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# Missing Signals

## Indian and Pakistani media on India and Pakistan

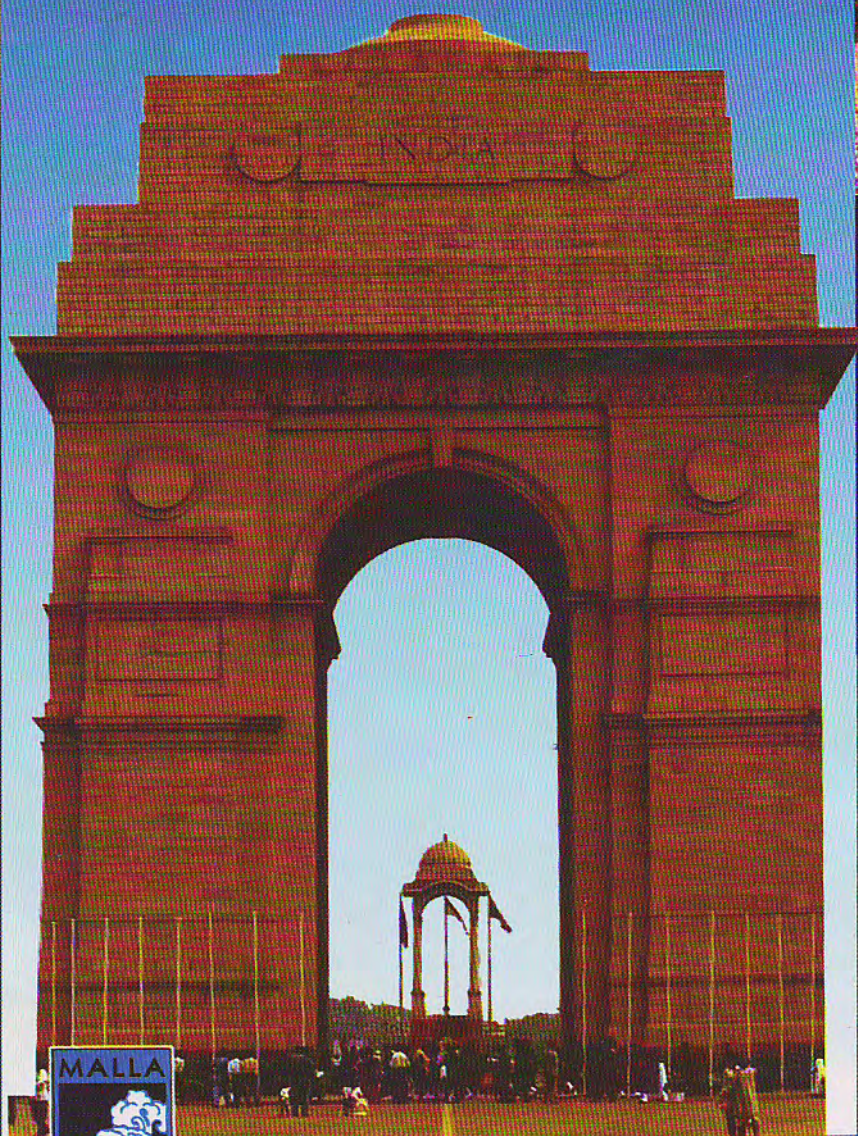
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## Missing Signals

The latest round of India-Pakistan tensions is another stark example of how both countries fail to see each other as 'normal' societies. The media in each country has taken on the task of state cheerleading, following a narrowly-defined script that encourages confrontation. With the region poised on the cusp of war once again, Himal assembled nine leading media professionals from India and Pakistan to discuss journalism in the two countries and debate the proper role of journalists in the South Asian nuclear age.



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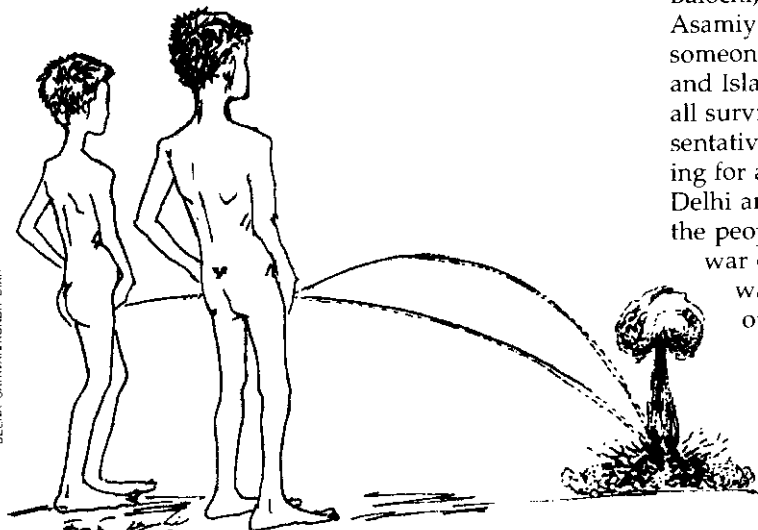
# Armageddon of arrogance

The tragedy in the northern-western quarter of South Asia came closer to being converted into a catastrophe for all of South Asia during the month of May. For, let us accept this as fact, the tensions of India and Pakistan have very little to do with life outside of the Hindi-Urdu belt. Two peoples across the borders of Punjab have the deepest dislike for each other because they are so like each other, and this is what gives fuel to the India-Pakistan animosities which could easily turn all of the rest of us into cinder. These two twin peoples, to cover up their visceral dislike, use the cover of religion to defy and denigrate each other. Allah and Ram are exploited for the sake of nationalist pride. The excuse of less than a million Kashmiris in the Vale is considered by Islamabad and New Delhi to be reason enough to drag 1400 million South Asians (counting 1000 million Indians) to the brink of nuclear war. This lack of imagination is stupefying but sadly real. What is the use of going to war over Kashmir, or forever using it as the excuse to call up war, when both Islamabad and New Delhi know that the Kashmiris themselves would prefer to be autonomous from both? Only an imperfect democracy like India would deliver an entity such as the Bharatiya Janata Party, so cynically capable of drumming up war fever to put the naked shame of post-Godhra Gujarat behind it. And only the under-educated strategists who today control all our collective fate would advise raising the rhetoric to such a level that any terrorist group could have the privilege of starting a nuclear war that will kill millions – the room for manoeuvre has been so restricted by loud talk out of New Delhi

that India will have to go to war if there is, god forbid, another vicious terrorist attack on innocents or an assassination of a national political personality. Lacking the self-confidence to address the problem of Kashmir and its separateness, even as recognised by Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, the political elite of India find it comforting to dare a smaller neighbour that has a massive inferiority complex. Such is the state of immature democracy that the part of this elite that makes up the media and the political opposition cannot speak up in the face of war hysteria, for fear of being labelled anti-national.

Meanwhile, what of the neighbour that is not even a democracy, which is shack-led by a theocratic state ideology, and nurses an infantile grudge against India that is larger than India itself? De-fined by a brittle superstructure which relies on the alertness of one man, a general metamorphising into a politician, Pakistan is an unstable adversary at the best of times. The post-11 September scenario makes it only much more insecure. This is a country which for a long time openly allowed jihadis to operate training camps, and abetted infiltration across the Line of Control to defile the very nature of Kashmiriat, knowing fully well the catastrophic whirlwind this may reap. It is a country which can propound the atavistic principle of first-strike, and which will test three missiles over three days in the middle of the most tense stand-off ever. It is better for New Delhi to talk to such an unstable adversary than to display a bellicosity which can lead to all-out war.

To repeat, this is really a war between similar peoples across the Punjab border. It is time for the Balochi, the Sindhi, the Bengali, the Tamil, the Asamiya and the Nepali to refuse to go along with someone else's angst and agenda. Both New Delhi and Islamabad must get the message – if we should all survive this bout to live another day – that representative and responsible government means speaking for all the people. The firefight between New Delhi and Islamabad will not serve the interests of all the people of India, Pakistan and South Asia. The war of words has come awfully close to being a war of warheads. It is time to come to collective our senses.



BEENA SARWAR/KUNDA DIXIT

Who can go further in South Asia?

*This image has been used by Himal whenever the India-Pakistan nuclear envy in South Asia rears itself. We will continue to use it until such time as it is no longer necessary.*

## INDIA • PAKISTAN

# LINE OF NO CONTROL

**THE POTENTIAL** for war between India and Pakistan in the coming days appears increasingly great. Tensions between the countries have been high for months. Neither country wants – or can afford – a war, but it appears that someone or some group is doing its best to start one. It will take only one match to start the fire – and neither India nor Pakistan has full control over the matchbox.

If a war occurs, it is unlikely to be confined to the disputed region of Kashmir. Sentiment among many sections of India's population has been growing in favour of decisive action, even all-out war, in response to the militancy that has been going

on since well before the attack on India's Parliament last December. Now, domestic political factors, intensifying Hindu-Muslim tensions and America's treatment of India and Pakistan in relation to the 'global war on terrorism' have created conditions for full-scale conflict. New Delhi had earlier recalled its envoy to Pakistan, and now it has expelled his Pakistani counterpart to India. The troops of both countries are poised on their respective borders. The monsoon will

arrive in less than two weeks. If war is to occur, it will do so before rains make the roads impassable. Villagers have left vulnerable locations on both sides of the border, hoping to be out of the way if war starts. Britain has sent Jack Straw on an urgent mission and the US is sending Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, and its Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld. But why the delay?

War, if it happens, is likely to be intense and could involve the use of nuclear weapons. Pakistan is reported to have readied its nuclear arsenal during the Kargil conflict in 1999. With little strategic depth, it has strong incentives to try to use such weapons for a devastating first strike. Public sentiment in India is also disturbingly unconcerned about the prospective use of nuclear weapons. Well-educated, interna-

tionally experienced individuals – early leaders in India's environmental movement – have expressed the sentiment that it would be worth losing a few cities to 'settle' the dispute with Pakistan once and for all. Others state that Pakistan's nuclear 'bluff' needs to be called; it is not something India can live with. There is little mass awareness of the effects that nuclear fallout would have across the plains of India and Pakistan, and to most members of the public, nuclear weapons are just "big bombs". India may try to confine the war to the disputed territory of Kashmir, thus avoiding actually attacking Pakistani territory and catalysing a full-scale conflict. But, even if it does so, avoiding escalation will be difficult. Furthermore, there are strong tactical reasons for any attack to occur directly across the border of Punjab or Rajasthan. Such an attack could well provoke a nuclear response from Islamabad.

India's government is facing heavy domestic pressure to attack Pakistan. The leading member of India's coalition government, the right-wing Hindu-nationalist BJP, did poorly in recent state elections. In the three months since then, Hindu-Muslim riots in the state of Gujarat, the only state now that is governed exclusively by the BJP, have caused over 800, mostly Muslim, deaths and led to extensive criticism of the BJP's leadership at both the state and central levels. The BJP government at the centre needs to shore up its support.

It was apparently persuaded not to attack Pakistan in January following promises of effective action by the Musharraf government to reign in militants. But then militants killed the families of Indian servicemen at Kaluchak in Kashmir even as Christina B Rocca, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, was visiting New Delhi. Targeting the families of servicemen is like killing police – it stirs intense desire in the armed forces for direct retribution. India's government cannot afford to appear soft on Pakistan. Also, both the BJP and the opposition are upset by their perception that the US has double-standards on terrorism. Bush's focus on Al Qaeda and the Taliban cuts little ice in India, where Pakistan is seen as the safe harbour and home for such activities.

And what of Pakistan? General Pervez Musharraf is walking a tightrope. In the aftermath of the attack on the Indian Parliament, Musharraf moved against the

War, if it happens, is likely to be intense and could involve the use of nuclear weapons.



sentiments of a significant number of his citizens and ordered the arrests of leaders of many Islamic militant organisations. Some of these, including a leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba, have since been released and only recently re-arrested following the attack in Kashmir in May. This, of course, adds to the perception in India that Pakistan is not serious about controlling cross-border attacks. There are other subtle symbols. Pakistani news reports in mainstream English language papers refer to the 'deaths' of Indian civilians and the 'martyrdom' of the attackers.

Is India serious about attacking Pakistan? New Delhi is reportedly considering high-profile actions it can take that stop just short of war. According to *The Hindu*, these include withdrawal of most favoured nation status to Pakistan, an abrogation of the Indus Waters Treaty and calling on the UN to enforce Resolution 1373, which mandates nations to control terrorism. All such actions have their own complications and are likely to be perceived as inadequate within India. The threat of war seems, as a result, very real. One can only hope that such analysis of the likelihood of hostilities is wrong.

—Marcus Moench

## SRI LANKA

# THE BATTLE FOR PEACE

**THE NUMBER** of lives saved in Sri Lanka in the past five months of ceasefire probably amounts to about 1500, given an average death toll of 10 per day of conflict. The ceasefire has had other benefits as well; the fear of sudden bomb blasts does not disrupt day-to-day life anymore. A general sense of improved security pervades public life. But with the passage of time the benefits of peace appear to be slipping out of the public debate, as the recent focus of both political and media attention has been on the shortcomings of the peace process. A commonly voiced complaint is that the government is giving in to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) without getting back anything in return, leading to a feeling that the LTTE is getting the better part of the deal. The bottom line is whether the country is

prepared to pay the price of war again for extracting more concessions from the LTTE than Colombo has so far been able to get.

Certainly, there are major persistent problems, some of which have even been aggravated in this time of ceasefire. For instance, international monitors have issued a ruling critical of the LTTE's refusal to open the A-9 highway to Jaffna to uninterrupted passenger traffic. Human rights organisations have challenged the main actors in the peace process for not doing enough to put a halt to continuing human rights abuses, including the recruitment of children by the LTTE. There has also been a failure on the part of international monitors in giving advance notice of the movements of the LTTE and Sri Lankan armed forces.

On the one hand there are all these issues that threaten the long-term sustainability of the ceasefire. On the other hand, the benefits of the ceasefire are being taken more or less for granted, and even being dismissed as unworthy. One of the most important benefits of this period of peace has been that the growth of ethnic polarisation has been halted. In addition, thanks to the ceasefire agreement, most roads in the north and east have been opened to passenger traffic and the markets are beginning to function, helping revive the formerly embargoed LTTE-controlled Wannu.

The high degree of politicisation in Sri Lanka ensures that considerations of party politics enter every nook and cranny, be it in media or civic organisations. On the political front, the inability or unwillingness of the government to get the mainstream opposition on board the peace process is a major impediment to progress. It leads pro-opposition sections, who might otherwise be supportive of the peace process, to find reasons to oppose it on behalf of their political parties. The government's strategy up to now appears to have been focussed on getting its own way in Parliament by pushing through the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which weakens the presidency by taking away its power to dismiss parliament after one year. Even though there are signs that the passage of this constitutional amendment is not a certainty, it can be anticipated that sections of the media and civil society that are pro-opposition will continue their aggressive campaign to discredit a peace

The Number of lives saved in Sri Lanka in the past five months of ceasefire probably amounts to about 1500.

India may be concerned that Sri Lanka not offer its Tamil separatists a degree of autonomy that far exceeds anything that India is prepared to give its own separatist groups.

process that is being taken forward by a government formed by a rival political party.

### Public attitudes

However, the infighting among politicians in Colombo is not necessarily illustrative of opinions throughout the country. The overwhelming victory by the United National Party (UNP) government in the local government elections of 20 May was a public vindication of the peace process.

An attempt made to assess opinions on the ground by the National Peace Council revealed three important aspects of public attitude towards the peace process, the first being the general absence of overt anger or hatred among Sinhalaes against Tamil people or even the LTTE. There appears to be the acknowledgement of another group (or nation) of people who had their own cause and their own valid reasons for fighting, dying and killing. There is private pain, sure, but there is no evidence of community-based anger or hatred towards the other.

The second observation is that the people interviewed in the survey were by and large very well informed about political affairs in Colombo. They knew, for instance, of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's forays abroad where she had spoken in favour of the peace process, and her contrasting words and behaviour in Sri Lanka. They were also aware of the issues surrounding the proposed 18th Amendment to the constitution, especially its main objective of curtailing presidential power. It is evident that mass media, in particular radio and television, has the capacity to penetrate the farthest reaches of the country, taking the

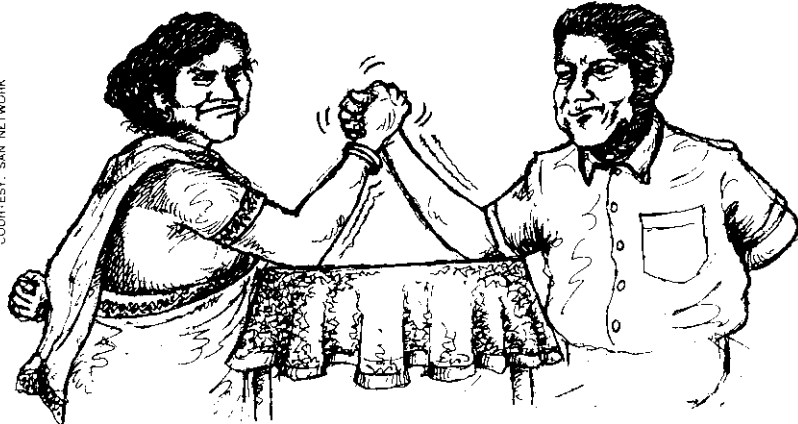
debates in the capital to the countryside.

The third observation is that in instances when the debate in the capital is itself weak or non-existent, people elsewhere are equally in the dark. This is the case with issues pertaining to the sharing of power and the form of the possible political solution in a multi-religious and bi-national society where Sinhala nationalism has been confronting Tamil nationalism for the past five decades. These are issues that are not systematically or rigorously discussed either in the mass media or even academia in the capital. It is therefore inevitable that the people at the grassroots level will also not be conversant with these issues.

### Pressures, internal and external

Obtaining the cooperation of the opposition in the peace process may not be as difficult as anticipated by the government. It must not be forgotten that the former People's Alliance (PA) government made strenuous efforts to convince people about the need for a political settlement to the ethnic conflict. PA stalwarts frontally confronted nationalist sections of the Sinhala population who opposed the devolution package the PA government had put forward as the base of its solution to the ethnic conflict. They were vilified, but, undeterred. The PA government launched massive propaganda campaigns to promote constitutional reform that sought to abolish the unitary constitution and take the polity in the direction of a more suitable federal one.

The major political grievance of the opposition appears to be the government's effort to marginalise President Chandrika Kumaratunga. As a popularly-elected president who has not yet even completed half of her term of office, President Kumaratunga is theoretically entitled to share power with the UNP government and have it reflected in practice. The president appears to be getting important international backing for her position, as was indicated during her recent trip to India, where the welcome she received suggests that the Indian government would like her to play a more participatory role in the country's governance. This Indian expectation becomes more relevant in light of the government's announcement that the Indians are offering some form of technical assistance to Sri Lanka in the fashioning of political arrangements pertaining to the peace process, such as in the interim adminis-



tration for the north and east.

It is entirely plausible that the imminent appointment of an interim administration for the north and east headed by the LTTE is causing concern in Indian circles. It is reasonable to believe that India will be concerned about the demonstration effect that an interim arrangement in Sri Lanka might have on Indian separatist groups. Further, India may be concerned that a government headed by Wickremesinghe will be less inclined to resist LTTE demands for maximum autonomy. India may also be concerned that Sri Lanka not offer its Tamil separatists a degree of autonomy that far exceeds what India is prepared to give its own separatist groups. In this regard, ensuring that President Kumaratunga gets back to the centre stage as a partner in the peace process who will be more prepared to strike a harder bargain with the LTTE may seem to be an attractive option for South Block.

Certainly the main credit for the rapid

progress of the peace process in the past five months needs to go to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the UNP government. But the prospects for sustaining the support for the peace process in the long term, especially amongst the Sinhala population, would be tremendously boosted with the participation of President Kumaratunga and the PA opposition. A government-opposition memorandum of understanding that provides both sides with mutual guarantees is inescapably necessary if the peace process is to succeed in the long term. A bipartisan approach will not only help to unify the negotiating position of the mainstream polity and provide a sense of security to the Sinhala population – it will also help to get partisan political and media critics of the peace process on board.

–Jehan Perera

**A government-opposition memorandum of understanding that provides both sides with mutual guarantees is inescapably necessary if the peace process is to succeed in the long term.**



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# A session in the hills

## The India–Pakistan media retreat

*Himal* and Panos South Asia organised an India-Pakistan Media Retreat at Nagarkot, Nepal, on 11-12 May 2002, bringing together editors, reporters, columnists and politicians from the two countries to discuss the pitfalls and opportunities before media in their coverage of bilateral issues. These are people at the frontline of news production and opinion-formation, individuals who through their proximity to news events have a heightened understanding of the geopolitical dangers that stare South Asia in the face today.

At the retreat, participants undertook to discuss a variety of issues that determine the way India and Pakistan figure in each other's media. Also under discussion was the role that the media plays or can play in either reducing or inflaming the conflict that has dominated South Asia for sometime, and dominates world news today. Through these and various other exploratory discussions, a perhaps unprecedented exercise was carried out: here is Indian and Pakistani media on Indian and Pakistani media. The result is an illustration of the processes of journalism and a revelation of the tensions that inform and emerge from the practise of this difficult trade in this difficult region. We reproduce an edited transcript of the discussion held in the belief that it will be of interest to a large section of our readers. We hope that this exercise will provide new ideas that will eventually contribute to improving the role of media in a perennially conflict-ridden, nuclearised Subcontinent.

### Market forces and coverage

**Siddharth Varadarajan:** The volume of coverage of the Pakistani point of view in the Indian press is very limited. There is a degree of reprint, but that is not done through any formal arrangement. Only the *Indian Express* has a formal arrangement with the *Dawn*. But the *Indian Express* excerpts invariably tend to concentrate on the macabre, the foolish and the obscure – like news about a man who stabbed his sister and burnt his wife because he wanted to marry someone else. That is the kind of snippet that is usually picked up. The *Asian Age* carries much more nuanced coverage but its circulation is low.

**Barkha Dutt:** Is the coverage of Pakistan in India completely defined by the market? Even if it were so, the coverage ought to be extensive since Pakistan is one story which the market has a lot of interest in. Can it not be presumed that people would read excerpts from Pakistani newspapers much more than they would read many other stories that appear everyday?

**Siddharth:** Newspaper managements insist that Pakistan is the single most important foreign story as far as readers are concerned. But this must be looked at in the overall context of lack of space and the compulsion to accommodate news about spot develop-

ments in Pakistan. The main problem is that the *Times of India* and the *Hindustan Times*, which dominate in Delhi and Bombay, lack physical space. When very important national news has to be compressed into 50 or 100 words, there is very little space left for Pakistan qua Pakistan. Besides, the media marketers have decided that at least one-third of the international page must consist of pop snippets such as a Britney Spears concert or something similar.

When the front page cannot accommodate more than 300 words in a main story, and marketing departments have decided that you cannot have stories continuing into later pages, we not only have a problem of absolute space but also of relative prominence for news from Pakistan. But even when there is space, perceptions, prejudices and lack of sensitivity come into play.

**Rehana Hakim:** Is editorial content being driven entirely by market forces in India? How much autonomy



Rehana Hakim, editor Newsline, Karachi.

and independence does the editorial department have within the publication?

**Siddharth:** Perception of what the market wants determines the broad structure, the pagination, the amount of space and so on. In most newspapers the advertising department provides a grid which is invariably 70 percent advertising and 30 percent news. Editorial departments operate within that. There is also a 'market-led' view of world news. So every day the editors are forced to include at least one science story and one pop story. So, the rest of world news, in which Pakistan has to be covered, unless it is on the front page, must be made to fit within the remaining space. In such a situation, given a choice between stock news which conforms to the competitors' view of what news is, which usually is "6 stabbed in Karachi" or some extremist speech made by somebody, even a fairly sensitive news desk will settle for the more sensational than the sober and serious story.

**Kalpna Sharma:** Large circulation papers set certain trends by defining the market for the media. But actually

these are just priorities that they have decided for themselves. Within this falls not just India-Pakistan relations but also things happening within India, which get marginalised. *The Hindu* would not have been the second largest circulating newspaper if the market did not want to read the kind of things that it publishes. And, more ironically, *The Hindu* is published from a very conservative part of the country in the south. And the kind of news it has carried and its editorial criticism of the BJP, has invited furious letters to the editor. But the paper's circulation did not decline for that reason. The market is therefore just an excuse behind which other kinds of priorities are being met.

The absence of coverage on real issues in Pakistan cannot be justified on the ground that the readers are not interested. Coverage can actually improve and having someone in Pakistan makes a difference. Within the existing pattern of priorities, a correspondent stationed in Pakistan will have to work within the dictates of an existing definition of news and events, and hence will have to focus on security-related issues. While such events are highly visible, they are occasional occurrences. And whenever such security-related issues are absent, the correspondent in Pakistan can do different stories that break perceptions not just of Pakistan but also of what news about Pakistan is. But a change in such perceptions can come only if large circulation papers make the effort. Till that happens, Indian media will labour under the self-imposed restriction of coverage to Kashmir and security related issues, to the exclusion of other equally important events. To some extent a change can happen if correspondents are stationed in Pakistan. The physical presence of a correspondent may not suffice but it does make a difference.

**Mani Shankar Aiyar:** The market validates the stereotype. There is an idea of what is 'Pakistan' and what is a 'Pakistani' and what is a 'Pakistani view'. And whatever appears in the Pakistani press that validates the stereotype is picked up and reproduced. What invalidates the stereotype is only occasionally reported. *The Asian Age* is plays a role in invalidating the stereotype,



Mani Shankar Aiyar, Member of Parliament and columnist, New Delhi.

# Issues of Access

– Siddharth Varadarajan

**THE RECIPROCAL** availability of respective media in India and Pakistan has two dimensions. One is the access Indians and Pakistanis have to each other's media and the other is the access each media has to the other country. There are problems on both counts. As regards the first issue, the main problem is access to print, TV and Internet is limited for legal, technological and political reasons. Apart from film magazines, there is no serious readership for Indian print publications in Pakistan at the mass level. Officials and journalists access magazines and dailies on the Internet. Here there are actual and potential problems. Even though the Internet as a media is not easy to restrict or censor, there was the problem during the Kargil war when the Indian government instructed VSNL, which is the main gateway, to block access to *Dawn* for at least a month and a half. Alongside that of course there was a ban on Pakistan's state run channel PTV. In Pakistan, there is no problem accessing Indian websites, but since 13 December, 2001, the government has banned Indian TV channels. The ban in Pakistan will not be lifted until Pakistani private channels can establish themselves.

There is a lack of symmetry in TV penetration in the two countries. Indian channels, despite the ban, are still watched in Pakistan but with a degree of scepticism. In India on the other hand, PTV is the only Pakistani channel presently available and this seriously affects the projection of Pakistan in India, providing a very blinkered view for the average individual. PTV today lacks the kind of programmes once popular in India in the 1980s when the country's state-run channel Doordarshan offered only staid, bureaucratic fare. If new Pakistani channels like Indus Vision and ARY are able to pick up and if they project credible news, they could provide a useful window on Pakistan for the average Indian viewer. This could help shape a different popular Indian perception of Pakistan.

India and Pakistan are not reported about as normal societies in each other's medias. Indian coverage of Pakistan is almost exclusively restricted to bilateral issues, and official concerns, such as terrorism and jihad dominate coverage of these bilateral issues. Even when some attempt is made to delve into Pakistani society, there is very little attempt to

deviate from these standard tropes. This is true of Pakistani coverage of India as well. The kind of stories picked up tend to reinforce negative stereotypes.

There are several reasons for this. The first is a lack of sensitivity on the part of journalists, publishers, owners and, to an extent, readers. Prefabricated and routinely invoked formulae determine what the most important issue is. This problem will not go away simply by granting people more visas. Were the Pakistan or Indian government to be more liberal about visas, there will simply be a larger number of people with a preconceived mindset travelling back and forth.

On the second issue, that of media's access to the other country and its people, there is a very serious problem. Prejudice is compounded by the problem of physical access. Visiting Indian or Pakistani journalists are restricted to a maximum of one or two cities and to a week-long trip at the very most. Invariably these visits are not at a time of the journalist's choosing. Typically, visas are issued when there is a major bilateral or multilateral event. Consequently, they descend on a city within the confines

of a narrowly defined news event and within the confines of a competitive news environment. Professional compulsions limit coverage to the official news event, even if much of it may be inconsequential. During official events such as a SAARC meeting, a journalist cannot deviate too far even physically from the official delegation. The officials so tightly control the outflow of news that unless you

are within a ten-foot radius of the spokesperson, you are likely to miss the news. This leaves very little time for other stories that break the mould. In this sense the problem of access and visas affects coverage and feeds prejudice.

The technology, the discourse of news, and the idea of what constitutes news also make a difference. Three years ago I went to Pakistan and did a story on an industrial group that had set up a foundation for running schools for under-privileged kids. I visited one such school outside Lahore where poor kids were being taught for a very nominal fee. The teacher was very proud of her wards. She wanted to impress upon me that all these kids knew English. So she drew a circle and said, "kids what is this?" They all shouted, "*sarcas*". She then drew a square, and they shouted "*saquwaruh*", just the way it would be pronounced in the Indian Punjab. I sent in this story including the idiosyncrasies of diction. It never saw the light of day. The man at the desk told me "people do not want to read about schools in India, and you are filing a story on schools in Pakistan".

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but as a consequence of that, perhaps only a few thousand copies are sold.

But there is an incident I can recall which can shed light on deviations from the norm. In 1994 I had published a book called *Pakistan Papers*, consisting of a set of articles, including my last despatch from Karachi. On a visit to Karachi in 1997 I was astonished to learn that *Jung* had carried translated extracts from it in 30 installments. They took the utmost care to say that they had nothing to do with the views expressed, but apart from that they carried the whole thing. And why? Because it was a slightly eccentric view of Pakistan. It suggested that there could be an Indian who actually liked them. I think it was partly because I had lived in Pakistan and many of the people involved knew me personally and I happened to have lived in Pakistan at a time when the Pakistanis were extremely disillusioned with themselves. It was the time when Bhutto was hanged and there was a lot of introspection going on. Perhaps that stimulated a desire to look across and see whether there was something they could pick up to make their own lives a little happier. Curiously, when the book was launched I came in for a lot of criticism from the Indian press for hugging Riaz Khokkar, the Pakistan ambassador to India, who I had got to release the book. There were letters to the editor for days on end saying why is Mani Shankar Aiyer hugging this chap as if he is the *baraat* just arrived. I think Riaz himself was a little embarrassed. He was terrified of what would happen to him in Islamabad. None of this proves anything, but perhaps there is a hint there of two different perceptions.

### The regional language press and Pakistan

**Om Thanvi:** In India, regional language papers have a much wider reach than the English media has and this is an area of concern as far as coverage of Pakistan is concerned. In the regional papers, including Hindi newspapers, barring indispensable news of Pakistan politics, in the treatment of which there is an evident and obvious bias, India's largest neighbour finds no mention.

**Mani:** From my experience as a diplomat, I can say that Urdu papers in India do station correspondents in Pakistan. The result is that, since 99 percent of the people who read Urdu are Muslims, some of our Muslims get information through this channel. The only other exceptions were the occasional Indrajit Bhadwar and of course the more frequent Kuldeep Nayar, who anyway always kept coming and going. He stays more in Pakistan, and sometimes in India and that too with great difficulty. But Hindustani correspondents



*Om Thanvi, editor, Jansatta, New Delhi.*

hardly ever go to Pakistan. Of the people who stay a few days, observe with some attention, speak to people and then write, the majority are from the Urdu press. For the rest you are absolutely correct, because nobody from any of the regions in India ever goes to Pakistan.

**Om:** The situation in the Hindi press merits very serious discussion precisely because of its dismal coverage of Pakistan. National newspapers like the *Nav Bharat Times* do not even send a correspondent over to Pakistan the way the *TOI* sometimes does. And this despite the fact that *Nav Bharat Times* sells more than the *Times of India*. The situation is really dismal in the Hindi press. The fastest growing Hindi papers, the *Dainik Bhaskar*, or *Rajasthan Patrika*, have a circulation several times larger than that of the English papers. It is another matter that because of this English hangover in India, the Hindi press does not have the same visibility as the English media. But it is necessary to pay attention to the Hindi press because of the way their character is evolving. Take papers like *Dainik Bhaskar* and *Rajasthan Patrika*, which are being published out of every district. *Bhaskar* brings out a Chandigarh edition, a Yamunanagar edition, a Sirsa edition, a Hissar edition. Because of their specific

areas of circulation and their structure they have no place for hard Pakistan stories. For the Yamunanagar edition international news will be considered unnecessary news. Pakistan news will figure only if it is the kind that, say, will show Pakistan in a bad light, and which will enable the paper to show that it is more patriotic, more nationalistic.

**Rahul Dev:** A count of just the large Hindi chain newspapers will give some indication of their popular influence. *Nav Bharat Times* has only two editions. By con-

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In the regional papers, including Hindi newspapers, barring indispensable news of Pakistan politics, in the treatment of which there is an evident and obvious bias, India's largest neighbour finds no mention.

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# Between the battle lines

— **Barkha Dutt**

**ABOUT** A year ago I started a weekly reporting programme called "Reality Bytes" on New Delhi Television. Some time ago I did a couple of stories on this programme which illustrate the challenges for a journalist, particularly a television journalist, covering conflict who does not want to be identified with any camp. The title of one of these stories "Between the Battle Lines" reflects one of these challenges, namely the frustration of a reporter on Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) caught between two kinds of expectations from the audience. It is basically a story of two women widowed in the conflict, the wife of Jalil Andrabi, the Kashmiri human rights activist who was killed by an Indian army major, and the wife of a policeman who was killed by militants. The other story I want to discuss is one on the build-up of troops along the India-Pakistan border in December. Together they demonstrate the difficulties and complexities of detailed reportage, especially when the story primarily concerns the army. What do you do then?

Despite all my efforts at achieving a balance, after these episodes were screened I was criticised by both sides. People in the army were extremely angry with me for doing this story; after Kargil perhaps they had thought I could be counted on to say 'the right thing'. They felt that I had given more space to the first story on Jalil Andrabi than to the killing of the policeman. On the other hand, in the border story which was just a narrative based on 'facts', there was criticism from liberal opinion that this kind of reportage could worsen an already tense situation. This is something to be factored in when looking at the impact of coverage.

In the context of multiple truths and lies and perceptions of coverage, the danger of slotting is not confined to just the viewers. Perceptions on the ground could be coloured and come in the way of reporting from a conflict zone. A story that I filmed at Kashmir University is a case in point. This was after the war against the Taliban had commenced. This seemed like a good enough context to look at the changing nature of the movement in Kashmir, which I personally believe has happened. From being a homespun political movement it is now a movement which the people who started it do not recognise anymore as their own creation. When we reached

Kashmir University there were about 200 people in a pro-Osama rally. Being very conscious of this stereotype that dominates international coverage, of Muslims everywhere rallying behind Osama, we really did not want to cover it. But these people told us to take footage of their rally and we agreed and did an interview with them. At the end, the man who was interviewed turned around and said, "I know you are an agent of India and you are going to give me less space and you are going to give the moderate voice more space."

We moved on to the mass communication department of the university, which is reputed to be a more liberal kind of centre. Students there told us that there was no pro-Taliban sentiment on campus. Meanwhile somebody went and reported this exchange to the pro-Osama group, who then accosted us and demanded our tape. When I refused, they accused me of being an agent of the Indian government who wanted to project the Kashmiris as moderates. Our camera was broken and I escaped with the tape. The next day a local newspaper in Kashmir printed a story saying that a lady reporter of Star News had egged on students to raise slogans against Pakistan and when they refused there was an altercation in which her camera was broken. We eventually aired the story in a raw, pretty much uncut kind of form, just showing what these people had to say. And once again I got slammed by both sides. In Kashmir, there are these kinds of stories where you cannot aggregate and balance out an overall reality. There is a little bit of reality here and a little bit of a reality there. Every angle of a story has one truth attached to it and one lie. A reporter's job is to sift through the various truths and lies and glean something worthwhile from both sides.

This raises questions about objectivity in reporting. My attempt at objectivity is defined not so much in the traditional way, which would suggest leaving your own subjective perception of the situation outside the story. My definition is to be allowed to tell every side of the story with my own subjective perception because I do not believe that it can be left out. If there is an emotional engagement with the story, as there often is when reporting J&K, then there should be the scope to report with the same degree of emotional empathy for the story on either side. Of course that kind of luxury is only available in the format of a longer programme. For those reporting within the framework of a 1 minute 40 second slot in the main news bulletin, this kind of formula where you can tell both sides of the story is not possible. This problem is more acute reporting something very specific like a troop build-up at the border. The only option is for a reporter over time to throw in an array and variety of stories and build up a reputation of being independent.



trast *Bhaskar* has some 15 editions in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan Punjab and Haryana. *Dainik Jagran* has about 18 editions in Uttar Pradesh, MP, Punjab and Haryana. *Hindustan* has probably nine editions, mainly in UP and Bihar. *Rajasthan Patrika* has seven editions just in Rajasthan. And there is *Amar Ujala*, which is published mainly in UP and Haryana. The reason these are important for us is their lack of coverage or their prejudiced coverage of Pakistan. That, plus the minds and sensibilities and perceptions of their owners, editors and journalists. They are very important. The mindset of the public at large is made by these papers and not by the English papers. Moreover, their writing is also influenced by their own constituency. So both reinforce each other's prejudices and stereotypes. And because the language reader is not exposed to a lot of other influences and realities which a typical English reader is exposed to, interest in external matters in general is very limited. But this tendency on the part of the regional press should not distract attention from the general tendency in the Indian media to focus on and accent the juicier stories to the neglect of deeper social stories. You notice that kind of mindset in relation to all our neighbours. It is not just Pakistan that is ignored. Every neighbour is ignored. Stories from the West, from the US and Western Europe, command more space in the Indian media – even soft stories like fashion or even crime. A big crime story from, let us say, America, would get a bigger display than a similar story from Pakistan or Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. So this general Indian or Asian obsession with the West and the US in particular is the broad context in which coverage of Pakistan must be looked at.

**Om:** Some complaint has been voiced about the shrinking of space in the English media, that stories now get a maximum of 450 words. But in the Hindi press even these 450 words will be wasted if they are going the way of *Punjab Kesri*. The other point is that discussion of the Indian media cannot be complete without mention of what the non-Hindi regional press is doing. More attention must be paid to it.

**Mani:** If you look at the papers from Tamil Nadu, there is more about Sri Lanka, and if you look at *Punjab Kesri* there may be more about Pakistan. And it is likely, that a paper from Bihar will have more about Nepal. And Bangla papers will have more about Bangladesh.

**Rahul:** This may perhaps be true of Tamil Nadu. But it is not true that *Punjab Kesri* prints more news about Pakistan.

**You are trying to depict an emotion at a certain point of time, to convey a sentiment on the ground. How much should you censor that because you may not make viewers comfortable?**

**Siddharth:** What *Punjab Kesri* prints cannot be called news.

#### **Objectivity or balance**

**Kalpna:** The question of objectivity repeatedly crops up in media discussions. It is important not to confuse the two separate issues – equivalence and objectivity. For instance, in the case of the Gujarat coverage, people kept talking about the equivalence between Godhra and the carnage in the state. That is not the issue. Equivalence of coverage is not objectivity. And in television even the question of equivalence is compromised by the subject. People in seemingly similar situations come across very differently, so that equivalence is not entirely in the hands of the reporter.

**Siddharth:** Tactically I can see that in covering a certain kind of story it might be necessary to provide another story from the other side, as in the case of Andrabi and the policeman. But that is purely tactical. I have a sense of unease with the need to achieve a balance because that balance is unattainable because of the very facts of the case. Andrabi's killing, from the point of view of Indian democracy, was an act of premeditated murder by an agent of the state, whereas the killing of the policeman, tragedy though it no doubt is, belongs to a different category. Showing both stories is a compromise of packaging. But the dictates of packaging should not force us to draw too theoretical a conclusion about so-called balance or objectivity.

**Barkha:** Every individual story cannot have an internal balance. Particularly in Kashmir where there are very few people who are not with one camp or the other. Stories of this kind cannot be set out by some conscious road map of being balanced, with the result that someone watching the story on the border could feel



*Barkha Dutt, reporter and anchor NDTV, New Delhi.*

that this is just one side, that it creates an atmosphere of war and so on. These are the actual problems that a reporter can face when covering a conflict. For example, on a border story I did my figures were based on data from the Indian army. It was my own assessment of what to use and I could make mistakes. Those figures could have been doctored. But at that point I am not actually going to necessarily be able to balance it in that theoretical way.

I think it is legitimate for a reporter to do a 30-minute programme just on the situation on one side of the border without someone, say, the Pakistan High Commissioner in Delhi, suddenly deciding that this is an exceptional act by someone who is otherwise a fairly liberal voice on Kashmir. Or liberals in India voicing misgivings about the intentions of the programme. There are certain stories that are valid as news stories. If there is troop build-up, that has a legitimacy of its own on which there is no way to do a mirror image from the other side.

**Kalpana:** I personally do not believe that there is any objectivity in anything that we report because after all we are all socialised into believing certain things and this comes in with the selection of facts. In all the facts we have, what we choose to highlight is based on our beliefs and what our papers choose to highlight – these are pressures which are far from objective. So I think



*Kalpana Sharma, correspondent, The Hindu, Bombay.*

we should just set aside this matter of objectivity. When you take up any issue of this kind, whether it is Kashmir or sectarian violence in India, there is no way that you are going to please all sides.

**Barkha:** The point is not to try to please everyone. The issue of balance is tied up with the impact of coverage.

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**In a war situation, you are free to shoot and talk about only one side of the story. It is physically impossible for you to talk about and show both sides.**

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Journalists can at best try to be fair, as distinct from being objective. In conflict situations, charges are often thrown against the media that a particular report is too soft on the separatist lobby or too soft on the government, and this is one dimension of the impact of the coverage. The constant deconstruction of media reports is part of the impact and almost amounts to propaganda of a kind. Independent coverage must be allowed to steer clear of this. The media, in this sense, is a whipping boy. It is naïve to expect the media to perform a role which is defined by one point of view or the other.

**Siddharth:** We are in a sense paying for the past sins of our profession, because the Indian media was not bold enough in the early stages on Kashmir. The Andrabi case should have been treated transparently by the media when it happened. The very act of recall now has somehow to be justified by packing it along with other things.

**Barkha:** The larger aim of the story was not so much to expose Jalil Andrabi through an ex post facto media exhumation. On a visit to Kashmir the two stories of the women just came up in front of me in the same week and it was just a coincidence. I do not think it was a conscious attempt to balance. But I think you are right to the extent that I would have had a tough time if I had done just the Andrabi story.

**Mushahid Hussain Sayed:** Your story on the border had a visual of the Indian farmer on the border demanding the elimination of Pakistan. Now is that not something that could inflame popular passions?

**Barkha:** That is a valid point, but the same principle could be applied to the shots of the women in the Andrabi story beating their chests and saying "azadi" (freedom).

**Mariana Babar:** But that is a liberation struggle how can you compare that with the farmer at the border?

**Barkha:** Doubtless these are elements which are potentially inflammatory in both cases. Both have a certain rhetoric to them and both are rooted in a reality. In the border villages there is an overwhelming anger about being dragged through the ritual of moving their homes every now and then, and so they want something to be done once and for all. That may be nonsense for some, but it is a sentiment. Similarly an angry, alienated Kashmiri can also have an extremely heightened and often exaggerated sense of hurt, but that is his or her perception. It is a judgement one makes in representing the

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# Media during intense conflict

– *Rehana Hakim*

IN 1998, when Nawaz Sharif was prime minister, editors from all over the country were invited to Islamabad to offer their opinions on Pakistan's nuclear options. India had tested at Pokhran and Nawaz Sharif wanted to know how Pakistani journalists felt about the issue. I suspect the decision to go in for the tests had already been taken but the government wanted to know the media reaction. What was surprising was that 90 percent of the journalists were for a commensurate response from Pakistan. There were journalists present who said, "if you do not go ahead with the blasts your authority will wane". There were a group of us from Karachi and Hyderabad who tried to point out the political and economic ramifications of the Bomb and how it would adversely affect Pakistan. At that point the country's foreign exchange reserves were dangerously low, the level of external debt was very high and we thought that this was really going to create a lot of problems. But nobody was willing to listen. In fact, the overwhelming reaction to our opposition was that Karachi people speak like *baniyas*, they cannot get out of the accounting mind set.

Soon thereafter Chagai happened and for many journalists it was a sobering moment. There were many lessons to be learnt from it, particularly on the question of whether the media can defuse tension. It seems to be quite evident that most of the time the media is not driven by noble intentions. More often than not, they are just chasing a story. That is the ground reality. But having said that, I also find that there is a certain change in Pakistan-India coverage that has come about gradually. I would like to believe that it has a lot to do with the interaction and dialogue between Indian and Pakistani journalists meeting over the years at various conferences. I think one of the first of such conferences was in Kathmandu and I remember being very irritated when an Indian journalist asked me whether we are allowed to wear sarees in Pakistan. Sunil Sethi was one of the first journalists who did a detailed cover story on Pakistan and he seemed to dwell at unnecessary length on the meat eating habits of Pakistanis. But I think those were the initial days and as we met over the years things improved.

One change in particular is striking. In the past when it came to domestic issues the Indian media

had very divergent points of view but on foreign policy issues they followed the establishment point of view. On Kashmir, too, the Indian media seemed to disregard the fact that a problem did exist. This went on for some time. But of late one sees much more independent reporting on Kashmir. It is also heartening that there are some individual journalists who are willing to go on record in Pakistani publications with their critical views.

A question that repeatedly comes up during conflict situations is how to cover issues like the Gujarat carnage or the Babri Masjid demolition. Are passions going to be inflamed in Pakistan by covering these issues? I feel that these stories have to be told no matter what. *Newsline's* coverage of Gujarat was by an Indian journalist. We thought about it and wondered if *Newsline* would be accused of inflaming passions. We eventually went along with the story and I feel that we did the right thing. But the reaction is often a cause for concern. *Newsline* did a story on Dawood Ibrahim and it was used by Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh to make a diplomatic claim on Pakistan. In response, Pakistan demanded that 20 people based in India be handed over. Such reactions make us wonder if we are doing the right thing.

There are no definitive rules and a responsible media has to go by its instincts. The media cannot prevent war largely because the government does not much care what the media feels on these issues. But the media can certainly publicise the consequences, for instance, of a nuclear war, by covering the human aspect, the economic aspect, the refugee aspect. But there are so many divergent views, there are different media with differing compulsions and motivations. The Urdu press in Pakistan is far more conservative. The English media is often criticised for being very liberal and pro-India. But such criticism should not be allowed to come in the way of fulfilling responsible objectives.

The media is placed under enormous strain during periods of intense conflict. The capacity for objective reporting can be a casualty when patriotism rises to the surface. People do tend to take sides and the media is not an exception. Besides, access to information is limited. Journalists are not allowed to investigate independently and so they have to rely on the government. But usually, and of late, once the event is over, there is a fair bit of introspection, as happened in the case of the Kargil war. By contrast, in the case of the Bangladesh war, the Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report was released only 30 years later. Because of these changes, there is ground for optimism and hope that the media can mitigate the effects of conflict even if it cannot prevent one. Nevertheless, there are still certain areas where the mindset needs to be changed. I am not certain it is possible in any comprehensive way, but it is still worth trying for.

perception. You are trying to depict an emotion at a certain point of time, to convey a sentiment on the ground. How much should you censor that because you may not make viewers comfortable? These were the kind of arguments that were used in Gujarat too on the grounds that the footage could provoke retaliatory violence.

**Rehana:** Your story on Andrabi and the policeman had a bit on the graves of militants from other countries who had been active in Kashmir. You also talk about how the movement had been hijacked. Don't you think this was diverging from the main trend of your story, namely the human costs? Why did you feel the need to add this particular bit? Was it also part of the balancing?

**Barkha:** I actually felt that the stories of both these women intersected and not just because of their personal tragedies. Both of them, though one represented a separatist voice and the other represented a policeman's point, were uncomfortable with the Kashmir of today. What I was trying to do was to interweave a macro situation.

**Rehana:** It appeared to me that by showing the grave of the militant from Birmingham you were trying to highlight fact that the movement in Kashmir had been hijacked by militants from outside.

**Barkha:** That is my subjective assessment of the situation. I may have failed to interweave the two points. This was a domestic political movement of resistance in 1990 which was transformed radically into an unrecognisable form and shape by 2001. That is what I believe. If the connection did not come through then that is a failure of the narrative.

**Mariana:** Any non-Indian journalist who had taken a camera to the graveyard would not have missed the other graves and maybe would have said that along with these Kashmiris who died in this freedom struggle, even these foreigners have joined and died.

**Barkha:** That particular graveyard is demarcated just for foreign militants. And I am saying unabashedly that what I showed was my sense of what was happening, which is that foreign militants have taken over.

**Mariana:** But they have been fighting alongside the Kashmiris for a long time.

**Barkha:** But they control it at this particular point of time, in fact since 2001.

**Mariana:** I still feel that your showing of only the graves of foreign militants was terribly unfair to the others who have been killed for the same cause, good bad or ugly. You simply sidelined them.

**Mushahid:** You asked some young boys whether they empathised with the foreign militants despite the fact that they were not Kashmiris. One of them said that these men "after all are Muslims" and hence there was no problem of acceptance. That showed the sentiment of the Kashmiri people. I thought that legitimised their cause.

**Mani:** The small boy saying "after all they are Muslims", legitimised their cause in Mushahid's eyes. It delegitimised it in mine.

I think the point that emerges from all this is that you also see what you are looking for. You do not only see what is shown to you. There is no such thing as objectivity. All the facts are out there and you pick the historical fact that you want to pick. That choice itself compromises any kind of hundred percent objectivity. What struck Mushahid was how provocative it is for that Indian peasant at the Kashmir border to say finish-off Pakistan. He did not at all find it provocative that his guns have gone and smashed the poor fellow's house. And so you come to back to what is truth, suggesting Pilate who would not wait for an answer.

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### Cross-border television

**Moderator:** What is the impact of programming aimed at an Indian audience, packaged in New Delhi and actually meant for an Indian audience but also watched in Pakistan?

**Mushahid:** One example of an Indian programme which is watched very widely among the educated people in Pakistan is BBC World's Question Time India, which is produced by NDTV. It often focuses on Kashmir and Pakistan-related issues. It is an instructive programme for the insight it gives into the thinking of the educated Indian middle class. In general, the kind of freedom in India and the diversity of its news reportage is appreciated in Pakistan. There is a certain resonance because they feel that the truth is being told, truth operationally defined as the criticism of the officially certified truth on a particular issue.

As for the impact of the Indian channels, if there is overt propaganda, I do not think it has such a lot of impact in terms of shaping perception or changing views. It is taken with a pinch of salt. For instance, in the case of the hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight in 1999, or the 13 December incident, many Pakistanis felt



*Mushahid Hussain, columnist and former information minister, Islamabad.*

that it was state-managed despite what Indian channels had to say on the matter.

In fact, the question of impact can be asked in the reverse. What is the impact in India of coverage of Pakistan-related issues? All channels had carried reports about 13 December being an ISI operation. That affects the average Indian's perception of Pakistan.

**Barkha:** With the Parliament attack I do not see how it can be otherwise. When Parliament gets attacked, the questions come later, when the chargesheets are filed or they pick up somebody and the case does not quite cut it. But immediately the instinctive response in the newsroom is to draw a connection to Pakistan. It is unfair and I think there are enough people in the Indian media who would argue that militant groups cannot be equated with the Pakistan government. And with something like the Parliament attack or the Srinagar State Assembly attack it is very difficult to get an average viewer to distinguish between a militant group and Pakistan.

**Mariana:** When Musharraf spoke after the Srinagar Assembly blast he condemned it unequivocally. He in fact said that the blast could not be equated with action for a freedom struggle. Was that carried in the Indian media? That was an interesting point because I do not think he has ever made such a strong statement.

**Barkha:** It was carried. The sequence of the bulletin that day was Srinagar Assembly attacked; 40 people dead; Jaish-e-Mohammad claims responsibility in the morning and withdraws it by afternoon; Pakistan President condemns attack. What is the viewer going to take from this? I am just asking the question, not representing the viewer.

**Rahul:** Doordarshan runs a programme, a series called PTV *Ka Sach*, twice or thrice a week. These are two or three minute programmes. They pick up a PTV story, which is usually full of the usual rhetoric and spin, the kind which says that Indian soldiers have committed

this or that atrocity. This programme then picks up factual holes in that story.

**Mariana:** That would suggest that PTV programmes do have an effect on the Indian audience. Was there any comment in the Indian media on the ban imposed on PTV in India and has there been any comment on the ban of Indian TV in Pakistan?

**Mani:** The ban on PTV was criticised. There has been some comment on the ban in Pakistan, but it really did not become a big issue, perhaps because it was not an act in itself. It was part of a package of measures which was supposed to have been taken at a time of high national crisis. And those in India who believe that there was a credible Pakistani threat to India which required a credible response must have been delighted with all this. And people like me who did not believe there was a credible threat from Pakistan, and therefore our response was excessive, wondered why these jokers were harming themselves by doing this.

**Siddharth:** In terms of the impact of programming, there was an interview with Sushma Swaraj on PTV which had quite an impact. It did not convince anybody of India's point of view on Kashmir. But many people in Pakistan told me that the ease with which she handled the questions showed the calibre of the grassroots Indian politician. In Pakistan, they said, after Zulfikar Bhutto and perhaps not even him, nobody would have that kind of skill, since they are not used to dealing with people and questions and getting into the hurly-burly of politics. That seemed to impress people more than the specificity of whether she projected India's case better or not.

**Mani:** To restore internal balance in this story, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, the Pakistani High Commissioner in Delhi, did an outstanding job of carrying conviction with regard to his point of view from public platforms and television. He was very convincing. It shows, I think, that if you are able to put the opposite point of view in reasonable language in a way which carries conviction then the other side at least begins to start listening, even if it is going to be a long, long time before some of them begin to agree. I saw Sushma Swaraj do this in Islamabad, where Ghower Ayub went into how he was at The Doon School at the age of 12 and how he saw all this massacre taking place between Ambala and Amritsar and how at that time he realised what a vicious lot we were and so on. I think she replied by saying that she could not match the story because she was not born at the time of Partition but that her mother told her that their house was opposite the Hyat Khans' and fruit was always coming from there so they believed themselves to be safe. But there was a mob attack and her grandfather was killed and the mother burnt the body in the courtyard, picked up the ashes, and as they

crossed the Ravi into India she dropped the ashes into the river. There were tear jerkers on both sides. Both were I think reflections of a reality but it did enable one to move the argument beyond these episodic instances of past brutality and into a rational form of discussion.

### Television in Pakistan

**Moderator:** Perhaps some idea of the difference of the new private Pakistani satellite channels will indicate the possibilities in this direction: is there any possibility that they will be watched as much in India as Indian private channels are being watched and how much freedom will they get?

**Mushahid:** The new aspect that has been added by the coming of these private channels is the increase in news and current affairs programmes. They may not go against the government but they will accommodate the opposition point of view which is lacking in the state channel. In that sense they will be widely watched.



*Mariana Babar, The News, Islamabad.*

**Mariana:** The News is starting a channel called Geo from August 15. They are aware they may come under pressure from the state but because they hope to beam in from London and Dubai the intensity of the pressure may be minimised. I think such channels will make a difference if they are beamed into India. I think that will balance out what PTV has done.

# Quest for credibility

— **Mushahid Hussain Sayed**

**IN PAKISTAN**-India coverage, both the market and the nation-state converge to an extent in the expectation of the audience. India is not just another foreign country in Pakistan. There is a special aspect to the relationship, and coverage is coloured to the extent that both states largely define each other as adversaries or even 'enemies'. Nationalism and the so-called national interest, what I call the officially certified truth, take precedence. The market represents what consumers want and there is a passion for Pakistan-India news. When Musharraf visited Agra he got the kind of coverage in India that even Clinton did not get. That was because he happened to be the President of Pakistan. It was the same when Vajpayee came to Lahore. The special relationship is therefore an element of the market.

But there are other ways in which the market comes into national considerations. When I was in government, we launched PTV World. An important factor for us was that Zee TV was getting a lot of Pakistani advertisements in the Gulf area. Pakistani advertisements were going to 'the other side'. In that sense the market factor is important. But in a fundamental way, political considerations and the so-called national interest, and not economic factors, take priority.

Since Indian news has a certain allure in Pakistan there is the question of how to counter it, how to make ourselves more credible. That is one of the reasons

private channels have been licensed and this will to some extent redress the television imbalance between the two countries. This is the change that could potentially manifest itself on the airwaves. It has been basically motivated by competition with India, but it is not economic competition. It comes out of the quest for credibility and the need to reach out to the Indian audience. The emergence of private channels will also drive the market forces, but it is useful to remember that trade between India and Pakistan and pure commercial considerations are way behind political factors.

That being the case, some specificities of politics are significant in influencing coverage. It is interesting to note that there is a similarity of pattern in the coverage of the military regimes of Zia ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf. Military regimes elicit a particular kind of coverage, especially in the Indian media. Because they are not legitimate, they tend to reach out more. Musharraf is a very media-friendly person. He loves to talk to the Indian media. Zia, who was carrying so much excess baggage, used to do that too. He had hanged Bhutto and his rule was quite oppressive. But despite that he got reasonably good press in India.

This of course applies only to coverage in relatively normal circumstances. Under conditions of tension, it is a different matter altogether. There have been two near-war situations, Kargil in 1999 and again continuing tension after 13 December. In such situations nationalism, even chauvinism come to the fore. There is

**Rehana:** If the publisher of a newspaper cannot withstand pressure, do you think it will make a difference where the signal is beamed in from?

**Siddharth:** Besides, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority has some power to regulate content if national security demands it. In India everybody now uplinks from within the country. So it is very likely that in Pakistan all these channels will eventually beam up from within the country.

**Mushahid:** All those stations operating out of Pakistan are affected.

**Mani:** There is the politician's point of view on television exposure, which I think we need to understand in the context of state pressure and freedom to operate. In India we tried for decades to prevent even our state channels from reporting the voice of our ministers, or what they had to say. Till the mid-1980s our ministers either read out statements or were seen

little room at such times for so-called independence, objectivity or even liberalism because that is deemed to be unpatriotic. Nation, mindset and market come together in a particularly potent form on such occasions.

Because the nation-state commands the relationship between the two countries, the attitude of the establishment becomes crucial, and in both the countries it is very rigid, conservative and hard-line.

This can be a hindrance to greater media access. At the time of the Lahore Declaration, one of the basic aims was to really open up on the media front. There was a lot of pressure from within Pakistan and India for more media exchange. We considered visa exemptions for accredited journalists cleared by both sides. But the security establishments of the two countries came in the way. They objected on the ground of security risks.

Because of all these reasons, between India and Pakistan many of the conventional rules and protocols of journalism do not seem to apply. The focus often is to look for negative stories. The killing of Muslims in Gujarat would be of interest. Similarly, sectarian terrorism in Pakistan is of great interest in India.

A certain mindset and world view by and large influences media issues. In 1999, when the Indians banned PTV there was a lot of pressure on me as Minister of Information to do likewise with Indian TV. Since the instinct is tit-for-tat, we do not often think things through. Instead of banning Indian TV we decided to counter the Indian point of view by taking columns from the Indian press that were critical of the

cutting ribbons. They were not heard saying whatever they had to tell. Now that these channels have come in there is tremendous competition among politicians to get on the channels. Even if the BJP does not want to come out on the question of Gujarat they feel that they have to accept the invitation of television channels, so that the next time when they want to come on to project some point of view on which they think they have the upper hand, they will still have the credibility to come on. So the debates that are not taking place in Parliament are now taking place on television channels and that will happen increasingly in Pakistan to the point where the politician will feel that it is in his own interest not to censor these channels.

### **Conflict and professionalism**

**Siddharth:** In covering conflict, whether of the Kargil, Kashmir or Gujarat variety, both television and print often forget the basic rules of reporting. The tools of the craft cannot be jettisoned in this casual fashion, no matter what the general climate of opinion or the mood

Indian government and using them against India. That is legitimate propaganda.

The retaliatory mode is pointless. When the Musharrاف regime banned Indian TV, I was one of the first and one of the few to publicly condemn the ban. I said this is not necessary; Pakistani viewers are capable of making their own distinctions without having to be

supervised. I know of many Pakistani households in which children are not allowed to watch Indian TV because of its proclivity to show half-naked girls dancing in a strange manner and that sort of thing. There is no doubt a lot of that in the international media too, but Indian TV is of more consequence because the language is so much more accessible.

On the whole, despite periodic efforts made by the leadership of both countries, I see difficulties ahead in promoting accommodation. There is an appreciable level of interaction but interaction has to be a two-way street. A lot of Pakistanis who went to the Agra summit came back with horror stories. So it is clear that just interaction is not enough. But the conflict between the two countries notwithstanding, I think we

in South Asia have been far more civilised with each other than most Western countries. The coverage of the war on terrorism on American TV has been absolutely offensive. No Indian or Pakistani journalist would stoop to the levels that American journalists have. There is a civilisational sophistication among South Asians and that is a saving grace and a reason for hope.

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in the country is. During Kargil, there was at least one instance when everybody swallowed the government version hook, line and sinker. This was on the alleged torture and mutilation of five Indian soldiers by Pakistani troops. The most basic questions were not asked. When the government argued that it would not release the name of the victims because the sentiments of families concerned would be hurt, it was accepted even though one name was subsequently revealed. The contradiction in the government's position was obvious but nobody had anything to say about it. The media was silent on the fact that the families were not allowed to examine the bodies before they were cremated. The holes in the story were too numerous to be ignored and invoking the most elementary principles of the profession should have taken care of that.

But neither the story nor the violation of professional standards was ever questioned. I know that a leading news magazine in India actually suppressed stories of Indian soldiers mutilating Pakistani soldiers. There have been unconfirmed reports about the editorial decision, taken in the national interest, not to publish photographs of a couple of regiments having pinned the heads of some Pakistani soldiers to a tree. In these matters, the media should have been more discriminat-

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**It seems to be quite evident that most of the time the media is not driven by noble intentions.**

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ing, critical and challenged the official Indian version of the mutilation, because that was very central to the way in which the war was then hyped up and projected.

**Barkha:** In Kargil, many editorial decisions were split-second decisions taken on the run. They may have been impulsive, or may have been taken with a lot of discomfort. Often, what was done arose from genuine confusion about how to present a complex situation. It was a personal struggle for every reporter and not necessarily a sacrificing of the rules of the profession at the altar of nationalism.

**Siddharth:** I am not making a plea for an editorial line that is not nationalistic. In a time of war no paper is likely to write editorials opposing the government's general line on the prosecution of the war. But in terms of news reporting, where possible, it is absolutely crucial that ethical and professional norms be maintained. The basic craft of the profession cannot be compromised. Such norms can be the yardstick for judging the quality of reportage. The fact is that the standards of reporting are not very professional even at the best of times. I do not say that the Americans are very professional. But at least they have a certain fetish

# Censorship, information and understanding

— *Mani Shankar Aiyar*

HAVING BEEN a government servant in the external publicity area where I was given the task of, a) protecting the blameless Indian mind from nasty propaganda, and, b) revealing the naked truth to the other side, I found this whole exercise of trying to either defend our own minds from the other side or inflict our point of view on the other side so naïve. It assumed that you could very easily change what the other person's perception was or get your own perceptions so easily changed. The attempt to use intelligence information or the media for propaganda purposes is doomed to failure, especially in our countries. I was myself very deeply involved in trying to see how we could use radio as an instrument of propaganda before television got so widespread. I had just come back from Pakistan and was Joint Secretary, External Publicity. I was pulled into a group whose idea was to use All India Radio (AIR) to spread our message, and the message was always against Pakistan. In Pakistan I had met a lot of people who

were extremely pleasant. I suggested that the most effective way would be to use AIR to tell the Indians what nice people the Pakistanis were. When the Pakistanis discovered that we are saying nice things about them, at least their hostility towards us would get reduced. Thus, we could more effectively change the situation in the Subcontinent than by attacking them. But the suggestions were obviously dismissed out of hand.

The attempt to use the media as an instrument of state policy in relatively open societies is doomed to failure and it is best for us to advocate against it. If you want to resolve any India-Pakistan issue, the Indians must get to know what the Pakistani point of view is. And reciprocally, the Pakistanis must get to know what is the Indian point of view, so that you get not an India-Pakistan divide but a viewpoint on this side which has some sympathy in Pakistan and a viewpoint on that side which has some sympathy for India. From that a rational solution may come. To put it very simply, the





*Siddharth Varadarajan, Times of India, New Delhi.*

for detail and they are much more methodical in a certain sense. But even their systems fail at a time of war. But even so, during Kosovo and Afghanistan, maybe not immediately, but three or four days after a particular incident occurred and the Pentagon had put its spin you had a credible media giving an on-the-spot account that did not tally with the official claim. There are examples of newspapers and television channels abroad bucking the pressures of nationalism as far as professional reporting is concerned. I am not suggesting that things will not improve in the Indian media the next time around, but what is the basis of the belief that it will?

answer is to have a cricket team where we have five Indians and five Pakistanis and get a Kashmiri to be the captain.

There is precedent of how just the flow of information can change perceptions. In the Vietnam War, which began on a major scale from about 1965, the Americans were absolutely delighted that technology had reached the point where a large number of American cameramen, academics and print media journalists could go into South Vietnam. Special arrangements were made for them to travel along with the heroic army that was going to defeat the reds. The stories came into the US in such a way that initially there was a huge upsurge of support for the American cause in Vietnam. But in time this same lot of media people started telling other bits of the story, which would otherwise never have reached America. And at the end of the day, two schools had developed, for and against fighting the communists in Vietnam. Over a period of time there was such a huge amount of information that had spread that many people had more information than either only their conclusion or their prejudices justified. So they began to see that the other side could hold a completely different opinion. A process of getting this kind of information across, which is usually blocked, will eventually weaken the idea that this is a fight between India and Pakistan and perhaps legitimise the idea that this is really a struggle between the preservation of

**Barkha:** I think we have acknowledged mistakes that were made inadvertently or because there was not enough time to make more considered choices. In that sense we have to distinguish between an incident-triggered conflict and a conflict that spreads itself over time, which is why we can be much more critical of the government on Kashmir even though that is also an issue of national security. We have the time to go there and analyse, assess and report. But Kargil was a limited war and you were just running to keep pace with events. Besides, there is the experience factor. There is that tone that comes into your voice when you see a rocket launcher go off. I think the next time the tone will be different. It will not be the same thing the second time around. Novelty gives way to experience.

### **Television war**

**Om:** Television coverage of Kargil was heavily influenced by nationalism. Unlike print media, in which you could present some amount of criticism, TV was overtly patriotic. I am not denying the need to cover military and government briefings on the war, but news does not have to be confined to just that.

**Barkha:** We must distinguish between a conscious decision to nationalise reportage and subliminal nationalism that creeps in. I also think that a television reporter more often than not will describe what she or

human decencies and their violation. And the violation is done by both sides, as much as the preservations up to a point are by both sides. And that is why I am against this censorship. Any attempt at using the media as an instrument of state policy or preventing the other side from using their media as an instrument of state policy is ultimately self-defeating to the state which propagates or indulges in censorship. We should really try to see whether the media community of the two countries cannot make a greater contribution, simply by dedicating themselves to their respective versions of the truth, being allowed to function as much as possible and being heard on the other side of the border.

What struck me when I was in Pakistan was how much the Pakistanis have to say which makes sense in terms of their perceptions, their realities, their national requirements. Therefore, we need to listen in India. This is where the media could play an important role, since Indian diplomats in Pakistan spend all their time reporting to Delhi what Delhi wants to hear instead of reporting back to Delhi what Delhi does not know. I am sure that applies reciprocally. Which is why I feel that the truth, as seen by Pakistan, should come to India, and the truth as seen by India, should go to Pakistan. Then we may arrive, over a period of time, at a common understanding of what is the truth.

## Roundtable

he has seen as a visual narrative being played out as distinct from making a conscious decision to present unfolding events in a particular manner. The circumstances on the ground will often dictate the course of the narrative. If you compare Kargil and Gujarat, I do not think there was any conscious aim to be nationalistic in the case of the former and critical in the case of the latter. The complexity of the situation must come in when analysing how stories are covered on television.

**Om:** The kind of coverage that you talk about cannot be called nationalist. That is purely a professional act that escapes such adjectives. But, broadly speaking, the perspective of our channels was certainly nationalist in tone.

**Rahul:** We must remember that certain things are determined by the nature of the medium itself. In a war situation, you are free to shoot and talk about only one side of the story. It is physically impossible for you to talk about and show both sides. So you have got to be one-sided. There is no other way. You cannot put yourself mentally on the Pakistani side and try and tell your viewers what is happening there. The dramatic nature of television creates its own impact and the more dramatic the event the greater and deeper its impact.



*Rahul Dev, newscaster, Doordarshan, New Delhi.*

**Rehana:** Would it not have been possible to get footage from the other side?

**Barkha:** When doing instant news that is pretty much impossible, because footage can take as long as four days to reach.

**Mushahid:** During the Kargil war, I was the Information Minister of Pakistan. Our view was completely blocked in India. I requested Zee and Star to air our perspective. Star agreed, Zee refused.

**Siddharth:** A lot of the biases and skewed perceptions emanate from the point of who defines the news event and how the news event gets defined. In Kargil, for in-

stance, even though you had people filing footage from the frontline, that is not where the news event gets defined. The news event was being defined at the military's briefing headquarters. At the military end, news was being defined by the briefing. And at the studio end, news was being defined by what kinds of guests were being invited to air their opinion. These were consciously defined. The dispatches from the field are not necessarily consciously biased. But at the studio level, that may not be entirely true.

**Barkha:** My belief is that a second war will be covered very differently. It was partly because this was the first war that was being covered by television. One of the reasons why television failed in Kargil is that TV is still a very young medium in India and it does not really have very senior reporters. Though there was broadly no difference between the tone and tenor of reportage in print and television during the Kargil operations, subsequently newspapers did more critical, investigative stories on what had gone wrong. Newspapers did those stories because the realm of investigative reportage in India still belongs to print. Television is still functioning in the breaking news format more than in in-depth reportage.

### Media and the nukes

**Sidharth:** Newspapers in India were extremely provocative immediately after India tested at Pokhran. It almost seemed like they were keen to make sure that Pakistan tested. K Subramaniam, the most hawkish columnist in India, for instance, was constantly making suggestions that Pakistan did not have the Bomb and even if it did, it would not dare to test. Would that have had an effect on Pakistan's eventual decision to test?

**Mushahid:** I think the decision to go nuclear was Advani's statement on Kashmir on 17 May 1998. We were in Almaty for a summit of the ECOA when the Pokhran tests took place. This was on 11 May. We had gone sightseeing in the mountains, and when we came back we got news that India had tested. It was quite a shock for us. My view was that we should wait and see what the West comes up with, whether India would be penalised or not, and whether we were given inducements or not. We were disappointed on both counts. The Indian attitude was very haughty and arrogant. Advani's statement that the geo-strategic realities had changed and Pakistan must adjust accordingly and change its Kashmir policy was particularly irksome. Then there was the summit of the European Union which did not come out with any kind of measures. Bill Clinton subsequently made an offer to us of about 5 billion dollars on the fourth telephone call to Nawaz Sharif. By that time we had already taken the decision to go through with the tests. But we did want to have consultations. That is why the journalists were called, and as it turned out they were of course very hawkish.

We wanted an honest debate and on television we had both voices, those who wanted the tests and those who did not want the tests. But the majority were against the 'peacenik' line. In my view, we took the right decision because the West did not offer us very much and the Indian attitude was insufferable. At the Lahore Declaration summit I asked a very senior Indian official what the reaction in officialdom was and I was astounded by what I heard. When the news of the Pakistan tests came, Prime Minister Vajpayee turned pale, cancelled the session of Parliament and called an emergency meeting. They were in a state of absolute shock. The official informed me that the official Indian belief was that Pakistan did not have the bomb, and that even if we had it we would not have the guts to test because the Americans would not let us. But it is not the case that we were provoked into it by the media. There were various considerations.

### **Responsible journalism**

**Mani:** In times of conflict, passions get inflamed in spite of the press. The media comes into the picture because passions have been inflamed. The job of the moment is to tell it as it is seen. There is no reason to feel guilty that it may be contributing to aggravating a tense situation. The media might aggravate the situation at the margin but it is never the cause of the situation.

**Kalpna:** That assessment is difficult to agree with if we consider the Gujarat case. Some of us did a media monitoring exercise of the Gujarat coverage in the Bombay papers – English, Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati. When Godhra happened, Gujarati newspapers carried exaggerated, unverified reports about attacks on Hindu women. Three days later they had small correction saying that these reports were not based on facts. This was done deliberately. Therefore to say that the media cannot aggravate the situation in times of internal or external tension is not quite correct. I think the important point is, regardless of what the mainstream newspapers do, the impact of regional papers that have set out to inflame the situation is huge.

Broadly, the papers that do not believe in any norms at all have very wide circulations and the biggest reach, and shape mindsets even if they do not determine policy. They shape mindsets which could ultimately feed into policy because it feeds into politics. For this reason, it is important for the mainstream media to evolve some norm of responsible journalism.

**Siddharth:** I think it is far easier for newspapers and channels to inflame a situation that has been created than it is for them to douse the flames. In other words, once Gujarat has started you can do your coverage in such a way that Gujarat drags on and gets worse. Certainly, the Gujarati press did inflame passions. However, I would also like to believe that the English media

and the electronic media helped limit the death toll in Gujarat. That is an unverifiable conjecture.

In moments of conflict between India and Pakistan, even a responsible and critical media may not noticeably alter the situation. At critical moments, the situation commands the news more than a responsible editorial stand can alter the circumstances, because the editorial stand of a paper has a very limited impact in the face of contrary news that cannot go unreported. The first week after Pokhran the *TOI* took a stand critical of the tests. But that was on the editorial page. The front page continued to have news of leaders of all political parties hailing the event, which automatically served to create the feeling of a national consensus in favour of the bomb. Responsible and professional journalism ended up reinforcing the view rather than eroding it. As individuals, we may be able to provide space to the dissenting view, but the fact of the matter is that in India-Pakistan affairs the tone is always set by the official line. And a bad situation is made worse when the media does not challenge the official line enough. But all too often, when reporting an official claim every rule of the craft that is usually applied for other news is jettisoned.

An official claim is reported as news, instead of attributing it as a claim. And this is very evident for instance in reports that are filed on the basis of the daily press briefings of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Journalists who attend these and ask difficult questions stick out like sore thumbs. Often these briefings result in hilarious incidents that ought to undermine the credibility of the official line, but do not seem to. I can recount an instance of a particularly absurd exchange at one such briefing. The MEA plants questions at these conferences and in this case it wanted to give a reaction to some new statement by the EU on Gujarat. Since it felt that making a *suo mottu* statement on it would be too much of a slap in the face of the EU, the spokesperson had primed a journalist to ask her a question on the ministry's reaction to the EU statement. Unfortunately for the ministry, this chap forgot the question. As the press conference proceeded and there was no reaction from him, the spokesperson started prodding him in rather an obvious way about some question he had posed to her before the briefing began. This incident is an illustration of the attitude of government officials, that journalists can be used for planting stories. And this attitude would not have come up in the first place if the press had not at various points given the impression that it could be used in this manner. Credibility of the media can be restored only when journalists practice their craft as they should. Otherwise, I agree that the responsible media matters only at the margins, unlike irresponsible journalism, which seems to matter much more. ▽

## The superficial oneness of satellite television

SATELLITE TELEVISION rules our lives in a way we could not have imagined just half a decade ago. In the far corners of South Asia, populations are being carried away by a societal tidal wave whose power and the transitions it introduces every passing day are not being studied and understood. Societies are being washed by broad cultural brush strokes, in a manner that is reminiscent of what the Hindi film did to large parts of South Asia over the second half of the twentieth century. Only, this new intrusion is in the living room, where it holds the youth in total command. While not every aspect of this intervention is negative, there is surely a need to raise a Subcontinent-wide alert so that the people's interface with satellite television is better charted, and not willy-nilly defined by the market. For that is how it is at present.

To speak of the northern half of South Asia, there is an incongruous mismatch – the reach of Hindi satellite television does not consider political boundaries, and the programmes are watched in Sindh, Gujarat, Bihar, Nepal, Assam and Bangladesh alike.\* And yet, the programme content is aimed squarely at the Indian middle-class market and audience. This is not only because the powerful private satellite channels are Indian-owned, and up-linked from India, but even more importantly, because the programme content and slant is dictated by advertising. This is where the mismatch is most decisive. Because of the separation of markets by national boundaries, the advertisers on Indian satellite television cannot hope to sell their goods or services in, say, Pakistan or Bangladesh. Hence, they are interested in only India and Indians, which is what defines the programmes they carry.

The cultural content of the programming on generic

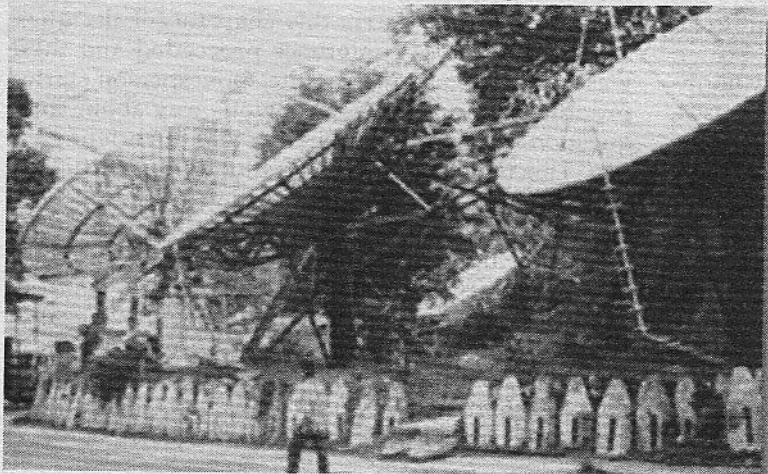


*Ringleaders of the North India satellite circus*

Hindi and Indian/English satellite television is problematic because it is aimed at the English- and Hindi-speaking consuming classes. Thus, there is spatial as well as class dissonance. Everything, from the context and use of the Hindi language in soaps, to the nuances in the presentation of news, to the inflections of news anchors, is dictated by this need to serve up to the (relatively) upper echelons of a particular nationality (Indian). It is in news and current affairs that the dangers are most immediate, particularly when the subject is geopolitical.

The challenge for satellite television news and current affairs programming comes from its Subcontinent-wide reach. Ideally, it would need to address Kolkata as much as Kathmandu but it is constrained by its location, geographical and otherwise, in the one city of the one country. It is an impossible task to try and be relevant to as vast a region and market as the Ganga plains in an evening news bulletin that is broadcast again the next morning. But that is the format of much television programming today. Forget ever trying to reach the larger population that lives beyond the Ganga plains, along the Indus and Brahmaputra, up beyond the Nepal Tarai and across the other national boundaries; these things are not even considered.

Such is the pull of the Indian market that even international channels have little interest in considering themselves truly 'regional'. Thus, you will have BBC World tailoring its programming to suit India's urban upper classes – fashion, interior design, automobile, and quiz programmes beamed down exclusively for this category. The extent to which the Indian market dictates content could be seen in what the BBC channel thought fit to broadcast in February and March 2002. At



*Delhi's dishes: A truly trans-national enterprise*

a time when India-Pakistan tension was at its peak and the two armies were massed at the border (as they are today) in hair-trigger readiness for war, the BBC was busy showing a documentary serial titled 'Commando'. This saccharine glorification of the Indian military's commando training programme could be considered in as bad taste as some of the downright insulting language carried in anti-Pakistan spots broadcast on, say, the B4U channel. Do the producers – and the handful of media critics in India – even consider what reaction is evoking across the Wagah-Atari border?



One could say positive things about satellite television, of course. For example, that it introduces a shared sensibility and brings people together. International satellite channels provide introduction and exposure to the English language, and programming such as that of Discovery or National Geographic, which would otherwise be out of reach. They also introduce advanced videography techniques that educate the South Asian public on cinematic grammar. Further, the spread of Hindi, first through cinema and now television, allows diverse linguistic populations to talk to each other across the table – have you noticed that most South Asians meeting around the table (except the Maldivian and the Sri Lankan) can now understand each other because they all now have a smattering of Hindi.

On balance, however, this spread of one-language television across the face of northern South Asia – and the absence of alternatives – is unwelcome. What is forfeited in the loss in cultural diversity across the Indus-Ganga-Brahmaputra plains is far more serious than that which is gained by the superficial oneness that satellite television does introduce. Moreover, at present, this superficial oneness is mostly on behalf of the centralised Indian State, and represents the upper and upper-middle classes of the Hindi heartland.

There is only one way to overcome this upper and upper-middle class Indian, Hindi-centric market monopoly of the satellite airwaves – accelerate the process through which diversity is introduced and make it possible for a hundred channels to bloom. Simply put, there must be more voices, more stations, more languages, and more of what in India are called "regional broadcasters". This diversity must be encouraged not only so there may be more choices across national boundaries but, as significantly, within countries. Even Bangladesh's surface demographic homogeneity hides so much diversity. What is required is a variety of channels addressing different mixes of audiences – rural-urban, regional, by dialect, by economic category, and so on.

The ushering of such diversity in stations, channels and voices is of course easier said than done, and it will not happen unless the market – particularly the advertising industry – finds such variety to be in the interest

of delivering profits. It is important to lobby for public television for all of South Asia, and individually for the various parts of South Asia, but that is a separate battle to be taken up another time. For the time being, because of the urgency, it is commercial television that needs to be challenged. It has to convert itself into a media for the people of all South Asia rather than remain the monopoly of the market leaders of India.

Bringing about such change will require real activism from those who feel the need to shift satellite media from its present-day axis. These would be activists who understand the dangers of the 'superficial oneness' in identity and spirit that satellite television is forcing on all of us, and who want to change the givens. These would be activists could work to make sure that the diversity of satellite channels tries to reflect the diversity of peoples on terra firma. South Asia and South Asians deserve no less, but there are as yet too few people interested in forcing such change.

—Chhetria Patrakar

\* Note: Indian satellite television has been officially banned in Pakistan for the moment, though large parts still receive it.

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# Insurgents and Innocents

The soldiers' fight against the Maoists since the Nepali Emergency was put in place six months ago has delivered an unacceptable volume of human 'collateral damage'. The civilian government must maintain control over the Royal Nepalese Army as it goes about trying to purge the Nepali hills of Comrade Prachanda's followers.

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The hills of Nepal are alive with the sound of gunfire. While the last few years have seen mainly the Maoists on the offensive, since end-November 2001, with the deployment of the Royal Nepalese Army, there has been heavy combat between government forces and the insurgents. With the politicians all having fled the field to cower in district headquarters, roadhead towns or Kathmandu Valley, it is the peasantry that is caught in the crossfire and left vulnerable between ruthless insurgents and soldiers just learning to fight. So far, the level of abuse – summary killings, disappearances, torture – is only a matter of conjecture because no one is monitoring events on the ground. Civil society as a whole, and journalists and human rights groups in particular, have turned timid after the State of Emergency was imposed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on 26 November 2001. There is no one looking out for the people when the army is out, whereas, earlier, there was quite a lot of watchdogging over the police.

The villagers of Nepal find themselves trapped between the demands of the insurgents and the soldiers'

imputations. A recent story published in a Nepali language fortnightly by the social critic Khagendra Sangraula sums up the situation – he tells of a man who hides from the Maoists, only to be forcibly conscripted. He escapes the Maoists' ranks, and returns home to be confronted and killed by the soldiers. While fictional, Sangraula's story was a composite based on information from the Maoist heartland district of Salyan, and captures the terrifying reality of a rural populace caught in a jam.

Simple peasantry living in subsistence conditions is being asked to provide food, shelter and recruits to an unflinchingly hard-headed insurgency that is feeling the pressure of stepped-up military activity. Then there are the soldiers, fighting for the first time in quintessential guerilla territory, with poor equipment and inadequate logistical support, and little in the form of intelligence to distinguish between innocents and enemy.

Nepal entered this blind alley in 1996, when far-left politicians who felt excluded in parliamentary democracy broke with the system and initiated an uprising. Without doubt, it was the civilian police that gave the initial momentum to the Maoist war when, following violent activities by the Maoists just beginning their underground activities, disgruntled policemen sent on "kalapani duty" to the western districts of Jajarkot, Rolpa, Rukum and Salyan went on a rampage. The state terror in these districts provoked a reaction in which were born the hardcore Maoists who today form the backbone of the 'revolution'.

The cauldron of disaffection among youth all over the country that was lit in the west by dark Maoist romanticism soon set the whole country aflame. Visions of storming Kathmandu and wresting state power offer momentum to the insurgent rank and file, who unleashed their own brand of terror against the police as well as district and village-level politicians opposed to them. The violence meted out by the followers of Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka Comrade Prachanda) in these far corners soon outstripped that of the policemen, who have been on the run since late 1999 and so fearful of the retaliatory rebels that they have dared not exhibit any bluster. The Maoists' molestation extended to the full gamut of the possible, from blackmail, extortion and looting to summary executions, torture, maiming and use of civilians and child soldiers in combat. Their original promise of social reform lies in tatters as hooliganism has overcome the movement, with commissars delivering gruesome punishment to local politicians, teachers and others. This is Pol Pot terrain in the making, and no amount of revolutionary gloss and manipulative rhetoric can hide the reality of the socio-economic dead-end that would be the Nepali Maobaadi's gift to the nation.

No doubt, the Maobaadi of Nepal engage in anti-humanitarian excess, but they are renegades, irresponsible and unaccountable. The government and its

institutions must have a higher purpose and deeper responsibility. Nepal is still a functioning democracy. The security forces, answerable to the civilian government, must respect the rule of law and due process even in the most extreme of circumstances. But since the imposition of the state of emergency, the civilian government of Prime Minister Deuba has abdicated all responsibility for bringing the Maoists to heel to the security forces, and apparently does not hold them to a high standard.

Because so little investigation or documentation is being carried out, there is no comprehensive pool of data to confirm the level of human rights abuse in the hills and valleys. There is, however, enough evidence to indicate that the situation is dire. The people of the Maoist-affected hills, historically backward and deprived of the socio-economic advances that the rest of the country enjoyed in the last half-century of development, are those who have found themselves in the crosshairs. As perhaps happened more than two centuries ago during the expansionary wars of the House of Gorkha, subsistence farmers are burdened not only economically, but also politically, having to support one side or the other and fend off accusations of being quislings and collaborators.

### Disappeared watchdogs

There is little protection for the people, because the non-governmental groups professing to be engaged in human rights work went soft during the decade following the restoration of democracy. After having been gifted democracy in 1990 by King Birendra with minimal activism, the human rights community reaped a bonanza of foreign aid meant to support pluralism in Nepal. However, the donors and recipients alike tuned off civil and political rights and preferred to invest their time and resources on 'human rights' defined indistinctly. The attention shifted to child rights, gender rights, dalit rights, indigenous people's rights, environmental rights, refugee rights, water rights... In this flood, the right to life and liberty was relegated to the background, and the attention of the NGOs got diverted to such an extent that now when the people are bleeding there are very few to take up their cause.

The few who remained focussed on "human rights" specifically defined, who might have mediated between the people, the Maoists and the state, were sullied by their ideological bearings, which made them look less than disinterested. Many from the human rights community had compromised themselves earlier before the public's eye by criticising everything the government did and clearly regarding the Maoists as true 'revolutionaries'. Given their anti-government stance, these activists should have really been protesting once it became clear soon after the emergency was imposed that the human rights situation was deteriorating. But they kept silent, and remain so today. Additionally, while it had been clear for some years that the reluctant

army brass would ultimately be forced to enter the fray in a fight that was originally between the Maoists and the police, the human rights community did not do enough to prepare themselves and the country for the challenges that would crop up once soldiers were deployed. Says Prakash Jwala, journalist and Salyan's member of parliament till its dissolution in 22 May 2002, "The activists should have shown some courage, but they did not even put up a weak front."

Together with the human rights activists, the press too has been found wanting in its watchdog role. At the time the emergency was announced, much of the print media had already been compromised. It had for long pandered to the Maoist insurgency by providing breathless coverage of its activities in the field. This was accompanied by an unwillingness to challenge the insurgents' deeper agenda of destroying the state structure. This attitude did an about-turn when with the clamping down of the state of emergency, publishers and editors vowed to support the government's fight against the rebels. Overnight, 'Maoists' turned into 'terrorists' in the news columns, only because the government now defined them as such. Thus compromised at their topmost levels, most of the newspapers were also unwilling to test the limits of the government's restrictions on press freedom.

Apart from media and human rights organisations, other institutions of society too are not up to the task of providing an overview. The courts have been made irrelevant by the state of emergency because the rights contained in the constitution (to freedom of expression, assembly and movement, information, property, privacy and constitutional remedy and against preventive detention) have all been suspended. The civilian bureaucracy at the centre and in the districts in any case exercises little control over the security forces. Parliament was suspended by Prime Minister Deuba in late May 2002 – the fallout of the ruling Congress Party wrangle related to the third extension of the state of emergency, reflecting an intra-party power struggle between Deuba and the party president, former prime minister, Girija Prasad Koirala. As a result the institution of last recourse in a democracy has itself disappeared.

"We have not been able to visit the major areas of confrontation between the military and the Maobaadi," says Bhola Mahat, who runs the human rights group INSEC's field office in Nepalganj. "Special efforts are needed in Kathmandu to persuade the army to allow human rights groups to go in." But groups in the capital are not losing much sleep over the issue – the most one particular group did was to seek support from a foreign

embassy to fly into the affected areas in a helicopter, but even this was not entertained.

## The security forces

The security forces of Nepal today are made up of the Nepal Police, the newly raised Armed Police Force (APF) and the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA). The civilian police have been on the run for at least three years, during which time they have served as sacrificial offerings to the Maoists as 'representatives' of the national establishment. The police force is today a weak player; most of its personnel have been withdrawn from posts in rural areas and are now concentrated in district headquarters and the larger towns. There is no doubt that the policemen will seek extreme revenge once the Maoists are on the run – and that in itself will be a matter of grave human rights concern when the time comes – but for the moment there is little fear of excess from this unmotivated force, the only objective of its members being to live to see another day.

The Armed Police Force was raised in January 2001 as a para-military unit, by a government that realised that the non-combatant Nepal Police were not up to the task of fighting insurgency. While the APF will ultimately have the numbers, weaponry and training to credibly counter the guerrillas, it is today an incipient force that will take a few more years to mature.

It was the debacle at Dang in November 2001, when the Maoists broke away from talks with Deuba's government and attacked and decimated an army garrison, that finally forced the generals to enter the fray. It

is the Royal Nepalese Army, with its logistics, automatic weapons, heavy ordnance and helicopter support that is now battling the rebels. However, the military did not do so before it got the 'cover' of emergency which would allow the soldiers to fight without shackles and accountability.

The soldiers, engaging for the first time in active warfare, find themselves pitted against battle-hardened Maoists who use all means fair and foul. While the RNA is a force of 50,000, various duties and obligations including guarding government installations, national parks, the royal palace, as well as serving in United Nations peacekeeping operations, leave a force of perhaps no more than 20,000 to directly engage with the rebels. Even though the primary focus of the Nepali military's training over the years has been to fight a reactive guerrilla war against an invading army (which could presumably be either Indian or Chinese), against the Maoists it has thus far been a largely sedentary force that only responds to attacks.



*Deuba and his shadow.*





MINI BALRACHARVA

The army is today spread out thinly over an impossibly large and complex mountainscape that is "designed for guerilla action", according to one insurgency expert. Low budgetary allocation from successive civilian governments over the last decade has prevented the army from upgrading its equipment and conducting training exercises. In addition, the army began its battle with the Maobaadi with practically no intelligence, having done nothing to build up its own information sources during six years of the 'people's war'. This is a weakness the soldiers have tried to overcome by extracting information from captured insurgents.

The army has kept a deliberate distance from the politicians during the 12 years of democracy, and the royal palace has helped maintain this separation for its own purposes. This lack of a relationship is all the more critical today, when the soldiers are in charge of the Maoist war and moves through the populated hinterland. The government has abdicated its own responsibilities of control and oversight, and there is no institution or individual holding the soldiers to any standard. Respect for humanitarian principles during the fighting is something that is now completely dependent on the uprightness and professionalism of individual officers in the field. A senior officer says that army training at Kharipati and Tokha training centres includes Red Cross courses on humanitarian principles and law, but he also admits that the entire six months of engagement with the Maoists has not seen one instance of a soldier facing reprimand for excesses committed. For being the commander-in-chief of a force that is out among the people, Gen Prajwalla Shumshere Rana has not made a single statement that indicates sensitivity towards the human rights of the people – his only public pronouncement consisted of a harangue against the political parties.

Prime Minister Deuba, as the head of government as well as defence minister, has not shown great enthusiasm to guide the generals. While he is vehement in expressing outrage at the "betrayal" of his effort by Maoists since he had gone the extra mile to talk to them upon taking up office last year, he seems unconcerned about the niceties of a respect for human rights in the larger battle that he has to fight as head of government. As someone who spent nine years in prison fighting the Panchayat system and who has himself suffered torture, it can be presumed that the prime minister has no stomach for state terror. However, he has done little to hold the military to humanitarian norms. It was only in an interview to *The Kathmandu Post* on 29 May 2002 that he responded to allegations by Amnesty International saying, "If we find that there are deliberate human rights abuses by the security personnel, we will take action against them after proper investigation." Given the tussle he is currently engaged in with Koirala, it is not possible to read Deuba's statement as anything more than an expression of intent by an otherwise



*King Gyanendra, Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the RNA.*

preoccupied prime minister.

The lack of sensitivity of Deuba's government to the finer issues of human rights was laid bare when a few weeks ago it placed a price on the heads of Maoist leaders caught "dead or alive" – NRs 50 lakhs for the top leaders, NRs 25 lakhs for the field commanders, and so on down the line. The fact that apart from a few murmurs of protest, the national human rights community did not vocally protest against such an outrageous pronouncement – in a country where the death penalty is actually illegal – shows both an exasperation with the Maoists as well as an ambivalence towards principles of civilised governance. One minister, in fact, announced that people seeking the bounty could bring the head of a Maoist in a bag, and take the cash back in the same bag.

### **Levels of sympathy**

When the RNA was fielded a little over six months ago, the government did three things simultaneously – it declared a nation-wide state of emergency, promulgated a Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Control and Punishment) Ordinance, which granted wide powers to arrest people involved in 'terrorist' activities, and declared the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) a "terrorist organisation". All these were what the army wanted in order to be able to engage the Maoists without the shackles of accountability.

During the first three months of the emergency, the average death toll of insurgents killed, as announced

by the government, averaged about five a day. After the state of emergency was renewed for the first time in February, the deaths of alleged insurgents in defence ministry press releases have averaged 10 a day. The casualties during the first six months of the Emergency culled from official sources totals 2850 'Maoists', 335 policemen, 148 soldiers and 194 'civilians'. Who really are the 'Maoist' dead? How much terror in the hills do these deaths represent? In short, what is the level of human security for the villagers in the hills of Nepal at a time when the army is out patrolling the terraces even while the Maoist have free range of large parts?

In the beginning, the soldiers were given the benefit of doubt from most quarters, and no one questioned the high calibre of the officer corps, whose presence it was believed would prevent excesses to a large extent. But, as the army's engagement intensified and the soldiers began to suffer casualties in attacks by hardened Maoist cadre, the care with which civilians were treated seems to have decreased. Not-for-attribution discussions with army officers in the field, interviews with district and national-level politicians, talking with the odd human rights activist who has actually visited vulnerable areas, and with *mofussil* journalists close to the action, present a bleak scenario as far as the situation of the hapless peasantry is concerned. The picture that emerges is one of grievous and regular excesses by an army forced to battle a harsh insurgency.

In the course of reporting this article, human rights activists, international monitors, as well as journalists and politicians were asked a question: from all the information that they have access to, would they say that the human rights situation in Nepal now is: a) very bad, b) not as bad as might have been expected, and c) can't say. All answered 'a'.

"There are many grave instances of misbehaviour towards the people by the security forces," says Mandira Sharma, a member of the group Advocacy Forum, who has visited the Maoist heartland in western Nepal since the emergency was put in place and the army activated. "There is a state of terror in the villages, but the news is not coming out. There is little pressure on the army to improve its record. Hundreds have been held incommunicado, not receiving even the right to justice which is available under the emergency."

Such observations extend beyond the human rights community. Sangeeta Lama, a journalist who has been monitoring media reports during the emergency period for the Khoj Patrakarita Kendra (Centre for Investigative Journalism) in Lalitpur, says that even with the subdued coverage, there is substantial evidence to prove that large-scale human rights abuse is the order of the day. "Often the stories are kept away from the front page, and the papers try to play it down so that the authorities do not crack down on them, but there is credible reportage pointing to lack of accountability among the soldiers."

Sushil Pyakurel is one of the four members of the

National Human Rights Commission set up by the government in June 2001, an institution with little manpower and resources but which is nevertheless evolving as a repository for complaints against authority. Circumspect because of his public position, Pyakurel says, "The situation is not good, and we in the human rights community have not been adequately on guard to prevent abuse."

"I fear there is a high level of abuse", says a diplomat who monitors human rights for a Western embassy in Kathmandu. "There is no rule of law, and civil society has ceased to function. You arrest reasonably prominent people in Kathmandu and the rest shut up. In the villages, the Chief District Officer just has to tell people to shut up and they will. Under such circumstances, the conditions are ripe for maltreatment by the security forces."

Referring to the Royal Nepalese Army, the same diplomat says, "The RNA was originally clean because it had never seen action. But once the rot sets in and mistakes begin to get covered up, the RNA will lose its lustre. It must learn to discipline itself in the new conditions. Unsystematic mistakes should never be allowed to become systemic."

Meanwhile, one retired army officer is convinced that fielding the RNA has been a "set-up", with the political parties sending in the soldiers to do the dirty job of "finishing off" the Maoists. Says the retired officer, "The RNA had better be careful, for the political parties will try to come out of it unblemished, putting all the blame on the soldiers. It is a trap, and the only way to respond is by ferreting out the real Maoists, otherwise it will lose the respect of the people in the long run."

Speaking of sympathy, there is a lot of it for the soldiers among the powerful diplomatic community in Kathmandu, particularly among those who have been helicoptered out and have seen the conditions in the field. Says one European diplomat, "Here is a country that is Serbia times twenty, readymade for insurgencies. And you ask the soldiers to fight on the cheap with inadequate and low-grade equipment, whether in gunnery, clothing, diet, communications or transport. Under such circumstance, of course the possibility of gross abuse increases. A well-equipped army fights more humanely."

Adds the diplomat, "The Maoist strategy of attacking all over the country has forced the RNA to spread itself thin. The army cannot then spare officers everywhere, which means that trigger-happy foot-soldiers are patrolling the trails on their own, and they are more liable to take drastic action."

Hari Roka, a leftist activist from Khotang district in the east of Nepal, says that while there is no doubt about the many problems confronting the soldiers, the impunity with which they are conducting their operations is unconscionable. "Many who are dying cannot be considered Maoists even in the wildest imagination. They are political activists of the main-

stream parties," says Roka, adding, "But no one is protesting because the activists have all abandoned their *saahas* (courage)."

In December 2001, a delegation from the main opposition group Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) met with Prime Minister Deuba to alert him that the security forces had misused their emergency powers in Dang, Dolakha, Ramechhap, Makwanpur, Rolpa, Sankhuwasabha and Solukhumbu districts. People visiting health posts for treatment, returning from the market, or simply participating in community festivals or *pujas*, had been targeted by the security forces, they said. Unfortunately, the expressions of concern – either by political parties, activists, community groups, or the diplomatic and aid community – have been sporadic and reflect the ambivalence they all share towards a group as renegade as the Maoists are increasingly proving to be.

### Ways of the soldier

The level of violence and lack of accountability exhibited by the army is a direct reaction to the savagery of the rebels when they have attacked police posts and army garrisons. The RNA and the police both have an unstated take-no-prisoners policy as far as 'hardcore Maoists' are concerned. The officers in both forces are dismissive of the principles of war that demand the humane treatment of combatants, maintaining that this is a response to "Nepali reality", excused by the brutality exhibited by the Maoists when they have attacked police and army posts. Red Cross instructors who have conducted courses with the soldiers say they find it a challenge to explain why the RNA cannot behave like the Maoists.

Using the letters of the Nepali alphabet, a police inspector serving in Dang Valley, the staging ground in west Nepal for the security forces, says, "We just don't keep those who are in the '*ka*' and '*kha*' senior categories, those Maoists in the central or regional command. We just kill them. But we tend to be more lenient towards those at the district level and even more so at the village or ward levels. But do not expect us to show mercy towards the hardcore when we know they are out to kill us."

The fact that the daily ministry of defence news bulletins refer only to dead insurgents, and rarely to the "captured wounded", is also proof enough that few prisoners are being taken. These killings often take place during staged encounters, and there are many incidents reported where individuals rounded up from a village one day are said to have been killed in an 'encounter' in another village the next day. According to one calculation, in the half-year of the emergency the government has announced the capture of only 60 wounded Maoists during action by security forces and the



Maoist rebels amidst the public in Jajarkot district, western Nepal.

death of nearly 3000 'Maoists'.

"The soldier is taught to engage the enemy differently, in a way that is bound to raise the number of innocent deaths", says a police officer in Dang. "As policemen, we have to live in the community and so we have to be selective even when we shoot to kill. The soldiers, on the other hand, will shoot first and ask questions later." Whereas a policeman may flee or surrender – particularly under today's conditions – soldiers socialised into a buddy system are more likely to become aggressive when one of their own gets killed or wounded. Trained to fight the invader, says the police officer, the soldiers shoot across the terrain with their automatic weaponry, whereas Nepal's policemen cannot do as much harm even if they want to, with their World War II vintage single-fire rifles.

An officer who has seen action in the western districts disagrees with this assessment: "In our case, the major or colonel himself leads his men, whereas among the police you rarely find an inspector in vulnerable posts in the field. The higher motivation of the officers, from the lieutenant level up and their broader worldview means that they exhibit more responsibility in the field. The automatic weaponry makes the soldiers more confident, so there is less possibility of mistaken deaths."

### The killing of innocents

While the effectiveness of the army against the Maoists is already being demonstrated, the military man's assurances are not borne out at all times in the field where innocent villagers and Maoist 'supporters' are being killed in large numbers together with the militants. The critical problem is the difficulty of distinguishing between 'villager', 'left supporter', 'Maoist supporter' and 'Maoist'.

All the army officers interviewed suggested that the reporter not be taken in by the rhetoric of Nepal's left

politicians in particular, and that, barring a few exceptions, those killed by the soldiers are all Maoists. Said one soldier based in Surkhet Valley in the west, echoing the sarcasm of his fellow officers, "They are all innocent villagers or UML supporters by day and Maoists by night." The fact is, it is difficult to distinguish between villagers who may have by force of circumstance become Maoist supporters, and who are actual Maoist cadre. There is also an understanding among many that Maoist supporters are fair game, even if they do not carry a gun, for the sustenance they provide the cadre.

Many villagers who are being killed for being Maoists are peasants with no ideological grounding to be class warriors, roped in as supporters through coercion and blackmail. Others have turned to the Maoists only because the state – in the form of the administration and police – has been absent for so long from their villages that they have had no choice but to turn to the Maoists. Many village headmen have been unilaterally declared heads of the "people's government" at the village level by the rebel leadership in the districts. These are all considered Maoists by default, individuals who do not by any stretch of the imagination deserve to die at the hands of the security forces. Says Hari Roka, the left activist, "Are we to call all villagers 'Maoists' because they give support to the rebels in the total absence of the government in their areas for years on end? Just because a poor villager responds to a plain-clothes soldier's 'lal salaam' greeting with a 'lal salaam' of his own, does that justify taking him in for torture and abuse?" Howsoever difficult it may be, the army is duty-bound to make the distinction between who is a fighter and who is not, says Roka.

While the loose understanding of 'Maobaadi' leading to death and abuse is a matter of major concern, what also must get attention are the numerous incidents where innocent villagers have been killed by security forces in the pursuit of the real Maobaadi fighters. These instances (perpetrated by the army as well as the police) add up to a regular, if not as yet systematic, killing of innocents, and there are just too many of these instances for them to be brushed aside as exceptional incidents.

- **30 November 2001** In Khumel village of Rolpa, a group of peasants was doing communal puja to the deity Baraha when some Maoists nearby shot at an army helicopter flying overhead. The army helicopter, one of those which have attached machine guns to the fuselage, swooped down and opened fire on the villagers, killing six, including a child and two elderly.
- **24 February 2002** At Kotwara village in Kalikot, more than 34 labourers working at an airport site were pulled out of their dwellings and shot for being Maoists. Many of them were from the Tamang and Chepang communities, brought west from Dhading

district by a labour contractor.

- **27 April 2002** At Chieuri Danda village in Khotang district, a group of four Maoists were fleeing an army platoon. Two slid into the jungle, while two joined a group of Rais fishing on the Sapsu River. Everyone put their hands up in the air, but the guns opened on all of them. All six present died, including the two Maoists. Among the dead were the supporters of the Nepali Congress and the UML. "What is the sense of this anti-Maoist action when only one in four killed are Maoists?" asks a politician from Khotang. "Why do we have to be part of a country called Nepal, if this is the kind of atrocity we have to suffer?"
- **1 May 2002** In an incident reported both by Scott Baldauf of *The Christian Science Monitor* and Gunaraj Luitel of *Kantipur* daily, a group of soldiers and policemen arrived at the village of Thulo Sirubari, Sindhupalchowk district dressed as Maoists. They called out with the Maoist greeting of "Lal salaam, comrade" and took away those who responded, regarding them as Maoists. Altogether six men were shot in the woods nearby while trying to escape, said the security forces. Villagers at Thulo Sirubari say that those killed were just farmers, shopkeepers, and family men with no interest in either the Maoists or the government.

These examples, say activists, reflect the general picture of large parts of the hills where confusion, terror and heartbreak have become the order of the day. Many of those killed as Maoists may be non-combatant Maoist sympathisers, but an equally large number may not even be that. "How is it that 15 people get killed in an incident and only three guns are recovered and a few socket bombs?" asks one activist, referring to the homemade grenades used by the Maoists.

Besides deaths during patrols or in 'encounters' that are real or faked, the majority of the deaths occur during offensives by Maoists on police and army positions. While it cannot be said with certainty that the Maoists make blatant use of a "human shield" of innocent peasants from nearby villages during their assaults, there is no doubt that they do field untrained supporters in the front line (often plied with drinks and drugs, say army sources), who are followed up by the militia and trained fighters. In such instances, during the heat of battle, it would be impossible for the soldiers to distinguish between the insurgent and the innocent.

There are, certainly, examples of 'close encounters' where the alertness of army officers has kept innocents from falling to the bullet. At the Kulekhani reservoir southwest of Kathmandu Valley a few months ago, some Tamangs coming down a hillside at night with flaming torches in their hands after a puja were nearly mowed down, but for the presence of mind of the commanding officer. Last month, in Rolpa, soldiers were keen to use long-range guns against a suspicious look-

ing group coming up the trail. The army officer asked his soldiers to hold their fire against what turned out to be a group of villagers walking single file. While in themselves heartening, these two examples set out a scenario showing how easy it is for innocents to get killed in the trails and terraces of Nepal.

### Take-no-prisoner

Nepal Television footage of the 'Maoist dead' shows many in non-combat gear, indicating that at least some of these may have been mere 'supporters' and not Maoist fighters. But in the see-no-evil, hear-no-evil atmosphere of Kathmandu Valley, these deaths – if indeed innocent to whatever degree – are seen as acceptable collateral damage in the fight to finish off the Maoists and get the country back 'on track'. While government would like the people to believe the figures announced daily by the radio and television as to the Maoists killed in action, there is increasing scepticism about these reports in the urban centres of Nepal, and particularly so in the affected hill regions.

According to Mandira Sharma, in the hills of Dang where the Maoist '*jana sarkar*' continue to function, there is no credibility attached to the numbers. "They do believe the number of people announced as dead, but not that they are Maoists", says Sharma. "So many have been killed in those villages, who everyone knows to be non-Maoists, and yet the radio announce them as rebels."

The military's attitude towards the Maoists is clear in the way that the bodies of the dead Maoist are handled. In a country where there remains a sensitivity and respect towards the bodies of the departed, the footage on nightly Nepal Television news – said to be edited and packaged by a military officer on duty at the station – has been grievously insensitive. Bodies of dead rebels in shallow graves, hastily buried by their comrades after battles, are dug out with picks, turned around by boots, slung on poles, dumped like sacks of salt, and left to putrefy in the open until, often, villagers themselves rally to bury them.

Says an officer at the army headquarters, "The army is able to see the Maoists for what they are, whereas the politicians' opportunism keeps them from being honest." This officer says that the motivation level among the soldiers is high: "We used to be a ceremonial army, but quickly we have realised that we do have fighting ability. There is a sense of purpose and achievement among the rank and file. They realise the Maoists are pests out to destroy our nation, and that they are not wanted."

There are those who say that the behaviour of the army in the villages is better than that of the policemen before they fled the Maoist onslaught. Even so, the treatment at the ground level seems to depend on the rank and character of the commander in the field. In general, the more senior the officer, it is said, the higher the possibility that he will be cool-headed and hold fire



Army's battle plan, Achham district, west Nepal.

during tense moments. There are instances of capable officers building bridges to community leaders, being sensitive to local concerns, and sowing enough confidence among locals to be able to recruit them in the fight against the Maoist. "But that is the exception", says a reporter from the far west who has trekked extensively in the western hills meeting Maoists and army men alike. "The army officers tend to be haughty and keep a distance from the people, so the villagers will never trust them nor share with them the information they have in their possession which would finish off the Maoists in two months."

The army, while it might have its own internal mechanisms to check abuse, has not opened up to human rights defenders. Neither has it indicated – more than six months into its deployment as the all-in-all force in the Nepali hinterland – an understanding for the human rights concerns that are rapidly building up among Nepal's national- and district-level politicians. Human rights activists based in west Nepal, where the army is headquartered for the all-important western front at Nepalganj town, say that they have not once been approached by the military. Once, the army did provide a helicopter tour of the western and central hills to American and British journalists, and later to a group of parliamentarians (those that oversee the army's budget and expenditure), but Nepali journalists and human rights

monitors remain shut out.

So, who will the army listen to? In a country as beholden to foreign aid as Nepal is, it is the donors who would seem to have significant clout – in peacetime and wartime. An European Union statement, representing the view of all parties did caution the government on the excesses. The Americans are said to have been vehement, that human rights abuse is a “no-no” even as the government goes about battling rebels. The United States does hold inordinate clout over the army because of the moral support it has provided the men in fatigues in their war against the insurgents, and, more so, because the RNA would be the primary beneficiary of the USD 20 million that the Bush administration has requested from Congress for a beleaguered Nepali government fighting the Maoists. And yet, the concern of the embassies and the donor institutions does not seem to be enough to move the government or the military top brass to take a second look at their actions and re-evaluate their strategy for bringing the Maoists to heel. In the latest instance, on 29 May 2002, the US Senate Appropriations Committee, while expressing support for the request by the Bush Administration, said that it “remains concerned about human rights violations by the Nepalese Armed Forces”.

If nothing else works in sensitising the ‘Nepalese Armed Forces’ from reworking their present strategy of containing the Maoists and the collateral damage that it is exacting, in a condition where a prime minister is busy with power politics and all governmental and non-governmental institutions are supine and silent, the only recourse may be the royal palace. While playing scrupulously by the book and remaining above politics as demanded by his role as constitutional monarch, King Gyanendra could perhaps play a part, given the importance the monarchy holds in the RNA’s scheme of things. Having just emerged from his one-year ritual mourning following the massacre of 1 June 2001, the monarch may consider having a talk with the generals about the safety and security of the Nepali people. Given the incongruous situation in Kathmandu, where even the human rights community is sitting back and waiting for the Western governments to speak up for human rights in Nepal, the new king may feel that this is an area where his role may come into use on behalf of the people.

## Shangri-La

The killings during the Kilo Seirra II police operations in the western hills in 1998-99 were “modest” compared to what is happening all over the country today, says one human rights monitor. “The nationwide activation of the security forces has multiplied manifold the chances of non-combatants and innocents being killed”, he says. During Kilo Seirra II, police units from Kathmandu moved into Rolpa, Rukum, Jajarkot and Salyan districts, and the instances of disappearances, summary killings and torture increased

dramatically. There is little doubt that it was that period of state-sponsored terror that gave fillip to the Maoist movement. Thereafter, it was the Maoists who converted the whole country into a terrain of mass death. Today, with the Nepali army being allowed to conduct its activities without challenge, it can be presumed that unless there is indeed more circumspection, the very nature of Nepali society and culture will change as the seeds of deep-set and long-term animosities and hatreds are sown.

Ingrid Massage, who has followed the happenings in Nepal for Amnesty International for the last decade, is extremely worried about the long-term implications of the killing of innocent villagers. “It may not ever be possible to make a full assessment of how many unlawful killings are happening in breach of international humanitarian or human rights standards. In most investigations of killings, it is the body that will provide most of the clues, but in Nepal there are no bodies or post-mortems.” The absence of investigation, according to Massage, means that Nepal will find it that much harder to return to normalcy when the Maoist problem has been ‘solved’. “This also means that at least parts of possible future truth processes, which have been so important in other countries to reinstate peace after a conflict is over, will not perhaps be very meaningful here. The truth about these killings will never be able to be told, which in itself could be an obstacle to peace and a contributor to further violence.”

The fact is, Nepal never was a human rights Shangri La to begin with, as far as authoritarianism is concerned. Historically, the public-at-large was once removed from centre so that it did not suffer directly from state terror – but they were exploited instead by the administrative satraps appointed by Kathmandu’s rulers. The Panchayat era, all too easily forgotten, was a 30-year-period where the population was cowed down by the weight of the autocracy. After the People’s Movement of 1990, a kind of a ‘truth commission’ known as the Mallik Commission was established to study human rights abuses during the end-run of the Panchayat era. The commission submitted a report and recommended action against police, administrators and politicians who had abused power.

Implementation of the Mallik Commission’s report would have cleansed the polity, but instead it was buried, mainly because Kathmandu’s establishment is too small with familial and other inter-connections. A clear message was thus sent out, that human rights violations could and would be condoned under the new democratic dispensation. This pattern of unaccountability continues, and the primary reason the RNA was unwilling to come out and fight in the absence of a state of emergency was also that it did not want its hands tied by any future accounting process. It is a measure of the failure of the political class that, while the Maoist problem was still on the rise, it was unwilling to use all its efforts – in particular, overcoming the reluctance of



a king who held the key – to have the army do the civilian government's bidding without the cover of an emergency.

It is against such a background of historical unconcern for human rights that the Maoist war visited unexpected violence and abuse on the people. This conflict has by now had myriad effects on the countryside. Religious festivals and age-old rituals that provided identity to the hill people have been disrupted, crops have gone unplanted, and increasingly large numbers of young men slip across the southern border into India to escape Maoist kidnappings and/or army action. As despair sets in, progress in education and public health has been forgotten, and the overall socio-economic development of society has been set back by years. However, despite these broader tragedies, the most critical issue remains that of life and liberty of the populace.

"There is a question that keeps nagging me", says Sushil Pyakurel of the NHRC. "What will the world say when it finds out of what is happening in Nepal? We will be shamed."

### Ambivalent kingdom

Outside observers tend to be nonplussed at the lack of righteous anger among the Nepal' educated classes against clear evidence of excesses committed by the security forces. For all their bellicosity when the going was easy, civil society, human rights-wallahs and

politicians have not made the kind of remonstrations one would have expected of them. While this may partly have to do with the lack of saahas, there is another reason for this ambivalence.

To begin with, one does not hear enough reaction against human rights abuse by the army because it is still a relatively new phenomenon, and under the conditions of the state of emergency credible information is hard to come by. But, more importantly, the ambivalence has its roots in the fact that the state committing the abuse itself is threatened by collapse because of the Maoists. Unlike dictatorships that can easily be upbraided for threatening the life and liberty of the people, here is a democratic state, still in its incipient stage, forced to battle a extreme-left insurgency for its very survival – in the process of which it is trampling on human rights. Many of those who understand the issues seem to have decided to support the government whole-heartedly until the Maoist problem is tackled, even if some innocents get caught in the middle – as the lesser of two evils.

"What is wrong with that argument is that democracy cannot be saved by shutting yourself off to villagers who are dying", says Prakash Jwala. "The government as well as the army have a duty to take care, and they cannot get away by pointing to the record of the rebels." Indeed, no one doubts that large numbers of innocent villagers and 'Maoists by default' are being victimised in the hills and valleys even as of this writing.



MIN. BAJRACHARYA

Army airlift, Achham.

Says Jwala, "An unwillingness to consider the issue as serious will vitiate the atmosphere throughout the kingdom for the long term. When elections are held and a new government comes into place, those who hold the reins of government will find it very difficult to control a populace which has had such a horrific experience at the hands of authority."

As experience from all over the world indicates, killing of thousands of innocents creates lakhs of disaffected, who tomorrow will rise as different kinds of militants, though not necessarily 'Maobaadi'. In *The Killing Terraces*, a documentary on the rise of the Maoists in Rukum, Rolpa and Jajarkot by filmmaker Dhurba Basnet, a child of eight whose parents were killed by the police during the Kilo Seirra II operation says to the camera, tears flowing down his grimy cheeks, "I want to drink the blood of their hearts", referring to the police. Revenge and despondency will rule the land if the army, the government and the educated classes do not wake up to the need to fight Maoists rather than target simple villagers.

The blame for today's 'collateral damage' can, in some ways, be laid at the door of the privileged and their rush to restore order. The killing of innocents has its origins in the impatience of the elite who, distraught at the way that the economy has crumbled following the boom period of just a few years ago, want it back. There were many who believed, with reason, that the Maoist organisation would collapse the moment the army was released to tackle them, after which the country would coast back to normalcy with minimal bloodshed. That is not quite how the scenario has played out and the quick-fix military solution has also proved to be somewhat more difficult than expected. The reality is that the Maoists had been allowed to become too big over too long a period by the time the establishment woke up to the need to tackle them with its full force.

Kathmandu has always looked away, and it does so now, while violence continues to extract a price from the rural society to a degree thought unimaginable even just a year ago. Today, Nepalis look askance at their own souls, to see how they have lost the ability to empathise. The large death toll from a criminally opportunistic insurgency and an army in single-minded pursuit has made the inhabitants of towns and villages lose the sensitivity they thought they had. As the police inspector in Dang explained, "The Nepali people have become like goats at the temple courtyard awaiting sacrifice, which show no concern even as their companions are getting slaughtered all around."

The conclusion is inescapable – the life of the villager is considered expendable in Nepal by those who 'matter'. The Maoists do not value the lives of ground-level policemen, the soldiers and politicians, and the army and police in return do not value the lives of the Maoists or whoever is caught in between. Given that the Maobaadi are underground, the death of innocents

is made possible when the military goes after them. The lives and livelihood of poor villagers are simply seen as the necessary price to pay for ridding the country of insurgents.

The government of Sher Bahadur Deuba today – out of preference – exercises little control over an army whose soldiers only quite simply go about the task asked of them. It has asked the generals to deliver a country where the Maoists have been decimated, and a negotiating window does not seem to have been kept open. Perhaps Prime Minister Deuba has a plan, and perhaps he understands the long-term repercussions of the forces he thus unleashes, which go far beyond the current bout of Nepali society versus the Maobaadi.

It is, of course, impossible not to blame the Maoists for having started it all. They have weakened Nepal economically and geopolitically as no 'anti-nationalist' could have, and they have created the conditions for soldiers to emerge from the barracks, to be used in all-out war against their fellow citizens. By forcing the army to become so overwhelmingly active, the rebels may have helped create a place for the army in the national equation that it did not have before. The upshot of this history may be that the soldiers and the executive in government will become unacceptably more powerful in the future.

There was perhaps a way out of the cul de sac if Prime Minister Deuba had decided to activate the army on the basis of existing anti-terrorist provisions rather than imposing the state of emergency. By retaining the political institutions of state right down to the local level, and taking the civil society and the press along with it, the government would have been able to isolate the Maoists through a judicious mix of military and political approaches. This would not have exposed the RNA to the thankless task given it, and the credit would have been shared across the institutions of state. By having let one institution – the military – monopolise the war against the Maoists, the soldiers become the fall guys if things do not work out quite as planned.

The next six months, till the general elections announced for 13 November, are critical for Nepal and Nepali democracy. This will be a period when there are no institutional safeguards in a country that will be dealing with both a state of emergency and an election campaign. There is no parliament and there are no courts; the bureaucracy, civil society and media have proven ineffective as checks on authority. History will therefore judge the period up ahead on the basis of the action and inaction of the government and its army. They can still wake up to the need to fight a war in which the insurgents are differentiated from the innocents, however difficult and time-consuming it may be. They owe it to democracy and to the people, and quick fixes and mass deaths will not work. There is a nation and a population in trauma out there, in need of healing. ▽



## Vacancy Announcement

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**Contract duration – 2 years**

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# Less to Musharraf than meets the eye

He is playing with the constitution like Ayub, he held a referendum like Zia, and he is as power-hungry as Nawaz Sharif and Benazir – ladies and gentlemen, Gen Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan.

by **Mustafa Nazir Ahmad**



When Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government was dismissed by Chief of the Army Staff Gen Pervez Musharraf on 12 October 1999, most Pakistanis were overjoyed. As Gen Musharraf disembarked from his 'hijacked' PIA airliner to issue the necessary orders, it hardly mattered to most whether the replacement wore khaki or a *sherwani*. Sharif's three-and-a-half years had become an affront to democracy: the prime minister was blatantly maximising his power through constitutional amendments, stifling freedom of expression, and suppressing judicial independence.

Those expecting a change for the better soon realised that a democratically-elected government is better than a military dictatorship for the long term stability it represents. With Gen Musharraf's record before us, the obvious conclusion is that despite their much hyped propensity for corruption, it is politicians who must run the country – and long enough to be able to make a difference. This they have never been allowed to do. Pakistan has never experienced true democracy, and at best, has had 'controlled democracy'.

Analysing Pakistan's political history, it is difficult not to conclude that the army as an institution has been the major hurdle to resolving problems of governance and development. With defence gobbling up a major portion of the budget, key sectors like health and education bear the burden. Those who suffer are the ordinary people – more and more continue to fall below the poverty line in the trade-offs made to support the military.

The buck does not stop at what is allocated to defence in the annual budget. The system of 'legalised corruption' eats up a major share of the country's limited resources. Officers are allocated plots in posh localities for throw-away prices, and their children get the best education for free. Their families receive excellent health services without paying a penny, besides furnished accommodations, domestic help and rations all at no charge. To ensure these luxuries, resources are often diverted from the social sector to the

military through covert avenues.

The argument that the military deserves all this for patriotic service rendered to the country's defence has long worn thin. It is received wisdom that the Pakistani military's discipline and professional capability is of "world standard", but then it would be difficult to locate a country on the map which did not consider its military to be the best in the world. All the self-propagated myths associated with the military point toward the generals' desire to remain unaccountable before other institutions and the public at large. Stories are legion of large-scale corruption within the military establishment; most organs of the military empire are running at a loss because of graft and inefficiency (*see box*). The bogey of 'patriotism' is trotted out whenever the army feels the need to make its case forcefully.

The military's 'holier-than-thou' attitude towards other institutions is reflected in an extreme form in the government of Gen Musharraf. To give just one example, almost all the major government and semi-government departments are today headed by retired or serving army personnel (*see box 2*). This more than anything else demonstrates the regime's lack of confidence in the ability of "bloody civilians" (as officers are known to refer to the general populace) to efficiently run national affairs. By thus sidelining the civilians, Gen Musharraf is merely slipping into the shoes of his predecessors, generals Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq.

Gen Musharraf knows how to charm with his apparent earnestness, winning over development activists and donor agencies by speaking their language. Meanwhile, careful use of the state media at home has created the image of a 'true soldier' fighting the just fight against 'corrupt' politicians. In fact, he has had something to offer everyone. He impresses the West and the moderates at home with his secular stance even while allowing state agencies to covertly work with the religious parties and sectarian organisations to advance the military's agenda abroad and domestically.

But not everyone has bought into the General's

image. There are those who from the very beginning saw through his veneer, and found a rehashed version of Gen Zia. Those who still reposed some faith in Gen Musharraf found their hopes dashed after he subordinated the judiciary through the Provisional Constitutional Order, which granted him extensive powers and made him unaccountable before any court of law. Similarly, while apparently there is more freedom of expression and of the media than ever, there is also a corresponding amount of self-censorship; a few journalists who stepped out of line were quickly taught a lesson – if not officially, then unofficially. A few concrete steps taken by the regime, about which the president-general brags at every forum, come with enough qualifications to make them more of a disappointment than harbingers of real change. These include raising the number of women's reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies – an overall increase in number, but no increase in proportion. Another step is the restoration of the joint electorate system, which enables the country's religious minorities to vote for candidates of other faiths, which had been barred under the separate electorates introduced by Gen Zia. However, the last couple of decades of religious intolerance and discrimination have sapped the confidence of the religious minorities; they and the country's human rights groups have been demanding dual voting rights, which would allow the religious minorities to vote for candidates from their own faith as well as from the majority community, in order to ensure a representation in the assemblies of various religious communities.

### **Rigged mandate**

Any lingering hopes that Gen Musharraf was good for Pakistan's future were dashed once and for all with the rigged referendum of 30 April, rightly termed "the biggest scam in the history of the country" by the outspoken economist S Akbar Zaidi. The shameful insistence by the general that the referendum was transparent proves just how far he has moved from reality and how much he disregards public and media opinion. His promise that the general election in October will be no different, is in the circumstances, not very promising.

Consider two of the clauses of the Referendum Order, 2002:

(1) Notwithstanding anything contained in the Constitution or any law for the time being in force, if the majority of the votes cast in the referendum are in affirmative, the people of Pakistan shall be deemed to have given the democratic mandate to general Pervez Musharraf to serve the nation as president of Pakistan for a period of five years to enable him, inert alia, to consolidate the reforms and the reconstruction of institutions of State for the establishment of genuine and sustainable democracy, including the entrenchment of local

### **The military-commercial complex**

As Chief of Staff of the Armed Staff (COAS) Musharraf presides over a vast industrial, commercial and real estate empire, with assets and investments of at least USD 5 billion. This military-commercial complex is a little-known network of four foundations that were originally created to promote the welfare of retired servicemen, but have since branched out into numerous money-making ventures manned by 18,000 serving and retired military officers. The biggest of these, the Fauji Foundation, is the single largest conglomerate in Pakistan, with assets worth USD 200 million. The Foundation operates 11 enterprises ranging from cereal, cement and fertiliser companies to sugar-mills and oil storage terminals. Three other foundations – Shaheen, Bahria and the Army Welfare Trust – run everything from banks and insurance companies to airlines, all under the control of the Defence Ministry or one of the three services.

In addition to the foundations, the armed forces also control a variety of large independent business activities, notably the National Logistics Cell, which is a trucking and transport giant; and the Frontier Works Organisation, which has a virtual monopoly in road-building and construction. Both were established to serve military needs, but grew so fat with military contracts that they moved into the civilian economy and have gradually squeezed out most private competitors. In her study, *Soldiers in Business*, defence analyst Dr Ayesha Siddiqi Agha demonstrates that most of these ventures have been suffering losses that are covered by financial injections from the defence budget or various public sector enterprises vulnerable to military pressure. She also points to the opportunities of corruption from the military business empire's exemption from "even a trace of public accountability".

government system, to ensure continued good governance for the welfare of the people, and to combat extremism and sectarianism for the security of the State and the tranquility of society.

(2) The period of five years referred in clause (1) shall be computed from the first meeting of the Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament) to be elected as a result of the forthcoming general election.

The phrasing of the Order itself reflects contempt for democracy, even though the stated intention is the "establishment of genuine and sustainable democracy". A mandate is being sought to "ensure continued good governance" while destroying the very institutions of state which can deliver such governance. It is all too clear that the officials at the National Reconstruction Bureau who suggest such flavour-of-the-month terms to Gen Musharraf are also losing touch with reality. The best part is that the president's tenure will start

from the first meeting of parliament, thus extending his current rule if the next general election is postponed indefinitely.

Before the referendum, Gen Musharraf had sought to make a distinction between those serious people who supported the referendum and the irresponsible ones who opposed it. Ironically, this distinction has helped civil society more than the general, by enabling one to distinguish between genuine activists and political opportunists. Meanwhile, the ordinary Pakistani has begun to see in the general the same craving for absolute power and position that he so vociferously decries in civilian politicians.

The local government elections held in four phases from December 2000 to July 2001 that the general was so proud of, were exposed threadbare when the 'elected representatives' thrown up by that exercise participated in vote-rigging during the recent referendum. Their support for the general spoke loudly of their own aspirations in a future setup.

These opportunists used the referendum to meet their personal ends – they supported the ill-conceived idea with a target in mind. Even someone as senior as the Governor of Punjab, himself a general, saw in it a chance to prove his loyalty (in this case, his own suitability as a candidate for heading the country as prime minister). This sychophantic trend trickled right down to the grassroots, with even local councilors supporting Musharraf under the impression that there will be rewards for loyalty.

The trend of co-option continues at all levels. Gen.

### **Military men in power**

Here is a partial list of retired and in-service army personnel holding key administrative and political posts in Pakistan (other posts not mentioned here, but where army men serve, include diplomats, provincial ministers, chairman of sports boards, director generals and managing directors of various authorities, vice-chancellors of universities and so on): General Pervez Musharraf (Chief Executive, President and COAS), Major General (Retd) Muhammad Anwar (President, Azad Kashmir), Lt Gen (Retd) Khalid Maqbool (Governor, Punjab), Lt Gen (Retd) Syed Iftikhar Hussain Shah (Governor NWFP), Lt Gen (Retd) Moinuddin Haider (Federal Interior Minister), Lt Gen (Retd) Javed Ashraf Qazi (Federal Communications Minister), Col (Retd) SK Tressler (Federal Minorities and Culture Minister), Lt Gen Hamid Javed (Chief Executive's Chief of Staff), Major Gen Muhammad Yusuf (Chief Executive's Deputy Chief of Staff), Major Gen Rashid Qureshi (President's Information Adviser), Lt Gen Munner Hafeez (Chief of National Accountability Bureau), Major Gen Usman Shah and Major Gen Shujaat Zameer (Deputy Chiefs of NAB), Major Gen Abdul Jabbar Bhatti (Chief of RAB-Punjab), Air Vice Marshall Zakauallah (Chief of RAB-NWFP), Maj Gen Tariq Bashir (Chief of RAB-Sindh), Maj Gen Owais Mushtaq

Musharraf has made possible the creation of an alliance of six parties, a 'king's party' made up of groups with no support at the mass level. The alliance is led by corrupt, turn-coat politicians of the kind, it is now clear, Gen. Musharraf would like to have in the next Parliament. He clearly fears that genuine politicians will not let him have his way.

Constitutional amendments aimed at increasing the role of the military in national affairs are also on the cards, peddled as necessary for checks-and-balances in the future dispensation. It is expected that a National Security Council (comprising the president, the prime minister, the chiefs of the three armed forces and the four governors as permanent members) will be formed to monitor the performance of the government. With the power to appoint governors and the service chiefs remaining with the president, the probable scenario is that, except for the prime minister, all the members of the NSC will be Musharraf appointees. This is the general who speaks so glibly of "genuine democracy", "good governance", "accountability" and "transparency".

The present warlike scenario has given the Musharraf regime an excuse for delaying the general election and, most importantly, increases in defence expenditures. With India's stance becoming ever-more aggressive, it has become difficult for media, civil society and opposition politicians to campaign against the latter. According to reports, the defence budget for the next year is being increased from PKR 131 billion to PKR 150 billion.

(Chief of RAB-Balochistan), Lt Gen Syed Tanvir Hussain Naqvi (Chief of National Reconstruction Bureau), Lt Gen Hamid Nawaz (Secretary, Defence), Air Marshal (Retd) Zahid Anees (Secretary, Defence Production), Lt Gen (Retd) Saeedul Zafar (Secretary, Railways), Lt Gen (Retd) Zulfiqar Ali Khan (Chairman, Water and Power Development Authority), Major Gen (Retd) Agha Masood Hassan (Director General of Postal Services), Major Gen Farrukh Javed (Chairman, National Highway Authority), Rear Admiral KB Rind (Director General, Ports and Shipping), Rear Admiral Ahmad Hayat (Chairman, Karachi Port Trust), Rear Admiral Sikandar Viqar Naqvi (Chairman, Port Qasim Authority), Vice Admiral Tauqir Hussain Naqvi (Chairman, National Shipping Corporation), Major Gen (Retd) Muhammad Hassan (Chief of the National Fertilizer Corporation), Lt Col (Retd) Afzal Khan (Chairman, Pakistan Steel Mills), Lt Col (Retd) Akbar Hussain (Chairman, Export Processing Zone Authority), Major Gen Shehzad Alam Khan (Chairman, Pakistan Telecommunications Authority), Air Vice Marshall Azhar Masood (Chairman, National Telecommunications Authority), Brig (Retd) Muhammad Saleem (Chairman, National Database and Registration Authority). Source: "The generals in power," *The Friday Times* (26 April – 2 May 2002).

### Trouble on the horizon

One can safely predict that there will be limited provisions for the social sector in the forthcoming national budget. According to economists, there will be no development budget for education and health, and the government might not even have enough resources to pay the salaries of existing staff. Large lay-offs are on the cards for government departments, with the figure predicted to be as high as 20 percent. This blow to an impoverished population already facing endemic unemployment, will, however, come as good news to the international financial institutions which want structural adjustments.

This also deflates all claims of improved economic performance. The increase in foreign reserves – the quid pro quo for the support provided to the United States in its war in Afghanistan – has not helped Pakistan's poor in any way, and it remains to be seen who corners the benefits. All estimates hint at the increasing incidence of both human misery and economic deprivation. One also wonders from where all the money required to realise the extravagant promises Gen Musharraf made during his referendum rallies, will come from.

The general never tires of comparing his performance with his predecessors', both civilian and military, in order to prove how different he is. It is increasingly difficult to identify any noticeable difference. He is playing with the constitution like Ayub;

he has held a referendum like Zia; his lust for power matches that of Nawaz Sharif and or Benazir Bhutto. Further, Gen Musharraf seems to mislead even more by his opportunist cronies than were his derided predecessors.

All of which presents a very bleak national picture in which one only discerns trouble and chaos on the horizon. The country's scarce resources are the bone of contention between institutions of the state, and the military which believes in 'might is right' presently has the bone within its grip and will not give it up. It is obvious that until the limits and roles of all state institutions are clearly defined, such conflicts will continue to arise between and among them. Some of the analysts refer to the ouster of Nawaz Sharif as a classic example of this phenomenon – they believe that his removal was a result of his peace overtures towards India that would have ultimately led to a reduction in defence expenditures.

At this crucial juncture in the history of Pakistan, it is important that all sections of society collectively take action to keep politics from slipping further from the grasp of the people. Political parties need to develop a code of conduct for the future, based on respect for each other and internal democracy within each of them. Meanwhile, one hopes that media and civil society will continue to express themselves even as the going gets tough as it seems it will. △

## Social Science Research Council



### South Asia Regional Fellowship Program

*Second Announcement, June 2002*

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC, New York) is pleased to announce the availability of short-term fellowships (3-4 month) for research in any discipline of the social sciences and humanities related to the theme of *Resources and Society*. Twenty research fellowships are available for junior and senior scholars from South Asia to begin new research, continue ongoing research or write up completed research. The objective of the SSRC Regional Fellowship Program is to strengthen the link between teaching and research; the competition is open to all full time university and college lecturers, readers and professors. Eligibility is restricted to faculty with PhDs presently teaching in an accredited college or university in South Asia. Fellows will be expected to attend a workshop in January 2003 before they begin their fellowship period. Junior fellows will receive up to \$2,200, senior fellows up to \$3,000. Application materials and more information can be obtained from the SSRC website <http://www.ssrc.org/fellowships/southasia/>. The deadline for receiving applications is August 3, 2002. Announcements of fellows will be made in October 2002. This program is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

# Good Cops, Bad Cops, & the World Bank

The war against terrorism used to include a battle against poverty. The “war on terror” seems to have dumped that creditable cause.

by **David Ludden**

When leaders of the institutions that guide global economic development set 2015 as a target date for reducing by half the number of people who live in extreme poverty, they did not anticipate 11 September 2001. The subsequent war on terrorism has altered the character of the campaign against poverty more dramatically than might appear at first sight, however. After 9/11, military men certainly did become more prominent in the project of protecting globalisation against its enemies, but reducing poverty had previously gained support in rich countries as a means to combat terrorism. Major new funding for a global campaign against poverty now seems hostage to military campaigns to pacify a world of insecurities aggravated by globalisation.

In the US, particularly, the stage was set for current military campaigns well before 9/11. Military security already topped the global agenda in the 1990s, when real US military expenditure remained as high as it was in the 1960s at the height of the global war on communism. In the 1990s, as the world's rich became rapidly richer and extreme poverty increased along with global inequality, American anxieties about the instability attending globalisation also increased. Robert D Kaplan detailed this anxiety in his influential 1994 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, entitled “The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation, Tribalism, and Disease Are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet”. Bill Clinton's presidency saw numerous attacks on US military installations that foreshadowed the attack on the Pentagon, and car bombers had attacked the Twin Towers once before 9/11.

American popular anxiety about foreign threats increased in the context of new immigration, some of it critical for the economic boom in America in the 1990s, especially of Asians in the hi-tech sector. Public suspicion of foreigners lurks in multi-cultural America, where the long war against communism promoted hatred for un-American aliens. The internment of Japanese-Americans in World War II suggests a

tendency to conflate foreign and domestic enemies, as do purges of Marxists and “communist fellow travellers” during the Cold War. The fear of foreigners has historically tended to peak in times of high immigration. As immigration boomed again, the Iranian Revolution produced a new alien menace, Islam. By 1990 and the war on Iraq, fanatic Muslims had replaced rabid communists in American demonology.

In American popular opinion, the war against terrorism resembles a war on crime on a global scale. Popular ideas about criminality support global police action by the US military. The American political system has habitually criminalised behaviour deemed unacceptable to the voting majority, such as drug use, sex work, and other deviant activities that other countries often treat as problems for medical attention and social reform. The crime problem also appears in the public eye as being most intense in poor ethnic communities in urban ghettos, now mostly African-American and Hispanic, but in earlier times filled with Italian, Irish, and Chinese immigrants. Racial stereotypes of poor people in poor neighbourhoods often mingle in discussions of crime. Local police commonly target young, poor, non-white men for special attention. Racial profiling by police is common practice. US prisons hold a hugely disproportionate number of poor people from minority communities.

In this cultural context, the public can readily imagine that global attacks on civilised society arise primarily from alien ethnic groups living in poverty, whose criminal behaviours include opium and coca growing, drug smuggling, honour killings, abusing women, rioting, corruption, and bombing American warships in the Gulf of Aden and US embassies in Africa. Amidst poverty and ignorance, fanatics seem to learn terrorist trades in schools of primitive hatred. Bill Clinton articulated this vision of the world in one of his last presidential speeches, when he said, “we have seen how abject poverty accelerates conflict, how it creates recruits for terrorists and those who incite ethnic and religious hatred, how it fuels a violent rejection of the

economic and social order on which our future depends”.

Two figures represent complementary strategies in the fight against crime in America: the “good cop” and the “bad cop”. A good cop brings a smiling face to patrol bad neighbourhoods teeming with poor youth. Good cops support local development initiatives by “keeping kids off the streets” and by leading them instead into schools, churches, sports, and other learning centres where they can improve themselves and stay out of trouble. Meanwhile, the bad cop patrols the streets with a mean face, gun in-hand, poised to arrest criminals and, if necessary, to shoot-on-sight dreaded enemies of the law.

In American national politics, Democrats and Republicans broadly typify good cops and bad cops, respectively. Democrats typically see crime as a symptom of poverty; and thus they promote social welfare and economic development schemes to reduce the lure of crime. Republicans typically see crime as an infraction of civil norms demanding punishment; and thus they promote strict law enforcement, tough sentencing, and harsh penalties to get criminals off the streets.

George W Bush is a life-long bad cop Republican. As governor of Texas, he signed more death penalty authorisations than any governor in American history. Since 9/11, his snarling self-image as the fierce leader of the global war on terror has been an everyday media spectacle. Such media displays are strategic, because like Genghis Khan, a bad cop seeks to compel compliance with fear.

Bill Clinton is now a good cop Democrat, who seeks to promote civility with economic development. In his first major post-presidential speech on US foreign policy (14 December 2001), he spoke to an audience in England, where Bush’s bad cop ally in the war on terrorism, Tony Blair, is also Clinton’s good cop friend. Clinton’s speech indicates the link between the military (bad cop) war on terrorism, (good cop) concerns for the poor, and the new global anti-poverty campaign led by the World Bank. He described 11 September as “the dark side of global interdependence”. He went on to warn his audience that “if you don’t want to live with barbed wire around your children and grandchildren for the next hundred years then it’s not enough to defeat the terrorist. We have to make a world where there are far fewer terrorists.”

Creating such a world is not a military mission. Rather, in Clinton’s view, it requires “wealthy nations” to acquire “more partners” and “spread the benefits and shrink the burdens” of globalisation. This is a job for development agencies. James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, is one of its leaders. He has said that, “On September 11 [2001], the imaginary wall that divided the rich world from the poor world came crashing down”, and that the Bank’s campaign against world poverty supplements the war on terrorism as a

means to secure globalisation. He says that we can no longer view as normal “a world where less than 20 percent of the population dominates the world’s wealth and resources and takes 80 percent of its dollar income”.

In his new anti-poverty campaign at the Bank, Wolfensohn echoes one of his predecessors. Robert McNamara left his office as US Secretary of Defense thirty years ago to start an earlier anti-poverty campaign at the Bank to combat communism at its roots among people in poverty. McNamara’s agenda fell by the wayside in the 1970s under the influence of structural adjustment policies that dominated Bank activity for the next two decades. When communism had quit the world stage, and when structural adjustment had subjected poor countries to world market discipline and to rich country policy dictates, poverty gained favour again at the Bank, under Wolfensohn’s leadership.

The “millennium development goals” now endorsed by all the major institutions in the world development regime include a 50 percent reduction in people living on USD 1 per day, primary school for all children, a 67 percent reduction in child deaths, a 75 percent cut in maternal deaths, and halving the number of people without clean water – all by 2015. Many world leaders have joined the 2015 campaign, and, like UK Chancellor Gordon Brown, promote a “new deal between developed and developing countries”, having accepted the idea that the critical issue now “is whether we manage globalisation well, or badly; fairly or unfairly”.

The scale of the 2015 campaign is unprecedented, and its future, uncertain. The UN convened a Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey, Mexico, on 18-22 March 2002, where it sought to raise requisite funds, but financial commitments from rich countries were meagre. Monterrey witnessed a unique gathering of big players in global development, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation, 171 heads of state, and representatives of civil society and business.

9/11 gave the 2015 campaign new urgency but also gave military initiatives firm control of public opinion. Fights against terrorists attract more public attention than efforts to alleviate poverty. The military and its support services – including education for specialists in subjects critical for global security – now receive more new funding than development programmes. Recession has also undermined prospects for new development funding. 2015 is 13 years away. The clock is ticking. Since the 2015 campaign began two years ago, more people have surely been driven into more desperate poverty in Afghanistan and Palestine than have escaped extreme poverty in most poor countries. Funding for a global campaign against poverty now seems more hostage than ever to military budgets buttressed by national fears aggravated by globalisation.

# Confused, bewildered, frightened

As a Muslim, Farid Alvie finds himself constantly having to clarify that he is a “moderate”, knowing that there is just that hint of disbelief that any of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims can be anything but “fanatic”.

by *Farid Alvie*

Over a decade before the tragedy of 11 September occurred, I first encountered a phenomenon, which, until then, I had only read about in newspapers or heard bandied about by visibly irate members of assorted political, religious or social organisations. For the first time in my life that day, I was slapped, without having done anything, with a “label”.

Walking down Main Street (and that is exactly what it was called) in “Ruralville”, Pennsylvania, that winter evening, minding my own business, I got called a wide variety of names by a group of half-drunk, half-witted university students, probably on their way back from a fraternity party. Among the many labels that were generously thrown my way that evening, two still stand out in memory. One was “Commie Cuban \*\*\*\*” (asterisks denote the word that rhymes with duck) and the other was “Stinky Pedro”.

There were others as well, but these two epithets confused me more than they angered me. Here I was, a 17-year-old Pakistani Muslim student, who had spent more years living in the Middle East than in my native Pakistan, being told to go back home to Papa Fidel or to my vast ancestral estate spread out all over central and South America. All because of the colour of my skin and the way I looked.

Ever since, I have always marvelled at how casually, intelligent and seemingly well-educated individuals indulge in the practise of labelling other individuals, cultures, religions, nations, concepts and systems. Labels are almost always assigned with nary a thought as to what they might actually infer in relation to the subject in question; they are oftentimes simply a convenient way of hiding the sheer laziness and ineptitude of our own intellect. I am, for example, as Cuban as former New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani is Afghan, but then again, labels are not meant to have any tract with truth or fact, or even with how and what things/peoples/religions/nations are.

After the tragedy of 11 September, labels, it appears, have become our security blankets. They seem to be the only “real” concepts, which help us deal with the uncertainty and insecurity that surrounds us these days. We cling to them like the desperate (and utterly irritating) Leonardo Di Caprio hung on to jagged wooden planks in the last scenes of that moving cinematic experience, *Titanic*. Unfortunately, we fail to realise that

the incredible power of a label to help us through a crisis (or even a minor unpleasant social or political hiccup), only leads us towards the same fate faced by young Leonardo as he sank, frozen, to the bottom of the ocean.

As I switch from one international news channel to the next, scan one front-page headline and move to another, I am inundated with newsprint and television screens throwing labels my way with a cruelty that leaves my eyes, ears and ego bleeding profusely and begging for mercy. Or at least for a long commercial pause in hostilities on humanitarian grounds.

“Is he/she a ‘moderate’ Muslim?” the media asks. “Pakistan is a ‘moderate’ Islamic state,” they tell us authoritatively. “Can President Pervez Musharraf guarantee that Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal rests within the control of the ‘moderates’ in his government?” they worry.

That’s one of my favourite labels these days: “moderate”. As a Muslim, I must walk around with the assumption that all non-Muslims believe that all 1.3 billion Muslims are fanatics (despite the many patronising assurances given us to the contrary by that insufferable member of parliament who lives rent-free at No. 10, Downing Street). Thus, I must always include the word moderate into any business introduction that I might need to make in future. (“Hello, my name is Farid Alvie. I’m a moderate Muslim journalist. I can provide your newspaper with a weekly column on the Pakistani entertainment scene for an incredibly cheap rate, if you’re interested?”)

No one in the media ever asks what catastrophe Ariel Sharon, the extreme rightwing, “democratically” elected prime minister of the nuclear state of Israel, might wreak on the rest of the world in pursuance of his political goals. Shouldn’t the Israeli “moderates” be better suited to keep permanent control of all of that country’s strategic military assets? Should the “moderates” in India be similarly sanctioned to wrest control of that state’s nuclear arsenal from the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government? But then the BJP and its fundamentalist, saffron-clad political allies might be forgiven their blatant fanaticism because the people of India have “democratically” elected them. Much as the current White House incumbent was democratically elected, despite losing the “popular” vote two years ago. But these, perhaps, are



irrelevant, minor details with no bearing on reality.

Which brings us to another neat label: democratic.

This bewilders me even more than being called "Stinky Pedro". I sincerely believe in the concept of democracy as a system of governance. I believe in it just as much as the next guy. Unless the next guy is a bigot, in which case I believe in it even more. This sort of "freedom to choose one's government" is an excellent concept, and gives the ordinary Joe Bloggs (or Ali Khan in the "moderate" Pakistani Muslim world) a sense of participation, of controlling one's own destiny. I am just a little confused about its definition.

If a polity has a frequently-held exercise that allows its citizenry to stuff ballot boxes with names of political organisations printed on it, it is entitled to being called "democratic". So when someone like Jorge Haider wins in a "democratic" election in Austria, why must Israel and the United States threaten to withdraw their ambassadors from that democratic country? Jorge Haider is an odious choice no doubt, but did he not come in through the ballot box fair and square?

So perhaps the etiquettes of this enterprise called democracy need to be enunciated more clearly. Voters must be clearly instructed to make acceptable choices, and not unacceptable ones. Participants must never show favour towards an anti-Semitic candidate, but give benefit of the doubt to an Islamophobe hankering for their vote. Presidential candidates in northern Africa must always win 90 percent of the vote in every election if they live along the Nile, and command the region as a pharaoh-democrat. And any candidate sporting a beard in neighbouring Algeria must not be allowed to assume power, even if the ballot box gives them the legitimate right to do so.

Lest you think I get confused only when the strong and the powerful seem baffled by the complexity of labels, let me assure you that that is certainly not the case. Even the weak and the poor are label-conscious. Sample the following, from an email I received regarding the Taliban: "Please note, that the following is NOT a defence of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, nor are we supporters of the regime, due to them being shadeed Hanafees, and mu'tassib, and having incorrect Aqeedah about Allah and Islam (they follow the ways of the Sufiyah and the Deobandiyah, and not that of the Ahlus Sunnah)."

Since I am an ordinary, "moderate" Muslim, and not well-versed with the multi-faceted schismatic complexities of the Islamic faith, with which an infinitesimally tiny, email-sending variety is concerned, I confess that I cannot be of much help in deciphering the many "labels" contained within the lines quoted above. Suffice it to say that my Label Lexicon is greatly enriched by the following: "shadeed Hanafees", "mu'tassib", "Deobandiyah", "Ahlus Sunnah", "Sufiyah". Some of these labels are used to denounce the Taliban.

However, what I find absolutely incredible is the primary rationale used to criticise the Taliban. They

are denounced, not because of their appalling violation and utter disregard for human rights and human life, but because they allegedly follow the Deobandiyah and the ways of the Sufiyah and are shadeed Hanafees, and possess incorrect Aqeedah! They are condemned not for the brutal treatment of human beings (and women are human beings first, no matter what other labels men might ascribe to them) within their care, but first and foremost for belonging to the wrong sect!

And this from the followers of a religion that says "to save the life of one human being is comparable to saving all of humanity". And this from the followers of a faith whose holy book begins with the words: "In the name of Allah, the most merciful and the most compassionate". And this from the followers of a God who told His Prophet that He was merely a messenger of the Divine Message, and not a warden over the people to whom this message was given.

Of course there are innumerable other all-encompassing labels. Some of them are constantly being used by "civilised", "good" people to describe "psychotic" "cave dwellers" in remote parts of the world. As a moderate Muslim human being, I am bewildered by the rhetoric I hear emanating from a big white house with huge pillars, as well as that being emitted from outside a crumbling cave. Labels galore yet again. "Crusade" is matched by "holy war" or "jihad", "infidels" is countered with "evildoers", and both sides order us to declare our allegiance: we must decide if we are with them or with the "evildoers/infidels".

Labels: evildoers, terrorists, freedom fighters, good guys, bad guys, fundamentalist, extremist, moderate, infidels, democrats, Blacks, Orientals, natives, Arabs, Jews, gays, liberals, pinkos, militants, commies, gentiles, hawks, radicals.

Plain, simple, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-purpose nametags. Bred in insecurity, narrow-mindedness, bias, just as much, perhaps, as our own anxiety and the uncertainty of the world around us. Not only are they useless, but dangerous as well. Is it easier for us, as ordinary people, to defer to the comfort zone of a pre-determined, pre-judged idea of someone else's second-hand experience? Perhaps.

Meanwhile, I remain a moderate Muslim, 30-something, Pakistani journalist who lives in West Asia, has a whole host of Arab, black, white, infidel friends, loves Afghan cuisine, Woody Allen and Cohen Brothers movies, the music of Echo and the Bunnymen, Dido, Pathan-e-Khan and Vivaldi, the words of Maulana Rumi, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Arundhati Roy, Chinua Achebe, Ernest Hemingway and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and utterly fail to comprehend prejudice, war, self-righteous cultural, racial, religious arrogance, and the appeal of country western music.

I wonder if old Fidel's still got a place for a much-labelled soul like me in his backyard?

*(Originally carried by tehelka.com)*

# “Slicing India”

## New perspectives on India since 1947

If we had a clearer picture of how India changed after independence, we might have a better sense of where it is going today. But how to encompass half a century’s history of hundreds of millions of people? Like a geologist analysing cross-sections of strata to understand how rock was formed and what may lie beneath, “Slicing India” examines the people, institutions, movements and diversions that were prominent in five specific years – the years of the Kumbh Mela when most of north India turns its attention for six weeks to Allahabad: 1954, 1966, 1977, 1989 and 2001. The last Kumbh Mela under British rule was in 1942, held at the same time that Singapore fell and as the Japanese were advancing through Burma. By 1954, India had been free for nearly seven years ...

by **Robin Jeffrey**

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**T**he Kumbh Mela of 1954, intended to be a celebration of the new India, became the greatest single day of death since the partition of 1947. On the main bathing day of 3 February, a crowd vastly greater than expected, estimated at between two and four million people, moved towards the confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna (the *sangam*) to bathe. When processions of holy men, demanding privileged right of way, became entangled with the crowds, frightened pilgrims ran, tripped, fell and tumbled down embankments made muddy with winter rain. Officially, 14 children, 49 men and 253 women were killed and thousands injured. Though the Prime Minister and other “VIPs” watched from the ramparts of Allahabad’s famous Fort, the size of the crowd was so great that the stampede was not evident and they did not learn of it until late in the afternoon. This was a stark metaphor for the new India: the rulers standing on the walls of an ancient fortress able to see the people, yet unaware that the people were surging to their deaths.

In the aftermath, one of the accusations was that politicians and officials had sought a record-breaking Kumbh Mela crowd to demonstrate the vitality of the new India. The chairman of the inquiry denied the allegation. “Hundreds of thousands of people have been coming to Prayaga to bathe in the Sangam for thousands of years from all over India”, he wrote. Their “irresistible inner urge and undying faith” meant that “no

propaganda is needed to induce such people to come”. And in this year, “the news ... spread and reached every corner of the country” that “this year’s Kumbh was of extraordinary significance”, a particularly auspicious occasion, happening only once every 144 years”.

The Mela in 1954 united two different impulses: the “irresistible inner urge” of ordinary Hindus and the visions and ambitions of the men and women trying to remake the Indian state. Even the author of the inquiry report conceded that the way in which the Kumbh Mela elicited a common do-or-die spirit in so many people in so many parts of India represented “a valuable asset in the national character of a people,” because it did not need government incitement.

There was little doubt that government and leaders sought to make the Kumbh Mela a great event. The railways promoted their special trains to the festival, and officials in charge of arrangements were said to have been “animated by the feeling that the 1954 Mela, being the first big Kumbha at Prayaga after independence ... should be made a grand success”. The Planning Commission took the opportunity to bring “home to millions of people” the virtues of the First Five-Year Plan “through Charts, Models, Maps, Radio Talks and Film Shows” at the Mela. And leading politicians and their associates made well-publicised plans to attend.

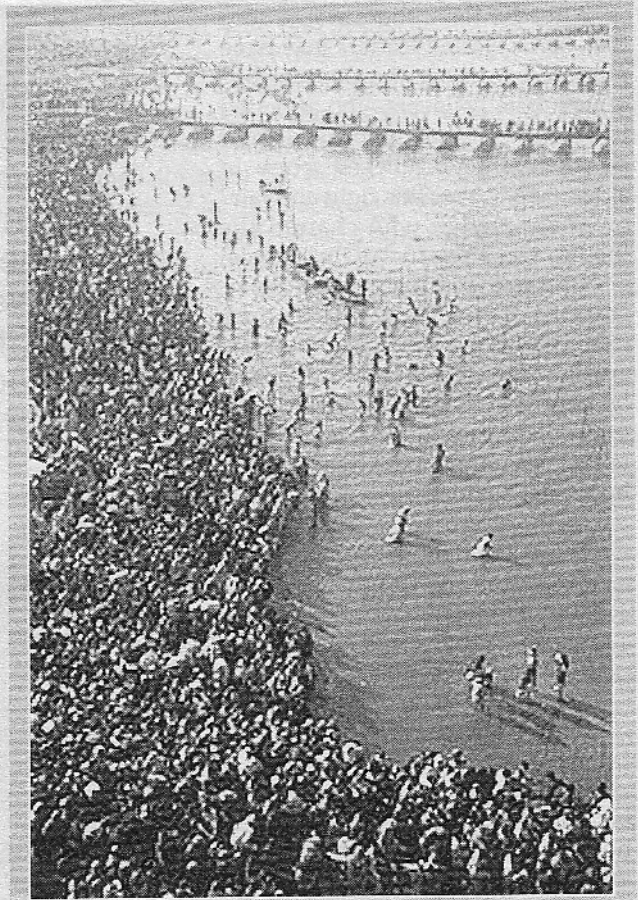
## Clash of great words

Great words clashed in the Kumbh Mela and its aftermath. "Democracy", "modernity" and "tradition", and the way characteristics of each might blend into the new India, were examined and questioned. The Mela seemed a potent force for "mobilising the masses" since it drew millions of people to a single place with very little government effort. Surely this was an expression of the popular will and should be welcomed and used. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) told parliament that he went to the Kumbh Mela "to meet the people of India who had gathered there in mighty numbers." He always "made it a point," however, "to abstain from bathing." The "modern man" aimed to use the "age-old sentiment" to communicate with "the people."

This tension ran through the year and the time. Newly-elected politicians and legislatures sought to uplift the masses, revive Indian culture, expunge the stains of colonialism, make a mark on world affairs, reward themselves for years of suffering in the freedom movement – in short, to create a new India. There were various road maps and plans of how this might be done, but all were charts of unknown country. No one had ever tried to make democracy work in a country as large and diverse as India, whose population in 1954 approached 400 million people.

Democracy itself seemed to sit uneasily with the requirements of crowd control and the intense emotional experience that even the Home Minister of the Government of India felt "connected him with his ancestors of a thousand years ago who had attended past Kumbhs". The huge crowds were "the people", as many of "the people" as anyone could ever envisage seeing in one place at one time. They were entitled to respect; but they also had to be managed. "On account of independence", wrote the responsible police officer to his subordinates before the Mela, "every citizens [sic] of our country expects his due from the Police". He emphasised that all policemen must be honest, polite and dedicated because that was what free India now expected. But the desire "to please too many people" could lead to "the sacrifice of the cardinal principles of traffic control".

For the British, management of the Kumbh Mela had required attention to law, order and public health. Bands of holy men, or *sadhus*, posed a threat to order, but they could be contained. "During the British regime", the police officer told the inquiry after the disaster, "the Sadhus obeyed orders more readily than they were prepared to do now". The British "could be, and were, very firm with the Sadhus". But now, wrote the chairman of the inquiry, himself a very British sort of official, administrators had "the feeling that they must be careful lest the Sadhus should enlist the sympathy of some political or politico-religious organisation ... which might get them into trouble".



Probably the largest religious gathering in the world, the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad is held at the junction of the Ganga, Jamuna and mythical Saraswati Rivers when the planets, according to astrologers, are in a particular constellation. This occurs every 11 or 12 years. Pilgrims come from throughout India to bathe at the sangam over a number of weeks but especially on the single most auspicious day. The origins of the Kumbh Mela are often described as "ancient," but some historians argue that its unchallenged supremacy as a centre for mass pilgrimage dates from the late nineteenth century. In 2001, official estimates claimed that as many as 30 million pilgrims bathed on the most auspicious day.

## New elites at an old mela

The Kumbh Mela no doubt had always had political potential. But in a practising democracy its potential and fascination grew. The country's leading politicians were keen to attend: the president and prime minister of India, the governor and chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, the governor of Punjab, the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh "and a number of Union and States Ministers, and scholars and religious leaders from abroad". The president brought with him his wife and elder sister, the latter in a wheel chair but intent on bathing on the auspicious day.

Already, then, there was a conflict. Some elected leaders may have attended to meet the people; but others were believers who attended to seek merit and who used their positions to get privileged access. In a democracy, was this right and fair?

The ex-judge who chaired the inquiry was a product of the colonial civil service and a sceptical democrat, if a democrat at all. Floating loftily above the rustics caught in the crush at the sangam on 3 February, he nevertheless disliked a new kind of privilege that he detected. A new term, "an unfortunate expression", he wrote, "gained currency". The term was "VIP".

These letters of the alphabet, I am told, stand for the words "Very Important Persons". I do not know when and how this expression came into vogue. Perhaps it is one of those phrases which became current during the last war. Be that as it may, we have had to hear a good deal about it during this enquiry.

He disapproved of the way in which "VIP" had been embraced and used to describe various politicians. Yet he rejected the allegation that the police and civil authorities were so preoccupied with the needs of "VIPs" that they neglected their duties. The old England-returned elite recognised a need for elites like itself; but it did not welcome upstarts of the kind who embraced the term "VIP" or were ready to live in something called the "VIP Camp". The truly distinguished, he pointed out, stayed at Anand Bhavan (Nehru's family home) or the governor's residence.

Here was one of the problems of the new democracy. It had an old bureaucratic elite, typified by the author of the inquiry report, that resented upstart politicians. It was creating a political class of tens of thousands of legislators and aspirant legislators. Yet everything was to be done in the name of "the people". After the stampede at the Kumbh Mela, one writer mused about whether it is wise to allow such vast congregations, but if it is the people's wish, how can you say "no" in a democracy? "... is there anything wrong in helping the simple masses to satisfy a traditional religious urge? This is surely for the people themselves to decide."

Open electoral politics were a fact. In the winter of 1951-52, India had held the largest elections in history with more than 120 million people casting ballots (46 percent of eligible voters). A correspondent on Republic Day, 26 January 1954, rejoiced that "the foundations for a democratic welfare State, where the people will live in contentment and happiness have been well laid".

Some of the old freedom fighters disputed how the

### At the 1954 Kumbh Mela, the Planning Commission took the opportunity to bring "home to millions of people" the virtues of the First Five-Year Plan "through Charts, Models, Maps, Radio Talks and Film Shows".

magnetism of the Kumbh Mela should contribute to the new India. JB Kripalani (1888-1982), whose life provides a long thread in the warp of Indian experience, attacked the "political capital" that Nehru's Congress Party made out of the Mela. Instead of propelling India into the future, such celebrations "tried to take the country back to the middle ages by making the Mela 'fashionable'."

Lean and ascetic, Kripalani was born in Sindh, educated in Bombay and teaching in a college in Bihar when he encountered MK Gandhi

in 1917. Thereafter, he was never far from the frontlines of the nationalist movement, becoming president of the Congress from 1946-48 before resigning and eventually forming his own party. By 1954 it had become part of the Praja Socialist Party which Kripalani led in parliament, where he delivered his scornful attack on the uses to which the Kumbh Mela had been put. Democracy, he argued, was tempting people to do foolish things. The 1954 Mela, he asserted, was

widely advertised and all and sundry were assured of travel and other facilities. This was never done by the former Governments, which had rather warned people against the conditions that were likely to be created. It was also advertised this year that high dignitaries of the Congress and of the Government would be present at the Mela.

In the past, even princes when they attended the Mela had gone on foot to the sangam, but today's politicians came in cars.

We are asking our country to go back to the middle ages and its forms and rituals in the name of Indian culture. We do all this to make ourselves popular with the masses so that they may keep us in power. And because we do these things without faith, our efforts fail as miserably as they failed at the Kumbh Mela and the country is plunged into gloom. Let us beware in time for the sake of our country and for the love of our religion.

The speech angered some members of the Lok Sabha, but when the deputy speaker sought to restrain Kripalani, Nehru supported Kripalani's right to continue. Nehru seemed to share the uneasiness about the attraction and the potential of the Mela.

The magnetism of the Mela offered temptations: a way of capturing "the people's" attention and energising them for the task of building a new India. So

many statements recognised that “a new social and economic order cannot be built without popular enthusiasm.” To remodel the countryside, it seemed necessary “to approach every individual villager” and make “him [sic] an active participant in the development effort”. The energy infusing the Kumbh Mela and captivating “the people” could be harnessed for such ends.

The men and women who evicted the British took over a deeply embedded administration. They faced a conflict adapting a system they knew, understood and had been trained to operate – perhaps in spite of themselves – to accord with their proclaimed ideals about empowering the people and reforming the state. How much of the old regime should be retained? How much of “organic, Indian India” that was practised and understood in 600,000 villages had to be rejected and itself reformed to accord with new visions of what a state should be and what modernity meant?

If the people were to be empowered, new kinds of leaders would have to come from among the people. The leaders who watched but could not see the stampede at the Kumbh Mela were high-caste, English-educated lawyers from an elite that had formed in the nineteenth century around the institutions that the British laid down – law courts, administration, schools and hospitals. Three, Nehru, GB Pant (1887-1961), the chief minister of UP, and KN Katju (1887-1968), the home minister, were Brahmins. The fourth, Rajendra Prasad (1884-1963), the president, was a Kayasth. But higher-caste Hindus were no more than a quarter of all the people who lived in India, though they formed a disproportionately large number of political leaders.

### Political stonemasons

On 30 March 1954, as the inquiry into the Kumbh disaster was hearing evidence in north India, a new chief minister was installed in Madras State (today’s Tamil Nadu). K Kamaraj (1903-75), a Nadar, a caste considered “low” and often associated with cultivation of the palmyra palm and with liquor-making, supplanted C Rajagopalachari (1879-1972), the intellectual Brahmin nationalist and last governor general of India, as the chief minister. Kamaraj was as corpulent and rustic as Rajagopalachari was ascetic and urbane. Kamaraj knew little English and had left school as a boy. Rajagopalachari translated religious works and theorised about nuclear war.

This transition from one leader to another suggested that India’s encounter with democracy might be more than a flirtation. In contrast, as it was happening, a democratic endeavour came apart within weeks in neighbouring Pakistan. In East Pakistan (today’s Bangladesh), the aged AK Fazlul Huq led a united front to a big victory in provincial elections in March. He formed a government that lasted only two months before its secessionist-sounding rhetoric provoked its dismissal by the central government in West Pakistan.

The situation in India was different, but the social and linguistic diversity out of which Kamaraj rose had some similarities. The Congress Party had not done well in Madras in the general elections of 1951-2. Rajagopalachari was able to form a government only with the support of independents and smaller parties. In addition, a resilient anti-north, anti-caste, anti-Hindi movement campaigned for local autonomy, ill defined but possibly extending even to independence. If Pakistan, why not Dravidistan (land of the southern peoples), some asked. In the face

of this, the rise of Kamaraj as a from-the-soil leader renewed the roots of the Congress in the

Tamil areas. Kamaraj won two elections, held the chief ministership for nine years and

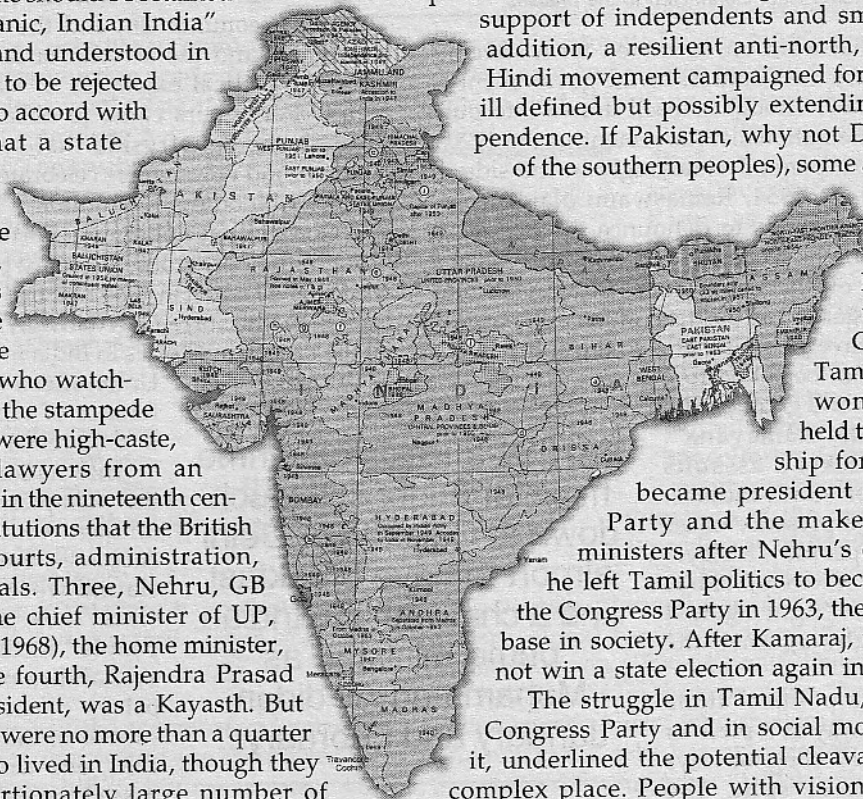
became president of the Congress Party and the maker of two prime ministers after Nehru’s death. But when he left Tamil politics to become president of the Congress Party in 1963, the Congress lost its base in society. After Kamaraj, the Congress did not win a state election again in Tamil Nadu.

The struggle in Tamil Nadu, both within the Congress Party and in social movements outside it, underlined the potential cleavages in a socially complex place. People with visions and ambitions tapped away with sharp-pointed chisels, searching out such cleavages to split off social constituencies for political purposes. “A ‘battle for religion’ is on in Tamil Nad [sic]”, the *Times of India* reported,

iconoclasts relentlessly preaching godlessness and godfearing people urging ... the need for piety and faith.

The din of this verbal “jihad” is heard even in the remote corners of the city [of Madras] as scores of lectures ... are held daily at every available maidan or public auditorium either to denounce God or sing His praise.

The provocateur was EV Ramaswami Naicker, who had founded the anti-north Indian organisation, Dravi-





*K Kamraj and NT Rama Rao: Connected to the masses*

da Kazhagam, that went on, in muted form after his ejection, to displace the Congress as the government of Tamil Nadu in 1967. Though himself drawn into public life through the nationalist movement in the 1920s, he became a thorn planted annoyingly in the side of Rajagopalachari. In 1954, Ramaswami Naicker appeared on Madras streets to denounce the *Ramayana* and “threaten to break icons of Lord Ram and make a bonfire of books on the Ramayana”. Rajagopalachari was “generally regarded as the head of the other camp” and was said to have given impetus to the anti-Ramayana forces when he “began writing a series of articles and giving radio broadcasts on the Ramayana”. Ramaswami Naicker’s assaults extended to other south Indians. He denounced the presence of far too many Kerala people – Malayalis – in the public service in Madras and promised to “fight against them as I fought against the Aryans”.

One can see a political stone mason, tapping away at a piece of rock, listening and feeling for ways that it will slice or split. The political boundaries of the old Madras state provided the rock, and the various language, religious and caste groups – or indeed, “racial” groups if people were prepared to respond to the threat from “the Aryans” that Ramaswami Naicker held out – were the layers and fragments in the rock. It did not fissure quite as Ramaswami Naicker might have envisaged, though the beneficiaries were his former associates (and filmmakers) in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Nevertheless, he was testing a method of political exploration that countless other politicians in India experimented with in the second half of the twentieth century in circumstances of “democracy” and elections.

In north India, too, similar, though less bold, probing went on. Ram Manohar Lohia, an ill-disciplined yet magnetic socialist, sought ways of “mobilising the

masses” by using close-to-the-bone sentiments like those of caste. Lohia preached a nationalistic socialism that ridiculed the communists as high-caste, out-of-touch and unpatriotic. In 1954, such headway as he made lay in disrupting the Praja Socialist Party and supporting attempts to “liberate” the Portuguese colony of Goa by sending in bands of *satyagrahis* to offer civil disobedience.

### Surpassing expectations

Confrontations like Goa, and practices like *satyagraha*, placed India before the world. In a time of nuclear confrontation between communism and the “Free World”, Vinobha Bhave and the *bhoodan* or land-grant movement offered practical examples of Gandhi’s non-violent recipe. Foreigners came to observe the processions through the countryside that solicited land for the landless, and newspapers celebrated Bhave as the “Man behind a Bloodless Revolution”. The *satyagrahis* sent into Goa did not undermine Portuguese rule, but they brought the Portuguese presence to the attention of the world. The French in 1954 had had enough. In Vietnam, Dien Bien Phu surrendered in May, and on 1 November, all the French territories in India merged into the Indian Union after a vote of 170-8 by a conference of representatives elected in the French territories.

International affairs provided the examples where the new government could claim its greatest successes. Partly, of course, such claims were harder to dispute since they did not affect “the people” in the same way as the availability of health care or the prices of rice and wheat. The success of India’s foreign policy in 1954, one writer enthused, “surpassed the wildest expectations of

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**In 1954 a Pakistani prime minister might still touch down at Calcutta or Delhi airport to have breakfast and a chat with the Indian prime minister, as Mohammed Ali did in January and February...**

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its most fervent supporters”. According to this view, India had reshaped the Commonwealth and made it a body of equals. It chaired both the UN Repatriation Committee created to help end the war in Korea and the International Commission for Indochina. It embraced the People’s Republic of China with visits by Chou En-lai to India in June and Nehru to Beijing in October. Even the great setback, the decision of Pakistan to accept US arms and alliances, could be interpreted as a stand on principle. When the US offered India arms and an alliance, India and Nehru proudly rejected them. Even a little noticed political party called the Jana Sangh concluded, “India’s foreign policy had already achieved considerable success”.

Economic planning was another aspect of the vision of a strong, effective state working for the prosperity

and cultural fulfilment of the Indian people. In 1954, the First Five-Year Plan was barely three years old. Its achievements were awaited, but its problems were beginning to be felt. Often, the apparatus to execute proposals was missing. Funds could not be spent because there were not the officials or the public pressure to devise programmes, extricate money and then see projects carried out. This was particularly true in rural India, where the plan architects placed their hopes for rapid transformation. "District plans are a vital stage in planning from the village upwards in all those fields of development which bear closely on the life of the people." But it proved almost impossible to produce district plans that were more than the product of hurried local officials manufacturing a document to satisfy their superiors.

Nevertheless, it was possible to point to economic achievements. Bicycle production nearly doubled in two years to 191,000 bicycles a year, a rate at which it would only take 15 years to produce a bicycle for every adult. The greatest symbol of economic dynamism, however, was the inauguration on 7 July of the Bhakra canal system to generate electricity from the great Bhakra Dam in Punjab. Nehru told a crowd estimated at 100,000 that

today, the real gurudwaras and churches were those places where great construction works were in progress. It was at these places that toiling millions were sweating for the benefit of other human beings. What place of worship could be more pure and more sacred? (*Times of India* paraphrase)

Another component of the vision of industrialisation lay in the factories that would use the power. Decreeing that factories would be built was easier than establishing programmes of rural development. A factory was a project that engineers could plan and contractors could execute. The state took responsibility for establishing a National Industrial Development Corporation, setting up a railway coach factory in Madras, a cable factory in Calcutta, a steel factory at Rourkela in Bihar. These enterprises celebrated not only purposeful economic development to eliminate poverty but the competence of Indian know-how. When disagreements with American engineers troubled the Bhakra project, a writer noted in the *Times of India* that "surely there is enough [Indian] talent available in the Punjab and other States to execute the Bhakra dam".

### **Terminated, not banned**

State-generated institutions were similarly welcomed

in cultural and administrative affairs. The central government started an Indian Institute of Public Administration to improve administration and three national academies of literature, music and the arts to "preserve the glorious traditions of the past and enrich them by the work of modern artists". In radio, the medium with the greatest potential to reach large numbers of people, All India Radio (AIR) provided the only service, through which it strove to improve the people by a diet of high and serious culture. Film songs, the minister of information and broadcasting told parliament, were not banned; it was simply that most film producers "had terminated their agreement with the AIR". This, he implied, was not a bad thing since film songs "generally appealed to children and adolescents, that is, those who do not understand things and who can be attracted in the most primitive way".

The men and women who steered the post-colonial state in 1954 exhibited a puritanical belief in the state's

duty to improve. In this respect, they displayed qualities of the more conscientious British colonial official. Radio, as a state monopoly, could be painstakingly controlled and used to better the tastes of the masses, but films, produced by capitalists, needed to be censored. The Central Board of Film Censors, founded in 1952 and appointed by the government from people like vice-chancellors and members of parliament, sought to purify the imaginations of the crafty directors and producers of Bombay and Madras. The latter, however, held their own.

"His passion plunged her into shame", shouted the advertisement for *Amar*, directed and produced by Mehboob Khan (1906-64), with Dilip Kumar, actor of the year in 1954, in the role of the "honest, god-fearing young lawyer Amar" who shelters a "young and beautiful milkmaid" who has run away "from a village wolf [two-legged]". But Amar "fall[s] prey to a violent fit of lust that seized him and plunged her into sordid shame".

Political elites made much of chastity and austerity and were troubled by their inability to rally the rural masses. The film industry frothed, fantasised and calculated its success by the profits of its films, measured in the millions of tickets it sold. In March 1954, *Filmfare*, the English-language magazine of the *Times of India* group, staged the first Filmfare Trophy Awards, presided over by the US ambassador. It was a remarkable choice, given that the Eisenhower government was in deep disfavour with the Government of India after embracing Pakistan as an ally in the containment of communism. The decision to give this [military] aid to Pakistan", Nehru wrote to Mohammed Ali, the Pakistan prime minister, on 5 March 1954, "has changed

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...it was also perfectly normal for a Pakistani team to reach the final of a Bombay soccer competition – before going down to a largely Muslim team from the former princely state of Hyderabad.

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the whole context of the Kashmir issue, and the long talks we have had over this matter have little relation to the new facts which flow from this aid". The film industry, marching to a different, capitalist drumbeat, was ready to do what was necessary to slip round state disapproval, if the results promised big audiences and good returns.

In Tamil, film was an art form, a political message-bearer and a source of funds for political parties and social movements. The hit of the year, *Manohar*, could be viewed as an historical epic, set in Chola times a thousand years ago, or as a subtle tale underlining the dignity of the Tamil people who uproot unrighteous interlopers and restore rightful heirs. Written by M Karunanidhi, a scriptwriter later to be three times chief minister of Tamil Nadu, it was part of a range of films bringing wealth and notoriety to men and women associated with the DMK. It marked the way in which the film industry, more successfully than the political system, connected an elite minority and masses of ordinary people. The Tamil film industry became a base for political movements asserting local identities. In Telugu, NT Rama Rao, later to be chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, produced his first film in 1954. *Toda Dongalu* "flopped", but was said to begin a new genre of realistic films about "little" people who eventually give oppressive bosses their comeuppance.

### **Making India modern**

In 1954, India was still coming to terms with the raw meaning of nation-statehood. This openness showed itself in the ambiguity over Kashmir, where discussion of a plebiscite was not officially ruled out, even while puppet politicians talked of the irrevocability of Kashmir's accession to India. In 1954 a Pakistani prime minister might still touch down at Calcutta or Delhi airport to have breakfast and a chat with the Indian prime minister, as Mohammed Ali did in January and February. It was reasonable too for a Pakistani team to reach the final of a Bombay soccer competition – before going down to a largely Muslim team from the former princely state of Hyderabad. Keamari Union of Karachi beat Mohun Bagan of Calcutta, 1-0, in the semi-final of the 56th Rovers Cup Football Tournament in Bombay on 2 November, but lost the next day in the final to Hyderabad Police, who won the cup for the fifth successive year. Underlining the diversity and complexity of India, three-quarters of the players on the field that day bore Muslim names.

The goal of being modern imbued the founders of the new state, and India's diversity had to be moulded to meet that goal. Matters of religion had therefore to be

addressed, and throughout the year, parliament struggled with legislation to codify the personal law of Hindus. The aim was to bring the vast complexity of "Hindu-ism" in India within a single framework, derived both from the writings and practices of people called Hindus and the inherited priggery of Victorian colonialism. The glacial pace at which various bills proceeded through parliament led Nehru to clash with his own law minister. When the latter asked for a further delay in then submission of a report on the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Bill, "Mr Nehru jumped to his feet" and "excitedly opposed" the motion. If matters "go on like this", Nehru complained, "then the Joint Committee will take 20 years to submit its report". Many members of parliament had an interest in leaving things as they were. The very modest Special Marriage Bill was finally approved by parliament in September after two years of discussion. It did no more than permit people of any religion to register marriages and thereby contract into various provisions for divorce and inheritance. The reasons for the codification of personal law, according to Nehru, were to overcome "the rigidity" that British law had unnaturally introduced into social practices in India. Yet he and his colleagues aimed for a new uniformity that they saw as essential for nation building. "In our building up a nation in this country", he told the Lok Sabha, "it is essential that we should aim at certain uniformities. If you do not break down the barriers, first of all in the Hindu com-

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**At the Kumbh Mela in January 1954, "ten thousand saffron-robed sanyasis broke their meditation ... to pledge to unite the people of India against the proposed US-Pakistan military alliance". They vowed to "bring about unity through country-wide preaching."**

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munity itself ... [and then] the others who live in this great country, you will never build up basically that national concept we talk about so much." He himself favoured a common civil code for all Indians, "but I confess I do not think that at the present moment the time is ripe in India to try to push it through". A supporter explained: "We should first put our own house in order before we invite Muslims to join us." Four other acts, which together made up legislation referred to as the "Hindu Code," took another two years.

Attempts to order the law relating to social practices went ahead at the same time that individual states were wrestling with land reform, when many aspects of the federal system were under review by the States Reorganisation Commission. Entangled in all questions of federalism and the rights of states was Kashmir and the developing relationship with Pakistan. In 1947 that relationship had been hostile, but at least it was ambiguous and unformed and it therefore was possible that it might become more friendly and co-operative. Over time, however, hostility became institutionalised. It was perhaps a sign of the way in which nation-states



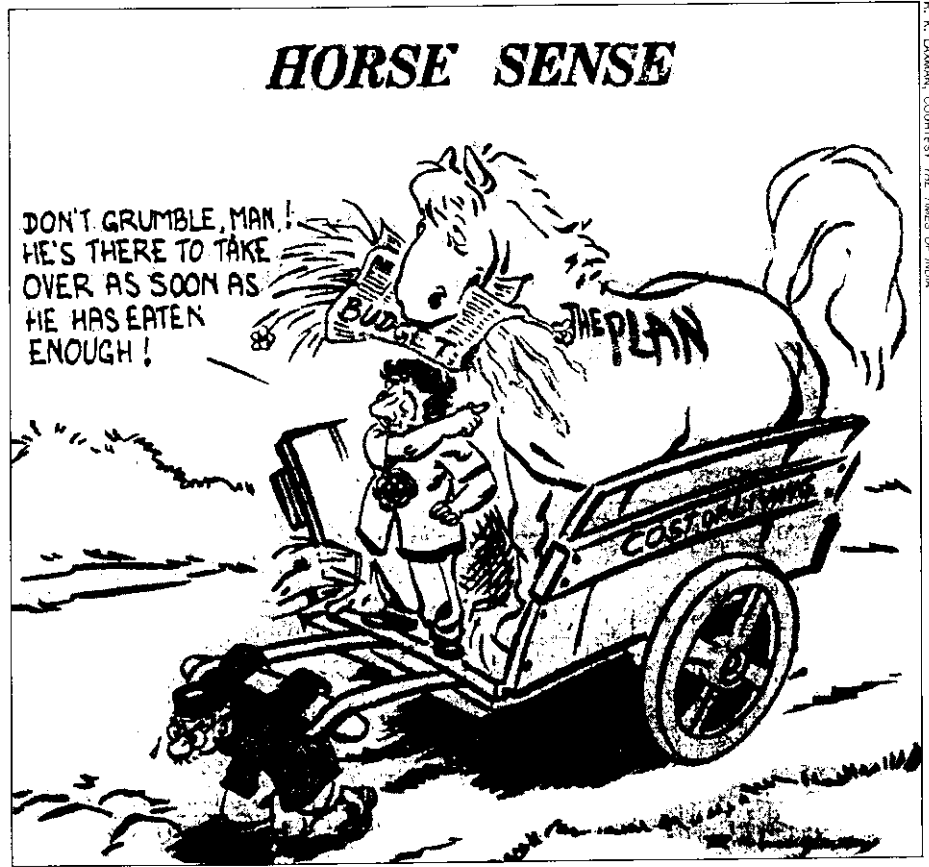
seek to reach citizens – and citizens seek to win the favour of states – that at the Kumbh Mela in January 1954, “ten thousand saffron-robed *sanyasis* broke their meditation ... to pledge to unite the people of India against the proposed US-Pakistan military alliance”. They vowed to “bring about unity through country-wide preaching.” Such gestures indicated that a perception of Pakistan as something concrete and adversarial would permeate widely and deeply through the population and could be made a way to mobilise voters. When the next Kumbh Mela assembled in 1966, there would be no Karachi football teams playing in Bombay tournaments.

### Faith in the fat horse

India’s national elite in 1954 was reaching a crest on a roller coaster of confidence and vision. There was widespread belief in the ability of the state to transform society, economy and political participation. “The people” needed to be mobilised, educated and improved. India needed to develop “national”, all-India practices, based on the finest aspects of ancient Indian custom and stripped of the worst accretions of colonial rule. The English language was to be steadily supplanted by a national language, Hindi, which All India Radio and the Indian Army were already adapting and propagating.

Amid the bustle and confidence were signs that expectations were too high. “Little ... has been done in the last four and a half years” to spread Hindi, the *Times of India* declared and doubted whether the target of replacing English by 1965 could be achieved. Editorial writers lamented “democratic immaturity of both Authority and the people”, exhibited in violent demonstrations and the inability of government to respond to clearly defined needs. Even the opening of state institutions on which hopes were pinned could provoke agonising about the direction of the new India. The inauguration of the Indian Institute of Public Administration led to expressions of hope that it might “help stop the rot” that had turned the “steel frame” of bureaucracy into “a bamboo frame ... being progressively eaten up by insects”.

The drivers of the state sought to involve “the people” yet frequently failed to do so effectively, as the stampede at the Kumbh Mela frighteningly illustrated.



R. K. LAXMAN, COURTESY: THE TIMES OF INDIA

The triumphs of foreign policy, the foundation-laying and the institution-building needed to make inroads into the 83 percent of 400 million people who could not read or write and among whom the infant mortality rate was more than 120 per thousand live births. The cartoonist RK Laxman captured the complexity of innovation, hope and doubt in a reflection on the five-year plan (see above). Laxman’s Common Man pulls both the politician and the fat horse called “The Plan”. The politician promises that things will get much easier once the horse has had enough to eat.

By the time the faithful gathered for the next Kumbh Mela in January 1966, faith in the fat horse called “The Plan” had diminished further. India had fought two wars and was enduring a near-famine, Nehru was dead, and there were 100 million more common women and common men, living little better than they had in 1954.

*Note: Most quotations in the article are either from the Times of India or The Hindu.*

*(This article is the first in a series by the writer on the history of modern India as seen through the lens of successive Kumbh Melas.)*

# Uncle Sam in South Asia

(Waiting for “imperial overstretch”)

Jawaharlal Nehru would have been shocked. His daughter Indira would have been outraged. Rajiv Gandhi would have been paralysed. But the person in charge of carrying forward the Nehru-Gandhi legacy these days is Sonia Gandhi. Being born in Italy, Sonia probably knows the literal meaning of the Green Berets’ motto, “De oppresso libre” – but as yet a greenhorn in Indian politics, she is unlikely to comprehend the true significance of an elite American corps’ mission of “liberating the oppressed”. It seems the saffronite dispensation in New Delhi has fully resigned itself to a subservient role even in South Asia. The United States of America is now the real overlord this side of the Himalaya. Chacha Chaudhary in New Delhi, Mama Abdul in Islamabad, Granny Bandarnaike in Colombo, Begum Didi in Dacca and Sanu Bhai in Kathmandu, please line up and applaud. Uncle Sam will presently take a bow.

## The heartland

When Coca-Cola staged a comeback in the Indian market, it chose to launch its products from Agra. And when American paracommandos decided to conduct their first joint exercises with the Indian Army, they too opted for a site close to the Taj Mahal. Such coincidences are not uncommon; there is a precedence of the American army marching along in the footprints of US multinationals. Coca-Cola and Pepsi – along with Microsoft, Murdoch and many other industrial motors run by Wall Street investors – are here to stay in South Asia. And so the US marines that will protect their interests must come over for a *recce*, and a taste of the mid-May *loo*.

Given the location, nature and timing of this joint exercise, public opinion in India should have questioned the propriety of bringing in the Green Berets next door to New Delhi. But much of the reporting in the Indian media was celebratory. Comments of the opposition leaders were congratulatory. And the consuming classes of urban India seemed to revel in this as a signal of America’s support for India, interpreted in India as a decline in America’s support for the land across the Wagah border. Very few appear to be bothered about the long-term significance of GI Joe and Jawan Ram Singh parajumping arm-in-arm.

The new-found camaraderie between the Pentagon and Raisina Hill is a direct result of the changed circumstances since 9/11, although its origin does go back to the arrival of Bill Clinton on Indian shores. Sensing an opportunity of setting an incensed Bush against a cornered Mush, Jaswant Singh immediately expressed willingness to help America every which way. But New Delhi’s calculations were off. General Musharraf took

no time in doing an about-turn. He not only abandoned the Taliban, but also actually joined America’s ‘War on Terrorism’ without a moment’s hesitation.

The abruptness of this somersault in Islamabad’s strategy left South Block’s design, of lumping the jehadis of Kashmir with Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda and getting the Americans to fight them simultaneously in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in tatters. Colin Powell decided to tackle one enemy at a time, and Pakistan was after all a frontline state in the ‘War on Terror’. But the larger Indian interest lies with India.

Apart from assuring the multinationals that it has not ignored their interests in one of the biggest emerging markets of this century, the Americans want to keep India in good humour for another important reason. The Pentagon brass wants the second biggest defence force of the world on board in its mission to ensure peace in an endemically volatile region. Crudely put, Fort Bragg was perhaps testing its sub-contractors in the scorching pre-monsoon heat of Agra. Bush’s boys probably wanted to see whether they could depend on an elite Indian corps raised on a staple of *roti* and anti-Pakistan rhetoric.

## Uneasy partners

The ruse of the two largest democracies of the world being natural allies notwithstanding, the partnership between Washington and New Delhi is not a long-term arrangement. At best, it is a ‘living together’ experiment that may or may not end up in a marriage of convenience. To wipe off the history of animosity that dates back to the 1950s – when the Americans put their money on Pakistan and India gravitated towards Moscow – is not as easy as it seems. Already the more principled among New Delhi academics who have chanted the anti-American mantra through their professional lives are finding it difficult to make this geo-strategic about-turn, and are chafing at the collar.

For the present, however, there are four objectives that the USA seeks to achieve by backing India. First, the Americans want to defuse the possibility of nuclear confrontation in what George W Bush’s predecessor termed ‘the most dangerous place in the world’. Second, the Indian Navy can be a handy instrument for policing the sea-lanes all the way from Saudi Arabia to Japan. Arundhati Ghosh (the former firebrand South Block warrior, *not* to be confused with the other more famous Arundhati) once boasted to Saarcy that New Delhi considered the stretch up to the Malaccan Straits as its area of influence despite the US base in Diego Garcia. Evidently, the Americans want the Indians to continue believing that fiction – the invitation extended to New Delhi to participate in the East Asian security meet in Singapore is an indication of this – so that they can concentrate their energies in West Asia for the present.

Make no mistake though. The Indian Ocean is precious to America and while they may be intending to hire a security service in the form of the Indian armed

forces, they are by no means transferring the title deed to the *chowkidar*. The third, and perhaps most important, reason behind the infatuation is a desire to preclude a *bhai-bhai* rapprochement between Beijing and New Delhi. The distance between Moscow and New Delhi has already increased and Washington DC would be happy if the Indians had nowhere to go other than into the embrace of its military-industrial complex for all their future needs. The fourth strategy is a long-term one that Chris Patten seemed to sense when he visited the Indian and Pakistani capital cities in May: the Americans are laying the groundwork for the day when the European Union will be competing for spheres of influence with them. Moscow itself may have forgotten the imperial directive, but there are historically conscious strategists in London and Paris who realise the enduring importance of Article VIII of Peter the Great's will: "Bear in mind that the commerce of India is the commerce of the world, and he who can exclusively command it is the dictator of Europe."

Goaded by the consuming classes and the influential Indian diaspora, the saffronites of New Delhi think they have no choice but to take shelter under the US security umbrella. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, for all his poetic abilities, lacks the vision to draft a long-term strategy for Indian foreign policy. Jaswant Singh, at the helm of foreign affairs, has a military background and cannot see beyond the reign of the generalissimo in Islamabad. If General Musharraf poured *ghee* over the ongoing fire of conflict with his inflammatory 27 May address, the very next day Mr Singh added some more verbal firewood to feed the inferno.

New Delhi seems to be under the impression that the cowboy combatants of the 'War on Terror' may not be against a direct assault on jihadi camps across the Line of Control in Kashmir if such a campaign were to be accurate, swift and successful. General Musharraf too appears to have realised that the Americans are getting impatient with his impotence in restraining Islamic fundamentalists. It must be this realisation that has made the general refer to his 'strategic weapons' so often lately. Ironically, the more Mush talks of a nuclear war, the louder the alarm bells go off in Western capitals, strengthening New Delhi's case that Pakistan is on the verge of going renegade. Have you noticed how, in the middle of all this, India has successfully diverted world attention away from the state-condoned pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat?

### Enduring allies?

Elsewhere in South Asia, Americans already hold sway. Sri Lanka is on the verge of signing a military pact with the United States even as New Delhi pretends not to see the emerging alliance. Earlier, when President Jayawar-



dane had tried to tow his tiny island to the US dominated ASEAN, there was a huge hue and cry in the Indian capital. This time, American overlordship is being accepted as a fait accompli.

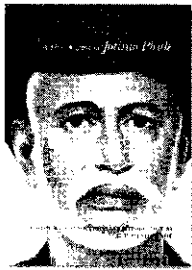
Despite the rise of *Talibangla* (the Bangladeshi version of hardcore Islamists) in Dhaka, both the begums of the country are committed to courting Washington. Dhaka intellectuals openly say that it is helpful to have the US on their side in dealing with the domineering power of the region. Besides, American investors eyeing deposits of natural gas in the Padma basin already enjoy considerable influence in the corridors of military power in Bangladesh. Multinationals instinctively know who controls the real levers of power in a poor, emerging democracy.

Even though precariously placed between Mao's China and Nehru-Gandhi's India, Nepal remained loyal to the West throughout the Cold War. (For almost a quarter of a century, Kathmandu was the only South Asian capital to have an Israeli embassy.) When President Bush agreed to grant an audience to Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in the White House Oval Office and Prime Minister Tony Blair graced a discussion between an aide and the visiting counterpart at 10 Downing Street, conservatives in Kathmandu went wild with joy. Perhaps it was the steroid of promised Western support that pumped Premier Deuba into going against his own party before mopping up the Maoist insurgency, dissolving parliament and promising a mid-term election even though the government's writ runs no further than district headquarters in much of the country.

### Hyper-power

To describe the strength of an empire unparalleled in human history, the French have coined an apt term: the USA today is not just the sole super power, but it is a hyper-power. Forces opposed to it cannot cause the downfall of a hyper-power. Rather, the world has to wait for it to extend itself beyond its capabilities and reach what the historian Paul Kennedy has identified as the point of "imperial overstretch". Meanwhile, we have no option but to put up with the imperious guest in the region, credit for inviting the camel into the tent going to the leaders of South Asia.

Now that dancing to the tune of Born in the USA has become inescapable, all that we South Asians can do is insist that the music be played on the *tabla*, flute and *sitar*. The militarisation of polity, privatisation of economy and McDonaldisation of culture that often follow the Americanisation of society must be resisted at all cost. Leaders of South Asia have failed to resolve the internal conflicts of the region, making the entry of the global hyper-power inevitable. It is left for the people and culture to bend 'Amrika' to their own image. ▽



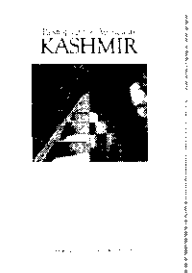
**Selected writings of Jotirao Phule**  
 Edited and with an introduction  
 by GP Deshpande  
 LeftWord, Delhi, 2002  
 pp xii+247  
 ISBN 81 87496 21 5  
 INR 450

Translated into English from the original Marathi, this collection of Jotirao Phule's writings includes most of his major works, including *Slavery* and *Cultivator's Whipcord*, although his poetry and personal correspondence are not in this volume. Principally concerned with the "brahmanism" of the ruling elite, Phule spent his life as a social reformer, educator and critic of the Hindu caste system, and established the first school for dalit girls in India. Writing that Phule was intimately concerned with the "misery and melancholy of the Indian peasantry," GP Deshpande notes in his introduction Phule's significance as the first major Indian thinker to break with the moderate English branch of European liberalism and advocate revolutionary social reform in the Subcontinent.



**Mother, sister, daughter:  
 Nepal's press on women**  
 Sancharika Samuha, Lalitpur, 2002  
 pp xx+268  
 ISBN 99933 648 1 9  
 No price recommended

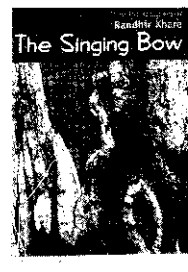
Printed with the financial support of UNIFEM, this collection of writings on women's issues in Nepal bring together recently published articles on a wide range of topics, including culture, law, health and sexual violence. Despite progressive legislative measures included in the country's 1991 constitution, discrimination against and exploitation of women is a common feature of contemporary Nepali society, with women oftentimes unable to access legal protections. Published by Sancharika Samuha, a Nepali women's advocacy group, *Mother, sister, daughter* is useful reading for those interested in understanding the multifaceted and evolving dynamic of femininity in Nepal.



**Reshaping the agenda in Kashmir**  
 By Sundeep Waslekar  
 International Centre for Peace Initiatives, Bombay, 2002  
 pp 51  
 No price recommended

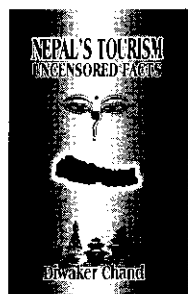
Despite representing only one-quarter of one percent of the population of India and Pakistan, Kashmir has become the most dangerous flash point for relations in

the Subcontinent. Arguing that the present morass in the divided land is a result of underdevelopment, flawed Indian governance and Pakistani-backed religious militancy, *Reshaping the agenda in Kashmir* argues for a new dialogue between India, Pakistan and the people of Kashmir. The report is the combined result of a study of international experiences and an assessment of the situation on the ground in Jammu and Kashmir. Hoping to "set the debate in a constructive direction", the author of the report, Sundeep Waslekar, argues that it is "necessary to take simultaneous steps for the resolution of conflict, reconciliation, and reconstruction of socio-economic fabric", especially in the context of the upcoming provincial elections next fall.



**The singing bow: Song-poems of the Bhil**  
 Translated and with an introduction  
 by Randhir Khare  
 HarperCollins India, Delhi, 2001  
 pp xxv+262  
 ISBN 81 7223 425 2  
 INR 295

The Bhil, India's second-largest scheduled tribe, occupy extensive portions of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan, although they have been steadily losing their group identity for several decades. Translated by the poet Randhir Khare, this assemblage of poems brings together basic Bhil poetic beliefs concerning marriage, creation, nature and death. Writing in his introduction that "today, they are a dispersed people, living in culturally cross-pollinated pockets", Khare's work is an important artistic and cultural record of a people that are quickly losing their heritage.



**Nepal's tourism: Uncensored facts**  
 By Diwaker Chand  
 Pilgrims, Varanasi, 2000  
 pp xxvii+283  
 ISBN 81 7769 078 7  
 NPR 632

Despite the traditionally fierce isolationism of the Kathmandu court, Nepal gradually opened to tourism in the years after World War II. In this well-researched work, Diwaker Chand explores the development of tourism in Nepal through the years of the 'open door' policy, panchayat state planning and the restoration of democracy. Chand weaves the threads of history, economic change and socio-cultural challenges together and offers analysis on the impact of the present Maoist struggle on the country's tourism sector.

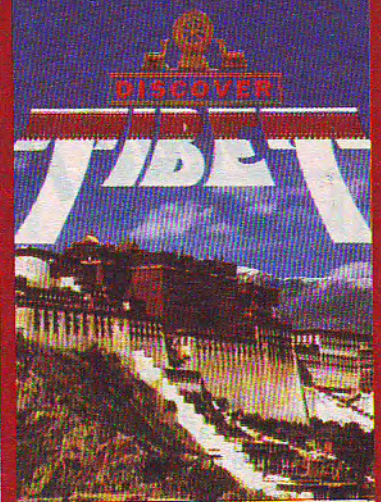
*Compiled by Deepak Thapa, Social Science Baha, Patan*



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# Dead people don't play football

**T**wo countries that cannot even play soccer propose to nuke each other, and we are all supposed to sit back and enjoy the show. At least they could hold the fireworks here in South Asia until the World Cup is over in East Asia. We will root for Argentina, we will cheer for Senegal, and not consider it at all incongruous that India and Pakistan are not on the field – they probably never will the way things are progressing. Irradiated people make bad football players and vapourised people are not even there.

Funny thing is, much of the Indus and Ganga plains, where these fierce fighting people live, is ideal soccer territory. It is flat, see. And it is a terrible place to test your ballistic nuclear missiles. Because it is populated, see. It is not as if Noida or Orangi are empty like Lop Nor or the Bikini atoll.

If only the great strategists on Star News and PTV discussed the reasons why we cannot make it to the World Cup... the stunting, the malnutrition, the diet, the facilities, the training, we would begin to get a glimmer of the misplaced priorities. *Hai na? Lekin*, till the bile rises up the gullet, they will talk about "coercive diplomacy" and nuclear throw-weight, kilotons and megatons.

Okay, the Americans and Brits – and Scandanavians, Japanese, Untied Nations staff, and even the Koreans – want their citizens out of the confrontation zone and have already evacuated. See how they value the lives of their citizens? But whoever said EU and ASEAN lives are more precious than SAARC ones?

Sheikh Hasina – sorry, Begum Zia – should immediately pick up the phone and call someone, anyone, and order the evacuation of the millions of Bangladeshi labourers, domestics and sweatshop workers from Karachi, Gujranwallah, Delhi (both cis-Jamuna and trans-Jamuna), and Hissar.

Kathmandu's government should send out an

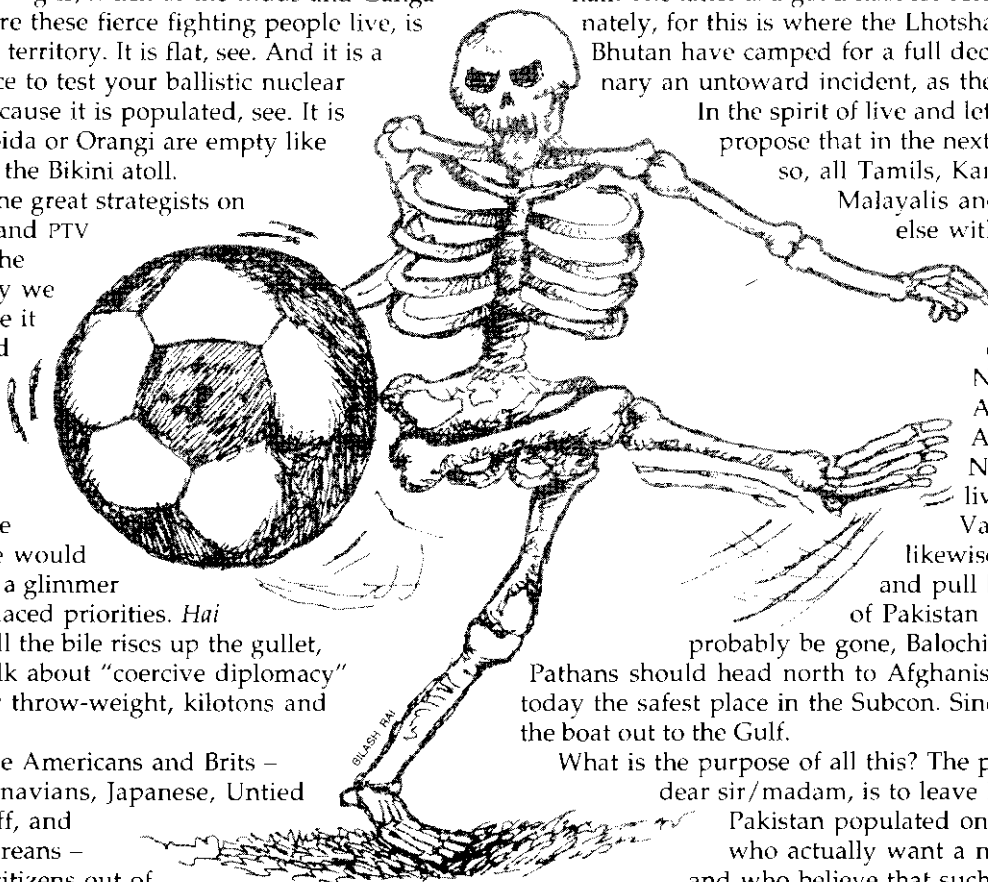
urgent travel advisory to all million-plus *desbaasis* living and working in the arch from the apple terraces of Himachal to the cages of Bombay. No better time to return to the motherland. Better to starve slowly to death than be incinerated instantaneously, unless you think otherwise.

Actually, West Nepal is so close to the possible nuclear theatre – the airforce base at Bareilly is just a stone's throw away from the Tanakpur – that the country should plan to evacuate its entire western half and use night buses to ferry the *janata* to the eastern half. The latter is a good host for refugees, fortunately, for this is where the Lhotshampa from Bhutan have camped for a full decade now with nary an untoward incident, as they say.

In the spirit of live and let live, I propose that in the next week or so, all Tamils, Kannadigas, Malayalis and whoever else with origins (and family) south of the Vindhyas evacuate all North India. All Bengalis, Assamese and Northerners living west of Varanasi should likewise pack up and pull back. Since all of Pakistan would

probably be gone, Balochis and Pathans should head north to Afghanistan, which is today the safest place in the Subcon. Sindhis can take the boat out to the Gulf.

What is the purpose of all this? The purpose, dear sir/madam, is to leave North India-Pakistan populated only by those who actually want a nuclear war, and who believe that such a war is nice and appropriate under the circumstances, and can have the satisfaction of having fought one. They want a nuclear Kurukshetra (the ancient equivalent of modern day Armageddon) overlaid over exactly where the first one was fought. Let 'em have it.



*Kanah Dixit*



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