmin alliance taking on a Muslim-Dalit combine in small town Bihar. *Pukar*, a jingoistic film made right after Kargil, plays on the easy association of Muslim with Pakistan, and thus got for its hero, Anil Kapoor, the National Award for acting conferred by a jury which included the editor of *Panchajanya*, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh mouthpiece. *Gadar*, currently running to packed houses all over India, uses the backdrop of the Subcontinent's partition to say some very vicious things about Muslims.

All these are important developments, and need careful study and analysis because of the sheer power of the Hindi movie on the elites and masses of South Asia. However, there are two other maters that stand out, which have escaped critical and political attention. One is how the new hero has redefined the meaning of the love triangle, and the other is that for the first time in Hindi cinema, the hero is someone without a past, and consequently without a memory. The first is essentially a matter of plot whereas the latter is rife with social connotations.

The new love triangle

The love triangle is the classic formula, with countless variations. At its most basic, however, the triangle traditionally had either one man and two women (*Devdas*), or two men and one woman (*Sangam*). The history of the love triangle is so dense with associations and allusions, that it tends to be rather complex. The first sort of triangle, the *Devdas* model if you will, is basically a story of the feudal aristocracy's inability to cope with the transition to capitalism. The two women, then, represent the unattainable aspirations of this class contrasted with its sordid and decadent reality. *Devdas* was made into at least two very famous versions: one by P.C. Barua in Bangla (starring himself) and one in Hindi (starring K.L. Saigal) in 1935. The latter version was remade by Barua's former assistant Bimal Roy (starring Dilip Kumar) in 1955. Apart from the Hindi/Bangla versions, there was a silent one in 1928, and two in Telugu (1953, 1974). Currently, there is another version being shot by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, starring Shah Rukh

Khan. Clearly the novel as well as the film (Barua's version, of course) have became a reference point of nearly mythological proportions, and this surely has something to do with it capturing the drama and the pathos of this great social transformation that destroyed the future of the feudal aristocracy. On the other hand, the other kind of triangle is far less interesting: at best, it represents a romance between two men (with or without homoerotic allusions) interrupted by a woman.

The love triangle of the 1990s and later, however, follows neither of these models. Think of some of the scenarios:

Girl 1 is in love with Boy, but Boy loves Girl 2, who loves him in return. They marry, have a child, and Girl 2 dies, but not before realising that Boy was actually made for Girl 1. So the spirit of Girl 2, using the child as mediator between the worlds of the dead and the living, brings about union of Boy and Girl 1. (Shah Rukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee, Kajol in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai.*)

Boy and Girl 1 are married, though not happily, because Girl 1 nags him incessantly about their lack of wealth. Girl 2, fabulously rich, makes the indecent proposal: husband in exchange for wealth. Girl 1 accepts. With wealth, Girl 1 becomes ever more insufferable, but Girl 2 turns *sati savitri*. In the end, though, the sanctity of the marriage is maintained, and Girl 2 walks away carrying Boy's baby in her womb. (Anil Kapoor, Sridevi, Urmila Matondkar in *Judaai.*)

Small-town hero Mithun and (above) a small-town theatre.

Boy and Girl 1 are married, happily this time, and have much cash as well. But Girl 1 suffers an accident during pregnancy, loses the child, and cannot conceive again. The couple and the extended family are desperate for a child, so adoption is suggested by the Boy, but ruled out by Girl 1. She forces him, instead, to look for Girl 2, who will bear his child. They live together as a happy threesome during pregnancy, and even though Girl 2 for a while contemplates not giving up the child, eventually she goes away with a beatific halo, leaving baby and cash behind. (Salman Khan, Rani Mukherjee, Preity Zinta in *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke.*)

Boy and Girl 1 meet in New Zealand, fall in love, but become separated. Boy comes back to India, saves (abandoned) pregnant Girl 2 from committing suicide. He agrees to masquerade as her husband in front of her family, but Girl 2 turns out to be Girl 1's sister. So Boy lives in their house, pretending to be Girl 2's husband, but loving Girl 1. Does it matter how it ends? (Govinda, Urmila Matondkar, Naghma in *Kunwara*)

An interesting case is Shyam Benegal's recent film *Zubeida*, in which Karisma Kapoor plays a divorced woman who marries a prince (Manoj Bajpai), who already has a wife (Rekha). While the film dwells on Zubeida's emotional insecurities in this triangular relationship, it does not condemn bigamy *per se*. Even more surprising is the nostalgic, almost heroic, treatment of the prince. This, from the maker of *Bhumika*, a film which was a radical departure in the late 1970s for its depiction of the independent woman.

How is this version of the triangle very different from earlier ones? Well, what you have now is two women wanting one man—and he gets them both! This development is basically a post-*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* phenomenon. *HAHK* is the landmark film which, by playing out the desires of unbridled consumerism, ritualism, and religiosity through the fantasy of the contradiction-free Hindu undivided family, became a massive blockbuster.

HAHK's formula was picked up with lightning speed by the industry, and a whole avalanche of feel-good happy family films followed. Film scholars and sociologists have showered attention on *HAHK*, but an unremarked fact is that at precisely the time that the new hero was becoming conformist and seemingly upholding family values, he was also turning bigamous! The consumerism of the new hero extends as much to the sexual realm as it does to the economic.

'Angry' no more

The other question, that of history and memory, is more complex. Manmohan Desai was the original postmodernist Bombay director, with a thorough (and often delightful) contempt for logic and meaning. He made a

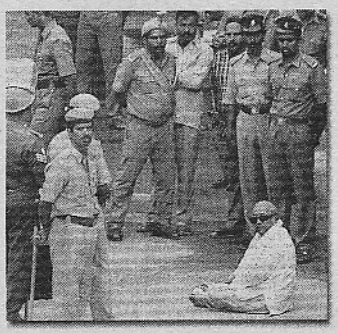
fortune by casting Amitabh Bachchan in lost-and-found potboilers: *Amar Akbar Anthony, Parvarish, Suhaag, Naseeb, Mard.* It is tempting to think that the brothers-separated-at-birth theme was in some ways perhaps a subconscious response to the trauma of a nation partitioned at birth. What is interesting is that this particular formula has completely disappeared from Hindi films of the 90s. It is not clear why this has happened, but what is certain is that the hero's past itself has disappeared, and there is no memory. This may seem like a baffling disappearance. Because in the past memory had always been memory which has driven the Hindi film hero to aggrandisement, revenge, vigilantism, crime, murder, or all of the above. The examples are many and well-known; so let us just stick to Amitabh Bachchan. If one were to ask what makes the angry young man angry, the answer will surely be memory: the memory of his parents' murder in *Zanjeer;* of his being an illegitimate child in *Trishul* and *Lawaaris;* of his childhood sweetheart in *Mukkadar ka Sikandar;* of his own betrayal under trying circumstances in *Kaala Patthar;* and, most famously, of his being branded as a thief's son in *Deewar.* Memory, after all, was what gave that high voltage intensity to the stunning screen persona of Amitabh Bachchan.

Think now of the Rahuls and the Prems of today's Hindi films. One of the things that is immediately striking is of course that these young men are no longer 'angry'. Forget about being moved by social injustice, they do not even run away with their beloved in the face of parental opposition. On the contrary, like the hero of *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge,* they celebrate their conformism as valour. But more striking still is the fact that they do not have childhoods any longer. Recall the films that have defined the consumable hero: *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge, Kuchh Kuchh Hota Hai, Dil to Pagal Hai, Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, Pardes, Kaho Na Pyar Hai,* etc. In all these films, you never see the hero's past, his childhood, the circumstances of his birth and upbringing.

The consumable hero is the creation of the liberalised market. To the extent that liberalisation itself is a relatively recent phenomenon, having been set in place exactly a decade ago, in 1991, the consumable hero has no history. His class acquired high disposable incomes, a jet-setting lifestyle, shopping holidays overseas, and the rest of the works, only from the mid-1990s or so. He has no history so he has no memory. Or rather, he has no history that *he* cares to recall. A generation before liberalisation, his father was solidly middle class, the type Amol Palekar excelled at playing in Basu Chatterjee films. This is a past the new liberalised yuppie, whether in India or abroad, disdains rather intensely.

One can imagine that there exists a strong connection between the bigamous consumable hero with neither memory and anger, liberalisation and the rise of new markets (NRIs, DVD sales, telecast rights, merchandising), and the celebration of family values and ritual. The average NRI (non-resident Indian) carries a great nostalgia for an imagined home that is governed by familiar and secure family ties and ritual observances that emphasise as well as enforce those ties. In having to cope with a system that grants greater prosperity while taking away family ties, servants, grandma-babysitters, the servile office-boy, and all the other cushy paraphernalia of middle class life in India, the NRI starts treasuring that imagination, embellishing it to the point where it becomes totally fetishised. With the rise in the NRI population (and their ability to pay hard currency, which grows by a factor of 50 when converted to the Indian rupee), Hindi cinema has become an active manufacturer of such fetishes.

The Bollywood scriptwriter Javed Akhtar has somewhere likened Hindi cinema to a state of India, whose language is not the language of India, but different, yet not alien. Indians understood that language, and understood that culture. In the last decade, however, much has changed. That state called Hindi cinema is seceding, and it has already started speaking a language that seems more and more alien. The party of the rich shows no signs of winding up; on the contrary, as it swings with greater abandon, the keyhole of our voyeurism gets only narrower. No happy endings here. ▷



THE TERRIBLE Amma Jayalalithaa (note the additional vowel at the tail, courtesy astrologer advice) has gone ahead and done it. Descending to the level of crass revenge, she got her nemesis, Karunanidhi, literally dragged to the prison. But what she did not count on was the power of electronic media. A crew from the ex-Tamil Nadu chief minister's SUN TV was there on the spot to capture the humiliation meted out to the boss. Amma was forced to back out and release Karunanidhi. Oh, the power of media, to be able to force the dragon lady of the south to back down! (Picture: Karunanidhi squatting in protest inside the Madras Central Prison.)

■

GEORGE BUSH'S foreign policy team is rather CIA-ridden, not least of whom is Christina Rocca, the new assistant secretary of state for South Asia who swung by India, Nepal and Pakistan. The lady has been a career officer within the CIA, although that was not stated in the media handouts. She is even said to have performed clandestine operations for the Directorate of Intelligence, one of the four units of the CIA. But when the lady came over, mum was the word in much of the media that has had the CIA as their staple. Ahhh, the days of the 'foreign hand' seem to have all but disappeared, when these days we have RAW and ISI to bandy about. Who cares for Central Intelligence?

■

NEW DELHI is fast becoming a fashion capital, and Chhetria Patrakar is not sure this is entirely a good thing for a Subcontinent where calico itself is in short supply as far as the population is concerned. Fashion shows just take the glitterati further into their cocoon. In the glossy sections of the Delhi papers, every day you get to catch glimpses of the ever-more-scantily clad skinny models (the Western ideal imported by the me-too sensibility of the Indian capital). A navel here, a midriff there, and generous frontal exposure—the public gets to lap it all up without realising the increasing distance that this puts between the powerful and the masses. India does need more than models and IT professionals.

■

ON SATELLITE television, CNN has Style South Asia, and BBC television is busy giving us automotive shows. It is clear that they think this is the target demography, or at least that this is the category that is the spending sort which will attract advertising. But it is interesting that Mallika Sarabhai should energise herself to show us the rarified lifestyles and interests of the top 0.5 percent of the South Asian (read mostly 'Indian') population. And the poor motoring show hosts. Sure, they may be able to get the rich and famous to spout off about their antique vehicles, their brand-new SUVs, and the pros-and-cons of the various new sedans jousting in the market. But once you go out for a spin with the proud owners, you see that THERE IS NOWHERE TO DRIVE! A Range Rover you may have, but the potholes of India can hardly make you feel king of the road. Thus does India have its revenge on the programme producers who would have us forget the real place and the real time.

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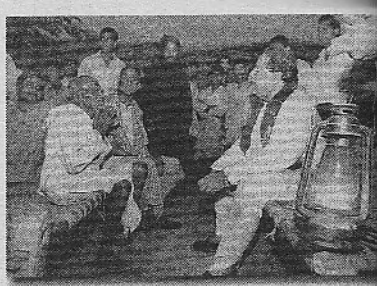


THIS IS a classic picture of politician-meeting-villager in our part of the world. The lantern is with BJP Uttar Pradesh leader, Kalraj Mishra. Once he goes away, so will the thin light.

■

IT'S NO more Indian English or Hinglish, but Indlish. That's the language in which a movie has been made in Bangalore, called 20 Plus. The blurb reads: Friends, Exam Results, Hope, Hormones, Relatives, Choices..." Is this a new film genre in the making? I sure do hope so. There is just not enough variety in the celluloid world, even though we, the people, are full of diversity.

■

NOW SAVOUR this picture of Sheikh Hasina in naval attire...

■

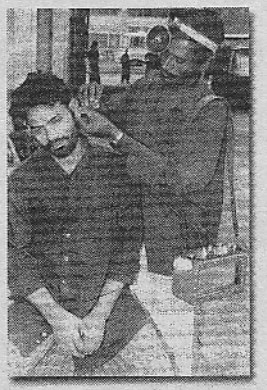
"'BAD CHARACTER' shot at in business rivalry" says *The Hindu* headline. The police, it seems, said that the victim was a 'bad character'. It is almost as if it is alright to be shot at if you have a bad character, in which case many people I know—including myself— would qualify for the bullet.

■

BY THE time you read this, the mango season will have been nearly over. Delhi, the city of the unlamented monkey man, just had a mango-eating competition in which a K.P. Rana, a medical professional no less, did his tummy proud by consuming 1.5 kg and winning. But methinks a SAARC Mango Eating Competition would

not be a bad idea, for the pear-shaped fruit is: a) quintessentially South Asian; b) found all over; and c) in different varieties. Rather than the uncultured attempt to consume the largest volume, this would be a competition of subtle taste and texture. There will be healthy rivalry between the Malda, the Dussheri or the Nepali mountain variety. Assam, Bihar, Punjab and Sindh, all would vie with their best offerings. I think this is an ideal subject for the next SAARC summit. How about a SAARC Mango Summit to coincide with the next SAARC summit, where the heads of state can start on their confabulations over a drippy breakfast of mangos from all over?

■



THERE ARE all kinds of occupations in this part of the world, and ear-cleaning is one of them. Check out this picture of Dhaka ear-cleaner, Abdul Gafur, and the snazzy gadgets that he is carrying. Did I hear someone speak of hygiene? What, and not have my ear cleaned?!

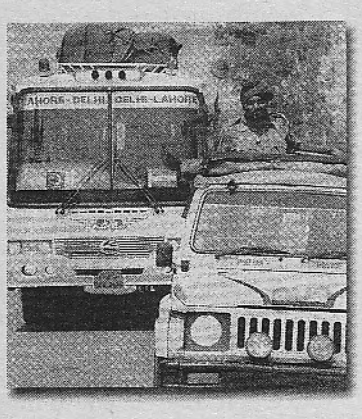
■

IT WAS bound to happen, but oh god not this way. Dev Anand might be still a heart-throb but does anyone doubt that he is a bad film-maker. Somebody please stop him from making one on the Nepal royal massacre. Says the "evergreen" man, "I am deeply disturbed by what happened in Nepal... I was very close to the [royal] family and that's the reason I'm making the film." God save the Nepali royalty. Meanwhile, we wait with dread for some Western (or Indian) pulp fiction author to churn out a novel on the blue-blooded murders in Shangri-la.

■

THE INDIAN Supreme Court came up with two interesting judgements early this month. It has declared that, "dying words made only in fit mind is relevant". So there goes the power of the last word. The next verdict is harsh on sniffer dogs. The court says the persons they track down, may not always have committed the crime. Bowbow. And let that not be my dying words, your honour.

■



THE AGRA Summit might be dead, but thankfully the New Delhi-Lahore bus is still plying (picture shows security man escorting the bus). More good news for South Asian transport is that all is set for an Indo-Bangla train, ready to chug it from Howrah to Dhaka. A trial run was done early this month from Calcutta to the eastern side of the Bangabandhu Bridge at the border. To make it even better, a goods train has been running from Indian Petrapole to Bangladeshi Benapole from 24 January this year. All this cross border bonhomie, that too so soon after Boraibari. Are we entering the Brave New World?

■

THIS IS a rare picture. Of Kathmandu's "Living Goddess" waiting to be worshipped one last time before she makes way for another pre-pubescent girl to take on her hefty mantle.

■

ENGLISH CRICKET everyone knows is in the doldrums. But what makes it worse is that when England at home plays teams from the Subcontinent, it hardly gets any support on the ground. Indian and Pakistani fans are known to outnumber their English counterparts, and have even created minor riots inside the stadium. Some say that's just dessert for the sins of the former colonisers, but that's putting it too crudely. Let's just say that if rowdyism enters the cricket stadia at Old Trafford or The Oval it merely means that the proper South Asian flavour has finally invaded the gentleman's game in its home territory.

■

SHOULD SUCH pictures be published or not? No, writes an angry Dhaka correspondent to *The Independent*: "How could the photographer aim his lens at such a picture of grief and sorrow... Grief is a private thing." This has always been a tough one for photographers and photo editors, a great picture for some is trespass on behalf of others. Hold those flash-bulbs.

■

"SIX [BANGLADESHI] women arrested with Indian saris", says an online headline. We must put a stop to this harassing of the ladies of Bangladesh who want the best in sarees. In fact, since we cannot close the borders, we should open them completely. In the end, water will find its own level and tensions will subside. Dhakai sarees will flood Calcutta, and Indian chiffon Bangladesh. What's wrong with that? Indian synthetics will invade Bangladesh, while Bangladeshi jute will wipe out Indian producers. Such should be the way of the future, where Comparative Advantage is king. When that day arrives, I will not be asked every time I cross the India-Nepal border, "Saar, are you carrying anything camera-wamera?" The cops at the border are still searching for cameras, whereas Mallika Sarabhai is into haute couture.

—Chhetria Patrakar

Dhaka in the 70s

Random memories in first and third person

by ***Afsan Chowdhury***

PHOTOMONTAGE/MANIPULATION

They held the stengun to the back of his head in the half darkness of the late winter evening. A lamppost threw uncertain light as they stood in a group and smoked and talked cheerfully. The man had been taken out of his home and made to stand on a vacant lot in the upper middle class neighbourhood. Nothing very extraordinary. It was just Bangladesh in mid-December 1971.

His name was Shahbaz. A noble name. But he was the typical neighbourhood thug, a swaggering, drinking, fornicating man. Yet he alone of all would also dare to take the small-pox patient to the hospital by himself when others turned away. A braggart and a bully but not exactly a criminal. Not even by the more uptight standards of that era. But Shahbaz, unwittingly and through no particular choice or resolve of his own, had broken a cardinal rule of history. He had stepped into one of its wrong moments. Bangladesh had just become independent and there were more guns in young, angry, impatient hands than the trees and leaves that populated a Dhaka December of that time. And guns sought enemies like the flies and vermin sought the garbage on the street.

Nobody was sure what his "crime" was but everybody was sure he was a "bad egg" and so someone had found a reason to complain. No one knew who and why, but to know gun wielders and curry favour by being in touch and complaining was the thing to do when life and death slept so close to each other. His brother, a plumber by profession, stood close by, as if waiting for something to happen but too puzzled at the turn of events to make any move, not even to beg for mercy.

"Get inside," someone hissed. "They are going to kill him." Scared feet shuffled inside scared, timid homes.

Shahbaz started to argue but the hands that held him, proud with the colours of freedom and machismo moved quickly. The gun barked. The sound was sudden, unexpected, but not really loud. No big deal really. Just the brief, harsh, staccato song of a firearm—*crack, chat, chat*. And then it was over. The man crumpled to the ground and lay still. The business over, the young men piled into a commandeered car and were gone in a whiff leaving a body in the dust, still, inert, bloody.

After a few moments, the corpse's brother stole out into the dark. Silently he dragged the corpse all by himself into the narrow lane where they lived, to face his sister-in-law and her kid and explain

why Shahbaz had died. It would certainly have been more difficult than the labours of those who had killed him. In fact, it seems always so easy, to casually bump off people when they least expect it and without so much as mentioning why. Shahbaz had died without a fight or a cry.

For a long time no taps were repaired in the neighbourhood, no clogged pipes were cleared. His brother's revenge caused much grief to all. But one day the whole family was suddenly gone and nobody ever saw them again. Soon there was a new plumber in the *para* who was much better than Shahbaz's brother. He was soon gone from everyone's collective memory. Nobody remembers no one, not even when they are plumbers. Or their brother.

History certainly came at full speed, hitting everyone with a bang and leaving them sprawled in the dirt and mud, pulling away the comfortable carpet from underneath collective feet. Since we couldn't afford eggs and toast for breakfast, we had fried green papaya and chapati instead. Afternoon tea was reduced to a fistful of puffed rice and a cup of weak tea as chasers, once in a while "toast biscuits"—often called dog biscuits with great affection and loathing—with drops of *gur* (molasses) sitting on them like clotted blood. The afternoon tea routine was as unnecessary as it was unbreakable. It defied history and survives till today. And of course most became Radicals. Was it the green papaya for breakfast that made it happen ?

Leftists. Communists. Marxists. I didn't know anyone who was not one. There was a bit of fashion but even unfashionable ones became Lefties. A large chunk of the party in power—the Awami League cracked open and let a stream of young cadres out. They disengaged and declared themselves Leftists. "We had been Leftists for long. The national liberation struggle was the first step in the total revolution. The unfinished revolution must now be completed," they solemnly declared. Their new party was called Jatiyo Samjtantrik Dal (JSD). In English that is the Nationalist Socialist Party. It became known as "Jashod" or the Bangla acronyms of JSD put together.

The old Left, still secretive and more rigid than ever before, felt very let down by all this. There was talk of the Mother Party and all that but not enough listeners. There was resentment that "upstart bourgeoisie politicians" and "foreign agents" were stealing their history. But they could do little. The rebellious drums of campus radicals drowned the noise from all their underground jazz .

It was all about unfinished revolutions. Everyone had a stake in this great inevitable change. Even many Awami Leaguers considered themselves Leftists. It was the one time in Bangladesh's history when there were few Rightists left to say hello to. But best was if one believed that only one's own party was right. Isn't that how it always went?

It was also a period of clandestine life. Everything was a secret, including life and hope and the huge profits from black marketing in a country still learning to manage everything from scratch. But for most, especially in the campus, hope wore the colour red. And red is the colour of blood. Sometimes the two mixed so well that nobody could tell the difference.

But life was swiftly changed for all. Even the awesome salaries drawn by senior executives were dwarfed by price rises, privilege cuts and shortages. Fair price shops, unheard of before, opened. They were actually ration shops politely renamed for the sake of the self-respecting middle class. They provided shoddy stuff at affordable prices. The salaryman's salvation home, a political necessity to keep the many hued babus not too unhappy.

The clothes people wore got coarser by the day and mothers became more innovative cooks as food price shot beyond domestic budgets. Even the government formed a Department of Price Control and Expenditure Management. But unheard of luxuries were available in the market as well. The configuration of economic classes changed like a shuffled decks of cards and some took public transport to work for the first time since Bengal was sliced in 1947. Meanwhile, some bought their first cars, others their second. A fewer still their third.

Suddenly, some people were getting awfully rich. Under-20-year-olds would arrive in chauffeured limos to visit friends in the early mornings or the late hours after or before parties, where smuggled Akai decks played contraband music and served scotch in wine glasses. They talked of the price of coconut oil in Calcutta and cardamom in Ceylon. What was a foreign

Principal? Indenting? LC margins? Overdrafts? Vat 69? Shared girl friends? Marx never explained these things in the books.

In secret meetings, comrades swore to kill all class enemies and swore at the cigarette that had died bitterly on tired lips. The butt ached from sitting on hard floors. Tomorrow we would have a revolution surely. "At best next year," the man from Calcutta promised. He was an Indian Maoist imported from Ballygunge. He soon had a Bangladeshi passport, soon he had friends dropping in, soon he had set up a network. And soon he had picked up the local accent. He knew the enemy better than the local lads did. He knew the friends even better.

He ran a network of Indian Lefties in Bangladesh. All of it was trundling along fine, until one night a visitor came carrying a letter all the way from across the border. It said that the Calcutta Comrade was probably a police informer and the cause of an arrest or two. When Avishekda returned, he was told about the visitor and the letter. He left hurriedly never to return. Years later someone met him in the Jadavpur area of Calcutta. He had married a wealthy senior citizen, and used a car now. They drank chilled bottles of club soda sitting on the sidewalk and talked of dead friends.

In Dhaka a university student could survive on taka 5 per day. A bus ticket was 1 taka for most places. A packet of 10 Star cigarettes, cheapest in the market, cost taka 1.50. A plate of oily rice with tiny scraps of meaty rubber was taka 1. And a cup of tea was .50. And with the left over 1 taka, catch a ride home. By that time, tea, literature, politics and dreams would have filled most bellies.

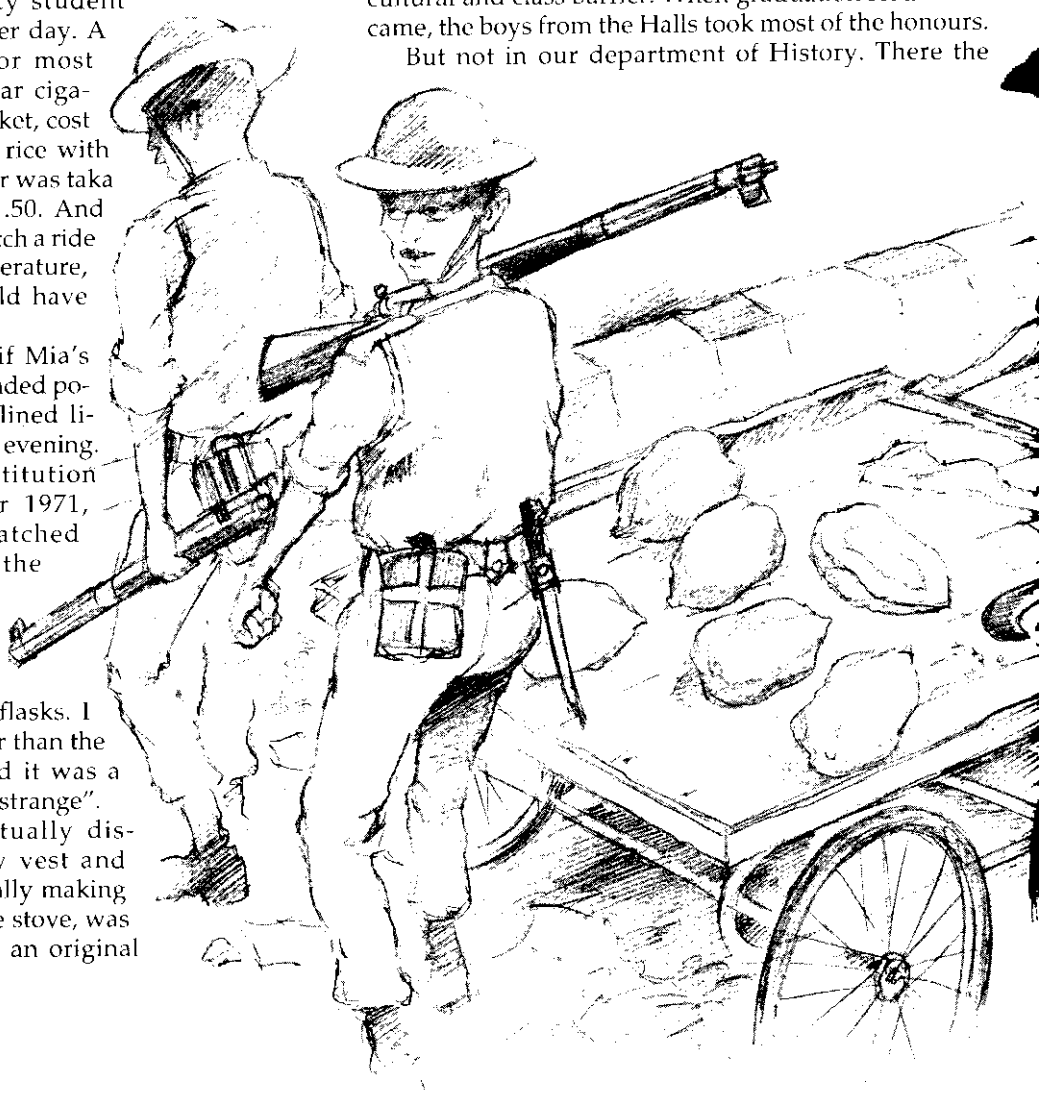
We hung out in Sharif Mia's canteen where literary-minded politicos and politically-inclined literati gathered till the late evening. It was the one true institution that had emerged after 1971, Dhaka University's thatched roofed equivalent of the famous Calcutta coffee-house. Its tea was legendary—though some disagreed. Some would even take it home in thermos flasks. I thought the talk was better than the tea. To the outside world it was a place that was "rich and strange".

Sharif Mia, a perpetually disgruntled man in a dirty vest and lungee, who was perpetually making tea bent over a ramshackle stove, was from old Dhaka. He was an original with a caustic wit so barbed that nobody dared cross swords with him, not even the premium poet or the party honcho. One day, much later, the university authorities came and dismantled his tea shop in all of three minutes. His shack of a canteen was probably the most significant part of our mental horizon, but then it was an illegal construction. And it probably irked them to see lectures so abjectly fail to compete with *adda*, I suppose. Oh, well. He is dead anyway.

But another 5 taka could certainly take you through the day. Lunch at the university hall canteens could be had for just taka 2, hugely subsidised, tasteless and slightly illegal if you were not a resident there. Like we were not. And in the evening, you could visit the Jagannath hall canteen, meant exclusively for the minorities, where for taka 2 you could feast on tiny helpings of *alu tarkari*, tomato curry, three chapatis and an endless supply of green chilies. The chapatis were a wonder and the canteen boy would bring a stack and then beat them like cymbals to get rid of the flour dust. It tasted marvellous.

Students were divided between Hall boys and City boys. Those who stayed in the Halls had a lifestyle very different from those who lived in the city and commuted to the campus. It was also an excellent index of cultural and class barrier. When graduation result time came, the boys from the Halls took most of the honours.

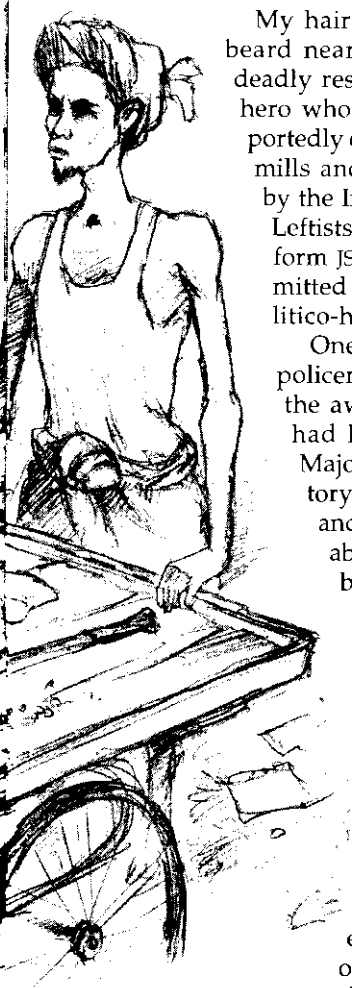
But not in our department of History. There the



ladies topped the list, these studious students who did well in every exam they took. Even the lady who now tells me twice a day that marrying me was her greatest mistake in life took the second position. I came out a distant third. It was not till a year later in the Masters that honour was restored when both of us jointly topped the list. Frankly, I cared most for the sense of liberation that the campus life gave me, so different from my sheltered growing up. So different to be late, late, late coming home.

And not bothering to explain.

In the seventies I had decided not to shave my beard. It didn't have anything to do with anything except evading the bother of shaving everyday. I was a grungy, dusty pajama-kurta wearing, bespectacled, slightly unwashed "intellectual Leftist" who practised regular highs. I was supposed to know all about the "class struggle" and was rumoured to have read Marx and Lenin, and Mao too. It was a mystery to many which party I belonged to. I moved in all the circles easily. I was probably the first free-lance Marxist in this land in that era. It says little about Marxism but perhaps a great deal about free-lancers.



My hair was shoulder length and my beard nearly touched my chest. I had a deadly resemblance to Major Jalil, a war hero who had been arrested after he reportedly opposed the stripping of the jute mills and the removal of the machines by the Indian army. He had joined the Leftists who had left Awami League to form JSD, which in the seventies committed one of the more significant politico-historical acts.

One day as I crossed the road, a policeman saluted me, and I noticed the awe in his eyes. I realised what had happened. He thought I was Major Jalil. I also realised my history had been reduced to my beard and long unkempt hair. And probably that look in my eyes which belched fire and smoke fuelled by tea and locally-grown grass. But I wasn't the only hairy one. The government ran regular hair-cutting campaigns and anybody sporting fuzz was suspect. History has often testified that the state likes clean-shaved men.

A week later they raided our neigbourhood to recover illegal arms and arrested the entire family on the suspicion of hoarding such weapons. One of my longest days had arrived.

The man in uniform held a gun to his throat, and kept asking where the weapons were hidden. It is difficult to talk with a gun of the automatic variety pressed against the Adam's Apple. He persistently denied any knowledge of weapons but the men in uniform were not convinced. They took out metal balls and rolled them on the floor. Magnetic? He looked at his death and wondered whether this made any sense. To have died for a reason not particularly clear to him. Was all this because of the way he looked?

They made him and the rest of the family search the house for those elusive weapons. In the rooms where the books were kept, they found a few Russian editions of the Marxist literary pantheon on his table with old Karl's face printed on them.

"Is it you?"

The young man wondered if it was better to deny or to affirm. They seemed to have made up their minds anyway.

"Yes, it's me."

They nodded and kept urging him to search as they stood with guns cocked at the full. So, a few people were alive that day who thought that Karl Marx lived in Dhaka and wrote books with his own picture on the cover. Conceit killed Karl. Now that made sense.

Finally they shoved the barrel inside his mouth. The metallic taste was strange and repulsive, mixing death and saliva in his throat. Then they asked the question again. He couldn't answer with this mouthful. He tried to move his head. Is this how it's done finally?

An officer type entered the room and asked them to take him and all other males away. His cheeks ached from the pain of having an AK-47 inside his mouth. His mother started to cry but he felt drained of emotions. As if he didn't exist. And then it was over.

A sort of senior officer stormed inside and demanded to know what the charges were. Suddenly nobody seemed to know any. Was there a complaint? There was no answer. Intelligence report? Silence. He then asked to set them free.

The man who had stuck the gun in his mouth now came over and warmly shook his hands. The young man was no longer a terrorist. And then they were quickly gone from the area. The family waited all day in the porch, fearful that they would be visited and picked up again. It was better if they stayed there and didn't have to come down again to be carted away. He kept remembering the taste of the gun inside his mouth. He still does.

Azam Khan was in full cry in the campus auditorium, and the couple of thousand students that made up the audience were hysterical. Reedy thin with a straggly beard, dressed in trousers and a bright coloured shirt, he was singing about love, drugs, and mysticism of the campus variety.

The High Court shrine has many faquirs but how many are real?

In the market of love so many lovers roam about, but how many are real?

Oh, in this world of today, people have ceased to be people

In this world of today human beings are no longer human beings.

As boys erupted in the seats, they were really for once becoming part of a history, a cultural history that has survived many changes and become mainstreamed and it was being born then and there. Only they didn't know it then. The pop songs of Azam Khan—often hyped versions of mystic melodies sung in various shrines for ages—defined them more than many other things and ideals. After all, they were just a bunch of nice kids caught in the wrong moment of history. They didn't know what to do with their time, their history, themselves.

His song " Frustration" was almost the campus national anthem and it was no secret that most thought that ganja was a treatment for that strange emotion which the womb of expectation holds. The seventies made dope respectable even if it failed to do that to the revolution. Dope was snatched from the lips of low caste Hindus and its smoke passed through middle class nostrils and this put a *poita* on its back. It was born first in the fields. The next time it was reborn on so many young, unhappy lips. Thus was ganja twice-born.

Azam Khan and his lot sang traditional songs with a touch of rock and Western accompaniments, Bangla's original remixer. He used traditions to create his own. The land of pure, pristine Tagore and Nazrul music was swamped by a new syntax of language and rhythm not heard before. Anger, arrogance and self-pity mixed with music. So many were already convinced that they had no future. The use of drugs said it all. Even for those who spoke constantly of the red dawn, nirvana in the evening came in rolled reefers and "high" and "low" pills. Poet Nirmalendu Goon took it to its highest level when he wrote a poem and read it publicly to thunderous applause.

Today's Sunday
Today's a holiday
Today it's Mandrax
It's only Mandrax.

Mandrax or "Mandy"—as it was affectionately called—was the one word that spelt a whole host of images now long ago forgotten.

The High Court *mazar* (shrine) was a "hot" mazar. That is, it was an active mazar. You could get immediate results. Mendicants of all sorts converged here as did drug peddlers. Even if you had nothing in particular to ask for, you still went to get high. But there was unease in the air which no shrine could heal.

When the Awami League and the pro-Soviet parties merged into one party called BKSAL and banned all other parties, the situation became even more uncertain. There was talk of 'emergency' being imposed.

The Islamic groups were also trying to resurface and clandestine meetings were reported. By that time the Gono Bahini (People's Army), the armed wing of the JSD had sprung up and campus Halls were the headquarters. There were rumours of military connections and some went so far as to say that the military was getting restive too.

On 15 August 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, it was announced, would visit the university. On 14 August a few bombs went off in the library area next to Sharif Mia's canteen. He was unmoved and made more tea. Many went and inspected the damage and returned to the feeble tea and literature and wondered what to do next. The next day everyone was expected to be present in the campus to welcome the President.

Gunshots awoke people at dawn the next day. Through a hazy sleepy dream, people thought they saw students letting off fire crackers to celebrate his visit. But the sounds were echoes of '71. Everyone knew those sounds only too well. In minutes everyone was huddled around the radio. The voice of a Major Dalim came through, announcing that Sk. Mujib had been killed. All knew hell would break loose, and waited for it. Things would never be certain again, the same again. If Sk. Mujib could be killed anything could happen.

By 10 in the morning, they imposed martial law. But few knew who the "they" were and what it all meant. Everyone said it was the CIA, some said it was the RAW. It was up to anyone to guess and to decide. It didn't matter.

But it was history and it began to happen at a frenetic pace. Three months later, on 4 November, the group that had taken over was deposed by another coup led by whom no one was sure. Some said that the AL had returned to power and cited a huge procession in the campus led by AL leaders. But the rumours were bigger than the procession. There had been more killings it was heard, but nobody knew who had been felled. But it was clear that no one was in full control. Another round of violence seemed imminent. The radio went on and on. Batteries did brisk business.

Apparently military forces had been arrayed on both sides, whatever the sides were. The dividing line seemed to be the railway line that bifurcated the city. We went down to see what was going on. Heavily armed soldiers with stoic faces were taking positions behind stacks of bricks kept for a suspended high-rise construction. The soldiers didn't seem particularly hostile. Maybe they were as puzzled as we were. And scared.

A bedraggled fruit vendor put down his basket of green papayas. I blanched at the sight of these vegetables masquerading as fruit. The man asked the soldier to take himself and his sub-machine gun somewhere else. He had important business to transact. The soldier obliged. Things didn't seem all right at all. Papaya vendors bullying armed soldiers?

On the night of 7 November, the Gono Bahini led by a one-legged legendary war hero, retired Colonel Taher, mounted a coup supported by soldiers who were loyal to him and his Red vision of Bangladesh. On the two or maybe three sides were war heroes of 1971, and so fel-

low comrades of the liberation war killed each other. Taher's men took over the radio station and we all gathered again in the morning in front of it. Radio became the face of the state.

By the end of the afternoon, Colonel Taher had lost control and Gen. Ziaur Rahman emerged from jail and took over. A few months later, Taher was sentenced to be hanged for treason and later his brothers—all decorated war heroes—tried to take the Indian ambassador hostage to free Taher and got killed and then...later...it goes on... But it was the Red's biggest hour if not the most glorious. In South Asia the Reds never came closer than that to taking over the state. They may have held it for half a day... By lunch time the revolution was over...

A new world was evolving. The old pro-Peking Leftists emerged from the underground to declare support to Zia because he was anti-Awami league and AL was pro-Soviet and so...the Leftist logic continued inanely. It was their death-knell anyway. The Leftist leaders were singularly unimpressive and when they visited the campus, they seemed to lose all charisma in a day's promenade. The old guard pro-Peking Leftists had, within a year, ceased to be a political force. They had been dropped from history. Like stale *bhajee*.

They found Khalilullah chewing a human heart with great relish sitting on the verandah. Near him were a human kidney and probably lungs. He was obviously enjoying his meal. Apparently he had been living on human offal for years. It helped that he was a "guard" at the Medical College morgue. He chilled hearts with a new image of fear and became a legend of ghoulish proportions. Now this was something.

A bunch of tired radicals sat under a tree in the campus to discuss the future. Of them, most had fought in the 1971 war, some had even "eliminated" enemies in the futile Red wars. They had handled guns and conducted raids. As dark came they talked of Khalilullah, the new "devil". Suddenly the lights vanished in the campus and the brave soldiers of the Red dawn held each other and shook in fear. Khalilullah was scarier than all of the Right put together. Says much about the Right. And the Left too.

The unfortunate Khalilullah was diagnosed by professional men. The doctors said he couldn't tell his right hand from his left. He was suffering from a disease of the degenerating brain. Khalilullah died in the lunatic asylum.

Crime and Punishment in Genoa

Even the grand statesmen of the West assembled in Genoa on 20 July would not have liked the images of conflict that their summit left in its wake, the media that they cannot do without, had a satisfying day with some help from the city's *carabiniere*. Carlo Giuliani, a young political activist (*see pic.*), was shot dead at the venue of the G-8 summit, hundreds were injured. The worldwide audience of television news—onlookers since three years ago in Seattle, and then successively in Prague and Gothenburg—could not but be bemused at how this gathering of the cultured representatives of the trans-Atlantic ruling class, assembled to discuss ways and means of reducing poverty, had provoked such vehement opposition, leaving one dead, still others mutinous, and people across the globe derisive of the pomp and circumstance that accompanied the summit.

The protesters with the grassroots trade unions (SLAI-Cobas) were in a combative mood and well-prepared to make the 20 July "rebellion in Genoa" a success. Among those present in the ancient mercantilist capital were delegations from Yugoslavia, Mexico, Turkey, Greece, Sardinia and elsewhere. As expected, the demonstrators represented various views and orientations—unions, political activists (including anarchists and communists), development ngos, religious and humanitarian groups, human right activists and a whole lot of others attracted to Genoa by the assembly of Big Men. The slogans ranged from the demand to withdraw NATO from Yugoslavia and the Balkans, to the dissolution of the Hague 'inquisition', to support for the Palestinian Intifada, and opposition to the embargo against Iraq and Cuba. However, the general theme that cut across the disparate groups was in the arena of global economics and politics—the need for "globalisation from below", a reduction of the current Third World debt burden, and the control of international capital flows by "civil society" rather than by the international corporations and the governments at their beck and call.

Just a week after the 'imperialist' gathering in Genoa, a much-less-publised Anti-Imperialist Camp was organised in Assisi, also in Italy. It was dedicated to developing political perspectives for the anti-globalisation movement, which the organisers felt was at a decisive stage following the G-8 meeting and its well-publicised fallout. The violence in Genoa was seen as a signal to the movement—how to continue the protests against globalisation, establish "civic control" over the emerging agenda in the wake of globalisation, and stand firm to confront the forces that are pushing the one-way economic globalisation. The continent most devastated by capitalism was present in Genoa as it was in Assisi: Lumumbist groups from Zaire-Congo whose country is being torn apart by Western intervention; people like Dr. Bashir Kurfi, an anti-imperialist intellectual from Nigeria; and activists from Sierra Leone, Senegal, Chad, Guinea... The delegates from West Asia questioned the West's management of peace in the context of the second Intifada, and sought lessons from the collapse of the Oslo agreement. Other activists pointed to how the Western powers were courting Turkey for the sake of its military machine even while in Ankara's jails political prisoners were engaged in fasts unto death. In Assisi, the revolutionary women from Afghanistan explained their struggle against the Pakistan-backed Taliban, while the Filipino members of Migrante suggested the political possibilities available to Asian migrants in the West. The Mexicans warned of how the struggle for state power could be forgotten when "civil society" issues take over the agenda, as it had in their country in these times of neo-Zapatism.

Just as globalisation has many faces, so too does the protest in its opposition. The rebellion in Genoa raises a problematic. By embodying contradictory phenomena, it asks of politics a whole series of questions that used traditionally to be part of the elite domain. If the meeting of G-8 was a manifestation of international democracy at work, how could such pomp and glory presume to represent the majority of people on this planet? How could those who claim to care for the poor and the victims allow "humanitarian bombs" and transnational murders? Was it possible for the manifold nature of the Genoa protest to be rewritten in a coherent political format, making it more powerful? That is what was requiring an answer, beyond the agitation and stone-throwing.

There were many images available at Genoa, starting with the ambition of the trans-Atlantic club and the failure of its rhetoric. Then there was the desperate

effort of the protesters to increase their ranks through global means, and the mob's resolve to spit on the moral indignation expressed against the agitation by the political leaders of that club. The unreality of the agenda of the super-rich to fight poverty was mirrored in the death of the protestor on the Genoa pavement. It was a hallucinatory world all right. Just as it happened in the case of Raskolnikov's murder of his landlady, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the killing of the youth in Genoa has left its clues everywhere. That lone, but symbolic, death now guarantees that henceforth the protests will continue wherever the symbols of global power present themselves. The G-8 may hereafter move their annual hermitage into the deepest forest of Canada or the furthest corner of Tasmania, but it does not look like they can easily meet amidst the glass towers and wide boulevards any longer. The docile welcome of the past will be a memory, with the protestors forcing them to remember the wealth that they do represent—and not the world that they would presume to.

But an assembly of emperors away from the bustle and din of crowd—will it serve the purpose? To ask this is to ask, what precisely is the purpose? Again, in Dostoyevsky's hands, punishment and crime were not events in sequel; they were one. Crime was punishment. The moment of commitment of the crime was the moment when punishment had begun. The long shadows outside the palaces and glass hotels of Seattle, Gothenburg and Genoa are there to stay. The protestors had meant the moments of assembly to be moments of derision and disbelief and now they have become that. An assembly deep in the forest or in a faraway island cannot attract glory. Montesquieu had reminded us more than two centuries ago, how the pursuit of glory was important for kingdoms. Modern republics, as kingdoms of today, pursue policies that promise glory, for glory brings in its wake power, wealth, and satisfaction. Hence the dilemma, how to pursue glory without murder, pomp without derision, riches without poverty, and democracy without coercion?

More than to those assembled at Assisi, this is a question to those who met at Genoa. △

—Ranabir Samaddar

The Chaos Theory at Narayanhiti

If the public begins to believe that Crown Prince Dipendra was responsible for the killings in the royal palace, then the "how" and "why" questions will be superseded by what ifs". To this, there are no answers.

In April 1999, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, in a sleepy town called Littleton in Colorado, 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School were killed by two students from the same school in a 16-minute killing spree in the worst school rampage in American history. The killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who had been described by a few of their teachers and friends as "nice and gentle", subsequently took their own lives.

On 1 June 2001, in the foothills of the Himalaya in a Kathmandu that was getting ready for the night, nine members of the royal family were killed, in a carnage that a dozen witnesses report was carried out single-handedly by Crown Prince Dipendra. He is thought to have killed himself subsequently.

All Nepal tried to make sense of the bizarre madness, the inexplicability of a son, an heir to the throne, no less, going around summarily executing his entire family within a few furious minutes. Two long months have elapsed since the chilling incident at the Narayanhiti Royal Palace, and the frantic fabrication of conspiracy scenarios has abated somewhat and the national attention is diverted to the ever-pressing problem with the Maoists. The public seems to be coming around to sullen acceptance of what it has been told was the truth.

That is the wrong way to tackle this problem and, even if there is no strident demand from the public, the authorities must live up to their responsibility and try to present more evidence and shed more light on the 1 June episode. If the royal palace, the Parliament and the (new) government of Sher Bahadur Deuba are not mindful of the need to pursue the matter, the cloud over the royal status of King Gyanendra will not lift. And in the long term, this will be to the detriment of both the Nepali monarchy and people.

For the sake of the collective Nepali psyche, therefore, it is necessary to keep the file on the royal massacres open and continue with the investigation. As and when the belief that Dipendra carried out the shooting becomes accepted, another set of questions will begin to trouble the national consciousness. If Dipendra did what they said he did, the questions of "what if" will come to the fore. While sifting of the evidence may well convince the public of Dipendra's responsibility for the massacre of his family, the questions of "what if" will stay with the country far into the future. It is this aspect, even more than the answer to "who-done-it", that needs to be tackled for the country to heal in the aftermath of the Narayanhiti murders.

Believers and non-believers

Those who suspect conspiracy, of course, continue to raise sceptical questions such as: with hundreds of palace guards around, with aides de camp attached to every member of the royal family, how come not one of them could intercept and disarm a "highly inebriated" prince? How was this "highly inebriated" prince able

to shoot with such alertness and accuracy? How could the right-handed Dipendra have shot himself through the left side of his head? Why was the cremation so hastily carried out? Was it just a series of fantastical coincidences that Prince Gyanendra was away at the time, that his wife Princess Komal was hurt but miraculously managed to survive, that Prince Paras his son escaped totally unhurt, that Princess Himani his daughter-in-law did not attend the dinner? Could parental opposition to the choice of a particular bride ever be sufficient to instigate such ghastly fury? Why did a prince, so cheerfully enjoying a squash tournament only a few hours earlier, go on a killing binge? And so on.

Because the palace authorities have clammed up, and those in government seem disinterested and Parliament have clammed-up and the media has not persevered, a majority of Nepalis persist with these questions and are unwilling to accepts Dipendra's possible culpability. An increasing number, however, are not so sure and are willing to come half-way and concede that Dipendra *may* have been the killer. There is also a significant minority that has now come around to the conviction that the crown prince must indeed have been responsible for the murders at the royal palace. Starting with those in the uppermost echelons of the Kathmandu society, this last believers' category is now roping in people from all walks of life.

Had various confusing factors not intervened to promote the rumours and conspiracy theories about the killing of King Birendra and his clan, the public at large would have accepted quite early what only this believing minority accepts today. With the blame assigned, the natural progression for the public would next have been to tackle the question of "what if". As it transpired, the Nepali public never got to this stage of questioning, being still stuck with "how" and "why" stage. However, as the months and years roll on, it seems likely that today's minority of believers will guide the debate on the massacre in the future, and start asking the next set of questions—"what if?".

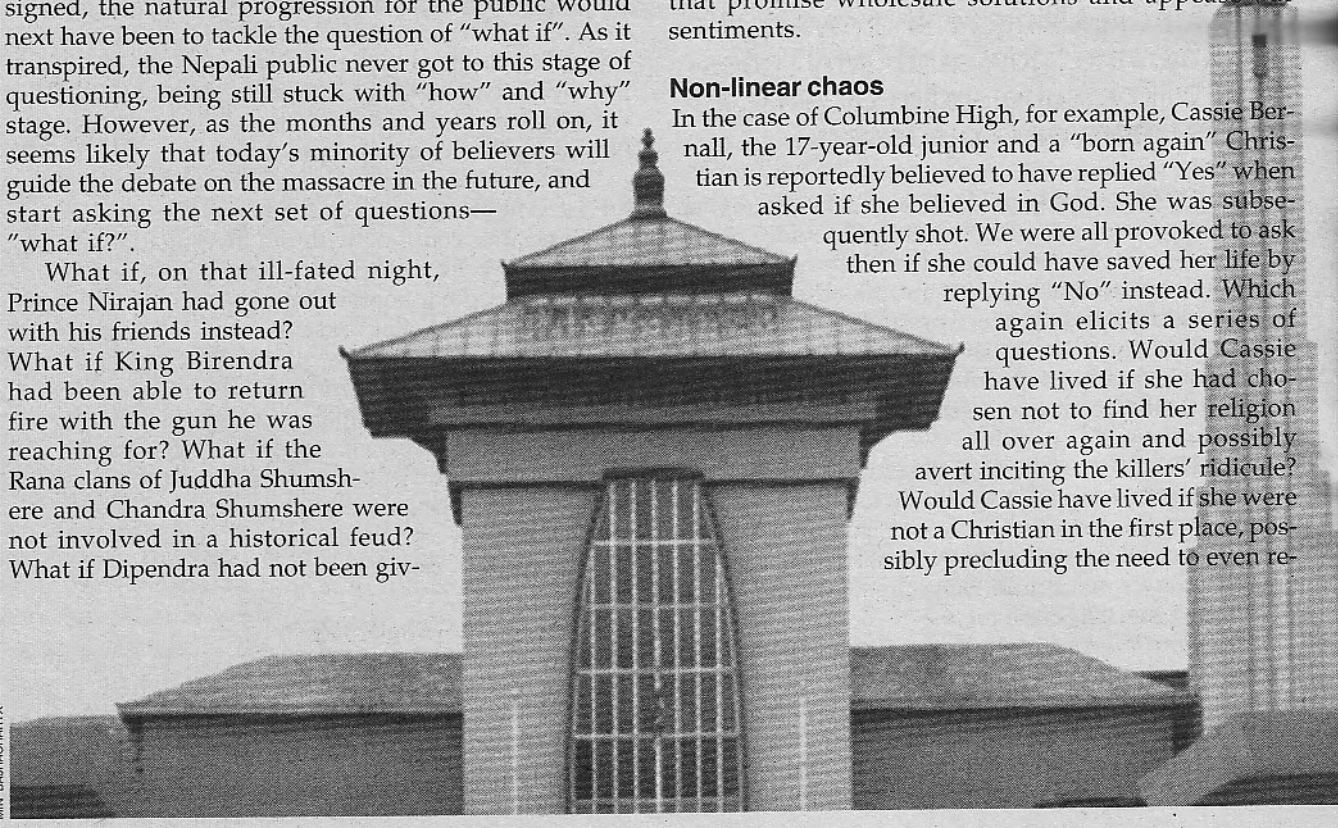
What if, on that ill-fated night, Prince Nirajan had gone out with his friends instead? What if King Birendra had been able to return fire with the gun he was reaching for? What if the Rana clans of Juddha Shumshere and Chandra Shumshere were not involved in a historical feud? What if Dipendra had not been given charge of evaluating guns for the Royal Nepali Army? What if the late king and queen had agreed to their son's marriage to Devyani Rana (Dipendra's love interest)?

In a way, the "what ifs" are more difficult to answer than the "hows" the "whys", which demands a higher level of specificity. The "what ifs", on the other hand, at least at first, are more ticklish—dealing with greater intangibles and more elusive notions, such as parental relationships, the metaphysical dimensions of contemporary society and socio-psychological deconstructions. Of course, the "what ifs" may serve the interests of the status quoists in Nepali society who will want to cover up the palace massacre and move on. However, they do give rise to a more solemn set of questions for the long-term because what it asks and tries to answer invokes, according to situation, our paternal, maternal, filial, social and national sensibilities. These sensibilities go far beyond Prince Dipendra's individual experience with his family, and apply more universally to a child's experience with the family, a brother's relationship with his sister, an uncle's relationship with his niece or nephew, one's relationship with one's inner self...our relationship with our destinies.

It is important to ask these questions and treat them with the seriousness they deserve—if only because they will be asked more often as more Nepalis begin to accept the crown prince's reported role in the massacre. But, the truth is that while some of the questions will be the right ones, and yet others interesting and necessary, we need to be careful in the way we try to seek answers from them, and be suspicious of those that promise wholesale solutions and appease our sentiments.

Non-linear chaos

In the case of Columbine High, for example, Cassie Bernall, the 17-year-old junior and a "born again" Christian is reportedly believed to have replied "Yes" when asked if she believed in God. She was subsequently shot. We were all provoked to ask then if she could have saved her life by replying "No" instead. Which again elicits a series of questions. Would Cassie have lived if she had chosen not to find her religion all over again and possibly avert inciting the killers' ridicule? Would Cassie have lived if she were not a Christian in the first place, possibly precluding the need to even re-



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spond to that fateful question? What if the two student killers had a predilection not for Doom, but for Ludo or Chinese checkers? What if Marilyn Manson (the rock star whose music is said to have triggered the killers' dark side) had by an accident of circumstance become a firefighter instead? Who should the blame be put on? On America's culture of violence? On diabolical computer games like Doom? On the Internet where Eric and Dylan had learnt how to make bombs? What if the Internet had not been invented by the US military?

Who should the blame be put on in Nepal? On Nepali parents, do not have sufficient empathy with their children's sensitivities, the departed royal couple epitomising the condition of the modernising upper classes? On royalty as a whole, that demands too much from its members? On drugs and alcohol that have seeped into the lives of Nepal's youth? On a culture that is still beset with looking at a child's aspirations in the light of family or caste expectations and requirements?

In times like these, even as a delayed reaction, it is normal to begin to manufacture a succession of "if only" and "what might have been" questions. What if Dipendra had been so drunk as to have been totally comatose that night? What if Princess Shruti had used her judo skills to interrupt a prince gone berserk? What if members of the royal family did not have unhindered access to arms? What if, Devyani Rana had not been born? How would things have been different, if at all?

It is not that these questions in themselves have no value. However, to dwell on them hysterically will yield responses and outcomes that are so infinite that we would get lost. It will create a situation where blame begins to disperse so rapidly that it eventually becomes meaningless. Killers become victims and victims become killers in ever-spiralling permutations.

Even if this is primarily a sociological issue, science might come in handy in trying to take the nation forward from these crisis-ridden times. Chaos theory is predicated on the notion that we live in largely unpredictable, irreducible, nonlinear, iterative and turbulent world—what the composer Gustav Mahler called the "ceaseless motion and incomprehensible bustle of life". Trying to model reality and find causal connection between remote events and action is therefore futile. We can begin to appreciate the futility of trying to chart the "butterfly effect"—the notion that, taken to the extreme, a single butterfly moving innocuously in the air in Amazon produces tiny wind currents which when causally linked to a series of other events could lead to a hurricane in the Colombo. But just how do we begin to identify the butterfly and the eggs that created them? What if ten butterflies had decided not to take up the journey on that particular day? Would there still be a hurricane?

Causalities are boundless and indeterminate. As we try to scramble for larger solutions—more security at Naryanhiti, restrictions on access to arms for members of the royal family, an examination of the child-parent relationship, the dissection of polemics on sibling rivalry, the anachronism of "clans" and "castes" in modern times—let us not lead each other into pretending that outcomes can be so easily linked and then predicted and controlled. The nature of the universe and the interplay of politics, drugs, love, community, human conscience, poverty, insanity—cannot be explained by linking all the situations in a cause-and-effect linearity. Trying to connect and reconnect all these infinite variables will invariably yield incoherent outcomes.

The tendency to try to come to terms with this hostile reality, to respond emotionally to a maddening act through the many "what ifs" is itself a natural one—to get absorbed by and preoccupied with it, is not. Robert Louis Stevenson had said : "Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant." When left to stray, the human sensibility tends to seek hidden arrangements in everything, but in doing so we lose perspective. The collective will and capacity of the Nepali people to move forward will languish if they continue to, as the academic Elaine Showalter says, "look for magic-bullet answers to the complexities of modern life".

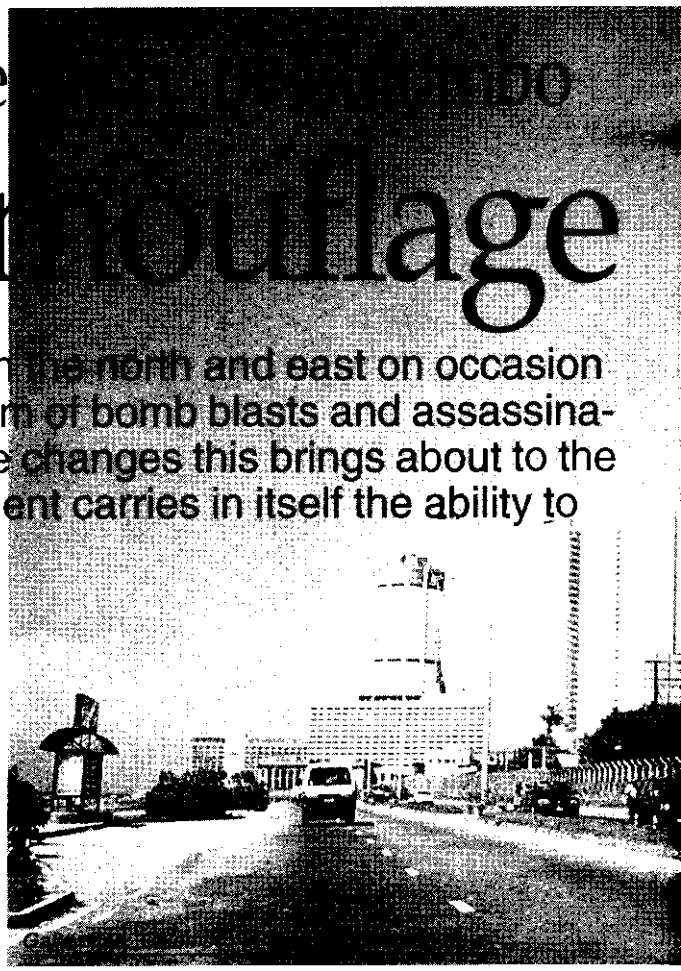
Nepali society needs to recover from the whirlpool of conspiracies and contradictions, sadness and anger. Do we want this incident to take away more from us than it already has? Any fixation in trying to establish the late Prince Dipendra's motivations and, worse, causally link them to the infinite number of possibilities is akin to trying to find the pattern of a falling leaf or a bat out of hell or trying to determine the relationship between a child's cry in Namche Bazaar and an avalanche on Nuptse's flanks. In hunting for societal scapegoats for Dipendra's alleged macabre act—whether in collective trends or individuals—we will only be labouring under confusion and dealing in dubious metaphors that lead ultimately to piles and piles of hypotheses and schemes that will soon enough crumble. In particular, such flights of fancy can be ill-afforded by a country presently beset with a serious Maoist insurgency, political instability, economic pessimism and such massive depletion of its emotional and mental stamina.

The process of national introspection is of course positive and cathartic, and the plea is not that questions not be asked—it is simply that we resist from reaching for short-cut answers to difficult issues. All the pundits, the psychoanalysts, the psychologists, the social commentators, novelists, and Bollywood producers (the actor Dev Anand, who would make a film on the royal bloodbath) and all well-wishers of Nepal must first look into the assumptions on which they begin to look for answers and to plot their narratives. There should be no trivialising of the tragedy that has befallen the people of Nepal. The analysts should not try and feed fodder to our dark side by dwelling on the "what ifs", and to recognise the limitations of what can be explained, controlled and predicted and what cannot be. The universe is not a pendulum that sticks to its arc, and we must resist the temptation to claim to know all the answers to the complexities of life?

—Ranjit Rauniyar

Public space and inse

City in ca



The war that is continuing to rage in the north and east on occasion visits the capital Colombo in the form of bomb blasts and assassinations. The public has adapted to the changes this brings about to the urban space, and this very adjustment carries in itself the ability to countenance continued war.

by ***Sasanka Perera***

If you are returning home from a late evening engagement in Colombo and want to turn to Independence Avenue from Reid Avenue to continue on your way, the chances are that you will not be able to do so. Independence Avenue, one of the better maintained and tree lined avenues in Colombo, leads to Independence Square, with its concrete lions glaring at you and the fluttering national flag, which commemorates Sri Lanka's Independence, attained in 1948. But after 7 pm, one cannot drive along Independence Avenue to relax or simply to revisit a moment of the recent history of the unsuccessful and incomplete exercise in nation-building by gazing at the towering statue of the Father of Independence, D. S. Senanayake, taking a giant step forward, immortalised in history and in reinforced concrete.

You will not be able to do any of these things because you will be confronted with a yellow movable sign in the middle of the road warning in Sinhala, "Independence Avenue is Closed". A few metres towards the square, you will be stopped by the young soldiers and policemen lounging about the permanent checkpoint that has come up. This simple reality says much about the freedom of movement and of independence itself. But the contradiction between the warning signs restricting the freedom of movement in the city and memories of independence is generally lost to many of the city's inhabitants who happen to travel along this avenue. This acceptance is a clear sign that war and its consequences have become generalised in society as a routine aspect of existence. Notions of security and insecurity, mobility and immobility, war and chaos seem to have acquired an air of normalcy.

This personal narrative, which most citizens in Sri Lanka are familiar with, furnishes the context for examining how issues of security and insecurity can be seen in the restrictions imposed upon public space in Colombo city, and to a lesser degree its suburban extensions, as a text to analyse. It is also useful to understand the way in which perceptions of insecurity manifest themselves within private space. Another issue that needs to be studied is the manner in which the restrictions on public space and individual mobility acquire the status of the normal and the routine. However, in the absence of a thorough sociological understanding and documentation of the city, this will be an essentially exploratory exercise.

Contemporary social science provides a number of ways in which a city can be seen or read. These different ways of seeing the city can be fitted into three categories of urban space posited in 1992 by Arata Isozaki and Akira Asada in their edited volume *Anywhere—Problems of Space*. According to the two scholars, "real cities" have preserved their historical context, "surreal cities" are metropolitan centres, such as Tokyo, where urban elements are intermingled with the hybridised without regard to historical context, while "hyper-real" or "simulated cities" are theme-park-cities such as Disneyland, devoid of context and based on fiction or artifice. Ackbar Abbas, in his essay "Building on Disappearance: Hong Kong Architecture and Colonial

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Space", suggests that these three types of space are defined by their proximity to history. He also goes on to suggest that real cities encourage a regime of the visible or seen, surreal cities a regime of the subliminal and uncanny or half-seen, and hyper-real cities a regime of the "televisual or quickly seen".

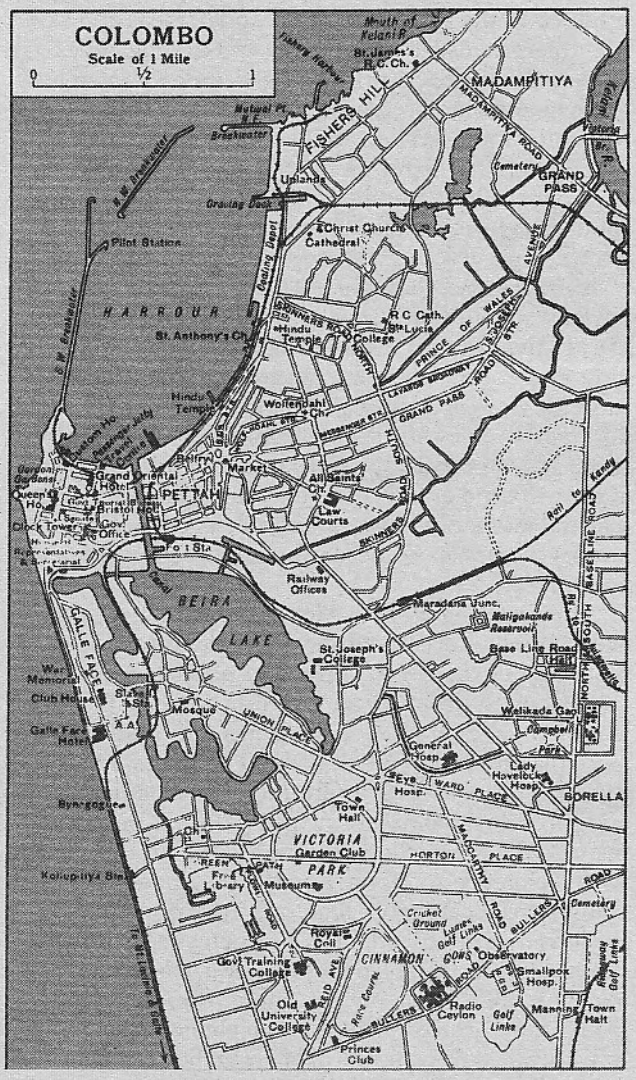
However, it will be difficult to define urban space entirely on the basis of such abstract categories. After all, like any other site of human habitation, urban space is like a living organism, constantly undergoing change. Often, urban space is of course an amalgamation of two or more of these categories. Even a small city like Colombo would be "real" in the older quarters of Fort and Slave Island, where some colonial buildings and their original environs still stand, while more recent historical developments such as road closures and permanent traffic detours, prompted by considerations of security have also "preserved their historical context". But, Colombo also has surreal features. This can be seen in the amalgamation of traditional Kandyan roofs placed on seemingly contemporary buildings. It is just as evident in the kind of "placeless" buildings like the Seylan Tower or the World Trade Centre buildings. These buildings which are not local in design or concept are nevertheless highly vocal, and are the products of the globalisation of capital, ideas and skills. It is this promiscuous hybridity of building types, colours and vintages that moved a visiting German artist to refer to Colombo (particularly Galle Road between Kollupitiya and Wellawatte) as Punk City.

On the other hand, Colombo even exhibits features of hyper-reality or simulation when one takes into account structures such as the recently constructed malls, which stand absolutely outside all local historical contexts. In a sense, they are not very different from Disneyland given their unreal appearance on a socio-political landscape at a time when the country's economy and social fabric are severely under stress. One can visit Crescat Boulevard or Majestic City and forget all such stresses until emerging from the buildings when one has to deal with the private security guards at the exits and entrances to the buildings. And beyond that the rather obvious military presence in the nearby streets and atop some of the roofs, complete with anti-aircraft guns.

However one may elect to see or read the city, to me, every building or structure or barricaded road is a sign that encodes the recent social and political history of a locality or the country in general. The city is neither simply an aggregation of buildings and roads nor the mere playground of architects and planners. It is also a dynamic space with a multitude of sociological issues and problems that has for nearly 100 years been a legitimate space for intellectual inquiry. It is in this context (with reference to Hong Kong) that Abbas observed, "built space bears more than one inscription, that built space is over-inscribed". He also notes that "if there is a message, it is a jumbled one, not reducible to one meaning". Architecture is merely one of these inscriptions. Even so, the structural and design elements of architecture are not merely technical or aesthetic, they also have to be understood in the collective contexts of the political and the social. Many of these conceptual and theoretical formulations, also apply to the study of Colombo. Unfortunately, in Sri Lanka, as in many other parts of South Asia, the city and its dynamics remain largely unexplored intellectually and academically. So whatever analysis of the city one undertakes, it has to be located in this absence of specific and critical knowledge.

Restricting public space

In the recent history of Sri Lanka, war has "inscribed" itself into the city in some noticeable and fundamental ways. Among the first casualties in the environment of war, has been the restrictions imposed on public space. That means restrictions on mobility in general as well as leisure. For instance, the Galle Face Green has been an open public space for over 100 years, initially as a space for the colonial elite to stroll around thinking of their distant motherland in Europe and devise means through which they could cling to their colonial possessions as long as possible. Much later, the Galle Face



A HANDBOOK FOR TRAVELLERS IN INDIA, PAKISTAN, NEPAL, BANGLADESH AND SRI LANKA (CEYLON)

became the preserve of the colonised local elite and still later, it came to be frequented by the public at large. But in terms of today's politics, it is also a high security area right in front of the Army Headquarters and in close proximity to the Navy Headquarters, the official residences of the president and the prime minister, as well as the Presidential Secretariat. In the kind of conflict that is going on in Sri Lanka, all of these sites are potential targets for terrorist attacks. In fact, there are a number of places very close to Galle Face where bomb explosions and assassinations have already taken place.

Thus, Galle Face is not the same space that the colonial rulers established or what the local elite inherited in the late 1940s. It is also not the place that many of us went to fly kites and ride ponies in the 1970s and even in the 1980s. It is a testimony to the institutional importance of Galle Face as an open place for leisure that it has not yet been completely closed to the public despite its location. At the time of writing, the Green has been completely fenced off, but the reason for this is re-turfing as opposed to security considerations.

Up to the time of the recent closure for maintenance and renovation, Galle Face was a place that attracted large numbers of people in the evenings, and one can imagine that barring any state restriction, it will continue to attract people once it is reopened. But the differences between 20 years ago and the present are obvious. There is a permanent army post checking vehicles on the adjacent Galle Road. Hundreds of soldiers monitor Galle Face and the sea beyond from behind the high wall and barbed wire protecting the Army Headquarters compound. There are police officers patrolling the premises, and perhaps many more not in uniform. The navy patrols the oceanfront at regular intervals. In addition, all leisure activities can be suspended without warning when a politician of 'importance' happens to be visiting that part of town. Photography is prohibited in the area, and so memories have to be preserved in one's mind and not on film. Moreover, beyond 9:30 pm the crowd does not stay on at Galle Face because security restrictions become more stringent at night. Besides, public transport in the vicinity of Galle Face has been suspended for security reasons and the buses in adjacent neighbourhoods come to a standstill by this time. The mobility of the average citizen who commutes on public vehicles is thus severely disrupted.

A similar situation prevails in the leisure area just outside the parliament complex in Kotte. There again, the restrictions are the same. Vendors selling edibles are required to close their stalls by 8 pm, and after which people usually disperse because of the restriction on food as well as due to a general sense of insecurity that people have subconsciously internalised.

The garden city transformed

In the beginning of the 20th century, Colombo was referred to in many travel commentaries of the time as the garden city of Asia. The streets were tree-lined and the houses had large yards, manicured lawns and flower beds. More importantly, these pleasing sights, though privately owned, were open to view from the street. The private grounds were generally demarcated by fences or low boundary walls. These walls have become progressively higher. Where only fences once existed, high boundary walls have now appeared in the city and its suburban extensions. Besides, many of the large gardens of the early part of last century have by now been partitioned and sold many times over in small allotments. In addition to the general restrictions imposed by the state, all these attendant changes have transformed large parts of the private spaces in this once-fabled garden city into a barricaded and fortified amalgamation of private residences.

The restriction of private space and the aesthetic disfiguration of the street fronts have seriously curtailed and disrupted the citizenry's visual opportunities. All of these changes point to people's increasing sense of insecurity over time. The emergence of high walls has

taken place over time, but with marked rapidity and consistency at particular historical junctures. These are the 1971 JVP insurrection, the 1983 violence against Tamils, and the reign of terror of the JVP and the state in the late 1980s. All of these moments, marked a general breakdown of law and order and the state's very clear inability to ensure security. Moreover, since the late 1980s the crime rate both in the city and in the country in general has also increased quite considerably. In some ways the government's war with the Tamil Tigers has a bearing on this as well. After all, many of the violent crimes committed in the country at the present are linked to military and police personnel who have deserted their units. The public's response to this general climate of insecurity, when it can afford it, is to build ever-higher fences and walls. In essence, they have decided to protect themselves in the general absence of protection from the state.

Barricaded roads

Whereas the private response is simply to put up a taller wall, public spaces associated with institutional power and authority have extraordinarily elaborate but often cumbersome security systems. Some of this involves the appropriation of public spaces and utilities by the select at the expense of the masses. It would be no an exaggeration to suggest that more roads have been closed or partially closed within the city limits of Colombo over the last 10 years than new ones have been laid since Independence in 1948.

Long before the present conflict arose in its violent forms, Sri Lanka had already established a tradition in road closures due to perceived insecurity. One of the earliest casualties was the road linking the Janadhipathi Mawatha near President's House and the Customs Office closer to the sea. Today, that road is completely within the compound of the Foreign Ministry and serves as the ministry's car park. Another early casualty is the road that used to run between the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and what later became the Sri Lanka Rupawahini Corporation, between Bauudhaloka Mawatha and Independence Square, which has become the joint car park of these two state electronic media organs. Both of these roads were permanently closed for reasons of security during the 1971 JVP insurrection, even though at the time it was considered highly unusual.

Amidst today's escalated conflict and heightened insecurity, permanent and temporary road closures have become the norm rather than the exception. One entire section of Galle Road near Temple Trees (the prime minister's residence) is permanently shut off, while what is open to traffic in the daytime also gets closed after 7 pm. The stretch of road that runs behind Temple Trees is also permanently closed. After President Kumaratunga moved residence to the Presidential House in Colombo 1, much of that area is also partially closed to traffic. Through similar permanent and partial road closures, the compound marked by Bauudhaloka Mawatha, Keppetipola Mawatha and other lanes in the vicinity of Colombo 3, where high profile politicians and military commanders live, has become a heavily fortified area with severe restrictions on public access.

Monsoon-time Galle Face.

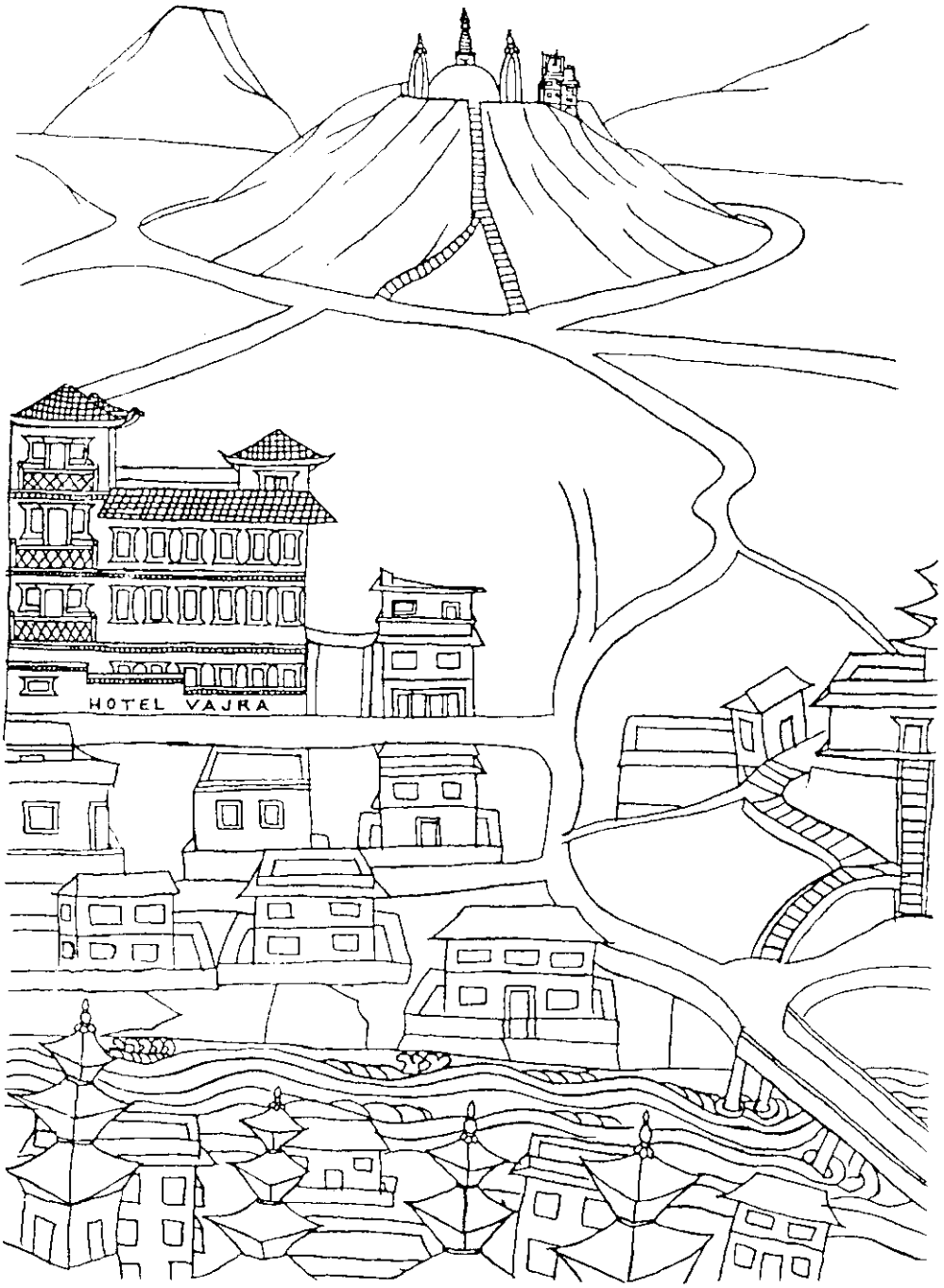
ers referring to the Hilton and Oberoi checkpoints as well as the Burger Land checkpoint, all with reference to the corporate establishments in the vicinity of these barricades. To many, they no longer seem like signs of war. In this sense, it would appear that the absence of war would be the abnormality. In Biyagama an intersection is referred to in popular usage as Bella Kapapu Handiya, which literally means in Sinhala, the intersection (or junction) where the head was cut off. This refers to the intense period of political violence in the late 1980s during which many assassinations took place, including in this locality. While the reference to this particular intersection using such graphic language is indicative of people's need to remember, the merging of check points within the identities of businesses in the vicinity is a sign of covering up the fact of war in everyday life. In this scheme of things, the Oberoi and Hilton checkpoints are as normal, routine and familiar as Oberoi and Hilton Hotels themselves.

Symbols of war and local capital

Capitalism has also made its contribution towards this process of routinisation of war in the urban space of Colombo. One of the most profitable inroads that capitalism has made into the conflict and war is in the realm of military procurement. Small time businessmen supply uniforms to the armed forces. Shady arms dealers with local and international linkages supply sophisticated weapons systems and other military hardware to the armed forces as well as the LTTE. On the other hand, a lucrative black economy has also evolved around the war. Merchants smuggle restricted items into the areas controlled by the LTTE. There are also those who trade in military hardware hawked by deserting service personnel. But these manifestations of capitalism profiting from war are generally not very visible, unless one elects to look.

But, there are a number of publicly visible ways in which local capitalism has made direct inroads by practically making an enterprise out of war and conflict and in the process merging its artefacts with the cityscape. Many industrial and trading establishments have found it appropriate and convenient to advertise their presence in the circuits of Sri Lankan capitalism and hawk their wares at the roadblocks and checkpoints. This is, after all, a most sensible thing to do. Since people always have to slow down at check points, they are ideal for the placement of billboards and other commercial messages. Courier companies, Orex Leasing, Siddhalaepa Balm, Maliban Biscuits, Korean Businessmen's Association in Sri Lanka and many other enterprises have joined in this great adventure of capitalist communication in a time of war. Local organisations and businesses in the immediate environs of checkpoints have also entered this dynamic of corporate image-making. It is no longer surprising to see the local garage sponsoring the little steel cabin in which the soldiers and policemen spend much of their time. It may not be too surprising to see in the near future signs like the following: "The Army Tanks at the Battle of Mankulam Sponsored by Tata and Maruti" or "The LTTE Weapons Used at the Battle of Elephant Pass are Courtesy of DMK."

This, then, was an elementary reading of how certain kinds of restrictions, developments and adaptations have evolved in Colombo city in the context of the ongoing war in the country. People have elected to continue with their lives making adjustments to these restrictions and routinising in the process both the restrictions imposed by war as well as the war itself. This normalisation, while clearly a means of coping with a difficult situation, may in fact become a barrier to the resolution of the conflict that has created these difficulties in the first place. It is also in this extended sense of apathy and "over-tolerance" that we see individuals taking their children to schools in different vehicles in case there are bomb explosions, thereby maximising the possibility of survival of at least some family members in true Darwinian fashion. It is also this sensibility which allows Vesak greeting cards to carry pictures of armed soldiers and battle tanks completely subverting the meaning of Vesak as well as the central teachings of the Buddha himself.



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

Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside.

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

John Collee
The London Observer.

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

Time.

in Kathmandu, the Vajra

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

"Mount Sino-Nepalese Friendship"

B.P. Koirala: On the question of the Nepalese-Chinese border, there are still differences. In our view, there are disputes in four places, based on the historical situation in the past 50 years. Now it is time to settle the disputes.

Chairman Mao Zedong: Good.

Koirala: In our talks with premier Zhou we have worked out several principles: first, draw the boundary based on the existing traditionally-accepted boundary line; second, take into consideration the practical situation of jurisdiction by either side at the border; third, try to solve the dispute on the few places; if some cannot be solved, hand them to a joint committee.

Mao: That's good.

Koirala: The principles are good so long as there are disputes between our two sides in specific places, which make us feel uneasy. When I went to Hangzhou, I told premier Zhou Enlai that I had come to Hangzhou with an uneasy mind. Premier Zhou said I should absolutely feel at ease.

Mao: You should absolutely feel at ease. Burma feared us, but now we have set its mind at rest. The Burmese now know our heart.

Koirala: I met with prime minister Ne Win before I came. He asked me to speak frankly with chairman Mao and premier Zhou Enlai, so I have spoken about all these things.

Mao: Good. These disputes are easy to resolve. There are no human beings in the mountain passes. As for disputes over the Himalaya, a joint committee may be established to solve them.

Koirala: To you, the currently disputed places are of no importance, while they matter to us. It is a question of prestige.

Mao: Don't worry; they can be solved.

Koirala: There is another question, a question of sentiment. We call it Sagarmatha, the West calls it Everest and you call it Qomolangma. This place has always been within our boundary, but premier Zhou Enlai said it was within yours.

Mao: You should not feel uneasy about it.

Koirala: It is a sentimental question.

Mao: It can be solved, half for each side. The southern part is yours and the northern part is ours.

Koirala: How about the mountain top?

Mao: Half for each side as well. Will that be alright? If it cannot be solved now, we may postpone it as well. The mountain is very high and it can safeguard our security at the border. Neither of us will suffer losses. If all of it is given to you, sentimentally we shall feel sorry. If all of it is given to us, sentimentally you will feel sorry. We can have a boundary marker on top of it.

Surya P. Upadhayaya: Who is to do it?

Mao: Difficult to do! We may have a written record of it. We shall inform you when our people are to climb it from your side and you will inform us when your people are to climb it from our side.

Upadhayaya: In the past, mountain climbers had to have a Nepali visa.

Mao: A mountain climber from a third country intending to climb from your side may obtain a visa from your country.

Pan Zili: In the past, mountain climbers had to have a permit from the local government of Tibet when they wanted to climb it from Tibet.

Luo Guibo: In the past, some foreign mountain climbers obtained visas from our embassy in Switzerland.

Koirala: No.

Mao: The long-time practice is that to climb it from Tibet, one has to get a permit from the local government of Tibet.

Koirala: There are other disputes.

Mao: It is easy to solve them. It is easy to solve them with you, unlike the resolution of disputes with India. Our disputes with India involve scores of thousands of square kilometres.

Koirala: Ours involve only several square kilometres.

Mao: The mountain can be renamed. We shall not call it Everest; that was a name given by Westerners. Neither shall we call it Sagarmatha, nor shall we call it Qomolangma. Let's name it Mount Sino-Nepalese Friendship.

This mountain has the highest summit in the world, with a height of over 8,800 metres. The United States, the Soviet Union and India have no mountain of this height. Only our two countries have. You may hold an internal meeting to discuss the question and air your suggestions. It may be put off for settlement in the future if no agreement is reached.

FROM A VERBATIM RECORD IN MAO ZEDONG ON DIPLOMACY, FOREIGN LANGUAGE PRESS, BEIJING.

Water

WATER IS a valuable resource, vital to human life. Water is owned by the commons. South African water policy states that: "There shall be no ownership of water but only a right (for environmental and basic human needs) or an authorisation for its use. ... Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient water."

Today, however, in many countries, including Sri Lanka, access to clean water has become very scarce owing to human attempts to control and manage this natural resource.

The Sri Lankan government's proposed National Water Resources Policy states that "all surface and ground water are owned by the state and managed by the government in partnership with water users on behalf of all Sri Lankans". This policy is the result of ongoing natural resource privatisation as promoted by transnational corporations and international financial institutions.

If water becomes government property, will we have the right to use it? Can the government own the water under the soil of our land? What about the air we breathe, and who owns the rain?

Today in Sri Lanka, more and more water is being taken out of the hands of small communities, siphoned off for bigger causes, and later reallocated at higher prices. The human and environmental consequences of such short-sighted management cannot be underestimated. In a region of growing demands on a limited resource, the increasing scarcity of water could result in devastating conflicts and catastrophes.

Rice is the staple food of our society, and access to water is essential for its cultivation. National policy-makers and international financial institutions including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank argue that the rice paddy farmers waste water and thus must be forced to pay for it.

If we measure the amount of water taken up by plants against that which drains away and evaporates, we get an average efficiency level of about 30%. But is the other 70% really lost? Large amounts of it flow back into the system and are used again downstream. The issue, then, is whether our irrigation systems are still efficient enough to reuse the water.

15 July,2001

Mr.Vajpayee where are you...?

Source: (To join send a blank e-mail to) Pakipower-subscribe@egroups.com

Centuries ago, King Parakramabahu (1164-1197) constructed a system that recycled water so that every drop was used for agriculture. In those days, we also had rice varieties that did not need such huge amounts of water. The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) destroyed these varieties during the Green Revolution, and it now wants to discourage people from engaging in paddy cultivation.

Although the Sri Lankan Minister of Irrigation denies that the proposed Water Resources Policy involves the imposition of a water-pricing mechanism, a careful reading of the proposed law shows otherwise. It is clear that the proposed policy will protect the rights of large companies with water entitlements. Small users will be charged higher prices for water, electricity and other resources that use water.

Thousands of Bolivians took to the streets in protest of water privatisation in April 00. British investors, including the Bechtel corporation that catalysed the problems in Bolivia, were recently in Sri Lanka on a "water mission" to explore the scope for developing joint ventures with Sri Lankan companies.

All water in the water cycle, whether on land, underground or in surface channels; whether falling on, flowing through or infiltrating such systems, should be treated as part of the commons. The water required to meet basic human needs and to maintain environmental sustainability must be guaranteed as a right. The national government should act as the custodian of the nation's water resources, and its powers in this regard should be exercised as a public trust.

FROM "WHO OWNS THE RAIN?" IN THIRD WORLD NETWORK FEATURES BY HEMANTHA WITHANAGE.

Veto power for South Asia

IN AND around the meetings between Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pervez Musharraf, there will be talk of 'core issues'. The Indo-Pak relationship is the core issue in South Asian security, Kashmir is the core issue in Indo-Pak relations, and terrorism or state terrorism (depending on your point of view) is the core issue in Kashmir. It will be easy to forget that underlying all these 'core issues' is a core structural problem. Briefly stated, it is the improbability of South Asia as a region in a world that is rapidly organising itself into regions. This core problem is structural because it is tied up with geography.

Solutions to structural problems require magnificent leaps of the imagination—true paradigm shifts. Try this one out for size: Imagine a South Asia permanent representative at the UN Security Council with veto powers. Imagine these powers being contingent on consensus-evolving mechanisms within South Asia. Imagine what this does for regional identity and for global governance.

History and culture have provided complacent explanations for the resilience of the India-Pakistan 'problem'. The history-culture analysis has ruled minds for too long and with too little scrutiny. The fact is that the India-Pakistan 'problem' is structurally very similar to the India-Bangladesh 'problem', the India-Sri Lanka 'problem', the India-Nepal 'problem', and even the India-Bhutan 'problem'. The relative power of each of these smaller neighbours vis-a-vis India is no doubt different, but their threat perceptions are more or less the same. And the reverse is equally true. If India's imperious size sustains the small neighbour's fear of its supposed imperial ambitions, protective action on the part of the smaller neighbour, such as its cultivation of extra-regional ties, makes India feel insecure.

The India-Pakistan problem is the most conspicuous manifestation of this structural problem: In any South Asia-wide meeting, regional issues always get bogged down in the Rann of Kashmir. At a recent such event, a Sri Lankan participant remarked laconically that South Asia turns out to be a Himalayan enclave where there are difficulties between Muslims and Hindus. But the same person and other colleagues from Bangladesh and Nepal also admitted privately that the India-Pakistan imbroglio is not entirely a matter of dismay for their countries. Pakistan's 'standing up' to

India provides them with bargaining space.

A South Asia identity will face a structural constraint even if India and Pakistan found a way of getting along. There are few regions in the world with a comparably dominant 'lead-player'. North America is one example, and here the US is unchallenged due to its global power. In South Asia, however, India's predominance will remain challengeable for a simple reason. In a world of power blocs, the smaller neighbour will always gain leverage vis-a-vis India by building relations with extra-regional powers. The latter lot will always find it expedient to patronise the small neighbour in order to maintain pressure on India. This was precisely the strategic logic of the Cold War.

Some Indian analysts expect the current warmth in US-India relations to free India from her neighbourly vulnerabilities. This expectation is unrealistic. The US would not simply forsake its leverage with India even if India were an ally. America's switch from Pakistan to India is not the dumping of Pakistan. The end of the Cold War does not mean that the US will abandon Pakistan. It simply means that Pakistan is available more cheaply. The same holds true also of other neighbours as well as other extra regional powers.

The weak regional identity of South Asia is manifest in the failure of the regional organisation (SAARC). But SAARC is weak because member states assign a low status to it. India remains wary because she suspects (correctly) that a regional organisation will become a forum for India-bashing. The other six members have bilateral relations with India and none (except Nepal and Bhutan) even share borders. The smaller countries are cautious because SAARC gives legal expression to a region that will be dominated by India due to its sheer size. The weakness of SAARC is not remarkable. What is remarkable is that the organisation should exist at all. While geography sustains this low-level equilibrium, there are costs to the peoples of the region. The global system rewards states and peoples that have succeeded in constructing regional blocs and punishes those that have failed.

South Asia needs a paradigm change. Regional identity can become a serious proposition if it is associated with regional power in the world. Citizens of South Asian states and others interested in regional peace should demand a region-based reform of global institutions, particularly the UN. They should demand a permanent veto-wielding delegate for South Asia on the Security Council. They should demand the South Asian veto to be contingent on acceptable mechanisms for intra-regional consensus.

Changes in the incentives for regional and global cooperation can be dramatic. India, more than the other regional states, has strong views on global governance. A South Asian seat at the high table will impart an Indian flavour to debates on security issues but also derivatively on other matters of concern such as WTO. The Indian view of the world at large is not too different from the perspectives of other regional states. At the same time, any intra-regional mechanism for evolving consensus will make India mindful of the concerns of her neighbours. The outcome will not be Bhutan getting a Security Council veto, but Bhutan getting better bargaining positions vis-a-vis India, and India (and South Asia) getting better bargaining positions vis-a-vis the rest of the world. The details can be worked out, but as a general scheme this proposal can be a win-win game for the states and for the region as a whole.

Mr Vajpayee and General Musharraf should get down to serious bilateral business but in their spare hours they can do worse than indulging in some mental acrobatics. Alas they will waste that time in trying to get to know each other better, ruminating over Urdu verse, or visiting each other's ancestral homes. The business agenda will be tightly scheduled—probably with extra-regional involvement—and for the rest of the time there will be history and culture, unless there is a leap of the imagination somewhere between Islamabad and New Delhi.

FROM "LEAP OF IMAGINATION: A SOUTH ASIAN SEAT IN SECURITY COUNCIL" BY HARIS GAZDAR IN *THE TIMES OF INDIA*, 9 JULY 01.

Baba's boys

ONE OF the most powerful holy men in India presides over the world's biggest ashram, Prasanthi Nilayam, or Abode of Peace, in a remote town located in a barren corner of Andhra Pradesh, a desperately poor state in a desperately poor country. The town boasts a shiny planetarium, two hospitals that treat patients for free, a college, a music school and immaculate, colourful playgrounds. Luxury apartment buildings are springing up on land that just a few decades ago was covered with ramshackle mud huts. And there's a brand-new airport to serve the wealthier devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, a 75-year-old south Indian man with a big bushy Afro and a warm smile.

Somewhere between 10 million and 50 million people worship Sai Baba as God incarnate, and they stream into Puttaparthi from six continents, sleeping in one of the ashram's 10,000 beds or at one of the town's many guesthouses. Meanwhile, the growing number of ex-devotees who decry their former master as a sexual harasser, a fraud and even a paedophile has hardly put a dent in his following, though their voices are getting louder.

"Sai Baba was my God—who dares to refuse God? He was free to do whatever he wanted to do with me; he had my trust, my faith, my love and my friendship; he had me in totality," says Iranian-American former follower Said Khorramshahgol. What Sai Baba chose to do with him, Khorramshahgol says, was to repeatedly call him into private interviews and order him to drop his pants and massage his penis. Other former devotees contend Sai Baba did even more. No matter—in this part of the world, faith is absolute. Believers don't refuse God, and they don't question him.

On Puttaparthi's outskirts, a Hindu temple has a

statue of Sai Baba among its pantheon of deities, standing right next to Krishna. In the town, every conceivable surface is adorned with pictures of Sai Baba wearing an orange robe and a benign smile. There's a photo of him garlanded with fake pink flowers in my hotel room and a giant portrait behind the reception desk. Each afternoon, a speaker across from my bed pipes in music praising the guru. When I buy a pen to take notes, it has Sai Baba's smiling face on it.

Days at the ashram revolve around an event known as "darshan", when Sai Baba walks through an open-air, pastel-coloured hall (called a mandir) and shows his precious self to the assembled multitudes. It takes place once in the morning and once in the afternoon, and people line up for hours beforehand. Everyone is desperate to get in first, because sitting near the front means that Sai Baba might say a few words to you, accept a letter or even invite you into his special chamber for a private interview. Private interviews are the raison d'être of life in Puttaparthi. They're where Sai Baba does most of his famous materialisations—ostensibly conjuring up objects like rings, watches and necklaces from the air as gifts for the faithful.

The afternoon I went to darshan, I spent 45 minutes waiting in a line outside and 45 more minutes sitting cross-legged amid thousands of other worshippers on the marble floor of the mandir. There were almost as many foreigners in the hall, which can seat about 15,000 people, as there were Indians. Dozens of chandeliers hung from the ceiling, which was decorated with gold leaf. At the foot of the mandir was a stage, with a door leading into the guru's private interview room.

Just when the boredom was growing interminable, recorded music started up and a charge went through the crowd as necks craned for a glimpse of Sai Baba, a slightly frail figure wearing his customary floor-length robe and fluffy nimbus of black hair. He gave a little Princess Di wave as he walked from the women's side to the men's side (everything at the ashram is strictly segregated by sex) and then back again, taking some of the letters that were fervently offered to him as he passed. All around me women's eyes were shining, and some of the women rocked back and forth ecstatically. Sai Baba then exited the way he'd entered, and it was over—in less than 10 minutes. An angelic-looking retired woman from Denmark told me she'd been doing this every day, twice a day, for three months.

Darshan is just about the only event that occurs at the ashram. There are no indoctrination or even meditation sessions. Aside from strict vegetarianism, Sai Baba prescribes no particular practices. His teachings are flowery and vague, combining colourful Hindu mythology, a Buddhist focus on transcending worldly desire, the Christian idea of service and an evangelical emphasis on direct experience of the divine. According to *Ocean of Love* a book published last year by the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust, "there is no new path that He is preaching, no new order that He has created. There is no new religion that He has come to add or a particular philosophy that He recommends... His mission is unique and simple. His mission is that of love and compassion."

This pleasant vagueness allows believers to project anything they like onto Sai Baba. People see his hand everywhere, and in Puttaparthi's spiritual hothouse nearly every occurrence is viewed as fresh proof of his power. Apart from letters and the coveted interviews, the accepted way to communicate with Sai Baba is via dreams and visions, and thus the town teems with people interpreting their subconscious hiccups as gospel. An American named George Leland said that Sai has come to him in the guise of a Tijuana, Mexico, traffic cop and a Japanese airline passenger. A 32-year-old Argentine woman told me she gave up her Buenos Aires apartment and her medical studies after Baba summoned her while she slept.

Stories of sacred synchronicity abound. A wheelchair-bound cancer patient from Holland, abandoned by her husband and living with friends who were Sai devotees, had a series of dreams in which the guru beckoned to her. She insisted that she told no one about the dreams, yet one day her friends surprised her with a ticket to India. The ring he materialised for her looks cheap to me—one of the stones had even fallen out—but to her it's a talisman that has helped fight her grinding pain.

To some, Sai Baba radiates love and whimsy, while to others he's stern and tricky, destroying their relationships or afflicting their bodies in the service of their spiritual advancement. Leland, a big, stately 61-year-old who looks like Hollywood's version of a powerful senator, told me, "Swami's job isn't to make you happy, it's to liberate you." In his case, that meant giving up his career as a motivational speaker and then his marriage. "Sai Baba is the most powerful being that ever came to the planet," he said over breakfast at a popular Tibetan restaurant in town. Leland, who has lived in Puttaparthi for four years, feels he must follow him, but that doesn't mean he enjoys it. He said sadly, "Even at this moment, my mind doesn't want to believe that God doesn't want me to be happy, to have a relationship, to be prosperous, to enjoy life."

"Sometimes I think the ashram is a madhouse and Swami is the director," said Rico Mario Haus, a recent 24-year-old convert. I'd met Haus, a Swiss man whose square black glasses lent a bit of quirkiness to his wholesome good looks, two months before in the seaside state of Kerala. We'd both been extras in an Indian musical, and we'd both learned of Puttaparthi from a Sai Baba follower on the set. Ironically (or, as it now seemed to Haus, portentously), we'd played Western devotees of a towering guru who saved the soul of the errant hero. At the time, Haus was a cocky kid planning to ride his motorcycle to Kashmir. Now, wearing white pajamas, he said, "Baba was calling me. When you believe in God, there are no coincidences." Nevertheless, he'd kept his sense of humour and found a certain subversive delight in telling us about the lunatics he lived with. "When you don't have problems, you don't go to the ashram," he said.

Most of the time, Puttaparthi's ambient spiritual hysteria is fairly faint. With its good restaurants and relatively clean streets, the town can be quite pleasant. But there are occasional bursts of madness. One afternoon, a young Malaysian woman had a psychotic breakdown, attacked ashram workers and was dragged away by police. I later found her at the police station, half-catatonic, mumbling "darshan, darshan, darshan" over and over again. At dinner another evening, Haus pointed out a wan Austrian woman tugging around a listless little boy. She was frenzied because she'd had a dream in which Sai Baba instructed her to abandon her 7-year-old son and live on the streets as a beggar, and she didn't know whether she had the "strength" to do it.

Of course, outsiders expect insanity in fringe religions. But Sai Baba isn't just any cult leader. Because he isn't well known in America, it's hard to convey the awesome power he has in India. In addition to the droves of foreigners who flock to see him, Sai Baba's acolytes include the cream of India's elite. Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee is a devotee, as is former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. A 1993 article in the Times of India counts among the guru's followers "governors, chief ministers, assorted politicians, business tycoons, newspaper magnates, jurists, sportsmen, academics and, yes, even scientists."

Even if you don't believe in the miracles he's credited with— resurrections, faith healings, materialisations—his phenomenal popularity in India is easy to understand. Just outside Puttaparthi is an enormous hospital he helped build that provides free cardiology, optometry and nephrology care to all comers. It was funded in part by a $20 million donation from Isaac Tigrett, co-founder of the Hard Rock Café. The pink façade looks like a cross between a Mogul palace and a wedding cake. One enters into a domed hall with marble floors resplendent with images of Sai Baba and other deities — Jesus on the cross, the Buddha, the elephant-headed god Ganesh. Yet for all the architecture's Las Vegas excess, especially in a country where many can't afford even rudimentary medical care, the hospital claims impressive figures: 10,594 free cardiac surgeries, 9,090 kidney operations, 382,328 outpatient consultations.

A host of other charity projects has also won Sai Baba favour with the masses. One of his projects installed 2,500-litre cisterns in several villages in Andhra Pradesh. Indian children who might otherwise never have access to higher education covet spots in his free colleges. Though rumours of chicanery and worse swirl around all these ventures, even Sai Baba's critics admit that he has eased some of the region's suffering. "God or a fraud, no one doubts the good work done by the Sai organisation," wrote the Illustrated Weekly of India.

All this helps explain why there has never been any official action against Sai Baba in India, despite the dozens of ex-believers who insist that his claims to divinity mask a wholly human craving for the bodies of the ashram's young men and boys. The evidence is strong that Sai Baba uses his power to get in his followers' pants. It's also strong that life is slightly less brutal for lots of poor Indians because he exists. Some call him a saint and some call him a lecher. Possibly he's something of both.

The stories about Sai Baba's sexual misconduct are all remarkably similar. "During my 'private audiences' with Sai Baba, Sai Baba used to touch my private parts and regularly massage my private parts, indicating that this was for spiritual purposes," wrote Dutchman Hans de Kraker in a letter sent to French journalist Virginie Saurel. In December 1996, when de Kraker was 24, Sai Baba allegedly asked him to perform oral sex: "He grabbed my head and pushed it into his groin area. He made moaning sounds," de Kraker wrote. "As soon as he took the pressure off my head and I lifted my head, Sai Baba lifted his dress and presented me a semi-erect member, telling me that this was my good luck chance, and jousted his hips towards my face." When de Kraker reported to others what had happened, he was thrown out of the ashram.

American Jed Geyerhahn, who was 16 when Sai Baba started coming on to him, echoes de Kraker's account: "Each time I saw Baba, his hand would gradually make more prominent connections to my groin." The stories are endless, and endlessly alike, concerning mostly boys and men from their midteens to their mid-20s.

They're not new, either. In 1970, Tal Brooke published a book called "Lord of the Air," later renamed "Avatar of Night," a vivid, detailed account of his mind-blowing days as a questing young acolyte and his total disillusionment on learning of his guru's sexual rapacity. Yet it's only recently, thanks in large part to the Internet, that various victims, their parents and defecting officials from within the Sai Organisation have banded together to direct the energy they once poured into worshipping their master toward bringing the man down...

FROM "UNTOUCHABLE?" BY MICHELLE GOLDBERG IN WWW.SALON.COM

Alhamd-u-Lillah

DEATH CELL, Camp Jail, Lahore, Pakistan, 1 July 2001: Having unshakable belief that life and death is in the hands of God Almighty, I am sure that ultimate justice will be done to me by Ahkam-ul-Haakimeen.

My hands are clean, conscience clear.

I have committed no sin except propagation of "Amr-e-Bil Maaroof" and "Nahi-e-Anil Munker" to expose the corrupt practices of the people at the helm and reform society.

I renew my pledge to leave no stone unturned and no gallow unkissed to hold aloft the banner of freedom of press and honesty, devotion and diligence in discharge of my professional duty and in service of the Pakistani nation.

Alhamd-u-Lillah! Your esteemed daily, *The Frontier*

Post, is today again in your hands after a lapse of 152 days and I feel beholden by the sense of profound pride for having been privileged with a rare and unique opportunity to directly address you from the death cell of Camp Jail, Lahore, [Pakistan], through the first issue of the re-launched daily.

The expression of sentiments of sympathy, support, sincerity and fortitude during all this arduous period is and shall remain a real asset for me and my colleagues in the organisation and I find no words to express my gratitude to you.

...The revered readers of my newspapers, *The Frontier Post* and Urdu daily *Maidan*, are well aware of the services rendered by me and my family for the cause of freedom movement in Jammu and Kashmir, Afghan Jehad, glory and propagation of Islam, and uplift of the Muslim Nation.

The history of ups and downs in the life of *The Frontier Post* is evident of the valiant struggle waged by the newspaper for the glory of Islam, to rid the oppressed and Muslims in various regions of the world, including Kashmir, Afghanistan, Palestine, Bosnia and Chechniya, of the yoke of oppression and subjugation.

...Dear readers! Believe it! Had I bowed my head before the rulers of the day, compromising on principles and freedom of the press, my position would not have been after the opening batsman in the batting order of the team of fortune seekers showered with permits, plots, factories and even cash worth billions of rupees.

The witnesses to this fact are by the grace of God still alive, who will bear me out that each and every ruler from General Zia to Nawaz Sharif tried their best to get me entangled in the nest of incentives and inducements by offering me high public office, elevated positions and huge material benefits.

But I would have never dared enter the profession of journalism if I had worldly office and honour dear to me. I would have opted to leave the profession gracefully, rather than be found rolling in wealth alongside my contemporaries.

...Journalists are shouldered with the responsibility of exposing corruption and corrupt practices, guiding the nation on the right path and steering the ship to shore. It can never be expected of me to term night as day and black as white.

I have unshakeable faith in "Iyyak a Nastaeen" (seek help but only from Allah) and truthfulness of my mission. I never liked to be included in the line of people bowing their head before the ruler, with a bowl hanging round their neck.

I have always tried to participate in Jehad (war against all evils) by remaining in the forefront to hold aloft the right to expression and press freedom.

That is why my newspapers, in spite of having vast readership and wide circulation, had always earned the ire of every government and am myself languishing in a condemned prisoners' cell... I pray to God to give me strength and fortitude to remain steadfast on this path littered with barbed wires all around.

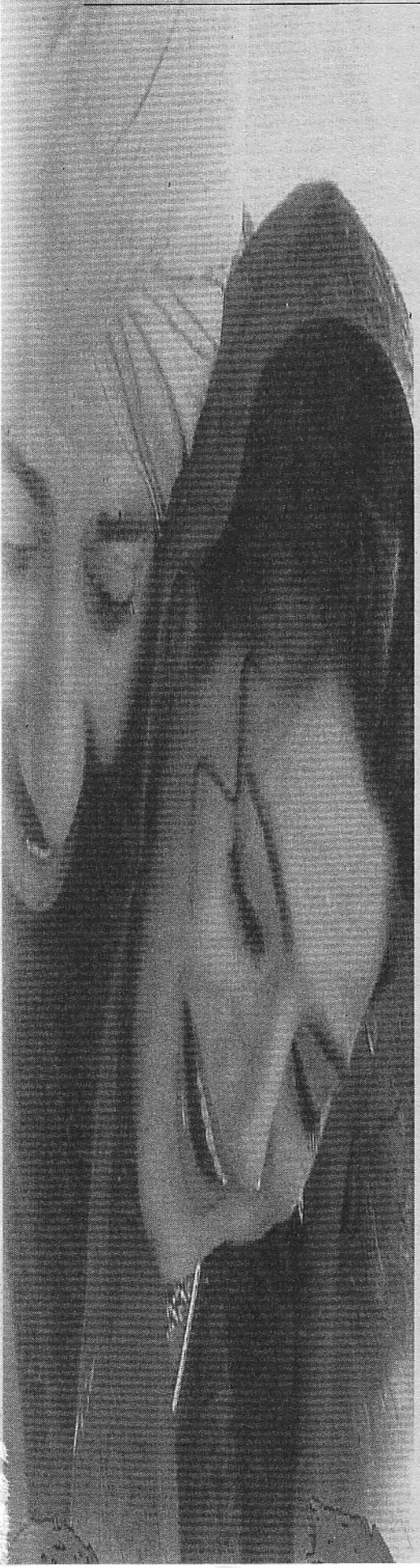
I do admit that my newspapers are forced to swim in turbulent waters but the fact of the matter is that this is not something rare for persons wedded to honesty and truthfulness and who are sincere to their mission. I am proud of having the company of the colleagues who have always marched shoulder to shoulder with me in the hour of trauma, turmoil and acute financial crisis.

There are some colleagues who did not feel hesitant in selling or mortgaging their lifelong belongings and even jewellery of their family, but did not leave me alone.

The truth will triumph, Insha Allah! At this juncture, I feel it is my duty to thank all those who, by taking timely and correct steps and actions, succeeded in controlling the situation after the incident of January 29, 2001 and preventing the provocation from spreading and creating unrest.

I wish to assure all our readers that with Allah's help and blessings, and your continuing support and cooperation, having once again found our feet after the trauma and sadness of days past, we will steadfastly and sincerely serve the nation and the country.

FROM "A SOLEMN PLEDGE" BY REHMAT SHAH AFRIDI, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, THE FRONTIER POST.

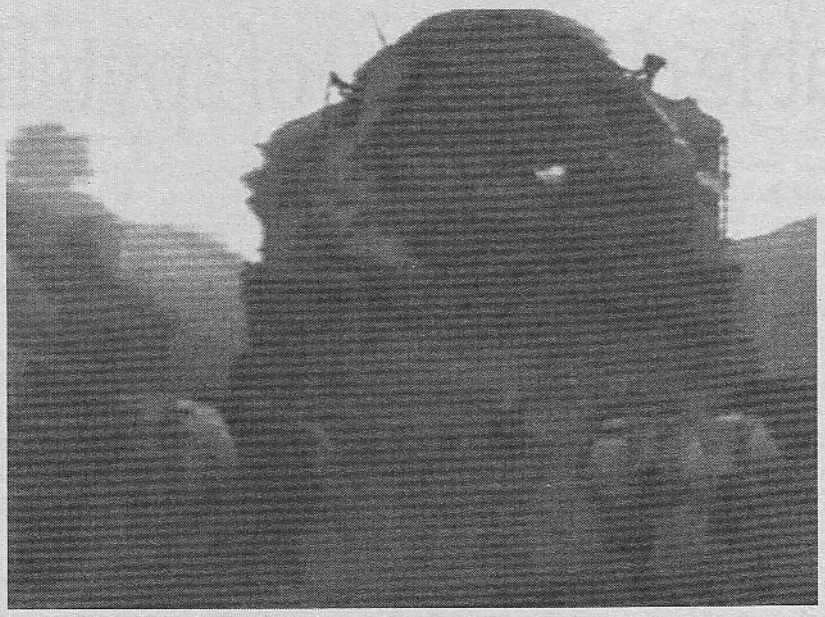


One-man-army Deol fighting his way out of the "Grand Mosque" of Lahore.

GADAR Bombay's gift to Lahore

When crises erupt, satellite television raises the pitch of Indian nationalism and gives it mass appeal. Bombay cinema hurries to catch up with ever-more fervid films, productions that have lately begun a no-holds-barred demonisation of Pakistan. Films from Lahore try to reciprocate, of course, but they hardly have the reach of Hindi films. The changing demography of the audience *(see "Hindi films: The rise of the consumable hero", p.8)* must be playing a role in this increasingly belligerent treatment of geopolitical themes. In long-ago productions, the handsome hero would disappear over the horizon in his Canberra bomber, presumably to fight Pakistan, never to return (or perhaps to return when his beloved had already married his buddy). Back then, Pakistan was a remote enemy that, if ever brought into the script, served as but a prop to sustain the love story. With every new episode that tries to rip the Subcontinent apart—Pokhran/Chagai, Kargil or IC-814— Bombay productions become more shrill. And, they get ever closer to Pakistan, across the line-of-control in Kashmir, amidst terrorist-infested redoubts.

Gadar storms Pakistan's Punjab itself. Starting as a love story that takes off during the Partition, with Sikh boy Tara Singh's love for Muslim girl Sakina, the last third of the film all-of-a-sudden infiltrates Pakistani territory. Sunny Deol sneaks into Lahore to rescue his Amisha Patel, who has been kidnapped by her politician father, a former Amritsar businessman who has gone on to become the ambitious mayor of Lahore. While earlier in the film there are occasional attempts (a la *Bombay*) to balance the Hindu/Sikh magnanimity with Muslim friendship and support, once the script enters Pakistan (across an incon-



Getaway train stops for cows.

gruous border lake), no need is felt for any gesture on behalf of the Pakistani Muslim.

The Pakistanis are depicted as an unregenerate dark-skinned, menacing force—from the consulate official to the *daroga* Suleiman ("I will cut him into so many pieces that he will be unrecognisable."), to the mob that attacks the hero in Lahore. Even the peasant woman who gives the couple refuge as they flee towards India ends up a mercenary wanting to snatch Sakina's *mangalsutra*. The climactic moment of the film occurs on the wide steps of what is obviously meant to represent the Grand Mosque of Lahore (reportedly shot at Lucknow's Irshad Manzil, a Shia shrine, courtesy the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh). Surrounded by the evil adversaries, Sunny Deol goes into a polemical defence of the Indian state and then proceeds to pull a tubewell handpump out of its moorings to take on the enemy. The couple has a son, no more than eight-years-old, who is made to ask querulously, "What is *wrong* with the Pakistanis?" Sakina's Pakistani father is not above having his daughter shot from a helicopter gunship. A whole platoon of Pakistani troopers are made mincemeat by Tara Singh as their getaway train speeds towards India. Suddenly, then the hero slows the train down to a crawl because a herd of cows is blocking the track. Some message there?

Could it be that *Gadar* visits Pakistan purely to be able to villainise Muslims across the border, given the backlash one could invite if this were done to Muslims of India? At other times, one wonders whether the film's descent into Pakistan-bashing had to do with the director Anil Sharma's attempt to rescue the production from the unremittingly poor acting by Sunny Deol. It is not that the film does not have good moments. The cinematography is fine, and does justice to the wide vistas of village Punjab. The mass movement of people to the 'other side' during Partition is also captured well. There is a single indoor scene that is to be appreciated, where Sakina helps her sardar husband fold and tie his turban. Patel knows how to cry convincingly and runs with full stride, but Deol does not know how to dance.

Gadar was running housefull in theatres all over India, and on its way to becoming one of the top grossers of the decade, at the very moment that Pervez Musharraf was visiting Agra. There is no doubt that mass-based big-budget films such as this one distort political sensibilities and subconsciously sabotage the inbred peaceful sentiments of the people. This trend towards nationalist jingoism in the second-largest film industry in the world is worrisome because it impacts on the geopolitics of a very unstable and nuclearised South Asia.

Gadar fosters gadar. It is not only the storyline of this movie that depicts frenzied mayhem, this soulless film itself encourages "frenzied mayhem". It is clear that the producer and director named the movie for something that they like rather than something they see as negative. And, backing them are the financiers who realise that anti-Pakistan sentiment offers a treasury of commercial possibilities in present-day India.

They may be weak tools, but peer pressure and ostracism may be one way to get the producers and directors to back off. Unfortunately, since criticism of exploitative films such as *Gadar* is restricted to the rarified liberal-progressive echelon, this does not seem a near-term possibility in a film industry whose father figure is the reactionary Balasaheb Thackeray of the Shiv Sena. What this means is that films like these will be produced again and again till this particular genre is exhausted of its money-spinning possibilities.

While the impact of *Gadar* on the targetted Indian audience is the main cause for worry, it is nevertheless worth considering what kind of reaction it will generate in Pakistan, where it is being viewed via videocassettes and DVDs. Will they see it as a movie targetting themselves, or as just another adventure plot? Will they know to distance themselves from the Pakistan depicted in *Gadar*? Perhaps, for the film reviewer of the *Newsline*, the well-known magazine from Karachi, does not seem too perturbed by *Gadar*. S/he reviewer ignores the patriotic proclivity of *Gadar*, and is quite content to say: "Notwithstanding the two flaws in the film—its excessive length and weak musical score—*Gadar* is certainly worth the watch for its brilliant dramatic sequences, commendable performances and touching moments."

—reviewed by ***Kanak Mani Dixit***

The inescapable circularity of spytalk

by Irfan Ahmed

IN MY response ("Whiff of a conspiracy", June 2001) to Subir Bhaumik's "Conspirators' cauldron" (May 2001), I had pointed to certain well-known criteria that distinguish journalism from intelligence-gathering. In his rejoinder "Indian wheat and Bangla chaff" (July 2001), Bhaumik returns to the fray armed with more classified information from secret files, some grand claims about his proximity to intelligence sources and his facility in dealing with their murky ways and a bit of tasteless abuse of Bangladeshi journalists. I feel properly chastised. Obviously, when journalists like Bhaumik are about, sermonising on this or that issue concerning Bangladesh, it is best for Bangladeshis to retire en masse and listen with rapt attention so that they equip themselves to understand their own country a little better.

But Bhaumik's omniscience notwithstanding, he has failed to respond to the substantive queries I had raised. I therefore feel constrained to remind him of the fundamental distinction between a reporter and a spy.

By definition, the intelligence report must concoct a world of conspiracies, machinations and intrigue, based on "secret, unverifiable sources".

A media report is a verifiable account that belongs in the public domain and is therefore as much available to the undercover agent as it is to the ordinary citizen. Freely available, verifiable public information is not what the undercover agent deals in. By definition, the intelligence report must concoct a world of conspiracies, machinations and intrigue, based on "secret, unverifiable sources". That is its professional compulsion. The spy's report is not open to corroboration nor is it governed by any code of ethics. Granted there are conspiracies that affect the public domain. But then the intelligence agency involved in uncovering it does not usually make it public precisely because it is also involved in the conspiracy as a counter-conspirator.

Since intelligence and counter-intelligence are party to the same conspiracy, their reports bear the stamp of their respective clandestine mandates. When such reports are recycled as media reports, the objective of the concerned intelligence outfit is clearly to influence an outcome in a desired direction. Is it the job of a journalist to participate in and fulfill the objectives of undercover agent? That is a question of ethics. There is also the question of verifiability that is involved when such reports are reproduced as media analysis. The authentication of the information reported is foreclosed by an inescapable circularity. The undercover report is its own source. By pushing intelligence reports as media reports which cannot be challenged, Bhaumik creates a situation where he will have to be judged either as the best reporter going or as a mere cog in the undercover mechanism. And when the sceptical among the public raise pertinent questions, he hides behind the privilege of confidentiality.

Bhaumik, of course, claims that he has surmounted all these problems because he is so adept at playing off one intelligence agency against another. That requires very special abilities, as Bhaumik makes amply clear, and we can just accept his word for it. But I am left to wonder why a person of such self-confessed abilities restricts himself to ferreting out information from India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Bangladesh's Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) when there are so many more he can tap in to explain South Asian developments

This brings me to some of the specific charges that Bhaumik has levelled. He says that I have not named the "foreign experts" who I have cited as saying that the Kotaliputra bomb had "military origins". I am not as privileged as Bhaumik to be in touch with so many foreign experts, but will clarify that "sources" did not tell me this. I merely repeated what had appeared in Bangladesh media reports. There are a couple of points on which Bhaumik has misread my argument. I did not suggest anywhere that Islamic terrorists did not plant the bomb at Kotaliputra. I simply said there was no proof that Islamic terrorists were responsible for the explosion. I still maintain that. Intelligence claims do not constitute evidence. Till the case is closed, the public has a right to get authentic information and not opinions based on unverifiable sources with a long history of misinforming. That is the difference between spreading rumours and reporting with credibility.

Evidently Bhaumik's inability to make careful distinctions is why he is "astounded" by my "assertion" that the "Breda conspiracy has disappeared from Dutch papers". What was said was, "The Breda conspiracy has also disappeared from the papers. In fact, check with the Dutch papers and you will see no such rumours. Notice also that the source quoted was the Indian mainstream media, and not the Dutch media." Read rigorously and logically, it is fairly clear that the papers I referred to were Bangladesh papers, which had quoted the Indian media. To those who do not have to

be fed their information it is obvious enough, from the second and third sentences, that there is no reference to any such report in the Dutch media.

Specifically on the story that Bhaumik broke, about the Breda-based, ISI-backed conspiracy to kill Sheikh Hasina, based on an intelligence report submitted to him by RAW or some other outfit, there are some questions I would like to raise. Bhaumik seems to suggest that the absence of any denial by Pakistan is proof of veracity. If only the geo-politics of nations were settled so easily, through the zeal of heroic individuals close to undercover agents. There could be any number of reasons why the Inter Services Intelligence should choose to say nothing. Why is it incumbent on the ISI to contest a story, on an alleged conspiracy hatched in Netherlands to kill Sheikh Hasina, published in an Indian paper? And is the Pakistani lack of interest in the story sufficient proof that there is indeed such a conspiracy? There are questions of method and logic that arise here.

Let us grant that there was conspiracy. Suppose the ISI knew the consequences and decided to keep mum? Suppose they felt that their objective was best served by letting people know that such a conspiracy was on? But then how can the absence of a Pakistani denial be construed to indicate the agency's involvement. Or suppose the ISI knew that Bhaumik's story was a RAW feed, in the same way that the transcript of the reported conversation between two ISI agents that he keeps referring to might well be? The fact that the Bangladesh government has so far failed to interest the Dutch authorities in this matter should make him wonder. Now that the matter has been well-publicised thanks to Bhaumik's efforts, would the Dutch let a few Bangladeshi terrorists and the ISI plan a murder on their soil? Bhaumik may well have converted an intelligence report into a media report on behalf of some intelligence agency. It will not do to so easily disparage everybody else's intelligence.

The line of credibility

Bhaumik also makes statements about Bangladesh that unfortunately give the lie to his claims to being an "East Bengali with firm roots in Bangladesh". For one, he has no idea about the 'bomb scene' in the country. It has by now acquired the status of a major industry. There are bomb manufacturing units in every town, especially so in the towns near the Indian border. Media reports (not intelligence reports) say that the raw material is imported from India. Hundreds have died from bomb explosions. Many others have died while making bombs. In fact, more people have died from bombs in Bangladesh than soldiers have died in Kashmir.

Bangladeshis have been hurling bombs at each other and will continue to do so for a long time to come. Practically everyone seems to be doing it. Those who have to live through it do not particularly need to cast about for Dutch conspiracies and then, through all manner of convolutions, link them to Bangla Islamic terrorists to explain why they happen. The bomb going off in Narayanganj did not blow up in my face because it just happened to go off in an Awami League office. Many bombs have gone off before and many more will. But till the culprits are taken to task on the basis of solid proof, nothing will abate. Taking action on the say-so of Bhaumik's undercover friends is not really going to help. Journalists can only report what can be proved and leave it at that. Nothing more can be said without breaching the line of credibility.

Not content with connecting the Dutch conspiracy with Islamic fundamentalism, Bhaumik then finds all manner of historical parallels. But his understanding of contemporary and historical Bangladesh is not terribly sound. The 1971 Al-Badr and Razakar killing of intellectuals and the recent bomb blasts at meetings organised by the Communist Party of Bangladesh simply do not compare. These meetings had nothing to do with intellectuals. One of these meetings was organised for labourers and the Ramna meeting had people from different strata of society. So much for the claim about Islamic fundamentalists targetting intellectuals. It is in fact the attack on meetings organised by a party that has no clout that is odd. Had AL or BNP or even Jammat been attacked, there would have been strikes and protest. Is it possible to draw any strong conclusions from all this? Were they picked on precisely because they were soft targets? Was it due to an internal feud? Was it a Maoist attack of the kind which has become more common now? Nobody knows as yet. Certainly, not mere Bangladeshis sitting in Bangladesh. What happened in 1971 was by contrast so much clearer. Then, there was a prepared list of people who were killed with the active support of the Pakistan army to avenge Pakistan's loss. Bhaumik should not decide on other people's history without first getting the facts right.

Hundreds have died from bomb explosions. Many others have died while making bombs. In fact, more people have died from bombs in Bangladesh than soldiers have died in Kashmir.

Having rehashed Bangla history, Bhaumik proceeds to recast its politics. He persists with the error that Awami League is a pro-Indian party. This is as erroneous as the notion that devout Bangladeshi Muslims are all anti-Indian or devout Hindus are all Bangladesh haters. As a matter of fact, Indians can afford the luxury of being pro- or anti-Awami League or Bangladesh Nationalist Party but no party in Bangladesh can really afford to have an anti-Indian policy and survive. The media may create images but all one has to do is look at trade figures over the last 15 years and see the ever-rising index, and the reality of Indo-Bangladesh relations will emerge. That is the reality of Bangladesh's

foreign policy. Bhaumik says that India should not fritter away the gains made in the last five years. Please understand that gains have been made not just in the last five years. The gains have been on for quite sometime and will go on, no matter who comes to power.

As far as Bhaumik's story of the LTTE angle in the plot to assassinate Sheikh Hasina is concerned, he has not provided any evidence other than repeating what his intelligence reports have to say. Such things are more competently described by Le Carre, Ludlum, poor Jeffrey Archer and the like. I, for one, would hesitate to provoke the journalist to further reiterations of the same banality. Sheikh. Hasina faces many threats to her life particularly since some of her father's killers are still on the lam. Naturally, some of them may be plotting her death and security agencies must be keeping track. My only plea is that reporting remain within the boundaries of verification. If there is no definite proof, spare the readers. They have a right to facts, not fiction. Let the intelligence agencies do their work and the media its.

Anti-Indian feelings in Bangladesh are traceable to a few issue like the Farakka Barrage, lopsided balance of trade, border management by the BSF, the support given to the Chittagong Hill Tract insurgents, and "migrant bashing" in the Indian media and by certain political parties. But anti-Indian feelings also rise because avowed "pro-Bengalis" often make unnecessary statements.

What may have caused the Padua takeover is still not known and till an independent investigation establishes the truth we can never be sure. Nor is the reason for the Boraibari attack clear. The chief of India's Border Security Force, in an interview given to an Indian magazine, has said that the Boraibari attack was cleared 'from above'. Some other reports have also surfaced. The post-clash situation is one of mutually contradictory statements. Unless both parties agree to tell the truth, we will all be engaging in pointless speculation. To stay within the parameter of facts is the safest and most reliable way to inform the public.

Bhaumik's close reading of intelligence reports seems to have affected him in matters of style as well. Intelligence reports are prepared for the government. Therefore, though often imaginative, their style is literal and dry. There is no place in it for metaphor, irony and the other stylistic devices of language and argument. I therefore can only sympathise with Bhaumik when he says "how preposterous to think India engineered the border crisis to strengthen Sheikh Hasina". If he read my response with the care he seems to reserve only for classified documents, he will find that I was merely being ironical. I was simply trying to take the implications of Bhaumik's argument to their logical conclusion by speculating on all the other possibilities that an open-ended conspiracy theory seemed to offer. Just as there is no proof connecting the border incident with the Islamists and pro-Pakistanis in the Bangladesh army and only speculation, there could be any other combination as well. I added my own concoction to show the absurdities one could conclude from the assumptions that Bhaumik makes. Conspiracies are not established by hearsay. And that is the point that Bhaumik misses. This is understandable, for in his scheme of things events must be made to follow prefabricated hypotheses.

There is one last point to be made. Anti-Indian feelings in Bangladesh are traceable to a few issue like the Farakka Barrage, lopsided balance of trade, border management by the BSF, the support given to the Chittagong Hill Tract insurgents (just as Bangladesh had supported some insurgent Indian groups in the past), and "migrant bashing" in the Indian media and by certain political parties. But anti-Indian feelings also rise because avowed "pro-Bengalis" often make unnecessary statements. Bhaumik says, "One has only to read my book *Insurgent Crossfire* to get an accurate account of the RAW's involvement in fuelling the insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. No Bangladeshi, I can challenge, can match the depth of my expose on that issue—unless all they do is speculate". A little later he says, "After all, in India, reporters are not afraid of taking on the military-security establishment, unlike our colleagues in Bangladesh."

We are led to believe that Bangladeshi reporters not only do not measure up to the standards of Indian journalists, they are cowardly as well. How does that make Bhaumik different from the Zee TV correspondent who asked him how "Bangladesh could be chastised"? Such statements are the reason for the belief common in Bangladesh, that many Indians are patronising, that they can never consider themselves to be in the wrong and cannot accept that others, especially those from the smaller South Asian countries, can ever be right.

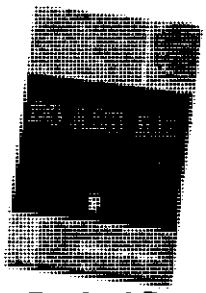
I will not go into what Bangladeshi reporters experience when they go out in the field. But Bhaumik will do well to read a recent report of the Paris-based RSF which will give him some idea. According to it, "The situation there is very difficult. Unlike in India, journalists there don't operate without fear. They are in danger, are unsafe but do their best and the injury and death toll for discharging duties is high compared to many other places". And unlike Bhaumik, most are not on talking terms with the military establishment, against whom many have fought and through their struggle against martial law, learned the meaning of freedom.

Retrieving a forgotten history

In the period when Indian historiography was dominated by the nationalists there was an overwhelming tendency to chronicle the Indian freedom struggle almost exclusively as achievement of the Indian National Congress (INC) under M.K. Gandhi's guidance. Even the so-called Cambridge school of Indian history, whose agenda was to critique the Indian nationalist perspective, by and large focussed on INC activities and personalities. This created for long the impression that at a crucial period of Subcontinental transition, forces other than the Congress and its leadership were of little consequence. The actual history of independence from British rule is somewhat more complex, as the other schools of history writing that rose to prominence in the last two decades or so amply testify. Under the influence of these new perspectives, a number of political tendencies and events that helped erode imperial self-confidence in holding on to India began to get the attention they warranted. Even so, such outstanding contributions as Bhagat Singh's gallant sacrifice, to use but one example, have not yet received due recognition. The Chittagong uprising of the 1930s is another such event which has been relegated to the footnotes.

Fortunately, there are signs that a beginning is being made in reversing this decades old attitude, and the proof lies in works such as Manini Chatterjee's *Do and Die: The Chittagong Uprising 1930-34*. From the voluminous documentation at the National Archives of India and sources scattered elsewhere, the author has unearthed the details of this adventure, pieced together its fragmented story and restored it to history in its fullness. The book is a fascinating account of the Chittagong revolutionaries who, in the words of the Bengal Government's official report, "had done what had never been attempted before—what must have seemed to be an unrealisable dream".

It all began with Surjya Sen, a Chittagong school-teacher, inspired by the 1916 Dublin Easter uprising against the British, collecting a band of local youth and infusing them with the spirit of supreme sacrifice for the country. These youngsters were mostly drawn from Chittagong's established, professional class families with a fair sprinkling



Do And Die: The Chittagong Uprising 1930-34

by Manini Chatterjee
Penguin Books India, New Delhi, Pp. xvi+ 356.
ISBN 0 14 029067 2, INR. 285

reviewed by ***Sanjoy Bagchi***

of recruits from the adjacent rural areas. They were young, some of them in their early teens. Even the sole girl from the group who survived, Kalpana Dutt, was only 15 when she joined the group. The few older members of the group provided the collective leadership in organisation and training. Surjya Sen, known as "Masterda", was indisputably the leader, commanding the group's complete confidence and loyalty. He inculcated a strong sense of discipline and co-ordination and trained the group's members in handling firearms. All these activities were carried out in Chittagong, the district headquarters, under the very nose of the police, which was constantly on high alert for plots against British authority. The group's discipline was such that not a word of the preparations or the objective leaked out. In fact, after it was all over, the British conceded that the armoury raid was a colossal intelligence failure on their part.

On the night of 19 April 1930, a Good Friday, as it had been 14 years earlier in Dublin, Masterda led the band of 64. Divided into four groups, they had four targets—the Telegraph Office, the armouries of the police and the auxiliary force and the European Club. The group assigned to attack the club found it deserted as the Europeans were observing a Christian day of mourning. As a result the club escaped damage. The Telegraph Office was torched, and with the railway track being disabled, Chittagong was cut off from the rest of Bengal province. The police armoury was attacked and captured, yielding a large volume of small arms and ammunition. The auxiliary force armoury was captured and its stock of arms taken, but the much-needed ammunition for the heavier weapons could not be found. The armoury was then burnt down. The District Magistrate, the Police Superintendent and other Europeans fled to the port and took shelter on one of the ships. The whole district was at the mercy of the young freedom fighters.

Because of communication problems, the four units could not regroup after their respective operations and therefore had to carry on their activities separately. Chatterjee's work traces the activities and travails of the groups in their wanderings through the province. Masterda led his boys into the hills. The British called in the army, and contingents of the Eastern Frontier Rifles, the Surma Valley Light Horse and the Gurkha Regiment began to comb the area. Three days later, there was an engagement at Jelalabad where the youths with their light arms could not cope with the army's heavier Lewis guns. Ten of them were killed while the rest managed to escape. Neither Gandhi nor Nehru had any word of tribute for the young martyrs or even an

acknowledge-ment of their efforts. On the contrary, on 26 April, Gandhi found the time to pay tribute to a Gujarati Congress volunteer who had died while cutting down a toddy palm! He said, "Vithaldas would live in the memory of the country for ever."

More lives were lost in several other encounters with the army and the armed police. The groups, though separated, continued the fight against the British. They were always on the run, and although the entire countryside knew their identity, no one betrayed them. Though terribly poor, most of the rural folk shared whatever little they had with the young revolutionaries. There was a touching little incident involving an old widow who had given shelter to one group. She had heard that town folk use tea and she sent her son to a faraway village to fetch it. Having never seen or tasted tea, she cooked the leaves the only way she knew—like a dish of spinach. Kalpana Dutt did not have the heart to tell the widow how bitter it was and she ate the cooked tea with rice.

A unique feature of the wanderings of the revolutionaries in the forests and the countryside was that Muslim farmers very often gave them shelter, acted as lookouts, guided and transported them across the various water bodies. They never gave them away and often had to face the brutalities of the police pursuing the fugitive revolutionaries. A year later, a small group led by a senior, Ananta Singh, made its stealthy way to Calcutta to seek help. Eventually got to the French enclave at Chundernagore, where they were encircled and arrested. The remaining groups, however, carried on the struggle. They hatched a plot to blow up the jail where the arrested persons were lodged, but this was foiled. A notorious police inspector was targeted and killed in 1931. The following year, in an armed encounter, one of the leaders was killed. But Surjya Sen managed to stay on the run and carry on with his remaining troops. Some prominent British establishments like the Pahartali Club was attacked later in the same year. For more than three years, the young band of revolutionaries, led by a school teacher, had evaded the British empire's armed might. Their last encounter was in May 1933, in the course of which Surjya Sen and Kalpana Dutt were arrested.

Surjya Sen and another leader were sentenced to death by hanging. Kalpana Dutt, on account of her youth, was sentenced to transportation for life. Several others also spent the rest of their lives in solitary isolation in the infamous Cellular Jail of the Andaman's.

Chatterjee's book brings out extraordinary features of the Chittagong group that enabled them to carry on despite the odds. It was clearly their indomitable spirit and unflinching ideals that sustained them for so long with so little support. Similarly, their faith in the leadership seems to have kept the group intact, so that even under difficult circumstances, there were no acts of betrayal. Of the two girls in the group, one killed herself rather than surrender. They well knew that their adventure would only end in their deaths—*"amra morbo kintu desh jagbe"* (we will die but the country will arise). The Chittagong uprising was the last act of classical terrorism in the Indian freedom struggle.

From the dry tissues of official reports and documentation, Manini Chatterjee has added flesh and blood to those shadowy but heroic figures of so long ago. Her work will do much to restore the balance in the account of India's independence struggle and perhaps induce more scholars to retrieve and rehabilitate other neglected heroes of the independence struggle.

Which Sikkim?

Sikkim: A Traveller's Guide
by Sujoy Das and Arundhati Ray
Permanent black, New Delhi, Pp. 159.
ISBN 81 7824 008 4

reviewed by
Narendra Pradhan

You can tell a book by its cover. Or so they say. This book is definitely a few miles beyond being a traveller's guide. I have not come across a more comprehensive work on all the important aspects of Sikkim—from flora to fauna to anthropology to history. And it says it both visually—by the profuse use of photographs—and with text that reflects detailed research.

The book is not only about general information on getting there and getting about—the local scenic spots, distances and modes of travel, and similar kinds of detail that are essential for the traveller. It is also about personal experiences through travel essays. This is what makes the book so much more interesting and enjoyable than the regular travel guide. These essays are vivid, sharp and evocative, and bring alive the wooded hills and mountain passes. The high-quality photographs accompanying each of the articles reinforces the imaginative appeal of the travelogue. The quality of production, binding and colour printing is what one can expect from international publishers, which indicate a good beginning in this genre by the start-up publisher from Delhi, Permanent Black.

The opening essay, "The Five Treasures of the Great Snows", is a fitting introduction to all that Sikkim has to offer to the outsider. The

A hot spring near Ralang.

chapter "Brief History of Sikkim" is anything but brief, and provides a detailed account of the history of the Himalayan kingdom-turned-Indian state. But history is a contentious issue, and historical accounts, no matter how detailed they are, cannot please everyone. For instance, a glaring omission in this account is that some crucial facts relating to the historical connections among Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet—especially with regard to the relationships between the royal families and the nobilities of Tibet. But then, perhaps that exercise would have demanded another chapter altogether.

There are some other grounds on which this chapter will invite the criticism from those who know Sikkim. The author makes certain controversial statements that can be considered akin to entering an ethnic minefield. On page 28, for instance, the authors comment on the origin of the Nepali arrival in Sikkim. This has been a point of long-standing contention between Bhutia/Lepcha and the Nepali-speaker, revolving essentially around the question of who came to Sikkim first. Bhutias say they entered from Tibet and the Nepalis counter that it was the Magars who carried them in. The colonisation of Sikkim is a matter of heated debate and the answers are not all in. The book seems to quote information supplied by the Kazis—the nobles of Bhutia/Lepcha origin who have always felt threatened by the overwhelming presence of the upcoming educated Sikkimese of Nepali origin. Notwithstanding the fact that this is a guide book written primarily for outsiders interested in Sikkim as tourists, projection of one side at the expense of the other will be a sore point for many.

Doubtless, it is the rich culture of the Bhutias/Lepchas and their art and architecture that blends so well with the backdrop of the mighty mountains that makes the place so attractive and colourful. But it is equally a fact that the Sikkim Nepalis too have a rich and varied culture and this has generally been ignored in this book. In fact mention of the Sikkim Nepalis and their culture is fleeting at best. Obviously, the camera's focus and the pen's concentration with Bhutia-Lepcha have to do with what is considered appealing to the tourist.

Indeed, it is worth considering how Sikkim's own tourism authorities should be 'selling' their state to the world? While there may be the natural propensity to highlight the Tibetan-Buddhist culture which finds great reception worldwide, the Lepcha culture obviously needs extra highlighting as it generally does not receive prominence anywhere. At the same time, is the culture of the Nepali-speaking ethnic and caste groups to be ignored just because they may also be found in neighbouring Nepal or Darjeeling?

But in spite of these errors of omission and commission, the book is successful in illustrating Sikkim in all its majestic mountainous glory. The photographs of the mountains, especially of Kangchendzonga and the surrounding smaller peaks are as good as any to be found in the illustrated books produced anywhere. Unfortunately, the most beautiful peak of Sikkim—Mount Siniolchu—considered by many mountaineers as the most majestic peak in the world, though written about in text, is missing from the plates.

Essentially, this book is useful because it has the combination of great photography and neatly-crafted text—the two have really come together in books on Sikkim. ▲

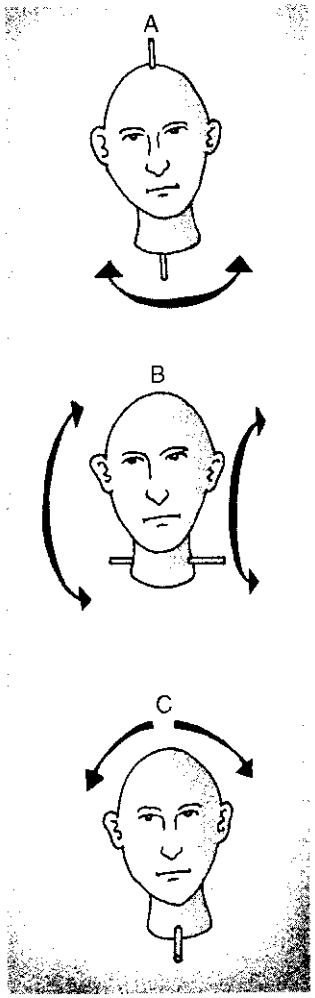
The shake, nod and waffle

All over the world, South Asians get a bum rap for being equivocal. This comes from the Occidental's inability to understand head movement. It is as simple as that.

They claim that we nod our heads to say 'no' when we mean 'yes', and 'yes' when we mean 'no', or at the very least we try to fudge the issue by making a vague gesture that signifies negative nor positive.

There is actually no cause for confusion, which only exists inside the head of overseas observers. For them, there are simply two kinds of head movements, those that indicate 'yes' and 'no'. They cannot countenance a third category of movement, which has very subtle shades of meaning that tilts from 'okay' and 'maybe' to 'if you say so'.

With this third type of head movement, the subject is not trying to equivocate or confuse, but is instead seeking to indicate a nuanced sensibility which understands that the world is not made up of blacks and whites, but overwhelming greys. Most importantly, this head waffle (as opposed to the nod and the shake) is a wholly different species of head-movement and not a lame South Asian mid-way gesture between the two.



The differentiation can be explained simply enough if one has an understanding of the concept of the fulcrum. It is quite basic, really. Keep in mind that it all has to do with the upper spinal column where the neck is, in particular the set of vertebrae that reach up from the thoracic region to the cervical.

Diagram A illustrates the 'yes' mode, in which the fulcrum is at middle-neck, around where the thoracic and cervical vertebrate meet up. The 'yes' movement causes the head as a whole to dip down and rear up.

Diagram B indicates the 'no' shake of the head. Its fulcrum is along the vertical axis going down the cervical column, with the head swinging horizontally left-to-right and right-to-left.

Diagram C is the difficult one, but only until you understand that there is an altogether different fulcrum and axis at play. Here, too, as in Diagram B, the movement is around the middle-neck, but the plane is different. Whereas in 'yes', the play of the vertebrae is back and forth, here it is an arc from side to side. If you are looking at the subject face-to-face, in a 'no' you will see the head turn left and right, whereas in a waffle it will tilt leftwards and rightwards.

Now that we have explained the science of the waffle, let us look into its anthropology. The yes-nod and no-shake are very much there in the South Asian repertoire, and they mean what they do elsewhere in the world. However, the head-waffle takes us into a cerebral terrain uncharted by many other societies. At its most positive, the waffle means 'okay'. Let us consider an encounter:

Question: *Do you want to try this spoonful of castor oil?*

Answer: (head-waffle)

This simple gesture is pregnant with possible meanings. A yes-nod would of course leave no confusion, as would a no-shake. But a head-waffle would mean: a) come to think of it, I quite like caster oil, so, okay, what the heck, give it to me; b) maybe I should have it, if you say so, oh, alright; c) I really detest the thing, but I am so dominated by you that I will signify my assent with this head-waffle.

So, which one is it among the three (in this instance, and there could be more) scenarios? That is the beauty of South Asian living! The observer must decipher whether the head-waffle is an 'okay' or a 'maybe' or fatalistic acceptance based on the surrounding circumstances and visual cues. However, the one confusion that has to be laid to rest is this—the South Asian is not saying 'no' when he is saying 'yes', or vice versa. He is saying something quite different—an 'okay' or maybe a 'maybe'.

Just because the dominant, globalised First World has only two kinds of head nods and shakes, it does not mean that there may not be more kinds elsewhere. Just as the Eskimos have scores of words for snow, the more varieties of nods and shakes present in a society, the more it speaks of that society's cultural sophistication and ability to address the subtleties of human interaction. Only when we come to a Ramrajya where everything is black and white, and positive and negative, good or bad, will us South Asians do away with the head waffle. For the moment, the world is full of greys, and we have the head movement to prove it.

Kanak Dixit

The Explore Nepal P.Ltd.

the explore nepal group

Vistas & Vignettes of Kathmandu Valley & Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve

Bhojan Griha... a grand old building restored and converted into the finest restaurant serving traditional ethnic cuisine Kantipur Temple House...a hotel that combines the unique architecture of a Newari Temple with traditional decor to create the perfect ambience Koshi Tappu Wildlife Camp...a remote luxury safari tented camp in eastern Nepal for exclusive sightings of rare wild water buffaloes & hundred of bird specieWe like to bring you more with our deep commitment towards restoration & conservation.

Post box: 536, Kathmandu, nepal.
Tel: 247078, 247079, 247081, 226130 Fax: 977-1-224237/243250
e-mail: explore@mos.com.np Website: www.catmando.com/the-explore-nepal-group