

# HIMAL

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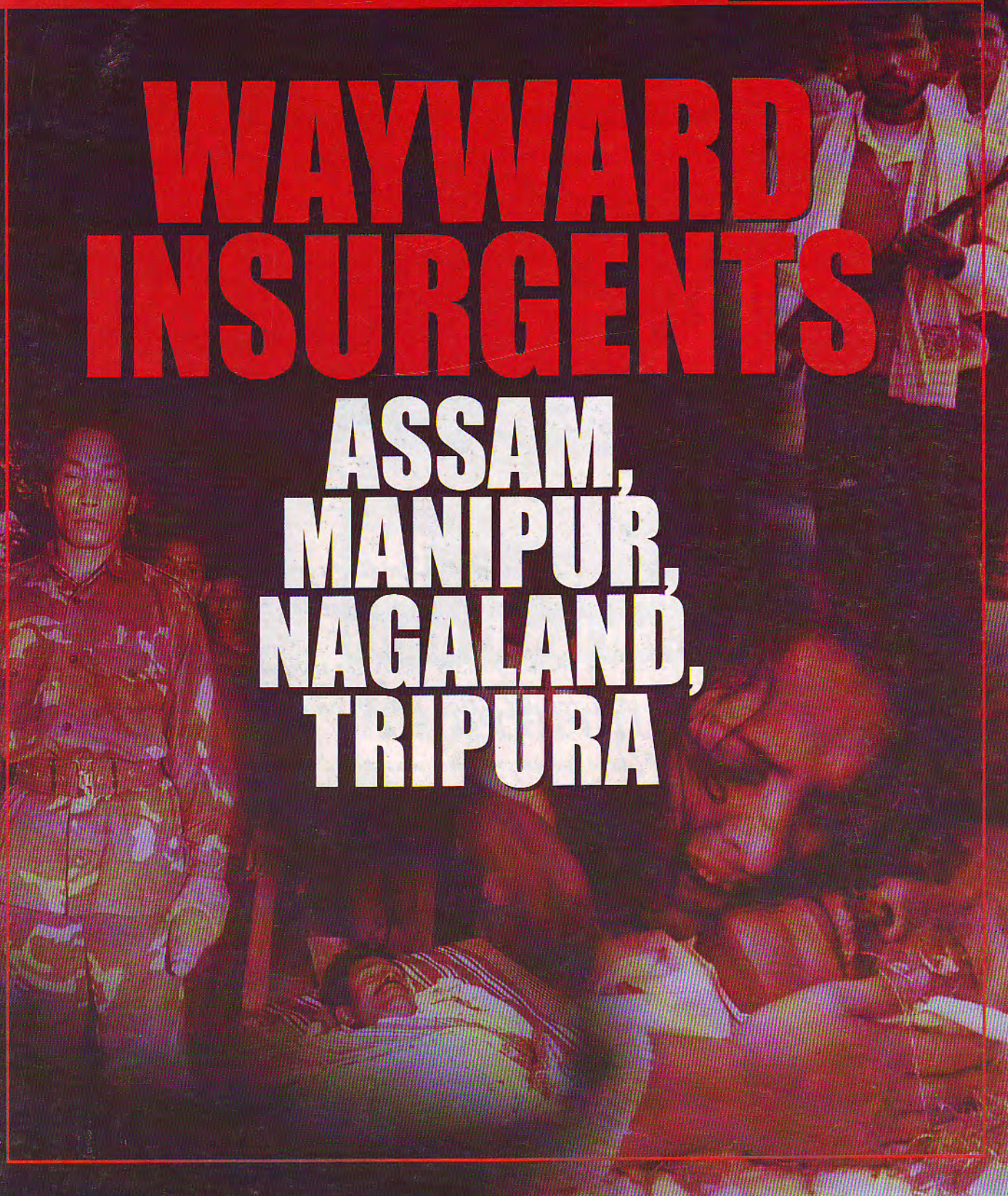
■ Fluorosis Fright

■ Tale of the Ticketless Traveller

# WAYWARD INSURGENTS

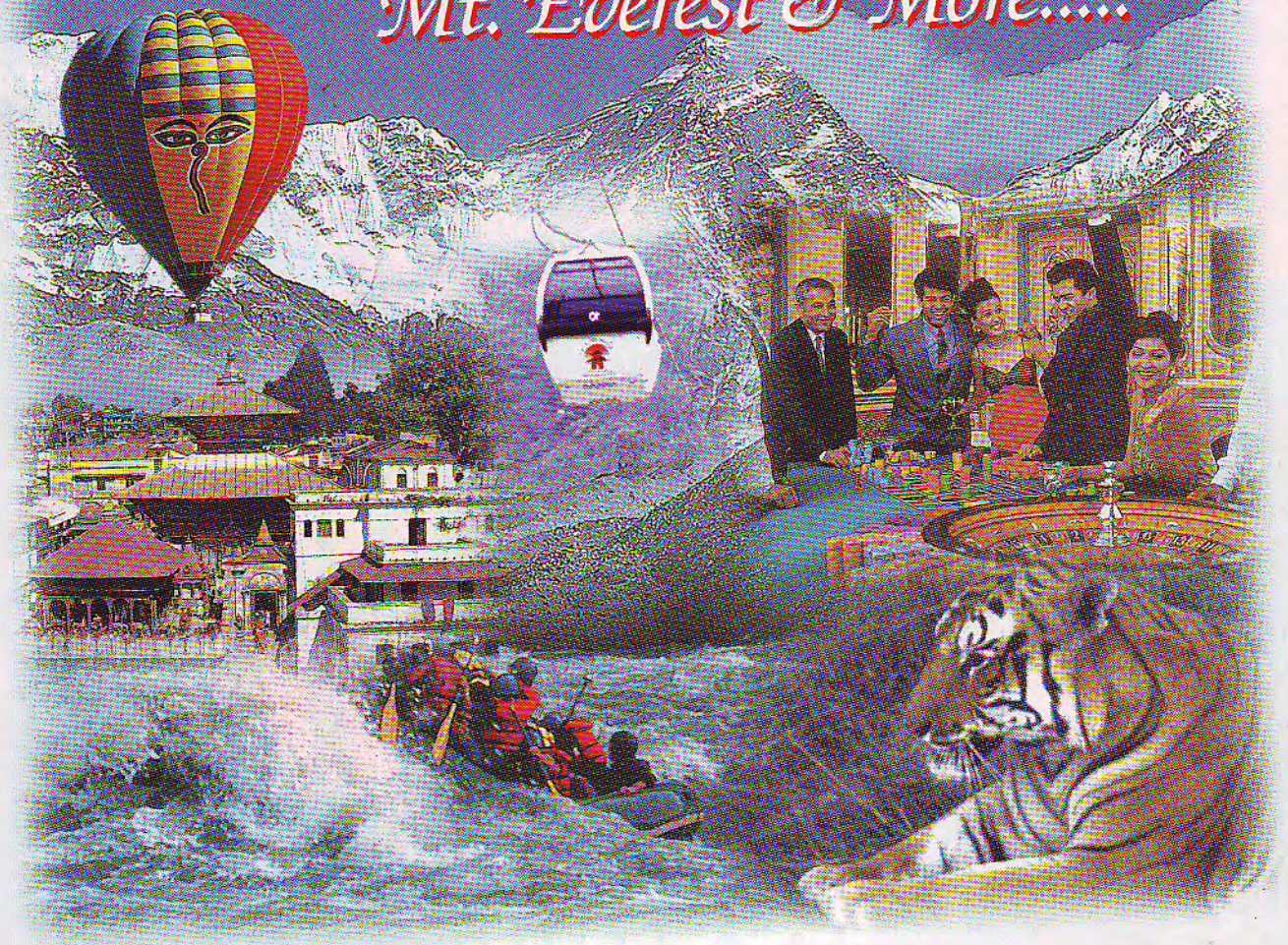
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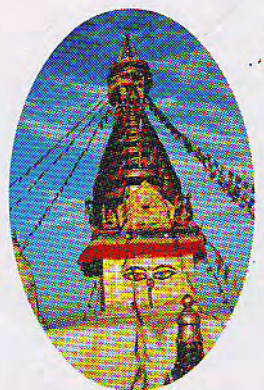
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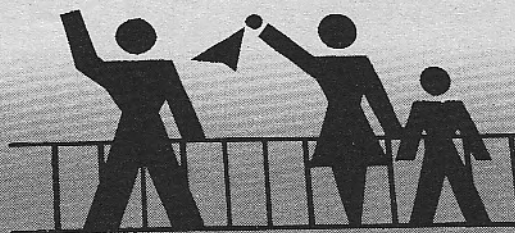


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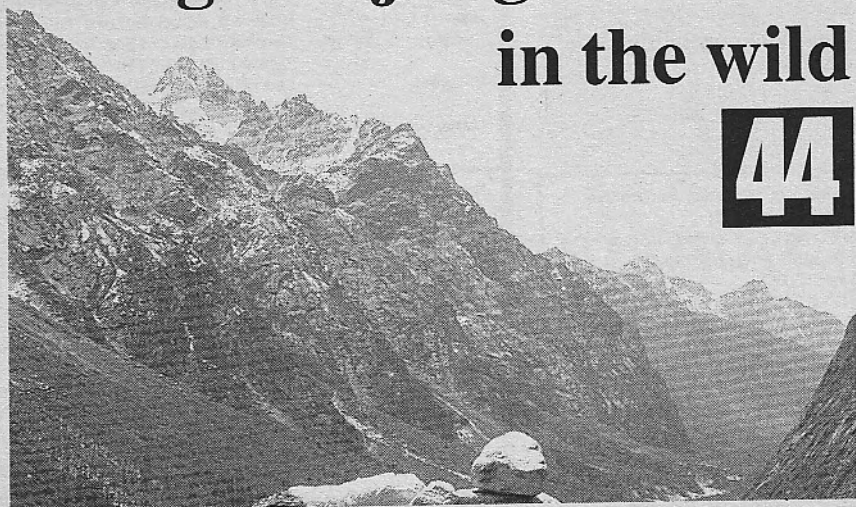
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Cover montage by **Subhas Rai**. Pictures by **Utpal Baruah**.

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**Ketaki Sheth**  
*Inside Outside.*

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**John Collee**  
*The London Observer.*

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*Time.*



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SOUTH ASIA

# SAARC SANS TERRORISM

**AFTER MANY** a hiccup, the SAARC summit scheduled for 4-6 January will finally happen at a difficult time in the entire region's history. There is an epic war going on in the Hindu Kush, and within each of our borders there are bitter insurgencies and separatist struggles. George W. Bush has set the agenda for the whole world by letting the cat out of the bag to catch the terrorist – but it would be a mistake for the SAARC summit to get carried away on terrorism. There is a serious worry that the SAARC agenda will be hijacked by heads of government suddenly finding the one area where they can agree - and thereby squelching the aspirations of minorities and oppositional political groups in each of the seven countries of the region.

The American need to find the perpetrators of the terror acts of 11 September and bring them to book is valid, and South Asia too is duty-bound to help find those who helped execute the plan to kill thousands of innocents at one go. But it is another thing to try and take advantage of the American war against terrorism to ease one's own burden by accessing a political cover to do what you could not do otherwise.

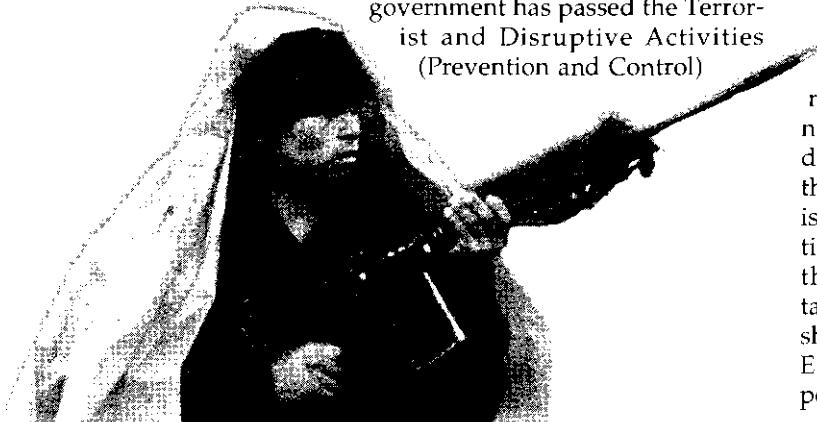
Look out over the political landscape of South Asia, and you find governments all-too-willing to try and finish the 'terrorist' problem once and for all. In Nepal the government has finally declared the Maoists a terrorist group and the army has been directed out of the barracks on a search and destroy mission. Sher Bahadur Deuba's government has passed the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention and Control)

Ordinance (TADO). In India, the BJP-led government is keen to pass the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO), as successor to the infamous Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), which was a much abused anti-liberties legislation. The BJP has declared that those who oppose POTO are anti-national.

In Sri Lanka, where it has long been the attitude of the establishment that the 'terrorism' in the north and east be contained by the strongest measures, the Peoples Alliance PA government of Chandrika Kumaratunga is now breathing fire in the runup to the parliamentary elections of 5 December. Known for its commitment to pluralism and resolution of the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict through negotiation, the agenda of the PA is now, in the words of a well-known Colombo analyst, "to define itself in a discourse of anti-terrorism as well as Sinhalese patriotism." Bhutan feels cornered between the Indian army and the Bodo militants who are hiding in its southern jungles. Bangladesh has just come through its most violent general elections ever, and the bomb blasts and mass killings that marked the electoral campaign are of the kind that will steel any middle class to 'hard action'. In Pakistan, the seething inter-ethnic and sectarian divides seem to be on the back-burner for the moment only because of the Afghanistan matter, and General Pervez Musharraf will likely find that once the Americans leave he will have massive problems of militancy on hand, which he will likely try to suppress with a heavy military hand, not having a political card to play.



It would thus seem that the summit of SAARC will bring to Kathmandu prime ministers and presidents, each for his or her own reasons, more than willing to agree on the need to tackle terrorism with military determination, and more likely than not their role model will be George W. Bush. It is our belief that this would be a waste of time, and extremely inappropriate. While the irrationally violent must always be tackled with a firm hand, the governments should not misuse SAARC for this purpose. Each government already is more than powerful with the tools of governance and







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war to tackle the insurgencies within each country without having to coordinate their activities at a regional level. By the looks of it, South Asia's weak 'civil society' must step up its decibel level to convince all 'POTO-inclined' governments that the social, economic and identity-based sources of militancy will have to be addressed before 'terrorism' will disappear.

We know it will not happen at this SAARC summit, but we look forward to such a gathering of leaders in the future when the individual polities are sufficiently mature to allow their leaderships to discuss the ground-level issues of representation, democracy, pluralism, identity, and social and economic exploitation. Only when the SAARC leaders are ready to discuss these, should they (and the organisation) be considered mature enough to discuss terrorism. ▽

## INDIA • PAKISTAN

# SHAKE HANDS

**THE LAST** SAARC summit was cancelled at India's behest because Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee did not want to shake hands with General Pervez Musharraf, who had just staged a coup. It had to do with the bad blood of Kargil.

India and Pakistan are jockeying for advantage in the continuing fallout of the Second Afghan War, and seem unable to see this crisis without the blinkers of their own bilateral lack-of-relations. Still, the events of 9/11 have transformed the region's geopolitics, and it must be eerie for the leaders of India and Pakistan to find themselves on the same side in the mother of all battles titled *USA vs. Osama*.

Regardless of an Afghan denouement of one kind or another, the bottomline goal is still the same as far as the rest of South Asia is concerned: the de-Talibanisation of Pakistani politics and an India willing to countenance Kashmiri self-government. Obviously, the first is a short-term objective, and the second more of a medium term one. The general is Islamabad needs to put the lid on the bottle from which the ISI genie escaped, and India must find a way to help him out. For New Delhi to see this as a point of weakness and drive the dagger in would

be a foolish and costly mistake that will only bring the Afghan war drifting eastwards.

Here from our Himalayan perch, we often wonder whether the stewards of policy in Islamabad and New Delhi realise how narrow-minded and self-serving their bilateral bickering appears. Do they not know that the rest of the neighbourhood, the world, and the 'lesser' regions within their own borders are laughing at them? Two impoverished neighbours, the twins of partition, locked in a fierce embrace. Spending billions on a cold, semi-covert war that neither can afford.

What will it take to unlock India and Pakistan? The Afghan debacle provides an excuse, and the imperative: the need to ensure that Pakistan becomes a Malaysia, and not another Afghanistan. The Kathmandu Summit may be the perfect opportunity to work towards making this happen. There is little doubt that the summit is going to be a photo-op, a formality with pomp without substance. But symbolism counts in these trying times, and it would be good if we did not have Indian and Pakistani officials behaving like teenagers having a tiff and refusing to talk to each other in the hotel lift.

Let us have some open back-slapping, not secret back-stabbing. Let them break into Hindustani and Urdu, and not glare at each other stonily at the banquets. The smaller neighbours, for once, would not mind if this summit was hijacked by the India-Pakistan bilaterals, and if it got all the media attention. This time, they will not complain. Just promise to patch up. ▽

## BANGLADESH

# HINDUS AND THE STATE

**WITHIN WEEKS** of coming to power, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led government in Dhaka finds itself mired in a crisis of its own making. The ham-handed manner in which the government has handled the post-election attacks on members of the Hindu community of Bangladesh suggests that it knows virtually nothing about managing social tensions that simmer just beneath the surface of Bangladeshi



society. Indeed, the apparent insensitivity could light the flames of permanent communal strife.

It would appear that after five years of trying to dislodge the preceding Awami League (AL) government through means fair and foul – hartals and parliamentary boycotts included – the BNP and its allies seem to have got accustomed to the strong-arm tactics of muscle politics practised by all previous governments. This can only be to the detriment of responsible administration, given that the parties concerned are now in power. The largest-ever cabinet in Bangladesh's history increasingly resembles a motley collection of political novices willing to take decisions that invite public ridicule. Clearly, the BNP under Begum Khaleda Zia has forgotten the rudiments of governance it had garnered when it was in power between 1991 and 1996. This is what we learn from the Hindu exodus.

It is public knowledge that many Hindus of Bangladesh fled across the border into India as a consequence of the fear psychosis that gripped the community after there were incidents of assault and rape against them. While the refugees may number no more than a few hundred, the Dhaka government found itself completely unable to manage the fallout. Rather than identify the problem, accept that there had been an exodus, and assure a remedy, it immediately took recourse to denial. This added fuel to the fire, providing ample opportunity for ridicule among the Bangladeshi media and intelligentsia as well as raising hackles across the border in India.

Hindu political groups in India staged demonstrations demanding that the New Delhi government act to stop the attacks in Bangladesh. In West Bengal, the Left Front government of Buddhadev Bhattacharya issued a strong statement condemning the targeting of Hindus. Other political parties in West Bengal were also not found lacking in capitalising on the events in Bangladesh; some of them have even opened gruel kitchens to feed the refugees.

In Bangladesh, the opposition Awami League is using the issue to salvage its political standing, denouncing the government's handling of the episode at every opportunity. To add to the BNP's discomfiture, the press has been united in its censure of the government, and the criticism has been sustained. Besides a "no Hindu bashing" position displayed by both the

Bangla and English media, this uprightness may well have had to do with the official response to the incidents of Hindu bashing, which questioned the veracity of the press reports and the competence of the journalists involved.

The scathing criticism from all around eventually forced the government of Khaleda Zia to take some action. In mechanical fashion, it set up a committee of secretary-level officials to investigate the matter, but the group's report did little to improve the government's position. The officials assigned to the case concluded that only two of the nine reported incidents were true, an assertion greeted with widespread scepticism. To compound matters, the committee went on to assert that Hindus had not fled across the border to India. To prove the point, M. Morshed Khan, the foreign minister, who is also a leading businessman, informed the press that he had received no official report on the matter from India.

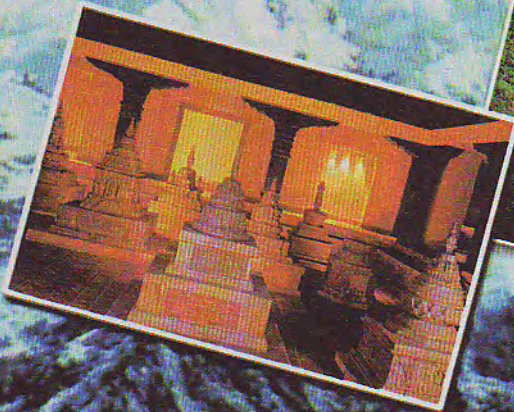
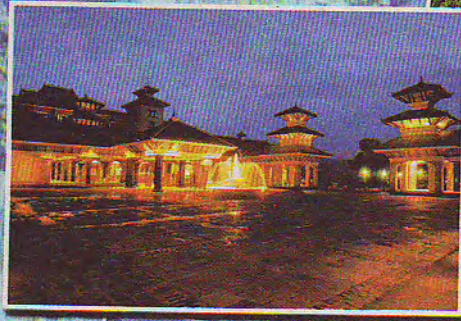
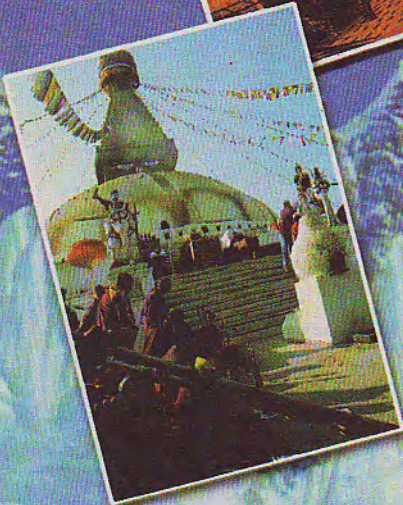
Bangladesh already has a Hindu migration problem. Once nearly 30 percent of the population, the number of Hindus is down to about 10-12 percent, which is around 10-12 million. The middle class has mostly left in a never-ending trickle. While the number of incidents after the recent elections may have been few, if they serve to lead to yet another exodus of Hindus then it would do irreparable harm to Bangladesh's self image as a tolerant society where the Hindus in an overwhelmingly homogeneous society are not in danger. The government's ill-advised response to the reports of anti-Hindu action therefore not only lacks sensitivity but would serve to instill a fear psychosis in the dominant minority community which is not needed. The small band of Christians and Buddhists are much better off and are relatively more apolitical with a focus on economics, the professions, etc. But the Hindus are active and in general support the AL, the party which has spoken about their rights. It has been a traditionally anti-communal party but the AL is accused of using them as a vote bank.

*Khaleda Zia: A crisis of the BNP's own doing*



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During this election, in places where minority candidates contested and the votes were split, Hindus had to face the AL's wrath as well. But Hindus still certainly feel safer under the AL.

As if its lack of proper reaction to the anti-Hindu incidents were not enough, a related phenomenon guaranteed that the chapter was not over for the government. This involved Shariar Kabir, a pro-AL personality with a long history in journalism, literature and film, and also president of the people's committee formed to bring the 1971 collaborators with the Pakistan army to book. Kabir wrote extensively in the Bangla papers condemning the attacks on Hindus. Subsequently, he had gone to West Bengal to gather more information on the Bangladeshi Hindus who had crossed over, for a film that he was making. While in Calcutta, Kabir had addressed meetings vociferously condemning the Bangladesh attacks, and discussed the issue in the Indian and international media – enough to rile any 'ultra-nationalist' Bangladeshi. It was no surprise therefore that the police arrested Kabir when he deplaned at Dhaka airport on 24 November.

While Kabir was doubtlessly trying to make life uncomfortable for the BNP and to turn the anti-Hindu attacks to the AL's advantage, there is no denying that in the process he also created an unprecedented level of public awareness on the issue. His arrest raised another furor, almost as great as the one which greeted the attacks on Hindus, and added the issue of freedom of expression and press. Many pro-BNP intellectuals are also unhappy and Enayetullah Khan, the highly influential editor of the pro-BNP *Holiday*, has argued against the arrest and in Bangladesh there will be few takers for the action against Kabir. The government is trying to justify his arrest but it is not selling like hot jalebi in Ramadan.

Shariar Kabir has been charged with involvement in anti-state activities, the usual catch-all phrase used against people when strong evidence against them is lacking. In a press note, the government claimed that Kabir had been trying to fuel hatred and contempt for it outside the country and also indulging in anti-state activities by holding meetings. At the time of writing, Kabir remains in detention by virtue of the Special Powers Act, but the government is in a no-win situation. If Kabir

is freed, he wins. If he is convicted, he wins even more.

It is important, however, to bring the focus back on the original issue and not be dragged down by the BNP vs Shariar Kabir case. Fortunately, the larger issue has picked up a life of its own, and the level of introspection this brings about can only be to the benefit of the national body politic. How effective the media (and the press in particular) can be when it catches on to a good issue is clearly evident from this case.

To begin with, the media as a whole is relatively more free under the BNP today than it was under the earlier Awami League dispensation. And it (the media) is not pulling its punches. The BBC radio's Bangla service is presently broadcasting a series on the recent Hindu migration out of Bangladesh and the programme has a multi-million listenership in Bangla-speaking South Asia, most significantly in Bangladesh. In the meantime, various Bangla newspapers in Dhaka have been publishing the transcript of the programme, sensitising the mass public to the subject like never before. And while Shariar Kabir is a partisan, no such charge can be brought against the outstanding BBC journalist Moazem Hussain, who travelled to India then returned to Bangladesh, tracked the families to the homes they had fled, and then did the radio series. All in all, the reaction of the press has clearly been sobering to the BNP government, a splash of cold water as it begins to grapple with the reins of power. Hopefully, the Bangladeshi public is now better informed about the Hindu community that is also part of it, and this may prevent future attacks, or at least blunt their edge.

In the meantime, the big issue of the days to come in Bangladesh will, of course, be gas. Natural gas, which lies within the deltaic country in a massive volume, attracted Bill Clinton all the way to Dhaka a couple of years ago. While outside of power, the BNP was a steadfast opponent of all attempts to make Bangladesh cohabit with American multinationals keen to exploit the gas to sell to the only market there is – India. This time, the BNP has promised to come to a decision within a month, and the Americans have descended on Dhaka.

Will the Bangladesh media cover the gas story with as much transparency and commitment as it did the story of the Hindu exodus?

– Afsan Chowdhury



NEPAL

# SHANGRI LA NO MORE, SHANGRI LA, STILL

NEPAL IS little understood by outsiders because it was not colonised – the reason why there was not enough written about it till the mid-20th century. The country is also a bit mysterious because there is so much variety within it – demographic, geographic, climatic - to be fathomed easily. The feudal era, which lasted all the way till the 1950s, did not help in the understanding of history either. Finally, Nepali scholarship has itself been weak, and what is written with on-the-ground sincerity is mostly available in the Nepali language.

The world therefore understood Nepal first as a Shangri La, and that representation endured for decades after the tourists discovered Nepal in the 1960s. That two-dimensional image of the country was made up of key markers which included: Himalayan Buddhism, the snow massifs (himals), the Tibetan societies of the Himalayan rimland, and the Kathmandu Valley culture. The highly populated midhill region – which actually provides Nepal its own self-image – and the Tarai were largely excluded from the mind's picture of Nepal.

The Shangri La image took its first beating when the promoters of the 'Himalayan degradation theory' claimed that the Nepali peasantry was wreaking havoc on its forests, which was leading to landslides, reduced agricultural yield, and enhanced floods in Bangladesh. It turned out not to be so bad, in hindsight, but the damage had been done, with even the locals convinced by this development propaganda.

Then democracy arrived in 1990, after which several factors aided the steady decline of

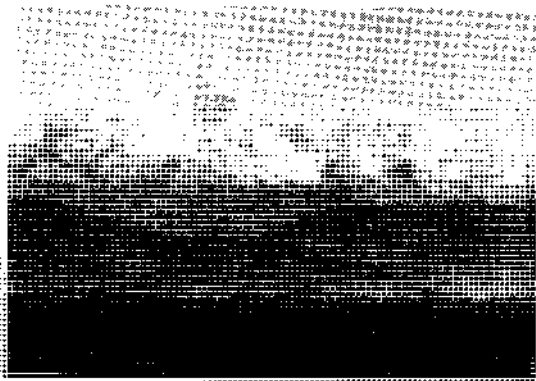
Nepal's exotic-forbidden-kingdom image. The fact that democracy had unfettered long-held societal angst meant that ethnic and religious assertion came to the fore and suddenly the country seemed to be (and was) in turmoil. The politicians did no service by becoming quickly corrupt, and the fact that Nepali democracy could not deliver fast enough on its promise led to the birth of a violent Maoist insurgency, which gave the lie to the belief that Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha, is a peaceful land.

In the latest segment of this unfolding story, the royal palace massacre of 1 June 2001 battered the kingdom's image further, then the Maoists feigned as if to parley and then in the second half of November decided to violently dare the state and establishment. The Nepali Government of Sher Bahadur Deuba reacted by: a) declaring the first-ever state of emergency in Nepal; b) approving an anti-terrorism ordinance; and, c) ordering the army out to pursue the Maoists.

For a country that relies on tourism, possibly nothing could have been worse than this continuous self-inflicted assault on its persona. But to look at the positive side of things – and indeed there is such a side even in these despondent times – the country has been going through a period of telescoped learning whose end result is a polity that will be better able to manage itself and rid itself of contradictions.

The world is shocked to see where Nepal has ended up. But Nepalis are equally surprised to see that they still have a country. Even in the most excruciating moments of national crisis, such as when an entire royal clan was massacred and an unknown void stared the people in the face, all the institutions of state remained in place and functioning. Nepal, indeed, is a country that seems to be able to take constant pummeling and yet remain standing. But this resilience is not useful if, at the end of it, there is not a trace of social and economic advance for the people.

The wait for such advance, hopefully, will



not be long. In the meantime, the world needs to know that Nepal is no longer a Shangri La, but that it is Shangri La, yet. Meaning that all that is written in the tourism brochures is true – isolated exotic communities, Hindu-Buddhist comity, great mountain peaks, forbidden kingdom. And it is also true that Nepal is a country of 23 million going through dislocating change aided by market penetration and satellite television, amidst a messy exercise in parliamentary democracy. In the latter sense, Nepal is like any other developing country in the world and to have thought otherwise was to have made the initial mistake. And this non-exotic image of Nepal actually makes Nepal more real, more a country of living human beings than a fantastical space inhabited only by gods, temples, and monasteries. Like everywhere, it is the people who make the difference, and Nepal's multiple identities are its saving grace and it is this diversity that has to be saved in this globalised age. The very heterogeneity of Nepal makes for a unique homogeneity, which is what makes the country different from so many regions in the neighbourhood. This is what makes Nepal truly exotic – an exoticism worth preserving even as

the kingdom strives to 'develop' economically.

So, to look at the brighter side: even the Maoist insurgency has it. At the very least, it professes to be fighting for a classless society, which is different from the fight for identity which marks the 29 insurgencies that pepper the Himalayan landscape all the way eastward from Nepal to Burma. On the ground level, thanks to a democracy, Nepalis are today more questioning of authority than ever before, and if that is not the foundation stone of democracy then nothing is. Then there is ethnic assertion, gender activism, dalit activism, and tarai activism – not always effective, but nevertheless there. The press is free, the only problem being that it does not use its freedom to the hilt.

Nepal is experimenting with democracy in fast-forward, and the Emergency put in place by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba should be only a brief aberration. The country needs to go swiftly back to democracy as usual. Except that it should not be democracy 'as usual', but one that begins to deliver economic and social benefits to 23 million people. △

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No direction home: Young militants put their hardware and grit on display.

# Tripura's brutal cul de sac

Political violence in the rest of India and the Indian Northeast pales in comparison to the apolitical mayhem that is part of daily life in Tripura. In the last four years, the state has suffered a higher proportion of civilian casualties than Kashmir has.

by *Anindita Dasgupta*

**K**ashmir receives a lot of coverage in the Indian and international press for its insurgency and state action resulting in civilian casualties. Indeed, Kashmir's sorrow is like an everlasting wound on the Indian psyche. And yet there is another corner of South Asia which is even more sad, violent, and neglected. The place is Tripura, in the Indian Northeast.

Civilian casualties in Tripura from insurgency-related incidents far outnumber those in Kashmir. One senior Indian bureaucrat informed the national press late last year that over 900 civilians had been killed in

as many as 87 militant attacks in Tripura over the last four years. During the same period, 477 civilians had died in 40 incidents in Kashmir. It comes as a startling bit of information – that this little state known for its rolling hills, orange crop and for being practically surrounded by Bangladesh – is really the most violent corner of India.

Innocent deaths, kidnappings and extortions are a regular part of life in Tripura and have been for many years now since an insurgency arose to unsettle this area more than two decades ago. These years of tribal



insurgency demonstrate the depths to which a misguided and frustrated identity movement can sink in the absence of a guiding political ideology and firm and recognisable leadership.

In the Northeast, where militancies with various levels of commitment to violence as means to an end proliferate, the Tripura insurgents manage to shock and chill for the nonchalance with which they commit crimes against the innocent and unarmed. Nowhere in the entire region, from Assam to Nagaland, is there such a thin line which separates the insurgent from the criminal. And what makes the Tripura rebels far more dangerous is their access to sophisticated arms, fed by a cross-border gun-running network. Besides, they enjoy the patronage of the local political parties, which have developed a stake in the insurgency. Unlike lay criminals, the violence practiced by these militants is more indiscriminate and cold-blooded, and it is this raw brutality that makes Tripura's experience stand apart from the other Northeast insurgencies. For all practical purposes, it can be said that the insurgents of Tripura have declared a war on the people - an unequal war in which no man, woman or child, whether 'tribal' or Bengali, is spared.

The fighting has by now affected nearly the entire rural hinterland of the tiny state, where some 30 odd militancies are active. However, two outfits carry out most of the attacks, abductions and killings. The National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), a tribal group, controls virtually all of the Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council (TTADC) area, which covers almost two-thirds of the state's territory. Its rival, the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), has undisputed writ over a smaller patch in the state's northeast area contiguous with Bangladesh. Several retaliatory rag-tag armies, such as the United Bengali Liberation Force (UBLF) and the Amra Bangali, had also managed to keep the levels of violence high, but they have by now petered out after much-hyped beginnings. However, other less organised but more criminal groups also operate in the state, sometimes kidnapping victims in order to 'sell' them to the more political outfits. There is a Left Front government in place in Tripura, of course, but its presence is felt only in the capital, Agartala. No one with a political identity or balance in the bank is keen to move out of Agartala for fear of being abducted or killed.

Ostensibly, the ATTF's main political demand is the

deportation of all non-tribals settled in Tripura since 1951, while the NLFT's is a "free holy land of Tripura", which is to be achieved after secession from India. On the ground, however, the two groups are locked in a schizophrenic contest involving money, political patronage and control over territory. While the NLFT and ATTF would thus seem to have complementary goals, however, it is fighting between these two groups that is one of the main reasons for the inordinantly high casualties in the war in Tripura. Innocents, as well as combatants, get caught in the crossfire.

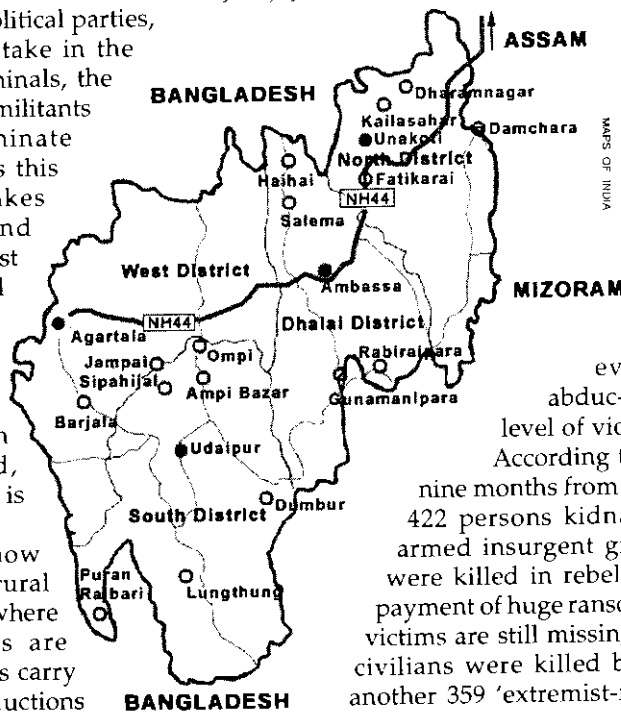
A total of 1718 civilians and members of the security forces (not counting insurgents) died in militancy-related violence between April 1993 and February 2001.

During the same period, 1961 persons were kidnapped. Chief Minister Manik Sarkar told the State Assembly that, of the total kidnapping cases, more than 47 were untraced. Actually, the number of abductions is thought to be much larger, for most cases go unreported, with the families reluctant to approach the police. Thus, even the number of reported abductions does not indicate the true level of violence in the state.

According to the latest official figures, the nine months from January to September 2000 saw 422 persons kidnapped in Tripura by various armed insurgent groups. Ten of those abducted were killed in rebel custody and 199 released on payment of huge ransoms. The remaining kidnapping victims are still missing. During the same period, 159 civilians were killed by insurgents and there were another 359 'extremist-related' incidents. In addition, 22 militants and 15 security personnel were killed in 61 encounters. Altogether 466 villagers were taken into custody for interrogation by the security forces and 637 people thought to be rebel collaborators were arrested.

Educational establishments have suffered much of the violence. There have been many school closures following the abducting and killing of staff. The last couple of years alone saw the slaying of 20 teachers in the state, and the abduction of 58 staff members of schools. According to reliable media and political party sources, 80 percent of the 1284 schools in the Autonomous District Council have remained closed for the past five years. All this in a state that already has one of the highest school dropout rates in all of India.

There has also been a dramatic drop in development work in Tripura, with bureaucrats and other government officials unable to visit the interior areas for fear of being kidnapped for ransom and whisked away to hideouts in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, there is a huge population displacement in progress as non-tribals



YEAR	TRIPURA POP.	TRIBAL POP.	TRIBAL %
1901	173,325	91,679	52.81
1921	304,437	191,610	56.37
1941	513,010	256,991	50.91
1951	645,707	237,953	36.85
1961	1,142,005	360,070	31.53
1971	1,556,342	450,544	28.95
1981	2,053,058	583,920	28.45
1991	2,757,205	853,345	30.95

1956 and a full-fledged state in January 1972. The reason Tripura entered its violent societal tailspin, so dramatic even against the backdrop of the generally insurgency-ridden Northeast, is its particular mix of history, demography and modern-day political evolution.

The origins of ethnic insurgency can be traced to the influx of Bengali settlers from East Pakistan immediately following Partition in 1947. The 1901 census of Tripura recorded tribals constituting 43 percent of the population, and by 1947 they constituted the majority. The

from the hills descend to the plains, and as tribals from the plains move up to the interior highland. Sharp ethnic polarisation is now a tragic reality in Tripura, accompanied with total collapse of the authority of the state government in Agartala. The rule of the gun is almost uncontested.

The people of Tripura are no strangers to political violence or to popular grassroots protest movements, having experienced their first organised insurgency back in the late 1940s. Organised by a leftist leadership, that movement was promoted as an "armed struggle against class enemies", meaning the Indian ruling class. What is noteworthy of the current situation, however, is the aimlessness of the insurgency. Tripura's insurgents have evolved into nothing more than gun-toting criminals targeting their own people, while enjoying immunity because of highly placed patrons and sympathisers. When the going gets tough, they are able to quietly evacuate across the porous border.

For these failed revolutionaries of Tripura, the shift from ethnic insurgency to criminality was fast, easy and lucrative. The money has rolled in, particularly from ransom demands, and this has assured lavish lifestyles for the leaders and a steady supply of arms from Southeast Asia for the cadres. Ironically, it is the Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council (TTADC) area where most of Tripura's tribal *jhumiya* (shifting cultivation) population lives, that is worst hit by militancy, and which also helps support the criminals masquerading as militants. Today's Tripura fighters have nowhere to go, no lofty battles to fight, no visions to sell. They live for the moment, given to things material, with a craving for the gun and a deep contempt for the rule of law.

The fact that Tripura is not visible in the Indian, South Asian or global indices of political violence merely points to media and scholarly neglect, and it is possible that this oversight itself has fueled the bloodshed.

### Way to self-destruction

On the map, Tripura is the stubborn little thumb of territory that juts sharply into Bangladesh, nestled uneasily between the Chittagong Hills Tracts to the south, Comilla to the west and Sylhet to the north. A princely state that acceded to the Indian Union on 15 October 1949, Tripura became a Union Territory in November

census of 1951, however, indicated a major shift in the demographic balance, with the tribal population having fallen dramatically to 37 percent (from 51 percent a decade previously). With the continuing inflow of Bengali migrants over the years, and with an additional surge recorded after the 1971 Bangladesh war, the tribal population of the state is now down to less than 30 percent.

Tripura's indigenous population, divided among 19 distinct tribes, forms a socially and economically deprived community which has traditionally depended on *jhum* (shifting) cultivation in the forest tracts. Following Partition, most hill-based tribes found themselves rapidly marginalised as a result of the homesteading by the culturally dominant Bengali-speakers. The indigenous people lost their unquestioned traditional entitlement to land as aggressive settlers moved in. With the locals unable to make quick adjustments in lifestyle or adapt to the evolving institutional circumstances, the latter were also quick to take advantage of modern-day occupations in civil service and commerce. The 'establishment' in Agartala thus rapidly became Bengali-ised, including the state administration, academia, and business, all of this fueling a deep feeling of alienation among the tribal population. In fact, the leaders of the Assam Movement of 1979-85 used the example of the marginalisation of the indigenous people of Tripura to justify their own campaign against Bengali 'outsiders'.

Recognising this process of marginalisation, the tribal leadership began to apply pressure on the Indian state through the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS), a committee formed in June 1967. The charter of the TUJS, set out in the face of strident protests by the Bengalis, sought tribal autonomy through a series of demands which included an autonomous district council for the tribal people; restoration of alienated tribal lands; extension of the "Inner Line" regulations to Tripura to discourage access to all and sundry from the Indian 'mainland'; and introduction of Kokborok, the indigenous language, with the use of Roman script as the medium of instruction for tribal students.

Feeling that their demands were going unfilled, and with the continuing arrival of settlers, in the late 1970s the tribal groups began to engage in violent guerilla



attacks against the Bengali settlers and the government they believed to be abetting the in-migration. A disturbing element of the tribal reaction, however, was that in parts it took the form of ethnic cleansing. Altogether over 2000 persons were killed and more than 20,000 houses burnt to the ground in the May Riots of 1979 and the June Riots of 1980. Almost all the victims were Bengali. To the insurgents, ethnically targeted violence seemed to hold the promise of changing the demographic facts on the ground which stood in the way of the formation of an autonomous district council in Tripura, a state within a state.

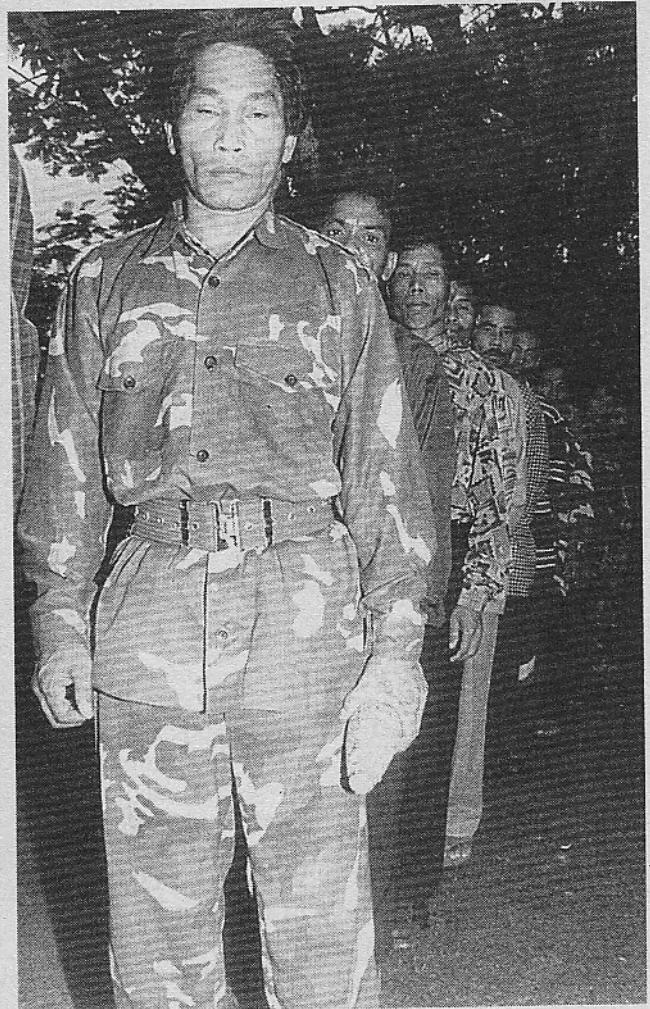
There were others, besides the Bengalis, who fell victim once the riots of 1979 and 1980 had released the genie of violence out of the bottle. A number of tribal leaders themselves fell prey to internal feuds and conspiracies. Security personnel, including those from the army, police and the Border Security Force, also died in large numbers. Before long, the non-tribal Bengalis also organised to carry out retaliatory killings. Frequent engagements between the tribal guerrillas and the Bengali fighters became common.

In 1979, in an attempt to take the edge off tribal insurgency, the state government proposed an autonomous district council in accordance with the relevant provisions in the Indian Constitution. The Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council Act, envisaged under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, was meant to give the tribal population of Tripura more political and economic powers at the grassroots level. However, this move elicited loud protests from the ethnic Bengalis, some of whom had already floated armed groups such as the UBLF and Amra Bangali. It was not until 1985 that the TTADC Act came into force, with a few modifications.

### Volunteers to tigers

The Assam Movement's twin themes of indigenous people's rights and the need to oust 'foreigners' seemed to have touched a chord in Tripura. The indigenous leadership was dissatisfied with the offer of an autonomous district, and the first demand for a separate state for tribals in Tripura was made by the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), the armed wing of the TUJS. The exclusionist ideologues demanded the deportation of all post-1951 settlers – after which Tripura could become a truly 'tribal' state – and began to successfully mobilise followers.

Under the leadership of Bijoy Kumar Hrankhwal, the TNV remained the prime sponsor of this sons-of-the-soil campaign in its early years. Its target was the Agartala government's cultural and employment policies, seen to flagrantly favour ethnic Bengalis. As the state government roped to tackle the problem, the TNV widened its contacts across the region, streamlined its supply routes, and established itself in forest sanctuaries to continue the fight. Links were made with the Mizo National Front, which was fighting the Indian 'occu-



*Tripura militants line up for duty*

pational government' in nearby Mizoram. In fact the MNF was active in helping set up the TNV's small guerrilla army with training and armaments.

A dramatic change came with the signing of the Mizo Accord between the Indian government and the MNF leader Laldenga, in 1985. This robbed the TNV of its chief patron and by August 1988 the TNV too had signed a tripartite memorandum of settlement with the Union Government and the State Government. The centerpiece of the agreement, on the basis of which the TNV, including its leader Hrangkhwal, came above ground, was the restoration of alienated tribal lands. However the Agartala government did not fulfil its obligations under the agreement, and return of tribal lands became the tinder which continued to feed the flames of insurgency in the state.

With an unsatisfactory accord that did not tackle the roots of the tribal dissatisfaction, and with the TNV being perceived to have been bought over, before long there was a mushrooming of other militant outfits, most significant among them being the All Tripura Tiger Force. What was most notable about the growing mili-

tancy was the absence of an all-encompassing vision or convergence of political goals, and there was little coordination between the groups operating. The only common element became the scramble for money and material gain, plus the easy access to sophisticated arms flowing easily across the borders of a state nearly completely surrounded by a porous international frontier. The availability of lethal small arms, in fact, became the deciding factor for the ease with which various small ethnic groups turned to militancy. Over the years, political strength came to be equated with the ability to incite violence, and unhindered gun-running only aided Tripura's decline into the abyss.

The level of violence, the targeting of civilians as well as the internecine fighting, were all fueled in part because the many different tribal groups did not have an umbrella organisation or unified programme. "The political aim of Tripura's insurgency is hazy and confusing," wrote noted Tripura scholar Mahadev Chakravarty of Tripura University in an article in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. "Some groups aimed at establishing *swadhin* or independent Tripura with sovereign power or a group of tribal states of North East confederacy with Tripura as one of the so-called Seven Sisters; others to dislodge by any means the so-called 'Refugee Government' or 'Colonial Government' of the state or to divide the state between tribals and non-tribals with the TTADC as the main center of the tribal state."

Unable to force the Indian State to take their political agenda seriously, and with the political establishment's reluctance to promote tribal advance, coupled with the lack of support from their own tribal populations, the insurgents had only the gun to turn to. Assault rifles in hand, they turned to banditry. Without a leadership to give a political spin to their depredations, the Tripura militants soon took on the appearance of

mere thugs. In a region with widespread deprivation and unemployment, even among the educated, the lure of the gun and easy money led Tripura to mass criminalisation.

### Underclass and economy

Violence against civilians has now become an almost daily occurrence in Tripura, and is carried out without even the fig leaf of political cover. While in Agartala town there is some semblance of law and order, out in the hinterland it is the gun that rules. Civil society has been desensitised to such an extent by the course of events that it tacitly accepts the killings and kidnappings as routine. With law and order completely outside anyone's control and extortions and abductions becoming the order of the day, there is hardly any flow of economic investment into Tripura today. The insurgency feeds the vicious cycle in which economic deprivation creates a sullen political underclass, which in turn feeds the non-ideological militancy, creating a mutually-reinforcing roadblock to economic advance.

And so it goes in a state that *ab initio* faced enormous economic hardship because of its distance from the Indian mainland and after 1947 the additional burden of the closure of land routes all around into East Pakistan. The natural direction and nature of trade as well as communication had always been into what became East Pakistan, and the closure hit Tripura even harder than the other states of the Indian Northeast. In one stroke, the Northeast became a cul de sac without access to the sea, with all road and rail links having to go through the 'chicken's neck' of the Dooars at Siliguri.

While for Assam, or Arunachal, Nagaland and Meghalaya, the land route to the port and cultural and communications hub of Calcutta made some economic sense, the situation for Tripura (and neighbouring Mizoram) was economically ludicrous. Goods unloaded

at Calcutta port now had to travel by road through West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya to finally reach Tripura after completing a circular carriage that took up to 20 days. Moreover, all major roads, including the national highway from Siliguri to Agartala, were vulnerable to attacks by different militant outfits.

The enormous costs of transport and carriage constitute the greatest hindrance to Tripura's economic development, for it makes the state non-competitive in the development of products and services. This is the main reason why Tripura has developed no viable industry other than tea. Complicating matters, a recent spate of kidnappings has led to a slow down in the work of the Rubber Board and the Oil and Natural Gas Commission



A militant surrenders to a district official.



(ONGC) because the areas containing potentially rich natural gas reserves are those where the insurgents are most likely to strike.

### Prize catch

There is no business quite like the kidnapping business in Tripura, where fabulous returns are almost guaranteed amidst the statewide anarchy. The official figures bear this out: between January 1997 and December 2000, there were some 1394 abductions reported, 96 hostages confirmed dead, and 444 hostages missing to this day. The ransom amounts usually range from INR 20,000 to INR 50,000, but can run to lakhs if the victim is thought to be affluent enough. However, given the non-ideological nature of the insurgency, the payment of ransom does not necessarily mean freedom, and there are many cases of death in captivity.

Yugabrata Chakrabarty was a prominent tea planter who was abducted by the ATTF in 1996. Thirty lakh rupees were paid for his release, but earlier this year after the payment of ransom the group announced that he had died of renal failure. Chakravarty's family members have said that the ATTF demanded additional lakhs of rupees for returning the body. In another instance, the son of businessman Mrinal Chowdhury was shot dead by ATTF gunmen while trying to resist his father's abduction. Chowdhury himself was later killed and his body thrown into a remote well. The NLFT, fighting for the "free holy land of Tripura", was responsible for abducting two boys aged three and four in South Tripura on 15 November, 2000. Both were later shot dead, even though their parents had paid a ransom of INR 25,000 for their release.

Tea production is the only commercial activity that has achieved any kind of scale in the state, but the industry has been grievously wounded by the kidnappings and killings. Many of Tripura's 57 tea gardens are located along the length of the border with Bangladesh, and the high and mid-level tea-executive is a prized catch for the abductors. The tea industry is thought to be able to afford hefty ransom demands, and it is relatively easy to whisk off victims from isolated tea gardens to rebel hideouts in Bangladesh.

As a result of the surge in abductions of tea executives in recent years, a large number of tea gardens lie abandoned while others function at half-steam in the

absence of planters. In many of the 20-odd tea gardens of South Tripura, which too have fallen victim to extremist violence, the bushes remain unattended and the crop unplucked as the proprietors themselves stay away. Even though the owners are desperate for a truce with the militants, they have been unable to establish any trust between themselves and the fractured groups that roam the countryside. This is in sharp contrast to the relationship developed by tea gardens in Assam and elsewhere in the Northeast with the various rebel groups, perhaps due to the unified command of the better organised insurgents elsewhere.

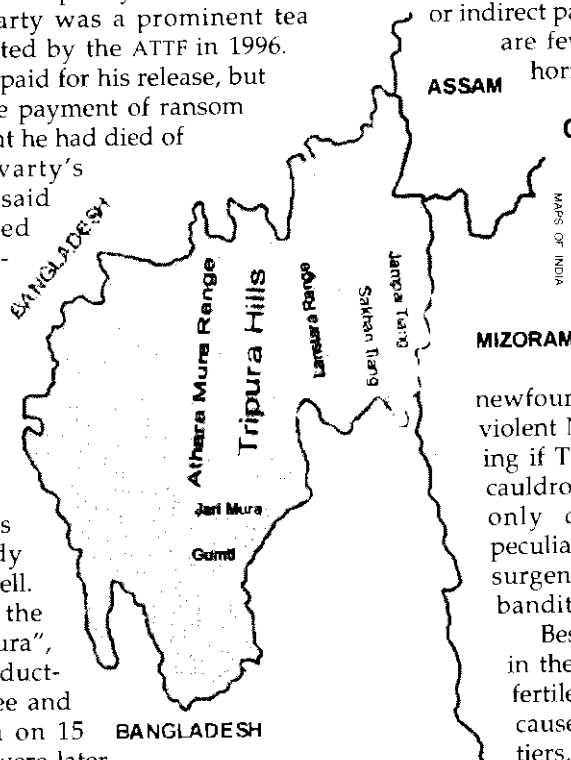
While the abduction of tea planters make news, the larger impact on Tripura society is in the numerous cases of kidnappings, random killings and extortion targeted at those less privileged. Almost every other person walking the streets of Agartala has been a direct or indirect participant in a violent drama, and there are few families that have been spared the horror of one violent action or another.

### Gun-running banditry

All of the Indian Northeast is marked by identity-related insurgencies, targeted against the 'Centre' in New Delhi, or the state government, or against neighbouring or cohabiting communities with whom there is either historical or newfound ire. With only Mizoram today serving as a newfound haven of peace in a progressively violent Northeast, it would have been surprising if Tripura had not been dragged into this cauldron of violence. And so it has been, the only difference being that the state's peculiar situation has made it easy for the insurgents to convert themselves quickly into bandits.

Besides the obvious dissatisfactions within the states of the region, insurgency finds fertile ground in the Northeast of India because of the long, winding and porous frontiers, the presence of elements hostile to the Central Government across these frontiers, an inhospitable and forested terrain, and the region's proximity to Southeast Asia. The fact that neighbouring Burma itself has a number of powerful insurgent groups only helps sustain those of the Indian Northeast. Most of the contraband weapons that flow into the Northeast originate in Cambodia, with its surplus of small arms. The underground route to South Asia is said to begin in the Rangong Islands off the Thai coast from where the arms are shipped through the Andaman Sea to Cox's Bazaar along the Bangladesh coast. From here, the weapons are carried in smaller consignments to various destinations in Burma and the Indian Northeast through different routes.

It is thought that the bulk of the arms that enter the





Northeast from Bangladesh do so through Tripura. According to the state's Finance Minister, Badal Chowdhury, the weapon consignments arrive in the districts of Dholai, South Tripura and North Tripura, from where they are transported further inland. The NLFT and ATTF, with camps and hideouts in Bangladesh, clearly play a key role in this gun-running activity. Agartala's authorities claim to have submitted a report to New Delhi some time ago documenting 21 NLFT and eight ATTF base camps in Bangladesh, most of them located in the Sylhet and Chittagong districts.

The quantity of weapons confiscated by the Border Security Force and other units does not reflect the actual volume of the contraband arms trade, but the seizures do clearly indicate the nature of weaponry in the possession of the militants in Tripura and elsewhere. Most of the arms are Chinese-manufactured pistols, revolvers, sten-guns, self-loading rifles (SLRs), as well as assault rifles such as the AK-47, 56 and 58, plus some .303 rifles. Unlike the smaller groups, the NLFT and ATTF both possess a formidable arsenal of such arms.

The power that comes from wielding an assault rifle keeps Tripura's under-educated youth in thrall, which makes recruitment easy. Meanwhile, the weapons horde of the two main insurgent groups gives them an enormous clout in the pecking order of Northeast insurgencies. Their firepower also makes them formidable foes of the security forces. Most importantly, however, the NLFT and ATTF are able to use these guns against the people of Tripura, which they do, and postpone indefinitely the rise of a civil society based on representational democracy and the rule of law.

### The politician's insurgent

One of the high profile ministers of the ruling Left Front government in Agartala explained in an interview last August that the insurgency in his state was not all it was cracked up to be. The problem was being highlighted and exaggerated, he said, "by the Congress Party just in order to dislodge us from power." The minister took great pains to explain the nexus between the NLFT and the State Congress Party and lamented the Congress' cynical encouragement of insurgency in Tripura. "We (the Left Front) enjoy a considerable support from the tribals in Tripura, and this is nothing but dirty politics by the Congress," he said.

The minister's reference to NLFT is significant. For, while the NLFT is alleged to have close links with the Congress, the ATTF is said to be aligned with the ruling Left Front. Tribal militant outfits have been used by the major political parties in the state either to remain in power or to dethrone the ruling party. Both the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist)



*The once flourishing tea gardens of Tripura are now paralysed by insurgency*

CPI(M), which have ruled Tripura alternately since 1978, stand accused of employing underground outfits against each other. Thus, there is little doubt that what can be called 'terrorism' in the state is supported and sustained by political patronage. This may explain why Agartala's authorities are unable to control insurgents, said to number, as a senior police officer himself admitted, no more than a thousand. So deep is the militant-politician nexus, it is said that the parties do not give the security forces a free hand in tackling the insurgents.

The state has abdicated its responsibility in Tripura. The democratic constitutional process has been subverted, and electoral outcomes are increasingly decided by the overt or covert support of the armed elements. Protected by political immunity and patronage, the insurgents enjoy untrammelled freedom to control territory, extort, loot, kidnap and rape. The politicians, meanwhile, look the other way.

A land-locked and Bangladesh-locked state that is far from even the Northeastern consciousness of the rest of India, Tripura and its people have been left to sort out their own problems. With a flick of a pencil, the border-demarkating Cyril Radcliffe managed to remove this region from its economic lifeline and make it the state that is the remotest from the centre of India. This might potentially even have been something of an advantage, but Tripura's particular history of indigeneness and in-migration, as well as the fractured nature of its local identities, has nurtured a soil that is fertile for political violence. Without a strong intelligentsia and civil society of its own, and neglected by the rest of the Northeast and India, the political violence soon degenerated into banditry. And that is what the people of Tripura suffer today.

Kashmir is more visible. It is here that real terror has come to roost, practically unremarked. ▽





# The Surrendered Insurge

The dance of convenience between the state Government, ULFA and 'Sulfa' has seen two rounds of accommodation and violence. As the third round begins, for the sake of peace in Assam, the authorities must stop making cynical use of the surrendered militants.

By Sunil Nath



UTPAL BARUAH

Just a decade ago, there was near-unanimous agreement among the people of Assam that the cadre of the United Liberation Front of Assam/Ahom (ULFA) should lay down arms and join the 'mainstream', a euphemism used by the Government and pro-establishment intellectuals to mean surrender. And so, many of the ULFA 'boys' did, to become known as the Sulfa, an abbreviation of "surrendered ULFA".

Today, there is an about turn in the public's attitude, and a cross-section of the Assamese population now says that, given a choice between the two, it would prefer the ULFA to its surrendered counterparts, the Sulfa. If an opinion poll were conducted now in the state, the diffuse grouping known as the Sulfa would probably come out on the top only in a measure of unpopularity. Indeed, it is an interesting phenomenon when nearly everyone continues to urge the ULFA cadres to surrender while abhorring the ULFA boys who have in fact surrendered. Understanding how this came to happen will provide a window on the state of the insurgency in Assam today, and the complicated nexus between the politician, political parties and the insurgents, which makes the problem so much more than a simple fight of good versus bad.

The Assamese middle class

Lieutenant Abinash Bordoloi, Sulfa leader slain in Nalbari in 1999. His fiancée grieves.

# nts of Assam

played the role of Frankenstein when it applauded from the gallery at an emerging ULFA, which rapidly grew in strength during the late 1980s in the adulatory atmosphere created by the middle-class led Assamese media. When the ULFA started to threaten seriously the integrity of the Indian union, the central Government swung into action by proscribing the organisation and carrying out a military crackdown. However, Paresh Barua, the crafty commander of the ULFA, managed to earn a respite from the military operation, code-named 'Operation Bajrang', by promising not to disrupt or interfere in the ensuing general elections to the State Assembly.

Immediately after the new state Government assumed office in May 1991, the ULFA struck back by resorting to numerous kidnappings in different various parts of the state. The victims included senior bureaucrats and foreign engineers. The Government, after initial attempts at buying peace by releasing some jailed ULFA cadres, retaliated by re-launching the suspended military operation. This time, the Indian Army's counter-insurgency action went all the way and a significant number of the ULFA's second-rung cadres were either killed or captured.

## Chief Minister's boys

Though the Assamese people were by and large still sympathetic towards the ULFA, with the Army continuing its effective action, popular sentiment veered towards a negotiated settlement. Public meetings were held all over the state to issue appeals to the "misguided youths" to rejoin the mainstream. The pressure exerted by the military operations and the built-up public opinion took its toll on the militants' morale. A section of ULFA cadres laid down their weapons en-masse before the state government in March 1992, the surrendered militants claiming that they in fact represented a split in the organisation and that they carried with them half of the total cadre-strength of the ULFA.

The ULFA reacted by labeling the deserters, 'betrayers,' and expelling them from the organisation. The role played at the time by the Congress Chief Minister of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia, in splitting the ULFA contributed towards immediate vilification of the surrendered ULFA members. Saikia bestowed 'blue-eyed' status on the surrendered boys, granting them all kinds of proper and improper favours. Very soon the term 'Syndicate', referring to its mafia-style mode of operations, became synonymous with the Sulfa. The label 'Sulfa', coined by the local media, itself took on a pejorative connotation.



ULFA BARUA

ULFA cadres surrender to become Sulfa.

Though the majority of the surrendered ULFA members returned to their homes and rejoined normal lives, there were quite a few who took advantage of the state government's patronage and barged into all avenues of moneymaking. Their status as the favoured brats of the Chief Minister made it easy for them to enter into collusion with unscrupulous bureaucrats and police officers, thus evading the normal process of law. Their conspicuous consumption and open display of suddenly-acquired riches, meanwhile, helped the government in getting more surrenders from the disillusioned ULFA ranks.

The threat of large-scale desertion loomed before the ULFA leadership, for it was beginning to appear as if renegade members were getting the best of everything while the loyal had to be on the run. After some hesitation, the ULFA hit back, systematically attacking its erstwhile members. Once the surrendered boys, wallowing in their new found riches, realised that they were now at the top of the ULFA's hit-list, they started grouping together. Offence was the best form of defence, these militants-turned-goondas concluded, and they



found that the government was ever ready to help. The military and police officers could hardly suppress their glee when they found eager volunteers amongst the Sulfa boys, with their insider's knowledge, in the fight against ULFA.

The results started pouring in soon enough. The combined onslaught of the Sulfa and the security forces took their toll on an already-weakened ULFA. The battle on the ground was being won by the Government, but it was paying a heavy price politically. The Sulfa did not exactly follow the book in its actions, and the excesses mounted. In some places, over-enthusiastic security officers allowed the Sulfa boys to operate by themselves, and this added to the mushrooming public resentment. Another outcome of this self-serving amity between the authorities and the Sulfa was that the police began turning a blind eye to the Sulfa boys' coercive business practices. It became an unwritten code that to engage in any business, construction contract, or trade in Assam, one had to pay a fixed percentage in commission to the local Sulfa chief. The public was becoming increasingly uneasy, although few dared to speak up openly for fear of being branded an active supporter of ULFA — the consequence could be incarceration, or even liquidation.

### Sulfa syndicate

The people had their revenge in the next general elections, held in February 1996. A snowballing anti-incumbency sentiment saw the Congress ousted and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) ushered in as the ruling party. The AGP government, led by Prafulla Mahanta, the erstwhile student leader who had been the Chief Minister of Assam from 1985 to 1990, started off by distancing the Government from the Sulfa. With the Sulfa keeping a low profile in the absence of official patronage, the ULFA reappeared on the scene with a vengeance. The killings and violence were such that at times the statewide scene resembled that of a banana republic after a military coup. With the escalating violence, and some added arm-twisting by New Delhi, which threatened to impose central rule citing administrative breakdown, Mahanta's government was forced to change its stance regarding the insurgency.

Within six months of the AGP's coming to power, the bonhomie between the state government and the ULFA turned to bitter enmity. The turning point was reached when the ULFA tried to bomb the car of Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta while he was traveling with his six-year-old daughter. After that, Mahanta started taking the anti-ULFA operations very seriously and some senior police officers known more for their shoot-from-the-hip philosophy than their adherence to the blue book were brought back into Assam.

As soon as this new counter-insurgency chapter started, the government re-discovered the virtues of the Sulfa. The boys were brought back to centre-stage on a red carpet, and the aftermath was a rehearsal of the

earlier episode. The only difference was in the heightened scale of blood-letting. The second cycle of fighting between the ULFA on the one side and the security forces and the Sulfa on the other saw the emergence of 'secret killers', unknown assailants who would raid the houses of ULFA members and assassinate them to exact revenge for their kin's rebellion. This cycle also witnessed a sharp rise in the 'syndicate' style monopoly exercised by some Sulfa groups over nearly all the high-profit business activities in the state. The AGP authorities gave the former rebels a free hand to create monopoly structures as long as they served in counter-insurgency operations. However, the end result was that the AGP was practically wiped out during the next elections in July 2001, when the opposition Congress made it back to the seat of government.

### ULFA facade

Assam is now at the beginning of the third cycle in this play between the state government, ULFA and Sulfa. The new government is wary of being perceived as patronising the Sulfa, and this has meant that the powerful boys are now on the run. A few top leaders have left the state, and others are maintaining a very low profile. The only discernable change this time is in the strategy being practiced by the ULFA. Whereas, it behaved like a victorious junta after the 1996 elections that brought the Prafulla Mahanta-led AGP to power, in these past months they have been more conspicuous by their low profile.

However, it could be that the ULFA is on an extensive extortion drive, as reported in a section of the Guwahati media. Indeed, the military and the central intelligence agencies operating in Assam believe that ULFA has adopted a cunning strategy to exploit the situation — on the one hand they are giving the Congress government of Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi hope of coming in for talks, while on the other they are collecting money, recruits and resources that had been depleted after the period of hard-hitting counter-insurgency operations under the previous regime.

In the meantime, this is not a good time to be a Sulfa cadre. With a seemingly less sympathetic if not outrightly hostile government in place, the former rebels are now at the mercy of their dreaded adversary, the ULFA. The senior leaders of the ULFA have lost quite a few family members to the bullets of secret killers, who it believes are none other than some Sulfa boys. Therefore, once the need for maintaining a facade of peace is over, the ULFA is sure to hit out at Sulfa. It is not a question of what will happen, rather one of when it will happen.

On the larger plane of strategy, however, the Sulfa is but an irritant for ULFA, whose *raison d'être* is fighting the Indian state. And the tone of the insurgent's regular newsletter, titled *Freedom*, does not indicate that the ULFA is ready to bury the hatchet with New Delhi. The present facade of peace in Assam is just that, and we are living

through a lull before it is ripped away by one more surge of violence.

If the ULFA launches any major armed operation against the security forces, as this writer believes it will, the state Government would have to initiate tougher measures. It has happened twice and from all indications it will happen again that the state Government and the ULFA will be involved in a bitter conflict. It is more than certain that the security forces will be needing the services of former rebels to enhance their performance. The Sulfa does not come cheap. It will exact its own price for cooperating with the Government. Syndicates will crop up all over the state again. It is indeed a nightmarish scenario for the average citizen caught between the devil of insurgents and the deep sea of counter-insurgency forces.

The saner elements amongst the Sulfa have suggested that since every government has ultimately felt the need for their services, the unofficial and unholy system of providing remuneration through 'syndicates' should be replaced with an official and transparent system. Elsewhere in India, ex-rebels have been absorbed into paramilitary battalions called IRBs (Indian Reserve Battalions). In Nagaland, Manipur, Punjab and Kashmir, these IRBs have proved their worth as effective counter-insurgency forces. However, being state-sanctioned units, these battalions are bound by rules and are answerable to codes of conduct as combatants. Such a transformation of the Sulfa will make them more responsible and less like vigilantes and warlords.

This issue was raised at a recent meeting between the State Home Minister Paradgul Bordoloi and some Sulfa leaders. The government says that it accepts the proposal in principle and has approached the central Government for necessary permission and funds. What actually transpires will be known only when it happens.

### **Surrendered privilege**

Though it is true that the Sulfa has fully earned its notoriety, going by recent Government statistics the fact is that more than seven thousand militants have surrendered in Assam. The present cadre strength of the ULFA is thought to be no more than five thousand. If there had been no surrenders, the underground ULFA would have twice the number of cadres it has now. Then there is the moral question — when somebody is hunted down by the State it is also natural justice that he should be given a chance to surrender rather than be killed in an encounter. It is also important to keep in mind that the State is dealing not with hardcore criminals, but misguided teenagers teenagers bowled over by ideology and the romanticism of holding a gun.

There is a false perception amongst many that the surrendered boys are granted amnesty for all their crimes. The fact is that the Indian Constitution and the country's legal system has no provision for the grant of



*Birth of underground counter-insurgents: ULFA 'boys' surrender to then-Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta .*

amnesty. There is a provision for granting pardons, but that happens only after conviction in a court of law. There is simply no provision for granting amnesty before trial and conviction. Thus, all the surrendered ULFA members have to regularly appear before courts to stand trial for cases registered against them while they were in the ULFA. Another common misperception is that the majority of the surrendered militants are a mischievous lot, but the truth is that more than half of those who left ULFA have gone back to normal non-militant lives. Possibly no more than seven hundred Sulfa members have been engaged in counter-insurgency and/or are living luxurious lives at a cost to the State. It would be a travesty to hold ninety percent responsible for the deeds of ten percent.

As long as insurgency maintains steam in Assam, surrenders will remain its inevitable by-product. The lure of adventure, and escape from an apparently hopeless future in economically stagnant Assam, will continue to draw the young into the militant organisation. While some will become hardcore insurgents, others become disillusioned soon enough. It would be morally and tactically unsound to disallow such cadre to return and repent. While this writer strongly believes that there should be no special privilege for the surrendered militants, at the same time they should not be permanently despised. Sticking a derogatory label to each and every surrendered ULFA member only creates another group that is psychologically kept outside civil society. This is a potentially dangerous situation both for the surrendered militants and the civil society.

Elected governments are influenced by strong and expressed public opinion. The public of Assam has proved more than once that it disapproves of the clandestine use of Sulfa to counter insurgency in the state. The message from the people of Assam to the government of Assam should be heard loud and clear. And the instruction is: officially induct the Sulfa boys in the security forces if you need their service, otherwise keep your hands off them. No special privilege and no special service!



# The Oppression Within

A degeneration of insurgencies is underway in parts of the Northeast, and in some instances the people are beginning to speak out.

By *Rupa Chinai*

Except when it explodes in violence, Manipur in Northeast India is a state that rarely attracts attention. That is perhaps a misfortune to equal the tragedy of death that perpetually stalks its society, for many changes have taken place in the last many years that a negligent "India" has not cared to notice. In late September this year, local newspapers and cable television operators in Manipur suspended work for two weeks, in protest against "interference". This was an act of protest against the degeneration of once idealistic "freedom movements" into internecine struggles for power and control by proliferating splinter groups. This is the sad reality of India's Northeast. Many of those who today speak on behalf of the region have become increasingly distant from its common people, and Indian policymakers have yet to register the importance of this fact.

Nagaland, which neighbours Manipur, has for the past 50 years been in the throes of one of the most tenacious armed struggles against New Delhi. There is virtually no Naga family that has not been scarred by this movement for independence. In the past two decades, Assam and Tripura too made their way into the roster of insurgency-affected states. These armed struggles have led to one of the saddest blights of the Northeast, the cutting down of youth at the peak of vigour and energy. In all these states, the crushing might of the Indian army is a conspicuous, menacing and oppressive one.

What is unfortunately rather less evident to those who sympathise with the regional movements for autonomy and self-determination is that oppression is equally ruthlessly practised by the local insurgent organisations. This is why the press of the Northeast has begun to protest, and why the common folk are increasingly perturbed by the 'parallel government' run by these organisations. The question that can legitimately be asked is how such organisations can claim to speak on behalf of an entire people in negotiations with the federal government and in international fora, when they silence the public back home at gunpoint and ruthlessly stamp out dissent.

## **Naga versus Naga**

The National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isaac-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) is one of the insurgent groups now

engaged in negotiating with the central Government on settlement of the Naga issue. There is widespread support for a ceasefire amongst the Nagas, and the talks reflect the deep desire among the people for peace. But the Naga public is also making it clear to the Isaac-Muivah group that unless they forge a viable consensus with rival groups about the terms of negotiation with New Delhi, any settlement that is arrived at will lead to more bloodshed. Thuingaleng Muivah, a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur, and Isaac Swu, a Sema from Nagaland, are amongst the Naga leaders who were closely associated with Angami Zapu Phizo, the founder of the Naga movement for independence.

In 1980 Muivah and Swu split from the parent body (the Naga National Council) to form the NSCN, in protest against the controversial Shillong Accord of 1975, whose terms—secretly negotiated with the Government of India by a small group of leaders reportedly close to Phizo—were described as a 'sellout' by a sizable section of the Nagas. In due course, the NSCN too began to be internally riven, with the Muivah group locked in a bitter fight with the Khaplang group (NSCN-K), dominated by the Konyak (the largest Naga tribe in Nagaland) and Hemi Nagas (who live in contiguous areas of Burma). The past decade has seen some of the bloodiest fighting between the IM and K groups of the NSCN, resulting in the loss of innocent civilian lives caught in the crossfire, and deepening the divide between the twelve major Naga tribes. While all Nagas acknowledge the armed might and organisational superiority of the NSCN(I-M), and its crucial role in any settlement with the central Government, many powerful tribes are unwilling to accept the NSCN(IM) as the sole arbiter of the Naga destiny.

What forms do the oppression from within take? At a recent conference in Shillong, women journalists of the Northeast spoke of the pressure they face from the insurgent groups seeking to dictate what could and could not be published. Northeast journalists have time and again traveled to New Delhi and elsewhere in an effort to draw the attention of the national media to their plight, to plead for national support so that the true picture of these areas can be presented to the rest of the country. The response, unfortunately, has been weak. At the ground level too, the open flaunting of insurgent might is evident. For instance, recently, local

Naga papers were forced to print a press release from a faction of the NSCN, intimating the public on how to recognise its letterhead when its members come calling for 'donations'. The notice also provided a telephone number in Dimapur for further clarifications or complaints against extortion by spurious groups.

Those who run the state machinery are not spared either. Many government servants pay up to 25 per cent of their salaries as 'tax' to insurgent groups which is efficiently 'deducted at source' by routine collections from the office cash box. In the villages, each household in Nagaland is forced to pay an annual tax of INR 400, apart from providing services as and when demanded, such as portering and hospitality to 'national workers'. For cash-starved Naga villagers with no money to pay for the health and education needs of their children (the government schools and health services are in shambles), such taxes for the 'Naga cause' are a huge burden. However, it is not as if there has been only subservient compliance with such demands of the insurgents.

In Manipur, where too the NSCN runs underground operations, several times over the past six years the Meitei—the people of Manipur valley—have come together to protest, against both the Meitei organisations and against the NSCN(IM). (The latter is dominated by the Tangkhul Naga tribe living in Ukhrul district of Manipur.) In 1996, the first public protest against the NSCN(I-M)'s extortion on the national highway—the sole supply line running through the Naga hill areas into the Manipur valley—was led by the Manipur Truck Drivers Association. Despite the massive deployment of army and paramilitary personnel for protecting the highway, the NSCN imposed a tax on every commercial vehicle, charging INR 3-5,000 per trip. Receipts for such collections are openly issued in the name of the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland. The Meitei public supported this strike even though it led to a severe shortage of commodities and inflation. Despite such protests, the practice continues, and the current rate is reported to be INR 10,000.

### Controlling the drug corridor

Such open confrontation with the Naga insurgent organisations has been less evident in Nagaland. However, in the towns and interior villages of the state, many Nagas are now speaking, though cautiously, about the devastating consequences of the violence that mark the struggle for supremacy between the two warring factions of the NSCN, and the extortion and naked intimidation that they indulge in. It is an index of the extent of degeneration of movements espousing the ideals of self-determination that their fratricidal struggle for control is now essentially about who dominates the corridors of the drug and arms trade with Burma. In Manipur, for instance, a porous border with Burma has facilitated a massive inflow of heroin from the Golden Triangle, en route to the international market. While the drug trade supports the insurgent groups in their quest for arms and easy money, it is destroying the youth of Manipur. The Kukis, who live in the areas adjoining Burma, have been embroiled over the past five years in a bloody fight with the NSCN-IM over control of the right of passage through this corridor.

The Naga Hoho, a powerful combine of Naga tribal organisations, has sought to provide an answer to Nagas who ask what the fight has been all about. The Hoho is trying to involve civil society in a dialogue with the different rival groups in an effort to make the latter accountable to the public. This is important because many tribes view the NSCN's "muscle flexing" as the continuing attempt by the Tangkhuls and their allies to assert their supremacy in the region. Some Naga intellectuals say that the recent Meitei riots, in the aftermath of the extension of the Naga ceasefire to Manipur and Assam, augured a "paradigm shift". For the first time, it brought to light the rising aspirations of myriad small groups living in the Northeast. "It demonstrates that no one group can hope to assert the solution to their problem, without taking into consideration the future of all these groups living within their fold", says a prominent Naga observer, who wishes not to be named.



*Rebels without a cause? Naga militants have increasingly turned from fighting New Delhi to battling each other for control of extortion rings and the state's arms and drug trade.*





Thuingaleng Muivah, leader of the NSCN-IM.

recognise the reality of tribal division and struggle for power and territory is creating conditions that are conducive for civil war. Says a Kuki leader, "The stage in Manipur is set for a clash of the titans—the Nagas and the Meitei—and small groups like the Kuki will be crushed underfoot." The Kukis are the third dominant group living in Manipur's foothills. Amongst the last of the migratory tribes to settle in Northeast India, they are still considered to be 'outsiders', and live in grinding poverty.

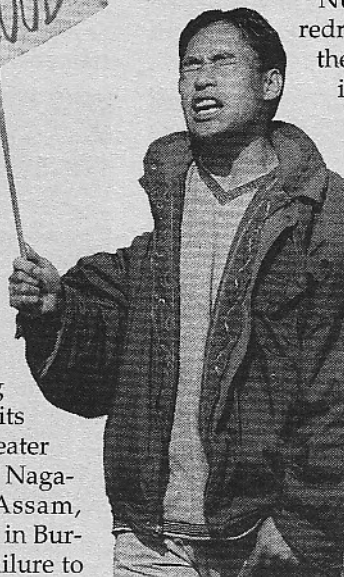
Above the tribal fault lines and the burden of long struggle lies the sad truth. After decades of suffering the Nagas, the Manipuris, the Assamiya, and the Tripura tribals face this most painful reality—the dissolving dream for independence and a need to accept new realities and visions. This unlooked-for reality has also been faced by the indigenous peoples of North America and the Pacific Islands. The elders of these societies are now consolidating what is left of their people and their distinct culture, by focussing on the 'rights of a nation within a nation'. Their distinct survival within the larger 'mainstream' now depends on issues such as the right to health, education, development and a political system that is rooted in their unique civilisation and wisdom.

Naga leaders have consistently held that Nagaland has never been a part of India – historically, racially or culturally. During 20 years of visits to Nagaland, this writer found village community leaders consistently emphasising the historical basis of the Naga movement for independence, such as the declaration of Naga independence on 14 August 1947, one day before Indian independence. "The Nagas say they are not secessionists or anti-India. They seek to live as honourable neighbours of India, and they want the rest of India to acknowledge the historical facts, and respect their right to determine their future, despite their small size," says a Naga leader.

The Nagas of Manipur have so far tried to abide by the appeals of the Naga Hoho for restraint and dialogue. But such efforts can collapse in the face of an insensitive response. For instance, the Manipur Nagas are deeply resentful of the manner in which the Union Minister of State for Home, I D Swami, visited Imphal only during the riots and failed to even make an attempt to go to the hill districts. The United Naga Council of Manipur says this is typical of the 'caste system' they have suffered all these years. Fortunately, the NSCN(IM) leadership has held its peace and tactfully retreated in the face of fierce Meitei opposition to the extension of the cease fire to Manipur. This stepping back has reportedly caused the organisation some loss of ground amongst its supporters, and it is now ambivalent on the issue.

In the circumstances, the only bargain the NSCN can realistically hope to drive is a solution within the Indian Constitution. But if the NSCN fails to consolidate a base among all the Naga tribes, the only way it can keep its existing base is to persist with its claim to 'Greater Nagaland' or 'Nagalim', i.e., the integration of Naga-inhabited areas in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal and across the international border in Burma. But many in the Northeast fear that the failure to

ENOUGH BLOOD



New realities however show that redrawing of boundaries has never solved the problems of the common people, and in the age of globalisation such smallness of vision cannot sustain their own people. In rural, interior Nagaland, villagers have no time to waste on dreams, so intense is their preoccupation with daily survival and the need to provide meaningful opportunities for their children. For far too long, the elders and leaders of Naga civil society have said, "Let us first achieve our independence, then we will deal with the problems of corruption, alcohol and drugs, and the divisions between Naga tribes". But the ground realities demand otherwise.







# The South Asian



*New Delhi displays its arsenal.*

by **M. V. Ramana and A. H. Nayyar**

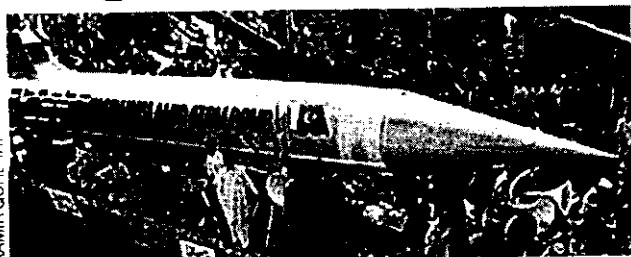
As the US mobilised its armed forces in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the world's attention focused on Pakistan, so crucial to military operations in Afghanistan. When Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf pledged total support for a US-led multinational force on 14 September, many people's first thought was: What about Pakistan's nuclear weapons? Could they fall into the hands of extremists? In an address to his nation, Musharraf proclaimed that the "safety of nuclear missiles" was one of his priorities. The Bush administration began to consider providing Pakistan with perimeter security and other assistance to guard its nuclear facilities.

The renewed concern about nuclear weapons in South Asia comes a little more than three years after the events of May 1998: the five nuclear tests conducted by India at Pokharan in the northwestern desert state of Rajasthan, followed three weeks later by six nuclear explosions conducted by Pakistan in its southwestern region of Chaghai. These tit-for-tat responses mirrored the nuclear buildup by the US and the former Soviet Union, with a crucial difference: the two Cold War superpowers were separated by an ocean and never

fought each other openly. Neighbouring India and Pakistan have gone to war three times since British India was partitioned in 1947 into Muslim-majority and Hindu-majority states. Even now artillery guns regularly fire over the border (officially, a cease-fire line) in the disputed region of Kashmir.

In May 1999, just one year after the nuclear tests, bitter fighting broke out over the occupation of a mountain ledge near the Kashmiri town of Kargil. The two-month conflict took a toll of between 1,300 (according to the Indian Government) and 1,750 (according to Pakistan) lives. For the first time since 1971, India deployed its air force to launch attacks. In response, Pakistani fighter planes were scrambled for fear they might be hit on the ground; air-raid sirens sounded in the capital city of Islamabad. High-level officials in both countries issued at least a dozen nuclear threats. The peace and stability that some historians and political scientists have ascribed to nuclear weapons—because nuclear nations are supposed to be afraid of mutually assured destruction—were nowhere in sight. Wiser counsel eventually prevailed. The end of the Kargil clash, however, was not the end of the nuclear confrontation in

# Bomb



*Grim fantasies: A pro-nuke rally in Karachi organised by Pakistan's main fundamentalist party, Jamaat-e-Islami.*

South Asia. The planned deployment of nuclear weapons by the two countries heightens the risks. With political instability a real possibility in Pakistan, particularly given the conflict in Afghanistan, the dangers have never been so near.

## Learning to Love the Bomb

Both countries have been advancing their nuclear programmes almost ever since they gained independence from Britain. Understanding this history is crucial in figuring out what to do now, as well as preventing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Although the standoff between Pakistan and India has distinct local characteristics, both countries owe much to other nuclear states. The materials used in their bombs were manufactured with Western technology; both countries' justifications for joining the nuclear club drew heavily on Cold War thinking. The continued reliance of the US and Russia on thousands of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert only adds to the perceived need for nuclear arsenals in India and Pakistan.

When setting up the Indian Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) in 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, laid out his desire that the country "develop [atomic energy] for peaceful purposes." But at the same time, he recognised that "if we are compelled as a nation to use it for other purposes, possibly no pious sentiments will stop the nation from using it that way." Such ambivalence remained a central feature of India's nuclear policy as it developed.

To Indian leaders, the programme symbolised international political clout and technological modernity. Over the next two decades, India began to construct and operate nuclear reactors, mine uranium, fabricate fuel and extract plutonium. In terms of electricity produced, these activities often proved uneconomical—hardly, one might think, where a developing nation should be putting its resources. Politicians and scientists justified the nuclear programme on the grounds that it promoted self-sufficiency, a popular theme in

post-colonial India. Rhetoric aside, India solicited and received ample aid from Canada, the US and other countries.

After India's defeat in the 1962 border war with China, some right-wing politicians issued the first public calls for developing a nuclear arsenal. These appeals became louder after China's first nuclear test in 1964. Countering this bomb lobby were other prominent figures, who argued that the economic cost would be too high. Many leading scientists advocated the bomb. Homi Bhabha, the theoretical physicist who ran the IAEC, claimed that his organisation could build nuclear weapons "within 18 months". Citing a Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory report, Bhabha predicted that nuclear bombs would be cheap. He also promised economic gain from "peaceful nuclear explosions", which many American nuclear researchers extolled for, say, digging canals.

In November 1964 Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri compromised, permitting the commission to explore the technology for such an explosion. It turned out that Bhabha had already been doing some exploring. In 1960 he reportedly sent Vasudev Iya, a young chemist, to France to absorb as much information as he possibly could about how polonium—a chemical element used to trigger a nuclear explosion—was prepared. Bhabha died in 1966, and design work on the "peaceful" device did not begin for another two years. But by the late 1960s, between 50 and 75 scientists and engineers were actively developing weapons. Their work culminated in India's first atomic test—the detonation on May 11, 1974, of a plutonium weapon with an explosive yield of five to 12 kilotons. For comparison, the bomb dropped on Hiroshima had a yield of about 13 kilotons.

## Nuclear Tipping Point

The 1974 test was greeted with enthusiasm within India and dismay elsewhere. Western countries cut off cooperative efforts on nuclear matters and formed the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which restricts the export of nuclear technologies and materials to nations that refuse to sign the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, including both India and Pakistan.

In the years that followed, the bomb lobby pushed for tests of more advanced weapons, such as a boosted-fission design and a hydrogen bomb. It appears that in late 1982 or early 1983, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi tentatively agreed to another test, only to change her mind within 24 hours. One of the causes for the volte-face is said to have been a conversation with the Indian Foreign Secretary, whom an American official had confronted with satellite evidence of preparations at the test site. The conversation seems to have convinced Gandhi that the US reaction would create economic difficulties for India. Instead, it is reported, she wanted to "develop other things and keep them ready".

The "other things" she had in mind were ballistic



missiles. In 1983 the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme was set up under the leadership of Abdul Kalam, a renowned rocket engineer. This followed an earlier, secret attempt to reverse-engineer a Soviet anti-aircraft missile that India had purchased in the 1960s. Although that effort did not succeed, it led to the development of several critical technologies, in particular a rocket engine. Kalam adopted an open management style—as compared with the closed military research programme—and involved academic institutions and private firms. Anticipating restrictions on imports, India went on a shopping spree for gyroscopes, accelerometers and motion simulators from suppliers in France, Sweden, the US and Germany.

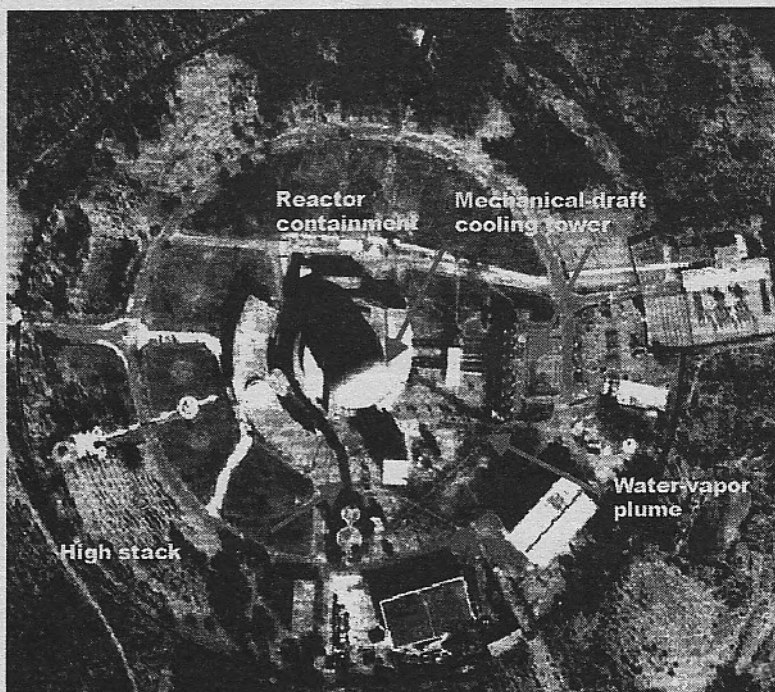
In 1988 India tested its first short-range surface-to-surface missile. A year later came a medium-range missile; in April 1999, a longer-range missile. The latter can fly 2,000 kilometers, well into the heart of China. Despite this ability, India is unlikely to achieve nuclear parity with China. According to various estimates, China has 400 warheads and an additional 200 to 575 weapons' worth of fissile material. If India's plutonium production reactors have been operating on average at 50 to 80 percent of full power, India has somewhere between 55 and 110 weapons' worth of plutonium. The stockpile could be much larger if commercial reactors earmarked for electricity generation have also been producing plutonium for weapons.

## Eating Grass

Pakistan's nuclear programme drew on a general desire to match India in whatever it does. The country set up its Atomic Energy Commission in 1954, began operating its first nuclear research reactor in 1965 and opened its first commercial reactor in 1970. As scientific adviser to the government, physicist Abdus Salam, who later won the Nobel Prize in Physics, played an important role.

The programme was severely handicapped by a shortage of manpower. In 1958 the commission had only 31 scientists and engineers; it was run by Nazir Ahmad, the former head of the Textile Committee. The commission pursued an active programme of training personnel by sending more than 600 scientists and engineers to the US, Canada and Western Europe. With generous help from these countries, some of which also aided India, Pakistan had a few nuclear research laboratories in place by the mid-1960s.

After the 1965 war with India, many Pakistani politicians, journalists and scientists pressed for the development of nuclear weapons. The most prominent was Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who fa-



*Khushab Plutonium Reactor, Pakistan.*

mously declared that if India developed an atomic bomb, Pakistan would follow "even if we have to eat grass or leaves or to remain hungry". After Pakistan's defeat in the December 1971 war, Bhutto became Prime Minister. In January 1972 he convened a meeting of Pakistani scientists to discuss making bombs.

As the first prong of their two-pronged effort to obtain weapons material, researchers attempted to purchase plutonium reprocessing plants from France and Belgium. After initially agreeing to the sale, France backed down under American pressure. But a few Pakistani scientists did go to Belgium for training in reprocessing technology. Returning to Pakistan, they constructed a small-scale reprocessing laboratory in the early 1980s. Using spent fuel from a plutonium production reactor that opened in 1998, this lab is capable of producing two to four bombs' worth of plutonium annually.

As the second prong, researchers explored techniques for enriching uranium—that is, for concentrating the bomb-usable isotope uranium 235. In 1975 A Q Khan, a Pakistani metallurgist who had worked at an enrichment plant in the Netherlands, joined the group. With him came classified design information and lists of component suppliers in the West, many of which proved quite willing to violate export-control laws. Success came in 1979 with the enrichment of small quantities of uranium. Since then, Pakistan is estimated to have produced 20 to 40 bombs' worth of enriched uranium. Every year it produces another four to six bombs' worth.

By 1984 designs for aircraft-borne bombs were reportedly complete. Around this time, some American

officials started alleging that China had given Pakistan the design for a missile-ready bomb. China and Pakistan have indeed exchanged technology and equipment in several areas, including those related to nuclear weapons and missiles. For example, it is believed that Pakistan has imported short-range missiles from China. But the accusation that China supplied Pakistan with a weapons design has never been substantiated. And understandably, Pakistan's nuclear scientists have denied it.

In spring 1990 events in Kashmir threatened to erupt into another full-scale war. According to a 1993 *New Yorker* article by American journalist Seymour M. Hersh, US satellites detected a convoy of trucks moving out of Kahuta, Pakistan's uranium-enrichment facility, toward an air base where F-16 fighter jets stood ready. Hersh reported that American diplomats conveyed this information to India, which recalled the troops it had amassed at the border. But the overwhelming opinion among scholars who have analysed these claims is that Pakistan never contemplated the use of nuclear weapons; experts are also skeptical that US satellites ever detected the claimed movement. Nevertheless, the Pakistani bomb lobby has used the allegations to assert that nuclear weapons protect the country from Indian attack. In India, officials have never acknowledged Hersh's story; it would be an admission that Pakistan's

nuclear capability had neutralised India's conventional military advantage.

### "Now I Am Become Death"

Further buildup of nuclear capabilities in both countries took place against a background transformed by the end of the Cold War. Superpower arsenals shrank, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which prohibits explosive tests, was negotiated in 1996. But the five declared nuclear states—the US, Russia, Britain, France and China—made it clear that they intend to hold on to their arsenals. This ironic juxtaposition strengthened the bomb lobbies in India and Pakistan.

Domestic developments added to the pressure. India witnessed the rise of Hindu nationalism. For decades, parties subscribing to this ideology, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had espoused the acquisition of greater military capability—and nuclear weapons. It was therefore not surprising that the BJP ordered nuclear tests immediately after coming to power in March 1998.

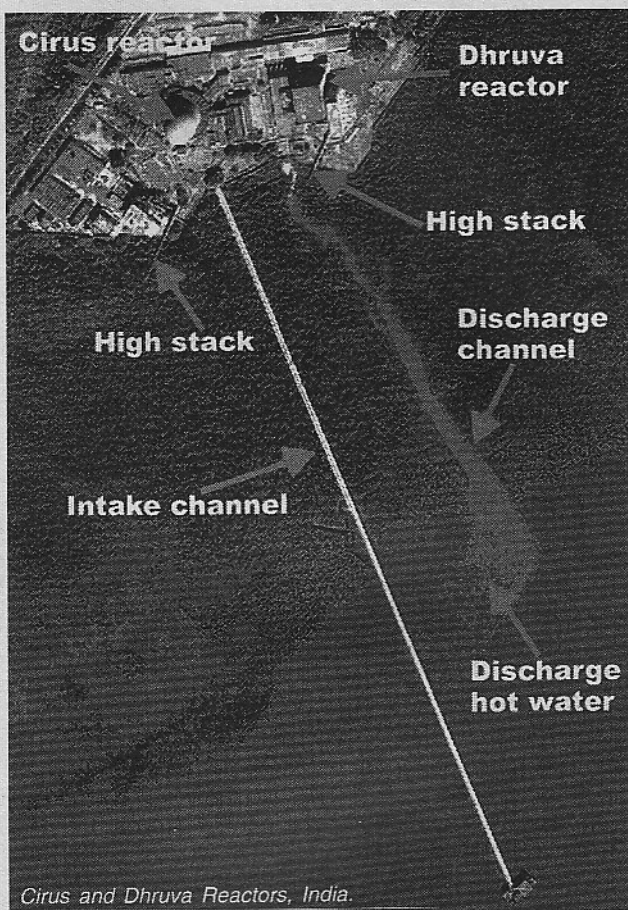
The Indian tests, in turn, provided Pakistani nuclear advocates with the perfect excuse to test. Here again, religious extremists advocated the bomb. Qazi Hussain Ahmad of the Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the largest Islamist groups in Pakistan, had declared in 1993: "Let us wage jihad for Kashmir. A nuclear-armed Pakistan would deter India from a wider conflict." Meanwhile the military sought nuclear weapons to counter India's vastly larger armed forces.

This lobbying was partially offset by US and Chinese diplomacy after India's tests. In addition, some analysts and activists enumerated the ill effects that would result from the economic sanctions that were sure to follow any test. They suggested that Pakistan not follow India's lead—leaving India to face international wrath alone—but to no avail. Three weeks after India's blasts, Pakistan went ahead with its own tests.

Bombast notwithstanding, the small size of seismic signals from the tests of both countries has cast doubt on the declared explosive yields. The data released by the Indian weapons establishment to support its claims are seriously deficient; for example, a graph said to be of yields of radioactive by-products has no units on the axes. Independent scientists have not been able to verify that the countries set off as many devices as they profess.

Whatever the details, the tests have dramatically changed the military situation in South Asia. They have spurred the development of more advanced weapons, missiles, submarines, antiballistic missile systems, and command-and-control systems. In August 1999 the Indian Draft Nuclear Doctrine called for the deployment of a triad of "aircraft, mobile land-missiles and sea-based assets" to deliver nuclear weapons. Such a system would cost about \$8 billion. This past January the Indian government declared that it would deploy its new long-range missile. A month later the Pakistani Deputy Chief of naval staff announced that Pakistan

SPACE IMAGING





was thinking about equipping at least one of its submarines with nuclear missiles.

**Critical Mass**

Deployment increases the risk that nuclear weapons will be used in a crisis through accident or miscalculation. With missile flight times of three to five minutes between the two countries, early-warning systems are useless. Leaders may not learn of a launch until they look out their window and see a blinding flash of light. They will therefore keep their fingers close to the button or authorise others, geographically dispersed, to do so. Broadly speaking, there are two scenarios.

The first postulates that India crosses some threshold during a war—its troops reach the outskirts of Lahore or its ships impose a naval blockade on Karachi—and Pakistan responds with tactical nuclear weapons as a warning shot. The other scenario supposes that under the same circumstances, Pakistan decides that a warning shot would not work and instead attacks an Indian city directly. In 1998 one of us (Ramana) conducted the first scientific study of how much damage a modest, 15-kiloton bomb dropped on Bombay would cause: over the first few months, between 150,000 and 850,000 people would die.

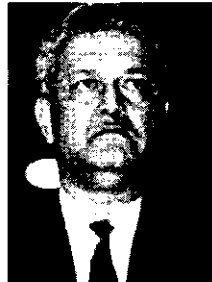
The Indian military is already preparing for these eventualities. This past May it carried out its biggest exercises in more than a decade, called Operation Complete Victory. Tens of thousands of troops, backed by tanks, aircraft and attack helicopters, undertook drills close to the border with Pakistan. The stated aim was to train the armed forces to operate in an “environment of chemical, biological and nuclear assault” and “to teach the enemy a lesson once and for all”. In one significant exercise, the military had to “handle a warlike situation wherein an enemy aircraft is encountered carrying a nuclear warhead”. Abdul Kalam, head of India’s missile programme, said that India’s nuclear weapons “are being tested for military operations... for training by our armed forces.”

Even before 11 September, South Asia had all the ingredients for a nuclear war:

*Protesters at the Pakistan Embassy in New Delhi after Pakistan’s nuclear tests in 1998.*



AP PHOTO



B. K. BANGASH



BHABHA ATOMIC RESEARCH CENTRE

*Fathers of the South Asian bomb: A. Q. Khan of Pakistan and Homi Bhabha (right) of India.*

possession and continued development of bombs and missiles, imminent deployment of nuclear weapons, inadequate precautions to avoid unauthorised use of these weapons, geographical proximity, ongoing conflict in Kashmir, militaristic religious extremist movements, and leaders who seem sanguine about the dangers of nuclear war.

The responses of India and Pakistan to the events of September 11 and the US-led attack on targets in Afghanistan reflect the strategic competition that has shaped much of their history. India was quick to offer air bases and logistical support to the US military so as to isolate Pakistan. Attempting to tie its own problems in Kashmir with

the global concern about terrorism, Indian officials even threatened to launch attacks on Pakistani supply lines and alleged training camps for militants fighting in Kashmir. Pakistan, for its part, realising both the geopolitical advantage it possessed and the dangers of civil instability, deliberated before agreeing to provide support to fight the Taliban. The diplomatic machinations, war in Afghanistan and violence in Kashmir may well have worsened the prospects for peace on the subcontinent. The lifting of American sanctions, which had been imposed in the 1990s, freed up resources to invest in weapons.

The limitations of Western nonproliferation policy are now painfully obvious. It has relied primarily on supply-side export controls to prevent access to nuclear technologies. But Pakistan’s programme reveals that these are inadequate. Any effective strategy for nonproliferation must also involve demand-side measures—policies to assure countries that the bomb is not a requisite for true security. The most important demand-side measure is progress toward global nuclear disarmament. Some people argue that global disarmament and nonproliferation are unrelated. But as George Perkovich of the W. Alton Jones Foundation in Charlottesville, Virginia, observed in his masterly study of the Indian nuclear programme, that premise is “the grandest illusion of the nuclear age”. It may also be the most dangerous. ▽

*(Reproduced from Scientific American, 1 December 2001, originally titled ‘India, Pakistan and the Bomb’.)*

# American infidelity or Pakistani duplicity?

by *Manzur Ejaz*

Pakistanis, living at home or abroad, have become masters at monologues, despising or ignoring the value of dialogue among ourselves and with others. We have convinced ourselves that we are the prime target of persecution and discrimination, ignoring our own infinite propensity to do the same within our own society and to others. We have started living by clichés. This xenophobic collective state of mind is, inadvertently, serving the interests of the state and the ruling elite and undermining the rights of the common citizen.

These days, the prized cliché is that the American abandonment of Pakistan after the Soviet forced withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistani expatriates interacting with American politicians never miss a chance to remind them of their infidelity. While it is true that the Americans did leave the region without fulfilling their responsibility, the fact is that this reference to American infidelity cloaks many a debacle of our own making.

Most Pakistanis believe that Pakistan has always stood by the United States in difficult times. A common perception is that, despite joining the US-led South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) agreements, the Americans did not help Pakistan when it was needed the most, in its war against India. In reality, the US gave Pakistan arms worth billions of dollars to fight Communism. Wisely, Pakistan did not actively participate in any anti-Communist war other than jailing a few of its own left-leaning activist intellectuals and retired military officials.

The SEATO and CENTO agreements were specifically designed to fight Communism and did not call for members' intervention in wars against non-Communist aggressors. Therefore, it could be said, from the American angle, that Pakistan misused its resources to fight India. Besides, once it had been shown that the US is an unreliable ally, Pakistan should have terminated its American links and devised an alternative foreign policy. But, our governing elite, having a vested interest in the US and its auxiliary international institutions, carried on with their servile attitude with the richest superpower.

An overwhelming majority of Pakistanis also believes that their country fought a proxy war against the Soviet Union for the Americans. This makes for some interesting contradictions. For, if one argues that the Russians were defeated in Afghanistan only with the mammoth infusion of American (and Saudi) resources, there are those Pakistanis who start fuming. They will quote unpublished intelligence reports to fervently

assert that it was Gen Zia-ul Haq who started the anti-Soviet crusade long before the Americans showed any interest in Afghanistan. If this is true, then the US helped Pakistan in its war against the Soviets and not the other way around.

Enlightened Pakistanis had warned the Zia regime of the pitfalls a religious crusade in Afghanistan, with many scholars predicting that Pakistan's indulgence would result in social anarchy, religious bigotry, and the rise of a drug and Kalashnikov culture. But the ruling junta would not listen to dissenting voices. Zia-ul Haq and his Islamic comrades-in-arm were determined to drive the pagans out of Afghanistan and cleanse Pakistani society of 'impure' Muslims. A record number of enlightened Pakistani activists were forced out of the country during this period, and Gen. Zia and his cronies had a free hand to try out their immature ideas.

Long before the US abandoned Islamabad, Zia-ul Haq had successfully subverted Pakistani society. His Islamisation drive had emboldened the fundamentalists, while ethnic divisions hardened in Karachi and Sindh. Corruption had become rampant. Many army men and inventive businessmen became millionaires and billionaires during this period. The inflow of huge foreign funds in the name of the Afghan war and billions of dollars transmitted by overseas Pakistanis created an economic boom in Pakistan. The situation was further exacerbated when hungry politicians accelerated the process of loot and plunder, with the banks emptied and state-run institutions robbed mercilessly. The irony is that the rich continued getting richer even while the US was allegedly betraying Pakistan.

Certainly, the Americans abandoned Pakistan and Afghanistan just as they left other poor allies to fend for themselves at the end of the Cold War. Of them all, Afghanistan has a genuine grudge against the US for not giving a helping hand to emerge from the devastation. The US was a party in the war against the Russians and had a responsibility to help rebuild the shattered land. Pakistan's economy certainly suffered, but most of Pakistan's problems were of its own making and had started much before the US decided to take its hands off.

Pakistan's evergreen ruling elite is trying to shift the entire responsibility for its failures on the Americans. This is a mischievous technique used by the powerful in poor countries to cover their tracks. Certainly, the US is the big boy on the block who does not hesitate to use highhanded tactics, but let Pakistanis not forget that the primary responsibility for the country's sorry state lies with those who are at the helm. ▽



WITH THE United States on a crusade against 'terrorism', the term is suddenly acceptable all over South Asia, with every government and person in

### 13 terrorists killed in Salyan Army seizes arms, cash from Maoists

authority rushing to use it against its own troublesome militants. In Nepal, the simultaneous declarations of emergency and of the Maoists as terrorists has had the local papers, which ran scared of the insurgents these past few years or shamelessly and spinelessly pandered to them, suddenly jumping on the bandwagon. Everyone who was a Maobaadi is now an *aatankabadi*. All nuances of terminology are thrown to the wind. Shocking.



inclusive of belly button. And so the photographers lie in wait for the holi frolics, or even more, they wait for the north Bihar Chhat festival in late November. And he did not disappoint this year either, see picture.

ANOTHER ORGANISATION which must love these terror-ridden times is the South Asia Terrorism Portal, a website started by the redoubtable KPS Gill. The invitations to international seminars and workshops, advisory councils and so on, must be pouring in to any organisation that had the sense to include 'terrorism' in their title in the earlier politically incorrect times. Now, with everyone dying to be politically correct, what a bonanza that little bit of hubris has delivered. In the meantime, those retired military men, bureaucrats and others who had jumped into the accommodative South Asian Track-II 'peace process' must be ruing the day they left belligerent statist terrain to speak up for regionalism.

IN NEPAL, there was a debate on, briefly. An Indian group decided to invest in a English daily in Kathmandu. It was natural for a section of the media to react: when the Indian media does not allow foreign media to enter its space, why should Nepal open its doors to *Indian* media – the group is made up of current and ex-*Times of India* staffers. Well, there is something to be said for the argument, but on the other hand, is it not possible that this new entrant will introduce a higher degree of professionalism into English language journalism in Nepal? Could it not be that an India-linked publication will finally be able to convince the

insular Indian advertising agencies in New Delhi about the importance of the Nepali ad market, thus far being accessed only as a 'bonus' in their campaigns? All these things needed to be considered before going for a knee-jerk 'Indian, therefore bad!' reaction. Besides, let's get serious: is it possible for any newspaper to survive in Nepal, amidst Nepali readers looking for the first pro-Indian weakness, to survive with an Bharat-first agenda?



SPEAKING OF the South Asia Terrorism Portal, here is its logo, which pretty much sums up its agenda, i.e., pursue the 'bastards'.

AND SO, with this new newspaper entering the Nepali market, all the other broadsheet daily publishers went into a huddle and came up with a new organisation of Nepali dailies, meant to safeguard their turf. Then the Emergency was declared by Sher Bahadur Deuba's government, and immediately this new group issued a statement promising to stand by the government and abide by the rules in the fight against terrorism. What becomes clear in all of this is that corporate media, which have the wherewithal to publish broadsheets, are ever-ready to crumble when the going gets tough. On the other hand, it is those political weekly tabloids which have little investment and little to lose, that find it easier to hold up the principles of journalism in times of stress. These were the tabloids which were supposed to die out with the arrival of corporate media, but in the aftermath of the royal palace massacre and now under the Emergency, it is they who show the broadsheetssome of the tricks of true journalism.

I AM all for Shabana Azmi and her alternative politics, and find the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid despicable for calling her "*nachne gaane wali*" in response to the actress' views on the US-Afghan war. But why did Azmi have to accept a National Integration Award conferred by – now get this right – the All-India Anti-Terrorist Front. Something absolutely does not fit here; this organisation run by the Congress' M.S. Bitta, whose goal is national integration but whose use of words would seem to colour every militant a terrorist. This is not how you integrate a country, Ms. Azmi should know, or has she also been carried away by unitary-nationalist hype in these troubled times?



POOR VEERAPPAN, hanging out in the sandalwood jungles of Karnataka, must be feeling awfully left out as



US special forces pursue Osama bin Laden in the mountain deserts of Afghanistan. Veerappan could have taught Osama a thing or two about remaining out of the military dragnet, having managed it for nearly half a decade himself. On the other hand, what the moustachioed bandit knows

is jungle trails and smuggling timber, and he probably does not know his caves.

BALRAJ PURI is an activist-journalist based in Jammu who has been a voice of reason and a campaigner for peace in J&K for decades. For seven years, he has published "for private circulation", a newsletter called *Human Rights*, which diligently monitors the travails of the militancy-ridden region. For seven years Puri has been given the go-around in his attempts to get the newsletter registered with the Registrar of Newspapers. In the last instance, the National Human Rights Commission has decided not to act on his complaint after the Registrar reported that the application by Puri was "not traceable". As Puri says, "To publish a newspaper is a fundamental right of a citizen", and Chhetria Patrakar hopes that the authorities will not turn a blind eye to the efforts of a citizen who is neither a terrorist nor an ideologue, but a reasonable person who speaks his mind.

THE UNITED News of India reports (rather self-centredly, if I may add) that 'India' is getting to be a popular name in the West. It started with the character in *Gone with the Wind* named India Wilkes, and was continued with Lord Mountbatten's granddaughter, India Hicks, and apparently now 'India' is all the rage. Chhetria Patrakar's only question is, are we talking about Undivided India here, or the post-1947 *Bharat-varsha*? I presume it is the former, in which case, may we suggest that all who wish to name their newborns India now consider 'Undivided India' instead? "Hello, my name is U.I. Wilkes."



WHEN YALE University Press published Lahore-based author/journalist Rashed Ahmed's book, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, there were few takers. That was before 9/11. I hear, indirectly from Shashi Tharoor's column in *The Hindu*, that he was paid no more than USD 5000 royalty to begin with. Now, everyone and his/her uncle wants a copy of a book on Afghanistan and militant Islam, and Rashed has climbed to No. 1 on the Amazon.com book sales site and is second on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Yale is said to have gone in for a reprint of 350,000 copies. Here is a South Asian that the world had better listen to!

THE ONE thing that Presidente General Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee still have not considered is that in the post 9/11 era, they are both, incongruously, on the same side. The overwhelming power of the United States has brought Pakistan to heel, while the Indians have willingly joined the embrace. At the very least, a Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) member understood this when he dressed as Uncle Sam and was driven by two oxen yoked together - el Presidente and the Prime Minister.



WHY DOES this passage by University of Colombo political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda, writing in *The Hindu* on the run up to the Sri Lankan parliamentary elections on 5 December, fail to take the rest of us by surprise?

"Sri Lanka today has a serious leadership crisis. It seems to have failed to produce leaders with sustainable vision, prudence and insight as well as intellectual conviction. Even those who possessed, once upon a time, the promise of such qualities have become ordinary politicians who see politics as the fine art of mastering the cunning and deception in governance. This also applies to leaders who have emerged from the traditional bourgeois-aristocratic ruling families as well as the subordinate rural peasantry..."

WELCOME, ONE and all, to enroll in the Bill Gates Faculty of Information Technology, in Birganj, Nepal, where "only vegetarian food will be served in Hygienic conditions" and where "Free Spiritual & Meditation Courses" are offered, and "Every Student's life will be insured." Looks like a worthy institution, with links we are told the Staffordshire University in the UK and "technically guided" by IIIT Allahabad. This is too good to miss. Write to [sachi@wlink.com.np](mailto:sachi@wlink.com.np).

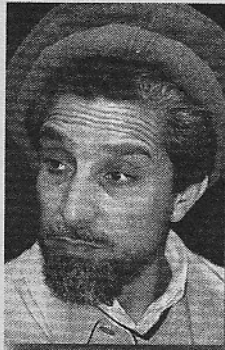


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SPECIALIZATION

THERE IS one man who might have brought all the bickering parties together in the post-Taliban phase ('era' is a term favoured by Western and Indian satellite media I will not use for reasons that you will have to understand), in Afghanistan. He was Ahmad Shah Masood, the Tajik Afghan who held out against Kabul in his northern redoubt. Masood was killed by a Taliban suicide bomber masquerading as a cameraman just days before the 9/11 attacks. How Masood may have made



all the difference is clear from a quote from the Northern Alliance Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, a familiar face now on television, speaking to the *New York Times*' Barry Bearak: "The fact that this one person is not among us changes everything. Afghanistan is a country without any institutions, without any systems, and what it needs in such a situation is a leader. We do not have one... We will try our best, but with Massood alive things would have been different."



FORGIVE ME for my error-ridden ways, but would I – being male, but perhaps sex is not the issue – be wrong in indicating that the iconic moments on television this



last month have been provided by the beautiful eyes of Afghani women flashing from half-covered faces? Especially in the case of the women associated with the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (in the picture see Samina

Kabeer of RAWA with Indian political activist Brina Karat at a political meet in Vishakapatnam), the eyes come part and parcel with vehement and articulate points of view of a gender long suppressed within Afghanistan but obviously sharpening its political tools without.

FOR SIX full years, the New Delhi press and television ignored the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, an extraordinary if not (perhaps) deliberate oversight given the vulnerability that this would export to India's own Hindi heartland. With the signal given by George W. Bush to counter terrorism worldwide, however, Jaswant Singh was emboldened to label the Maoists of Nepal terrorists before even the Nepali government had done so. And then Kathmandu received the expected influx of parachute journalists – neophyte satellite television reporters and smug print journo's willing to pontificate with no background and understanding of a rather complicated political scenario. One *Hindustan Times* hack said that the way to distinguish the Maoists from other Nepalisis was that they "looked Mongolian". To the last one, the analysts and the reporter strove to drive a link



between the Pakistani ISI and the Maoists of Nepal without offering a shred of evidence, other than the say so of Indian intelligence agencies. Ignoring the sporadic attacks over the years on Indian multinational production units in Nepal, the Indian media went to town over a minor blast in a Coca-Cola plant. So this is how it goes now, if we are to believe it - it becomes news for Indian media only when an American multinational is hit, howsoever mildly.

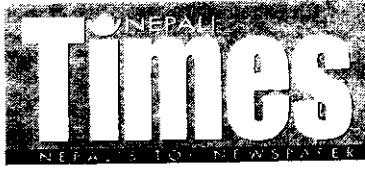
COMES A time when a headline "We have tested the hydrogen bomb" raises nary an eyebrow, not in India, not in South Asia, not in Japan, the United States or the rest of the world. That was what the new "principal scientific adviser to the government", Dr. R. Chidambaram, declared. Firstly, why do we assume (as we do) that the role of the principal scientific adviser to GOI is to tackle nuclear warfare as his principal area of involvement? Is there not enough for the PSAG to do with public health, industry, trade, mining, information technology and other scientific past times? Why this focus on the science of death? Secondly, do we not know that building nuclear weapons is no longer 'high science', and why does the South Asian leadership on the other hand continue to think so? Thirdly, why am I worried that Mr. Chidambaram's confirmation of India having successfully tested a hydrogen bomb in May 1998 did not raise a ripple?

**'We have tested the hydrogen bomb'**



THE SIGHT of American fighting hardware has given many a South Asian military man a hard-on that he is hardpressed to hide. All those missiles, those guns, those night vision paraphernalia, those fighter bombers - these are the stuff to make the military man's mouth salivate and groin get activated. The danger is that, all over South Asia and the world, while the media's guard is down (with editors too busy printing pretty pictures supplied by the Pentagon), the politicians will be waylaid by the generals and asked to sign on the dotted line so they too can access these warfare hardware at a cost of billions. (dollars that is) Who knows, this Afghanistan war is probably the best thing that ever happened to the hi-tech military suppliers of the West.

—Chhetria Patrakar



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# ASSAM DANGEROUS UNDERGROUND

While the attention of the public is focused on arsenic poisoning in Bangladesh, West Bengal and other places, fluorosis is quietly exacting its toll elsewhere in South Asia. For example, the Karbi Anglong district of Assam.

by *Nava Thakuria*

For more than a decade, Assam has been in the limelight for its multiple insurgencies. Because of this almost exclusive focus on violence, a new danger confronting Assamese society may go unnoticed to the point where it assumes an uncontrollable magnitude. Hydrofluorides have begun to threaten a potential health disaster and today over one hundred thousand people of the state suffer from hydrofluorosis, a disorder caused by continuous consumption of ground water contaminated by excess fluorides. Hundreds of villages on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra in middle Assam are affected by the contamination. The problem is so serious that, besides the Assam valley, the rainforest belt of Karbi Anglong and regions neighbouring the state's Nagaon district have now been included in the "fluoride map" of India. Karbi Anglong, which has an area of 10,332 square kilometres, is by far the worst affected, with 10 per cent of its population of 700,000 suffering from dental or skeletal fluorosis. Of the Assamese population afflicted by fluorosis, 70 per cent are from Karbi Anglong. The affected areas include Tekelangjun, Dokmaka, Lungnit, Taradubi, Tuplem, Garampani, Karbi Anglong, Ratiagaon, Haldiati, Parakhowa, and the Neelbagan area of Nagaon district.

The first fluorosis case in the

Northeast was discovered in 1999 in the Tekelangjun area of Karbi Anglong, where fluoride levels were found to be as high as 5 to 23 mg/litre. According to World Health Organisation guidelines, the permissible limit of fluoride in drinking water is only 1 mg/litre. This creeping tragedy came to light following a study conducted by the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) of Assam. Subsequent independent studies conducted by various organisations, including the Central Ground Water Board (New Delhi), The All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (Calcutta), The School of Environmental Studies (Jadavpur University, Calcutta) and the Public Analyst in Guwahati, have corroborated the findings of the PHED survey. Interestingly, as late as 1998, the country's geological and public health scientists had declared the Northeastern region safe from fluoride contamination.

Available statistics indicate that all over India more than six million people are seriously afflicted by fluorosis and another 62 million are exposed to it. In Assam, at least 20,000 young people suffer from severe fluorosis. Fluorosis has no cure but deterioration can be arrested if the disease is diagnosed sufficiently early. Fluorides, when consumed in excess, replace hydroxide in bones, causing a chronic

condition called skeletal fluorosis. It affects people of all ages. Victims of skeletal fluorosis suffer severe pain in the joints, back bone and hips, as well as increased bone density, calcification of ligaments and paralysis. Fluorosis also leads to severe anemia, painful and restricted movement, mottled teeth, loosened muscles, kidney failure and premature death. Many victims are crippled for life.

Fluorides enter the human body through edibles, toothpaste, oral rinses and, most swiftly, through drinking water. A colorless and odorless natural pollutant, fluoride comes into contact with ground-water from its source of origin in mineral rocks. The concentration of fluoride in ground water basically depends on extended contact of the water with fluoride-bearing minerals. Three major sources of fluoride in India are fluorospar, rock phosphates and phosphorites. Most fluoride compounds in the earth's upper crust are soluble in water. Because of differences in geographical, chemical and physical characteristics of water bearing aquifers, the porosity of rocks, the pH and temperature, fluoride content in ground water varies between 1 to 25 mg/litre. When fluoride-bearing minerals in rocks and soil come into contact with ground water, they release fluoride into water by the process of hydro-

lysis. Geologically, Karbi Anglong and parts of the Nagaon district have numerous joints, fractures and faults. In addition, the area also has large quantities of sedimentary rocks and unconsolidated material like gravel, sand, clay with intrusive granite and quartz shale, all of which are known for their high fluoride content.

The effects of fluorosis may vary from person to person, depending on the strength of the individual's antibodies. Sometimes the effects begin to manifest themselves almost immediately, but occasionally they may take a long time to develop. Women and children are more prone to the malady as they remain at home for longer periods and thus are exposed to prolonged contact with contaminated water. Moreover, malnutrition during childhood makes women more vulnerable to fluorosis.

The life of a fluorosis victim is painful and without hope. Paulina Lakra, a victim of skeletal fluorosis from Ratiagaon, cannot walk without assistance. Her six children also suffer from dental and skeletal fluorosis. The family used to drink water collected from springs but then switched over to tube well water. They have received no medicine from government hospitals and they are too poor to purchase such supplies from private sources. More than 150 Adivasi families practise farming in Ratiagaon and are in a similar situation.

Ironically, it is the government-sponsored schemes to provide drinking water to villages that have unwittingly been the cause of the problem in some areas. According to Lonki Teron, the village chief in Lungnit Bazar, near Diphu, the villagers used to use collect potable water from the nearby Lungnit River until the government water supply scheme was launched in the early 1990s. The scheme was abandoned in 1999 following the report of fluoride contamination. Now they prefer to collect water from Kacha Kuwa, a low depth well. The residents of Burha Teron were lucky

that they relied on groundwater supply for only a few years.

Despite the scale of the tragedy, health officials in Karbi Anglong have been slow to react. Affected villagers say that government doctors have not even bothered to visit the villages. Some health officials have tried to evade the issue by arguing that fluorosis is a manifestation of other disorders. There is also the resort to the pretence that the problem is not yet clearly identifiable. The tragedy is still "suspected" to be caused by fluorosis. A senior health official in Diphu claimed that they had to follow strict instructions from the authorities in Guwahati, Assam's capital, and that they were, with current resources, unable to manage the time, funds and energy to deal specifically with fluorosis. He was even reluctant to recommend a survey and study exercise on fluorosis in Karbi Anglong to the head office. The civil administration of the district is no more concerned than the local health functionaries. The deputy commissioner, when approached, candidly admitted that the district administration had not formulated any policy or visualised any solution.

What compounds the problem of official negligence is that fluorosis is often overlooked in diagnosis by doctors, who sometimes mistakenly believe that it only attacks teeth and bone-joints. In reality it can cause numerous other ailments that are neurological, muscular, allergic, or gastrointestinal in nature. Reportedly, physicians sometimes find it difficult to differentiate the early stage of skeletal fluorosis from other common bone diseases such as arthritis, spondylitis and osteoporosis. Hence doctors as well as public health engineers (who are responsible for providing safe drinking water), water analysts, health workers and community leaders need to be given training in identifying fluorosis.

There is a strong correlation between poverty and fluorosis, and the fact is that almost 70 percent of

the affected people in Assam are very poor. Socio-economic deprivation plays a significant role here. One major remedial factor is nutrition, the lack of which can contribute to fluorosis complications. The spread of fluorosis has led to increasing social dislocation in the affected areas, with restrictions in social interaction and even the marriagibility of young Karbi Anglong women. In some instances, fluorosis victims have been abandoned by their spouses and fluorosis victims generally suffer from social inferiority. When the disease cripples the principal income earner of the household, the entire family descends deeper into poverty.

To prevent a fluorosis disaster it is imperative that safe water supply is made available, with more emphasis placed on surface water sources, as they are generally free from fluoride contamination. Rain-water harvesting is potentially an effective and cheap method of storing clean drinking water. De-fluoridation techniques can also be employed as an alternate arrangement, but these are complicated and time-consuming exercises and will require concerted action and investment by the government. A few local NGOs, including Jirsong Asong, Lions Club, and Nehru Yuva Kendra, have been involved in health awareness drives in the affected areas of the district. Jirsong Asong has so far conducted several preliminary investigations in fluorosis-affected villages. For the moment, some non-governmental groups have been active in tackling fluorosis in Assam, launching programmes to educate doctors, community health workers and community leaders, but overall the response has been scattered and ineffective. These are not sufficient to avert a disaster that is being piped into every household and every individual on a daily basis. The state government in Guwahati must wake up. ▽



# Flight The Tale of the Ticketless Traveller

There are many in the poorer countries for whom the plane in flight represents the journey that, when undertaken in the future, will take them to the promised land.

by **Amitava Kumar**

### Air

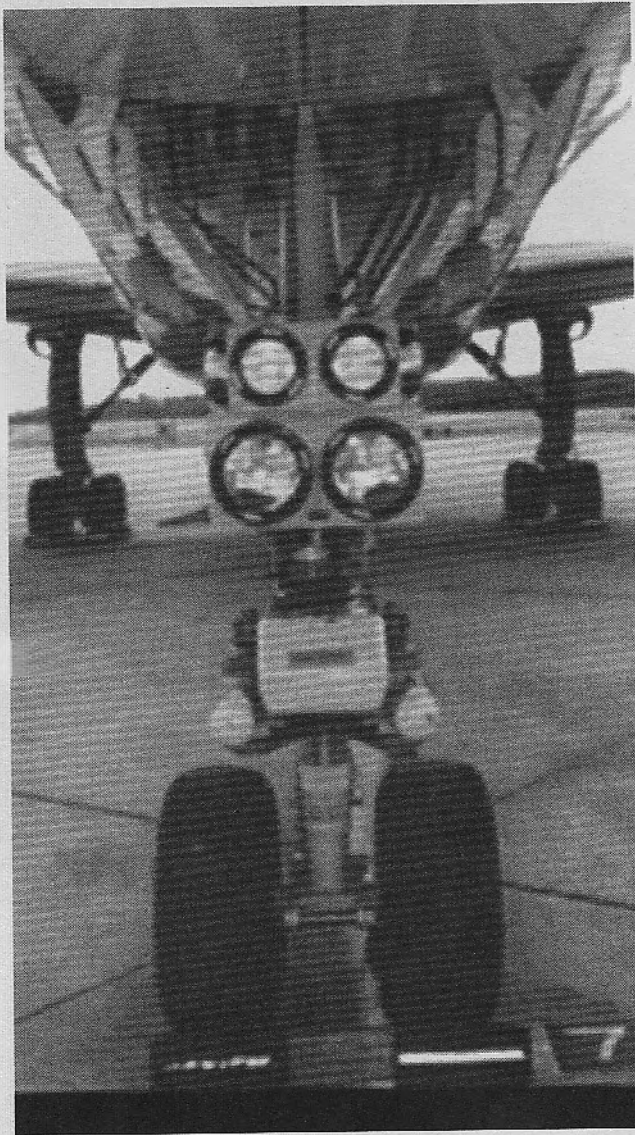
The writer Rabindranath Tagore flew in a plane in 1932. He had awoken at three-thirty in the dark morning and was in the air at four. Tagore was travelling in what was then called Persia; at half-past eight the plane reached Bushire. "Now comes an age in which man has lifted the burdens of earth into the air," the writer noted in his travel diary. The achievement of flight did not always promise freedom for Tagore. On the contrary, he felt that the airplane was not in harmony with the wind. It roared like an animal in rage. A plane in flight suggested very strongly that human conflict had been raised from the level of the mundane world into the heavenly skies above.

Tagore had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his book of poems, *Gitanjali*. The thought that the earth lost its hold on man when he flew into the sky was not the result of poetic fancy. A few paragraphs later in his travelogue, Tagore had supplied the context for his thoughts. "A British air force is stationed at Baghdad," he wrote. "Its Christian chaplain informs me that they are engaged in bombing operations on some Sheikh villages."

The fields, ponds and rivers of his childhood bound Tagore to the earth and its beauty. To fly was to lose this contact with the earth. Only one sense remained for the one who was in the air, the sense of sight, and it gave man the disease of aloofness. For Tagore, the man in the plane raining bombs below could not even in

good faith ask himself who is kin and who is a stranger: he has put himself in a place from where he is unable to be aware of the difference and to judge accordingly. "The men, women and children done to death there," wrote Tagore, "meet their fate by a decree from the stratosphere of British imperialism – which finds it easy to shower death because of its distance from its individual victims."

At the same time, the invention of the airplane impressed Tagore. He saw in the race of the inventors qualities of character like perseverance and courage. The sight of his four Dutch pilots ("immensely built, the personification of energy their rude, overflowing health, bequeathed by generations brought up on nourishing food") evoked admiration and the thought that his own compatriots had been deprived of food and exhausted by toil. This picture has now changed. The descendants of those who were, in Tagore's time, the subject peoples have for long been flying planes. They also travel in planes. This situation also incites ambivalence. The travellers are often workers migrating long distances in search of work. In fact, such travel remains a part of the fantasy in the minds of the poor. There are many in the poorer countries of the world for whom the plane in flight represents the journey that, when undertaken in the future, will take them to the promised land. In airports all over the world, one can see the migrant workers from countries like Tagore's India, waiting to be taken to another place to work.



### Fire

On the morning of 11 September, nineteen men, in their appearance not different at all from the others who stand in the visa lines outside the embassies and consulates of rich nations in cities like Calcutta and Cairo, Karachi and Khartoum, hijacked four American jets filled with fuel and people. The suicidal acts of the hijackers also gave a perverse twist to the old story of the difficult travel to the land of plenty and promise. According to reports that were published in the days following the attacks, it was revealed that the hijackers believed that their deaths promised them entry into the garden of heaven and the ministrations of seventy virgins. We can persist with Tagore's vision of the fiery bird raining death, but his universe is already lost, the simple oppositions between the earth and the sky rendered obsolete. Those who had been chained to the earth have also learned to claw their way into the air and wreak havoc from on high. There are new stories

of travel, and now terror touches all.

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* opens with an explosion in the air. A jet is blown apart while in flight, and two actors tumble out, "like titbits of tobacco from a broken old cigar." The two men, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, were passengers in the jumbo jet *Bostan*, Flight A I-420. In the night air around them, "floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home.*" Rushdie's fictional mid-air explosion was based on an actual event. On June 28, 1985, Flight A I-182 had burst into flames off the coast of Ireland. The plane had taken off from Toronto and Montreal; it was headed for New Delhi and Bombay via London. All of the 331 people on board were killed. The plane's destruction was widely believed to be the work of Sikh extremists who wanted to avenge the Indian army's assault on the Holy Temple in Amritsar. Two Indo-Canadian Sikhs were arrested by the police and charged with first-degree murder. Flight A I-182 had indeed been packed with migrants. Rushdie's catalogue of the debris from the destroyed airliner furnishes a valuable, and touching, inventory of the baggage "the load of everyday experience" that immigrants carry with them. And the play of magic realism allows the writer to introduce, amidst the destruction, the miracle of rebirth. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha survive death, and are transformed. This is an allegory of migration. Loss renews life. As Gibreel Farishta croons, even as he falls from twenty-nine thousand and two feet, "To be born again, first you have to die."

### Flesh

The sweet dream of reinvention is a radical one, but reality turns out to be more intractable. Rushdie's story of the passenger floating down to a part of London is not nearly as surprising as the actual, unheralded fall from the sky of a secret passenger at the edge of the same city. According to a July, 2001 report in the *Guardian*, a body was discovered in a parking lot of a departmental store in west London. A workman in the nearby Heathrow airport had seen a figure in jeans and a black t-shirt suddenly "plummeting from the sky like a stone." Where was the home of this dead man who was lying in a pool which had formed from his own split brains? The report said that the man who had fallen to earth was Mohammed Ayaz, a 21-year old stowaway, who had made a desperate attempt to escape the harsh life of a peasant in his village in Pakistan on the Afghan border. The previous night, when a British airways jet had turned around to begin taxing at Bahrain airport in preparation for takeoff, Ayaz had apparently sprinted through the dark and climbed into the huge chambers above the wheels of the Boeing. It could not have been an easy task to find one's way into the wheelbay. The report said: "It involves climbing 14ft up one of the





aircraft's 12 enormous wheels, then finding somewhere to crouch or cling as the plane makes its way to the end of the runway and starts its deafening engines." At that point, the plane would have accelerated to 180 mph.

Ayaz would not have known this, though one cannot be sure, but the undercarriage compartment "has no oxygen, no heating and no pressure." Within minutes, the temperature around Ayaz would have dropped below freezing. The report that I have been quoting had furnished, at this point, its own sense of journalistic pathos: "At 18,000ft, minutes later, while passengers only a few feet away were being served gin and tonic and settling down to watch in-flight movies, Ayaz would have begun to hallucinate from lack of oxygen." The report had then added plainly: "At 30,000ft the temperature is minus 56 degrees." When, many hours later, the plane was still a few miles away from Heathrow, the captain would have lowered the wheels of the aircraft. It was at that time, when the plane was likely to have been between 2,000 and 3,000ft, that Mohammed Ayaz's lifeless body must have been delivered into the morning air.

For seven months prior to his death, Ayaz had been working as a laborer in Dubai. His family is poor, finding a meagre livelihood from farming wheat, barley, corn and onions. The agent who had secured a way for Ayaz to go to the Gulf had demanded money in addition to the cost of travel and visa. The family had had to borrow heavily. The money that Ayaz was going to earn

would allow him to repay the debts in two years. But, things did not turn out the way Ayaz had expected. In Dubai, Ayaz's employer took away his passport. The salary he received was less than one-fourth of what the agent had promised. Ayaz was able to make barely enough to buy food. Ayaz did not tell his family of his plan to cross into Bahrain or his attempt to make his way to England. Ayaz's brother, Gul Bihar, told the reporter: "He always spoke about going to work in America or England. But they don't give visas to poor people like us."

### Earth

The report in the *Guardian* had been sent to me in the mail by a friend. I was standing outside my house when the post-man brought the letter one morning, and I read the newspaper-cutting while standing on my steps. As I began reading the first few paragraphs, I thought of the opening lines from Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* that I have quoted above. Those lines were what first came to mind. But, in seconds, the mood had slipped. The pain and despair that surrounded me as I read the report took me away from the pages of celebrated fiction. In much that I have written in the past few years, I have tried to understand how Indian writing has populated the literary landscape familiar to Western readers with people who look and speak differently and who have their histories in another part of the world. The presentation of this record by Indian writers has been a great,



imaginative achievement. But, a dead stowaway? So much that appears in Indian fiction today, particularly in its magical realist versions, appears banal if not also meretricious, when compared to the fragmentary account that emerges from a news-story of a poor youth's struggle to cross the borders that divide the rich from the poor. The textbook of "multicultural literature" carries no words of testimony of a young man narrating what flashed through his head as he went running in the dark behind a giant airplane that was about to pick up speed on the runway. It suddenly strikes me that Mohamed Ayaz could not have foreseen his death – and that seems to me to be more and more a triumph of his imagination.

The article in the *Guardian* also said that Ayaz was not the first to fall down from the sky. In October 1996, the body of a 19-year-old from Delhi, Vijay Saini, had dropped out of a plane at almost the same spot. Saini's corpse lay undiscovered for three days. (Vijay Saini's brother, Pradeep, according to the report, is the only person believed to have survived such a journey. The article said that the man was found at Heathrow "in a disorientated state shortly after a flight from Delhi landed.") Then, two years later, a couple drinking in a pub in nearby Marlborough had seen another man tumble out of the sky. That body was never discovered. The police believe that it might have fallen in a reservoir. "The undercarriage is always lowered at the same point, that is why they are falling at the same place," an official told the *Guardian*. "But it's an almost uncanny coincidence – these people fly right across the world in this way from different places, and they all end up in a car park in Richmond. If there are any more bodies to fall, that's where they will fall." The West rushes up to meet the migrant, not as the promised land but, instead, a parking lot which becomes for him a desolate, temporary graveyard.

**Dream**

On 11 September, bodies fell from the top floors of the north tower of the World Trade Center. One writer, watching from the street below, wrote "it looked like a desperate ballet: some seemed to be flying, their arms sweeping gracefully as they picked up speed. Others tumbled and some just dropped, rigid, all the way down." As I reflect on that ghastly scene, months after it occurred, I find myself mentally moving Mohammed Ayaz from a parking lot in west London to the Twin Towers. He could have been one among the many migrant workers, dish-washers, messengers, cleaners, and restaurant help who perished on that day. But, it doesn't work. I see him again and again in the wheelbay of the airplane. That thought won't go away. I also realise that I am perturbed by the thought that the hijackings and the mayhem that followed should erase from public consciousness the presence of the other illegal passenger, the humble stowaway, and stretching behind him, the memory of a whole history of

*Delivered dead from East to West. Mohammed Ayaz (far left, with his cousins) in northern Pakistan. Ayaz's father (below) and other relatives beside his simple grave.*



dispossession. The sad truth is that the stowaway is not alone. Hidden behind that figure are the untold millions in countries like India or Pakistan who dream of a different future. Often, these young men and women have been turned into migrants in their own land because of poverty, or famines, or wars waged by others in the fields where their families have toiled for generations. How removed is the pathos of the stowaway from the rage of the hijacker?

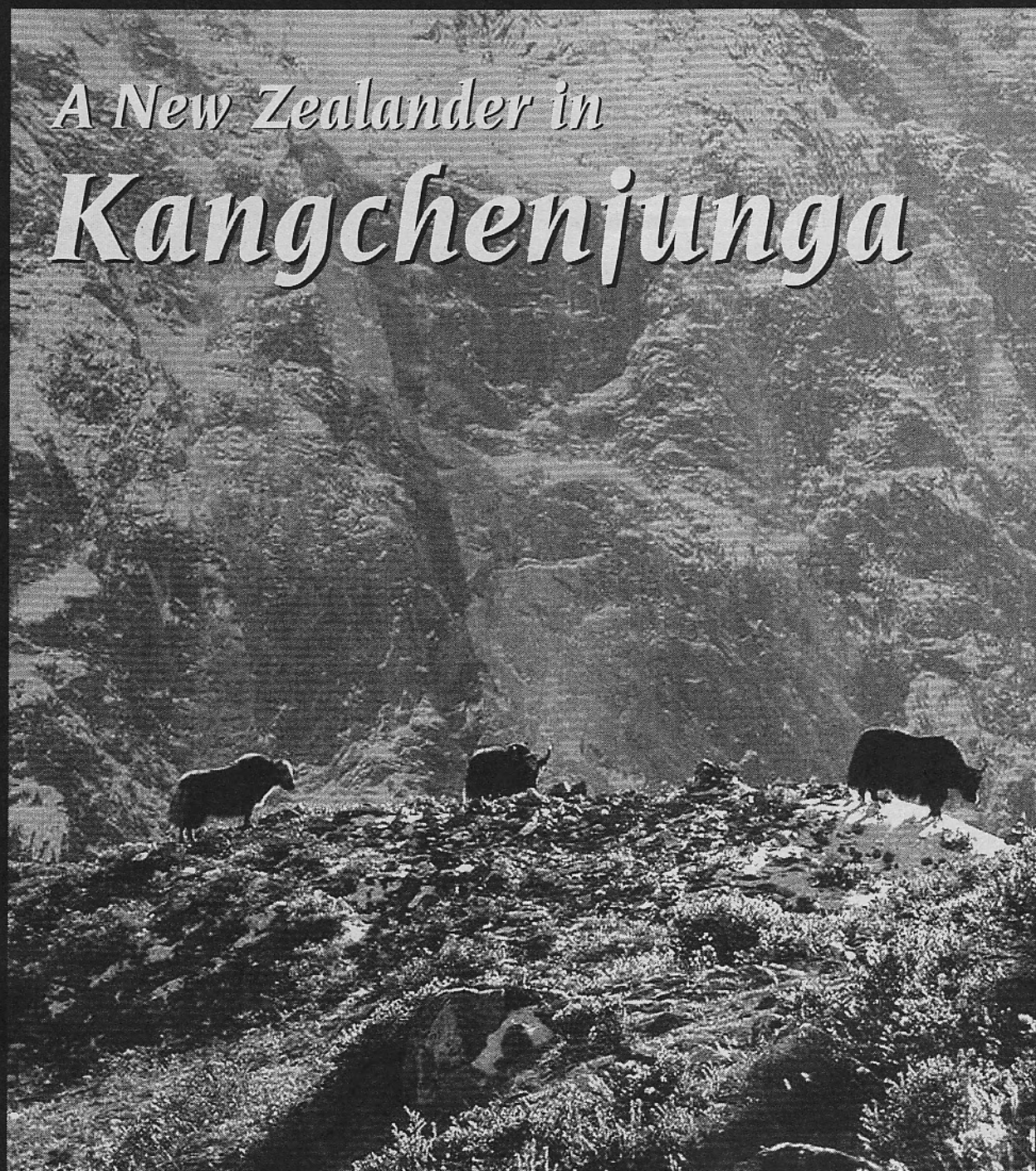
The body falling out of the sky is the other and silent half of the story of international travel and tourism. We are reminded that not everyone crosses borders alive, despite the cheerful acceptance of globalisation by all the governments of the world. Standing near his son's unmarked grave, a mound of brown earth ringed by stones and covered with a plastic sheet, Mohammed Ayaz's father said, "My son was as strong as four men but he died in search of bread."

I can try to imagine the dreams that come to the stowaway when he begins to drift into sleep despite the cold and the noise in his shuddering cage. But, these would be speculations. The stowaway will not share his secrets. It is impossible for me to know if the stowaway is nostalgic for the fields in his village and the familiar sunshine on the wall of his house. He had wanted to leave them behind.

The plane is carrying him into the future. He tells himself that he can bear hunger for a long time. He is a quick learner. Once he has his feet on the ground he will find a way to earn money soon. These are the thoughts that I surround the stowaway with, as if he were, in reality, trapped inside the darkness in my head. It is because I am telling myself over and over that he does not feel any pain. He feels light-headed. He is not fleeing anything any more. He is flying. ▽



# *A New Zealander in Kangchenjunga*



*Yaks graze near the village of Khambachen, across from the snow and ice of the north face of Jannu.*

Kangchenjunga is known mostly for its distance-view from Darjeeling. Getting up close from the Nepal side is a trekker's delight, even if there are Maoists about.

*Text and pictures by Wanda Vivequin*

For as long as I can remember, and for reasons I have never got to the bottom of, I have always wanted to visit Nepal. At age 12, my ambition was to become New Zealand's High Commissioner in Nepal. This career choice was later abandoned when I learned the position did not exist, although the desire to visit remained strong and grew with each passing year. Finally in 2000, aged 34, I visited the country and trekked the 'Annapurna Circuit' and Annapurna Sanctuary, the circle of himals in central Nepal. Now, aged 35, I am here again and will come back again when things settle down a little. That last reference is, of course, to the Maoist (recently declared 'terrorist') movement which has slowly seeped up the valleys of mid-hill Nepal and is presently at a decisive stage of confrontation with His Majesty's Government, the Nepal Police and – a new entrant – the Royal Nepal Army.

After six years working as a spin doctor for a not particularly well-liked or understood New Zealand Government Department, I was ready for a good holiday. The plan was to arrive mid-September and leave at the end of the year. So I quit my job, sold my office clothes and bought a good sleeping bag and down jacket, bid farewell to my friends and family in New Zealand and headed off to Kathmandu. The destination was the region around the western base of Kangchenjunga, the sprawling Himalayan massif that defines the north-eastern edge of Nepal, with Sikkim on the other side and Tibet/China to the north.

Flying in from Bangkok, from 31,000 feet, Kangchenjunga was clearly visible in the first group of peaks in the march westward of the Himalaya. Backtracking somewhat to Biratnagar, out of the left window of the turboprop, there it was again, larger and up close. The more direct route to the region, via the flattop airstrip of Suketar, had been ruled out because there were no seats available on the Twin Otter. This was why my group was headed for Biratnagar, and on the flight I was mentally preparing myself for the 40-hour bus ride to Taplejung, which we all knew was not going to be pleasant.

Our bus was jam-packed with porters, bags, food and an assortment of trekking paraphernalia, and the seat could be defined as ergonomically deficient. The road felt like an endless sheet of corrugated iron. The bizarre noises coming from mechanically-challenged parts of our bus, the sheer drops down seemingly endless terraced hillsides, and the fingernail width gaps we witnessed between ourselves and other buses we passed all added to the adventure. Around the occasional bend in the precipitous road, we were afforded some spectacular views of Kangchenjunga, most impressively its Jannu face which looks west towards the Nepali midhills.

The bus ride also provided an introduction to the latest in Nepali music. In the last few years, we learned, there has been a revolution in Nepali folk and 'Nepali



*The broad Kangchenjunga massif from the mid-hills, on the trail from Taplejung and Tumlingtar. Jannu stands out at left.*

modern', and the staple Hindi film songs are now being quickly supplanted by local fare. The music was good, but it was being coaxed out of a dying tape deck and some very dodgy speakers. The very busily patterned brown velvet lining of the bus kept me awake and alert, as did the constant need to readjust the way I was sitting to stop parts of me from going dead.

What can be said about the 40-hour bus ride from the plains of Biratnagar to the hilltop former trading post (and now district headquarters) of Taplejung is that it increases your urge to start off on the trek, to get your body moving and away from the discomfort of the ride. And so we alighted in Taplejung, half expecting an applause from the small audience that gathered to watch us unload.

We were greeted warmly by the owner of a very nice hotel run by an ex-British Gurkha who played a mean game of badminton and had cold beer in his fridge. However, there were Maoists about, so we had to sit in a curtained booth inside to drink it. While the drinking was clandestine all right, I wondered what the insurgents would make of the growing collection of bottles outside.

### **Boring water**

The trek up to the above-10,000 feet 'High Himalaya' that is the Kangchenjunga region required first





From 6220 metres, looking north towards Tibet

passing through the midhills of Nepal. This region is generally neglected by the tourism literature of Nepal, although this is where the bulk of Nepal's mountain people live and where Nepal's demographic diversity is most evident. The castes and ethnic groups of Nepal populate the midhills, whereas the higher reaches – from Kangchenjunga westward through the Khumbu, Rolwaling, Helambu, Langtang, Manang, all the way to Humla – are inhabited by the Tibetan-speaking Bhutia people or their kin, such as the Sherpa.

And so, here in the approach march to Kangchenjunga, we left the Newar-inhabited outpost of Taplejung to pass through villages inhabited by a sprinkling of Bahun, Chhetri and other caste groups. However, this eastern corner of Nepal is the home ground of the indigenous Limbu people, who together with the Rai make up the Kirat civilisation. This Limbu region beneath Kangchenjunga is divided between Nepal and Sikkim, which lies on the other side of the Shinghalila range, a long ridge that heads down from the high ramparts of Kangchenjunga all the way to near the hill station of Darjeeling.

And so it was the tropical terrain at 6-8000 feet that led us away from Taplejung. On the second day out, we were in Chiruwa, a small but significant centre for the rapidly growing cardamom cash crop industry of this region. Our group, of four trekkers and our two 'trek leaders', was on the lookout for something nice to drink and we had been told we might find something in this village. Trekking is thirsty work in the middle hills and water gets boring after a while. The promise of a soft drink had become more appealing as the afternoon wore on and when we finally hit Chiruwa's stone paved streets and collection of shops I was on the lookout for something sweet and fizzy.

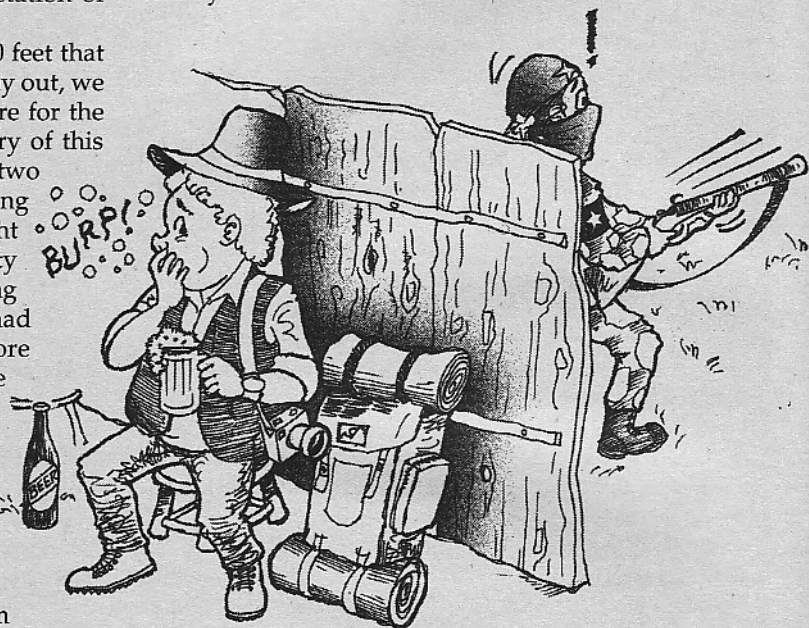
It was disappointing to learn that the Maoist diktat had reached here too, which meant we would probably have to drink hot milk tea instead – the standard glucose fix that keeps locals on the go in the mountain trails. However, dudh-chiya was a far from

appealing prospect in the heat, and some fast-talking by one of our experienced trek leaders meant that five minutes later I was crouched behind a closed door, glass in hand and trying to hold back a burp. We were trekking in the time of Maobadi and it was almost certain that this would not be the last of our encounters with their clear and present influence.

### The intrepid trekker

Other kinds of tourists may cancel their tickets and stay home in uncertain times, but trekkers are a more intrepid sort, willing to jettison all fear of air travel in the face of aircraft colliding with tall buildings, and despite knowledge that their very destination is infested with bands that take their cue from Chairman Mao's Red Book. The trekker is nothing if not intrepid, and our own band was made up of: Wendy, a 40-year-old Canadian accountant taking a break from her life; Robin, 65, a mountain lover, former mining engineer and financial management-type whose view on womens' role in society and their social obligation to produce children fed a number of discussions during the trek; and Kirsteen, a 26-year-old lieutenant in the New Zealand Army, recently returned from a tour in East Timor with an astounding knowledge of guns and an appetite that belied her slim build. That, and our two trek leaders, made up the group, although we occasionally enjoyed the company of some local Tamang porters at different points, including two beautiful young girls named Tsering and Tshering. It is likely that without the Maoists, there would have been more of us.

The main intent of our two trek leaders and trek sirdar seemed to be to ensure that not a single one of us would lose weight on the trek. Inside the low slung yurt-like tent, we consumed enormous quantities of restaurant quality food prepared in a simple kitchen tent by our most able cooks and assistants.





## Conservation area

The Kangchenjunga region has been open to trekking since 1989, and trekking companies asked that access be restricted via permit to group travel only so they could make more money. This has kept the area off limits for individual trekkers. Thankfully, however, there is no requirement to have a government liaison officer along, which is mostly a scam created by the authorities to get extra pay for their employees. Over time trekking companies and individuals have been able to bend the rules a little and it was not uncommon to see the occasional individual with a small crew working off a permit with an invisible trekking partner, which made it a 'group'.

The trekking permit is meant to be inspected closely by all manner of authorities along the trail, to ensure that the trekker is what s/he says s/he is and not an intelligence operative or a gun-runner. However, the entire swath of midhill Nepal that is remote from district headquarters or large towns has now been emptied of administrators and police posts. It became apparent very early on that the Maoist threat would mean our trekking permits would remain quite clear of official stamps, an open invitation for anyone to chart out into unexplored Himalayan nooks and crannies.

The police have been on the run these past couple of years, with the Maoists pitting their motivated cadre by the hundreds against police posts manned by untrained policemen with antiquated .303 rifles. While the major attacks had all been west of the Kangchenjunga hills – and all of them away from the popular trekking regions such as the Khumbu, Manang and Annapurna – that did not stop the policemen from abandoning their posts here en masse. Along our trail, all the police stations had been boarded up with the men in blue moving down to the relative security offered at the district headquarters in Taplejung with its army garrison for extra comfort.

As it is, the Kangchenjunga area is sparsely trekked compared with the other regions and this year numbers were down further still. Knowledgeable locals had all the reasons right as to the reduced numbers of tourists: "Maoists, the Indian Airlines hijacking, the Royal Palace massacre, the World Trade Center..." No more than 350 trekkers seemed to have visited the Kangchenjunga region thus far in 2001, as far as I could make out – and it was already late November.

The trek travels through the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area, which was established in 1998 as a joint undertaking of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) Nepal. The goal of the conservation area is to protect the natural habitat of the region and promote sustainable development in the area in a similar fashion to what is being done by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). The area covers a number of different ecological zones and focuses also on species conservation, education, reducing waste and building local capacity for conservation.



*The author with Tsering and Tshering, two Tamang porters.*

The aim of just about everybody visiting Kangchenjunga is to visit either the north or south base camps used by mountaineering teams climbing the mountain (8,586m) from the Nepal side. They try to make it to both base camps if time permits. While it may not yet have the "been-there done-that and I have the t-shirt to prove it" mass appeal of the Everest Base camp, the Kangchenjunga area offers quiet trails sans tourists and a sense of what things might have been like in the now popular trekking areas. In so many ways, Kangchenjunga is a perfectly balanced trek reminiscent perhaps of the Annapurna Circuit before roads ate into the beginning and end of the trail. Winding its way through the midhills and onto the high altitude valleys around Khambachen and Lhonak, this trek is one of the last 'undiscovered' major treks of the Nepal Himalaya.

## Camping ritual

The warmth of the middle hills and cardamom growing regions soon gives way to larch forests and hill-sides covered in sub-alpine vegetation until finally you reach the high altitude grazing areas and glaciers that can provide such a challenge for trekkers. The altimeter I had bought from an American journalist in Kathmandu, who had been writing about his sister's attempt at Cho Oyu, allowed me to plot our gain in altitude. It felt a little bizarre to be walking through a bamboo forest at an altitude the same as New Zealand's highest mountain (12,349 feet).

Really getting into the trekking groove takes time. Rushing along the trail, some first-time trekkers seem more intent on the day's destination than what they pass through to get there. At Kangchenjunga I willed myself to slow right down, and began to feel almost lazy at times, dragging my poles in the dust, really wishing that some moments just would not end, and often sad to be leaving behind a particular outlook. Walking along a rather narrow path from Khambachen to Lhonak I was moved to tears by the sight of a valley with mountains that rose above in an almost sheer wall, the contrast of an intensely blue sky making the snow seem somehow whiter. How does this happen, that a view can make your eyes water?



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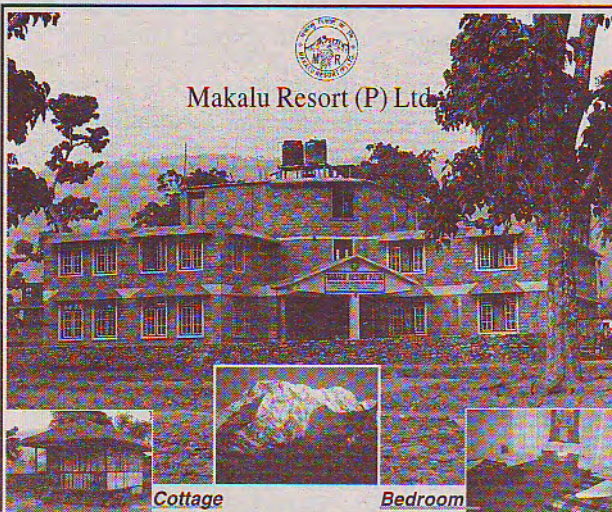
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Our trip had been billed as exploratory, and with plenty of days to allow for this we were in no rush to move fast. Occasionally we would come across a group storming along trying to squeeze a trip to the north and south base camps into dangerously few days. I felt relieved that we were not under this sort of pressure. Breathlessness, loss of appetite, headaches and lethargy are just some of the side effects of trying to go "too high too fast", and I was not about to destroy the flavour of the trek by any show of bravado.

Camping treks have their own routines and, in our case, also rituals that provided regular comedy at the breakfast table. The sound of the stoves being fired in the morning meant Prem, Raju and hot milk coffee were not far away. Warm washing water followed, delivered to tent, and then there was bag packing, tent folding and breakfast outside under yet another cloudless sky and the himals\* for company. Our trekking crew worked hard, especially our sirdar, who had to manage the movement of up to 40 loads for nearly 40 days. There were some especially cold nights higher up and we wondered what might come out of the kitchen. Without fail a meal of four or five fancy dishes, including sometimes a chocolate cake, would appear. (\*Himal: snow mountain)

Our time exploring the region above Lhonak provided some interesting moments, the mission being to have a close look at an old pass bordering Tibet called the Chabuca La – roughly translated, this means tea place, perhaps the last place to brew up. From a distance, it looked like a steep wall of crumbly rock. Up close it looked no different and we wondered how anything or anybody could have ever made it up or down with a load in the days when trans-Himalayan trading took place here. Perhaps the Chabuca La was more accessible before the glaciers receded many years ago, we surmised. I could not make it to the 6000m pass, but my altimeter finally recorded 6220m several days later on a spectacular and windy day, snow blasting off the top of the north side of Kangchenjunga on the opposite side of the valley.

### Snow leopard

The most dramatic moment of the trek, for me, was the gift of sighting a snow leopard mother and two cubs. Wildlife biologists in search of this great and elusive creature of the high Himalaya often wait months to be afforded a glimpse, so a snow leopard sighting is not to be shrugged away. Additionally, for an endangered mammal, here was good news – the mother was rearing two of her young. It happened in an area close to



*Spoor of a mother snow leopard, next to a 7.5 European-size foot print.*

the Jannu Base Camp, and our sighting did not require a lot of effort – it seemed to be simply a case of being in the right place at the right time. A good pair of borrowed binoculars helped.

We camped for two nights in that valley knowing that the snow leopards were around. It was a privilege to be in the same place which was theirs, with us simply as visitors. Kangchenjunga affords the trekker such humble thoughts. Each morning the mighty north face of Jannu blocked the sun from our camping spot until almost 10am, the head of the valley a continuous wall of vertical rock, snow and ice. Eventually it was time to head out again, down to the valley the way

we had come. Leaving the high Himalaya, it was back down into the midhills and Maoist country.

Some members of our group witnessed a training camp of the insurgents, at Mamangkhe on the south side of the approach to Kangchenjunga. The Maoists came out to check how heavy the loads were and the condition of our porters, which showed concern I thought. The following day, while camped in Lali Kharka, our sirdar spent an hour conducting delicate negotiations with a delegation of Maoists that asked for donations, as well as our binoculars and cameras. They claimed that these were tools that would be used in their training and surveillance work, and he politely refused them.

Eventually, after my obligatory game of badminton with Mabindra, the hotel owner in Taplejung, we were off to Tumlingtar. This is the airstrip by the Arun river, between the Kangchenjunga and Everest/Makalu massifs, a valley so deep it is almost as warm as the Tarai, I found. By the time we arrived in Tumlingtar, we learnt that the Maobadi supremo, Prachanda had broken the four-month long ceasefire with the government. In the airplane back to Kathmandu, we learned about a night of bombs and killing in the hills around Nepal. The next day, the government announced a state of Emergency.

Now it is time to go home to New Zealand, and to hope that the midhills and High Himalaya of this lovely land can go back to the peace that was its hallmark till just five years ago. When I started on the trek, my hope had been to write an article concluding that trekking in the time of the Maobadi was no problem for tourists. Right now I am not so sure. ▽



## Test for a citizen

EDWARD SAID points out how, in the global panorama of cultures, not all peoples are endowed with the equal right to narration and representation. This is more true of Muslim communities the world over. Hence the appalling ignorance displayed in the media after September 11, the confusion about the meanings of Islamic symbolism, and the tendency to conjure the image of militant Islamic forces seizing control of the 'civilised' world.

At another level, an utterly futile counter-exercise goes on ceaselessly - to prove that terrorism has no sanction in Islam, that Islam is a peace-loving religion, and that the clash of civilisations theory is unfounded. Added to this cacophony is the clamour that every Indian Muslim must pass the loyalty test prescribed by self-proclaimed patriots. Otherwise, one is told, their silence will be construed as acquiescence in terrorism.

Like Gabriel who brought Allah's message to his Prophet with the prefatory remark "say", India's Muslims are told to condemn Pakistan's invasion in Kargil, and terrorism in Kashmir and the US. And when they reiterate what they believe in, somebody comes up with the startling revelation that liberal Muslims hardly represent the community - only the Jama Masjid's Imam does.

Life goes on with the accusing finger pointed at the Muslims, regardless of whether one is an atheist or a believer, secularist or Islamist, Marxist or Congressman. But, then, why should anybody trust us? Our ancestors destroyed and desecrated temples: hence our public figures remind us of our collective guilt by visiting the Somnath mandir. Muslim leaders partitioned the country; hence we must live in Bharatvarsha on the sangh parivar's terms. Our co-religionists instigate caste/class violence in different states. They foment terrorism in Punjab, Kashmir and the Northeast - not the Sikhs, Christians or Afghan mercenaries. And our educational institutions - not the Gurukuls and the RSS schools - disseminate 'mischiefs', and produce unpatriotic men and women like Badruddin Tyabji, Azad, Ajmal Khan, Ansari, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, Zakir Husain, Amjad Ali Khan, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Begum Akhtar, Azim Premji, Abdul Kalam, Shabana Azmi, and the nawab of Pataudi.

We are a threat to India's unity. Why? Because we constitute a monolithic entity, marry four or more times, cheer the Pakistani cricket team, go to Saudi Arabia for Haj, read and recite Urdu poetry, and valorise terrorists like Osama bin Laden. This is how over 120 million people speaking different languages, following different customs, and owing allegiance to different parties, are located, categorised and described. To cap it all, Osama reminds everybody of the strength of the pan-Islamic sentiment. Besides the

'Islamic bomb' stored somewhere, Islamic terror is knocking at our doorsteps. No wonder, BJP politicians gird up their loins to perform their patriotic deed! SIMI is

banned; POTO is in place. Freedom is in peril: Three cheers for its defence by the sangh parivar.

A balanced appraisal is required in these unsettling times. Let us not regard the Muslims as a homogeneous entity, but as disparate and differentiated. Let us concede that the interpretation of Islam has changed over time, and that powerful pluralist visions shape Muslim communities. Let us spell out the Islamist and modernist movements without prior assumptions, discuss the contested terrain of who represent Muslims in state and society, the nature of the political and religious leadership and its ability to connect with the varied experiences of Muslim societies.

Let us also recognise the emergence of a trans-national community, an importantly new phenomenon. Its social and economic profile is different from the previous unwieldy coalition of Islamist formations. It is upwardly mobile, self-confident, and in tune with the changes ushered in by globalisation. Although this constituency carries some of the baggage from the past, its members mostly draw upon the range of contemporary experiences not from one but different locations. Why, they ask, are their co-religionists victimised in Bosnia, Somalia, Chechnya, Palestine, and Iraq? These sites confirm them in the belief that something is fundamentally wrong with the world they live in. It is this contemporary reality, rather than any Islamic doctrine, which contributes to the collective reaction.

My intention here is not to present an image of always enlightened, largely innocent Muslim communities, 'sinned against' but hardly ever 'sinning'; nor to suggest that their fortunes or misfortunes can be explained solely in terms of unremitting power and prejudice of the West. I believe sections of the Muslim intelligentsia have made their own history at least as much as hers have made it for them and the reality is that they have not made it very well.

The Muslim intelligentsia - from the days of Shah Waliullah in the eighteenth century to Iqbal in the 1920s and 30s - dialogued with itself and not with others. This has limited its political and religious engagements. The intervention of Muslim scholars seldom went beyond the communitarian frame, and, instead of re-writing their script in the light of ever-changing context and situations, they allowed ill-conceived theories and ill-founded assumptions to dominate the intellectual landscape.

Today, it is easy to notice the scholarly inertia in Muslim institutions, and the absence of protest, dissent and political activism. Lamentation rather than self-introspection is the dominant refrain. Not much has been done to interpret Islam and analyse Muslim societies. The few Muslim intellectuals who have done so are, invariably, tied to flawed frameworks, use Islam lazily to validate or refute different theories, and draw comfort from the limited intellectual resources provided by unoriginal thinkers.

Let me conclude on a different note - pointing to

Muslim societies not being attuned to creating icons. Political heroes are scarcely remembered. On the other hand, the martyrs, fighting on behalf of the oppressed souls, form part of a nation's memory. While the West has to guard itself against them, it must not ignore those Muslims who wish to fashion their lives differently from their ancestors and who, as co-citizens of an international community, seek havens of peace and justice.

Meanwhile, my countrymen please let me know, once and for all, if I have passed your loyalty test.

FROM "THE INDIAN MUSLIM AND THE LOYALTY TEST: DID I PASS OR FAIL?" IN THE INDIAN EXPRESS  
BY MUSHIRUL HASAN

## Lucknow wants a Library

**"This is not a newsletter but an appeal"**

LONDONERS TAKE their public libraries for granted. But can they conceive of their city without its libraries? London without its libraries is like curry without spice. What is far worse is to have a good library and then to lose it. This is what has happened to book-lovers in Lucknow who have lost their beloved British Council Library, fondly referred to as BCL, which recently met its untimely demise in the fortieth year of its birth.

Lucknow, once a jewel in the Indian crown, is the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh. It boasted of the only British Library in the state, which was our pride and joy. BCL's closure has left a book-shaped hole in our lives.

The excuse given for the closure was that there were not enough members. But there was, nonetheless, a faithful core membership, which is left with a profound sense of sadness to be deprived of their beloved library.

The closure, the powers-that-be insisted, was not caused by lack of finances but by under-subscription. This was in contrast with their statement to the press that the money saved from closing down the library — about five million rupees annually — would be utilised in putting up databases on the Net that could be accessed by everyone. This did not impress those who knew that the cold computer could never replace the warmth of a book, and moreover Internet connectivity in India is dismally low and slow.

It was apparent that the resources to fulfil somebody's hi-tech, ultra-modern fantasies were being gathered by closing down the two of the thirteen libraries it runs in India. Insensitive authorities couldn't care less about the trauma BCL's closure would cause in people's lives. A most uncharitable act coldly done by a registered charity that is the British Council.

The British Council was nonetheless generous enough to donate its books to another library in Lucknow itself. But what use such generosity when the said library has, for instance, provided space between bookshelves to enable staff to stretch out and take a siesta during the long, hot summer months.

BCL is now a part of Lucknow's history and its closure symptomatic of the socio-cultural decline the city is facing. Now is the time for all good men to get together and give Lucknow a library, which will gladden their hearts and nourish their minds. Your help is solicited at shivamvij@indiatimes.com. Thank you.

FROM SHIVAM VIJ

## One Vote for Peace

WE ARE not dealing with a conventional war. We cannot respond in a conventional manner. I do not want to see this spiral out of control. This crisis involves issues of national security, foreign policy, public safety, intelligence gathering, economics, and murder. Our response must be equally multi-faceted.

We must not rush to judgment. Far too many innocent people have already died. Our country is in mourning. If we rush to launch a counter-attack, we run too great a risk that women, children, and other non-combatants will be caught in the crossfire.

Nor can we let our justified anger over these outrageous acts by vicious murderers inflame prejudice against all Arab Americans, Muslims, Southeast Asians, or any other people because of their race, religion, or ethnicity.

Finally, we must be careful not to embark on an open-ended war with neither an exit strategy nor a focused target. We cannot repeat past mistakes.

In 1964, Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson the power to "take all necessary measures" to repel attacks and prevent further aggression. In so doing, this House abandoned its own constitutional responsibilities and launched our country into years of undeclared war in Vietnam.

At that time, Senator Wayne Morse, one of two lonely votes against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, declared, "I believe that history will record that we have made a grave mistake in subverting and circumventing the Constitution of the United States... I believe that within the next century, future generations will look with dismay and great disappointment upon a Congress which is now about to make such a historic mistake."

Senator Morse was correct, and I fear we make the same mistake today. And I fear the consequences.

I have agonized over this vote. But I came to grips with it in the very painful yet beautiful memorial service today at the National Cathedral. As a member of the clergy so eloquently said, "As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore."

FROM THE US "CONGRESSIONAL RECORD."

PART OF A STATEMENT BY US CONGRESSWOMAN BARBARA LEE ON A CONGRESSIONAL RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE AGAINST TERRORIST TARGETS. REPRESENTATIVE LEE WAS THE ONLY DISSENTING VOTE IN THE US CONGRESS.



So Nepal has gone and declared an Emergency. Now all of the country's 14 kilometres of railway from Janakpur to Jayanagar will run on time, and the middle class will be happy at the thought. When Indira Gandhi declared Emergency in 1975, she had younger son Sanjay Gandhi to do her dirty work. Fortunately, Sher Bahadur Deuba's son is all of seven years old, and so there is little fear of forced sterilisations and slum clearances, and for that we thank Lord Pashupatinath.

However, the Emergency could certainly be put to good use in the land of the Gurkhas, Sagarmatha/ Everest, Mechi-to-Mahakali stretch, Lumbini-of-Buddha's-birth, and Hindu-Buddhist amity. How about using this time of draconian measures to build footpaths along Kathmandu's thoroughfares. The Minister for Urban Development asks - "what are they?" But of course, you see, there are these raised platforms that run the length of a road, on the side, so that citizens who cannot afford a Zen, a Santro or a Pajero can walk on this platform (otherwise known as a 'footpath') without fear of vehicular molestation.

Maybe an Emergency does not only have to be used to wage an under-reported war on a violent insurgency. An Emergency could be the time to get the public used to a world without bandhs, highway closures and chakka jams, where schools attended by millions are not closed arbitrarily by party diktat, and where examinations are held as announced. Let the tourists come to a bandh-less Nepal, let the economy surge and achieve a momentum which will continue into the period when the Emergency is lifted.

Or how about using the Nepali Emergency to actually make people pay their taxes? Nepal's fatcat businessmen may not have become fully corporate, but liquid they are, and they can pay. It is just that nobody has asked them forcefully enough. How about, in these emergent times, using this window of governmental potency to push through a sewage treatment plant for Kathmandu, so that all raw sewage - from the compounds of the highest to the spanking new slums of Naya Baneshwor - that presently makes up all the inflow of the holy Bagmati is converted to water.

The government did not need the Emergency to get the Royal Nepal Army out of the barracks to

combat the Maoists, but now here's the opportunity for the RNA to try and become a part of Nepali society in democracy rather than an aristocratic non-combat military that was seen to be happier wearing the blue helmet overseas than muddy khakis at home. And let the Army use this opportunity to disarm the Maoist rank and file, rather than to try and exterminate them. That will create a much larger problem for the government when the Emergency is over.

And let not the Emergency be used as the excuse to go collecting all kinds of non-essential fighting machinery at inflated costs and hidden kickbacks in the name of combating Mao's Nepali offspring. Most importantly, let the Nepali army never demand (and be given) helicopter gunships. And tanks. These are the weapon-delivery instruments of mass death that the country does not need - whose use in the Nepali hills will be the equivalent of American B-52s raining ordinance on Afghan villages. True, the use of the ultra-sophisticated weaponry by the

Americans in Afghanistan has every military man salivating, but that is the

last thing Nepal needs to remain a people's democracy.

Let the Army buy (or be gifted) all the air transports it needs, but it must keep clear of helicopter gunships with the ability to rain terror on the people below. For the power to kill and maim en masse that these choppers of death represent, their acquisition would change the very nature of the Nepali state. Lord Pashupatmath knows that it has altered enough already with the Maoist carnage.

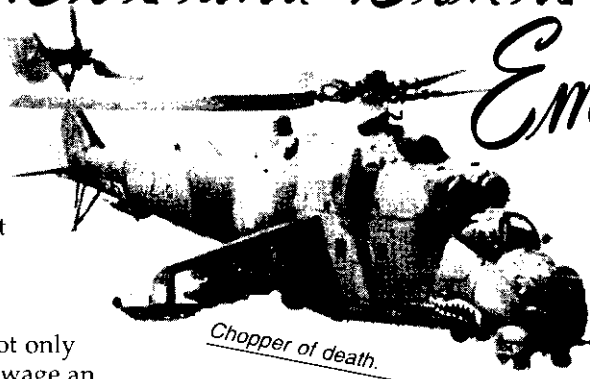
Here is a passage on what war brings with it that applies as much to George W. Bush, presently fighting Osama, as those engaged in battling the Maoists in Nepal.

"Of all the enemies of true liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people."

That was James Madison, fourth president of the United States.

*Kanah Dixit*

## Do's and Don'ts of Emergency







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