# HIMAL
## SOUTH ASIAN

# CASTEISM IN EELAM

*ALSO INSIDE*

## CYNICISM IN THE
## AGE OF INFORMATION

# dealing with dalits

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The peace dividends Tamil Eelam leaders expect to reap over the coming months should not be allowed to overshadow the long-ignored plight of Dalits in Sri Lankan Tamil society. Making peace with the Sinhalas may happen first, but the LTTE must also make peace within its own community. An opinion piece by a prominent caste critic.

# the information revolution that wasn't

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Efforts to bring the 'information revolution' to the South Asian public have thus far been a failed combination of cynicism, incompetence and malfeasance. Even as thousands in the Subcontinent have entered the information age, millions more languish on the dark side of the digital divide. Rather than focus on big-dollar projects that only benefit consultants and the urban elite, the best hope for our region is to develop low-cost, modest solutions that can be made widely available.

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Cover image by **HW Cave**, 1903. Reproduced from *Insight guides: Sri Lanka*, 1985.

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# Nepal to Nalbari, Assam

*"Dui mohor jujat moron xadharon raijor??".*
*(Innocent citizens caught between two horns).*
– Headlines in an Asamiya daily anchoring a lead
story on Nalbari district in lower Assam.

**KANAK MANI** Dixit's essay on innocent Nepali civilians caught in the crossfire between insurgents and security forces was disturbing to say the least. The Treaty of Westphalia acknowledged the problem of civilians in situations of conflict in 1648 and yet, so many centuries later, it continues to be a thorny issue that is far from resolved, whether in Nepali or Indian villages, in the sub-Saharan deserts or along the Sri Lankan coast.

The north eastern Indian state of Assam has experienced armed violence for almost two decades now and Khagendra Sangraula's short story, quoted by Dixit, could just as well have been a replay of the experiences of Bibhuti Sarmah and so many other villagers in the Nalbari district of lower Assam, whom I interviewed last year in the course of a commissioned research project*. The objective was to study levels of human insecurity in societies that have been exposed to the threat of gun-violence over a long period. "Most people here in Nalbari live in constant anxiety, in perpetual anticipation of trouble", said Bibhuti Sarmah in the course of a focus-group interview. "It could be a threat or demand by militants; it could be fear of being unnecessarily harassed by the security forces or something as simple as someone not returning home on time. We live in constant fear because neither the militants nor the security forces would spare us if they could find half an excuse to trouble or torture us".

While armed violence in Assam has been of relatively "low intensity" and the casualties fewer in comparison to the other conflicts in the Subcontinent, it is telling that of the nearly 4500 killed in the last decade, more than half were civilians. They were victims of ethnic cleansing, retaliatory killings by militants and, it is suspected, state agencies, political targets and even victims of purely criminal acts. As the lethality of the conflicts and the numbers of ethnic militias have increased, there has been a concurrent increase in accusations against the state police and central security forces of having violated human security in the course of counter-insurgency operations.

In the Assamese hinterland, like in the Nepali villages, civilians are today caught in the crossfire between insurgents and state forces. As Khalid Ali, a schoolteacher and president of the local peace committee explains, "They (the security forces) accuse us of harbouring militants and not cooperating, of refusing to

provide information on the whereabouts of militants. But if we do so, can they ensure us protection from the inevitable retaliation?" There is a general acceptance today that in most cases civilians who still provide shelter to militants do so under duress. As one man justifies, "If one was to turn up at my doorstep with the intention of staying the night, I surely would not ask him whether he is carrying a gun. The demands are best complied with. It is unlikely that I would inform or even turn to the security forces because they would not be able to protect me from the retribution such an act will inevitably invite from the militants".

## "People-talk" in Nalbari

Participatory interaction with the local communities revealed that fear of armed violence was widespread among civilians in the villages of Nalbari district. The district has, for several reasons, been the worst affected district in the insurgency, and is particularly prone to militant violence even now. In this predominantly tribal area on the north bank of the Brahmaputra in lower Assam, communities identified militants belonging to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the state security forces as the chief sources of insecurity. 'Unidentified gunmen', widely believed to be SULFA or Surrendered ULFA, militants who surrendered and who may well be working for the state now, evoke considerable fear as well. It is known that they have been involved in killings of retribution on numerous occasions. However, the easy accessibility of weapons in Assam today makes it possible that these unidentified gunmen could even be "just about anyone" killing to settle political scores, for personal vendetta, business rivalry, or simply out of contractual obligation. There were several instances of civilians in Nalbari being abducted by 'unidentified gunmen' who are believed to have subsequently died tragic deaths at the hands of their abductors. Overt SULFA operations that confirm the suspicion and the knowledge that the SULFA are protected by the government only compounds the feeling of helplessness and insecurity. The level of insecurity is so high that researchers were told, "It could even be you! If I say something that displeases you, perhaps you will come back at night, your face covered and a gun in your pocket".

In the areas where Bodos are the predominant tribe (west of Nalbari district) and where there currently is massive armed agitation calling for a separate state, non-Bodos are apprehensive of the militants belonging to both the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, as well as the security forces. Bodos too (though most were reluctant to admit openly) are fearful of the militants as rivalry between the two groups often results in fratricidal killings. Significantly, both Bodos and non-Bodos consider the security forces one of the primary sources of insecurity and yet, paradoxically, feel that their removal from the camps would worsen the situation.

Villagers in Nalbari, regardless of their ethnic identity and political affiliation, articulated concern at the growing nexus of armed elements, political entities and vested interests. This, they felt, had not only resulted in failure of the state to provide protection and ensure the well-being of its citizens, but also often enabled violations of human rights by state security agencies.

Apart from the numerous civilian lives lost, an environment of prolonged violence and insecurity has resulted in almost perpetual anxiety, severely restricted mobility and increased polarisation between communities in the Nalbari villages. Indiscriminate killings have corroded the bond of trust and disrupted the channels of communication between different ethnic communities, between opposing ideological entities, rival factions within groups or even between neighbours, making it very easy to sow seeds of mistrust and trigger violence. This rupture in community ties will be a serious stumbling block in future efforts at reconciliation and peace. The cost to innocent civilians is definitely not restricted to Nalbari district.

In the big picture, militancy has restricted access to education, health care and other such services considered indispensable for human development. The unchecked proliferation of guns in civil society has extracted its price: the near-death of democracy, collapse of economic activity and the criminalisation of youth are only the more obvious of Assam's losses. Widespread underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure and industry, and growing unemployment is what remains. Lost economic opportunities apart, even thriving enterprise has succumbed to the burden of extortion. Many businesses have relocated to 'safer' areas elsewhere in India. While legitimate enterprise has witnessed a decline, organised crime, racketeering, use of threats and coercion to achieve legitimate gains or to bag lucrative contracts, often through investing huge illegitimate funds, by a cohort of ex-militants and lumpen entrepreneurs has led to the emergence of a flourishing illegitimate economy at a cost to the exchequer and the people. Also, the environment of unrest and uncertainty has facilitated the siphoning off of huge sums from the state's coffers by unscrupulous officials, politicians and these lumpen entrepreneurs. While the militants continue to fill their coffers quite easily, the state continues to squander huge amounts to contain them. Money – to the tune of INR 7 billion in the years between 1 April 1990 and 31 March 2001 – it can ill afford to spend. 'Development' meanwhile remains a

> ## Indiscriminate killings have corroded the bond of trust and disrupted the channels of communication between different ethnic communities, between opposing ideological entities, rival factions within groups or even between neighbours, making it very easy to sow seeds of mistrust and trigger violence

pledge successive governments have committed to only on paper and recalled only before elections.

## A wake up call

The situation in Assam should be a wake up call for the Nepali authorities. The current situation, in Assam or Tripura or any other north eastern state of India facing violence, should be example enough to drive home the fact that mismanagement of insurgency can drive a state into a cul de sac and keep it there for some time to come. 'People'-force has a very crucial role to play in determining outcomes of political insurgency. The ULFA in Assam began its operations with a huge popular mandate for what had seemed like an effort by 'our boys' to liberate 'Mother Assam' from the 'tyranny of the Centre' along the lines of the Gandhian freedom movement of India. But with the ideological and methodological derailment of the ULFA, there has been a withdrawal of such support. Open criticism, even outright condemnation, of the banned outfit by civil society has made it increasingly easier for the state to make its response. However, enormous damage has been done already.

But the debate is not only political. There are deep moral issues involved. It is widely accepted today that 'security' has a wider connotation than state security alone; security of an individual is considered just as important, if not more so, than that of the state. For a large number of people around the world today, insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than a catastrophic world event. Job security, income security, health security and security from crime are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world. To quote a United Nations document: "No provisions that can be written into the Charter will enable the Security Council to make the world secure from war if men and women have no security in their homes and in their jobs". As more and more countries of the developing world fall prey to intra-state violence, insurgencies, identity movements and ethnic cleansing pogroms, the issue of the innocent civilians caught in the crossfire draws urgent attention.

As Dixit has pointed out in his article, insurgents are "renegades, irresponsible and unaccountable" anywhere in the world. It is the "government and its institutions that must have a higher purpose and deeper responsibility". This is not an easy task because security is a double-edged sword. But what we need today, whether in the Northeast, Kashmir or in Nepal, is to

clearly and directly address the issue of civilians caught in the killing fields, held hostage between demands of the insurgents and being victimised by the security forces for catering to these demands. The fields where battles are being fought are also fields that grow rice, where children play, maidens laugh and lovers meet at night. Lives must go on and people must eat, live, work, laugh, love, marry, worship and be happy. We are fools that we do not learn anything from history; all we have to do is to look at the devastated hills and valleys of the Northeast. We do not have to go too far.

*Anindita Dasgupta*
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# More to the Indus water fight

I READ with interest Hasan Mansoor's article, 'Water wars: Sindh's struggle for control of the Indus' (July 2002). Firstly, while Mansoor provides an extensive historical perspective to the water-distribution profile of the Indus, he leaves a large gap in his tracing of the developments between the years 1994 and the present. The article therefore fails to highlight recent political developments, including the controversial resignation of the Governor of Sindh, former Air Marshal Azeem Daudpota, and three senior ministers from his cabinet in May 2000. It also does not report on the furor over the proposed construction of the Kalabagh Dam. Please refer to the compilation of reports from the Pakistani press, which I have appended, that throw some light on these matters.

Secondly, mentioning the plight of the endangered Blind Indus Dolphin (*Platanista minor*), known locally as *bhulan* or *susu*, could have enhanced the discussion on the ecological losses being incurred due to water shortage in the Indus' lower riparian regions. The bhulan used to be evenly distributed throughout the Indus river system but today it is concentrated between two of the Indus barrages in Sindh: Sukkur and Guddu.

Lastly, a point that was left unclear is that the Ghulam Muhammad Barrage marked on the map is also called the Kotri Barrage that is discussed in the text. This barrage was commissioned in the year 1955 and not in 1961, as the map suggests.

*Rinku Dutta*
*Calcutta*

*Appendix*
As complied from various Pakistani media sources:

*24 May 2000:*
The Governor of Sindh, Air Marshal Azeem Daudpota

(retired), and three Provincial Ministers (for Health, SM Rab, Food and Agriculture, Iftikhar Soomro and Irrigation, ANG Abbasi), resign.

*25 May 2000:*
Mohammad Mian Soomro, a financial manager, takes oath as the 26th governor of Sindh to replace Air Marshal Azeem Daoudpota. A senior official of the Ministry of Information, states that the Governor of Sindh and his three ministers had resigned after the Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf expressed his concern over the law and order situation in Karachi that had culminated in the killing of Sunni scholar, Mullah Yusuf Ludhianvi, and the subsequent ransacking of properties in the city on 18 May.

*20 July 2000:*
Hyderabad: Former Sindh Irrigation Minister ANG Abbasi, while addressing the participants of Sindh Agriculture Conference, convened by "The Reformers" at Hala on Wednesday (19 July 2000), says that former Sindh Governor Azeem Daudpota had accused Punjab of inequitable distribution of water by the Indus River System Authority (IRSA). "Our accusation was based on facts, as Punjab gets more than its share", he stated. He demanded that the federal government compensate Sindh for losses incurred due to water shortage. He said IRSA was responsible for water theft. "The Kalabagh Dam is neither feasible nor acceptable". The former irrigation minister in his speech hints that Daudpota and he were punished for speaking up against the discrimination against Sindh.

*The educated of Sindh*
KARACHI: Mine was the pleasure and the honour to be the first man upon whom Governor of Sindh, Air Marshal Azim Daudpota, called after he had been appointed.

My first thought on hearing of his appointment was, 'How will this man, officer and gentleman, survive the politicians, the boors, the wrigglers and wranglers; how long can he last?'

The right and proper thing would have been for Musharraf to drive to the Governor's House, meet the air marshal, who is ten years his senior, and say to him,

"Air Marshal, Sir, we wish to make a change, and appoint *a less bothersome junior man* to sit in the governor's chair. May I have the privilege of dining you out and driving you home?"

He chose the craven, rather than the correct way of ridding himself and his corps commanders of a man who was capable of saying what he felt had to be said.
Ardeshir Cowasjee
(*Dawn*, 28 May 2000)

*Kalabagh dam issue and the government*
The Kalabagh Dam has again erupted as a political issue, which is least political. It has been pointed out in

some quarters in Sindh that the construction of the dam at Kalabagh will be a disaster to Sindh and the Frontier provinces. That apart from 6.7 MAF water stored in the dam some 12.8 MAF of additional water will also be diverted from river Indus to irrigate the agricultural fields through Chashma Right Bank Canal and Chashma Left Bank Canal to irrigate the areas of Mianwali, Khushab, Jhelum and Dera Ismail Khan. Therefore, the Kalabagh Dam will consume 19.5 MAF water of Indus and not 6.7 MAF which will cause problems in ensuring the availability of 10 MAF water in Indus river provisionally earmarked for outflow into the sea as agreed in the Water Accord of 1991.

The story also goes that Air Marshal (Retd.) Azeem Daudpota lost his job as Governor of Sindh because he aired his views on a matter so vital as the lifeline of Sindh. He has been replaced by a Sindhi banker who does not have any political views.

*Ali Ashraf Khan*
*Karachi*
*(Defence Journal, September 2000)*

# Armies and errors

**MAJOR GEN** Ashok Mehta's article in *Himal* ('Shooting to kill in Nepal', July 2002) was as biased as it was superficial. It is perhaps normal for senior officers of a bygone era to present an air of informed judgement on present issues. However, this officer's relation to Nepal, largely based on matters pertaining to Indian Gorkhas, obviously does not qualify him as an expert on the current Maoist crisis in Nepal. The Indian Army wins its wars through the coordinated use of massed artillery, air and armour and sound administration. Basic soldiering skills, junior leadership, initiative, individual courage and endurance are less important. With a total of 1.2 million men under arms, including Nepali Gorkhas, they can well afford to fight without huge regard for human casualties. The steep casualty rates of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka and, more recently, Indian army involvement in Kargil, bear testimony to this fact. The Nepalese Army, on the other hand, following British example, relies heavily on basic skills and an abundance of personal endurance and courage.

In a matter of a few months, the very Nepalese soldiers that Mehta belittles have gone into harm's way in prohibitive environments with little more than what they carry on their backs, overcome an almost-total intelligence vacuum and achieved amazing kill ratios of 1:40 while suffering only three tactical setbacks to date. To further put things into context, one must consider that this hostile, in-conducive, unclear atmosphere is the result of six years of national neglect as
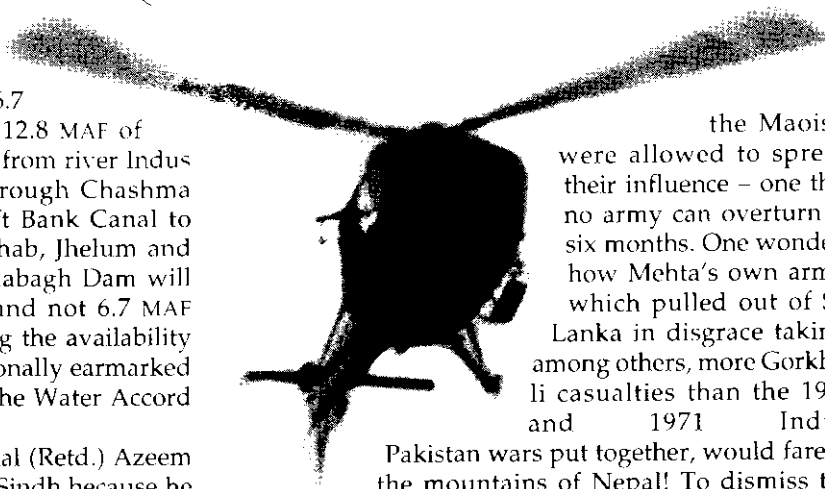
the Maoists were allowed to spread their influence – one that no army can overturn in six months. One wonders how Mehta's own army, which pulled out of Sri Lanka in disgrace taking, among others, more Gorkhali casualties than the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars put together, would fare in the mountains of Nepal! To dismiss the occasional use of mortars and the measly three MI-17 helicopters that the army has as "excessive" only highlights Mehta's disconnect with Nepal's reality. No other terrorists mass attack 31-man posts with 2600 intoxicated and heavily armed fighters. Furthermore, few other armies can fight extended engagements against such odds, often while taking 50 percent casualties, and still win. The Nepali army did so in engagements in Salleri, Ratmate, Kapurkote, Khara, Salyan... To suggest that the largely defunct Nepal Police, often viewed as being part of the problem itself, is coping better than the army is simply ludicrous. I am surprised the Maj Gen does not cite a "Pakistani connection" as well! Excesses, however, have and will unfortunately occur. What is important is that they should not be institutionalised and must be punished.

Depthless responses like Mehta's taint the neutrality of your respectable publication. Himal's editors would be well advised to reconsider publishing such pieces, even in the name of free speech, and ask themselves what kind of Nepal they want – a well-intentioned democracy with all its correctable weaknesses or an extremist Maoist utopia in which they among others, and perhaps more than others, will have no place. It would behove all of us to stop, reflect a moment and accept the bitter reality that while only peace talks and political deals will provide the ultimate solution, the Maoists themselves will keep on the warpath for as long as they see a glimmer of hope that they may win. That is the bottom line; the first step to solving this is unquestionable military defeat of the Maoists by the army. All other things, even far more important ones, are possible only as "follow-ons". The Royal Nepalese Army is on the way to achieving this and they need and deserve our support. Our, and not just the army's, way of life depends on their success.

*Prajwal Joshy*
*by email*

# Truck art is no laughing matter

WE ENJOYED the candid message conveyed through your satirical column 'Lorry Art and Us' (Lastpage, July 2002). There are rare writers who will make an effort to convert culture into science. The "effortless ease" of your puns and twists is worthy of a response. We would not like to comment on some general concepts forwarded about South Asian region. However, some impressions about Pakistan conveyed in the article need to be rectified.

Pakistan is not a nation of show-offs, inefficient and grandstanding kind of people who exaggerate actions at the cost of their "own income, health and peace of mind". We are a realistic and goal-oriented nation and our development related statistics speak for themselves. Besides, the stature gained by Pakistan in international comity of nations is another proof of the realism, hard work and pragmatism of our approach and efforts to enhance prestige of our country.

The truck art and culture of Pakistan has been widely acknowledged as a reflection of intense feelings and moods of general masses. The majority of painters of these trucks are less-educated people who express their feelings through the medium of art and splendour or colours. In my view it is unfair and unjustified to relate art and science. Although it is an age old debate, by and large people appreciate art for its intrinsic value and believe in art for the sake of art. Therefore, the expressions of less-educated artists/painters of Pakistan should be allowed to flourish without giving any meaning or scientific explanation to their artistic work.

Incidentally, I might clarify that the upper deck of the truck is normally used as a resting place by the truck drivers and cleaners at the stop-over points. I might also add that your innovative design will certainly not amuse the lorry owners of the Pakistan.

*Kamal Ahmed*
*First Secretary*
*Embassy of Pakistan, Kathmandu*



*The offending design*

SRI LANKA

# GROWING PAINS IN COLOMBO AND JAFFNA

**RECENT EVENTS** in Sri Lanka suggest that government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leaders are discovering the complexity of their evolving roles and slowing adjusting to them. President Chandrika Kumaratunga's formation of the National Consultation on Ethnic Reconciliation, for example, could have been motivated by several factors. During the previous government, Kumaratunga had virtually single-handedly took the country in the direction of a peace process that envisaged fundamental constitutional reform. She also brought in Norwegian facilitation, which has become the greatest asset to the peace process despite the strong objections of Sinhala nationalists.

However, the president's image on peace issues took a beating during the election campaigns of August 2000 and December 2001. She campaigned on a strategy of militarily weakening the LTTE as a precursor to peace. She was reported to have made chilling predictions about the fate of the Sinhala people in the aftermath of a peace process initiated by the United National Party (UNP). After the UNP's decisive victory in the general elections, and its equally decisive revival of the peace process, the president has clearly been on the defensive vis-à-vis Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

During the past five months of ceasefire the president has been seen more as a potential spoiler of the peace process than as a positive contributor to it. In this context, it is likely that the primary purpose of the National Consultation is to improve the president's image, especially regarding her commitment to negotiations with the LTTE. Concurrently, the consultation also provides a mechanism through which Kumaratunga can participate in the peace process and make genuine contributions to it. Although

> It is clear that the government has failed to engage with civil society organisations in a systematic manner since the inception of the peace process
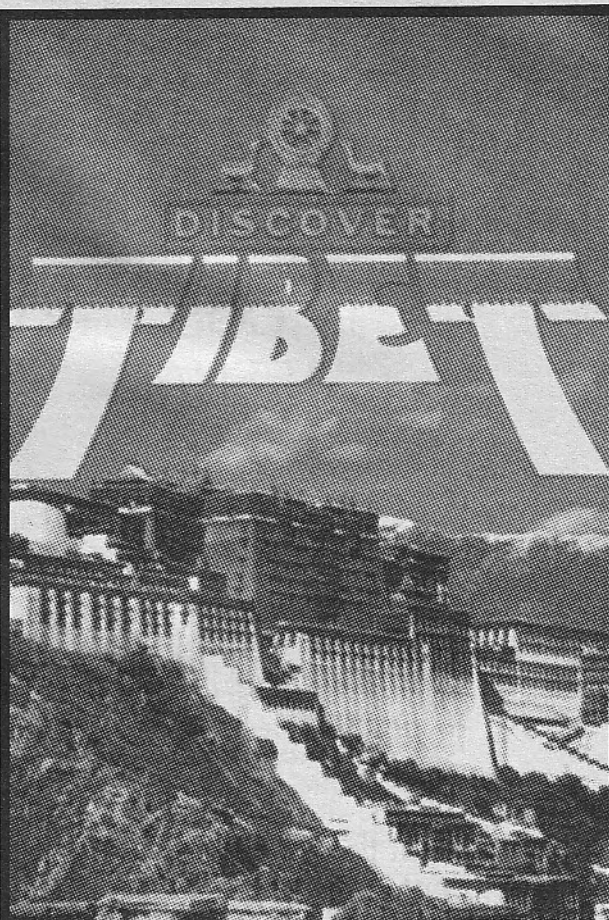
she is president, and constitutionally the head of state and government, she is only one of 32 in the cabinet, as she herself has admitted, and the consultation provides an avenue for the exercise of power.

A legitimate and necessary role for the president could be upholding the people's right to be informed participants in the peace process. No doubt since the general election of December 2001, the new government's handling of the peace process has surpassed reasonable expectations. But it is also the case that the government's approach to the peace process stresses technical and non-transparent issues, as a result of which few in civil society and the political sphere are aware as to what is actually happening. Kumaratunga could help fill this void.

## On and off track
In the language of conflict resolution theory there are three tracks in any peace process. Track I refers to the direct relationships between the conflicting parties, which in Sri Lanka means the interactions between the government and the LTTE, facilitated by the Norwegian-staffed Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM). The remarkable success of the Sri Lankan peace process to date is confined to this track. Track II refers to the interaction of parties who are in close relationship with the main conflicting parties. Track III refers to civil society involvement in the peace process.

At present the government's success at the Track I level has not been matched by equivalent successes in the other two. One reason could be the absence of external third party facilitation which has been so vital to Track I. There appears to be a failure on the part of the leaderships of both the government and LTTE to educate their lower-level cadre about what the peace process entails and their obligations in terms of the ceasefire agreement. Among others, these include reports of continuing child recruitment and extortion by the LTTE at the local level and the apparent reluctance of the Sri Lankan security forces and police to deal in an effective manner with law and order problems in the north and east.

In this context recent media reports that the LTTE has requested direct talks with Colombo through the by-passing of Norwegian facilitators cannot be welcomed. Much of the credit for the success of the ongoing peace process needs to be given to

the Norwegians, whose quiet diplomacy has been competent and balanced. The importance of an impartial umpire was underscored in the recent confrontations between government forces and the LTTE. One of the key reasons why these incidents did not escalate into violence was undoubtedly the presence of the Norwegian monitors whose impartiality could not be reasonably challenged by either of the two main parties.

At the Track III level it is clear that the government has failed to engage with civil society organisations in a systematic manner since the inception of the peace process. The Norwegian facilitators have been careful to regularly consult with civil society leaders regarding the latter's observations about both the ongoing peace process and social attitudes toward it. But the same cannot be said about the government leadership, which appears disinterested in what civil society has to offer. Ironically, the national consultation organised by President Kumaratunga was the first major public meeting convened by a government leader to discuss the peace process.

While the Track I and possibly Track II processes can benefit from foreign expertise and impartiality, the third track is a purely Sri Lankan matter. Explaining the compromises and complexities of the peace process has to be done by Sri Lankans with public credibility. The national consultation on ethnic relations organised by the Presidential Secretariat could therefore serve as the framework of a new effort by the country's political and civil leaders to make the general population informed participants in the peace process.

To make this initiative credible, the president will have to ensure that the consultation is perceived to be a non-partisan forum drawn equitably from all sectors of society. The challenge to the president is to transcend her partisanship and resist her political instincts to seek unilateral advantage over opponents. The president's role in the Track III process will need to be a non-partisan one, requiring considerable statesmanship. Kumaratunga has an unparalleled ability to reach out to people and make the case for political compromise and constitutional change for the sake of ethnic peace, and hopefully she will put these skills to good use.


The sun may be setting on the LTTE's violent path.

## LTTE reverses

Leadership challenges are not the exclusive purview of Colombo, as the recent incident at sea involving the SLMM, the LTTE and the Sri Lanka navy demonstrates. The dispute arose after two fishing trawlers spotted off the northern coast refused to halt at naval ships' command. Eventually one of the vessels was stopped, and SLMM representatives were called to board the ship. However, once on board, LTTE crew-members prevented a complete inspection and moved the trawler to land, taking the monitors with them.

The LTTE's initial reaction to the strong protest by the SLMM was characteristic of its old habits. Instead of admitting fault or being contrite for violating the ceasefire agreement, the LTTE attempted to take the moral high ground. Their leadership issued a statement accusing the navy of firing at the LTTE vessels, and claimed that the LTTE had taken the international monitors to land for their own safety. Most of the Tamil media gave wide publicity to the LTTE's version of the incident, and some civic and religious leaders tried to extend credibility to the LTTE story, despite the fact that it was totally contrary to the version of events given by the international monitors themselves.

The LTTE's response and the supportive environment provided by sections of the media and civil society were replays of what has often happened in the past. When the LTTE engaged in some act that would earn it condemnation, it would justify that act as being in the interests of the Tamil cause. It would take the position that it was right in what it did, and it would expect its supporters to follow the same line. An example of this was the assassination of Dr Neelan

## The LTTE must deal with an impartial facilitator whose word will be taken as final by the international community and most Sri Lankans

Tiruchelvam, the internationally respected constitutional law expert and human rights activist whose death the LTTE and its allies claimed to be justified because Tiruchelvam was a 'collaborator' with the government.

The LTTE's accustomed ability to get away with even facile stories of events may explain its unconvincing justification that its cadre sailed away with the international monitors for their own protection. In its dealings with the SLMM, however, the LTTE seems to have overlooked one crucial factor. Unlike as in previous contests with Colombo or other Tamil political parties, the LTTE could not contest the version of events put out by the SLMM, which enjoys independent credibility. Consequently, the LTTE had to back down to the SLMM and express regret over the way it had treated the monitors. Despite its initial intransigence, the LTTE demonstrated that it can quickly adjust to new realities and apparently has succeeded in patching up its relationship with the SLMM.

In the past few months of ceasefire, the SLMM has been playing a vitally important role in preserving peace between the government and LTTE. The physical presence of the SLMM and the ability of the two sides to complain to it, and to have an impartial third party take down grievances, has helped defuse tensions.

The new challenge for the LTTE's leadership is dealing with an impartial facilitator whose word will be taken as the final one by the international community and also by most Sri Lankans. It is no longer a question of having to choose between the LTTE's version of events and the government's and doing independent research to find out who is saying the truth. The presence of the SLMM has made an objective assessment of the situation in the north and east possible in a way that was not practically possible prior to its entry into the Sri Lankan peace process. Hopefully the LTTE will learn a lesson that its interpretation of future events, and of the ceasefire agreement, will not be the only valid one amongst both northeastern Tamils and all Sri Lankans. ◊

*— Jehan Perera*

# Caste of the Tiger
# Eelam and the Dalit question

## As the tiger begins to change its stripes, it must grapple with the shifting terrain of the jungle. The Sri Lankan Dalit movement has been subjugated by the larger cause of Tamil nationalism all these years. It is time for its revival.

### by Ravikumar

"In 1981, the UNP leaders, who shout themselves hoarse about democracy, summoned their military thugs and burnt down the Jaffna library, the biggest library in Southeast Asia. About the same time, caste fanatics in a small village, Ezhudumattuval, near Jaffna, threatened Dalit children at a school, seized their books and notebooks and set them afire.

"Why did Tamil society choose to condemn one incident and remain silent on the other?"
– Dominic Jeeva, Dalit author from Eelam

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) chief V Prabakaran's two-and-half-hour press conference on 10 April this year is regarded as a turning point in the ongoing peace initiatives in Sri Lanka. Prominent among the issues raised at the press meet were those concerning Muslims and Estate Tamils (also called Hill-Country Tamils, Tamils of Indian Descent or New Tamils, since a majority came over from India as plantation workers). Responding to these queries, Prabakaran and LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingam said they had invited leaders of these two groups for talks on issues concerning their future and, as expected, an agreement has now been arrived at. However, the press conference was disturbingly silent on the question of Dalit-untouchables who constitute nearly 15 percent of the Tamil population in Eelam. No one saw fit to raise the matter and the Eelam leadership too chose not to dwell on it. The silence of the assembled press corps is understandable. But the reticence of the Tamil leadership is deliberate neglect. A problem that has been awaiting a resolution for decades was simply glossed over as if it did not even exist.

The primary reason for this neglect is that contemporary Sri Lanka lacks an energetic Dalit organisation that can exert the necessary social pressure to ensure that the issue gets the prominence it deserves. This current absence of Dalit political leadership is conspicuous in an otherwise forceful history of assertion. In fact, Dalit political consciousness among Sri Lankan Tamils predates the mobilisation of their counterparts in Tamil

Nadu. The militant struggle against untouchability by Sri Lankan Dalits gives them the distinction of being among the earliest to wage war against casteism. But over the years the Sri Lankan Dalit movement has lost its organisational drive, and so while the Muslims and the Estate Tamils have ensured that their issues remain prominent on the Eelam agenda, the most oppressed of the Tamils do not evoke even a passing mention from the Jaffna Tamils, who lead the armed separatist struggle.

### Roots of violence

It is customary for Tamil nationalists to regard the Jaffna Tamils as role models, particularly because of their 'achievements' in the armed struggle. But Eelam and the Jaffna Tamils have an unsavoury tradition that does no credit to their claim to special status. They have produced casteist, chauvinist scholars such as Arumuga Navalar of the early 19th century, who, echoing Manu, the preceptor of the *varna* system, declared that the *parai* (Dalit drum), the woman and the *panchama* (Dalit) are "all born to get beaten". Navalar is just one among a large company of Jaffna Tamils who stoked casteism and helped it take strong roots in the island. The history of caste Hindu atrocities on Dalits is long and shameful. The significant moments in the Dalit struggle for self-respect and upper caste reprisals merit recapitulation if only to demonstrate why this problem will not be easily resolved.

Those who celebrate the greatness of the Tamil armed struggle are of course careful to avoid mention of when Jaffna's earliest episodes of armed violence took place and against whom these were directed. Violence began to inform the Tamil landscape as early as 1944 when some caste Hindus gunned down a Dalit as he tried to cremate the body of an old woman of his community at the Villoonri cremation ground in Jaffna. This anti-Dalit violence was to continue sporadically over the years. Thus, it can be said that the culture of armed struggle began in Sri Lanka in the form of attacks on untouchables. However, Eelam's panegyrics
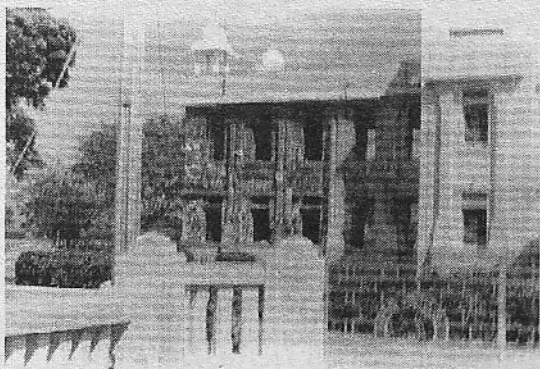
The Jaffna public library after being ravaged by fire in 1984 (top); an upper-caste Tamil having his head shaved, circa 1900.
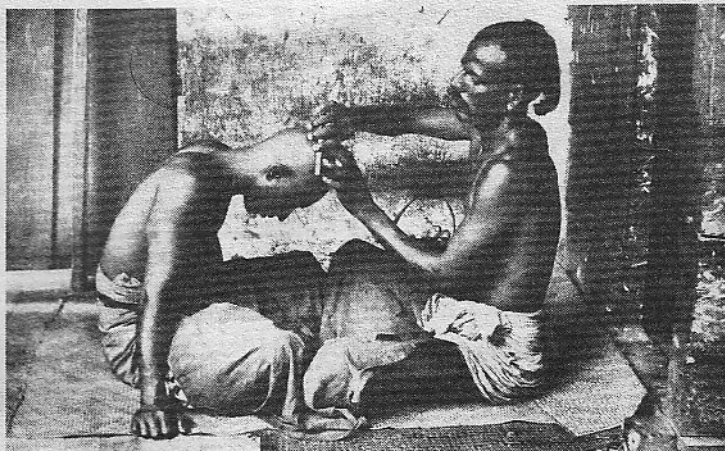
to itself and its armed revolution cannot accommodate such uncomfortable facts.

In the circumstances, it is not surprising that Dalits in Sri Lanka were forced to form political organisations much earlier than Tamil Nadu Dalits. In fact, they were pioneers in political mobilisation even among Sri Lankan Tamils. Tamil nationalism acquired a real political edge only in the 1940s with the formation of the Tamilar Congress in 1944 and the Tamilarasu Party in 1949. Dalit mobilisation preceded this by a quarter century, with the formation of the Forum for Depressed Class Tamil Labourers in July 1927. The forum launched an agitation for "equality in seating, equality in eating" in 1928 in protest against caste discrimination in schools where Dalit children were forbidden from learning or dining with other children. Two years of sustained struggle resulted in an administrative order that in grant-aided schools low-caste children should be allowed to sit on benches instead of on the floor or outside on the ground. In retaliation, caste Hindu Tamils burnt down 13 schools that implemented the new regulations. And by way of political follow-up, the elite of the Vellala community from Urelu, Vasavilan and Punalakkattavan petitioned the government in 1930 to rescind the equal-seating directive.

The next major effort to thwart Dalit rights took place in 1931, when the then British government of Sri Lanka set up the Donoughmore Commission to look into the changes to be introduced in the country's constitution. The commission recommended the introduction of universal adult franchise in Sri Lanka. As a result, the Dalits gained voting rights. Unable to tolerate this development, caste Tamils, headed by prominent leaders like S Natesan, launched an agitation. They were ready to give up their own voting rights to prevent Dalits from getting theirs. To demonstrate their social power, they went one step further and imposed several new restrictions on Dalits. According to the new draconian stric-

> **This current absence of Dalit political leadership is conspicuous in an otherwise forceful history of assertion**

tures: "Untouchable women should not cover their torso and (must) remain half-naked. They should not wear jewels, not use an umbrella, nor use the caste thread in marriages. Their children should not bear the names used by dominant castes. They should not cremate, but bury the dead bodies. They should not use footwear; should not get water from public wells; should not sit in buses; nor send their children to schools". These restrictions were even harsher than the restrictions imposed in the 1930s on Dalits of Tiruchi, Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu by the dominant Kallar, Maravar and Thevar communities.

Sri Lankan political parties, including caste Tamil leaders, advanced several reasons to oppose universal franchise. They argued that the extension of voting rights to all would increase corruption; that only landowners are patriotic so voting rights should be restricted to them; that voting rights would be misused by the illiterate and that women should not get involved in politics and hence should not be given the right to vote. However, the Donoughmore Commission stood firm, and Dalits attained voting rights in 1931. Suffrage gave them some political leverage and was a boost to their struggle, as is evident from some of the limited changes that came about in the economic sphere. For instance, S Natesan, who was at the forefront of the opposition to voting rights for untouchables, under compulsion of seeking Dalit votes, had to introduce measures such as the legalisation of the tree tax (*mara-vari* scheme) in 1936. This helped the Dalits involved in the toddy business gain economic independence from upper caste Tamils. This and other successes stimulated further attempts at forging Dalit political unity for agitational ends. The Conference of Oppressed Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka was organised in August 1943. One of the outcomes of this conference was the formation of the Northern Sri Lankan Minority Tamils Mahasabha. In order to unite Dalits all over Sri
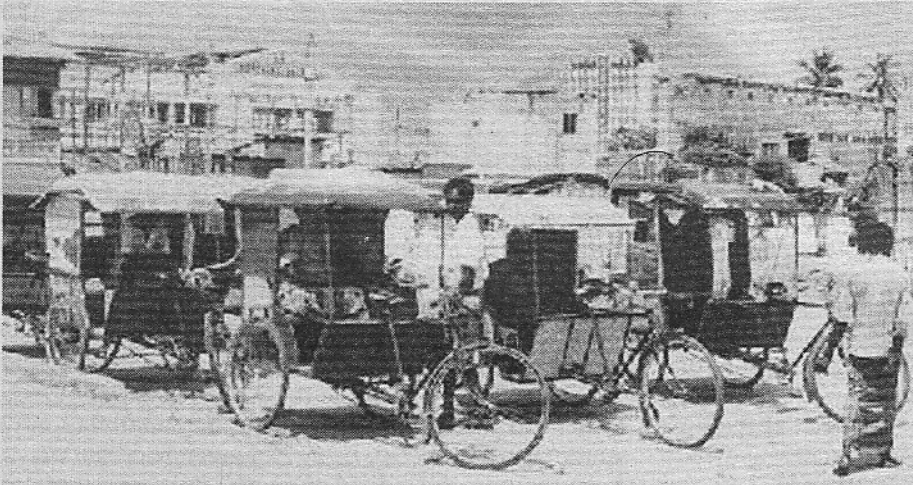
*The hustle and bustle of Jaffna's streets conceal the divisions within Tamil society.*

Lanka, the Northern Sri Lanka Minority Tamils Mahasabha was renamed the All-Sri Lankan Minority Tamils Mahasabha and its demands were enlarged to include protection for arrack production, improving educational opportunities for untouchables, reservation for untouchables in teacher training and representation for untouchables in the legislature.

Meanwhile, the agenda to suppress Dalits was being continuously pursued in the constitutional sphere. Sri Lankan political parties, dissatisfied with the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission, demanded a new constitution for Sri Lanka. In 1942, these parties asked that the British send a mission to Sri Lanka to initiate the process of writing a new constitution for the country. In response to such pressures, London dispatched a commission to Sri Lanka to elicit the views of the various communities on the proposed new constitution.

## Competitive politics

The Commission, headed by Lord Soulbury, conducted its deliberations from December 1944 to April 1945, and held discussions with representatives of various communities. The Minority Tamils Mahasabha decided to submit a separate memorandum to the commission. But the Tamilar Congress Party and its president, GG Ponnambalam, insisted that a separate submission would affect the unified Tamil cause. To decide the issue, the Minority Tamils Mahasabha organised a meeting in Jaffna, to which Ponnambalam was also invited. The Mahasabha made it clear that if the Congress memorandum included issues of Dalit welfare, particularly those concerning education, professional rights and eradication of untouchability, it was ready to give up its plan to submit a separate memorandum. With Ponnambalam rejecting this demand, the Mahasabha was forced to go along with its original plan to submit a separate memorandum.

In the hostile climate that prevailed, with the Tamilar Congress and caste Tamils assuming a threatening attitude, the Dalit leadership was forced to smuggle members of the Soulbury Commission to their villages in order to show them the wretched conditions of living. But all this was of no consequence, since the caste Hindu sentiment prevailed and the welfare of Dalits found no place in the newly drafted constitution. Instead the 'unified Tamil' cause found safeguards in the 'Soulbury Constitution', which proscribed any legislation that would affect a community or religion. This constitution was in force till 1972, when it was redrafted. Ironically, the constitution that caste Hindu Tamils believed would safeguard their interests exclusively, to the detriment of the Dalits, was later to pave the way for their own marginalisation, as Sinhala chauvinism rode roughshod over the clauses designed to protect minority rights.

As recommended by the Soulbury Commission, elections were held in 1947 in which the United National Party (UNP) and the Tamilar Congress were the main contenders. The third force was constituted of the left, represented primarily by the breakaway factions of the sole pre-war left party – the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSP). One faction of the LSP set up the Sri Lankan Communist Party in 1943. When M Karthikeyan introduced this party to the Jaffna Tamils, a large number of Dalits joined it. Dalit writers like Daniel, Dominic Jeeva, ML Subramaniam, and K Pasupathi were part of this group. Though they joined the communist party, they continued their work with the Minority Tamils Mahasabha, with which they had been associated in the past.

As political consciousness among the Dalits evolved, two trends emerged within the Minority Tamils Mahasabha. Some accepted the communist ideology while others were content with agitating for small privileges. On the electoral strategy, there was unanimity of opinion that they should not vote for the Tamilar Congress, which had not only actively campaigned against the inclusion of Dalit rights in the Soulbury constitution but had also failed to nominate Dalit candidates in the election. There was however a difference of opinion between the moderates and others on whether they should vote for the UNP or the left parties. The majority of the Minority Tamils Mahasabha campaigned for the UNP, which had appointed a Dalit to the senate. The UNP programme was more pro-Dalit than that of the Tamilar Congress. The UNP campaigned against untouchability, announced several schemes for Dalit welfare and promised to nominate a Dalit member to the assembly. For many moderate Dalits, these assurances were sufficient ground for supporting the UNP.

In contrast to the stand taken by the Tamilar Congress, the Tamilarasu party, which first raised the slogan of Tamil 'right to self-determination', initially embarked on a policy of Dalit accommodation. The Tamilarasu decided to take Tamil nationalism beyond Jaffna and unite Tamils from all the areas, focusing on the racist attitude of the Sinhala government. As a Tamil nationalist party it was forced by the presence of independent-minded Dalit political organisations to address the problem of untouchability and casteism, at least nominally. The Tamilarasu included 'abolition of untouchability' as one of its resolutions at the party's fifth conference held in July 1957. The accommodationist compulsions of an inclusive nationalism are evident in Tamilarasu leader Thanthai Selva's speech at the time of the party's founding: "If we want to qualify ourselves to win, we have to eradicate the evils in society and purify it. Among the Tamils, there are untouchables. They think they are oppressed by others. Ethically speaking, if we do harm to others, someone will do the same to us. If Tamils want to attain liberation, they must give the same to those who are deprived of their rights in our society".

The promises and resolutions however, did not add up to much in real terms. The Tamilarasu did not make any effort to implement them in their parliamentary programme. Meanwhile, developments in the larger Sri Lankan polity were to have adverse consequences for both upper caste Tamils and Dalits. This was particularly the case with the government's chauvinist Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which deprived all Tamils of their fundamental rights. Despite such openly discriminatory developments, the communist party continued to support the UNP and since by now the communists dominated the Minority Tamils Mahasabha, many Dalit leaders had no option but to join Tamilarasu. A new organisation, the Minority Tamils United Front was formed with the support of the Tamilarasu party.

**Tea and temples**
In order to consolidate its support among the Dalits, the Tamilarasu pushed for the introduction of the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act in April 1957. This act treated caste-based discrimination in public places as a crime but imposed a fine of 'not more than SLR 100' and a jail term of six months for perpetrators of such crimes. Just how lightly the problem of untouchability was taken is evident from a comparison with the situation that obtained in Tamil Nadu in the 1930s. Raobahadur 'Rettaimalai' Seenivasan (a Tamil Dalit leader who attended the Round Table Conference with BR Ambedkar) says in his autobiography that a fine of INR 100 was imposed on those who prevented untouchables from using public wells, ponds and the market. In 27 years the real value of the rupee had declined, but

> ## The culture of armed struggle began in Sri Lanka in the form of attacks on untouchables

there obviously was very little change in the legal attitude to untouchability. In the interest of condign punishment, if nothing else the depreciation of the currency could have been factored into punitive fines.

With such weak protective laws to help them survive with dignity, Dalits had to increasingly address their own social issues through direct action to force poltical parties to heed their plight. In October 1958, the Minority Tamils Mahasabha gave a call for a "teashop entry movement". The Mahasabha delivered an ultimatum demanding that teashops should begin admitting Dalits before 13 December, failing which they would agitate in front of the offending establishments. This movement put pressure on the Tamilarasu Party, which responded by announcing an "annihilation of untouchability week" from 24 November. The party, keen to prevent the division of its Tamil base, initiated a dialogue with the teashop owners in Jaffna. As a result, two teashops run by non-Tamil south Indians admitted untouchables. Others soon followed suit. It is a singular irony of Sri Lankan politics that Dalits attained the right to vote in 1931, but had to struggle for another 27 years before they could drink tea in public with dignity. But though teashop doors had opened, school gates remained remained shut.

It was only through the efforts of the Communist Party leader Pon Kandaiah that 15 schools for the children of the Dalit community were opened. Competitive politics involving the communist and the Tamilarasu parties, in the context of organised Dalit activity, was clearly a determining factor in securing some limited policy gains. Changes in the nature of competitive politics were to have adverse consequences for the Dalits. This is most clearly evident from the developments in the aftermath of the split in the Communist Party in 1964 and the subsequent participation of Tamilarasu in the UNP-led government in 1965.

As part of its constituency building, N Shanmugathasan's communist party led the popular temple-entry movements, apart from launching agitations to seize untilled lands and access water from public wells. Newspapers almost daily carried stories about Dalit agitation – among others, the burning of Kandasamy temple chariot in April 1968 and the riots that took place during the staging of the play *Kandan Karunai* in June 1969. In response, Tamilarasu, the Tamil nationalist party, strongly criticised this agitation. The Tamilarasu leadership had become concentrated in the hands of a Colombo-based group with representatives from the dominant communities in Jaffna. The political resolutions of the party were drafted in accordance with the interests of the dominant caste of Jaffna, the Vellalas.

By the 1970s, Sri Lankan politics had taken a turn for the worse, acquiring an increasingly ethnic charac-

ter, as the politics of Sinhala-Tamil accommodation began giving way to conflict. Tamil nationalism intensified in response to the continuous Sinhala racist policies. The Tamilarasu, having compromised itself by participating in the government, began to lose its base among Tamils. The major racist attack of 1983 opened a new trend in the country's politics, particularly Tamil politics. While Sinhala politics continued to be competitive, Tamil politics became the monopoly of a nationalism that subsumed every other division within society in the interest of an overarching unity that refused to admit intra-ethnic differences.

## Caste and the Tiger

The rise of armed struggle after 1983 and the consequent fall of democratic movements became a major hurdle in the way of an independent Dalit movement. Since nationalism could not concede even the slightest hint of an inner contradiction, writers who continuously focussed on the problem of 'panchamars' were dubbed enemies of the Tamil nation. The Tamil national liberation movement suppressed the voice of the Dalits. The discrimination that followed from Sinhala majoritarianism in education and employment largely affected caste Tamils. But the ethnic conflict drew Dalits into the circle of violence. As the conflict heightened, well-to-do caste Tamils fled to foreign lands, but Dalits who lacked the resources to follow suit remained in Eelam, and consequently were recruited into the armed struggle. This trend intensified in the 1990s and today the majority of LTTE cadres happen to be Dalit.

The increased participation of Dalits and women in the armed struggle had the paradoxical effect of loosening some of the more rigid strictures of Hindu society that are incompatible with the flexibility required by armed combat. But this did not lead to Dalit issues being addressed in any formal or concrete sense. The changes that have taken place are merely pragmatic adaptations dictated by necessity. Even so, caste Tamils, who see themselves as the sole representatives of all Tamils, are uncomfortable with this new state of affairs since they fear that the rigid rules of subordination will be permanently breached. As if to reinforce the orthodoxy, while limited social change has been taking place in the Lankan Tamil homeland, émigré caste Tamils have reinforced caste distinctions in their adopted countries.

Clearly, migration to foreign lands has not mitigated the effects of caste; caste feelings remain strong and there is little reason to believe that the pragmatic concessions that the Tamil society in the home country has made in conditions of war will last when and if peace arrives. Hence, it is important to ask whether the (interim) government that will be formed after the peace initiatives will address the problems of the Dalits. Dalits

have played a crucial role in the powerful struggle that forced the Sinhala government to negotiate, but it is increasingly looking like the LTTE will abandon the Dalits when there is no longer any need for their services. Caste Tamils in Eelam could well give vent to their caste feelings once the climate of fear is dispelled. To avoid such a situation, the Dalits need to procure some assurances.

The details of the LTTE's understanding with the Estate Tamils and Muslims are not very clear. Yet, the concessions that the latter have managed to extract over the last two decades is instructive at least as a modular specimen to be imitated. On 21 April 1988 an agreement, based on talks held in Madras on 15, 16 and 19 April 1988, was reached between the leaders of Muslim United Front and the Tigers. The 18-point agreement, signed by Kittu alias Sadasivam Krishnakumar for the Tigers and MIM Moheedin for the Muslim United Front, recognised the cultural and social distinctness of the Muslims and provided constitutional safeguards to them. 33 percent of the population in the eastern territory is Muslim and the figure is 18 percent for the northeast. Hence, the agreement stated that not less than 30 percent of state assembly seats should be given to them, besides giving them an unspecified representation in the ministry. Based on the percentage of Muslims living in each district in the northeast, proportional reservation would be given to them in jobs in the public sector. It was also agreed that an Islamic university would be started with special educational facilities. The chief ministership of the northeastern province would rotate between Muslims and 'others'.

Such an agreement is important for the Dalits. A similar agreement could now be chalked out to provide education, jobs and land to the Dalits. The demands made in the resolutions of the Minority Tamils Mahasabha and the plan of action put forth in the movements for eradication of untouchability (by the communists in the 1960s) should also be taken into account in such an agreement. If the future is to be insured against social conflict, the Tigers will have to come forward unilaterally to provide a solution to the Dalit problem. The current absence of a Dalit movement is no indication that there will not be one in future. The long war has paved the way for change, and the long negotiation for peace has forced on the LTTE many unprecedented changes in their policy. This newfound flexibility can be the basis for a long-term vision to secure genuine democracy. And that can happen only when the problems of the most oppressed are substantially addressed. This is the primary duty of a democratic dispensation and to fulfil that the Tiger must lose its caste.

*(Translated from Tamil by R Azhagarasan)*

> ## "Ethically speaking, if we do harm to others, someone will do the same to us"

# Digital delusions in

## Digital technology in its current corporate form is irrelevant to a wide cross-section of the populace. What can be done to salvage it and orient it towards the objectives of development?

by **Gaurab Raj Upadhaya**

The digital hype in South Asia has been around for close to a decade now and there is no end in sight. Institutions, agencies and organisations concerned with digital policy, implementation, lobbying, education and dissemination have mushroomed across the technologically-arid landscape of the Subcontinent, promising "giant leaps" and cutting-edge developments that claim to bring all manner of electronic conveniences to "village South Asia". The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), whose annual Human Development Reports (HDR) over the last few years have provided the clearest indicators of social and economic disparities between and within countries, is another recent high-profile convert to the digital cause. Thus, even those who deal in poverty eradication and sustainable development have now come around to accepting the technocratic route to their objectives.

Yet these grandiose digital dreams come up against some very real problems. Minimally, participation in basic digital activity requires an electric socket and plug, some electricity, a computer of any brand or model, functional literacy in English or another European language, plus a suite of software applications. If this participation is to be upgraded to the most rudimentary network activity, additional requirements include a modem, a phone line and an e-correspondent with access to the same facilities. As against these requirements, consider the actual realities of 'average South Asia', leave alone 'village South Asia', which harbours the bulk of the region's poverty and undernourishment.

In India, the most digitally advanced country in the region, as much as 42 percent of the population earns an annual income of only USD 365 a year (HDR 2001), which is approximately the price of a personal computer. When close to half the country's population just about survives a whole year on the sale price of one PC, for the average Indian even rudimentary hardware and software remain unaffordable. Electricity is a scarce commodity in the Subcontinent and supplies mainly urban and industrial regions. And, for a great many rural citizens, even getting hold of a remote e-correspon-

dent is not as easy as it may sound to a habitué of the anonymous cyber-chat networks. Most rural inhabitants in the Subcontinent cannot digitally communicate even personal information for want of basic literacy.

Sanguine hopes of 'useful' information floating about freely through a wired world are therefore misplaced in an environment in which scarcity is both pervasive and unevenly distributed. Lack of access to current digital technology is an outcome of the failure of development. It is difficult to see how an arrested technology can root out its impeding circumstance. The aim of harnessing digital technology to the ends of development will be defeated by the cold indices of underdevelopment. For years now, the effort has been to peddle this technology to all corners of the globe, to achieve the dream of connecting every individual to every other individual in the world. Little attention is paid to the fact that "business at the speed of thought" is a concern that unites Bill Gates and Azim Premji, but is as inconsequential, as it is in any case impossible, for the tea-shop proprietor in the Indore municipality, the herdsman at Khyber Pass, the porter in the Nepali midhills, or the boat people of the Padma.

Despite seemingly insurmountable constraints, development and marketing professionals and national policy makers are all unanimous that greater doses of digital technology are what underdeveloped economies need in order to overcome their problems. The reason for this is not far to seek. A glance at some of the HDR figures is sufficient to explain this enthusiasm. In the Human Development Index (HDI) rankings for 2002, Maldives leads South Asian countries at 84, followed by Sri Lanka at 89. India ranks 124, Pakistan 138, Bhutan 140, Nepal 142 and Bangladesh 145. All of them have dropped in global ranking since the 2001 HDI. In most of these countries, between one-third and one-half the population lives on about USD 1 a day. In all of South Asia, about 45 percent of the population above 15 years of age is illiterate. 22 percent of the region's people are undernourished, 48 percent of its children are underweight, and 98 out of every 100,000 persons suffer from tuberculosis.

# the South

All this, despite the hectic development activity of the last half century. Influential participants in the self-perpetuating aid-and-development business, increasingly fed by corporate funds, are keen to endorse corporate technologies in the hope that these will quickly make up for the failure of the development models they have chaperoned over the decades.

Consider now another set of figures that will delight the corporate managerial class. The Big Five of South Asia have a total population of 1.4 billion. The depth of IT penetration is abysmally low. India has 32 landline telephones for every 1000 people, and Bangladesh has four per 1000. Mobile phones range from between four to one per 1000 in the whole region. Bhutan has 1.2 internet hosts per 1000 people. The others do not even figure. For the corporates this represents a potential market. They are no doubt aware that this large population does not by itself constitute an independent market. But when technology free-rides on development, the poverty-stricken masses can be converted into a substantial body of proxy consumers in the aid-generated market. When development funds are thrown in, the state's development bureaucracy jumps at the bait and starts to echo the same theme. Information Communication Technology (ICT) is therefore the current panacea for all maladies.

That ICT as currently understood will continue to bypass the majority of South Asians for some time to come is a foregone conclusion. The technology in its current form is irrelevant to a wide cross-section of the populace. Nevertheless, digital technology can be made useful in limited and clearly-defined ways. To do this it is necessary to identify the precise nature of the irrelevance, for which it is useful to look at the broad principles on which the technology is based, the driving force of the digital industry, the assumptions underlying global connectivity, and the development of standardised hardware and software. The concrete aspects of the technology as it is being developed and used are an indication of what it is useful for and why and, therefore by extension, what it is irrelevant to and why.

## The world of obsolescence

Digital technology uses algorithmic procedures for problem solving. At its most basic level it can perform complex computing exercises at very high speeds. At its most advanced it can perform a whole range of esoteric functions that are incomprehensible and irrelevant to the average user. If it resembles human intelligence, it is with good reason, for it simulates certain aspects of the cerebral function that are related to problem-

solving. Given its nature, it can be used to automate repeatable and predictable functions that are based on well-defined formulae, even if they involve a large number of variables. The wide range of its functions is what gives it potential relevance across a wide social spectrum, but the manner of its development is the key to its current mass inappropriateness in poor societies. Applications designed to address a certain range of problems cannot be used to solve problems that lie outside this range. The relative rigidities of its application require it to be oriented towards specified ends if it is to be useful.

The pattern of digital development is influenced to a great extent by some of its unique properties. Digital technology has a very low rate of physical depreciation. On the other hand, it has an inordinately high rate of obsolescence that is necessary for the industry's survival. This has implications for the patterns of current technology use and potential reuse. The industry is of course not a monolith and the patterns of end-use are not uniform. Even so, there are certain broad trends that are relevant to a discussion of the wider application of electronic technology.

Obsolescence afflicts users in both hardware and software terms. The very nature of developments in the industry restricts the purchase and use of the technology to those institutions and operations whose functioning matches the system principles on which the digital 'solution' is based. The process is somewhat circular. The large hierarchical organisation is the model for the architecture of the electronic system that manages information flows within and between such organisations. In turn, these organisations adjust the pattern of information flows to the possibilities and limitations of their electronic data management systems. In effect, electronic systems become, predominantly, the preserve of organisational systems wired into a global digital network of ever-upgrading machines.

Connectivity between machines stimulates, on pain of incompatibility, perpetual upgradation across organisations. To take just one example, many new computers do not have a parallel or serial port, so that users are forced to change over to the Universal Standard Bus (USB) port. This upgradation also promotes increasing standardisation. In short, the prevailing trend in electronic system designs is primarily oriented to a globally standardised enclave of end-users across the globe. This group of end-users is the electronic vanguard, who can take advantage of the many benefits that are designed in accordance with its needs. The global financial sector, bureaucratic institutions, large corporations, small businesses, universities and the professionals associated with them, all partake of the fundamentals of the "new economy" and its protocols of communication. The constant cost of upgradation is the first impediment to 'massifying' the technology.

The second obstacle is that the technology's real utility is limited by the first principles of its design,

which is confined to standardised formats based on demanding preconditions – including a reasonable base level of familiarity with office technology, fluency in at least one of the major languages of the developed world, and an ease with the procedures of modern organisational systems (such as filing and document management). In other words, it suits people who are potentially employable in a modern workplace, i.e. people who are products of 'development'. It is not difficult to see why a majority of such individuals are at the forefront of the campaign for digitally-led development despite the fact that it has no mass affinity in its current form. The specie tries to expand its habitat, and the utopias that have been barred from politics have returned, with modified agenda, to roost among the technocrats.

If there are good reasons why the technology cannot sink roots naturally, there are also equally sound economic reasons why it should not be thrust on people who have no use for it, which is what is being proposed. Upgradation to ever more advanced levels of computing, storage and communication outruns the average real utilisation of available facilities even among high-end users. As a general rule, upgradation creates idle capacity since, typically, only a fraction of a digital system's full capabilities is utilised and the end-user has no choice in the matter. For prosperous societies, this superfluous capacity may not represent a major burden, but societies that continuously face resource and allocation crises ought not to be investing in high-cost idle capacity. The attempt to foist high-end technology on users with an entirely different set of priorities subverts the basic principles of development accounting.

## Software bugs

If these are just a few of the generic problems of the technology that constrains its generalised assimilation, there are also specific constraints related to the software. Software has its own peculiarities that make it almost completely marginal to much of the underdeveloped world. Hardware, being just the medium, is relatively more passive and lends itself to some degree of useful adaptation. Software, on the other hand, offers very little possibilities, since its creation involves a greater number of rather specific end-use assumptions. Software can potentially be developed by much larger numbers of individuals than hardware can be. Yet, the way in which the industry has evolved has prevented this potential from being realised, arresting in the process greater diversity of products and functions, and impeding the emergence of packages more customised to local requirements.

The tendency to integrate different kinds of functions, and the high degree of duplication within the industry, has not been conducive to providing low cost, affordable options. Given the high cost of developing and marketing software in the corporate environment,

it is evident that functions that are meaningfully related to each other in some way should be grouped together in a single package. Unfortunately, where such integration does take place, the end-product is usually an extravagantly expensive bundle of functions with high hardware requirements. Typically these bundles tend to be geared to a particular kind of clientele that passes under the description "knowledge workers". This is the fundamental problem of software as it is being currently developed. Its assumptions are invalid for the vast majority of non-knowledge workers.

Take the case of the set of applications that is most widely familiar to the average computer user, both in offices and outside, i.e. the Microsoft Office suite. Office, as its name suggests, is limited to a certain set of functions that are of little use to those who do not belong to the "knowledge economy". Its wide range of functions, coupled with Microsoft's monopoly in the software market, has given the company what, by industry standards, can be considered a mass market. The Office package includes the word-processing application Word, the spreadsheet application Excel, the Access database application, Power Point, Photo Editor, and a host of other paraphernalia.

Given such a wide range of functions, which could very easily have been made available as separate applications, the end user has no choice but to pay for those components. Microsoft's position as a market leader gives an indication of corporate software development trends. The tendency to manipulate end-users by large corporates who have gradually come to occupy near-monopoly positions does not inspire any confidence in the industry's capacity to provide software solutions oriented towards more diversified needs. The current philosophy of developing solutions is to devise packages that assume the needs of as wide a set of people as possible within a limited and common spectrum of activity.

This approach to designing software solutions raises some important questions relating to the willingness of the industry to develop applications more relevant to users with far less standardised needs. The informal, unorganised, non-regulated "chaotic" world of underdevelopment does not easily lend itself to a bundled set of applications designed for cognate sets of activities. The assumptions of integrated solutions fall apart here and more context-specific software has to be created if it is to meet the objectives of economic development. But the financial incentive simply does not exist, if the example of the Microsoft Office package and the general inclination to "bundle" software is any indication.

The mass market is the main aim of such integrated packages. However, where social and economic agenda are the objective, macro-level solutions applicable to the entire developing world, or even to specific countries, are futile. The disaggregated approach that effective development requires automatically reduces

the scope for bundling software applications. Software corporates are unlikely to be enthused by the prospect of having to produce niche commodities, which will require high levels of preliminary research on unfamiliar societies and their varied needs. The costs are too high and the market too small. Clearly, under the present digital regime, software development and social development are very different issues. As the 2001 HDR notes, "Technology is created in response to market pressures – not the needs of poor people, who have little purchasing power". What is puzzling is that, having acknowledged this fairly well known fact, development agencies have still gone ahead and endorsed it as the agent of development.

The cause of adapting the technology to social needs is not helped very much by the fact that advocates of digitally-led development have not been particularly forthcoming in spelling out how precisely it is to be applied. With the existing global gusto for bringing digital technology to the forefront of the development agenda, it would only be reasonable to expect some minimal but concrete recommendations. But this has been a vain expectation. The last four years or so has seen a high level of rhetoric from various quarters but little else, and more than a hint of malafides must be attached to the corporate sector's sudden interest in alleviating poverty.

A great many international fora have been established to foster all-round electronic development, and these have met and issued statements so often that it is now possible to detect a uniformity in their conduct. The Group of Eight (G8) initiative is a case in point and worth examining. When the G8 economic powers met at the Kyushu-Okinawa summit in Japan in June 2000, they adopted a charter on Global Information Society ("the Okinawa Charter"), and agreed to establish a special task force to study the subject. As a result, the Digital Opportunity Task Force, or the DOT Force, was formed soon after, "with a mandate to work with partners in a manner that would be responsive to the needs of developing countries".

The composition of the DOT Force as outlined in the Backgrounder to its Report Card is revealing. It has officials from the G8 governments, seven representatives from multilateral organisations, 11 leaders from the private sector, and eight representatives from the non-profit sector. Its only concession to the under-developed world it has been mandated to work with are the "representatives from 8 developing countries", presumably numbering eight in all. This is one of the world's expert groups that will "do development".

In pursuit of its mandate under the Kyushu-Okinawa Communiqué the DOT Force proceeded to have three plenary meetings and six international "forums", and it also conducted an internet survey. It then formulated

a nine-point Plan of Action (the Genoa Plan of Action) "to provide a basis for developing economies to achieve sustainable social and economic development enabled by information and communications technologies".

Shorn of the verbiage, all that the DOT Force did was to constitute a cabal of technocratic, managerial and development professionals which, in the course of travelling around the world, came to the unanimous conclusion that the digital industry must be developed by pouring its products into the underdeveloped and "emerging" economies, and reorienting international aid for this purpose if necessary. The G8's digital experts had no concrete suggestions on the deployment of IT for development, barring some confidential hints that "ICTs offer powerful tools to address and improve health and fight against HIV/AIDS", besides being useful to "foster e-literacy". Instead, between the lines of the incessant e-chatter of its Report Card can be found the lynchpin of the new agenda, viz connectivity.

## Utopian connectivity

How connectivity is even conceptually a factor in development merits some consideration. The emphasis on connectivity comes from the laissez faire assumption that information is a key variable in the creation of perfect markets. And with market failure becoming an increasingly persistent fact of economic life today, the techno-managerial utopia takes the form of facilitating perfect markets. The premise is that with the free flow of information market participants can take rational decisions, armed as they are with all the inputs necessary for decision-making.

Relevant information is necessary for any kind of economic activity. But when the scale of the activity is circumscribed by factors other than information, no amount of connectivity can fetch the produce a worldwide market. The picture, in the DOT Force Report Card, of two happy girls with a laptop in the wilderness of some "emerging economy" makes a powerful impression no doubt (see icon at top right). And the odd entrepreneurial success story of an artisan striking it rich, or a fisherman doubling his catch through connectivity, which have fuelled a new genre of e-fairy tales, do not add up to much more than exceptions in an otherwise grim saga of developmental stagnation. Besides, they represent individual successes, which may fit in well with the new model based on individual entrepreneurship, but for these to be treated as symbols of the unfolding future is somewhat premature. The sample size is far too small and possibly a tad too contrived for it to ring true.

In any case, connectivity on the scale that is being implied is hard to come by. The staccato manner in which e-connectivity was established in South Asia is

> # More than a hint of malafide intent must be attached to the corporate sector's sudden interest in alleviating poverty

an indication of the potential problems facing digital infrastructure development. This has partly to do with the fact that governments were slow to react to the technology as it emerged and, consequently, it was policy that for long obstructed connectivity. In India, academic networks like ERNET were the first to connect to the internet. In Sri Lanka, the internet became available through university initiatives. In Pakistan and Bhutan, donor assistance was the stimulant, while in Nepal, private internet providers had to prove the viability of the market before the state-owned telecom monopoly entered the fray. In South Asia, where the state's role in infrastructure development is still crucial, governments are notoriously suspicious of the free exchange of information, and all countries have at some point or the other witnessed curbs on the conventional media. Consequently, even though South Asian governments enthusiastically echo the virtues of connectivity, it is unlikely that they will actively participate in its genuine dissemination. This is something that development professionals have clearly not understood, or prefer not to.

Another constraint is that the global structure of connectivity is likely to impede more optimal solutions from emerging in the immediate future. Take, for instance, the most basic of all forms of internet communication, e-mail. This essay, to reach its editor a few kilometres across Kathmandu Valley, from the writer's resident at Koteshwor to Pulchowk, first went all the way to San Francisco by one channel before returning via a different channel. The sheer enormity of providing connectivity will be evident from the reported data which shows that trans-Pacific bandwidth connecting Asia to North America is a mere 25 percent of the trans-Atlantic bandwidth connecting North America with Europe.

With such constraints, deficiencies in the level and quality of existing and likely future connectivity can be imagined. The fact is that connectivity involves not just software and hardware, but a whole range of investments in infrastructure, which makes clear why it has become the focus of multinational corporate attention. The only problem is that for poor countries to make such consolidated investments amounts to gambling on an outside chance. It will either create excess capacity in small countries like Nepal, where capacity absorption is currently very limited, or it will simply be used by already 'developed' and connected sections of the populace in large countries like India. Whether such investments need to be made in the name of development is the pertinent question. ICT infrastructure on

> The odd entrepreneurial success story of an artisan striking it rich or a fisherman doubling his catch through connectivity, which have fuelled a new genre of e-fairy tales, do not add up to much more than exceptions in an otherwise grim saga of developmental stagnation

such a stupendous scale is best left outside the rubric of development.

## The second-hand solution

Development is the key issue before poor countries, but this does not necessarily call for investing digital technology with any special status. Development involves hard choices. But it would seem that the question of choice of technique is no longer available for developing countries. Under corporate pressure, the choice has already been narrowed down to the intensive application of digital technology. The fact that it is a purely imported technology, more or less under the control of network engineers, to whom differences in socio-economic environments have no particular value, is largely overlooked. As the scientist and author Arthur C Clarke told the United Nations, "the debate about the free flow of information which has been going on for so many years, will soon be settled – by engineers, not politicians".

This new corporate-driven agenda, surprisingly, has evoked very little protest from civil society organisations, despite the fact that the Southern societies on which this technology is being imposed neither have any inputs in it, nor any real degree of control over it. In the last decade or so, instances of inappropriate imported technologies, ranging from dams to genetic modification, have attracted vociferous criticism from local organisations and pressure groups. The reason why the digital solution has escaped any activism is that, barring its corporate sponsors, no one else involved in promoting the technology, including governments and development agencies, has a clear idea of what it is all about.

This is a technology to which all kinds of magical qualities have been attributed. The cult status that has been granted to it is based on the assumption that it is an independent solution. If the real potential of electronic technology has to be salvaged for the purposes of development, its limitations have to be kept in mind. Digital technology can neither identify the problem nor generate the solution. It can only be used to implement already identified solutions. Put very simply, digital technology can regulate an automated process by which a car is made, but the car itself cannot digitally be made. Likewise, it can be applied to execute solutions to poverty, but it cannot remove poverty.

The potential of the technology to achieve the objectives of development can, therefore, be realised only if it is streamlined and the superfluities of its current struc-

ture are eliminated. If it is to be of any use, the idea of connectivity as a solution must be discarded. Connectivity may be generally useful, but it has no particular value in reducing poverty. The operational modalities of development work need to be digitised into local languages, if connectivity-based development can work at all. But as the foregoing analysis shows, localising software is not about to happen under corporate auspices.

Therefore, what is required is the judicious application of digital technology, without any emphasis on its communication aspect. The routine computing process, using minimal hardware and relevant software, is more than adequate for the present. Hardware, for all its industry-driven problems, does not present obstacles in the way of minimising investment costs. In fact, the advantages of minimal depreciation and high obsolescence can be used to the advantage of poor societies. Upgradation of hardware creates wasted capacity in the form of computing equipment that is phased out of networked organisations. These machines are obsolete only because they are connected and not because their inherent utility has been made redundant. As independent machines, reoriented to appropriate ends, they constitute cost-effective and durable resources. Given the steady flow of such equipment that is made available by constant obsolescence, there is little point in developing countries investing in cutting-edge hardware. So long as connectivity is not an issue, reusing discarded equipment is a feasible option. The first step towards the appropriate use of "future-proof" digital technology is, therefore, to exit from the connectivity loop.

This option also dispenses with the need for incurring huge expenditures in research and development that are necessitated by the search for indigenously developed, specialised hardware resources, which in any case might lead nowhere. Take the case of the Simputer, or the simple computer developed in Bangalore. Its value lies in its attempt to synthesise vernacular dialect into text, and it has been built keeping in mind developing country situations. The Simputer also makes provisions for connectivity. But, the question that arises is whether this effort and investment in research was not wasted. Last year, its cost crossed the USD 200 level. At this price, it begins to lose its attraction since a higher capacity, refurbished, personal computer can be had for less than USD 200. The lesson is fairly obvious. There is scarcely any point in developing alternatives to feasible and cheaper options that are already available in the market.

The main constraint to the extended use of information technology in the developing world is therefore appropriate software. This is the key area of concern since no second-hand solutions are available. Developing software is particularly difficult. The irony of South Asia is that it provides software professionals at all levels to the global industry, but does not have a single major application in any of the local languages,

let alone a programme geared for local needs. If development funds for ICT are to be invested anywhere, it is in software creation – and let the donor agencies hear this loud and clear.

This involves two related issues, namely the principles of using programming code and investment in training, research and development. The only way towards the creation of less expensive software technologies that are not based on the assumptions of the networked world is to participate in the arena of non-proprietary code. Globally, programming runs on two different principles. There is the proprietary system generally adopted by large corporates, wherein the original code of the programme is not available in the public domain. Against this, there is the principle of open-source development, according to which, whoever develops a programme releases its code in the public domain, for use in whatever form by other software developers.

Open-source is about the free development of software that is based on design ideas that have been collaboratively developed. This considerably reduces the time and effort spent in developing programmes and is the key to generating locally adapted solutions. All this makes for a great deal of flexibility in creating software options, including the incorporation of local language computing into the system, which otherwise is difficult to do.

The other question to be addressed in the localisation of technology is the creation of facilities for training and research. This is by far the more expensive aspect, since it involves competition for human resources with corporate software developers. If development funds are to be genuinely spent in the pursuit of relevant digital inputs, the first task is to invest in training and research facilities that will reorient programming on the basis of open-source principles. But training alone will not be sufficient, since there is no guarantee that trained professionals will want to stay back and create development-oriented software when other opportunities abound. It is necessary, therefore, to also create centres of software development that have sufficient attractions and incentives to retain the interest of a critical minimum number of professionals.

The common denominator of all development is the management of resources to meet prioritised needs. Corporate-driven social development programmes are more likely to waste scarce resources than achieve useful objectives. Reused hardware, open-source software and content in local language employed in well-defined ways that do not exceed the capacity of the technology can facilitate development. For that there must be a clear recognition of the principle that digital technology is not an end in itself but an instrument to be usefully employed. ♭

*(The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the views of any of the organisations with which he is associated.)*

# Briefs

## Delhi belly

THE SOUTH-central area of New Delhi has a genteel grandeur that suits the city. It is a quality that is impossible to locate in the Delhi Development Authority's Delhi and even less likely glimpsed in 'unauthorised construction' Delhi. South-central Delhi is where Lutyens gently gives over to Lodhi. Wide avenues lined by trees run a neat grid pattern past sprawling tomb gardens, United Nations offices, government quarters which have the luxury of a preserved elegant 1980s, and residential colonies where news of the 'car driver abets kidnapping of boy' variety is still received with startled incredulity.

This is where the diplomatic corps shops, and where the capital region's most exclusive culture clubs are located. The India Habitat Centre, a touch less exclusive than the neighbouring India International Centre but many notches higher on the creative use of space scale, is an amalgam of NGO offices, auditoriums, conference centres, banquet halls, restaurants, well-appointed guest rooms, restaurants, and more restaurants. Some of the eateries are Members Only while a couple are open to all. The All American Diner



The All American Diner: Tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to be free not welcome.

at the concourse, complete with a mail order set of 1940s Americana, is a recent addition. There is no restriction on entry, and here it seemed was a welcome concession to egalitarianism by the IHC.

Or so everybody thought till a story broke one morning this summer about how the Rights of Admission Reserved privilege that restaurants reserve, largely for keeping drunks and guns out, had been invoked to keep a maid from lunching there. Lalitha was with her employers when the staff at the All American Diner, obviously trained in spot-servants-and-spurn-from-site tactics, asked her employers to get rid of her. It did not matter that nobody else eating there had protested against Lalitha's presence. Or that she was not making a nuisance of herself. She was just summarily evicted.

It is not as if such regressively elitist, snobbish and silly attitudes are specific to New Delhi. After all, a certain Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi once did get thrown out of a first-class train compartment in South Africa; his attire was fine but apparently his colour was not. Closer to home, tea shops in rural Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh still have a two-tumbler rule; a separate woven-leaves set for the 'even poorer'. And, now, eateries in Delhi, have become so self-important they forget that in America diners are places where anybody who can pay for it will be served a hearty meal at very low rates.

Perhaps the IHC's faux pas is just symptomatic of the US-orientation of New Delhi's upper crust when it can take down-home Americana and convert it into a plaything of the rich.                    ▵

## History lesson for intrepid bicyclists

DEAR AHMER Arsalan Zahid, Hassan Mehmood, Bilal Ahmad and Usman Ijaz,

You said you are going to cycle from Khunjerab to Islamabad in 12 days (approximately) to promote the cause of peace and education. That is a fine thing to do; Pakistani youth rarely go anywhere off the beaten path. You will have the opportunity to see some of the most picturesque areas of Pakistan that are, at the same time, its most neglected and deprived regions. The people who live here liberated themselves from Dogra rule through hard, strenuous ef-

fort. Before proceeding on the journey, do read their story in *Liberation of Northern Areas*.

You will be tracing the footprints of a young soldier from Gilgit Scouts who, when the scouts revolted in August 1947, was dispatched with four letters for Quaid-e-Azam, Liaquat Ali Khan, Abdul Qayum Khan and Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar. He mailed the letters at the GPO in Abbottabad, which was outside Dogra control. This trip out and back was about 450 km long, and it was undertaken at a time when the best access that existed were foot tracks along mountain tops or along the river Indus. Unlike the legendary Greek soldier who ran the famous 26 miles and died at the end, our hero returned to Gilgit, was promot-

ed to *havildar* and retired from service many years later.

The region you will be biking through can justly be termed 'the museum of languages'. One comes across a different tongue every few miles. Perhaps one of you could pack into your luggage *Tribes of the Hindu Kush* by Brig Biddulph who thrice served as resident of Gilgit in the British era. He prepared notes on the grammar and vocabulary of ten languages spoken in the area.

Many Pakistanis and Chinese laid down their lives to enable you to travel on bikes on this road. You will notice that engineers of the Frontier Works Organisation and their Chinese compatriots worked under tough conditions and did things that were harder than pedal-

## Evangelical takeover

HENRY THE Eighth did it for Anne Boleyn, Edward VIII did it for Wally Simpson. One built a whole new Church to keep his crown and divorce his wife, the other built a huge big reputation when he divorced the crown to marry a divorcee. All this flamboyance is of course, easier to display when you're rebelling in Europe and belong to British royalty. On the Subcontinent, however, where changing a set of rules is in any case a Herculean task, how do you go about changing a set that's taken for gospel truth? A toughie if there ever was one!

Christians in Pakistan are peculiarly stuck. The marriage and divorce laws that govern them date all the way back to 1872 and 1868 respectively. Personal law for Pakistani Christians is of a vintage when the sacrament of matrimony was based on truth and an acceptance of the divine will. Your lawfully wedded may be your awfully wedded, but to obey and to cherish thou hast pledged and so shall be done, dear God. An escape from this has sprung forth, however, in keeping with the Subcontinent's robust aptitude for ingenuity. Lots of small evangelical churches, such as The Church of God of Pakistan, have sprung up in the Pakistani landscape, where getting a divorce and getting married are not as great a challenge as in the conservative churches. For better or worse, Pakistani Christians have the opportunity to get out of a bad marriage (or get into one) much easier by switching loyalties from the Protestant or the Catholic churches to these. And, of course this is playing havoc.

The foremost authority of Christian religious institutions in Pakistan, the National Council of Churches, refuses to accept the legitimacy of the newer, relatively minor denominations. They are hardly disposed then, to recognise the marriages that have the blessings of these churches. Divorces neither. As a result there is now almost a flood of cases where Pakistani Christian marriages fall right through the loopholes in the system. Girls switch to the evangelical churches to marry boys from that church only to find that when they are whisked away, sometimes kidnapped, by their orthodox families, nobody is willing to recognise the betrothal. The guy waits around for a while, eventually gives up and marries another, the girl gets stuck because in a society where finding a first partner is such an adventure, finding a second is well nigh impossible. The National Council asks that it be given the sole authority for registering marriages. The solution lies in modernising the laws and making the whole system both more comprehensive and sensitive to the social developments since the 19th century.                    Δ

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ling. I can also recollect an English woman who often cycled, or rather carried her bike, through Kaghan valley a very long time ago when there were no roads.

You will notice that people of Gilgit and Baltistan are some of the most truthful and welcoming people. Please return the honour to them: while you travel in their land, be respectful. And yes, if you delay your trip to late July or August you will be able to enjoy the fruits of the region, especially apples and apricots (*khubani*) that ripen in late summer. Visit the fabled land of Deosai Plain. The days you will be there are just the season for some of the most rare flowers to blossom. Also do bring along the tail of a yak even if you are not able to ride one!

Finally, do try to meet at Gilgit the former librarian of the Muncipal Library, Mr Muhammad Ashraf. I hope he is not only alive but also physically fit to talk to you: there is nothing in the region's history that he is not well acquainted with. When you meet, do convey my regards to him.

Let me end with some suggestions. Carry a good camera but a video may do better, and you should think of packing a sensitive audio recorder too. It might be helpful to get in touch with Brig Jan Nadir Khan, president and founder of Adventure Foundation Pakistan, and Brig Gulistan Janjua, President, Pakistan Alpine Club – two aged yet young *jawans* who will be able to answer any query you may have.

Wish you a happy and thrilling journey and a safe return.    Δ
— *Tariq*

# Corporate theft of 'traditional knowledge'
# Biopiracy by another name

## The Subcontinent's inheritance of traditional knowledge and methods is safe. Think again.

by **Devinder Sharma**

Thirty years after developing countries were first made to believe that their economic interests were perfectly safe in collecting and conserving quickly disappearing plant germplasm, the global bosses are at it again. However, instead of the biological inheritance, this time it is traditional knowledge that the international community is suddenly so concerned and worried about.

Once again, the same emotional rhetoric fills the air. Traditional knowledge, which has been passed on from generation to generation by local and tribal communities in the developing world, is getting lost. This knowledge might soon be lost to posterity, denying humanity its rightful inheritance. The answer, we are told, is to document the traditional knowledge, which is, after all, all of mankind's heritage.

In the mid-1960s and early 1970s the same justifications were used to seek monopoly control over plant germplasm resources in developing countries. At the height of the green revolution, with a land grant system borrowed from the United States well in place in India and other countries, prevailing rhetoric said that plants were mankind's heritage but were being lost in the process of development. Letting plant germplasm disappear would be at the world's own peril. So what needed to be done was to collect whatever was available and keep it safely stored and coded in gene banks.

The developing world followed its marching orders. Plant expeditions set out to locate, classify and store germplasm resources in gene banks. After this was complete, we were told that humanity would benefit if, for instance, all rice-growing countries were to keep their rice collections at an international centre, which in turn would act as a custodian of the invaluable genetic wealth. Once again, this was done in good faith. India provided a copy of its rice collections for common custody at the International Rice Research Institute, Manila, in the Philippines. The wheat collections were kept at the International Research Centre for Maize and Wheat in Mexico City. The remaining collections went to the 14 other international agricultural centres under the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research.

We were then informed that these collections were not safe in Manila or Mexico City. After all, a terrorist group could blow up the gene banks and destroy the assembled collection. So what should we do? Keep a copy of these collections in safe custody. And what would be the safest place? At Fort Knox and Fort Collins in the United States. We assented again in good faith.

The world's largest collection of plant germplasm, some 600,000 plant entries, is now in safe custody under the control of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). The thinking on genetic resources meanwhile has undergone a paradigm shift in the intervening years – the collections under USDA control are now classified as a national property rather than as universal heritage protected under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) signed at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The countries from which these specimens were collected have no control over the resources. In fact, efforts are now being made to impose intellectual property rights (IPR) controls over these resources, with the countries of origin enjoying no benefit or say in the matter.

Since the early 1980s, when Anand Chakravorty got the first life patent on a bug that he had created by genetic engineering, seed and life science companies have realised the importance of these genetic resources. The US has these resources, the finances for research and unrivaled mastery over genetic engineering, although complications arise over precisely what to do with this genetic information. After all, it would be impractical to work out the chemical compositions and pharmaceutical properties of each and every plant stored at Fort Collins. The best (most profitable) option is to direct companies' attention to the places from which the plant resources originated to find out from the local communities in what ways and for what purposes the plants are used. This, in turn, gives multinational companies the chemical blueprints to decipher knowledge, draw industrial uses, seek patents and market the very product which has been used in traditional forms for centuries under a corporate label.

Analysis of records with the US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), which extends institutional legit-

imacy to this process, only verifies suspicions about corporate piracy of traditional knowledge. A recent survey conducted by a task force from the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) found that of the 4896 references on 90 medicinal plants in the USPTO database, 80 percent pertain to just seven plants of Subcontinental origin. In other words, nearly 4000 patents or patent applications are based on already known medicinal properties of plants. According to the TKDL, 47 percent of the 762 medicinal plant patents granted by the USPTO could be easily classified as traditional.

The TKDL, a digital database advanced by India and operating in 170 countries on a trial basis, has been offered as one answer to the biopiracy threat. Proponents argue that this library will serve as a centralised database of local knowledge that will prevent biopiracy through internationally agreed-upon standards of documentation. A CD-Rom database shared among patent offices worldwide would thus, in theory, prevent the copyrighting of traditional knowledge. India's support for the TKDL includes the documentation of 35,000 *slokas* (verses) drawn from the *Ayurveda* system of traditional medicine.

However, the TKDL is, at best, an incomplete solution and, at worst, a gateway to even greater piracy. The USPTO is not required to recognise information contained in the library's projected 140,000 pages as authentic and unduplicable, meaning that it carries little legal weight. More strikingly, the TKDL will likely serve only to organise – rather than protect – existing traditional knowledge, making it that much easier for companies to pilfer traditional methods. A recent patent issued by the USPTO on aloe vera treatment for 'dry eyes', for example, was identical to traditional procedures, except that chlorinated water replaced 'regular' water. Small changes in technical procedures can grant the veneer of originality to what are really thinly-disguised copies of age-old methods.

Developing country governments are particularly constrained in their ability to resist this process. The Indian Ministry of Commerce has admitted that it lacks the resources to battle the copyrighting of a slightly modified form of basmati rice – a staple of South Asian diets – and the Government of Pakistan has balked at assisting New Delhi's cause despite a shared dependence on the grain. The British company BTG recently filed a case against the Pentagon for patent infringement on the US military's unauthorised reproduction of the BTG hovercraft and received USD 6 million in compensation, but only after it spent USD 2 million on lawyers' fees. While multinational corporations can commit such resources to court cases on lucrative projects, cash-strapped developing countries can hardly be expected to incur the cost of fighting thousands of potential copyright abuses.



*The governments of India and Pakistan surrendered to the patenting of a genetically-modified version of Basmati rice after deciding that the legal battle was too expensive to continue.*

In the absence of globally-recognised standards and norms on the protection of local knowledge, participating in an international system of traditional knowledge-sharing is likely to work against the interests of developing countries. Powerful corporations have discovered that the best way to legitimise biopiracy is to encourage local researchers, NGOs and public sector institutes to document traditional knowledge and then use the collected data as a basis for new product lines. Assembling information in collections beyond the control of national bodies thus probably runs counter to the interests of developing countries.

The UNDP, UNCTAD, DFID, SIDA, CIDA and GTZ – and almost all other donors – are pumping in grants for the documentation of traditional knowledge. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research are also promoting such documentation. No one knows what this documentation will accomplish or what its purpose is. No one seems concerned to learn why we have become suddenly so conscious of the quickly eroding corpus of traditional knowledge – or who will be using the documentation that is being compiled so assiduously.

## Traditional knowledge: locals do the research, corporations patent it, labels sell it

We all are facilitating the process of biopiracy. And we are doing it legally and with the backing of international donors. Once again, such documentation is safely and through legal channels going into the hands of companies who wish to use it as a basis for product development. But as happened with genetic resources, it will not take 30 years for these companies to draw IPR over traditional knowledge, as international efforts have already begun to draw a *sui generis* system over this body of knowledge. It is only a matter of few years. The documented traditional knowledge will then be out of the control of the communities which nurtured and maintained it. The tragedy is that unlike biopiracy in the past – neem, turmeric and the like – the scientific community and civil society are willing partners this time. After all, have we not heard countless times that there are 'challenges and opportunities' in the intellectual property system that are being forced down the throats of developing countries? △

*(This is the first article in a two-part series by the author on genetic technology issues.)*

# Unbecoming conduct

### by *Vidyasagar*

On 26 December 2001, a woman and her 13-year-old daughter were allegedly attacked and gang-raped by eight young men from Sovima village near Dimapur, the cultural capital of Nagaland. The accused youths first overpowered the driver of the auto rickshaw the mother and daughter were travelling in, and then took the victims to the old airfield at Sovima and raped them. Word of the incident spread like wildfire in the area, even as women came out on the streets to protest the rape. The police arrested all eight accused within two days but by then the situation had stirred the public to an unprecedented level of rage.

Angry protest marches and public meetings were held. At one such, in the second week of January, some speakers from non-governmental organisations demanded that the administration hand over the accused to the public so that they could be paraded naked through the city. Reacting to the public hostility, Horangse Sangtam, the Naga Council chairman, submitted a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner of Dimapur appealing that the severest legally possible punishment be given to the accused. Sangtam's memorandum also asked that authorities prevent lawyers from representing the defendants. In addition to this, several women activists severely criticised lawyers who represent accused rapists out of, what they believed to be, exclusively monetary persuasion. Tiala Sapu, president of the Naga Women Society, Dimapur, further alleged that lawyers openly lied in court to gain rapists their freedom, an opinion that drew the ire of many lawyers in the state. The Dimapur Bar Association resolved in an emergency general meeting to withdraw all legal advisors engaged with NGOs. Nonetheless, giving in to the pressure from public sentiment, the association decided not to represent the accused in this particular case.

This sequence of events raises compelling and uncomfortable questions about the relationship between progressive social campaigns and the principles of jurisprudence and justice. Liberal jurisprudence prescribes well-defined procedures to be followed in administering criminal law and justice. Among others, the accused is presumed to be innocent until proved guilty; the proof of guilt, besides being beyond reasonable doubt, must be judicially established through tangible, legally admissible evidence. Besides, the accused is not obliged to give self-incriminating evidence and has the right, irrespective of the nature of the crime, to legal representation. More importantly, puni-

tive justice must be proportionate to the crime and can only be administered by the legally designated authority in accordance with prescribed procedure. These are well-established principles necessary to protect the individual from the juridical and enforcement agencies. They are just as necessary to protect the individual from the public and to insulate the processes of justice from the mechanics of society.

In the reported instance, the accused have not only been pronounced guilty outside the court, but that too even before the evidence has been submitted to, let alone examined by, the judiciary. They have been denied the right to legal representation through civic pressure, and in the process lawyers' rights to practise their profession freely have been impeded. In addition, the demand that they be handed over to the public is tantamount to equating popular justice with juridical justice and undermines the principles of proportionate punishment and the due process. In short, the modalities of justice seem to be shared between the duly constituted legal and judicial authorities and the public at large operating through non-official civic organisations. Leaving aside for the present the guilt or otherwise of those accused in this particular case, as a rule justice is bound to be miscarried if it is left to be decided by popular opinion. Through the prism of pure liberal jurisprudence it would appear that the established principles of dispensing justice are under threat from determined civic activism.

However, problems of this order are merely symptoms of a deeper and larger malaise that lies on the other side of the fence. How valid is it to view the practicalities of justice from just the prism of a purely theoretical jurisprudence, considering that the loftiness of its intent is rarely to be found in the mechanisms of its practice in illiberal South Asia? Why do the forms of civic activism that *de facto* contradict and undermine liberal jurisprudence emerge in the first place? The answer to this must lie in the maladies of the justice system and its methods. The abstract virtues of liberal theory are not sufficient to put a gloss on the frequent duplicities of its institutional procedures. Nowhere is the discrepancy more evident than in the legislations that affect ordinary members of the public in everyday situations.

All too often the travesty of justice lies in the anomalous laws governing specific crimes. In the case of rape and other sexual transgressions, where guilt, to begin with, is difficult to prove, the law is antiquated, based

on conservative assumptions and prejudices, and has an inbuilt tendency to favour acquittal. Add to this a police force that is male-dominated and, in most part, prone to hobnob with the criminal classes, and whatever little evidence of the crime remains, and on which the slim hope of a conviction rests, can be expected to vanish. The situation is compounded by a largely conservative judiciary, which has all too often placed on record, in decision after decision, its view that rape is provoked by the purportedly "unbecoming conduct" of the victim. And since the law practically grants reprieve to the accused *ab initio*, legal representation is easier to come by for the perpetrator than the victim. In effect, in a rape case it is generally the rape victim who is on trial.

In the circumstances, when even the procedures of justice are not available to the victims of crime, and the judicial process is not immune to orthodox social mores, the pretence of securing the principles of jurisprudence from civic activism is meaningless. Clearly, the disposition of the law and the operation of the judicial system are calculated to provoke, in extreme instances, the rejection of the duly constituted system. In effect, jurisprudence has first to be secured from its own internal infirmities before justice can be saved from public interference. In Nagaland, which has been debilitated by military conflict for the last five decades, the organs of the Indian republic have through heinous acts of omission and commission eroded their own legitimacy. It is not surprising that the civil agitation in the state against the Sovima rape did not demand immediate and efficient action by the administration. Instead, it actually influenced to some degree the judicial process, besides of course asserting the public's right to award punishment as it saw fit.

This makes for a piquant paradox. Nevertheless, trial by the public is no substitute for judicial trial and the question that arises is whether the liberal model can meet the requirements of traditional societies like those of South Asia, which it has been grafted into. Judicial systems across the region are in crisis; burdened by outmoded laws, self-serving judges and corrupt enforcement mechanisms, they are now increasingly coming under attack from various quarters. It is customary for the higher judiciary in typically supercilious fashion to regard the judicial crisis as one originating in and restricted to the lower courts. However, the recent conduct of the Supreme Court of India concerning two different, high profile mass issues will suffice to prove just how deeply entrenched the problem of illiberal attitudes is even in the higher judiciary.

Over the last few years both the Sardar Sarovar Project and the Ayodhya temple issue have repeatedly come up for hearing in the Supreme Court. The former involves the construction of a series of dams that will displace thousands of the mostly poor and marginalised in the submergence zone of the reservoirs. Since the rehabilitation of dam oustees has not been convinc-

ingly addressed either administratively or judicially the matter has attracted widespread attention and public protests. A few months ago, in one of the most egregious instances of judicial expropriation on behalf of the rich farmers who are the primary beneficiaries of the project, the highest court in India endorsed the decision of the project authorities to increase the height of the dam. The fate of those who will thus be deprived of their livelihood was not among the court's concerns. And faced with criticism for its unconscionable decision, the judges responded by admitting contempt proceedings against some of the leading opponents of the project, including the Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar, lawyer Prashant Bhushan and writer Arundhati Roy. The court, in fact, went so far as to lower its dignity by demanding that Roy desist from criticising the courts decisions.

In sharp contrast, the apex court which displayed such indecent enthusiasm in depriving people of their land and livelihood, has been stricken by an obsequious paralysis when it comes to issuing a ruling on the status of the disputed site at Ayodhya, vacillating on one count or another every time the matter surfaces for hearing. More than a decade has passed since the temple controversy came into prominence and in all these years the court has been unable to summon the necessary vigour to hand down a conclusive ruling. Meanwhile, spiritual lumpens associated with the ruling party in New Delhi, and their political henchmen in the government have run amok, making offensive statements about the inapplicability of court orders in matters of faith.

A court overly attentive to its own prestige could not have found a larger and more appropriate crew of contemnors to vent its anger on. Instead, it chose to ignore all the assaults on its dignity, such as it is. Perhaps the court is sensitive to the possible repercussions of its ruling. If that is indeed the case, the court's extreme concern about political violence is at odds with its extraordinary indifference to the fate of the people it has displaced from the vicinity of the Sardar Sarovar dams and condemned to virtual destitution. Whatever the reason, it is clear that justice in India is not to be readily had from the courts unless there is a lot of influence to be peddled and favours to be curried.

The discrepancies in the Supreme Court's conduct are too stark, too numerous and too symmetrically aligned to power and influence to be either ignored or regarded as accidental outcomes. If the crisis of legitimacy stretches all the way from the apex court in the national capital to the lower court in the boondocks, there is little reason for any sentimental attachment to liberal concepts and institutions of justice, particularly among those whose lot it is to be at the receiving of judicially dispensed injustice. The Naga episode is just one of the numerous instances where segments of society selectively secede from the ambit of judicial jurisdiction.

## Mud and straw

Reproduced below is a work by the activist-poet Cecil Rajendra, published in the Malaysian daily, *Harakah*, the official publication of the opposition party Parti Se-Islam in 1998. I know that there are many writing such protest poetry in the various languages of South Asia, but I wonder if there are many doing the same in English. I doubt it, which indicates yet again the distance of the English-speaking classes from the realities of mud and straw.

'Blood and Barbed Wire'

Like weeds that sprout
from fissures in pavements
corruption's found a niche
in every crack of governance.

The call for 'transparency'
is targeted solely
at NGOs & the Opposition.

Kickbacks & contracts
ensure the rich get richer
in their marble mansions;
while the poor & outspoken
like flesh on a skewer -
are grilled, 'turned-over'
basted into submission.

Editors. & newspapers
(keepers of the Fourth Estate)
assume the staid posture
of dummies on the lap
of their ventriloquist master -
The Minister of Misinformation.

And that Hall of Justice
once hallowed & revered -
has become an abattoir
for the daily slaughter
of the rule of law
& Articles of the Constitution.

A few brave citizens keep
vigil with placard & candle
at this demise of Democracy;
while the silent majority
hold their silence, intimidated
as ever, by the spectre
of blood & barbed wire ...

## NRAs, the Non-Resident Asamiya

People have a never-ending urge to assert one's primary identity while remaining willingly subsumed under the utilitarian ownership of the nation-state (be it India, Pakistan or Nepal). South Asia is a *khichadi* gruel where the various ingredients maintain their distinct flavour while cohabiting with the other ingredients. It is not a melting pot, which is what the United States has claimed to be, but even that country is converting into a *khichadi*, what with the rise of the Hispanics, among other peoples. In any case, it was nice to see, in a notice put out by the New York-based South Asian Journalists Association that that Asamiya of the United States recently held their annual get-together, something they have apparently done since 1971. Reports the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of the convention, "Despite its relatively small size, the convention represents a kind of independence: a chance to socialize and reaffirm Assamese identity amid the swirling American melting pot... The Assamese say their culture is as distinct within the scope of India's 25 states, seven territories, and one billion people as Indian culture is in the United States".

## Unorthodoxy

"Abraham, the Jewish patriarch, probably never existed. Nor did Moses. The entire Exodus story as recounted in the Bible probably never occurred. The same is true of the tumbling of the walls of Jericho. And David, far from being the fearless king who built Jerusalem into a mighty capital, was more likely a provincial leader whose reputation was later magnified to provide a rallying point for a fledgling nation". These "startling" propositions, as reported in the *New York Times*, are the product of findings by archaeologists digging in and around Israel. And these propositions are apparently finding wide acceptance among non-Orthodox rabbis in the United States. A new Torah and commentary now offers, says the paper, "an interpretation that incorporates the latest findings from archaeology, philology, anthropology and the study of ancient cultures... It represents one of the boldest efforts ever to introduce into the religious mainstream a view of the Bible as a human rather than divine document". The reason I bring it up here is to highlight yet again the need to separate myth from history among South Asia's Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist realms. If only because 'Ram' is today defined by a narrow-focused, super-nationalist, obscurantist cult that has achieved political power, it is important to delve into the historicity of the person of Ram. If the non-Orthodox rabbis of North America can take the dare, why not the non-Orthodox priestdom among us?

## Nigerian scam in Nepal

The unsolicited offers of making millions of bucks by laundering some ill-gotten gains have been mostly a trick originating in Nigeria, and a fairly large number of South Asians have been taken in by the scam and made to lose both their wealth and pride. Some evil South Asian (maybe Nepali, but who knows) seems to have decided to take advantage of the royal palace massacre of 1 June 2001 to bamboozle the greedy brainless. This solicitation is from a Yuvraj Kailash, "a native of Nepal and attorney to the late king of Nepal who died as a result of loss in temper caused by an argu-

ment between him and his family, as they were against him marrying his fiancée". If you are to believe it, prior to the event, the late Crown Prince Dipendra had "kept aside a secret amount of money" for his fiancée to the tune of USD 30 million. "The money was kept away in such a way to prevent any member of his family from having any access or trace to the funds". Mr 'Kailash' goes on to write, "The death of my late boss, left us stranded, we have therefore been searching for a genuine and reliable person or company of trust and with whom the Nepalese Royal Family have never had any previous, personal or business relationship with. That person will assist in the transfer and business re-investment of this money. We cannot do it alone due to our present social status. We also intend to give you a reasonable share of the funds for your assistance".

So, dear reader, if you are one of those who think something comes out of nothing, and have dreams of someone just handing you a few million – and also if you want to be hijacked by the scamsters, kept at gunpoint until your family shucks out its entire earned and ancestral wealth – then do get in touch with this crook. But if you are part of the saner half of South Asian humanity, than send him abuse at this 'confidential UK number': 44-870-1309342. And if you have any mole within Scotland Yard, have them trace the fax and lie in wait for 'Yuvraj Kailash' when he comes to pick up the letters expressing interest.

**The World Bank and dead grass**

Rarely, particularly in the 'smaller' countries of South Asia, will the multilateral organisations come under the microscope as they did over July in Bangladesh in the columns of Afsan Chowdhury, a Himal Contributing Editor, in Dhaka's *Daily Star*. (The media in New Delhi, in particular, think they have bigger fish to fry so they actually tend to leave these institutions alone). This questioning, even though some may consider Chowdhury's own piece written in the extreme, is healthy for it makes the multilateral and bilateral donors who are so powerful but so unanswerable in, say Nepal or Bangladesh, realise that the 'people' are watching. This particular case is about a World Bank employee in Dhaka who went to court against what he claimed unfair termination of services, to which the Bank claimed immunity from the jurisdiction of the court. I excerpt below from the original article titled, "Of Immunity, arrogance and accountability: The World Bank claims (false) immunity".

"Journalists get sued all the time. That's how the system works. Most laws in spirit are meant to protect the indigent and if need be serve as the tool of the affected to seek justice in the court through suing. One of the great rules of modern society is that no one is above law. Unless it seems, you work for the World Bank or the UN agencies. If you are immune how will you be accountable? How do you protect people from decisions arising out of bad policies, errors, silliness, arrogance, stupidity and plain ignorance of development agencies and their partners? It's society's check and balance. But the World Bank is demanding that it be considered above all this. Even when it recommends that as a pre-condition for loans. "Mama, I won't wash but you can't say I stink." Is that it?"

Chowdhury then takes a pot-shot at those who work for the Bank: "I have very little sympathy for the position of the terminated and the new staff member now filling the post because they have wilfully gone to work for an organization that has been documented as being involved with more economic crimes against humanity than any other. It pays bloody well, does it? Conscience motivates neither of the local staff involved but lost opportunity. But they aren't even cogs in the wheel, they are dead grass willing to live on if paid mega bucks to sing along. It shows how easy manipulation is. One leaves and another comes in. Will the terminated staff refuse to join the Bank if given a chance again? Most well educated – read foreign university – developing world kids join the Bank because it's the best paid job they can get by putting their conscience and brains to sleep. Most westerners join the Bank because they can't get a job on Wall Street".

The Chowdhury column generated a volley of letters, as you may well imagine, but space restricts me from reproducing them here. You can check them out at www.dailystarnews.com (archive letters).

**Bharat Dutt Koirala**

Bharat Dutt Koirala has broken the decades' long jinx of Nepalis getting international recognition by receiving the 2002 Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts. He received the award from the Philippines-based award committee for "developing professional journalism in Nepal and unleashing the democratising powers of a free media". What they might have added, in a regional context, is that Koirala had a key role in making Nepal the first (and thus far the only) country in South Asia that has truly released 'radio' to the people. His one concern, when the award was announced, was that the present government (in the form of the relevant ministry and minister) was sitting on the application of nearly two dozen radio stations, "which would truly make for a radio revolution in Nepal, which the rest of South Asia could study and emulate". Chhetria Patrakar also takes comfort in the fact that, while this may not have been something important for the Magsaysay committee, Bharat Dutt Koirala is the founding chairman of Himal magazine, which you hold in your hands.
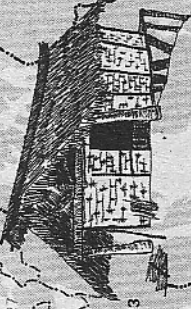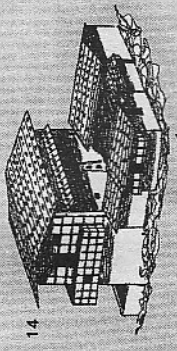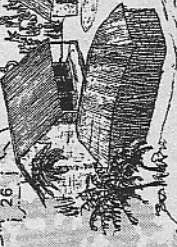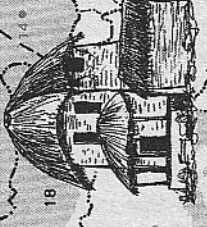
—*Chhetria Patrakar*
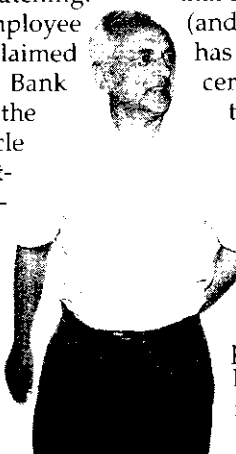
# RURAL HOUSE TYPES OF SOUTH ASIA

- ● Fairly precise location of illustrated house type.
- ○ Approximate location

Illustration numbers are keyed to location numbers.
All house types and locations are identified by their numbers in the list below.

*My home, a thousand houses would I sacrifice for thee!*
Kashmiri proverb
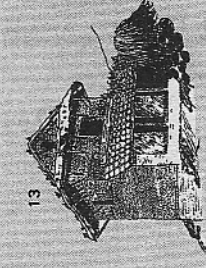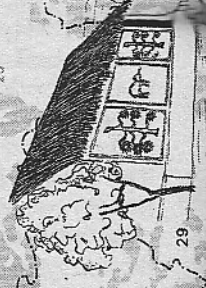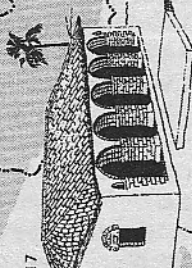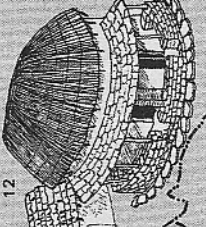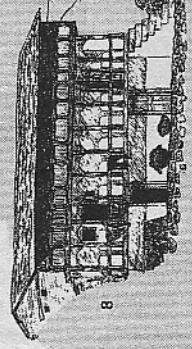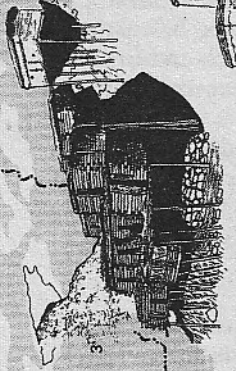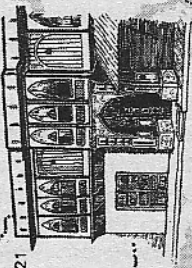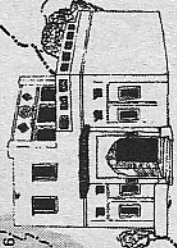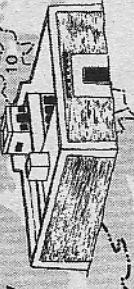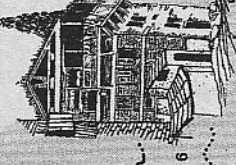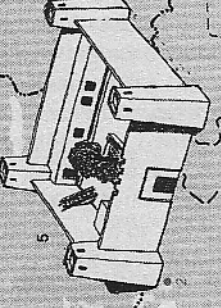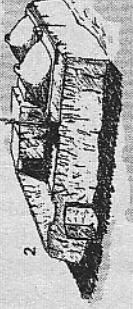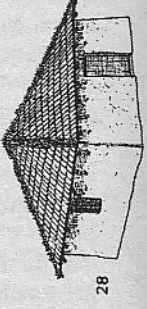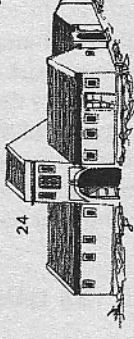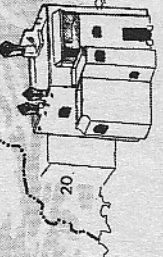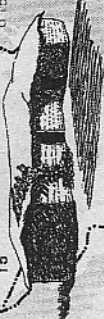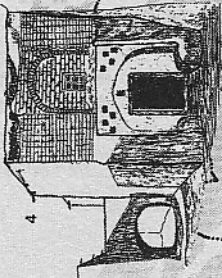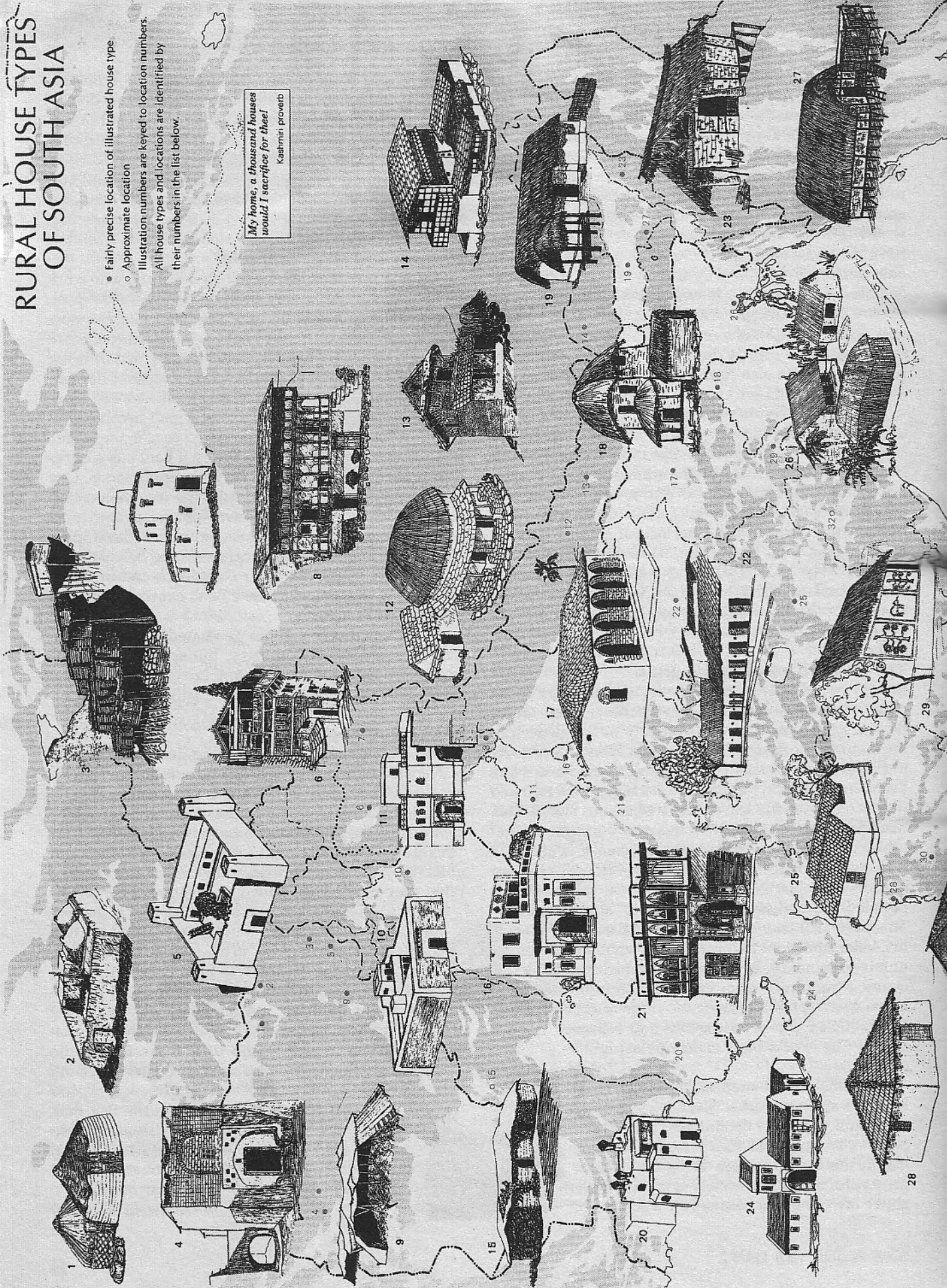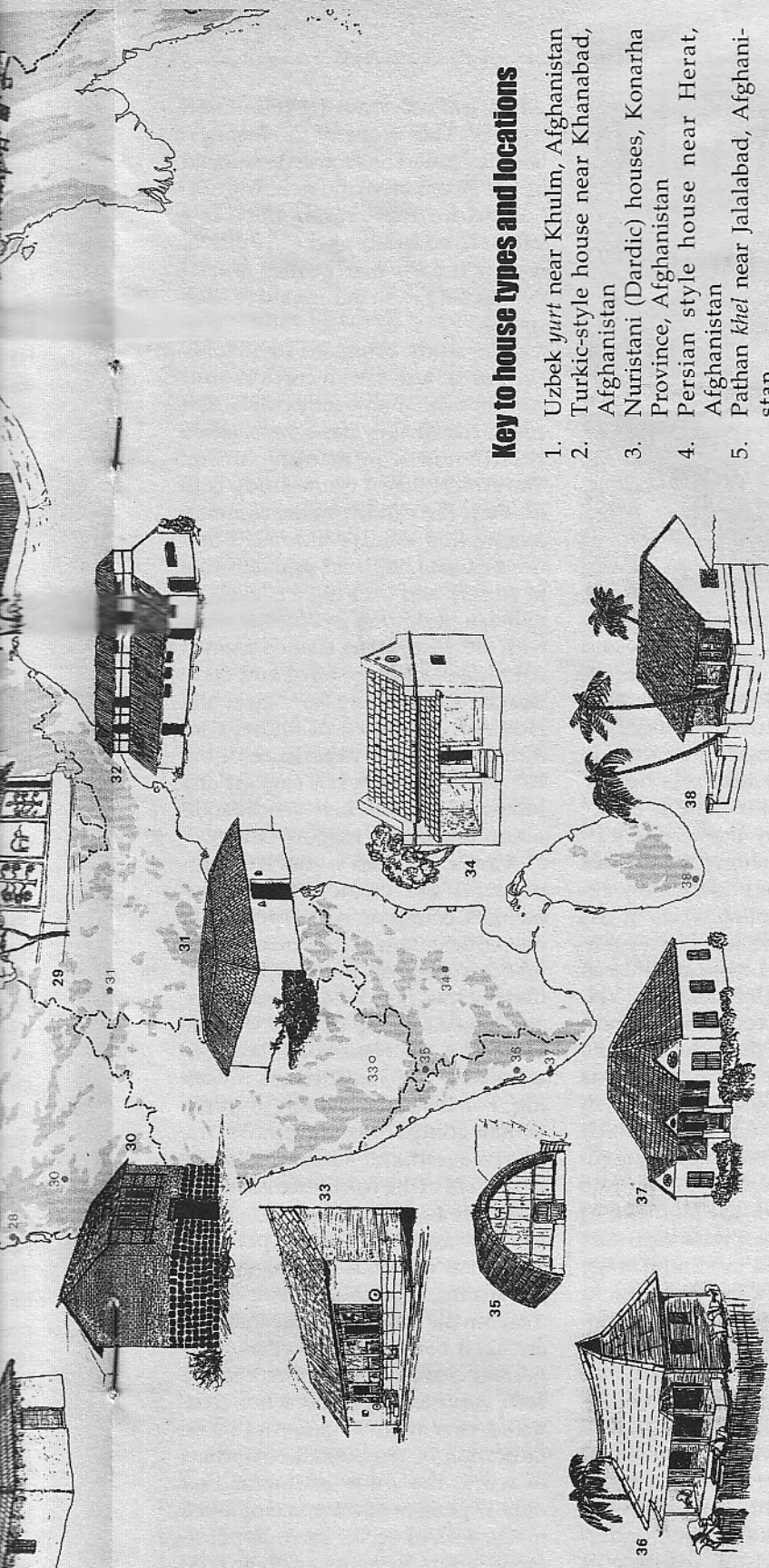
## Key to house types and locations

1. Uzbek *yurt* near Khulm, Afghanistan
2. Turkic-style house near Khanabad, Afghanistan
3. Nuristani (Dardic) houses, Konarha Province, Afghanistan
4. Persian style house near Herat, Afghanistan
5. Pathan *khel* near Jalalabad, Afghanistan
6. Tibetan-style house near Leh, Ladakh District, Kashmir
7. House in Anantnag District, Vale of Kashmir
8. House in Sirmur District, Himachal Pradesh
9. Tents of Ghilzai Pathan nomads, near Kabul, Afghanistan
10. House in the Salt Range, Jhelum District, (West) Punjab
11. House in Hissar District, Haryana
12. Gurung house west of Pokhara, Nepal
13. Newari house, Vale of Kathmandu
14. House in Paro Valley, Bhutan
15. House near Quetta (?), Baluchistan
16. New-style house near Delhi
17. House in Patna District, Bihar
18. House in Birbhum District, West Bengal
19. House in Kamrup District, Assam
20. House in Hyderabad District, Sind
21. House in Jaipur District, Rajasthan
22. House in Allahabad District, Uttar Pradesh
23. Ao Naga house in Mokukchung District, Nagaland
24. House in Rajkot District, Gujarat
25. House in Bilaspur District, Madhya Pradesh
26. House in Dacca District, Bangladesh
27. Mirik house in United Mirik & N Cachar Hills District, Assam
28. House in Thana District, Maharashtra
29. Santhal house in Singhbhum District, Bihar
30. House in Poona District, Maharashtra
31. House in Medak District, Andhra Pradesh
32. House in Sambhalpur (?) District, Orissa
33. House in Mysore District, Karnataka
34. House in Tiruchirapalli District
35. Toda house, Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu
36. Hindu house in Kottayam District, Kerala
37. Anglo-Indian house in Quilon District, Kerala
38. House in Southern Province, Sri Lanka

'Rural house types of South Asia', University of Minnesota, 1978.

Source: *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992.

*Himal* will periodically reproduce maps from the same publication.

SOURCES: The illustrations above have been adapted from photographs and line drawings in the following works (numbers in parentheses indicate illustrations selected from each source): N. K. Bose, *Peasant Life in India*, Calcutta: 1961; (1B): F. Bremner, *Baluchistan Illustrated 1900*, Quetta: c. 1900 (15); Census of India, 1961, Vol. I, Pt. IX, *Census Atlas*, New Delhi: 1970 (32); Census of India, 1961, various volumes, village monograph series, various places and dates of publication (7, 8, 16, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37); Census of Pakistan, 1961, *District Census Report*, Dacca, Dacca: n.d. (26); E. Charlier, unpublished collection of photographs in Arnes Library, U. of Minn. (38);

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# No emancipation in the liberalised economy

A pathbreaking study on the status of women labourers in Pakistan's manufacturing sector shows that they fare as badly as women in the rest of South Asia and perhaps worse.

by **Ammara Durrani**

The pundits of globalisation were perhaps trying to pre-empt a feminist critique of their macro policies when they devised – for their corporate clients – an elaborate employment structure that, on the face of it, appears gender-sensitive with its 'equal opportunity' and 'women are strongly encouraged to apply' slogans. This astute strategy may have worked for the handful of dynamic urban women in developing countries who have managed to break the proverbial glass ceiling and grace the boardrooms of multinational corporations. Indeed, leading women entrepreneurs and managers make regular headlines in the Pakistani press these days.

But those in the ivory towers of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Bank who care to look beyond the frosted glass of corporate culture will be confronted by the cheerless sight of women eking out a paltry living in the squalid outposts of the global production system. The Afghan refugee women toiling in the plastic 'industry' of Lahore's garbage dumps or women packing spices for a living in the slums of Karachi are more visible to the passer-by than the little events of the *haute monde* that seem to grab the attention of the media and policy establishment. Yet they have for all practical purposes been

disowned by the globalising intelligentsia, except as so much dressed up numbers to 'prove' that liberalisation has empowered and emancipated women in conservative societies. And so long as this attitude persists there is unlikely to be any reformulation of the current orthodoxies on 'poverty management'.

The grim sociology of women's work is more than adequately reflected in the grim statistics of the last decade. The trickle-down economy has regained respectability in the doctrine of globalisation. Yet, after a decade of economic liberalisation in Pakistan (introduced in the country in 1991), close to two-thirds of its women workers earn less than the official minimum wage, which in 1992 was set at PNR 2000 a month. After factoring in the inflation rate for the year 2000, the number of women in Pakistan who earn less than the stipulated minimum wage rises to 88 percent. Furthermore, in consonance with the pattern in other developing countries, incomes of women workers are lower than that of their male counterparts.

These and other findings of a similar nature have been unearthed by a recent study, 'Women's Work and Empowerment Issues in an Era of Economic Liberalisation', undertaken by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research (PIL-ER) on behalf of the Women's Development Project of the Can-

adian International Development Agency. This is one of the first systematic studies on women employed in the Pakistani manufacturing sector and for that reason alone is a valuable addition to the corpus of research, particularly since official figures tend to be indifferent to such issues.

The study brings to light some startling new information and corroborates many conjectures that could reasonably have been made about women in manufacturing. The critical thrust of the study is to examine the validity of the common assumption that development and urbanisation improve women's role in society and that higher levels of national per capita income correlate with more educated, trained women entering the labour force and commanding a premium for their work. However, as the PILER findings indicate, Pakistan's experience of the last ten years does not suggest any robust correlation between liberalisation and social empowerment.

Given Pakistan's uneven sociopolitical and economic environment, it comes as no surprise that the participation of its women in the labour force has remained exceptionally low. For those who do manage to secure employment outside the home, the returns are low and unsteady. The statistics are revealing. For instance, though multinational companies dominate the pharmaceutical industry, only 35 percent of the workforce is female, giving lie to the common belief that offshore capital is more 'progressive' than domestic capital. Another startling revelation is that of the total female workforce, the majority are aged between 14-24 years, suggesting clearly that women neither hold very senior positions nor command very high wages. And as an indication of the overall conditions of work, the study estimates that only 17 percent of women employed in the formal sector have appointment letters formalising their contractual status.

Using Pakistan's manufacturing sector as its sample area, a pilot

survey of 600-plus blue collar women workers was conducted in the informal sector (37 percent home-based and 31 percent small-scale) and in the formal sector, in Karachi (Sindh), Lahore (Punjab), Peshawar (North West Frontier Province) and Quetta (Balochistan). These are the major cities in which the country's manufacturing sector is concentrated. The four industries selected for the survey were food, garments, pharmaceuticals and plastic. The survey also included a sample of male workers as well as managerial functionaries who were asked to respond to questions concerning perceptions of their female colleagues or employees. According to economist Asad Sayeed, who along with Saba Gul Khattak of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, formed the core research team of the project, the manufacturing sector was selected for the survey because it provides the maximum existing industrial data and information base.

According to Khattak, the study is an "attempt to see the general set-up of women workers in specific conditions in order to establish some guidelines. It reflects a desire for an egalitarian society". The study is also informed by the belief that since women workers are the most vulnerable members of the workforce, they have to be considered first in any strategy for improving labour conditions. The emphasis, she says, has been on three central issues pertinent to women workers in Pakistan: 1) the prevailing nature and conditions of employment in the urban manufacturing sector, 2) the extent to which remunerative work empowers women, and 3) the level of organised activity and collective bargaining by working women to secure basic rights in the workplace.

Tracking female participation in the labour force in Pakistan is a difficult task considering the paucity, poor quality and archaic character of available data. According to the estimates projected by the study, while the share of urban women in the labour force was 3.0



Women between the ages of 14 and 24 power Pakistan's manufacturing sector.

percent in 1991, by 1997 it had dipped to a low of 2.7 percent. This exceptionally low ratio could be due to the under-reporting of women's work, especially when it takes the form of home-based work. The reasons cited by the study to explain that these figures are an underestimation of female participation in the labour force include increased literacy, increased poverty, privatisation and downsizing. This last factor is crucial since more women are believed to have entered the workforce to protect household incomes from the effects of retrenchment in the public sector, which has predominantly affected male workers. On the whole, the contribution of women to household incomes has been estimated at an average of 42 percent, which is a significant contribution by any standard.

Like retrenchment, poverty too has been a factor in forcing women to take up sub-optimal employment options. The report observes that "the most striking statistic in Pakistan's contemporary socio-economic landscape is the steep increase in absolute poverty witnessed over the last decade". Estimates put the mark at 45 million individuals below the poverty line. The study points to the link between the macro-economic policies pursued in the 1990s and the accentuation of poverty in the

country. In 1990, the poverty ratio was 18 percent. By 2001 the figure had jumped dramatically and alarmingly to 40 percent. And at the time when the survey was conducted, 38 percent of the households to which women workers belonged were below the poverty line.

It seems reasonable to postulate some kind of a connection between the policies of the last decade and the deteriorating conditions of women's work. Quite apart from the possibility that in a significant number of cases women's employment is distress-driven, as poverty statistics seem to suggest, liberalisation has also, perhaps obliquely, affected women in their capacities as workers as well as home managers. "Structural adjustment is not the only factor in our analysis", says Sayeed. "We are not establishing a direct causality between it and the impact on women workers". But he also adds that structural adjustment policies nevertheless do seem to have a visible impact and therefore cannot be ignored. This impact has been by and large negative, particularly for those on the production side.

Owing to the sharp decline in manufacturing sector growth rates, combined with rising material and production costs, producers have minimised outlays on labour. As a

direct result of this there has been a phenomenal decrease in regular, permanent employment and an increase in part-time and sub-contracted work. In consequence, employment in this sector now entails very harsh working conditions and the almost complete absence of normal employment benefits. The more than 100 percent increase in poverty levels over the last decade has created a labour surplus, which in turn has exerted a downward pressure on wages.

This general economic slowdown has affected women both directly and indirectly. Blue-collar women workers in private manufacturing enterprises are more vulnerable to job losses or are more likely to be employed as casual or part time labour. The reduction in employment opportunities in this sector also has an adverse impact on women from households affected by general retrenchment. Women who are not in the workforce are much more affected on the domestic front as other members of the family lose their jobs or have their wages cut. "On the home front", states the report, "increasing inflation, the resulting decline in real wages and a heavy dose of inequitable, indirect taxation has adversely affected household consumption

patterns, especially in the low income quartile".

The study has also been instrumental in furnishing data that can be used to construct a broad and general profile of women workers in the manufacturing sector. For example, the fact that women aged between 14-24 years form the bulk of the female labour force is a reflection of certain larger trends. There seems to be a preference for employing young workers, which is matched by the necessity and hence willingness of females to enter the labour force at an early age. Predictably, since a large number of workers are less than 24 years old, 54 percent were found to be unmarried. This may perhaps explain why they are so prominent in the female work force, since employers may prefer single women who can work longer hours without the compulsion of having to run the home and manage the family. Besides, there is the perennial employers' fear of older, married women workers taking maternity leave. Whatever be the reason, this data also raises interesting sociological questions: is there an emerging trend of women from blue-collar households getting married at an older age than before? And, if this is indeed so, has this been prompted by the compulsion of women from blue-collar households to take up employment? On the other aspect of this profile, the study, using primary school education as the criterion of literacy, found that 67 percent of working women were literate. The pharmaceutical sector, which, unlike many other sectors, requires workers to have formal education, has a large concentration of literate women workers.

With regard to health issues, it was found that 36 percent of the women working in factories (both large- and small-scale) complained

of lethargy and listlessness due to work, while 26 percent of those doing home-based work had the same complaint. The report also looks at other important parameters, such as household size, number of children, number of earning members and dependents. In addition, besides sampling male worker profiles, it records men's perceptions about working with women workers. According to the report, 93 percent of male respondents said that they had no inhibitions about working with female workers. They did not believe that the work could have been performed better had their been only male workers in the department.

So what, if anything, has employment done for Pakistan's women in terms of empowerment? "Women do not automatically get empowered by doing wage work", says Khattak. "The number of women going out to seek work has increased, but for most of them work is oppressive, rather than a source of empowerment". Khattak believes that the reasons why women enter the workforce have more to do with the need to supplement household earnings and less to do with aspirations of financial independence. "The important fact is that these women still buy the traditional gender ideology", she says. "Much more is tied to empowerment and independence than earnings alone. Age, marital status and class directly impact a woman's level of assertiveness and autonomy", says the report.

Besides, the 'care economy' is an important aspect of the lives of women workers in Pakistan. Not only are women forced to enter the market on terms that are not set by them, they also often have to take on an additional burden of the care economy in order to mitigate pressures on the family's capacity to survive as a unit. This largely involves extending psychological as well as material support to the family and the head of the household. "The double burden phenomenon", notes the report, "has become deep-

ly entrenched due to a combination of changes in the economic landscape of the country". The decline in state expenditure on public services, which is part of the structural adjustment package, has meant that the poor are condemned to access the market at costs that are unaffordable for them. The ability of the poor to meet even basic needs is low. This has a direct and adverse effect on the woman worker of a household.

The study explores possibilities of women workers organising to protect and even extract labour rights from employers. In large-scale industries, where work conditions are regulated by law, statute and monitoring mechanisms, women are paid better and on-time. Women in such workplaces are more assertive and knowledgeable about their rights than home-based workers or those who work in small-scale factories. The report's prognosis is that increasing poverty will lead to increasing misery among the marginalised and hence it is imperative for women workers to devise strategies to organise themselves in order to protect their rights and acquire a better bargaining position vis-a-vis their employers. But this is unlikely to be easily achieved.

As the report points out, "women workers are reluctant to take the initiative to organise due to a variety of reasons" and therefore it is incumbent upon "civil society and the state... to step in and take responsibility". In such circumstances a great many assumptions and assertions made about women, work and emancipation are untenable in Pakistan's case and the real data, as opposed to convenient statistics, need to be given due consideration if women in the labour force and women from labouring households are to get some respite from the onerous burdens that are gradually being piled on them. ⌂

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# People's Voices

## The challenges and opportunities of community radio

The growth of community radio has long been retarded in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, states that inherited centralised systems of state control over electronic media. The experiences of Nepal and Sri Lanka suggest that innovations are possible and that lessons can be learned all around.

*by David Page and MJR David*

After years of resistance to community radio in many parts of Asia, national governments are beginning to see its value. Thailand and Mongolia recently established their first community radio stations and Indonesia has moved forward with enabling legislation. In January, the government of Pakistan issued an ordinance liberalising airwaves and opening the door for community radio. India's Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Sushma Swaraj, has been discussing the possibility of allowing All India Radio (AIR) transmitters to be used for 'narrowcasting' by educational institutions, which is a small but encouraging step for the many Indian NGOs working to make community radio a reality.

For the champions of community radio, whether they work in development, culture or communication, the arguments for it are self-evident. It is now widely recognised that top-down economic development does not work. Development has to come from a two-way process where the community is not just at the receiving end but an active participant, something that community radio is uniquely suited to accomplish. It is a potent and affordable instrument of self-help, education and development, as well as a means of entertainment.

### Local vs global

In South Asia, where the nation-state often seems overwhelmed by the size of the problems it faces, and where national broadcasters are under pressure from satellite channels and becoming increasingly commercial themselves, community radio offers a chance to strengthen local culture and empower local communities. Community radio therefore is a means of reviving and reinforcing the 'local' – a necessary counterbalance to the pressures of economic and cultural globalisation.

Globalisation means ever-bigger companies working in ever-bigger markets, but it also provokes a countervailing trend of sharper local and regional loyalties demanding recognition. The centralised nation-state is caught in the middle and is only slowly learning how to face both ways at once. One powerful argument deployed against community radio is that it might threaten national security. Politicians and bureaucrats fear that community radio could fall into the wrong hands and be used to foment insurgency or communal violence. "Government has a responsibility to society to create a friction-free environment", explains Kumar Abeyasinghe, Secretary to the Media Ministry in Sri Lanka. "If community radio is to be extended there would

have to be a charter, a code of ethics, a set of articles to be observed... There is a need for greater autonomy but I don't think the government should wash its hands of it. Government should be an enabler".

Wijayananda Jayaweera, a UNESCO official who has done much in the area, accepts that there need to be rules but he believes that security fears are based on a misunderstanding of how community radio works. In fact, he argues, far from threatening the nation-state, community radio is a means of integrating local communities. It is the disempowered and the alienated who threaten national integration, whereas the decentralisation of the media is a means of giving local cultures and marginalised communities a voice and a sense of belonging. He says that militant groups do not usually target community radio stations because they do not wish to alienate local communities.

This has certainly been the experience of Nepal during the Maoist insurgency. Maoists have not yet attempted to interfere with the many private and community radio stations that now exist or with their programmes. Bharat Bhusal, the manager of Lumbini FM, a community radio station in the Nepal Tarai, explains that "when the Maoists call a strike, the whole town comes to a standstill but the radio

station is allowed to function uninterrupted". The country's latest community radio station, Swargadwari FM, is in Dang district in the west of the country, an area considered the locus of the Maoist insurgency, yet the rebels have not attempted to take over the station or to influence its programmes.

## Himalayan airwaves

Nepal is well ahead of its neighbours in licensing community radio stations, a phenomenon whose roots can be traced back to the People's Movement of 1990: the monarch became a constitutional head of state, power was transferred to parliament, and the new constitution gave guarantees of freedom of expression. Those who understood the possibilities for radio in a democracy began lobbying to break the monopoly of the state-owned Radio Nepal and working to create the enabling legislation. Nonetheless, it was 1997 before Radio Sagarmatha, the first of the new stations, went on air. Even though the law providing for private radio stations was passed relatively quickly, it took time to frame the regulations and to issue the licenses. At each stage there was hesitation and resistance from politicians and bureaucrats.

Bharat Koirala, one of the architects of Radio Sagarmatha, says that the station was established in the capital to show radio's potential to policymakers. "Educating officials is more difficult than educating the people", he says. Murari Sivakoti, a former station manager, says that the Nepal advocacy campaign employed myriad methods: recourse to the courts, lobbying of officials and politicians, interventions by diplomats and donors, unauthorised test transmissions, and the willingness of those involved, if necessary, to go to jail for their beliefs on the need for radio, which ultimately led to the license being issued to Sagarmatha. One lesson they learnt, says Sivakoti, was the need to mobilise a range of pressure groups – including teachers, politicians and the

print media – to build an alliance across civil society. A second was to be "a little balanced", to know when to exert pressure and when to hold back. A third was to take what was on offer and argue for more afterwards. Though the license finally came with 15 onerous conditions they took it with both hands.

There are now some 22 independent stations in Nepal, the majority of which are in the Kathmandu Valley, the country's largest and most prosperous conurbation. But there are a growing number of small stations outside the Valley, four of which claim to be 'community

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**The centralised nation-state is caught between a globalising marketplace and a countervailing trend of sharper local and regional loyalties. It is only slowly learning how to face both ways at once.**

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stations'. The rest operate as commercial businesses, though many of them claim a public service role in the range of the programmes they offer.

Nepali law does not recognise any difference between community and private radio stations. License fees are tied to transmitter power and not to the purpose of the station. Small community stations like Radio Lumbini and Radio Madanpokhara claim that the law is a disadvantage for them, as theirs is the performance of a public service. But private stations point out that most community stations do take in advertising revenue and thus the differences between the two are less clear than the community stations claim.

Prabhakar Adhikari, Nepal's former Officiating Secretary of the

Ministry for Information and Communications, says that the government thinks the present system works well and is flexible enough for different sorts of stations to apply under the same rubric. In Adhikari's view, the government's main concern is "to maintain cultural integrity" in the face of the existing challenge to the state. The people needed to be "well informed" but now the government is considering whether the time has come to put limits on programme content.

Whatever the worries, it is clear that the existing licensing system has permitted the emergence of a number of different models and that this has been the strength of Nepal's experience. Apart from commercial stations, there are stations run by NGOs, local government bodies and co-operatives. Dr Vinod Pavarala of the Sarojini Naidu School for Communication in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, says that one of the lessons to be learned from Nepal's experience is that "a multi-model approach works best".

However, Nepal, like the rest of South Asia, suffers from major shortcomings in transparency. Critics point out that the government of Nepal has started going slow on issuing new community radio licenses. Some 25 applications have been pending for a while, including several for community stations. Observers say ministers and officials seem to favour commercial bidders and make ad hoc decisions without thinking about the impacts affecting other parts of the sector. The government has recently licensed Kantipur FM, one of the capital's most successful commercial stations, to broadcast on powerful new transmitters in the eastern half of the country and there are fears that this will undercut the survivability of some of the smaller stations. Typical of this case is the problem that Samir Nepal, the owner of Manakamana FM, a commercial station operating out of Hetauda in the central plains, anticipates. He worries that the new station will lure away some of his national advertising,

which accounts for some 70 percent of his income.

The sustainability of community radio is a key issue. The calculations are surprisingly positive from the small Nepali stations. Radio Madanpokhara, the only community radio station to be set up in a village so far, reports a monthly income of NPR 30-50,000 and monthly expenditures of NPR 25,000; likewise, Radio Lumbini reports a monthly income of NPR 120,000 and expenditures of around NPR 100,000. It is not these small stations but Radio Sagarmatha, operating in the more competitive Kathmandu market, which is having difficulty balancing its books.

Since much of the capital expenditure for community stations was met by donors, with UNESCO and the Danish agency, DANIDA, taking the lead, the smaller stations are already beginning to break even. Financial problems do arise when equipment fails, and the station does not have a back-up transmitter or studio. Radio Madanpokhara shows what can be done, however, if communities put their shoulders to the wheel: after two years of broadcasting, it is now moving to a purpose-built station that has been entirely funded by local resources.

## The voice of peace

The Madanpokhara station operates in the unique setting of a partially converted residence, with a traditional household functioning side-by-side the broadcasting room. The Village Development Council (VDC) supports the radio station with an annual payment of NPR 80,000 and the chairman of the VDC is the chairman of the station's management committee. The village is considered a leftist stronghold and the level of education is high. When asked whether the station is used for political propaganda, the chairman points out that if it were to do so, the community would object. The station provides a forum for villagers to thrash out their problems and a means of holding others to account. After a local politician



Low-cost but high hope: Lumbini FM's makeshift control room (top); the station's roof-top transmission.

promised electricity and no progress had been made in two months, the radio station chased the story. At times the radio station has intervened with the local administration on behalf of villagers. On one occasion it enabled the redress of a villager's grievances by the powerful Chief District Officer. Additionally, the station is trying to encourage local artistic talent and it makes a point of not playing Hindi music. As an elderly committee member remarks, "There is enough Hindi music all around. It is our local music that should be preserved". The station has produced two cassettes of folk songs and these are now on sale to help raise revenue.

For Radio Madanpokhara, obtaining the radio license was a long struggle and eventually involved the assistance of local politicians There is some lingering resentment that the community station has been made to pay a license fee and is taxed on the income it generates. "We have not received a single cent from the government and now they are trying to tax us", says the principal of the village school. "It is unfair to treat us as a commercial concern".

The wall of the village school is daubed with Maoist slogans, although for the moment the Maoists have not interfered with the radio station. Ian Pringle, a Canadian

community radio specialist familiar with the village, explains that "this community radio station is heavily dominated by the elders and prevailing structures. More than change, it facilitates continuity. That's OK as long as that is what they need".

South from Madanpokhara, in the plains, Radio Lumbini is just half an hour by bus from the birthplace of Lord Buddha and calls itself the "Voice of Peace". Its full-time staff of 19 broadcasts 12 hours a day and the station is run as a co-operative, with 96 shareholding members. Membership fees were much lower when the station started but now it costs NPR 20,000 to join, of which NPR 17,000 is a non-refundable deposit. People from disparate political parties, castes and ages have joined the co-operative – the majority being farmers. The station has been actively involved in villagers' lives, including participating in a programme to revive the lift irrigation system in the neighbourhood, and the broadcasting of programmes in Nepali, as well as, uniquely, the Bhojpuri language that is spoken in this part of the Nepal Tarai and adjacent regions in India. There have been some problems with shareholders defaulting on payments, but as station manager Bharat Bhusal explains, "We went to the extent of warning the

farmers that if you don't pay up without a valid reason we will broadcast the names of the defaulters. The majority paid up and the system was restored to a great extent".

As the station is situated close to India, it gets some advertisements from across the border as well, charging an extra 10 percent for advertisements promoting Indian goods. The station has to pay a four percent tax on revenue earned from advertising. In a few months, a commercial radio station will start broadcasting from the nearby town of Butwal, so competition is definitely on the way. But Bharat Bhusal is confident that the station's co-operative structure gives it the resilience to maintain its position.

**Radio stories**

For NGOs petitioning governments for licenses in other parts of South Asia, it is heartening to see aspirations realised in Nepal. For people who only associate radio with official buildings and tight security, it is a new experience to walk into a village house or a three storey building on a busy commercial road and to see villagers or college students preparing to go on air. This is radio located in the community, not telling it what to do from a distance.

Sri Lanka is the only South Asian country to have successfully integrated community radio into the national broadcasting system. Mahaweli Community Radio, set up 20 years ago to serve communities settled on newly irrigated land created by the Mahaweli Project, has maintained its reputation for innovation with the recent creation at Kothmale of an Internet facility in an effort to bridge the digital gap between town and country. Sunil Wijesinghe, the Controller of Broadcasting at Kothmale, has developed a special relationship with Colombo, which allows him to say that the station is "truly under the control of the community with minimum supervision". Wijesinghe and his team have managed to orchestrate a new creative equation between

national broadcaster and community but it is not altogether clear whether this is a matter of personality or systems. The jury is also still out on whether this model will succeed in its digital ambitions. There is no shortage of evidence that the station has become a centre for computer training and Internet use by members of the community but the precise role of broadcasting in spreading knowledge of new technologies is less well documented.

In India, Dr Sreedhar of Indira Gandhi Open University in New Delhi is the official custodian of the community radio ideal. A former broadcaster with AIR and Doordarshan, he has been given the task of setting up 40 'community radio'

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## In Pastapur, Andhra Pradesh, the Deccan Development Society has built a studio, set up a transmitter and trained a staff, but still cannot get government permission to go on air

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stations in collaboration with educational institutions in different parts of the country. Where studios already exist, they are being reactivated under the project; where they do not, the Open University is building new ones. Dr Sreedhar believes that the smaller stations of AIR should also be mobilised for community radio purposes. This was the unrealised vision of broadcasters like K Anjaneyulu, who set up the first district FM station at Nagercoil in Tamil Nadu in the 1970s. There are almost a hundred small AIR stations in different districts of the country but they are perceived more as the voice of the central government than as local radio stations.

The National Foundation of India has shown one way forward

with its interesting collaboration with All India Radio Jharkhand. It is helping village communities to make their own programmes and paying for them to be aired weekly on AIR's Daltongunj FM. The response at village level has been very positive but there are questions about the sustainability of the venture when the funding runs out. In a more ideal world, this is the kind of work AIR would be doing on its own.

In the face of present realities, community radio activists in India argue that they should not focus exclusively on radio but exploit whatever spaces are available in other media. A group called 'Voices', in Bangalore, has begun a community media experiment called *Namma Dhwani* – 'Our Voice' – at Kolar on the Karnataka/Tamil Nadu border. This is an area where AIR does not have a station and where the mix of languages is not catered for by existing broadcasts. The aim is to empower the local community, which is for the most part impoverished and illiterate, by helping them to make programmes on, for example, women's health, education and access to credit. A low-cost audio production centre was established there in 2001, with analogue equipment and field recorders. With the establishment of Gyan Vani, an educational radio network that sources its programming from different educational institutions such as the University Grants Commission, the National Centre for Educational and Research Training, the Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Indian Institute of Technology and the Distance Education Council, issues of ownership and management have become more palpable. Gyan Vani operates through various FM stations, including one in Bangalore. 'Voices' has been invited to collaborate with Gyan Vani but there are some reservations. As Ashish Sen of 'Voices' puts it, "It is not clear how democratic that process will be".

The most extraordinary commu-

nity radio story in India actually is from Pastapur in Andhra Pradesh, where the Deccan Development Society has built a studio, set up a transmitter and trained a staff, but still cannot get government permission to go on air. UNESCO provided the equipment and All India Radio engineers erected the mast but as one government gave way to another the expected permission failed to materialise. This is a station staffed by women from disadvantaged communities, who are operating as narrowcasters within their community in the hope that one day they will be allowed to go on air. Narsamma, one of the women, expresses the village's disappointment at receiving the information and broadcasting ministry's letter that they should work more closely with AIR. She says, "We have our own

way of doing things. This is not just about radio. It is about our way of life".

Bandana Mukhopadhyay, a former AIR broadcaster who is at the forefront of the attempt to develop community radio movement in

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## "This is not just about radio. It is about our way of life."

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India, believes that the government is slowly moving towards permitting community radio. The Convergence Bill, by which a 'super regulator' will be created by combining the ministries of information and broadcasting, communications and IT, had initially made no mention

of third=tier broadcasting or community radio but there have been some signs of a rethink. There is an evident concern for safeguards – a requirement for proper technical specifications and a clear code of conduct – but legislation is apparently being drafted to create some limited new space for educational and community media. It is perhaps the nature of things that India, the largest and most culturally diverse of all South Asian countries, should be the slowest to give media recognition of its own diversity. The message is however clear; civil society across the region is increasingly convinced that community radio has an important role to play in development, democracy and bridging the digital divide. The quicker community radio is allowed free reign, the better. $\triangle$

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# The Indian doll's house

## Thoughts on women in theatre after attending the National Women's Theatre Festival

### by *Ranjita Biswas*

Today wherever there is a theatre movement in India, women work in every department of theatre production, be it set design, costumes, lights, direction or acting. But till recently, women's presence at a theatre was confined to being seated in the audience, and even then, segregated from the men and perhaps sitting behind screens. Back then the female characters on stage would be males with padding for breasts and pancake makeup to hide greening stubble, and this is still in evidence in many folk theatre forms. But even in the urban milieu, during the colonial period when women were allowed to 'act' on stage, the opportunity was confined to those from red light areas or engaged in entertaining male connoisseurs with their song and dance.

Developments since then not-

withstanding, the question of lack of space for women is still relevant. This question came up at the "National Women's Theatre Festival", organised by the well-known Nandikar group in Calcutta (February 2002). To hear the veteran artistes, both from films and theatre, it would seem that the struggle for them to gain respect / vindication / recognition of their existence was as hard as the struggle of the heroes and characters they sometimes portrayed on stage. The patriarchy that bogs down women in the Subcontinent obviously informs the seemingly 'open-minded' form of theatre too.

The theme of women's search for identity ran through the plays presented at the festival. In *Jaara Brishtite Bhijechchilo* (Those who got wet in the rain: Bengali), Bijaylakshmi Barman's protagonist was the ar-

chetypal girl next door, trapped in an exploitative marriage, her aspirations for higher education smothered. Swatilekha Sengupta's *Shanu Roychowdhury* (Bengali), adapted from the Willy Russell play *Shirley Valentine*, had the eponymous character as a role-model housewife and mother whose desires to enjoy life and hankering for love remain unfulfilled within the domestic setup. In both plays, the painful search for an identity by these middle-aged 'ordinary' women yields results; the former finds release in the company of her fiercely independent school friend, and the latter while travelling to Kathmandu with a feminist friend. In both these plays walking out of an oppressive home situation seemed to echo Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A doll's house*.

The space to rebel against the

system is something women in the past did not have, even in theatre. Binodini Dasi of Calcutta, better known as Nati Binodini (1863-1941), to whom Nandikar dedicated the festival, came out of the red light district to fulfil her love of the art. A legendary actress, she could pull a full house with the promise of her histrionics. Yet her lifetime ambition of having a theatre hall named after her never materialised even though her savings funded the legendary Star Theatre on Beadon Street (now Bidhan Sarani) in Calcutta. In her autobiography, *Amar Katha* (My Story), Binodini laments the betrayal by her mentor, the renowned playwright Girish Ghosh.

An ironic complement to the Binodini story is that of the enormously talented Ketaki Dutta. Ketaki played the lead in the runaway success, *Barbodhu*, which ran an unprecedented 1800 shows between 1972 and 1980, where she acted as a sex worker with aspirations for a 'normal' life. Though her performance was immensely appreciated, the role almost ended her career. At 60-plus now, the actress recalls, "I was stamped for life. I was a fallen woman in the play and directors would not give me any other role, saying the audience would not accept me". It fell on Usha Ganguli, director and the moving spirit behind Rangakarmee, a Hindi theatre group, to resurrect the artiste in *Mukti* (Freedom), the group's first Bengali play in 25 years.

Usha herself has metamorphosed from a classical dancer, to a stage artiste, to a director. Rangakarmee's plays are known for focusing on social issues, especially women-centred ones. Her autobiographical play *Antar-Yatra* (Journey Within) premiered at 'Samanvay', a forum she had organised to showcase women in the performing arts for Women's Day on 8 March 2002. In the play, at one point she asks, "Do I sound too much like a *'naari-badi'* (woman activist)? But then I am a woman. If I talk about a woman's inner turmoil and her problems, isn't it natural?" Women are still



made to feel guilty about voicing their concerns, and every time they do, they find a justification must be tendered. Naturally then, despite the wide-ranging repertoire of roles in her long career, the character closest to Usha's heart is Sanichari of Mahasveta Devi's *Rudali*. Sanichari is the professional crier who cannot cry as family members die, but weeps heartrendingly at the loss of Bhikhni, an old friend who has been discarded by her family. In their

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**Critics who find fault with the 'uni-dimensional' concern of women's theatre must remember that in practical life women are judged by men's laws**

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partnership for survival in a cruel world, the two women formed a lasting bond.

The recurrent theme at the festival was that of women searching for space, a search conducted in theatre that reflects that search in society. Dr V Padma (under the pseudonym A Mangai) observed in 'What does she want? Female Identity in Indian Drama' that even in the plays of the legendary Badal Sircar of *Evam Indrajit* fame, female presence was shockingly minimal. She argued that it was nearly impossible for male writers to do justice to women characters. It is then apparent that even in an intellectually

progressive and apparently gender-neutral domain like theatre, women players/members are faced with a void, an under-representation of women's concerns, that they feel the need to fill. Interestingly, this feeling of alienation is probably felt more in the urban milieu, dependant as it is on the patronisation of a usually conservative middle-class audience. In folk art forms where women do take part, whether in India's *Pandavani* of Madhya Pradesh, or the *Chhattisgarhi* of the new state of Chattisgarh, the women seem to face less censure. The same applies to the tradition of *dohori geet* in Nepal, which is a form of music rather than theatre, but a performing tradition nonetheless.

When elements from these art forms that are not grudging of a woman's space are introduced in contemporary theatre, such as when a theatre director of the stature of Habib Tanvir adapts the Chattisgarhi style for stage, or Manipur's H Kanhailal incorporates the nuances of its traditional martial art and Manipuri dance style in plays such as *Draupadi*, women protagonists exude an extraordinary power. Perhaps while exploring for stylistic elements for women-theme plays, picking up from such traditions can introduce a more vigorous grain to contemporary plays.

Ibsen wrote, a century ago, "There are two kinds of conscience, one in man and another altogether different, in woman. They do not understand each other, but in practical life the woman is judged by man's law, as though she were not a woman but a man". Critics who find fault with the 'uni-dimensional' concern of women's theatre would benefit from keeping that in mind. From Nora to Shanu, from Draupadi to Sanichari, the basic concerns of a woman seem to repeat themselves over and over again. Hence, women's theatre is bound to reflect her realities in a niche of her own till the general creative corpus expands to give her the space she requires.                          ⊿

# How not to achieve

In South Asia, 75 years is not a young age to die. And Krishna Kant, India's Vice President had nothing left to live for. Perhaps he had harboured hopes of making it to the top ceremonial post of the largest democracy in the world. But the ruling coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) apparently had other plans, and it denied Krishna Kant the opportunity that had often been given to vice presidents in the past. Krishna Kant passed away the week the BJP's nominee, APJ Abdul Kalam, walked into Rashtrapati Bhawan. Embracing death while still in harness is a glory that comes to the chosen few, and he was perhaps lucky that he did not have to spend his last years in anonymity.

Dhirubhai Ambani was the other prominent South Asian who died last month. In a region where wealth is inherited rather than created, Ambani was a kind of pioneer. He exploited the desires of common investors like none before him and, in the process, single-handedly rewrote the rules of the game for managing shareholders' confidence. Ambani's life is often portrayed in the Indian media as a rags-to-riches story of a person destined to be great. Perhaps Lady Luck too played her part in the transformation of a safari-suited salesman into a suiting tycoon. But it would be gross disrespect to the man if we were to attribute all his successes to mere chance. Dhirubhai's ability in convincing common investors that the system could be used if one knew how was perhaps the main propellant that made this man star of India's burgeoning middle-class. Ambani Senior (he has two sons in the trade) was to India's petty traders and salaried class what Laloo Prasad Yadav is to the so-called 'backwards' in Bihar. Charismatic leaders sell dreams and prosper. Be it in politics or business, the basic rule of leadership is the same – you show your vision and sell the idea that it is achievable.

For reasons rooted in South Asian religions and culture, businesspersons in our region do not command the respect that their peers do in the West. Even East Asian societies are far ahead of us in recognising the role of profit-seekers in creating wealth that can be shared around. Sri Lanka gave the democratic world the first ever woman prime minister in human history. Bangladesh is perhaps the only country in the world where both the ruling and opposition parties are led by women. Kerala became the home of the first popularly elected communist government. Man Mohan Adhikary of Nepal was the first communist prime minister in any parliamentary democracy. Sure, this is a Subcontinent of many achievements. But why is it that this region of

> **Ambani Senior was to India's petty traders and salaried class what Laloo Prasad Yadav is to the so-called 'backwards' in Bihar**

poverty has failed to present even one noted industrialist, trader or banker as a national personality? One answer may be that, as in most feudal societies dabbling in democracy, politics continues to be the playing field of the landed gentry, lawyers, and the military. The traditional elite maintains a firm grip on the destiny of our societies.

## The unsustainability of it all

When even elected posts have fallen prey to the ambitions of the elite, it is not at all surprising that the higher echelon of the military remains the sole preserve of the gentry. Exceptional individuals that rise from the ranks are too few to challenge established authority, and they are willingly co-opted by the class of the top brass. General Pervez Musharraf may be a Mohajir, but he has proven to be no different in his mindset and behaviour than his predecessors, General Ayub Khan and General Zia-ul Haq. Thus, his recent diktat that Pakistan needs a sustainable federal democracy has not convinced anyone – and the entire political leadership of Pakistan has positioned itself against the chief executive and president. General Ayub's experiment in 'controlled' democracy was given the moniker of grassroots or basic democracy. General Zia ruled in the name of Islamic society. And now, another pretender in uniform wants his ride in the chariot in the name of sustainability.

The Swedes and the United States Agency for International Development may use this vague phrase for their programmes in the Third World, but Myalimu (or Teacher Julius K Nyerere) of Tanzania was perhaps the first to define it properly. The Southern African Research and Documentation Centre, an organisation that boasts of Nyerere as its founding patron, believes that the concept of sustainable democracy is based on the perspective: "Democracy is more than just an election. It is a culture that cannot be imposed but must be developed from within". Precisely. But how does one develop the culture of democracy if not through timely and impartial elections? Can a military takeover, no matter what the pretext, ever strengthen democracy? General Musharraf knows that it cannot, but he is hoping that a phrase will save him from the ignominy that is the fate of military rulers, howsoever well intentioned they may be at the outset, as the chief executive doubtless was.

Coining terms to hide their ambitions has always been the favourite game of our leaders. Indira Gandhi's *Garibi Hatao*, Ayub's *Basic Democracy*, Bandarnaike's *Sinhala Pride*, King Mahendra's *Partyless Democracy* – we have heard them all, and found them insincere to begin with and counter-productive in the end. It is now time for mistakes by the general in Islamabad, for he seems not to recognise the inherent vacuity of his pro-

posal. The general cannot ride into the pages of history books on a horse that is little more than a stale phrase. Apart from the proposal for a joint electorate and the reduction of age of voting from 21 to 18, no other provision of the "Creating Sustainable Federal Democracy" document deserves even a close examination. It is little more than a fig leaf to hide the ambition of a serving general bent upon consolidating all power in his own hands in the name of "Unity of Command". Under the system the general has in mind, no amount of checks can create balance in governance.

*Dhirubhai Ambani (left) and Krishna Kant left behind very different legacies.*

## Swearing by democracy

It is easy to be critical of the Pakistani regime because men with guns are in charge in Islamabad, but the travails of democracy are no fewer elsewhere in South Asia. Afghanistan is yet to extricate itself from America's War on Terror. The fate of democracy in Bangladesh remains hostage to the clash of egos between the two begums in Dhaka. The Bharat of LK Advani and Narendra Modi (or even Sonia Gandhi and Mulayam Singh Yadav for that matter) has very little resemblance to Jawaharlal Nehru's Idea of India. King Jigme in Bhutan may be morally correct in pursuing Gross National Happiness for his subjects, but he denies individual Bhutanese a say in the determination of their own destiny. In the Burma that is now Myanmar, the common people still bear the curse of the Buddha, suffering having been assigned to their lot when an ancient king stripped off the gold plating of the Buddhas in Ayudhaya (Siam). Maldives may be doing fine thus far under the charge of Uncle Gayum, but it is time we started asking, after him, who?

There is no peace in Nepal, and civil war is hardly the right environment for the nurture of a nascent democracy. After the dissolution of the parliament and the expiry of the term of local government units, it is back to rule by fiat in the Kingdom of Nepal. The traditional elite is in the saddle in Kathmandu like it has not been for half a century, through control of the administration and the army. The press is cowed down and there are too few willing to question authority. It is a nervous time in the island of serendipity as well, as everyone holds their breath willing the negotiations between the Tigers and the government to keep from collapsing. Up in Lhasa, where Beijing's decree runs since Tibet is an Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, democracy remains as distant a dream as ever.

All in all, South Asia seems to be far behind on the road to democracy even though our leaders swear by it all the time. Given the mess in governance, there was little surprise when the United Nations Development Programme ranked all the countries of this region at the end of its list on the basis of the human development index. South Asia is lagging behind not just in economic growth, but in social equity as well.

But cursing the stage is unlikely to improve the performance of our dance instructors, in Jaffna, Imphal, Srinagar or Karachi. No constitution can guarantee good governance if the entrenched elite of the society is not sincere. For all its ills, democracy is the only system of governance where polling booths decide the fate of the ruler rather than court intrigues and battlefields. General Musharraf's designs need to be condemned all over South Asia because they seek to put the fate of elected persons in the hands of someone who is not answerable. His is an open invitation to anarchy and continuous rebellion – for the general is introducing a virus far deadlier than the greed of petty politicians.

The only way to strengthen democracy is to ensure that generals keep their hands off politics. Aspiring Musharrafs of South Asia must realise that the fundamentals of democracy have remained unchanged since the days of the Magna Carta and the French Revolution – its three pillars are still liberty, equality and solidarity. These are values that no armed force of the world can deliver. Elections may leave a lot to be desired, but they ensure that the likes of Krishna Kant have higher chances of dying of old age rather than being killed in a coup or a rebellion.

The excuse that military rule is good for the economy is another fallacy that needs to be exposed yet again. Some Pakistani commentators have been shamelessly promoting this theory, citing the growth rate of the Zia years. But those were the days when American overlords footing the bill of a neo-imperial war in a frontline state overlooked the excesses in Pakistan. But these are times when entrepreneurs like the late Dhirubhai Ambani can spur growth and others seek to establish social justice in the land. That can happen only in a democracy.

General Musharraf must understand that no one other than the common citizen of Pakistan has the right to decide the fate of a country that grew out of a desire of a section of Muslim Indians to be masters of their own destiny. Disqualifying over 90 percent of the national population from holding public office just because they are not graduates is nothing but a ploy that no one is ready to buy. All it will do is cause the rise of more Osamas.

Pakistan's future seems already mortgaged, at least in the short term. Let not others in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh or India look to the Musharraf example as something to emulate.

*– Saarcy*

# What reality to imitate...

# The Balinese dilemma

## An ancient outpost of the Hindu world is under threat from banal conformity, and the traditional *Legong* of Bali is simply turning into background music. The tourists are gone, but there may yet be hope.

### by *Andre Vltchek*

Located in the equatorial underbelly of the Indonesian archipelago, the island of Bali is one of the few remaining Hindu-Buddhist cultures south of the Malaya peninsula that, at an earlier time, dominated the landscape of Asia from Sindh and the Himalayan massifs downwards in a southeasterly arc. Nestled next to the much larger island of Java, Bali is tropical, green – a formerly remote outpost of an ancient world known to tourists as "the island of the gods" and termed by Jawaharlal Nehru as the "morning of the world". It is an emerald tucked into a corner of the warm, blue ocean, and home to a culture that has resisted successive waves of conquest and conversion.

Bali is also a land of picturesque extremes. Its majestic volcanoes touch the clouds while its skilled musicians play gentle variations of traditional *Legong* court music as vigorous dancers step barefoot on burning coals in the nocturnal bravado of ritual performances. Painters labour over unique canvases in studios on the edges of deep and mysterious canyons. These are the scenes of 'exotic' life that frustrated city-dwellers come from the around the world to experience and appreciate. Is Bali then a paradise on earth?

Definitely not. It is an awkward, clumsy Shangri-la, retaining many of its original qualities but ravaged by colonialists and globalisation. Despite its charm and beauty, Bali is like the rest of the world – a confused place fighting to retain its uniqueness, its way of life, its old and deep Hindu culture that seems to be under constant attack from 'modernisation' and Western influence. It is desperately trying to find a third way between newly introduced consumerism and ancient traditions, and struggling with the nuanced act of balancing culture and commerce, heritage and high-rises.

This struggle is neither unique to Bali nor entirely new to the island. In 1935, the music ethnographer Colin McPhee lamented the island's burgeoning motor traffic and noted that only three years previously islanders would ask him how "a chariot [is] going like that without horse or cow?" The roots of disaffection and dis-ruption extend back even further; in 1906, the entire Balinese royal family committed mass suicide by marching into the guns of the Dutch. By 1908, the colonists had secured complete control of the island, and missionaries and 'modernisers' set out to remake Bali in a foreign image. The question that haunted the island then – as it still does today – was how to face the challenges of a contradictory world. Will Bali become a fenced-in cultural preserve or a five-star fantasyland?

## Balinese Hinduism

Hindu-Buddhist states, centred primarily in Java and Sumatra, ruled large sections of the Indonesian archipelago for more than one thousand years. Various dynasties – Srivijaya, Mataram, Sailendra, Kediri, Majapahit – consolidated their power and built large temple complexes and stupas, including the famous Borobudur complex near Yogyakarta. Indonesians fused Hindu-Buddhist concepts with local traditions. The Javanese shadow puppet tradition (*wayang*), which scholars suspect dates back to the neolithic age, combined with Hindu dramas (*lakon*) to create a new art form.

Beginning around the late fifteenth century, the Hindu-Buddhist rulers of the archipelago faced twin invasions: Islam and Christianity. While extensive Muslim contacts dated back for centuries, the decline of the Indonesian states vis-à-vis the Muslim city-state of Melaka, which dominated the Strait of Malacca and controlled much of the trade throughout the archipelago, helped a surging Islam spread throughout the islands. Although Melaka ceased to be an Islamic centre after its fall to the Portuguese in 1511, proselytisation continued at an accelerated rate in the islands to the south through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indonesian rulers sometimes converted to Islam and then forcibly converted those under their control, such as the ruler of Gowa in 1605, while others preferred to adopt Muslim overtones without dropping other aspects of the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, such as Sultan Agung of Java (ruled 1613-1646).

Christian missionaries arrived in Indonesia at almost the same time. Saint Francis Xavier founded the first Christian mission in 1546, and some pockets of Christianity continue to exist in Indonesia to this day. However, while the Portuguese (and later the Dutch), were able to establish stronger political control over the islands than Muslim rulers, in the long run the European colonists lost the struggle of religion: 88 percent of Indonesians today are Muslims.

In certain ways, the political-religious story of Indonesia mirrors that of South Asia. In both places, millennia-old Hindu-Buddhist traditions faced a surge of Islamic power, which gained adherents amongst large sections of the population and established political dominance. At the time Muslim empires were consolidating their control in Delhi and Java, European colonists inspired by greed and faith gained control of huge swathes of land and submitted millions of people to the cruel tasks of empire building. As with South Asia, Indonesia gained its independence from colonialists after World War II, and the cultural divisions built on millennia of practices and traditions have reemerged in both places.

While the modern state of Indonesia is known for its cultural diversity (there are 688 languages spoken in Indonesia, including 15 spoken each by at least 1 million people), Bali is one of only a handful of islands that retains its 'original' Hindu character. While the Hindus of Bali have maintained their traditions for nearly two millennia, the tidal flow of tourists in search of exotica during the last three decades has drowned Bali's traditions in ways that Muslim and Christian missionaries were unable to do in five centuries.

Ninety-five percent of Balinese people are Hindus, despite the preponderance of Muslims in most other parts of Indonesia (only two other places – both of them in Western Java – remain Hindu). Statues of Dewa Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge and the arts, stand in front of countless museums and galleries. The island's narrow beaches are still used for ceremonies; ashes of the dead are scattered on the sand after cremation. Women walk to magnificent temples, dressed in colourful sarongs, carrying offerings of fruits in large baskets, balancing them skilfully on top of their heads. But how Hindu is Bali?

Purists would argue that Balinese religion (known as *Hindu Dharma* or *Agama Hindu*) is in fact a unique blend of Hinduism, Buddhism and pre-Hindu animist beliefs. Balinese worship the Hindu trinity of Vishnu, Brahma and Siva, but they also worship their ancestors and deities of fertility. Buddha is regarded as Siva's younger brother. The aim of Balinese Hinduism is to reach 'peace of spirit and harmony in the material life' by achieving a balance of philosophy, morals and
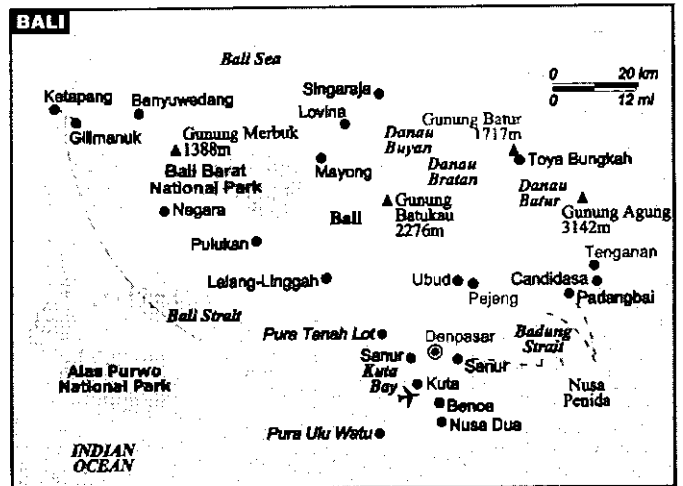
ritual. Reincarnation, an integral part of Balinese religion, is observed mostly in connection with newborn children, who are believed to be reincarnations of ancestors (mostly dead grandparents). Often, a birth is followed by a ceremony to ascertain who has been reincarnated in a ritual performed by a spirit medium.

Religion was crucial in forming the complex and unique Balinese society – its culture, social solidarity and family values. Religion helped this island to become philosophically and culturally self-sufficient and remain so for centuries. This fierce cultural independence preserved and reinforced Balinese traditions, but in doing so it also created an isolated exotica waiting to be 'discovered'.

**Divine 'discoveries'**

Jane, a 65-year old literary agent from New York City, first visited *The island of gods* in 1969. She fell in love with its natural beauty and local culture and decided to divide her life between New York and Bali:

> I found a gorgeous little village in the middle of the jungle. I hired an interpreter and approached the elders of the village, asking them if I could build the house here. We spoke for seven hours. At the end they said to me: 'We think you are a good person. We are accepting you.' I didn't have to pay for anything – they built the house for me. The word 'money' was never mentioned... Now look around: it is not the same Bali anymore. It totally changed.

Indeed, Bali was 'discovered', first by the globetrotting and fashionable crowd (including Mic Jagger, but also by some great painters like Antonio Blanco and Rudolf Bonnet), and later by the 'general public' that arrived in droves from every corner of the world. Thousands of Australian, American and European tour-

> In certain ways, the political-religious story of Indonesia mirrors that of South Asia

ists came in search of 'enlightenment', tropical beaches and exotic adventures. Very soon, dormant and reclusive Bali became 'in'. Flashy five-star hotels forced the traditional and quiet lifestyle off the southern coast of the island. Kuta was the first to loose its dreamy charm, 'enriched' by countless nightclubs, restaurants, boutiques and an international airport.

Beaches became over-crowded and almost fully dominated by foreign visitors. Locals complained that they now had to disperse ashes of their dead while being photographed by topless Australian and European female tourists. "I feel like some exotic animal", says Ketut, a fisherman from Sanur. "They look at me, point fingers at me, photograph me".

With the boom, Bali became a land of opportunity, attracting thousands of seasonal workers and prostitutes from the poorer parts of the Indonesian archipelago, particularly from Eastern Java. The population of Denpasar, Bali's biggest city, doubled, and traffic jams and pollution became a part of everyday life. Sanur and Kuta beaches became associated with 'sex, drugs and rock 'n roll' in the early 1970s; with time they also became increasingly dirty. Temples built on the coast came to be surrounded by beach resorts and golf courses. Young Balinese boys began walking the streets for easy cash from amorous encounters with middle-aged European and Japanese women. Female sexual tourism was booming.

While Western pop music was introduced at most of the bars and night clubs, traditional *Legong* was rapidly turning into just some sort of background music, drowned out by the nocturnal screams coming from drinking establishments along the beach. The style of painting was changing too, catering mainly to the tastes of package tourists. *Ramayana* was performed for a bored foreign crowd in T-shirts and sneakers. Thousands of years of culture were not undone overnight, but the pressures of the outside were quickly altering the cultural and social interior of Bali.

Up in the hills, the situation is markedly different. In the ancient Kingdom of Ubud, the monarch still owns close to 80 percent of all land. He has rejected attempts to develop Ubud into another tourist trap. This small town, home of great painters and musicians, reacted to the tourist invasion by building grand museums, in-



*Balinese drummers setting the beat for a confused time.*

cluding the world famous Puri Lukisan. Visitors are confronted by great beauty and sophistication. Those looking for the wild nightlife have realised that Ubud is definitely not their place. Visitors are welcome to Ubud, but they have to play by the rules.

Foreigners unaccompanied by locals are not admitted to the main hall of the temple during ceremonies and a sorong has to be worn before entering religious sites. The building of American fast-food joints is discouraged – the only one in Ubud, a Dunkin Donuts outlet, closed down right after the attacks of 11 September. All new cafes, galleries and restaurants have to comply with the unique local style of architecture and landscaping.

In the heartland of Bali, local culture is slowly fighting back and in some cases even regaining ground. Hinduism has proved to be an important tool in this fight for the cultural preservation and survival of the island. In Ubud and elsewhere, two powerful cultures have suddenly managed to coexist peacefully: one traditional - Balinese, the other international.

The 'quality' of tourists visiting Ubud has suddenly improved. Those who now arrive come because they wanted to experience local museums and galleries, performances of *Ramayana* ballet, *Kecak* and *Trans* dances or *Legong* music. By defining itself, Ubud defined its visitors and shaped its own destiny.

> **The tidal flow of tourists during the last three decades has drowned Bali's traditions in ways that Muslim and Christian missionaries were unable to do in five centuries**

Legong: *revival of the traditional dance (left); the recently abandoned streets of 'paradise'.*

## Too late?

Did the 'Ubud experiment' come too late? When anti-Suharto demonstrations and riots shook Jakarta (and consequently almost all foreigners cancelled their trips to Indonesia), the Balinese economy collapsed, and the island was on the verge of starvation. Many owners of small hotels, restaurants and shops decided to return to the fields, in order to feed their families. But there were not enough rice fields left to feed the Balinese population – many of them were sold in previous years to developers and foreigners.

The situation deteriorated even further after 11 September. Tourists afraid to travel to the 'most populous Muslim country on earth' almost all cancelled their trips to Indonesia. The Laskhar Jihad militants and other groups promised to attack American and Western travellers and there were bizarre rumours that Osama bin Laden himself was hiding in the wilderness of the neighbouring island of Lombok. As if this was not enough, Indonesia's 14 percent inflation rate made Bali more expensive than Thailand and the Philippines. 'Paradise' became suddenly empty. Hordes of tourists moved to other, still 'undiscovered' places.

"I don't know what happened", says the owner of the prestigious Agung Rai Gallery. "One day we woke up and there were hundreds of thousands of foreigners in Bali. We had to change our culture, the way we live and the way we do business. A couple of decades later they were all gone, but Bali will never be the same".

Bali has long been a land of struggle: of a tiny island against the mighty sea; of a distinct Hinduism against the invasion of Muslim and Christian missionaries; and today of a unique culture pitted for its survival against the worst excesses of globalisation. Now is the time for soul searching. "I don't understand how we got so dependent", laments a taxi driver in Ubud.

Will Bali go back to its roots? If so, what will happen to the devastated coastline, broken family structures and over-developed land? And can people who got used to motorcycles and television soap operas return to the way things were before? Are Balinese the victims or the villains or both?

In the ancient Balinese political tradition (*negara*), ceremony played an important political function. Symbolic acts assumed concrete proportions and rulers believed that by imitating divinity they could attain earthly perfection. Thus, the kingly pretension of ruling people as Siva rules the heavens was not a cynical gesture; as the scholar Clifford Geertz notes, the Balinese believed that "to mirror reality is to become it". The question today is what reality Bali will imitate.

The story of modern Bali is not unique. Thousands of beautiful cultures were 'discovered', utilised and abandoned, leaving them confused, angry and poor. However, Bali is too unique to be in this sad position for a long time. It will probably soon recover, attracting millions of foreign visitors once again. The questions remain, however: is that what the Balinese really want? And do they have a choice? Can one attract visitors and prosper without having to ruin nature, culture and identity? Does one have to 'serve' people from rich countries, catering to their wishes, or can one demand that visitors respect the culture of the place they are visiting?

If positive answers to these questions really exist, chances are they will be found in Bali. In economically depressed times, people are returning to their temples, their courtyards, their families. Money and the West have influenced this island of three million inhabitants, but money never became the most important part of people's lives. When the party is over, it turns out, they still have plenty of places to return to.     ∆
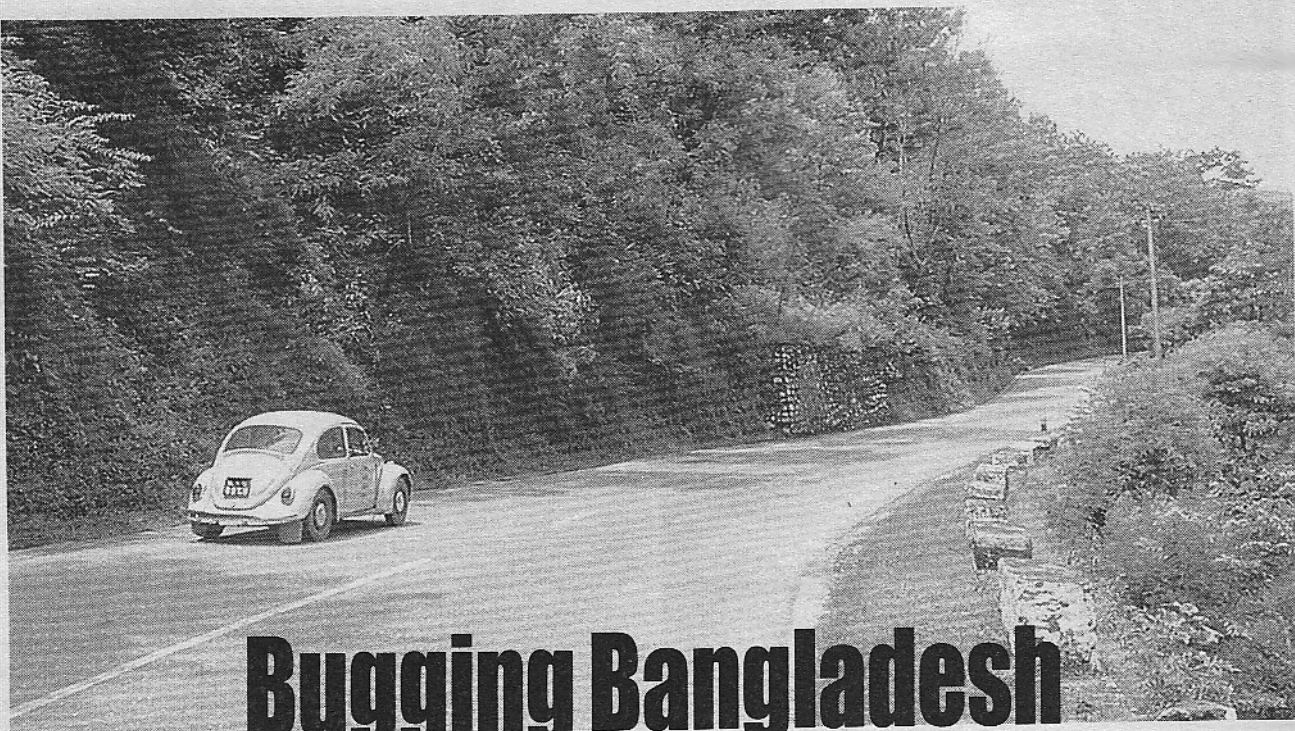
# Bugging Bangladesh

## The Great Kathmandu-Dhaka Volkswagen Beetle Spinal Injury Fundraising Drive

### by Kanak Mani Dixit

When the idea hit us, it did so in our bellies. A massive whump planted itself in the solar plexus, and we knew we had to take it up, beat the challenge and take this ride. It is 1200 km from Kathmandu, where the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre (SIRC) is, to Dhaka, where its experienced older cousin, the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed, is based. The newly started SIRC desperately needed 12 lakh Nepali Rupees for sheer survival and to invest in much needed physiotherapy equipment. The numbers fit together so beautifully, the poetry of it could not be ignored. And thus it was decided that The Great Kathmandu-Dhaka Volkswagen Beetle Spinal Injury Fundraising Drive would be done. We would yet find support from all over to sponsor the ride at the rate of 1000 Nepali rupees or a rupee a kilometre, raising (we hoped) NPR 12 lakh in the process.

Plans finally bore fruit auspiciously on 12 July 2002, with Himali, Miku and me being flagged off with much enthusiasm at the SIRC in Jorpati, with garlands from the patients, *tika*, *khada* and Salil, Kathmandu's best (actually only) didgeridoo player, weaving his music and magic into the morning while doing a circumam-

bulation of the 1973 Volkswagen Beetle. We drove out with the best wishes of the patients and a good many friends who had come to see us off. Leaving behind Kathmandu Valley's congestion was going to be great, a point that reinforced itself when we found ourselves right in the slipstream of a truck full of slopping cow dung (where did it come from, where was it headed?), its aromatic contents splattering our path all the way around the Ring Road. But we managed to lose the truck at Kalanki, not a moment too soon too, and made our exit from the valley via Thankot. There were no clouds in the sky, so the fear of encountering landslide blockage on the road receded. The car seemed to dislike inclines, and it was fortunate that our trip was decidedly downhill all the way to the delta!
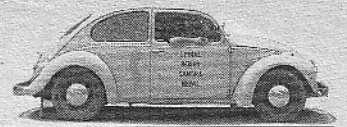
Heading southeast, we coasted past Mugling, Bharatpur, Hetauda and into the plains of Nepal, past vast tracts of *sal* jungle that still survive in the Tarai. At Hetauda we came to a military roadblock meant to check for Maoists.

Soldier: "Where are you headed?"

Me: "Bangladesh".

Soldier: "Bangladesh? Okay, you can go".

Just like that, as if he saw hundreds of cars doing this everyday. We grinned at each other as we drove off.

It was dark by the time we crossed the Kosi Barrage, with the roaring river below engorged with monsoon flow. We parked for the night a little further from there, at Itahari – by day a bustling Tarai town. While we were tucking into our dinner, two policemen unceremoniously produced for us a 'bandit': he had been nabbed opening the 'boot' at the rear of our Beetle. Imagine his surprise at finding the engine there instead.

The next morning we made it in good time to Kakarbhitta at the India-Nepal border. The Nepali officials shooed us through, expressing some surprise that the party they had just read about in the morning paper had already arrived. The Indian immigration and customs officials took a while to verify our car papers, but we were soon on our way through the chicken's neck that separates Nepal from Bangladesh and connects the Northeast to the rest of India, driving over the gushing waters of the Mahananda and the Teesta as we headed east. The nearest border point of Fulbari-Bangabandha having been closed, we had to drive further on but the Beetle behaving well, we arrived at Chyangrabandha within three hours of leaving Nepal. Looking across no-man's land, at Burimari on the Bangladeshi side, we espied a blue Dhaka Beetle parked and patiently waiting to greet us, and behind it some more. Immigration and customs once again took time, mainly because Nepali cars do not make this trip, period. Apparently though, some Bhutanese vehicles do.

Across, then, to Burimari, the entry point into 'North Bengal'. The Volkswagen Club of Bangladesh was there to greet us in force – Zubeir, Razu, Zayd and Murtaza. When we shook hands at no-man's-land, it was as if we had been friends for years, for this is how it is with Beetle*wallahs*, hail-fellow-well-met, regardless of age, distance, gender or point of origin. The Dhaka friends immediately turned their loving attention to our Bug. Murtaza *bhai* was excited that most of the car's gadgets and gizmos seemed original. The Volkswagen Club of Bangladesh noted, however, that the air pressure in the tyres seemed far too high. Sheepish before these aficionados, I cooked up a theory about how the air in them tyres must have expanded during our descent from cold, high-altitude (low atmospheric pressure) Kathmandu into the hot, low-lying plains of Bangla; the subject was politely changed. However, despite the embarrassing
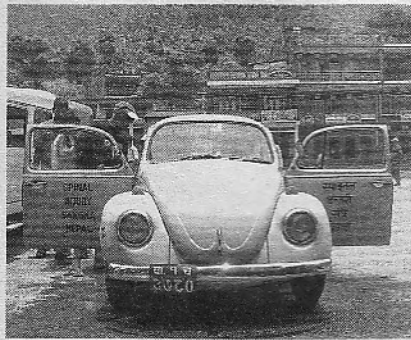

*The SIRC chariot*

first impression made by the Kathmandu party, it was treated to a fine lunch at the *dhaba* by the immigration post at Burimari. A television set at one corner producing a scratchy reception of Nepal Television's Saturday special Hindi film, we settled into an easy camaraderie. Lunch done, we started off southwards for Dhaka, four colourful Beetles driving past the dewy green paddy fields of North Bengal.

This, June-July, is really the time to be visiting Bangladesh. Let not one be scared off by the threat of floods for at stake are stunningly profuse vegetation, low clouds and dramatic horizons. We sped against the fading light with Razu's 1600 cc supervoxy in the lead. Everywhere, people looked shocked as the first oddly shaped Bug barrelled past, only to be stunned three times over as three more went by. Wherever we stopped, Bangladesh being the densely populated country it is, a hundred people would gather around in a matter of minutes, excited by the cars and the strange spectacle of a female in trousers, Himali. Many were intrigued by our light blue Beetle, which, in addition to the usual eccentricities, sported the words "Spinal Injury Sangha Nepal" on its sides in English and Devanagari, and had the Nepali white-on-red license plates with Devanagari letters and numerals.

Soon we were in Rangpur, the hometown of General Ershad, erstwhile dictator, who dismantled many things but built the great highway that runs down the spine of North Bengal, from that town to Bogra and beyond. Whizzing along,

> Soldier: "Where are you headed?"
> Me: "Bangladesh".
> Soldier: "Bangladesh? Okay, you can go".

interrupted only by knocking engines – the result of spurious gasoline taken in near the border – and one tyre puncture (not ours), we arrived at Safeway Motel in Bogra for the night. A reporter was waiting to scoop the rest of the Bangla press, and he did all right except for reporting me the next day as a 73-year-old driver. It seemed to have had something to do with the fact that the Beetle was a '73 model; on the other hand it may have had something to do with my very silver hair.

Over dinner at the Safeway, the members of the Volkswagen Club of Bangladesh proceeded to grill me on the finer points of Beetle Care and Maintenance. What spark plugs did I use? (Don't know.) What was the mpg of my Bug? (Uh-huh) The seats in the 1973 models do not come with headrests so how come mine had them? (Time for confession: the seats were cannibalised from a dead Beetle.) The rest of the evening was given over to Beetle lore and trivia, and highly charged discussions on matters relating to steering columns, windshield wipers, camshafts and sideboards. Unlike a sim-
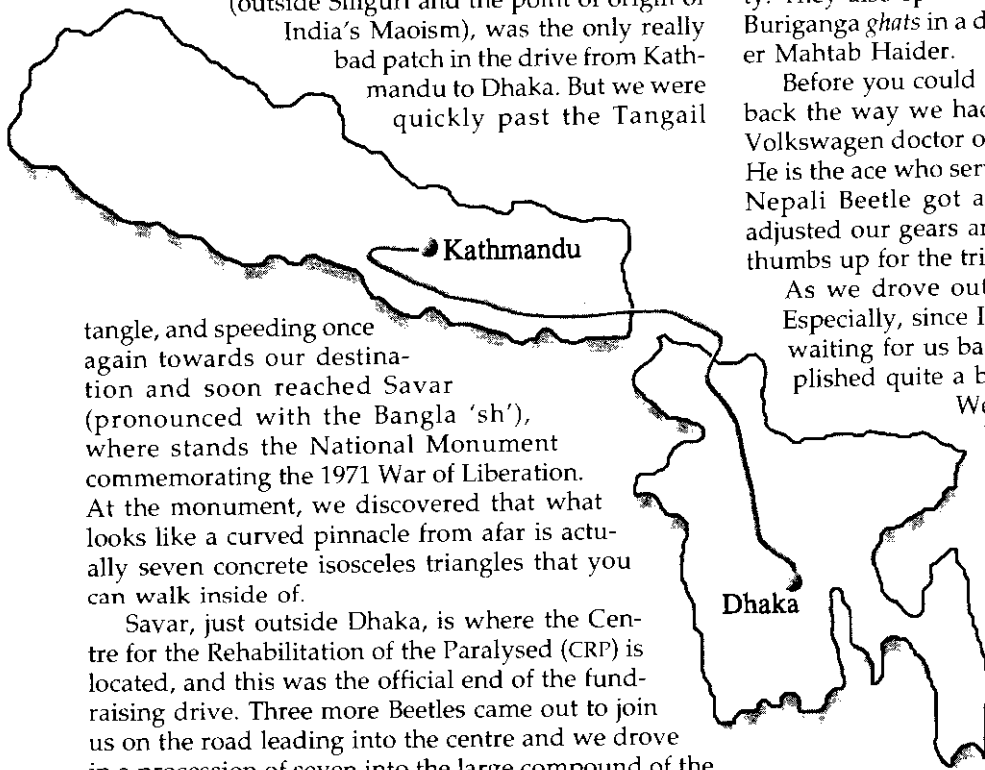
ilar group of, say, Nepalis, these guys did not need beer to rev up, and none was served. They were intoxicated with their love for the Bug, and I must say, it was catching. Razu recounted the story of a fuel gauge needle that refused to budge even with a full tank, and then suddenly sprang to action, crossed the dial and went out of view, so that you had to bend down into the leg space and peer upwards and sideways into the gauge. The audacity of the fuel gauge had the Beetlewallahs of both Dhaka and Kathmandu rolling on the floor. By when that uproar died, the rice and fish (*rohu*) were cold.

The next morning, we headed out early and stopped for a breakfast of *paratha* and mutton curry at a crowded all-male establishment where Himali bravely upheld the right of her half of humanity to do the same. Having feasted on the steaming food, we topped it off with special tea brewed in the manner of espresso coffee (I cannot describe it better than that) and headed off for the Bangabandhu Bridge, the Pride of Bangladesh. Its five-kilometre span over the Jamuna (called Brahmaputra in India) is stupendous, built on rocks brought all the way from the Bihar Plateau, Bangladesh having lots of mud but no stone. The bridge has no structural shoddiness to it, and it will clearly be also the pride of the Asian Highway when geopolitics succumbs to economic rationality in the Subcontinent, and the dream of driving from, say, Delhi to Bangkok via Dhaka and Rangoon, finally becomes a reality.

After the bridge we came to a half-hour stretch in Tangail, which, other than a strip at Naxalbari (outside Siliguri and the point of origin of India's Maoism), was the only really bad patch in the drive from Kathmandu to Dhaka. But we were quickly past the Tangail tangle, and speeding once again towards our destination and soon reached Savar (pronounced with the Bangla 'sh'), where stands the National Monument commemorating the 1971 War of Liberation. At the monument, we discovered that what looks like a curved pinnacle from afar is actually seven concrete isosceles triangles that you can walk inside of.

Savar, just outside Dhaka, is where the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP) is located, and this was the official end of the fundraising drive. Three more Beetles came out to join us on the road leading into the centre and we drove in a procession of seven into the large compound of the

CRP. Our car was singled out and asked to pull into a large auditorium-like space filled with over two hundred souls, about half of them in wheelchairs and wheeled stretchers. On the wall behind our Beetle was a banner announcing this as the 'Finish' line of the Kathmandu-Dhaka drive. The patients and staff of the CRP had been waiting patiently, and rounds of applause greeted our arrival.

Garlanded and greeted by several spinal injury patients, we were reminded of the send-off by the patients in Kathmandu. I was asked to speak, so I described our drive over, my own accident and recovery, and how our centre hoped to learn from all that the CRP had done in Bangladesh over the last two decades. Later, and also the next day, we took tours of the CRP's (what can only be called) township, and were astounded at the low-key, practical approach taken to addressing all aspects of spinal injury, from medical treatment to rehabilitation and resettlement, and that it even had a school for caregivers. Here was an organisation that had already grappled with the challenges of responding to spinal injury in a South Asian context, and we in Jorpati could learn much from Savar.

From Savar, we drove on to Dhaka, and stayed with family friends Naila and Badal Khan. The next few days in Dhaka were a whirlwind of parties, interviews, press conferences, and dealing with press and television coverage (thanks Ekushey, and hope you overcome the challenge to your survival!). Himali and Miku enjoyed their first trip to Dhaka, guided by new friends Almer and Aneire, and they revelled in the city's cultural intensity. They also spent a memorable morning touring the Buriganga *ghats* in a downpour by boat, guided by writer Mahtab Haider.

Before you could say *bhalobashi*, it was time to head back the way we had come. But first, Raouf Bhai, the Volkswagen doctor of Dhaka, had us in for a check-up. He is the ace who services the Bugs in that city, and our Nepali Beetle got a thorough medical. Raouf Bhai adjusted our gears and engine timing and gave us the thumbs up for the trip back.

As we drove out of Dhaka, we felt melancholic. Especially, since I remembered the cow dung truck waiting for us back in Kalanki. But we had accomplished quite a bit while having had fun doing it. We had proven that the Kathmandu-Dhaka drive was easily done – it was thought to be difficult only because hardly anyone had tried it. Contrary to popular perception, the roads were superb throughout (the Tangail stretch would be repaired by December, everyone assured us), and also contrary to popular belief, it was not difficult to obtain papers for transit through India. It took some time to gain permission from

*Cavalcade of the open road: Bugs in pursuit of a Bangla rickshaw.*

Dhaka to drive our Beetle into Bangladesh though, but that is explained by the fact that ours may have been the first private Nepali vehicle wanting to do so. Let more people (from both sides) take their cars through; the wrinkles are bound to get ironed out.

One is not always able to get the message across, however. An imaginative caption writer who obviously did not attend the press conference called by the VW Club of Bangladesh, wrote in a Dhaka paper the next day, underneath a picture of the Nepali Beetle, that we had made a "spine-chilling drive down from the Himalayas to the Ganges Delta..." Not true.

We managed to raise some amount of awareness regarding spinal injury in Bangladesh and in Nepal, and had by the time we reached Dhaka raised a little over half our target of NPR 12 lakh; friends from Nepal, Bangladesh, India and overseas came through with sponsorships.

At a time when people are flying between South Asian capitals attending seminars and workshops (and there's nothing wrong with that), it is important to ensure that the overland possibilities not be neglected. It is cheaper, closer (certainly) to the earth, and more fulfilling in so many ways. Already, the many Nepali students in Dhaka make the trip over on the public transport of the three countries. And quite a few Bangladeshis make the reverse journey. The Volkswagen Club of Bangladesh is tentatively planning to bring a convoy of Bangla Bugs up to Kathmandu in the fall. Many more friends are planning to drive across in assorted other vehicles, now that they know that the paperwork can be dealt with and that the journey is easy on the tyres and the muscles.

Goats! Almost forgot the goats. From the Nepal Tarai through the chicken's neck and past North Bengal and Tangail into Dhaka, besides the identical ecology and terrain and the good roads, everywhere we found similarly inclined goats on the roads. Goats rather than dogs, and everywhere they were flat on the gravel against the tarmac, using it to scratch the lower part of their neck. That this is goat-neck-scratching-season all the way to Dhaka is the only observation I can make on the subject.

Himali, Miku and I are very happy we made the trip. We are glad the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre will be kept afloat for another few months. And we are thrilled that friends from the low country are now thinking of driving to Kathmandu. I will end this report with a note sent by Zubeir Moin, President of the Dhaka Beetlewallahs, after we got back to Kathmandu: "It was a pleasure for Volkswagen Club of Bangladesh to receive you at the border. We all enjoyed it very much and shall cherish the memory all our lives. Please change the engine oil and also rear shock absorbers of your Beetle".

Point taken, Zubeir bhai.

# Death of an icon
# Kaifi Azmi (?-2002)

The words of Jigar Muradabadi can perhaps best summarise the loss of Kaifi: *"Jaan ke min jumlaye khasane maikhana mujhe / Muddaton roya karenge jaam-o-paimana mujhe".*

## by *Rizvi Syed Haider Abbas*

Kaifi Azmi was one of the greatest stars in a galaxy that included the likes of Krishna Chandar, Rajendar Singh Bedi, Mahendra Nath 'Ashk', Sahir, Asmat Chugtai, Majaz, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Sulaiman Areeb, Ali Sardar Jafri, Josh, Faiz and Firaq, all members of the 'progressive writers movement' of 1936. Kaifi was many things and wore many caps: a rebel, a romantic yet a realist, a secularist, socialist and humanist, he was a satirist, a poet and a lyricist among other things. He, Syed Athar Hussain Rizvi, rose from the nondescript village of Mijwan in the Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh to become Kaifi Azmi, one of the best-loved Urdu poets and Bombay songwriters ever.

The rebel in Kaifi, who died in Bombay on 10 May 2002, found early expression. Attending his first *mushaira* at Bahraich at the age of 11, he recited, *"Qismat hamari gaisu-e-jana se kam nahin / jitna sawaarte gaye utne hi bal pade / Itna to zindagi mein kisi ki khalal pade / Hasne se ho sukoon na rone se kal pade".* (My fortune is as are the locks of my beloved / the more I seek to untangle them, the more entangled they become / there can be no life so distressed with interference / that neither can I gain peace by laughter, nor hasten tomorrow with tears).

He was admitted to Sultan-ul-Madaris, Lucknow, a centre for theological learning but he left it very soon with the awareness that religious education was not for him. Instead, guided by his temperament and worldview, Kaifi embraced Marxism at the age of 19 and started writing for *Quami Jung*, the Communist Party paper. The fire of revolution made him drop his studies to join the 'Quit India movement' of 1942, and by the time

*Baba Azmi: rebel, romantic, red*

India got independence, Kaifi had evolved into more of an activist than a journalist.

A thorough nonconformist, Kaifi did not lay down his pen with the coming of independence but used his energy to question and challenge the ills of the new India, and 'the establishment' often found itself the subject of Kaifi's critical exercises. When the government engaged in anti-people manipulations, Kaifi aimed this comment at the then-chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Govind Vallabh Pant: *"Gunde communist hi mazdooron ko bhadkate hain / Pant ro dete hain jab golian chalwate hain".* (Ruffian communists instigate the labour / while Pant sheds tears even as he orders gunfire). Maulana Azad's efforts to sway Malik Khizr Hayar Tiwani and bring him into the folds of the Congress Party made Kaifi write: *"Thhe hotel mein bechain Azad udhar / Idhar Khizr takiye pe dhunte thhe sar".* (As Azad paced uneasy in the hotel / Khizr struck his head repeatedly against his pillow).

Kaifi, who was not certain which year he was born in (but is thought to have been born between the years 1915 and 1925), liked to say that he was born in an enslaved India, had lived in an independent India and relished the idea of dying in a socialist India. His wish may not have been realised but the vision with which he nurtured his daughter Shabana (now a member of parliament, an actress and an activist) has paid dividends. It was when Kaifi was on his first visit to Europe that Shabana, like any other girl, asked him to bring her a doll. She visualised a blonde, peach complexioned doll but daddy brought back a black golliwog with thick red lips! Shabana says she will never

forget the incident. On another occasion he gave her a birthday gift: *"Ab aur kya tera bimar baap dega tujhe / Bas ek dua ke khuda tujh ko kamyaab kare / Wo taank de tere aachal mein chand aur tare / Tu apne waaste jisko bhi intekhab kare"*. (Now what more can thine ailing father give thee / But a prayer that Khuda may grant thee success / that he may embellish thy wrap with the moon and stars / that thou may'st choose whichever of these thou pleasest).

Kaifi made his writings a rallying cry for the struggle of peasants and labourers, and the struggle of an individual against injustice was written of in poetry that was drenched in red: *"Ailan-e-haq se khatra-e dar-o-rasn to hai / Lekin sawal ye hai ke dar-o-rasn ke baad"* (Declaration of rights does lead to the gallows / But the question is: what after that?) speaks of the immortality of life laid down for justice and truth. The realist in Kaifi would make him say: *"Tum pareshan na ho baab-e-karam wa na karo / Aur kuchh dair pukaroonga chala jaaonga / Isi kuchein mein jahan chand uga karte hain / Shab-e-tareek guzaroonga chala jaaonga"*. (Fret not thou, gateway of deeds, nor do aught / A while longer shall I call and then be gone / In these confined apartments do the worlds bring forth moons / The night I shall tarry and then, be gone). And as a broken–hearted romantic he wrote: *"Ek to itni haseen doosre ye aaraish / Jo nazar padti hai chehre par thahar jati hai / Muskura deti ho mooh pher ke jab mehfil mein / Ek khanak toot ke seene mein bikhar jaati hai"*. (Such beauty; and so well embellished / glances that perchance fall on this face are stayed thereon / when you smile and turn away in a gathering / the jingle of them embellishments strays away and spreads within my breast).

Kaifi's rendezvous with films brought into existence some spectacular songs. *Haqeeqat* had *'Ho ke majboor mujhe usne bulaya hoga'*; *Hanste Zakhm* had Kaifi's *'Aaj socha to aasoon bhar aaye / muddatein ho gayeen muskuraye'*; his song in *Arth* became all the rage, *'Tum jo itna muskura rahe ho / kya gham hai jisko chhupa rahe ho'*. His words became a countrywide phenomenon when the playback singer Mohammad Rafi in the film *Shola Aur Shabnam* gave voice to the song, *'Jaane kya dhoondti rahti hain ye ankhein mujhme / raakh ke dhair mein na shola hai na chingari hai'*.

The renowned poet Ameer Minai Lucknawi once said of poets: *"Khanjar chale kisi par tadapte hain hum Ameer / Saare jahan ka dard humare jigar mein hai"*. (The dagger may lodge in another's chest but it is I, Ameer, that shivers with pain / all the agony in the universe resides in my breast). Kaifi, with his political awareness, embodied these words to a greater extent than any other. Reacting to a Shia-Sunni riot in Lucknow, he lamented: *"Aza mein bahte thhe aasoon magar lahoo to nahin / Ye koi aur jagah hogi Lucknow to nahin / Yehan pe chalti hain chhuriyaan zabaan se pahle / Ye Mir Anees ki Aatish ki Guftugu to nahin / Chamak raha hai jo daman pe dono firqoun ke / Baghaur dekhein ye Islam ka lahoo to nahin"*. (It surely was tears that flowed at the mourn-

ing, not blood / this must be another place, surely not Lucknow / Daggers are brandished here before tongues can be / These are surely not the fiery words of Mir Anees / That which gleams on the robes of the two sects / regard it carefully: is it perchance the blood of Islam itself?)

The anti-Sikhs riots in 1984 and the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 shook him. His pain and anguish were evident in *'Ram ka doosra banwas'* (A second exile for Ram): *"Paon Sarju mein abhi Ram ne dhoye bhi na thhe / Ke nazar aaye wahan khoon ke gahre dhabbe / Paon dhoye bina Sarju ke kinare se utthe / Ram ye kahte hue apne duare se uthe / Rajdhani ki faza aaye nahin raas mujhe / 6 December ko mila doosra banwas mujhe"*. (Ram had not even washed his feet in the Sarju / When he spied deep stains of blood upon it / Rose he from the bank without washing his feet / Left he that place saying thus / The reigns of my capital's government are not in my hands / On the 6th of December was I exiled again).

Kaifi, who had travelled far and wide, was denied a visa for Pakistan for several years despite the fact that his family lived there. When he did visit Karachi finally he expressed a yearning for everlasting peace between India and Pakistan: *"Rahegi dosti hi dosti ab dono mulkon mein / main har dil mein apne dil ke arma chhod aaya hoon"*. (I have left my desire in every breast / now will there be only friendship between the two nations). He believed that friendly relations between India and Pakistan would be the greatest joy for the Muslims of India.

His emotions in real life and reel life were almost the same. His angst in Saeed Mirza's film *Naseem*, where he played the role of an old bedridden man reciting Mir Taqi Mir, trying to explain the untenable situation of the Babri Mosque to his granddaughter, was a rare character for Hindi films.

*"Main ja raha hoon sareshaam laut aaonga / Safar safar hai mera intezar mat karna"* (I will only be back from where I am headed when it is sunset / this is a wandering of mine, do not wait for me), said an unknown poet but Kaifi, at the fag end of his life returned to Mijwan, and poured his energies into the development of his home village. He pursued the authorities at the Uttar Pradesh capital till a metalled road was actually laid in Mijwan. The road was inaugurated without the pomp and importance of a dedication ceremony but as was inevitable, it has come to be known as Kaifi Road nevertheless. Kaifi's efforts meant that Mijwan acquired a girls' high school, a government hospital and a post office. It was a personal tragedy for the residents of Mijwan then, that their poet was not buried in the village but in Bombay.

The echoes of 'Jhankar', 'Aakhir-e-Shab', 'Awara Sajde', and 'Sarmaya' (collections of Kaifi's work) are not only invaluable as literature but also as records of images from pre- and post-independence India. It is almost poetic that the poet died even as the *mazaar* of Wali Dakhini (the Chaucer of Urdu poetry) was being demolished in Gujarat. △

# Twisted troubles

## Building anew and moving on three years after the Orissa cyclone

Chalo re chalo
Aagey chalo
Ladaiero maidane

*Let's march, let's march,*
*Let's march forward,*
*On to the battleground*
*– Oriya chant*

Cutting like a jagged blade through the populated Orissa coastline in India's east, the devastating cyclone of October 1999 left immeasurable hopelessness and destruction in its trail. Though storms pass through Orissa's fields and villages annually in September and October, the 1999 cyclone set a modern day standard of human misery: 10,000 dead, by official counts, and many times that number deprived of sustenance and shelter.

Orissa is a harsh land, prone to droughts in the western parts and to cyclones and floods along the eastern coastal belt. Inland, periodic water shortages compounded by the worst kind of extortionist feudal structure mean that many people go hungry to bed, official claims notwithstanding. Along the Bay of Bengal coast, each autumn the eastern portions suffer the brunt of sea-borne natural violence.

But 28-29 October 1999 was different. The 'normal' thresholds of misery and loss were swept away in the pounding of one of the most devastating cyclones on record. Storms raged for three days with peak wind speeds of 280 kilometres per hour. Villagers talked of waves towering 60-70 feet lashing the coast, sweeping away everything 30 kilometres inland. Deltaic rivers remained swollen during those three days, submerging huge tracts

in several districts, including the Ersama and Balikuda blocks of Jagatsinghpur district, where about 90 percent of 'official' deaths were recorded.

It is with this troubling legacy that the simultaneously poignant and inspiring film, *Batya Porey Alodon* (Stirrings after the cyclone), attempts to grapple. Directed by Sumit Chowdhury, the film is as much about documenting loss as it is about recording the reconstruction in Orissa – physical, social and emotional. The storm washed away all that there was, and Chowdhury's film sets out to record the struggle to replace that vacuum with a new and sometimes different order.



### Batya Porey Alodon
### (Stirrings after the cyclone)
A documentary
80 minutes; Oriya with English subtitles
Sponsors: Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS).
Unnayan, Action Aid India
Directed by Sumit Chowdhury

*reviewed by*
**Pranab Kanti Basu**

The stories told in *Batya Porey Alodon* play themselves out in recollection and reflection, a device that humanises the otherwise inaccessible loss of missing family members and devastated lives. Renubala Devi, a grieving widow who witnessed her five children being swept away by the charging

waves, recounts the day of the disaster. Human tragedy is more chilling in memory. The sequence is an everyday situation: Renubala is stirring the vegetables in the kitchen, and the narrator-interviewer, Rashmi, warns her that the water is boiling over. Renubala proceeds to narrate the most insignificant details. She tied her sari tightly round her waist, she recounts, only to pause and repeat herself a few seconds later. Renubala remembers that her daughter removed the straw from their thatch roof that was lodged between the horns of their bull after the roof caved in. She recounts the minutest details of who said what to whom in the last minutes of her children's lives. Yet despite the grievous loss, there is faith and hope; the mother has found her children in the orphaned Jayanti, Minati and Rashbehari, and a new family is born from the detritus.

The film is structured in three parts, each reflecting a facet of reconstruction. The first narrates the immediate collective struggle to rebuild homes, clear the fields of saline deposit, build embankments to prevent ingress of salt water from the sea and resume agricultural work. The second part presents the *Sneh Abhiyan* – the struggle to heal the mind. This is the story of the Renubalas, Jayantis and Minatis, mending traumatised minds and reconstructing families from fragments of decimated households. The third part traces the beginning of the protracted struggle of putting together a new and changed community based on 'participatory democracy' and 'community empowerment'.

After the debris had settled and the losses were tallied, survivors formed village reconstruction committees to regulate the distribution of relief under the food for work scheme. In the documentary, we meet a villager whose betel vine has been planted anew by collective effort and another who has rebuilt her house in the traditional model. The narrator, Rashmi, talks with one at work building a village road,

and accounts of the reconstruction tasks help the film to maintain a symbiotic relationship between disaster and renewal, life and death.

The democratic aspirations of the villagers even in this earliest phase of rebuilding, though inchoate and halting, are brought into focus. The reconstruction committees emerge spontaneously and are remarkable for their large female membership. At a community meeting in progress, villagers are shown giving voice to their plans for a new life and struggling with their fresh burdens. "Shall we build a road or try to get electricity?" the assembled survivors ponder. "We have to list who will help us?" "Perhaps, the company people [the NGOs working there]". "Forget it, first plant the deep-rooted *keya* trees. We were saved by clinging to them".

Later, at a village meeting for a social audit of the ongoing food for work programme, villagers voice their other concerns. Obviously, the democratic experiment has its hiccups. There are allegations of misappropriation and misallocation of funds, followed by some justifications. The democratic ethos also finds support amidst a performance of the *Kalajatha*, a ceremony that has villagers participating until deep into the night. Superstition and unquestioning faith, the enemies of the democratic experiment, are warned away with midnight chants offering a distinctly Oriya form of people's power:

*Jago, jago, jago dalito,*
*Jago, jago, jago abohelito.*

Wake up the oppressed,
Wake up the deprived

*Shoshon bhitore banchibo na,*
*Shoshon bhitore na moribo.*

We will not live with exploitation,
We will not die of exploitation

The process of dealing with grief, one of the major themes of *Batya Porey Alodon*, is accomplished in


Post-cyclone people's power: Oriya women at a community meeting.

several ways. At a *Mamta gruha* (abode of affection), orphaned children act out their sorrow for an audience of widows. Volunteers offer another kind of therapy, with Oriya women arriving from all over to assist the traumatised of the Ersama-Balikuda block. At a meeting of a women's micro-credit group, one can glimpse increasing awareness of socio-economic problems. There is a knowledgeable debate about the proper rates of interest and an interest in extending the activities of the group. With assistance from BGVS, villagers hold meetings to plan their futures, and another indoctrination of sorts takes place. "Why do government efforts to rebuild fail?" the BGVS volunteer asks. "They are unaware of local needs". "Why do you have to plan the reconstruction of your village?" "Because it is our lives. We are the toilers". The answers come pat. But is there irony lurking in the answers? What is the difference between Action Aid and BGVS and government agencies? The answer has to be provided by the volunteer herself. "Because we are working for people's planning."

The last sequence is a meeting of the vanguard. 'TJ', a BGVS leader from Kerala, is conducting a class for volunteers. While discussing resource mapping, Rashmi asks a question of TJ. People's planning is

just not a technical exercise; it requires social mobilisation. It has been successful in Kerala where there is a strong peasant organisation, but Orissa has no recent history of peasant mobilisation. So what purpose can resource mapping serve? TJ's answer is that resource mapping itself can be an instrument of social mobilisation, allowing villagers to see, graphically, ownership patterns. This heightened awareness, so it goes, will itself act as a catalyst for social mobilisation.

*Batya Porey Alodon* is a fascinating tale of struggle to rebuild a lost community, only more democratically. The theme of rejuvenation comes through sharply in the film, from the many interviews, reconstruction committee and volunteers meetings and the telling visuals, which show the hope and faith of ordinary people. Renubala, after adopting Jayanti, considers a wedding match for the girl who is now her oldest daughter. She later turns her attention to Minati's desire to learn tailoring. Characters discuss everyday concerns and keep their attention focused on what is before them. Chowdhury's achievement comes through in these scenes of masterly braiding despair and hope. They show that when all is said and done, there remains a life after the storm.                    Δ

# Documenting differences

## A new book examines the sociology behind communal riots in India, drawing attention to some startling differences – between cities, not people.

Every time major Hindu-Muslim riots like Ayodhya 1992 or Gujarat 2002 take place, they are accompanied, in liberal circles, by a sinking disillusionment with the idea of Indian democracy's capacity to keep the world's most diverse society together. Riots are no doubt not the only infirmity of Indian democracy. But the frequency with which they occur in India, and the magnitude of destruction they wreak, as much in human and material terms as in the long-term damage to the social fabric, call for some kind of an explanatory framework. Since Hindu-Muslim violence is one of the enduring legacies of the public sphere in India, 50 years of recurrent riots have provided scholars the stage to examine the phenomenon in some depth, and to detect possible historical and sociological patterns, if any. Few have chosen to examine the problem with the required diligence, though that has not come in the way of a superfluity of general theories that come nowhere near an intelligible broad spectrum understanding. This is what Ashutosh Varshney now undertakes in his book *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*.

Varshney argues that the various existing perspectives of Hindu-Muslim violence are deficient on two counts. The first is that they fail to distinguish between ethnic conflict and ethnic violence. Wherever there is Hindu-Muslim animosity, it does not follow that a riot is waiting to happen. And second, these theories generalise in excess, as a result of which they are unable to explain differentials across the country. Why is it that some places manage to remain peaceful while others are engulfed in hideous communal violence on the slightest provocation? Why is it that 96 percent of the communal violence takes place in cities, while only four percent happens in villages? How are these variations to be explained?

Research strategies so far have focused on "uncovering commonalities" in cases of violence. But an obsession with the commonalities must by definition exclude the differences. If, for example, two cities in a state regularly witness riots because the state government encourages them, why is it that a third city in the same state manages to remain peaceful? Communal



### Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India
Ashutosh Varshney
Oxford University Press, 2002
Price: INR 495
Pages: 382

### reviewed by **Shivam Vij**

violence tends to be concentrated in pockets. The whole country does not erupt all at once and national politics only provides the broad context for violence. To grasp the differences and understand the variations in communal strife Varshney found it important to study communal peace as well.

A thorough survey of Hindu-Muslim violence between 1950 and 1995 led him to identify Bombay, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Meerut, Aligarh, Baroda, Delhi and Calcutta as the most riot-prone of India's cities. These eight cities alone account for 45.5 percent of deaths in Hindu-Muslim violence, although they represent a mere 5 percent of the country's population. His next step was to select six cities – three from the list of the most riot-prone and three peaceful cities – and study them in pairs, namely Aligarh and Calicut (Kozhikode), Lucknow and Hyderabad, Ahmedabad and Surat. The cities in each pair have roughly the same Hindu-Muslim demographic ratios, besides sharing other similarities.

The study of these cities led Varshney to the conclusion that there is a direct link between civic life and ethnic violence. The more closely Hindus and Muslims in a city are integrated, the less chances there are of violent clashes between them. This idea is simple and, perhaps for that reason, convincing: sustained interaction diminishes hatred and distrust. Further, "If the electorate is inter-ethnically engaged, the politicians maybe unwilling or unable to polarize". Not only are the state and the police compelled to behave responsibly, their chances of success in arresting violence are increased because of the co-operation they get from citizens in an ethnically integrated city. In Varshney's view, pre-existing local networks of civic engagement between the two communities, and not state action, is the biggest guarantor of communal peace.

### Associational living
Civic integration has two forms: routine, everyday integration and associational forms of integration. Everyday integration promotes communication between members of the two communities and makes neighbourhood-level peace possible. Temporary peace committees are formed in times of tension to police neighbourhoods, counteract rumours and provide information to the local administration. The second form, associational engage-

ment, is more robust and durable. Organisations such as trade unions, associations of businessmen, traders, teachers, doctors, lawyers and cadre-based political parties (apart from communal ones), serve the social, cultural and economic needs of the two communities and solidly express the need for communal peace. Everyday interaction is enough to keep peace in the villages because of their small size, but associational forms of engagement become necessary for cities. Associational civic life in India was stimulated mainly in the 1920s by the Gandhian strategies of mass mobilisation.

The bulk of Varshney's book (chapters 5 through 11) is taken up by the empirical and theoretical study of the three pairs of cities, studied not in isolation but contrast.

The "master narrative" of politics in Kerala has been Hindu caste injustices rather than communal oppression, making it easier to forge Hindu-Muslim links. Despite the Mappilla Rebellion of the 1920s in the Malabar area of the Madras Presidency, in which Muslim tenants of Hindu landlords revolted against oppressive tenancy conditions, Calicut, the main city of the region, has maintained an impressive record of communal peace. Hindu nationalists have at various points tried to polarise Calicut along Hindu-Muslim lines but failed. Calicut is remarkably integrated, ensuring that electoral politics remains free of divisive communal issues. On the other hand, to the north, the west Uttar Pradesh town of Aligarh has minimal Hindu-Muslim civic engagement. The Aligarh Muslim University has traditionally been a Muslim bastion and has a past association with the Pakistan movement. To 'counter' the AMU, Aligarh has several educational institutions dominated by Hindus. This segregation is seen even in primary and secondary schools. Aligarh's trade associations have broken along religious lines and the Congress Party, whose umbrella character brought

together members from different communities, has been gradually falling apart.

Lucknow, unlike Aligarh, has held its peace. This is because the master narrative here has been the Shia-Sunni conflict, which is internal to Islam, and further, the local *chikan* and *zardozi* industries ensure that Hindu traders are locked in a relation of interdependence with masses of Muslim workers. Though electorally Lucknow has been a stronghold of Hindu nationalism, the civic pattern has ensured communal peace. On the other hand, Hyderabad's Hindus and Muslims have not been drawn together partly because the Nizam, who governed the Telengana region of Andhra before its post-independence integration into the Indian union, prevented the Congress Party from mobilising on an inclusive, cross-communal basis. The Nizam had banned all intercommunal organisations, which came in the way of organised interaction between the masses of the two communities. The elites of both Lucknow and Hyderabad are socially integrated in many ways, but in Lucknow it is because of mass interaction that communal violence does not occur.

In Varshney's analysis, these are the reasons that Aligarh and Hyderabad have experienced frequent bloody riots, though Calicut and Lucknow have remained peaceful even during the partition of British India in 1947 and the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. This is not to say that Hindus and Muslims in the latter two cities live in perfect harmony; indeed, it is significant that Varshney makes a distinction between ethnic 'conflict' and 'violence'. Conflict is bound to be present in an ethnically plural society, though violence need not follow in its wake.

The study of Ahmedabad and Surat presents some interesting differences. These are cities which remained peaceful for a long time because of Mahatma Gandhi's influence, but exploded because of the decline of civic institutions.

Ahmedabad erupted in 1969, Surat in 1992. Varshney successfully demonstrates how "institutional peace systems" were politically constructed in the 1920s and how their decline directly led to communal violence. The greatest loss, perhaps, was when the cadre-based Congress, which became aligned with the state, ceased to function as a social institution. In Surat, it is only the shantytowns that are highly riot-prone; business links save old Surat. The arguments about a link between ethnic conflict and civic life are convincing.

Bombay, for many, represents a curious and seeming paradox. Until the riots of 1993, Bombay was believed to be very modern and cosmopolitan. So why did the 1993 riots take place? Varshney argues (page 106) that the perception of Bombay not being riot-prone before 1993 "is simply not true". This needs to be elaborated further, if only because Bombay's conversion to Mumbai is still a matter of great interest.

Although the incredible amount of empirical data collected over 10 years of painstaking research make his arguments all too convincing, there is nevertheless the occasional unease while reading *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, that Varshney underestimates the role of the state. In the preface to the Indian edition of the book, Varshney explains how the Gujarat riots this year confirmed his findings and asks, "Even if Narendra Modi were to fall tomorrow, can we be sure that the next government would do any better?" There are many who would disagree with Varshney. A non-BJP government very likely would have a dealt with the situation differently.

But this apart, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* is a remarkable achievement. Varshney's contribution to the study of Hindu-Muslim relations is that it has shifted the focus from the state to civil society. His model needs to be paid greater heed by policymakers not just in India but wherever two communities are in conflict with one another. ◊

**Parties and Party Politics in India**
edited by Zoya Hasan
OUP, New Delhi, 2002
pp xvi+566
ISBN 0 19 565596 6
Price: INR 750

This work looks at the origins, evolution and transformation of party politics in India by focusing on important parties and their organisation and focus since Independence. The book is divided into five parts: the dominance and decline of the Congress party; the rise of Hindu nationalism in party politics; the Left; alternatives such as the Janata Party/Dal experiment and the Bahujan Samaj Party; and how the party system has evolved over time. The list of writers is an impressive one, with both Indian and Western scholars contributing. The Annotated Bibliography at the end of the book should prove especially useful to students of this subject.

**Space, Territory and the State: New Readings in International Politics**
edited by Ranabir Samaddar
Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2002
pp xvi+263
ISBN 81 250 2209 0
Price: INR 450

The end of the Cold War and the removal of the compulsion for historians and social scientists to look beyond prescribed worldviews also led to the articulation of perceptions that had earlier been subsumed under similar constraints. This collection of essays is one such attempt to address the neglected issues of space, borders and statelessness in international politics as seen from the South. Beginning with a discussion that Asia can possibly have its own geopolitical identity, the book moves on to the problem posed by borders. Still, there is no ambiguity in its assertion that there is no chasm that cannot be bridged through dialogue – even the one between India and Pakistan.

**Many Tongues, One People**
by Arjun Guneratne
Cornell University Press
Ithaca and London, 2002
pp xvii+236
ISBN 0 8014 8728 5
Price: GBP 12.95

The Tharu of the Nepal Tarai have been historically far removed from the state as well as from one another. This diffusion has been so great, Guneratne argues, that the various groups who fall under the generic socio-cultural group called the Tharu would not have been able to relate to one another until quite recently. The book looks at how this marginalised group is seeking out an identity in a country whose multi-ethnicity is increasingly defining its national character. The writer shows that the Tharu identity is developing in opposition to the activities of a modernising, centralising state and through interaction with other ethnic groups that have immigrated to their home region – the Nepal Tarai.
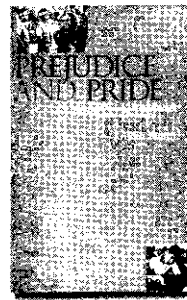
**Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan**
by Krishna Kumar
Viking, New Delhi, 2001
pp xii+274
ISBN 0 67 004913 1
Price: INR 395

This is the first-ever exhaustive analysis of what children in India and Pakistan are taught at school, where they often receive demonised accounts of each other. The author draws upon textbooks used in classrooms in each country to examine major historical incidents and figures common to both – the 1857 rebellion, Partition, Gandhi, Jinnah, and so on – to conclude how differently they are viewed on either side of the Radcliffe Line. The book ends with a section that analyses writings by Indian and Pakistani schoolchildren on the subject of partition and discovers that there is "an impressive range of views among both groups of essays, and not the uniform, stock responses that Indian and Pakistani systems of education train children to articulate".
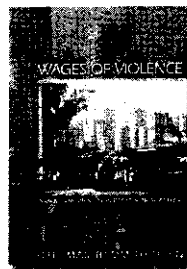
**Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay**
by Thomas Blom Hansen
Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001
pp vii+269
ISBN 0 691 08840 3
Price not recommended

The rechristening of Bombay as Mumbai marked the end of a long process of transformation during which India's most cosmopolitan and modern metropolis was converted into an urban jungle beset with ethnic conflict and communal nationalism. A movement that began in the 1960s led by the virulently anti-Maratha/Muslim/Christian (in that order) Shiv Sena undermined the democratic structure of the city and ushered in 'plebeian' politics. Hansen's argument is that the Sena's success must be seen against the backdrop of a general 'vernacularisation' of politics in India and its violent possibilities. The author seeks to show that the xenophobia so apparent in Bombay is a result of its history of contested identities. He also provides insights into the city's Muslim communities and how the authorities understand and control its ethno-religious subcultures. ᐅ

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

# Chicken's Neck

A h, Chicken's Neck! What an incredible spot on the South Asian map this is. With nothing to show for it but the lines drawn on the map after 1947, which separate this country from that and the other, the narrow strip is like the mouth of the tube of toothpaste that is India, squeezed out through this orifice, to exude into the eight states of the Indian Northeast.

At the very southeastern tip of Nepal is the town of Bhadrapur. Cross the border by wading through the shallow waters of the Mechi river, which drains the southern watershed of the Kanchenjunga, and at the village on the Indian side, catch the *chhoti* line (one of the few metre gauges still operational in India) which hugs the Nepal border all the way west to the Nizam's Lucknow. Or forego that option on this occasion and turn your attention southeast, where, barely two-dozen kilometres away, it is Bangladesh – Rangpur district of "North Bengal".

Ecologically, whether it is Nepal, Bangladesh or India, it is all the same floodplain. Paddies and banana groves, and the aromatic stench of drying hemp, which villagers have peeled from jute stalks that have been steeped in stagnant water. Clumps of dwellings all raised above the flood line because of centuries of rebuilding. More or less, even the same level of poverty in the villages in all three countries and flashy display of wealth of the mofussil trading classes in the cacophonous bazaar towns, whether Siliguri or Rangpur.

All the goods and services that mainland India provides the Northeast and all the natural resources the latter has to export to the former, pass through the Chicken's Neck. And so, National Highway No 31 has no choice but to make it to this northern tip of West Bengal before heading down the Siliguri bypass into lower Assam. The chhoti line and the broad gauge all funnel their way through this sliver of land, ferrying passengers, goods and – a most significant category for the Northeast – soldiers.

The railway station of New Jalpaiguri can easily qualify as the ground zero of the Chicken's Neck. Nothing could be of more strategic importance for the Indian state given the multiple insurgencies in the Northeast, from Kamtapur right there in Indian 'north Bengal' to the tender spot just east of where the Bodos and the ULFA are agitating. To add to that are the complications offered by the proximity of the Tibet border (just a question of hopping over, via Sikkim into the Chumbi Valley and on to Lhasa), being hemmed in by two reasonably unstable neighbours – Bangladesh and Nepal, and having Bhutan no more than a stone's throw away.

Kilometre after kilometre at the Chicken's Neck, you drive by towering pylons past vast lengths of high-tension lines that transfer energy from the Northeast to the mainland. Underneath, runs the pipeline, which starts in Assam's oilfields and ends at the refinery in Bihar's Barauni. The reservoir on the Mahananda sends a massive canal southeastward into West Bengal through this same narrow stretch of Indian territory. Only the civilian air corridor does not follow the strictures, air agreements allowing the Indian airlines to overfly Bangladeshi territory to connect with cities such as Guwahati, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Dimapur, Agartala and Imphal.

In terms of places of interest, the Chicken's Neck is home to Naxalbari, whence Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal called on the peasantry of India to rise against the bourgeoisie in the 1960s. Other than some disconsolate statuary by the roadside, there is little enthusiasm, let alone revolutionary fervour, visible here in the listless villages that border the air force base at Bagdogra. The energy of the 'Naxals' has, however, been picked up today by comrades in Bihar, the Deccan and the Nepali hills. Increasingly, you have to be a "remote area" if you want to keep the fire burning, and the Chicken's Neck, where every third vehicle on the highway appears to be military or police, is hardly the place for it.

I started by saying that the Chicken's Neck had nothing to show for itself. Well, clearly, it has a lot to show for itself.

*Kanak Dixit*

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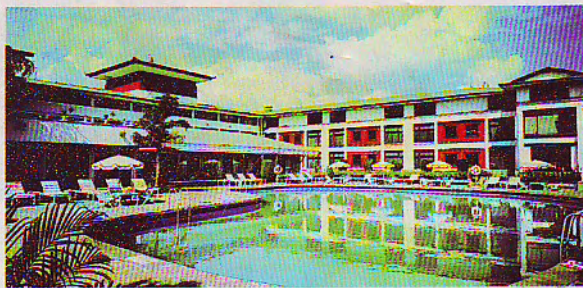
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