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HIMAL

SOUTH ASIAN



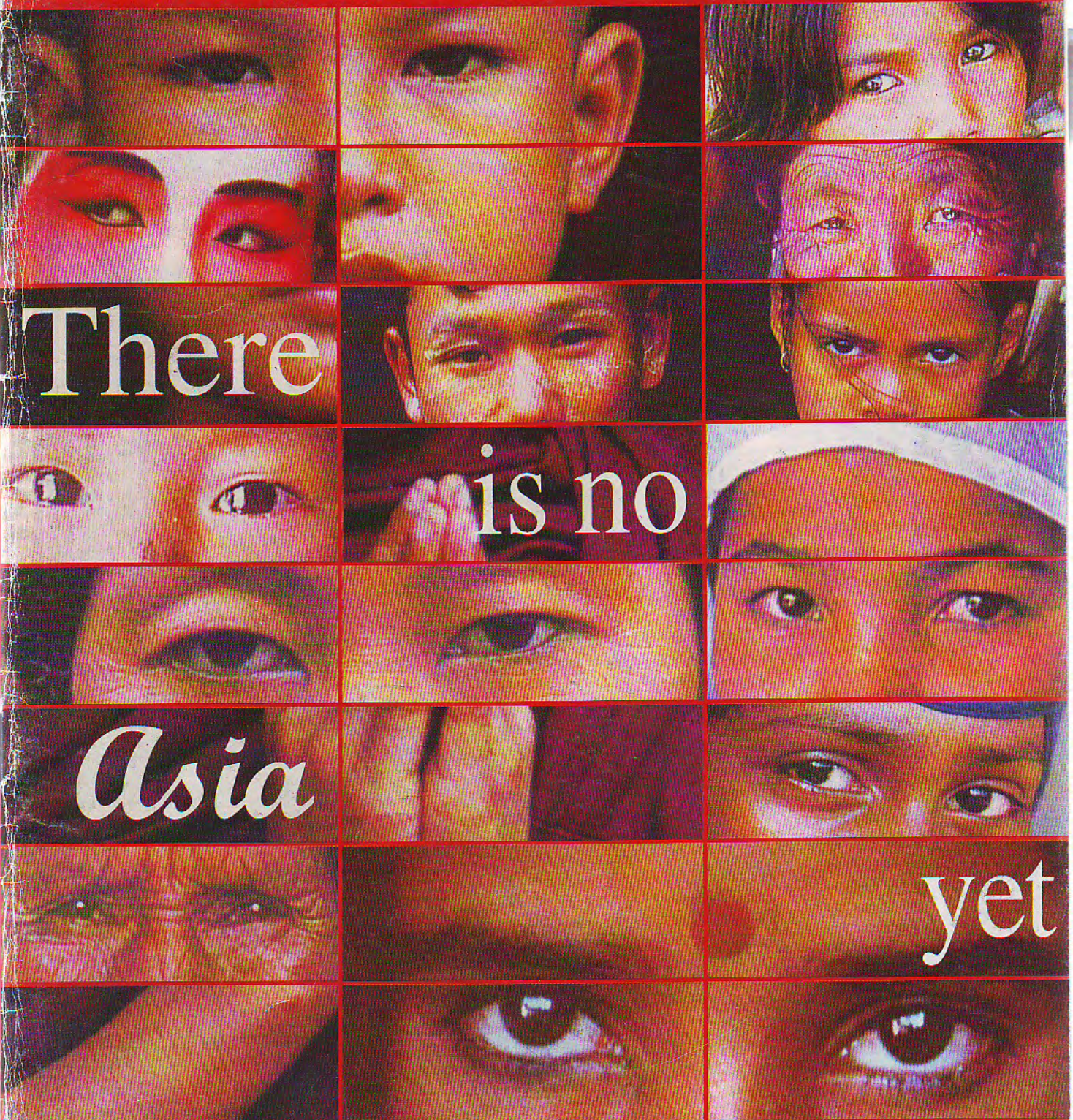
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In search of Solidarity

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Monarchy matches the military

I MUST compliment CK Lal for his piece comparing the role of monarchy in Nepal with the military rulers in Pakistan (*Himal* December 2002). I have myself been underlining this comparison in many seminars and conferences, invoking strong criticism and comments from my Nepali friends. This comparison takes us logically to certain conclusions.

In Pakistan, the centrality of the army in the political structure has not allowed democratic institutions to grow and evolve in their natural course. In some critical areas of national policy, such as Islamabad's nuclear and India policy, the army has not allowed the civilian authorities and political leaders to have any say, even when they were in power. Similarly in Nepal, the monarchy has not allowed democratic institutions to grow and evolve on their own.

While more than 30 years of misgovernance by the Panchayat regime under the direct guidance of the royal palace is forgotten, 12 years of messy democratic politics is held to be solely responsible for the pains of the Nepalis and the rise of the Maoists. It is time that the ways of the monarchy are now corrected.

The constitutional monarchy in the Nepali context is an inherently incompatible arrangement. While no one approves the violence, mayhem and destruction unleashed by the Maoists in their search for power, no one can term their demand for a constituent assembly as irrational or unjustified. No wonder, mainstream political parties such as the Nepali Congress and the United Marxist Leninist have also now started gravitating towards this position.

Nepalis have to be educated and enlightened regarding the need to evolve truly democratic institutions in Nepal and also to redefine their developmental interests vis-a-vis India, and in both these areas the one real obstacle is posed by the political managers in the palace.

SD Muni
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi

"Imaginative but baseless"

CK LAL'S highly imaginative but baseless assertions in his article, 'The oligarchs of Islamabad and Kathmandu' (*Himal* December 2002) reflect badly on his profession and his country.

While I do not want to comment on the internal af-

fairs of Nepal, I would certainly draw attention to the exaggerated and inaccurate references to Pakistan. The writer obviously does not appreciate, or perhaps deliberately chooses to ignore, the political realities of Pakistan.

Since its independence, Pakistan has confronted multiple challenges – both internal and external. Admittedly, our experience with democracy has been mixed, but it has to be recognised that the people of Pakistan, despite setbacks, have always aspired to and succeeded in upholding democracy. In times of crisis, the Pakistani bureaucracy and the armed forces have been forced to play their role to safeguard national interests and put the country back on the path of democratic progress. This they have done with the support of the Pakistani people.

It would be instructive for Mr Lal to revisit the circumstances in which President General Pervez Musharraf was compelled to assume power with, it should be noted, the popular support of the people. In his brief tenure he has achieved remarkable successes, including the revival of the economy, restoring law and order, ensuring freedom of the press, devolution of power to the people through local bodies and elections to the national and provincial assemblies which mark the restoration of democracy in the country.

Mr Lal is welcome to quibble about details, but no one can overlook the fact that the president has acted with popular support and in accordance with the people's will. Surely the experience of one country or system is different from that of another and for that reason there is no universal yardstick to judge Pakistan.

Kamal Ahmed
First Secretary
Embassy of Pakistan, Kathmandu

Third way to Africa

THOMAS BLOM Hansen writes, "Indians came to South Africa in two ways" ('Diasporic dispositions', *Himal* December 2002). There is a third, and historically, it was the first. Many hundreds, if not thousands, of Indian slaves were brought to South Africa in the late 17th and early 18th century. They were mainly from Bengal, the Coromandel coast and Kerala, and were one of the constituents of the Cape's coloured population.

For more information, look at www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/solidarity/indiasa3.html

Mina Kumar
via email

SRI LANKA

TRANSMITTING CONTROVERSY

THE SRI Lankan debate on the peace process is a pessimistic one, opined Professor Johan Galtung in mid December at a seminar on peace journalism organised by the Sarvodaya Movement in association with the National Peace Council and the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections. Galtung, a world-renowned authority on conflict resolution and a pioneer in formulating peace concepts, came to Sri Lanka at the invitation of the Sarvodaya leader, Dr AT Ariyaratne, and his speech was at least partially an appeal to his old friend and civil society more generally. Speaking at a gathering of journalists, Galtung urged his audience to cultivate a spirit of optimism and take it to the country at-large.



Johan Galtung

There are pessimistic and optimistic ways of looking at matters. Religious teachings have often been a source of optimism for human beings, whatever may be their rational or irrational basis. They provide hope that the future can be positive even when the present is negative, thereby inducing people to work hard for a better tomorrow. While finding fault with the present peace process on many grounds, including the issue of the Voice of Tigers radio transmitters, Galtung urged optimism in working through the problems and finding solutions to them.

In his address, Galtung drew a distinction between war and peace journalism. In war journalism, which is the kind practised by most journalists covering conflict situations worldwide, there are two important questions: who did it, and who is winning and losing? War journalism tends to focus on what is negative and what causes hatred. As a counterpoint, Galtung discussed peace journalism, which is based on two different questions: what is this problem about, and how can it best be resolved? Good journalistic practice, he said, combines both types of reporting.

Considerable journalistic energy has been expended in recent weeks over the shipment of radio equipment to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Wann

by the Norwegian embassy in Colombo. The discovery of the shipment, and the appearance of Norwegian partisanship colouring it, led to calls for the expulsion of the Norwegian ambassador by extremist Sinhala parties. Premier Wickremesinghe has also been the subject of opposition party anger, which has included allegations of treason. Despite being a Norwegian himself, Galtung was very critical of the Norwegian embassy's role in the radio transmitter affair.

No clarification

Undoubtedly, it would be a great improvement if the LTTE engaged in a dialogue with Sinhala through radio waves rather than in military assaults of the kind that have caused large-scale loss of life affecting families in both the north and south. Strengthening the LTTE's radio transmission capabilities at this time would help it in political, not military, work. This would help the LTTE to strengthen itself politically at a time when it is expected to make the difficult transition from a military organisation to a political one.

From the viewpoint of peace journalism, the controversy over the radio equipment is an opportunity to understand the complex set of issues inherent in the peace process. The circumstances under which the Norwegians came to be involved in the import of the radio transmitters and their clearance past customs authorities have not yet been clarified by either the Sri Lankan government or the Norwegian embassy. This needs to be done without further delay – people have a right to know what has actually happened. Until such time, speculation can be expected to take the place of facts.

Some background information, however, is available at this time. Even before signing the ceasefire agreement and especially since, the LTTE has been trying to get its point of view across to Sinhala. The LTTE feels that at present only part of its message reaches the Sinhala public, and even that is filtered through the perception of Sinhala-owned media. In recent months, the LTTE has made an attempt to address this problem by publishing a monthly newspaper in Sinhala called *Dedunna* (rainbow).

Another potential LTTE strategy to reach the Sinhala people was the use of the radio waves. A few months ago, there was some informal discussion about the possibility of the LTTE getting time on SLBC state radio to

Even before the ceasefire agreement, the LTTE was trying to get its point of view across to Sinhala

broadcast its message to the whole of Sri Lanka. Obviously, these broadcasts would have been within the framework of the ceasefire agreement and the larger peace process. Southern-based development NGOs, ruling party officials and media personnel with government links participated in these preliminary discussions.

Providing the LTTE with a programme on the SLBC channel would have enabled it to reach a much larger audience than setting up its own radio channel to broadcast to Sinhala. A radio programme on SLBC would have permitted interaction with Sinhala audiences through a question-and-answer format in which Sinhala listeners could have voiced their concerns to the LTTE and received responses. The LTTE's current effort to publish a Sinhala newspaper has not been very successful, given that it reaches very few people. A similar investment in an advertising supplement in a large circulation Sinhala newspaper would garner a much larger readership.

At a subsequent stage in the discussions, it is likely that higher-level government contacts were made. It is probably at this later stage that the prospect of providing the LTTE with radio transmitters capable of reaching beyond Wannai was broached. In its election manifesto, the ruling party promised to establish an interim administration headed by the LTTE in the north and east, which is similar to what its predecessor in office, the People's Alliance (PA), was contemplating before losing power in 2001. The ultimate aim of both parties has been to transform the LTTE into a political organisation with Norwegian facilitation.

Bad timing

However, there is valid cause for concern over the undemocratic way in which the government and the Norwegian embassy are assisting the LTTE's bid to strengthen itself politically. The LTTE is currently making a major effort to suppress the political activities of its Tamil rivals in the north and east. The LTTE-backed campaigns of intimidation against the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), and its insistence that the EPDP should vacate the north and east, cannot be justified by the criteria of democracy and justice that the peace process is meant to restore. Further, the murder, torture and disappearance of Tamil political activists in the north and east are reprehensible and should be stopped

immediately.

One of the opposition's main charges against the peace process is that it is based on a one-sided compromise and appeasement in which the LTTE prevails at the cost of the government. The PA, now in opposition, has called for the government to engage in harder bargaining with the LTTE. Certainly, where it concerns human rights, and the freedom to live without fear of being picked up and disappearing, there can be no compromise. It is clear that the present mechanism is inadequate in this respect. A human rights monitoring mechanism needs to be put in place that can name, shame and put a stop to such abuses.

A further problem concerns the involvement of the Norwegian embassy in securing the radio transmitters for the LTTE. As the facilitator, it is important that the Norwegians maintain an image of neutrality in the eyes of the general public. Even if the Norwegians were requested by the Sri Lankan government to facilitate the provision of the radio transmitters, the mere fact of such assistance without an explanation damages their image of neutrality in the eyes of the people.

Conflict resolution theorists have developed a concept of 'insider partial' mediation. This concept seeks to explain situations where a third party mediator is partial to the parties whose conflict it is trying to resolve, even at the expense of others, such as the EPDP and other Tamil parties, who are outside that process. In this instance, however, there is a danger that the general public will see the Norwegians as having acted in a way that is partial only to the LTTE, which is not the complete picture.

The Norwegian government is a major source of developmental and technical assistance to Sri Lanka, regardless of whether the island is headed by the United National Party or the PA. It is not as if it is helping only the LTTE. Both the government and the LTTE have repeatedly expressed their gratitude for the Norwegian role in bringing about the ceasefire and taking the peace process forward. But there are other parties that need to be brought on board, the most important of which being the general public. △

—Jehan Perera

Where it concerns human rights, the freedom to live without fear of being picked up and disappearing, there can be no compromise

The Un-Continent of Asia

A ludicrously designated set of contiguous regions that involuntarily, almost distractedly, constitutes a nebulous landmass – there you have it, Asia. Perhaps the onslaught of the globalising West will impart the impetus for giving meaning to the idea of Asia.

by *S Patra*

Asia is to all appearances just a sloppy state of mind. As a term it lacks a constant connotation. As the possible provenance of a composite, supranational identity it is and has been an abject failure. As an ill-advised cultural metaphor invented by uncomprehending Europeans, it betrays too many contradictions to have any consistent value. As a geographical designation it is no more than a lexical dustbin for the untidy residuum of an imprecise scheme of continental classification.

Asia is altogether too casual about itself. The regions into which it is currently divided do not aggregate into a continental totality. Those who have assembled this disembodied whole through the designation of its parts – the merchant-warriors of the colonial enterprise and

merchant-academics of more recent vintage – have been singularly thoughtless in their nomenclatures.

There is a distressing lack of rigour about Asia's current regional denominations. The relational coordinates are hyper-absurd. From a strictly European point of view, the Middle East makes sense only on the condition that there is a Near East. Unfortunately for the Middle East, the western end of the Near East turned out to be so near that it is busy trying to get into the European Union. As for the Far East, it is considerably nearer east than Alaska or the Siberian outposts.

When the cardinal coordinates are invoked, the outcome is a caricature. There is a vast stretch of the Pontic and Caspian steppe that is called Central Asia, but this appellation lacks its justifying complement, namely

West or Asia?

TWO MILLENNIA of history have clearly played havoc with both the idea of a rigorously defined continent and the possibility of sustaining some of its geopolitical categories in any meaningful sense. West Asia, inclusive of 'Asia Minor' and the larger Asian 'Near East' exemplifies this best. It is a moot point whether there is a distinctive 'West Asian' identity common to the diverse sub-areas of this region which can be annexed to a larger Asian one.

The cultural cross-fertilisations of the region are not surprising considering that the earliest civilisations to emerge in West Asia grew out of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the second of which lies in northeast Africa. These two centres of power, which over two millennia of periodic conflict with each other for regional dominance, strongly shaped the social and cultural contours of the areas closest to them. As the Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations went into gradual decline in the mid-first millennium BCE, new powers, the most important of which were Achaemenid Persia and Greece, made inroads into West Asia and established empires.

Central Asian influences continued to flow into the region as the Parthians replaced the post-Alexandrine Selucids, in an empire that stretched all the way to Taxila, while the Tocharian nomads established the Kushan empire that extended from northwest India to the edge of the Black Sea. The Roman conquest of West

Asia from the first century BCE briefly displaced Greek influence along the eastern Mediterranean coast, while further to the east, the rise of the Sasanians in the fourth century CE revived Persian influence in the Graeco-Asian interior. However, about the same time the Roman empire gradually separated into two halves, and by the fifth century the collapse of the western part shifted the imperial centre of gravity to the Byzantine or eastern Roman empire, which increasingly became less Roman and more Greek.

The Byzantine influence spread over the eastern Mediterranean region, including its Greek orthodox Christianity, which was distinct from the Roman variant. Christianity, which grew out of Roman Palestine, had become the dominant religion of West Asia within a few centuries of its appearance in the first century CE and gained numerous adherents in parts of Asia, including India's southwest coast, before travelling to western Europe and northern and eastern Africa. The tradition of Asia re-importing its own products from the West evidently began with the arrival of Byzantine Christianity.

In the course of West Asian history, there were moments when 'Asia' could potentially have been realised. The rise of Islam in the seventh century was one such moment. Unlike Christianity, which increasingly drifted westward before returning east in later centuries as missionary cargo, after having been reverse engineered

North Asia. Central Asia is central in relation to nothing in particular. The lands immediately adjacent, to the east of the steppe, do not fall within Central Asia. Instead they are called Mongolia and China. The land to the west, bordering the Caspian Sea, is Europe. There is also a South Asia whose southern tip is a long way north of the southern edge of the continent taken as a whole.

The net result is a ludicrously designated set of contiguous regions which involuntarily, almost distractingly, constitutes a nebulous landmass without a west and a north, which lies almost entirely north of the equator but is deemed to belong economically to the southern hemisphere and culturally to the eastern hemisphere. Clearly, in a world that is only physically round, but culturally and economically flat, 'Asia' is a 'continent' with which a great many liberties can be taken.

There are many logical and historical factors that violate the notion of a separate Asia. Logically, the differentiation of comparables can only be on the basis of commensurable differentia, that is, the separate constituents of a class must be distinguishable from each other by specific, non-transferrable and non-overlapping characteristics.

Therefore, if a certitude called Asia is postulated, it should be possible to predicate of it attributes of so singular and uniformly prevalent an order as to purposively distinguish it from other equally coherent, con-

in Europe in the intervening period, Islam, by contrast, gave rise to an Arab-led religio-political empire that, at its height, stretched from Central Asia to Sindh to Spain, making inroads as far north as France, Sicily and Italy.

Within a few centuries, however, the Islamic religious-secular authority, the caliphate, lost control of most regions beyond West Asia, while within the region a fierce schism had emerged between the Persian Shias and orthodox Arab and Turkic Sunnis. Following the collapse of the Arab imperium, beginning in the 10th century and accelerating in succeeding years, Turkic-speaking Central Asians migrated to, settled in and periodically ruled over portions of present-day Turkey, Iraq and Iran. In the Levant, to the south of Turkey, however, the external influences of Egyptian power and European crusaders left their mark on cultural and social developments.

As West Asia approached the modern era, the two most important powers were the Safavid empire of Persia and the Ottoman Turks who had replaced the Byzantine empire in the eastern Mediterranean. But as these entities gradually weakened in power, the region came increasingly within the Western sphere of influence. Though the Persian empire survived the European colonial era intact, though reduced in size, the Ottoman empire's control over West Asia dissipated with the emergence of a strong, quasi-independent Egypt in the 19th century and eventually collapsed after the first

tiguous geographical entities. By this token, it will be necessary to furnish constitutive attributes that are not only uniquely specific to Asia, and hence absent from Europe and Africa, but are also uniformly characteristic of the entire landmass. It follows, as a logical corollary, that there cannot be differences within Asia that are of a magnitude that overrides the unifying pan-continental criteria.

In Asia, these logical demands are not met. It is difficult to identify a single principle of Asiatic uniformity, other than those fabricated by European prejudice - notably the idea of a continent populated by wily, inscrutable, lazy, deceitful and barbaric orientals. In a real historical sense Asia's currently designated regions have been fluctuating zones that overlapped culturally and politically, not only with each other, but also with cultural and political zones inside Africa and Europe.

Historically, the different 'regions' of Asia violate the conditions of a rigorously coherent continental definition. The first of these are the so-called Near East and Middle East, which stood at the confluence of the Afro-Eurasian civilisation, in the lap of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, (excluding the Indic religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) and in the mutating cusp of pastoralism and sedentism, in which the organising principle of life struggled between the imperial pomp and nomadic sim-

(continued on page 10)

world war. With the creation of modern Turkey in the early 20th century, Britain and France gained mandates over newly carved out Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, with Britain also enjoying control of the foreign affairs of the Persian gulf emirates through a series of treaties. West Asian states put under colonial rule all gained their independence within a decade of the close of the second world war.

History provides some bases for claims of a West Asian identity and the attachment of that identity to a larger Asia, although both cases are weak. The first could include the traditional role the region played as an overland trade route between the Mediterranean and Arabian seas, which distinguishes West Asia from northeast Africa and areas north and east of Iran. More striking, perhaps, is the region's role as the birthplace and incubator of the world's three dominant monotheistic faiths, and the ongoing geographical importance of West Asia to those three religions. No empire, however, has ever created a political unit composed of an exclusive and complete West Asia. And the region's politics, largely as an outcome of geography, have often been controlled by forces to the north, south and west. In the current configuration of world politics, West Asia belongs almost exclusively to the Western sphere of influence, its connection to Asia being restricted to the employment of blue-collar workers from all corners of the rest of the continent. ▽

The reluctant Asians

CENTRAL ASIA, like West Asia, began life as a fluid zone, with the difference that it also possessed a highly mobile culture, which included the frequent intermingling of people of different physical types and languages. As the times became more modern, life and its history in the region became more rigid. Central Asia from the 19th century wears on its surface a tidy look, being divided into Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. But this neat division conceals wide variations in its culture and particularly its history, and is an outcome of imperial Russian colonisation that started in the 18th century under Catherine.

Prior to that, Central Asia was simultaneously the habitat of nomads and the crucible of empires. For over a millennium, the region was marked by the hectic mobility of pastoral peoples, elastic boundaries, shifting political units, constant wars for territory in the heartland, the formation of great tribal confederacies, and the ethno-linguistic amalgamation of peoples. But the most marked feature of steppe life which impinged on the world outside, and one which remained inexplicable to the surrounding sedentary peoples, was the periodic and seemingly sudden out rush of great bands of nomads from their homelands into neighbouring regions of more settled life.

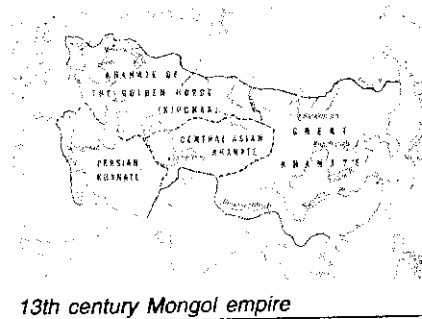
Due to the fragile demographic equilibrium of the steppe, small dislocations in the core areas, arising from conflicts over space, generated great outwards ripples that had far-reaching consequences, as tribes displaced by wars poured out from their territories and attacked the surrounding sedentary empires. These great movements of people may have had the appearance of sudden spontaneous eruptions but were actually often the result of protracted processes of change in the Central Asian interior and the marches between the steppe and the settled world of the Chinese, the Persians and the Graeco-Romans.

Hence the implacable hostility of the sedentary and the imperial to nomadism as a way of life, which carries on as a deep-rooted prejudice well into modern times. These movements of nomadic people have left their mark on the Indo-Gangetic plain, Persia, the Graeco-Asian formations that followed the conquests of Alexander, the Anatolian region, various Chinese dynasties and most notably the western Roman empire and the Byzantine empire. The Kushan empire, which for the first time politically connected the northwestern parts of India with the regions bordering the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, was the creation of the Yueh-chi or the Tocharians after they were defeated by the Scythians in the mesopotamia of the Amu and the Syr Darya.

Likewise, the military collapse of Europe's favourite empire, Rome, began with the declining fortunes of

the Hsiung-nu on the northwestern borderlands of China. The Hsiung-nu confederacy, which included Mongol and Iranian nomads, was the core of the Huns who, in the fifth century CE, moved through Russia into the Danubian plains and disturbed the equilibrium of the Germanic tribal world, which in turn set off the great 'barbarian' movements in Europe that led to the break up of the Western empire of Rome.

Many of the empires surrounding the steppe, in turn, made repeated defensive or offensive forays into Central Asia at various points with varying degrees of success. As a result, till the colonisation by the Russians, the steppe was in a more or less continuously hostile relationship with sedentary civilisations, being either colonised by the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese and Arabs, or in turn raiding them. As a consequence, the region not only received a great many distinct influences from the east, west, south and north but also exported its culture to other regions of the Asian landmass, most notably Turkicising Anatolia and creating external empires, particularly when an internal unity was



imposed on the steppe.

When such a Turko-Mongol unity emerged in the early 13th century under Chingis Khan, the most persistently nomadic region of the world created the largest land empire in history, stretching all the way from China to West Asia on the east-west axis, and extending into Russia in the north. The Mongol foray went as far as Japan, Korea and Java in the east and Austria in the west. The Indian Subcontinent was the only significant region to remain outside the Mongol empire, its defence having been successfully conducted by the Turkic sultanate of Delhi. To make up for this lapse, the Turko-Mongol chieftain, Babur, set up the Mughal empire in India a couple of centuries after the collapse of the Mongol domination of Asia.

The creation of the Mongol empire was only the second, and culturally more eclectic historical instance, after the Arab-Islamic empire, when Asia, momentarily, if a shade incompletely, came into existence. With the collapse of the Mongol empire, Central Asian residues were deposited in some parts of Asia, most notably the stretch from Afghanistan to the Deccan, and parts of northwestern China, while the independence of the homeland itself withered away under the onslaught of Russian imperialism.

Since then, Central Asia's history and its relationship with Asian neighbours have been mediated by Europe, and its resources have lately come under the watchful care of Western global corporations. It is an irony of history that the only region that came close to creating a pan-Asian political formation should be so completely absorbed by Europe that it has since not looked back at its past.

The continent of China

WHILE IN many respects China remained more isolated throughout its lengthy historical development than other parts of Asia, it nonetheless was influenced by and did influence other parts of the continent. The first Chinese dynasty, the Shang, marked China's arrival into the Bronze Age in the mid-second millennium BCE. Given that West Asians had first used bronze 1500 years earlier, some historians argue that its adoption in China grew out of cross-cultural contact. In the following dynasty, the Chou, China entered the Iron Age, and the Chou's short-lived successor, the Ch'in, successfully expanded its influence to most parts of present-day eastern China in the third century BCE.

During the five-century long rule of the Han dynasty, China expanded its perimeters to the Pamir mountains of Central Asia. The rise of the Hsiung-nu in Central Asia proved to be of far greater significance, leading to competition and conflict along China's north-western frontier. Buddhism, which first appeared in the Subcontinent in the sixth century BCE, reached China within five centuries and won converts, as result of which Chinese Buddhists made pilgrimages to India. Buddhist influence continued in a diluted, Sinicised form after Han power collapsed in the early fourth century CE and political authority was divided among three regional competitors.

In the late sixth century, a Chinese leader at the head of a 'barbarian' northern army established the Sui dynasty, though instability provoked by Central Asian Turks led to its quick demise. The succeeding dynasty, the T'ang, also became entangled with its neighbours to the west. Tensions along the western frontier persisted, and in 705, a new threat to stability arrived in the form of Arab missionary-warriors emanating from West Asia. In a 751 battle, China lost control of west Turkestan to the Arabs. Paper made its way out into the rest of the world after this as captured Chinese soldiers spread the technology via West Asia.

In one of its rare moments of adventure, China sent a diplomatic mission and an army to north India in the seventh century to intervene in the succession crisis in the Harshan empire, where the scholar Hsuan Tsang had taken up residence. Christianity and Zoroastrianism, two West Asian exports, enjoyed three centuries of modest success till the ninth century, though Buddhist influence survived. (Christianity reappeared in the 16th century through European missionary activity.)

With the collapse of centralised power in the ninth century, decades of upheaval ensued, with a partial reunification of the country in 960 under the northern Sung dynasty. China's population expanded rapidly under Sung rule to around 100 million by the early 12th century, facilitated by the introduction of early-ripening rice from Southeast Asia. But the Sung dynasty lacked its predecessors' military vigour, and by the mid-12th century, China was divided between the Tungusic-speaking Jurgen tribes of Manchuria, who formed the

Chin dynasty, and the southern Sung empire.

This unsteady balance was unhinged in the early 13th century by the emergence of, quite possibly, the only pan-Asian power in history, the Mongols. The Chin dynasty fell to the Mongols in 1234 with the help of the Sung, who were in turn defeated in 1279. The Mongols established the Yuan dynasty, the first foreign regime to administer the whole of China, and incorporated it into an empire including Central Asia, West Asia and eastern Europe. This period also witnessed the arrival of numerous foreign visitors to China, including Muslims from north Africa and Europeans from as far away as the Adriatic and possibly Scandinavia.

The Chinese chafed under foreign rule, and by 1382, the Ming dynasty completed its usurpation of the Mongols. During the early Ming period, the Mongol threat remained, but the Chinese also ventured out of the 'middle kingdom' by sending naval expeditions to West Asia and the eastern African coast. The Portuguese, however, followed soon after by the Spanish and the Dutch, eclipsed China's naval efforts, and took possession of the lucrative East-West trade. In 1644, after decades of Ming decline, a Manchurian dynasty, the Chi'ing, took control of the country, though Manchurians represented only two percent of the Chinese population.

As in other parts of Asia, Chinese power in the 18th and 19th centuries gradually weakened in the face of Western encroachment, though China did not face outright colonisation. By the end of the 18th century, China's population had reached 300 million, but its administrative structures had remained largely unchanged for two millennia. The British forced the Chi'ing to capitulate on trade issues in 1842, and a series of rebellions, the most serious of which was the Taiping, highlighted the country's collapsing central authority. China suffered an embarrassing defeat by the Japanese in 1895, and Chi'ing rule collapsed in 1911, ushering in a turbulent four decades of political struggle.

Following the death in 1916 of China's first president, Yuan Shih-k'ai, the country witnessed the period of warlordism, as military chiefs carved up their regions of control. Warlordism was brought to an end by Sun Yat-sen's nationalist Kuomintang party and the country was reunified in 1928 under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek. China gained international diplomatic recognition even as the shadow of communist takeover under Mao Tse-tung loomed. Internal opposition, particularly from persecuted communists, grew in the following years, setting the stage for a decisive fight for control of China in the years after the Japanese invasion of the second world war. Mao Tse-tung, drawing on the imported ideas of Marx and Lenin, prevailed over Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, and set out to revitalise Chinese unity and power through the peasant route to revolution that has since given way to the state sponsored capitalist route. ▽

plicity that lay on either side. Today West Asia cannot be detached from the larger preoccupations of the West, particularly its hydrocarbon enthusiasms.

The other region that deviates historically from the rigidities of both regional and continental demarcation is Central Asia, again a zone of Eurasian convergence, whose relatively more rudimentary culture gave rise to empires in Eurasia to the west and north, eastwards in China, southwards in Persia, and south-eastwards in the Indo-Gangetic plains. The first and only time that Asia ever came close to achieving a continental political unity was under one of the khanates of the imperial nomads of Central Asia. Yet, Central Asia was so comprehensively integrated into the Russian empire, and subsequently the Soviet Union, that it was unwilling to disengage from even a collapsing USSR. Central Asian republics voted by overwhelming majorities to stay with the union in the referendum to decide the future of the USSR.

The third region that defies the continent of Asia is the continent of China. Standing at the eastern edge of the Central Asian political formations and the north-eastern edge of the Persian, China partook of some of the artefacts of external history, including Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. But the 'middle kingdom' was also careful to maintain its distance, only occasionally intervening, for its own purposes, in the business of others, and, for the most part, remaining disdainful of the surrounding 'barbarians'. In the process, it insulated itself to a greater degree than its neighbours from the upheavals in the vicinity that intermittently brought about the collapse of other empires, notably the Persian, the Roman, the Arab, the Byzantine, the Central Asian and the Indo-Gangetic. China's modern history has been dominated by a concern for internal stability and, more recently, a search for external markets.

Meanwhile, Japan and South Korea, which participated in the history of the landmass in their own detached but real ways, have practically seceded from Asia over the last century. Japan, in fact typifies the paradox of Asia. Having intellectually stimulated the concept of Asia for the first time, following its military victory over Russia in 1905, it was also the first to launch a modernisation drive that was explicitly based on the idea of escaping Asiatic backwardness.

Southeast Asia to all outward appearances presents the picture of being a self-contained region, largely because of its recent history of economic cooperation and its collective plunge into a globally publicised financial crisis. But the appearance is deceptive. Southeast Asia is unique for having seriously attempted to constitute itself into a region, but the effort has not been entirely successful. And, to the limited extent that a region has been moulded, its orientation is westward economically, and in, a more ambiguous fashion, culturally. Curiously, while the term Asia has more popular currency here than elsewhere, the definition tends to be narrower and more self-referential than inclusive.

A possible Asia

The evidence of history is stacked against the idea of Asia. But this historical lack of an Asian coherence is not a necessary impediment to the realisation of a continent of the future. The European experience offers conclusive proof that history can be overcome. History weighed just as heavily against Europe as it does against Asia. Europe was just as similarly lacking in coherence and definition until just after an internecine war that brought it practically to the brink of extinction a little over five decades ago. Yet Europe today has a greater clarity about itself and its past than it or any other continent has ever had. It is the only continent of which it is legitimately possible to refer to in any collective sense.

The post-war European identity carved itself out of a reconstructed historical imagination. In the process of constituting itself, it posited some of the most divisive aspects of its history as the defining characteristics of its continental unity. Christianity, colonialism, the invention of capitalist competition and nationalism, political philosophy and the classical heritage have all become monopolies of the European sensibility. Clearly, neither the rules of formal logic nor the contradictions of history need come in the way of successful experiments at conjuring social collectivities out of the hostilities of the past.

But for that to happen the mentality of a collective must first be forged. Europe admittedly had historical advantages of the kind that Asia lacks. At various points in its past, starting with the 'Renaissance', Europeans have assiduously rewritten history, detaching classical antiquity from its Afro-Asiatic influences, and instituting it as the 'childhood of Europe', to create a fictitious common sense of the past as the basis of a common identity. Classical antiquity was as far removed from the heritage of large parts of Europe as the Mesopotamian civilisation was from the heritage of Southeast Asia. But, politics, as has been repeated ad nauseam, is the art of the possible and from this unlikely heritage of civilisational genius, the historically counter-intuitive idea of a united Europe, with an overriding identity and interest that simultaneously admits of internal differentiation, was realised.

The idea of Asia seems on current evaluation to be more compellingly counter-intuitive than the idea of Europe. Yet the potential for an Asian confederacy is not entirely exhausted either by history or by the present politics of the world. The colonial experience had stimulated the intellectual articulation of an Asian solidarity opposed to the West. The period of post-colonial national anxieties precluded the pursuit of this idea, particularly given the decolonising machinations of departing Europeans and the geopolitical manipulations of the advancing superpowers. But today, the fresh onslaught of the globalising West renews the context and perhaps imparts the impetus for giving meaning to the idea of Asia.

If the possibility of an Asia exists, it cannot be brought into existence through the conventional politics of existing state systems. Nor can it be based simply on the reflected glory of an ancient and overlapping heritage. It will have to be configured on the practical foundations of radically defined material interests and minimally defined cultural identity. In the age and zone of dependent capitalism, this is a task that the bureaucratic and commercial imagination of Asia is unequal to. The vision of crony capitalism is circumscribed by the calculus of its profits.

Consequently, Asia can only be conceptualised against the intrigues of both neo-imperial North America and Europe (including Japan), and outside the existing state structures of the continent. The unequal division of the world is sustained through the national client state and its personnel of purchased elites. The intellectual articulation and social energy for the elaboration of a unified Asia will have to be marshalled through civil networks that must quell the comprador tendencies of the state, and redirect it towards the welfare functions it is mandated to undertake.

The necessary manufacture of South Asia

Nation-states are facts of South Asia, but none of them is a reality: all nations extend beyond the political boundary of a single state and all states are multi-national. This is why the as-yet-unformed South Asia is already a more real entity than the other more 'successful' regions of the world.

by **CK Lal**

In his classic *Imagined Communities*, political scientist Benedict Anderson argues that nationalism is an imagined political landscape, imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. But conflict between some of these imagined communities within a region can lead to catastrophes. To check the process that is leading South Asia inevitably towards what could be termed 'the end of imagination', as coined by the doomsday prophecy of writer-activist Arundhati Roy, it has become essential to imagine afresh an inclusive regional identity.

The imagination of nation was necessitated by the emergence of a set of historic, economic and technological circumstances. But are there enough reasons to justify the imagining of a new entity – a regional identity? To deliberate over this and other related questions, *Himal* hosted a roundtable on 18-19 November 2001, just prior to the 11th SAARC summit in Kathmandu. A summary of the proceedings was published in the January 2002 issue of the magazine. A year after the event, the need for imagining a regional identity has become only stronger.

Fertile ground

Nothing can be created out of nothing – even imagination needs a basis in reality if it has to emerge as a practical possibility. My argument is that there is enough in our history, geography and culture to build an inclusive regional identity for South Asia, certainly with more inclusiveness than the other 'successful' regions of the world.

First, if a nation is to be perceived as a political and

cultural identity that is self-defined, and acknowledged by others as such, then South Asia has two major nations with religion as their defining feature – Hindu and Muslim – and several other relatively smaller nations centred on language or caste. But these identities overlap all the time. Nation-states are facts of South Asia, but none of them is a reality: all nations extend beyond the political boundary of a single state and all states are multi-national. Even Bhutan, despite its relentless persecution of the Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas over more than a dozen years, is a multi-national state.

Second, since nation-states are not realities, they are projects taken seriously by the power elite of South Asian countries. The Muslim Indian's homeland Pakistan, Sri Lanka for Sinhalas, Bangladesh for Bengali-speaking Muslims, Nepal of the HANS elite (Hindu, Aryan Nepali-speakers), and most prominently, India as a predominantly Hindu entity are some of the dreams of empire building sold to the masses by the power elite of these countries. The process of empire building has resulted in conflicts between nations. The conflict between India and Pakistan is fiercer primarily because it is a confrontation between two aspirant empires competing for Kashmir to be their sphere of influence, and to a certain extent even Afghanistan. Pakistan perceives itself as a loser in 1971 in Bangladesh; therefore it tries harder to 'contain' India, and has no qualms about seeking the assistance of powers from outside of the region.

Third, since 'states' in this region in themselves are in the process of being formed – none of them has a history of more than 200 years and even the oldest state

of Nepal got confined to its present boundary only after the sepoy mutiny of 1857 – the very concept of the supra-national region is seen as novel and conflicting with the immediate task of ‘nation-building’.

India sees regionalism as a challenge to its predominance in the region, while all others fear Indian hegemony if an integrated, interwoven region were to become a reality. Because of this, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has failed to develop as a forum for conflict resolution between its member countries.

But what SAARC has managed to do is survive as a platform for discussions, and even that is being seen as no mean achievement given the acrimony between the states of this region. However, a section of India’s foreign policy establishment thinks that the regional body is too small a forum for its global ambitions. Even though some perfectly valid reasons for the tardy progress on the economic agenda of SAARC exist, as pointed out by New Delhi, India’s scuttling of the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad scheduled originally for January 2003 is nothing but the naked muscle flexing of a strong state. Ironically, it is India’s peripheral regions bordering on the neighbouring countries which stand to benefit most from the opening up of the region through the aegis of SAARC. And so it is the attitude of the centralised political elite which emerges as the main impediment to the emergence of regional identity in South Asia.

Fourth, regionalism may not be fact as yet, but it is hard reality. If identity is not just about your definition of yourself, but also how others see you, then a South Asian identity has become a reality in most other parts of the world. Whether one is dismissed as a ‘Paki’ or ridiculed as Indian, people from all over South Asia have come to be identified with curry, *qawalli*, cricket, Hindi films, and a distinct variety of imperial English. This identity has been historically known as ‘Indian’. But after the partition of the Indian Subcontinent, India ceased to be a geographical-cultural expression and became the name of a state – a structural political formation. Hence, no other state of the region now likes that appendage. There was a need to rename this distinct regional identity and it so happened that a particular geographical name was found to be the least unacceptable – *South Asia*.

Fifth, the problem with the expression ‘South Asian’ is that it is incomplete without Afghanistan, Tibet and Burma in it. According to the Hindu mythology of the *Jambu Dwipe*, *Bharat Khande shloka* that is recited at all Hindu *pujas* across South Asia, ‘Indian Subcontinent’ could have been an appropriate name, but it failed to gain acceptance as it did not accommodate the cultural aspirations of an assertive Muslim and a resurgent Buddhist populations. This region could have been named after the Himalaya – the mountain range that makes the region South Asia – but then ‘Bay of Himalaya’ and ‘Himalayan Ocean’ are names that need to be recognised by people from regions other than this

one. So, for now, the name South Asia has stuck, and there is no immediate alternative to it.

Sixth, regionalism has a compelling economic justification – it has become axiomatic that due to reasons of compatibility and competitive advantage, nations seldom rise; it is regions that do. Re-conceptualising South Asia as a functional region around a network of urban nodes can revitalise the economies of all the nation-states by controlling waste and streamlining resource uses. Startling examples of wastage are Pakistan’s import of Indian goods via South Africa, and Nepal importing Chinese potatoes and German onions.

Seventh, the cultural justification for the renaissance of ‘nations’ within nation-states is compelling. Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, Maithili and Nepali are language-dominated cultural groups that immediately come to mind – all of these can immensely benefit by working together with people from the ‘other’ side of state borders.

Persuasive economic and cultural reasons thus do exist for the political regional identity of South Asia. But the rhetoric must necessarily be built around secular symbols that do not threaten ‘national’ identities. Some of such symbols include, but are not limited to, Lord Buddha as an apostle of peace rather than the founder of a new creed, the heritage of the Indus valley civilisation, the Himalaya, the monsoon, and two symbols of the British legacy – cricket and South Asian English. The challenge is to build a common identity around these secular symbols (there could be many other such) by beginning to build public opinion in its favour.

Fears and hopes

The experiences of a shared past and the realities of a conjoined present are powerful, but even more compelling is the common future that stares in the face all South Asians regardless of location. There are several internal and external factors pushing for the manufacture of a distinct South Asian identity.

To be sure, there are voices of disagreement over an identity based on landmass. For several years now, V Suryanarayan has been calling for a ‘Bay of Bengal community’ from his academic perch in Madras. Nepal’s effort to join BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation) is indication of its disenchantment with SAARC as an economic block-in-formation.

The proposed petroleum pipeline from Iran to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan will extend the regional boundary further west, while Islamabad’s dream of transforming Karachi into a port of supply for the central Asian republics is sure to integrate it with neighbours up north. In an age when boundaries are blurred by globalisation, geographical markers are indeed fluid. So, had land links been the only justification, it would have been impossible to contemplate a distinct South Asian identity. But there is more to the future than historic inspiration and geographical compulsion.

The most pressing issue is the environment. The South Asian 'brown cloud' may well be a hoax as claimed by some in the Indian bureaucracy – more rigorous scientific explanations are needed to establish its extent, cause and effect. But, there is no denying the fact that the impact of land, air, water, energy and ether pollution – the contamination of *Panchatatwa*, elements that Hindu scriptures say constitute life – are shared by everyone in the region. The intricate relationship between the Thar desert, the Himalaya and the Bay of Bengal may not yet be well understood, but the people of the Ganga plains know by instinct that the greening of Rajasthan and the denudation of the Himalayan foothills have unpredictable consequences on their lives. The impact of environmental dislocations are and will be greater in South Asia than anywhere else in the world simply because of the density of population here.

One could say that ecology has global as well as generational dimensions, but it is a lot easier to establish their relationship when the local in *glocal* is a geographical region. It is easy for politicians to dream up a garland canal system comprising the Brahmaputra, Cauvery, Ganga and Narmada rivers, but almost impossible for scientists to model it with any precision. Modelling even one river and predicting its behaviour in the face of massive human intervention is fraught with danger. It is only by thinking regionally that the fixation with technological solutions to civilisational problems can be negated.

South Asians must also wake up to the potential of a nuclear catastrophe that makes this region the most dangerous place on earth in the eyes of others. After Pokhran Two and Chagai, the risk of perishing together makes it obligatory to contemplate ways of surviving together. When the risks of matters nuclear have to be described, words often fail. An alternative is to use words to imagine another world, an alternative world relatively free of catastrophic conflicts.

The third reason to begin forming a common identity in South Asia is the relative backwardness and rampant poverty in the region. Identity does not feed the hungry, treat the sick, educate the illiterate or reduce the inequality between classes, castes and gender. But what it does is reinforce solidarity, resulting in a reduction in the wastage of resources on physical security and the diversion of savings towards human security. There is no reason why Pakistan should stockpile nuclear missiles when women in Balochistan and Sindh are not free to earn a living. Of what use are the Belgian guns of the Royal Nepal Army when Nepal is one of the very few countries where the life expectancy of women is lower than that of men?

Will a South Asian identity reduce these sufferings? No, such a simplistic understanding would only lead to the frustration of unfulfilled expectations. But what the process of common identity formation can do is reduce tensions all around, leading to some creative think-

ing about the ways and means of addressing common problems.

A fourth compulsion to make leaders of the region rise above their parochial interests lies in the realm of geopolitics. After 11 September, South Asia has been transformed into an arena of contest for the global powers. For the present, the United States, the first 'hyperpower' of the world, holds unchallenged sway in the entire region south of the Himalaya. But the possibility of a Beijing-Moscow-New Delhi axis of resistance emerging in the future seems to have prompted Washington into courting each of them separately.

If the game ends up disturbing the strategic balance in the region, the US has nothing to lose; but the very existence of some of the states in South Asia would be in jeopardy. This 'great game' has dangerous implications, because Pakistan is a military-dominated society with a basement full of nuclear-tipped missiles. Add to that the possibility of the European Union emerging as an independent player in the international trade power game, and the scene becomes too complex to even comprehend, let alone predict the course of action that states of the region should take in order to protect their national interests. The only way to have a place at the table of such power games is to forge regional solidarity and speak in a single voice on international affairs.

Fifth, there is a need for what social scientist Arjun Appadurai calls the 'production of locality'. Appadurai stresses that the simultaneous process of 'global homogenisation' and 'heterogenisation' has necessitated the conceptualisation of a different kind of locality that addresses the aspirations of a globalising population everywhere. South Asia is no exception.

If anything, the need for re-conceptualising an inclusive identity is even stronger in this region, as nation-states here are younger, but ethnic identities deeper, and competing population groups denser. The fear of 'Indianisation', rampant all over the neighbourhood, is beautifully captured in Appadurai's haunting observation, "One man's imagined community is another man's political prison". However, he fails to consider that were everyone in the region a participant in the process of imagining, the result would not be a prison but a surrogate community instead.

The sixth reason to forge a plural identity is the large South Asian diaspora, bound together by its obsession with curry, cricket and Hindi cinema. The phenomenon of 'long-distance' nationalism – yet another colourful description from Benedict Anderson – makes them susceptible to exploitation by extremists selling an imagined community of the virtual world. Whether it was the Tamil professionals of Sri Lanka in Europe being mobilised by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to further their separatist cause or Patel motel-owners in the United States being prevailed upon by *Hindutvawadis* to fund the 'Gujarat experiment' back home, the net effect of offshore South Asians' efforts has mostly been negative.

In the words of historian Irfan Habib, the reason for this may lie in a "paradoxical experience in which local identitarisms are fuelled by global forces, in which the state is too far away to be felt as protector and therefore recognised as legitimate by this category of citizens". Perhaps the formation of a strong regional identity can prevent an individual from being torn apart by the dual forces of localism and globalism, pulling her emotionally and physically in two opposing directions.

The seventh reason for reflection lies outside – since the Arabic or the Chinese identity of Asia have already excluded this region from their self-definition, South Asians are what they are simply because they cannot be anything else. Even VS Naipaul was forced to establish his tenuous link with South Asia by alluding to his genealogy in Nepal and ancestry in Awadh in his Nobel acceptance speech simply because he could never be Caribbean, and the English would never accept him as one of their own despite his knighthood. So Sir Naipaul has married a South Asian, makes it a point to be seen with the writers of the Subcontinent, and seems to have no objection to being used as a saffron icon. At the end of the day, even the most famous 'mimic man' has to manufacture an identity to match the expectations of others.

So it is not just the past and the present that necessitates a South Asian identity, but considerations of the future. That said, it must be accepted that efforts so far to forge South Asian solidarity have been tardy at best. Precious time has been lost in what has been a false start – SAARC.

Only a careful review of the beginning of the SAARC process can reveal why failure is almost in-built in its conception – no organisation can survive by proscribing bilateral issues. The purpose of every institution – starting from the family at the micro level to the United Nations on a macro scale – is to contribute towards conflict resolution, since conflict is an inevitable part of everyday life. Perhaps the meaningless forum was created because any other form of association was considered rather premature. If that is so, then it is the most powerful reason to 'manufacture consent' around South Asian-ness through a process of the production of culture.

Sketching a roadmap

Stressing the need for a South Asian identity is the easy part; the challenge lies in finding a way that can lead to the desired destination – a realisation of shared commonalities. The animosity among the power elites of Dhaka, Islamabad, Kathmandu and New Delhi has percolated to the level of the South Asian bourgeoisie, hence the effort of creating goodwill has to begin at the ideological level. Upper classes may establish ideals, but it is the class in the middle that forms public opinion and thereby shapes behaviour.

Pathways to the minds of the middle class begin at universities. Unfortunately, no university in the region

treats South Asia in totality in any of its courses, least of all economics and history. As would be expected of them by their constituency, universities in the West address the concerns of their respective governments in teaching South Asian courses.

The enduring obsession of South Asia centres in universities of the West has been the partition of British India, and for perfectly acceptable reasons. After all, it now pits two poor states with nuclear weapons against each other over a piece of controversial real estate that rightfully belongs to its own people – the Kashmiris. If an understanding of the complexities of the region has to be created within the region, a beginning has to be made by South Asians themselves.

It is not for nothing that Albert Einstein championed the cause of a Hebrew university all his life, for him it was the 'flagship project' of fashioning a new state. If only the two Abduls (APJ Abdul Kalam of India and Abdul Kadir Khan of Pakistan) of South Asia had pooled their intellectual resources in establishing a South Asian university somewhere in Kashmir!

Writers, painters, poets, dramatists and journalists of the region have a vested interest in furthering the cause of a common identity. Nothing wastes creative resources as much as the manufacture of parochial nationalistic rhetoric along the lines of ideology produced by the ruling elite in each of these countries. Cultural works of lasting value need a bigger human canvas than that of bickering nation-states mired in poverty and backwardness.

One of the reasons behind the rise of fascism in the region is the abdication of ideological space by the intellectuals of the left. If the print media was instrumental in the formation of the imagined community of nations, the electronic media should have helped fashion a larger community at the regional level. But somehow, the left has missed the bus of the new media revolution, which has therefore been captured by deadweight capital. Paradoxically, the market is creating regional solidarity – but largely in its own image, which means that it is inherently unsustainable. The people's voice needs to be raised in favour of regional identity by workers' solidarities of the region.

Truth be told, there are no readymade solutions based on grand narratives of regionalism. All that is known at the moment is that South Asians have to forge a regional identity before they are forced to do so by events beyond their control – a natural calamity, a nuclear war, further marginalisation from human history, multinational satellite channels, or the overlordship of a global hegemon.

National boundaries are human creations, hence, often fluid, sometimes blurred, and seldom sacrosanct. Nationalism had its uses against colonialism, but it is time now to rise above the nation-state to the level of the region. Which just may lead to global human solidarity sometime in the future, but it could all start here in South Asia.

Global imperialism and the world's people

Because international finance capital requires stability at the core, all the important capitalist powers endorse the crucial political and economic positions taken by the United States. But the Americans are not providing stability to world markets, even as the countries of the South fall prey to predatory capital. As the global economy crushes the poor beneath its heel, the welfare states of the underdeveloped world are further weakened, public services less accessible, employment more insecure and income disparities accentuated. The contradictions of a rapacious imperialism are making themselves felt more acutely, but the ground needs to be prepared for a resistance movement across the countries of the South.

by Jayati Ghosh

Two features define the capitalist world economy at the start of the 21st century. The first is the continuing, indeed overwhelming, significance of imperialism as the defining feature of global economic relations, with the term broadly defined as the struggle by large capital over control of economic territory of various types. The second is that this current imperialism is different in several crucial ways from that described by Lenin nearly a century ago as the monopoly stage of capitalism. To some extent the differences are simply the result of history, the evolution of both the institutions and processes of capitalism. But they are also the result of the effects of the recent processes of deregulation of trade and capital markets as well as other forms of economic liberalisation (constituting the essence of what is typically called 'globalisation'), which have given the new imperialism its cutting edge.

In terms of the current world economic trends, therefore, we can identify a number of important differences from the imperialist globalisation of the late 19th century. These include: the implications of accentuated internationalisation, the concentration of both production and finance, the greater domination and changed nature of finance capital, as well as the effects on inter-imperialist rivalry (or the lack of it). Further, in the present day, multilateral institutions and rule-based regimes are used to further the aims that in earlier periods of history were resolved through more direct militaristic or political means. There is also the changed nature of the systemic instability of global capitalism and the new forms of economic territory that are currently being contested. Technologi-

cal changes have furthered the process of global corporate dominance as well as allowed for the possibility of confronting it at an international level. The implications of the global spread, privatisation and concentration of media industries, meanwhile, add another dimension to the current imperialist regime.

It is obvious that the processes of concentration and centralisation of capital, as well as the internationalisation of production, have gone much further, with some important implications. The recent phase of globalisation has been marked by some of the strongest and most sweeping waves of concentration of economic activity known historically. Looking at the multinational firms, vertical disintegration of production has allowed parts of the production process to be relocated and geographically separated, but this has been associated with greater vertical integration of the control (and ownership) of production. In addition, the past decade in particular witnessed a wave of cross-border mergers and acquisitions across not only major manufacturing industries but even in the service sector and in utility provision. The increased concentration of economic activity in general could reflect the recession and slump in recent years: concentration is always more marked in the downswing phase of economic cycles.

This process should not however be misinterpreted to imply that the links between multinational conglomerates and their home governments have disappeared: they may appear to be more tenuous, but nevertheless still exist and continue to influence geopolitical and economic strategies of the major capitalist powers.

Internationalisation is, of course, most



marked in finance. The domination of financial flows in cross-border transactions, as well as the greater role played by speculative elements and the separation (and to some extent supremacy) of finance capital over productive capital, are too well known to require further discussion. However, some of the more significant outcomes of these processes may be noted. They include the enhanced differentials in speeds of adjustment between capital markets and the markets for goods and services, implying both more rapid changes in terms of financial variables and more accentuated effects on real economies. The speculative capital flows play a destabilising role, leading to more volatility of relative prices in general and periodic crises of varying intensity in particular economies. There are constraints on national economic policy-making, especially in the fiscal and monetary arena in almost all countries, and one is confronted with the heightened inability of states (independent of political persuasion) to ensure basic needs and minimum socio-economic rights to all citizens. The need of finance to constantly, if temporarily, discover new avenues or emerging markets for investment, ensures that deflation is not a uniform process across the world economy, but is always accompanied by a few pockets of capital-inflow-led boom.

The domination of finance capital has had an impact on the nature of inter-imperialist rivalry as well. The point is essentially as follows: when finance capital, independent of national origin, seeks to ensure the stability of its investments, it will be especially concerned about some degree of stability at the capitalist core, notably in the United States government and private securities. This means that (notwithstanding the recent and continuing decline of US stock markets, the move away from US financial assets and the associated decline of the US dollar in world currency markets) there will be attempts to maintain some degree of stability in terms of the most important financial assets available, and therefore to reinforce the geopolitical arrangements which underlie such stability.

This requirement creates a different source of pressure from that determined solely by US military domination. It means that in crucial political and economic areas, the important capitalist powers tend to act together or at least implicitly endorse the positions taken by the US, whether in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations, or in the use of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to determine country policies to directly or indirectly benefit US-based capital, or in the 'war on terror', and the treatment of so-called 'rogue states', and so on. It also means that US unilateralism in economic and political matters tends to be accepted (if not condoned), whether in terms of allowing the continued use of unilateral protectionist measures such as

Super 301, or the US Farm Bill, or in terms of pushing for greater enforcement of multilateral liberalisation in precisely those sectors in which the US economy is perceived to have competitive advantage, or in terms of military engagements with what it chooses to define as 'rogue states'.

The new imperialism, in addition to utilising new institutions and international rules and protocols to its own end, is also about the struggle to control newer forms of economic territory. This is not to deny the continuing significance of economic territory as traditionally conceived, in the form of natural resources, markets and labour. Indeed, control over natural resources – particularly energy and oil resources – remains central to imperialist preoccupation. This is demonstrated by a number of recent and current events: the significance of the proposed (and soon to be constructed) oil pipeline through Afghanistan to the US military intervention and ongoing geopolitics of the region; the (failed) attempt to instigate and support a military coup in Venezuela against a president elected by a huge popular margin; the US administration's continuing obsession with forcibly instituting regime change in Iraq using whatever means possible. While these are in fact the most blatant political expressions of imperialism today, it is in the area of developing new markets that the economic implications are most pronounced.

One important reason for the success of imperialist globalisation has been its ability to draw local elites and middle classes across the world into its own ranks

New markets for the core capitalists

New markets are sought to be developed and made accessible in two ways. The first is the opening up of existing mar-

kets in developing and formerly socialist countries through the processes of trade and investment liberalisation, using the agencies of conditional lending by the IMF and World Bank and, more recently, the rules and dispute settlement procedures of the WTO. Such opening up, especially if it involves the relative de-industrialisation of the newly liberalised economies, contributes new markets for manufactured goods and services for the core capitalist countries.

It is surely not an accident that, despite fears of manufacturing jobs being 'exported' from North to South, in fact the manufacturing trade balance of the South with the North remains negative and indeed the deficit has been growing. Associated with this is the lowering of world prices of Southern exports, as more and more developing countries are forced to increase export volumes either to repay debt, or to pay for more imports, or simply because they have been told that it is good for them to do so. This in turn provides the related advantage of cheaper imports to the core countries, not only of raw materials and tropical agricultural commodities, but also of the manufactured goods that developing countries have been encouraged to specialise in and

which are now characterised by massive over-capacity internationally.

The more innovative form of finding new markets in the recent past has been that of creating markets where none previously existed, that is, by encouraging and furthering the commercialisation of activities that were earlier not perceived as commercial, or were defined in the public domain, or were only enabled by social intervention. The push towards commercialisation and then privatisation of a range of public services – such as power, telecommunication, and now water and sanitation – is the most obvious expression of this. The proliferation of new forms of commerce has never been so rampant. Knowledge and what is defined as intellectual property, rights to energy use, pollution control certificates, all are now subject to trading; and even the via media for trade have expanded to include e-commerce and the like. The forced commercialisation of a wide range of services therefore provides the newest and most promising hinterland for capitalist expansion.

One aspect of this is also that information and entertainment have themselves become not just commercialised but have emerged as major industries; indeed, they are now the fastest-growing segments of the global economy. They are also among the most concentrated and centralised of all sectors. The multimedia boom has spawned large multimedia companies which can now be counted among the largest multinational corporations. This is really a phenomenon of the last decade, as giant media firms have sought 'synergy' through not just vertical integration but by effectively "acquiring control of every step in the mass media process, from creation of content to its delivery in the home", as argued by media critic Ben Bagdikian.

The 1990s witnessed an unprecedented wave of mergers and acquisitions among global media giants. As a result, the top six multinational conglomerates – News Corporation, Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom and TCI – now effectively own and control huge swathes of the media, publishing and commercial entertainment activities across the world. Many of these firms have explicitly rejected national identities and posited themselves as global or internationally-based corporations. Nevertheless, and despite the attempts to programme according to local sensibilities, the bulk of the content, the forms of expression as well as the structures of ownership and management, reflect the domination of the core capitalist countries, especially the United States.

In sheer quantitative terms, the most important new markets are of course the financial ones, and the explosion of financial activity reflects the ability of capitalism to create and enlarge the spheres of economic activity even where material production is flagging. In addition, financial services such as banking and insurance – an area in which companies based in the core capitalist countries clearly have competitive advantage – have been among the fastest-growing areas of world trade.

The huge cross-border and intra-border flow of financial resources often reflects trade in commodities that are purely notional, such as derivatives trading. That huge profits can be made from this pyramiding of financial assets reflects the ingenuity of capitalism, but it also marks speculative bubbles, which do have to burst eventually.

In addition, the new imperialism seeks to make use of the skilled labour that is found in some developing countries. This has meant greatly enhanced labour mobility of a small section of highly skilled and professional workers, even as other labour finds it much more difficult to move, and aggregate rates of labour migration are lower than they have been in the history of capitalism. This in turn has contributed in no small measure to the enthusiasm for the process of global integration among such groups of skilled workers in developing countries. In fact, it can be argued that one important reason for the success of imperialist globalisation has been its ability to draw local elites and middle classes across the world into its own ranks, to offer part inclusion into a privileged international space within which the travails of the local working poor can be forgotten, even while their crucial role in generating productive surplus is sustained.

Predator and the prey

Despite the appearance of complete domination by a single and determined superpower, which has been a requirement for periods of stable world capitalism in the past, the current world economy is an unstable one, which is prone to systemic instability and constant possibility of crisis. This emerges from many factors.

First, the US is not currently fulfilling its role of leader in the world economy to maintain stability. Such a role, as argued by the economist Charles Kindleberger, requires the fulfilment of three functions at a minimum: discounting in crisis; counter-cyclical lending to countries affected by private investors' decisions; and providing a market for net exports of the rest of the world, especially those countries required to repay debt. The absence of discounting in crisis is not universal; there are countries that have received large bailouts orchestrated by the US Treasury and the IMF. But the spectacular collapse of Argentina, the bleeding of Sub-Saharan Africa despite impending large-scale famine, and the indifference to implosions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, bear witness to the fact that the US administration does not see its responsibility to discount during times of crisis in terms of salvaging the larger system. Similarly, counter-cyclical lending has been discouraged, as private finance (including portfolio capital) has been associated with creating sharp boom-and-bust cycles rather than mitigating them, and US policy has been geared towards protecting such behaviour rather than repressing it. Finally, while the US did play a crucial role as the engine of world trade by running very large external trade deficits in the 1990s, that role

has been much diminished after 2000. Indeed, even before then, the import surplus in the US reflected private investment-savings deficits, as the government's budgetary role became more contractionary.

Second, partly because of this inadequately accepted role of the leader, and partly because of the deflationary impulse provided by the greater mobility of finance capital, aggregate growth in the world capitalist system has been far below expectations in the recent phase of globalisation. It is now clear that the period has been associated with a deceleration of economic activity in much of the developed world, a continuing implosion in vast areas of the developing world including the continent of Africa, and a dramatic downslide in what had hitherto been the most dynamic segment of the world economy – East and Southeast Asia. The rate of global output growth, which averaged three percent in 1990-97, was less than half that in 1998-2000, and even worse subsequently. Nearly 40 countries have experienced a decline in per capita income since 1990. These processes are reflected in rates of growth of world trade (in value terms), which have decelerated despite the enforced liberalisation of trade in most countries, as well as in declining rates of greenfield investment (involving the setting up of physical plant, equipment etc) across the world.

Third, the recent process of imperialist globalisation has been marked by greatly increased disparities, both within countries and between countries. The gap in per capita income between the industrial and developing worlds has more than tripled between 1960 and 1990. Between 1960 and 1991, the income share of the richest 20 percent of the world's population rose from 70 percent to 85 percent, while the income share of the poorest 20 percent of population fell from 2.3 percent to 1.4 percent. In fact, the income shares of more than 85 percent of the world's population actually fell over this period. The ratio of shares of the richest to the poorest groups doubled from 30:1 to 60:1. Subsequent data indicate a marked worsening of such disparities. While there is – inevitably – a debate over this, most careful studies find increased inequality within and across regions, as well as a stubborn persistence of poverty, and a marked absence of the 'convergence' predicted by apologists of the system. In addition, the majority of the people across the world find themselves in more fragile and vulnerable economic circumstances, in which many of the earlier welfare state provisions have been reduced or removed, public services have been privatised or made more expensive and therefore less accessible, and employment conditions have become much more insecure and volatile.

Fourth, these features in themselves have led to a major crisis of legitimisation for the system. Not only are the basic tenets of the neo-liberal argument (which forms the theoretical support for the current pattern of imperialist globalisation) under question, but increasingly the institutions which serve to uphold it (the IMF,

the WTO and so on) lack popular support and legitimacy. The anti-globalisation umbrella movement is one expression of such growing dissent in local and national contexts. One important – and new – feature, is that the process of integrating elites from developing countries, and rewarding them materially for their active cooperation in furthering corporate globalisation, has slowed down. The complicity and participation of local elites has been a potent force in ensuring the success of global capitalist integration – but as the world recession bites and rewards become more scarce, such complicity can no longer be taken for granted. Since the political economy of resistance movements everywhere requires the involvement of at least some middle class and professional elements and often some local elites as well, this may prove to be a critical development.

Fifth, imperialism has an increasingly ambiguous relationship with various backward-looking, revanchist and reactionary tendencies in different parts of the world. At different times and places, such tendencies have been encouraged and allowed to spread, but increasingly many of them are now seen as threats to the system, to be rooted out and destroyed. All of those currently seen as enemies of the US and therefore as the objects of attrition in the current 'war against terror' – Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda and the Taliban, Saddam Hussein – have been at one time or the other overt or covert factotums of the US administration, used against other perceived enemies or simply to destabilise regions. Even now, in clientelist regimes such as that in Saudi Arabia, reactionary forces have been allowed to grow.

Elsewhere, US imperialism has turned a blind eye or even implicitly encouraged the growth of semi-fascist movements (such as the Hindutva tendencies in India) as well as separatist forces, which encourage the disintegration of large nations. However, many of these movements now threaten to spin out of control and to destabilise the system itself, even if only partially. The terrorist attacks of September 2001 mark a watershed only insofar as they forced a realisation of this tendency towards destabilisation; they do not mark any major changes in the basic organisation of the system itself, which is still run as cynically as before.

Finally, one important contradiction that looks likely to become more significant in the near future is the requirement of deflation, which predatory finance capital imposes on the system as a whole even while it encourages differential rates of deflation in different areas so as to maximise its own profits. A sustainable prey-predator relation requires the continued existence of the prey, but widespread deflation makes this less likely. The current downslide in the major equity markets, and especially in the US, suggests that while finance can be separated from real economic trends for extended periods, and can even profit from such separation, it cannot do so indefinitely.

All this means that, while the world capitalist sys-

tem may not yet be in full-fledged crisis (even though parts of it clearly are) there are systemic instabilities, which suggest that the current pattern cannot continue without some changes or even substantial overhaul in the medium term.

South Asian supporting cast

The South Asian region (broadly interpreted to include the region from Afghanistan to Burma) has become very important for the imperialist core, and in particular the United States. While South Asia's economic significance may appear to be weaker than some of the other regions in terms of both markets and resources, this is not completely true. The Indian economy is viewed as a major market for a range of consumer goods, and even the limits of that market given the prevailing income distribution have not completely diminished expectations. In addition, there are large possibilities in terms of introducing commercialisation and the possibility of private profit generation into activities that have not previously been treated as commercial in India, either because of lack of development or because of the role played by the public sector.

There are other sources of interest in South Asia. Geopolitically, the region is viewed both in terms of its capacity (especially India) to assist in the containment of the potential power of China, and as a means of providing access to the oil and mineral resources of Central Asia and the Bay of Bengal area. The region is also the location of the struggle for control over other, newer forms of economic territory, such as certain types of skilled labour.

The economies of South Asia – and especially India – are often portrayed in comparative discussion as among the 'success stories' of the developing world in the period since the early 1990s. The sense that the Indian economy performed relatively well during this period may simply reflect the much more depressing or chaotic experiences in the rest of the developing world, with the spectacular financial crises in several of the most important and hitherto dynamic late industrialisers in East Asia and Latin America, and the continuing stagnation or even decline in much of the rest of the South. In comparison, the Indian economy, and indeed most of the smaller economies of the region, were largely stable and have been spared the type of extreme crisis that became almost a typical feature of emerging markets elsewhere. But the picture of improved performance is a misleading one at many levels, since in fact both India and the entire South Asian region as a whole experienced economic growth which was less impressive than the preceding decade's. Further, across the region this growth pattern was marked by low employ-

ment generation, greater income inequality and the persistence of poverty. In other words, despite some very apparent successes in certain sectors or pockets, on the whole the process of global economic integration did little to dramatically improve the material condition of most of the population.

In India, the rate of growth of aggregate GDP in constant prices was between 5.5 percent and 5.8 percent in each five-year period since 1980, and the process of accelerated liberalisation of trade and capital markets did not lead to any change from this overall pattern. Further, while investment ratios increased (as a share of GDP), this reflected the long-term secular trend, and in fact the rate of increase decelerated compared to earlier periods. More significantly, the period since 1990 has been marked by very low rates of employment generation. Rural employment in the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000 grew at the very low annual rate of less than 0.6 percent per annum, lower than any previous period in post-independence history, and well below (only one-third) the rate of growth of rural population. Urban employment growth, at 2.3 percent per annum, was also well below that of earlier periods, and employment in the formal sector stagnated. The only positive feature was the decline in educated unemployment, largely related to the expansion of IT-enabled services in metropolitan and other urban areas. However, while this feature, along with that of software development, has received much international attention, it is still very insignificant in the aggregate economy.

Other indicators of the Indian economy point to disturbing changes in patterns of consumption. Thus, per capita foodgrain consumption declined from 476 grams per day in 1990 to only 418 grams per day in 2001. The National Sample Survey data also suggest that even aggregate calorific consumption per capita declined from just over 2200 calories per day in 1987-88 to around 2150 in 1999-2000. It has been argued that this may represent the positive diversification of consumption away from foodgrain that is associated with higher living standards. But, usually the aggregate foodgrain consumption does not decline due to indirect consumption (for example, through meat and poultry that require feed). In any case, the overall decline in calorific consumption (covering all food products) suggests that the optimistic conclusion may not be valid.

Given the aggregate growth rates and the evidence of improved lifestyles among a minority, this points to substantially worsening income distribution in India, which is also confirmed by the survey data. While the evidence on poverty has been muddied by changes in the procedure of data collection, which have made the

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recent survey data non-comparable with earlier estimates, overall indicators suggest that while the incidence of head-count poverty had been declining from the mid-1970s to 1990, subsequently that decline has been slowed or halted, as indicated by the economist Abhijit Sen. Meanwhile, declining capital expenditure by the government has been associated with more infrastructural bottlenecks and worsening provision of basic public services.

The major positive feature which is frequently cited, that of the overall stability of the growth process compared to the boom-and-bust cycles in other emerging markets, reflects the relatively limited extent of capital account liberalisation over much of the period, and the fact that the Indian economy was never really the chosen favourite of international financial markets over this period. In other words, because it did not receive large inflows of speculative capital, it did not suffer from large outflows either. Meanwhile, stability to the balance of payments was imparted by the substantial inflows of workers' remittances from temporary migrant workers in the Gulf and other regions.

In other countries of the region, the economic growth experience subsequent to liberalisation has been even less impressive in most cases. In Pakistan, average annual growth rates plummeted in the 1990s compared to that of the earlier decade, by about one-third. Industrial growth rates almost halved from 8.2

percent to 4.8 percent per annum. The earlier success at reducing poverty was reversed in the 1990s, as the percentage of households living in absolute poverty increased from 21.4 percent in 1990-91 to 32.6 percent in 1998-99. Unemployment rose, real wages fell and income distribution worsened. All this occurred in a climate of much greater macroeconomic instability than in the past.

In Bangladesh, while aggregate growth rates over the 1990s were marginally higher than in the earlier decade, the overall incidence of poverty (at around 45 percent of the population) has been stubbornly resistant to change. Indeed, the rate of poverty reduction slowed down after 1994-95 because of both lower growth of production and lower employment generation. Industrial growth was positively affected by the expansion of the export-oriented textile sector (taking advantage of previously unutilised multilateral multi-fibre arrangement – MFA – quotas) but other than textiles and garments, most manufacturing sectors have stagnated or declined. All the productive sectors have been adversely affected by trade liberalisation in India, given the porous border, which allows for the possibility of substantial smuggling. Thus import penetration has adversely affected production and employment in both agriculture and most manufacturing, and even sectors of rural economic diversification such as live-

stock and poultry rearing.

Income distribution worsened over the 1990s. The economy of Nepal has been affected by Indian trade liberalisation because of its open border with India. Growth in the productive sectors has been weak, especially in agriculture where the removal of subsidies was not accompanied by public investment in rural infrastructure. In Sri Lanka, relatively low growth in the 1990s (especially in the agricultural sector) was associated with high macroeconomic imbalances, high trade deficits and reduced employment generation. Domestic political strife and the state of war in the Sri Lankan north and east were only partly responsible for this; an important role was played by the decline in value of agricultural exports, the mainstay of Sri Lanka's economy.

This has been the dismal record of the South Asian economic performance in the age of globalised liberalisation. The constant hectoring for more liberalisation

and the habit of attributing failures to inadequate reform, either wittingly or unwittingly, fails to take note of the very obvious adverse consequences of the process that has been unleashed so far.

Per capita foodgrain consumption in India declined from 476 grams per day in 1990 to only 418 grams per day in 2001

Ways of Indian capital

Throughout the region of South Asia, the process of increased integration with the global economy was not associated with higher GDP growth or more productive employment generation, or improved

performance in terms of poverty reduction. Rather, employment possibilities became more fragile and there were clear income distributional shifts towards increased inequality. In all the countries, the combination of attempts to impose 'fiscal discipline' by cutting public expenditure resulted in adverse consequences for producers as well as reduced quality and quantity (in per capita terms) of physical infrastructure and basic public services. The loss of revenues from import tariffs, the associated necessary declines in domestic duties, and the need to provide incentives to capital through tax concessions, all led to declines in tax-GDP ratios across the region, further reducing the spending capacity of the states.

If such have been the consequences of the process of global integration, adversely affecting the material circumstances of the large majority of citizenry in the region, the question may be asked as to what influenced government policy in all these countries to make the neo-liberal economic strategy so inevitable nonetheless? In other words, what was the domestic political and social support for the process of liberalisation, which made it fit so neatly into the requirements imposed by international imperialism? Obviously, the political economy processes involved are complex and vary from country to country. But some idea may be had from a more detailed consideration of the Indian experience in particular.

One of the interesting features of the political economy of the Indian strategy of liberalising economic reform has been the at first conditional, and subsequently more unqualified, support extended to it by various elements of the large capitalist class and other social groups which have substantial political voice, such as middle class and professional groups. To some extent this can be explained by the proliferation and diversification of the Indian capitalist class that took place during the years of import-substituting growth and later. There were three factors that led to this.

The first was related to the process of introduction of new products and markets. In India, over time there were a number of areas outside the traditional bases of existing monopolistic groups, such as trade, services of various kinds and operations abroad by non-resident Indian groups, which served as sites for the primary accumulation of capital. A typical example is trade, which saw the growth and proliferation of relatively independent capitalist groups, some of which on occasion made relatively successful forays into industrial production, particularly in steel, tyres and cement – sectors that have been through periods of shortage, have a burgeoning black market and extremely high margins from trade. Another example was finance. While the ability of domestic capital to use the financial sector as a site for accumulation was earlier contained by the presence of a large public sector in banking, matters changed substantially from the 1980s, especially when the stock market came into its own. The subsequent periods of speculative boom in the stock market allowed some insiders within the erstwhile financial community to accumulate substantial sums of capital, most often at the expense of the small middle class investor.

Over time, groups that had accumulated capital in this fashion sought to diversify into manufacturing, not only by entering new niche markets, but also by investing in large capacities in industries characterised by economies of scale. This created a direct challenge for several of the traditional business groups. These traditional monopolies had in the past been protected by the barriers to entry created by the government's industrial and trade policies, which involved not just import substitution but also substantial regulation of capacity creation and production. They had therefore been able to hedge against risk by investing small sums embodied in uneconomic plants in each individual industry, given the narrow domestic market base for most manufactured goods. This meant that they were unable to compete successfully with the new entrants, who because of newer technology were also less averse to import competition.

Established big capital, insofar as it could not enter into certain spaces and was not able to take full advantage of the entry of new products, found its relative position worsening in the economy over time. To reverse this decline, it looked for new avenues, including expansion abroad. It is necessary to distinguish here be-

tween two different types of expansion abroad. One is simply expanding activities abroad, which requires little export of capital from the domestic economy since it is largely locally financed. The other involves the export of capital through the non-repatriation of exchange earnings, which, at the very least, involves the acquisition of rentier status, but may help the expansion of activities as well. The non-repatriation of exchange earnings, for a given level of domestic activity being maintained, has to be financed for the economy as a whole through larger international borrowing.

The second avenue open to established big business was to move into the space occupied by the public sector or smaller capitalists; and hence they also demanded an opening up of space through industrial deregulation. This was achieved by the elimination of anti-monopoly legislation, the removal of licensing requirements, the removal of legislation 'reserving' certain sectors for small capitalists, a regime of high interest rates that squeezed small capitalists, the privatisation of a number of profitable public sector units, and the delinking of the public sector from budgetary support of any kind. In short, even the established big businesses that were, to start with, the beneficiaries of state controls of various kinds, began to chafe against these controls at a certain stage. Hence, large capital extended at least qualified support to the neo-liberal 'liberalisation' programme, no matter how uneasy it may have felt about some other aspects of the programme, such as import liberalisation.

Among certain other sections such as the agricultural capitalists, the regime change met with qualified approval, though parts of it were objected to. Agricultural capitalists, while being hostile to the withdrawal of subsidised inputs and directed credit, favourably anticipated the prospect of exporting at advantageous prices in the international market. In the event, a substantial section of domestic capital was willing to make compromises with metropolitan capital on the terms that the latter demanded. It was therefore all for allowing metropolitan capital to capture a share of the Indian market even at the expense of the entrenched capitalists, not to mention the public sector, in the hope of being able to better its own prospects as a junior partner, both in the domestic as well as in the international market. It was thus in favour of import liberalisation, a full retreat from state interventionism, and accepting the kind of regime that metropolitan capital generally, and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as its chief spokespersons, had been demanding.

It is true that the more powerful and the more entrenched monopoly houses of India were more circumspect. They would not have minded import liberalisation in areas other than their own, including those dominated by the public sector, would not object to collaborating with foreign capital and thus the relaxation of controls to facilitate the same, but they would not welcome encroachment by metropolitan capital. Their atti-

tude towards neo-liberal economic liberalisation was more ambiguous.

Support for liberalisation was growing not just among a section of industrial and agricultural capital. A whole new category of an altogether different kind of businessman was coming up, containing those who were more in the nature of upstarts, international racketseers, fixers, middlemen, often of 'non-resident Indian' origin or having NRI links, often linked to smuggling and the arms trade. Such private agents in any case did not have much of a production base, and their parasitic intermediary status as well as the international value of their operations naturally inclined them towards an 'open economy'.

And finally, one should not exclude a section of the top bureaucracy itself, which had close links with the IMF and the World Bank, either as ex-employees who might return any time to Washington DC, or through being engaged in dollar projects of various kinds, or as hopeful aspirants for a lucrative berth in Washington DC; the weight of this section in the top bureaucracy had been growing rapidly, and its inclination naturally was in the direction of the Washington consensus-style policy regime. Thus, quite apart from the growing leverage exercised by the international agencies in their capacity as 'donors', the internal contradictions of the earlier economic policy regime generated increasing support within the powerful and affluent sections of society for changing this regime in the manner desired by these agencies.

Besides this support from large corporate capital, the large and politically powerful urban middle classes, along with more prosperous rural farming groups, whose real incomes increased in the consumption-led boom of the 1980s, actively began to desire access to international goods and gave potency to the demands for trade liberalisation. And of course, the technological and media revolutions, especially the growing importance of satellite television, imparted a significant impetus to the international demonstration effect, which further fuelled liberalising and consumerist demands.

One important social change, which was arguably influential in creating pressures for the shift in macro-economic strategy, was the accelerated globalisation of a section of Indian society. Apart from the media, one major instrument of this was the post-war Indian diaspora. The 'NRI phenomenon', by means of which a qualitatively significant number of people from the Indian elites and middle classes actually became resident abroad, contributed in no small measure to consumerist demands for opening up the economy. The importance of non-resident Indians was not only because they were viewed as potentially important sources of capital inflow, but also because of their close links with (which in many cases made them almost indistinguishable from) dominant groups within the domestically resident society.

While the liberalising reforms failed in the aggrega-

tive sense and also in terms of delivering better conditions for most of the Indian population, there was anticipated and achieved a definite improvement in material conditions for a substantial section of the upper and middle classes. Since these groups had a political voice that was far greater than their share of population, they were able to influence economic strategy to their own material advantage. It is in this sense that local elites and middle classes were not only complicit in the process of integration with the global economy, but active proponents of the process.

The streak of venom

While the neo-liberal economic reform programme entailed a changed relationship of the government with economy and polity, it was not a 'withdrawal of the state' so much as a change in the character of the association. Thus, while the state effectively reneged on many of its basic obligations in terms of providing its citizens access to minimum food, housing, health and education, state actions remained crucial to the way in which markets functioned and the ability of capital to pursue its different goals. Government and bureaucracy remained crucial to economic functioning at the end of the decade of reforms; in fact the overall context was one of greater centralisation of economic and financial power. Many had believed that a 'retreat of the state' and the exposure of the economy to the discipline of the market would cut out arbitrariness of decision-making and the corruption that is inevitably associated with it. It would streamline the functioning of the economy by making it a 'rule-governed system', though admittedly the rules of the market.

What happened instead in the Indian economy during this period of neo-liberal structural adjustment was an increase in the level of corruption, cronyism, and arbitrariness to unprecedented levels. The privatisation exercise became another vehicle of primitive accumulation by private capital as it acquired public assets cheaply. Precious natural resources, hitherto kept inside the public sector, were handed over for a pittance (and alleged 'kickbacks') to private firms with dubious objectives. With the wider corruption that increasingly pervaded the system, the 'discipline of the market' proved to be a chimera.

Across the South Asian region, indeed, and not confined only to India, the period has witnessed an increase not only in levels of open corruption but also in a decline in substantive democracy and acceptance of basic socio-economic rights of citizens. While the formal denial of democracy has been more limited (as in Pakistan) across the region, the states have in effect become more centralising and more authoritarian in certain ways, even as their ability to control events and processes becomes more tenuous.

It could be argued that the centralised, centralising and increasingly authoritarian state is in fact a necessary requirement for this type of liberalisation which is

based more on external legitimisation (from foreign financiers and the perceived discipline of international markets) than on internal legitimacy derived from the support of the majority of its citizens. Such a change in the nature of the state may therefore be a fallout of the substantially increased income inequalities associated with liberalisation and the social and political processes that they unleash. These inequalities have accentuated certain longer-term structural features of South Asian societies, whereby more privileged groups have sought to perpetuate and increase their control over limited resources and channels of income generation in the economy. This in turn has involved the effective economic disenfranchisement of large numbers of people, including those who occupied particular physical spaces in rural areas, or were urban slum dwellers who constituted both the reserve army of labour for industrialisation and the most fertile source of labour supply for extra-legal activities. The basic disregard for 'rule of law', which has characterised economic functioning in most parts of South Asia over several decades, became even more pronounced in this period, with both economic and other lawlessness becoming accepted features pervading all aspect of civil society, and allowed everything – even the rights of citizens – to become marketable and negotiable. Meanwhile ordinary citizens tended to experience reduced civil liberties and security along with worsening socio-economic rights, which may even have been necessary to allow the more centralised state to direct particular forms of lawlessness to the benefit of powerful agents and groups

These concomitant trends of greater economic and financial centralisation and increased income inequality in turn operated to aggravate the various regional, fissiparous and community-based tensions that have become such a defining feature of South Asian societies and polities. One of the features of the region as a whole has been an increase in the degree of instability and the growing absence of security. It has been reflected not only in greater cross-border tension, as between India and Pakistan, but also in civil- and communally-inspired clashes within national boundaries. These conflicts both emerge from the prevailing material contradictions and contribute to them. They also serve the very important political economy use (for the states concerned) of distracting people from the real and pressing issues resulting from the government's denial of basic economic responsibility, and serve to direct anger in other less potentially threatening directions.

Obviously, not all such tension has had a direct and monocausal material underpinning. Nevertheless, it is true that the combination of greater material insecurity in terms of both lower real incomes and more precarious employment opportunities for a very large section

of the population, with the explosion of conspicuous consumption on the part of a relatively small but highly visible minority, can have very adverse social and political consequences. The frustration that may arise because of the gap between aspiration and reality for growing numbers of people in the system can be only too easily directed towards any apparent or potential competitor in such a system, or even to those who are not in competition but simply represent a group that can be attacked with relative ease.

The streak of venom that has been periodically directed towards various minority groups across the region can be seen as one expression of this trend. The inability to confront those who are responsible for the system, or actually benefiting from it, or even the lack of desire to confront these much more powerful elements, given that they still have the power to distribute some amount of material largesse, has meant that they could

The privatisation exercise became another vehicle of primitive accumulation by private capital as it acquired public assets cheaply

not become the direct objects of any aggressive vent for frustration. Rather, the outlet was increasingly found in terms of growing antagonism, increasingly finding violent expression, towards other categories of people who are nearer home, closer in terms of lifestyle and more susceptible to such attack. It is worth noting that often these groups are already the most disadvantaged and materially weak sections of society.

There is the broader international context to this, which is particularly reflective of this phase of imperialist globalisation. Across the world, in both developed and developing countries, there is a greater tendency on the part of the rulers, and those who are privileged in society, to ignore the interests of the majority and to blatantly push for those policies that will only benefit a small minority. The rise of finance capital and the hugely powerful role played by speculative capital in determining the fortunes of even large industrial countries has made this even sharper. Increasingly, governments point to the threat of capital flight as the reason why they cannot undertake basic measures for the welfare of most of the citizens, since anything that involves more expenditure for the people is inherently viewed with disfavour by international capital.

Of course, this international tendency then has its counterpart in each national economy, as particular groups that actually benefit from the process seek to establish that 'there is no alternative'. Which is why we have the spectacle of local elites and governments not just advocating, but also able to continue to push through, policies that are likely to be to the detriment of most of the people. The situation is neither inevitable nor permanent, however, and the contradictions in the global system that were outlined earlier in this paper mean that even in particular regions, forces that will instigate change are likely to surface.

Southeast Asia Imagining the region

The development of a regional Southeast Asian identity may not necessarily conform to the 'facts' of geography, history, culture or politics. The notion of Southeast Asia as a homogenous cultural or geographic entity can indeed be overstated. But its social and political identity, derived from the conscious promotion of the regional concept by its states, societies, and peoples, is what makes it a distinct idea in the latter part of the 20th century.

by **Amitav Acharya**

Southeast Asia is an 'imagined' region, its physical, political, social and cultural diversity being too immense to qualify it as having a distinctive personality. Yet, what gives it coherence must count as one of the finest acts of collective self-imagination undertaken by a region's nationalist political elite in the wake of their liberation from European and American colonialism. As with nationalism and nation-states, regions may be 'imagined', designed, constructed and defended.

This approach to the study of regions and regionalism shares many elements of the political scientist Benedict Anderson's approach to the study of nationalism and the nation-state, as set out in his work *Imagined Communities* (Verso, London, 1991). There are many parallels between 'imagining the nation' and 'imagining the region'. Particularly, Anderson's focus on the collective imagining of the nation by a nationalist elite is mirrored in the Southeast Asian region-building as a process of elite socialisation. But drawing upon the work of some other scholars, it is also important to highlight the role of traditional political-cultural frameworks and pre-capitalist commerce in building modern social identities.

Indeed, the term 'proximities' more accurately reflects the degree of socialisation and bonding evident in the case of Southeast Asia than 'communities', which is used to describe nations. Although a certain sense of community can develop within a region, as has been the case with Southeast Asia, the continued salience of state sovereignty (despite claims about its alleged obsolescence and erosion) makes regional communities fundamentally different from nation-states. Southeast Asia is still a region inhabited by highly sovereignty-conscious actors.

In the light of the tumultuous events of the past two years, it becomes additionally important to investigate the historical, material and social foundations of South-

east Asia as a region. These foundations are not tectonic plates, although they do sometimes collide and work at cross-purposes. However, none of these foundations are complete by themselves; and in the absence of an active and continuing process of social imagination and construction, the regional personality of Southeast Asia runs considerable risk of unravelling, notwithstanding strategic, economic and political imperatives to the contrary. As the political scientist, Donald Emerson, once suggested: "Nations come and go, why not regions".

The mandala of autonomous history

To a large extent, the conception of Southeast Asia as a region is a product of the historian's imagination. In the aftermath of the second world war, it was some Western scholars working on Southeast Asia who began to 'imagine' its past as a distinctive region. They were rebelling against an excessively Indo-centric and Sino-centric view of Southeast Asia. What had been called 'Southeast Asian studies' had been traditionally dominated by Indologists and Sinologists, many of whom saw the region as a cultural appendage of India and China, two of the older civilisations in the neighbourhood which had powerfully influenced the assortment of inland and maritime units that comprise today's Southeast Asia. In this sense, the region was 'east by south', that is, east of India and south of China, an expression that was as much a cultural statement as a geographic fact.

Moreover, as a result of the profound impact of the changes brought about by colonialism and Westernisation, "many Southeast Asian historians have interested themselves primarily in external stimuli, to the detriment of the study of indigenous institutions" – from the D Joel Steinberg edited *In Search of Southeast Asia* (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987). Post-war views of Southeast Asia, shaped by indigenous

nationalist thinking and Western scholarship, begun to imagine Southeast Asia's cultural and ideational autonomy from India and China. Moreover, Southeast Asians were viewed not as passive recipients of Indian and Chinese ideas, but active borrowers and modifiers. They were to be cast as makers, rather than victims of history.

The demand for an 'autonomous history' of Southeast Asia built upon the work of a Dutch economic historian Jacob Van Leur, who had as far back as 1932 challenged the notion that Indian cultural and political ideas were imposed on or imported into Southeast Asia through commerce (by Indian merchants or *Vaisyas*) and conquest (by Indian warriors, or *Kshatriyas*). Instead, Van Leur argued that Southeast Asian rulers had "called upon" Indian civilisation through the medium of the Brahmans, because Hindu political concepts helped them to enhance their legitimacy and organise their small territorial units into larger states. Historians pointed out that ancient Southeast Asians were actually quite selective in what they borrowed; ideas which they found useful and legitimising (such as the code of Manu or Kautilya's *Arthashastra*) were accepted, while those which did not fit into local traditions and beliefs (such as India's caste system) were rejected.

Van Leur's 'idea of the local initiative' was joined by similar concepts. The art historian HG Quaritch Wales spoke of "local genius" which modified Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture by infusing it with local meaning and forms. And the historian OW Wolters coined the notion of 'localisation' and 'relocalisation' to describe how Southeast Asian borrowers adapted Indian, Chinese and other foreign ideas to fit indigenous traditions in the fields of religion, arts, law, poetry and politics. Responding to the demands for an autonomous history, the geographic size of Southeast Asia accepted by the area specialist and the policy-maker alike was reduced. No longer were parts of India and China included in the region. More importantly, as pointed out by Emerson, Southeast Asia was no longer considered part of South Asia or East Asia, a crucial factor in the development of a regional concept.

Other historians also began to reconstruct Southeast Asia's past in ways that sought to uncover distinctive patterns of organisation and governance that dotted its ancient political landscape. The most famous of these was Wolters' characterisation of pre-colonial polities in Southeast Asia as *Mandalas*. These lacked territorial specificity, but they did represent an acute concentration of political management and moral authority, which made it possible to speak of a distinctive political order in Southeast Asia.

For Wolters, despite being "demographically fragmented", politically "multicentered", and socially "characterised by stubborn small-scale sub-regional



identities", pre-modern Southeast Asia did develop a common pattern of intra-regional authority thanks to the "patchwork of often overlapping mandalas, or 'circles of kings' in each of which one king, identified with divine and universal authority and defined as the conqueror, claimed personal hegemony over the others, who in theory were bound to be his obedient allies and vassals". This historian identified several mandalas which existed between the seventh and the 14th centuries, the most prominent examples being Srivijaya, Angkor, Ayudhya, and the Majapahit. Wrote Wolters:

A glance at some of the famous mandalas which adorn the textbooks of earlier Southeast Asian history shows that each of them increased flow of communications between some of the many centres in different parts of the region. We may too often tend to strike contrasts between these earlier states and the modern states as though great men in the past made exciting impressions in their own day but left nothing behind them of consequence. But there were some enduring consequences which helped to reduce the multicentric character of earlier Southeast Asia. (*In Search of Southeast Asia.*)

Others joined Wolters in describing common and

overlapping political forms in classical Southeast Asia: the Sri Lankan social-anthropologist who has worked extensively in Southeast Asia, Stanley Tambiah, for example, proposed the idea of 'galactic polities' to describe the Buddhist political world of mainland Southeast Asia. While Wolters focused on court politics and the religious 'great traditions', Anthony Reid, another prominent historian of Southeast Asia, urged students of Southeast Asian history to focus instead on "popular beliefs and social practices of ordinary Southeast Asians". He proposed that it was this which defined the "the common ground" among Southeast Asians, notwithstanding the region's "bewildering variety of language, culture, and religion" and its "historic openness" to foreign trade. Reid identified a number of such social institutions and practices which were absent in cultural India and China. For example in "the concept of spirit or 'soul stuff' animating living things, the prominence of women in descent, ritual matters, marketing and agriculture, and the importance of debt as a determinant of social obligations".

Even more importantly, Reid directed his attention to commercial interactions in building a pre-colonial region of Southeast Asia. In Reid's view, the period between the 15th century and 17th century constituted an age of commerce in Southeast Asia. During this period, Southeast Asian port cities, already having cultural and linguistic commonalities, were bound together in a structure of close economic interdependence. While the Indian Ocean trade network extended from eastern Africa and the Arabian peninsula to Japan, within this structure, the most intense commercial network was developed among the port cities of Southeast Asia.

Reid focuses on the high degree of commercial intercourse between the great maritime cities of Southeast Asia, such as Melaka, Pasai, Johor, Patani, Aceh and Brunei. The growth of intra-regional trade reduced cultural barriers, leading to the spread of Malay as the language of commerce. While the trade networks were pan-Asian, Reid found evidence that until the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century, the "trading links within the region continued to be more influential than those beyond it". Wrote Reid in *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680* (Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1988-93):

[M]aritime intercourse continued to link the peoples of Southeast Asia more tightly to one another than to outside influences down to the seventeenth century. The fact that Chinese and Indian influences came to most of the region by maritime trade, not by conquest or colonisation, appeared to ensure that Southeast Asia retained its distinctiveness even while borrowing numerous elements from those larger centres. What did not happen (with the partial

exception of Vietnam) was that any part of the region established closer relations with China and India than with its neighbours in Southeast Asia.

This historical imagination of an autonomous Southeast Asia has not gone unchallenged. The critics argue that there is no firm archaeological evidence that decisively affirms Van Leur's 'idea of the local initiative'. Reid has been accused of unduly reifying intra-Southeast Asian commercial transactions that could not realistically be isolated from the larger Indian Ocean network, as well as ignoring crucial mainland-maritime variations in classical (as well as contemporary) Southeast Asia's political and commercial landscape.

Meanwhile, Wolter's Mandala thesis has been attacked as an Indocentric notion (after all, Wolter was an Indologist), since it is impossible to prove the existence of this notion given the paucity of archaeological evidence. These criticisms, however, do not detract from

the important influence the project of historical imagination has had in drawing attention to the regional identity of Southeast Asia. If regions are imagined constructs, then no one does a better job of offering legitimacy to the act of imagining than the historian who can claim familiarity with an era long gone by.

Southeast Asia is still a region inhabited by highly sovereignty-conscious actors

Conflict, communication, cooperation

The conception of Southeast Asia as a geo-strategic and political region of modern nation-states draws from far more recent events in historical time. Its original reference point was Lord Mountbatten's Allied Command for Southeast Asia established during the second world war. The command, which was ironically headquartered in South Asia's Ceylon, helped to make Southeast Asia a "fixed and practical term even in the United States" during the war, notes Reid.

Another strand of Southeast Asia's geopolitical lineage came with accelerated decolonisation and the outbreak of the Cold War. Southeast Asia now acquired a growing familiarity as a 'region of revolt' (to borrow the historian Milton Osborne's term), as "the Balkans of the Orient", and finally as a hotbed of communism and hence a key flashpoint of the Cold War. The region's proneness to strife became a distinctive feature, prompting the Southeast Asia specialist, Bernard K Gordon (*The Dimensions of Conflict in Southeast Asia*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1966), to write that one of the factors "which makes Southeast Asia a 'region' is the widespread incidence of conflict, along with some attempts at cooperation", and that "instability is the one feature of Southeast Asia that gives the region much of its contemporary importance".

Conflict, in Gordon's view, was a form of contact and communication, since much of it involved the interference of Southeast Asia's leaders in the affairs of neighbours. He wrote, "The region's leaders...have been

thrust into intimate contact with their neighbours, often through conflict: the communications developed as a result are one factor which perhaps more than anything else compels us to accept the fact that a sense of 'region' does now exist in Southeast Asia".

This negative strategic perception of Southeast Asia would not change until the 1970s, when the region finally shed its image as a conflict zone, especially in view of far more intense and enduring conflicts in neighbouring South Asia, West Asia and North Asia. Yet, where great-power geopolitics let off, domestic politics took over in defining Southeast Asia's regional identity in primarily negative terms. The new pro-Western states of Southeast Asia made a collective descent into authoritarianism in the course of the late 1960s and 1970s. While the European Community defined its regional identity as a grouping of liberal democracies, underpinned by the Kantian dictum that democracies avoid warring against each other, Southeast Asia developed its own version of illiberal peace, a regional system in which authoritarian states developed long-term habits of peaceful existence out of a common concern for regime survival.

Moreover, throughout the post-1975 period, Southeast Asia remained ideologically polarised. Vietnam, leading an Indochina bloc that included Laos and the auto-genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia (renamed 'Kampuchea' by its captors), challenged the regional conception developed by its rival grouping that had organised itself since 1967 as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While the latter professed to represent the whole of Southeast Asia, Vietnam laid a firm and coercive claim to Indochina as a distinctive and a 'single strategic unit'.

The East Asia historian, Wang Gungwu's, distinction between 'moderate' and 'revolutionary' types of nationalism elegantly explains the strategic polarisation of Southeast Asia as a by-product of the region's competing conceptions of nationalism. The three countries swept by revolutionary nationalisms – Indonesia, Vietnam and Burma – also proved to be least amenable to regional cooperation and identity-seeking at the outset of the postcolonial era. While Burma drifted toward isolationism, Sukarno's Indonesia proved expansionist. Communist Vietnam showed open contempt for ASEAN's vision of regional cooperation. Meanwhile, countries that experienced a more moderate nationalism, such as Malaysia and Thailand, played an instrumental role in regional cooperation.

The ASEAN-Indochina ideological polarisation between the mid-1970s and late 1980s, which is usually seen as a by-product of the Cold War, was thus not entirely unrelated to the political legacy of colonialism. The moderates and revolutionaries held radically different conceptions of Southeast Asia as a region. The

revolutionaries rejected the idea of a region dominated by Western powers, while the moderates had more to fear from a region dominated by China. While the revolutionaries hoped for a confederated region, the moderates would only accept regional cooperation based on the principle of equality and sovereignty. The moderates desired a region freely and multilaterally linked to the outside world, while the revolutionaries would accept this only if the communist powers were integral to this external linkage.

It was not until the final Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and the subsequent Paris Peace Agreement securing Cambodia's future as an independent nation that the decades-long polarisation of Southeast Asian finally ended. The regional elite was quick to point out that their forerunner's alleged dream of 'one Southeast Asia' was now close to fruition. ASEAN quickly expanded its membership to include the 10 countries that the regional elites insisted were always meant to be part of Southeast Asia (thereby conveniently ignoring the fact that Sri Lanka had been invited to join as a founder-member of ASEAN, an invitation it had declined, much to its regret).

Even after the realisation of One Southeast Asia, however, old divisions have persisted. The integration of Indo-Chinese states, and more importantly, of Burma (Myanmar) into ASEAN, carried out with undue haste and with little advance planning – in marked contrast to the European Union's project of membership expansion – has proven to be a daunting task, a burden that has undermined South-east Asian regionalism to a much greater extent than the economic crisis of 1997.

If the impact of political and strategic forces in the making of Southeast Asia was ambiguous and indeterminate, the other key material determinant in the form of intra-regional economic linkages was even more problematic. Colonialism had terminally damaged the 'age of commerce' in Southeast Asia. The post-colonial nation-states of the region, like counterparts in other parts of the developing world, maintained closer economic links with the former metropolitan powers than with each other. Rather than being complementary, the raw material-producing economies of Southeast Asia were competitive and servicing their colonial masters.

Since economic interdependence was not a given, it had to be created. Yet, non-communist Southeast Asia was noticeably unsuccessful in organising itself into an economic region, despite professing this objective for over three decades. Intra-regional trade has seldom touched 20 percent of the region's total trade. Economic disparities among members have been accentuated by unruly membership expansion, thereby producing an economically divided Southeast Asia of 'haves' and 'have nots'. The ASEAN Free Trade Area, the ultimate

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weapon that could deliver the idea of an economic region, is mired in uncertainties and exclusions (of items from the tariff-reduction list), as well as attempts by Singapore to leapfrog the region and develop free trade links with major economic powers outside.

Sub-regional cooperation (the so-called 'growth triangles') seemed to be an appealing idea in the 1990s; but it is rarely spoken of these days, especially in the aftermath of the regional economic downturn. In the meantime, Southeast Asia remains more integrated with its northeast Asian neighbours, China, South Korea, Japan, than within itself. The emergence of macro-regional entities, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group and now the ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN plus Japan, China and South Korea) unit attests to this reality.

Politically engineering a region-ness

As we see from the preceding analysis, Southeast Asia's claim to be a region cannot be entirely justified on the basis of strategic, political and economic factors and dynamics. To complete the analysis, we need to examine Southeast Asia's regional identity as a social construct. And as it exists, this identity is carved out of the manifest diversity and disjuncture among its constituent national units, through an act of political engineering by a group of like-minded elites who have nurtured and employed a wide variety of tools, including myths and symbols (such as the 'ASEAN Way'), as well as a notions of collective identity (such as 'One Southeast Asia').

A common culture is not adequate basis either of regional construction or of regional unity. If it were so, the Arab world should have been the most cohesive region in the world today. The quality of socialisation, ultimately, decides whether regions rise or disappear. The social construction of 'region-ness' requires a continuous process of interaction and socialisation.

The original proponents of this socialisation were Southeast Asian nationalists. "The isolation of centuries had to be breached; lost ties had to be restored", wrote the Filipino policy-shaper Alejandro Melchor Jr in one of the most remarkable collection of essays on Southeast Asian area studies, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta, 1975). Unlike in Europe, regionalism in Southeast Asia has been made to serve the interest of nationalism. "The search for national solidarity and unity...is replicated, albeit on a broader scale and less urgent, but equally persistent, in the relations among nations of Southeast Asia", wrote Melchor.

Southeast Asia saw a dramatic phase of regional socialisation in the 1970s and 1980s, when ASEAN's founders set about a deliberate process of collective identity-building while recognising the cultural diversity of their members and fully respecting their sovereignty

as nation-states. Unlike the European Union, this was not a sovereignty-defying project. Supra-nationalism was incompatible with the long and hard-fought struggle against colonialism. But socialisation, especially elite socialisation, was undertaken as a way of reducing the tyranny of structural diversity and pre-empting post-colonial divisions from erupting into violent conflict. As a result, the original members of ASEAN have not fought a war against each other since 1967. Conflicts have been 'swept under the carpet', admittedly to reappear now and then, but not as yet to a degree that could justify resort to war. Nationalism has not waned. It has been subsumed under a socially constructed framework of regionalism.

The expansion of ASEAN to assimilate Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma after the end of the Cold War represented a new phase in the process of regional construction. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, the former Thai deputy foreign minister, argued in a 1997 paper (delivered at a conference on 'Asia in the XXI Century' at

The original members of ASEAN have not warred with each other since 1967

Hanoi) that having all 10 countries of Southeast Asia under the banner of a single regional grouping would "enhance the region's security and well-being", and represent "the fulfilment of a dream to create a region-wide organisation, which had begun some three decades before". Documents such as 'Shared Destiny: Southeast Asia in the 21st Century', issued in 1993

at the launch of the ASEAN-Vietnam Task Force Draft, and 'Southeast Asia Beyond the Year 2000: A Statement of Vision', issued in 1994 by the civil society group, 'Citizens of Southeast Asia', attest to the fact, as political scientist, Carolina Hernandez, writes, that "one Southeast Asia...is a goal increasingly captivating the imagination and support of the region's political and other opinion leaders from academe, the media, the private sector, and other professionals" (in the paper 'One Southeast Asia in the 21st Century: Opportunities and Challenges', presented at the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies convention, University of Laval, Quebec City, 1995).

There remain several gaps in the social construction of Southeast Asia as a region, gaps which this writer has discussed in his 2000 work, *The Quest for Identity*. Failure to extend the socialisation process from the elite level to the people at large is especially debilitating to the future of Southeast Asian regionalism. Regional coherence is undermined by the avoidable squabbling between the founding regionalist states, such as Singapore and Malaysia. Moreover, the social construction of Southeast Asia is being challenged by the forces of globalisation. The Asian economic crisis underscored the vulnerability of Southeast Asia to the forces of global capitalism, which has become deeply embedded into the regional national economies.

Over and above this, the region now faces a new menace, that of transnational terrorism. Whether South-

east Asia has actually become global terror's 'second front' can and should be debated, since the claim often relies on uncertain and unverifiable evidence. Terrorism, however, does contain within it the potential to serve as a common focus of danger against which a new sense of purpose may be instilled into the region's floundering multilateralism. However, response to terror can engender division as much as unity; differing domestic circumstances and strategic priorities of Southeast Asian states can frustrate any effort to develop cohesion around this transnational threat.

The prospects of American support against the terrorist challenge is insufficient to hold the region together. To overcome this challenge and develop a new re-

gional identity into the 21st century, Southeast Asian states must return to the building block, and develop the political will to preserve their hard-earned regional identity. Increased regionalism, at the level of governments and civic organisations, is the only hope for the region to remain an entity in the face of dark clouds that have gathered on its horizons since the outbreak of the Asian economic crisis in 1997. But Southeast Asia will remain a politically important, if analytically fuzzier, notion as long as local governments and elites find it useful to advance their common economic, political, and geo-strategic interests and objectives. Regionalism and regional identity-building will continue to be a key determinant of the idea of region. △

The awareness of continent

On the way to dominating us, the West defined Asia for the Asian and continues to do so in the post-colonial era. But other than a landmass called a continent and given a name, there is nothing that binds 'Asians'.

by **GP Deshpande**

There was once a very famous book titled *Asia and Western Dominance* (G Allen and Unwin, London, 1953) by the historian-diplomat KM Panikkar. The book made quite a splash when it first appeared half a century ago, but now it is nearly forgotten. While it still does find mention in PhD dissertations and books on modern Indian history, Panikkar's work is no longer part of a living discourse either in Asia or elsewhere.

In many ways, the language that Panikkar employed appears almost forgotten. Nobody talks of Western dominance anymore. There is occasional reference to Asia, but unlike as in Panikkar's heyday, the term is not used in any political or cultural sense. 'Asia' is reserved for mere geographic usage. When Panikkar wrote his book, everybody was certain what Asia was and meant. Today, nobody is. The term is used more to denote a landmass which is not Europe or Africa. Indeed, was there ever a meaningful reality called Asia?

It is interesting to note that most of the Indian languages, the classical Indian tongues such as Sanskrit or Pali, or even modern languages, some of which are 1000 years old, do not have a word for Asia. At best, they have coinage such as '*Ashiya*', which is nothing but a transliteration of 'Asia'. In other words, the Indian language world has no awareness of an Asia from pre-colonial times. I am not certain if the Chinese word for Asia, '*Yazhou*', is also not merely a transliteration. A modern dictionary of Chinese gives the meaning of

Yazhou merely as a word for Asia. But we do know that the classical Chinese tradition had hardly any awareness of Asia.

It is possible to argue that it was Europe which created the notion or awareness of Asia. For the Europeans, Asia constituted the world to discover and to dominate. Asia was in that sense a territory to be colonised. One can even say that historically Asia was, to use the Chinese term *Ya*, 'inferior' or second in status. Europe invented Asia as an area to be occupied and exploited and, perhaps for that reason, to be celebrated. When the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, the queen's representative spoke of connecting the two continents of Europe and Asia. Interestingly, he went on to add that the canal would also link two periods of history. In his view, Asia belonged to a historical epoch while Europe was contemporary. The dominating colonialism was modern and contemporary while the colonised and the dominated world was the dated 'Asian' world.

The world and word of Asia would have been discarded and forgotten if the phenomenon of Asia was limited to what the queen's representative had said at the opening of the Suez Canal. The colonial powers had made the interesting connection between the civilisational greatness of the lands they were going to rule or dominate and the historical need of that dominance for the colonised lands themselves. Lord Balfour defended the British role in Egypt in these terms in 1910.

This need not be taken only as an exercise in cynicism as it no doubt also was. There was an orientalist view of the greatness of the 'other' necessarily involved in this exercise. The orientalist scholarship of the 18th and 19th centuries, as also British and German romanticism, had invented an Asia, which the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist leadership, both political and cultural, internalised. It was comforting and even flattering to see that European scholarship was interested in 'our' cultural achievements. The paradox in all this was that the Europeans were also introducing us to our own historical past. The German poet Goethe's apostrophe to Kalidasa's play *Shakuntalam* made us aware of the greatness of the classical Sanskrit drama.

A typical Asia-Europe relationship had begun. Europe defined Asia for us. We did not like it and at the same time lapped it up. For colonising Europe, the notions of cultural and civilisational greatness were both a historical reality and an instrument of dominance. Asia as Western dominance was as much a reality as Asia and Western dominance.

The fact of the matter is that there is in reality no such entity as Asia. Even the orientalist scholarship estimated the several Asian civilisations differently. It was far more respectful of the Chinese civilisation than it was of the Hindu-Bauddha or the Islamic, respectively of the Subcontinent and the Arab-Persian world. While Edward Said has

argued that the thrust of orientalist scholarship was far more dismissive of the West Asian Islamic civilisation than it was of the other civilisations, that may not be entirely correct. The Hindu-Bauddha world was as much demonised as the Islamic world was.

Perhaps the Chinese world at least partially escaped this demonisation (through simultaneous glorification) because it escaped total colonisation as a result of which there was no rupture in its political tradition. The Confucian world remained a distant world, which the Europeans were destined to only vaguely and respectfully understand. James Legge, the Jesuit missionary, translator of the Chinese classics, once wrote of the surprise many expressed at his respect for the Chinese classics. He then went on to explain his respect for those classics. No Indian classic has ever received such awe-inspiring respect. Even the Goethe apostrophe is qualified.

Many Asias, none Asia

Europe thus not only invented Asia; it also invented many Asias. We have now to come to terms with these many partly real and partly unreal Asias. Asia is a myth. Certainly one Asia is. And this simply is why no pan-Asian movement ever succeeded. This is also the reason why Asian consciousness is on the decline if it has not already disappeared. A shared history of colonialism of barely a couple of centuries could not have made

one region of many which had their own heritages going back two millennia. And indeed, it did not happen.

The modern Asian mind remains torn between an imposed cultural and civilisational unity and actual divisions on the ground, including hostilities. India and Pakistan are a good example of this phenomenon. There are no deeper hostilities and distrust than exist between the people of these two countries, even though no two peoples have as much in common. Indeed, the recent history of South Asia, extrapolated to the larger continent, is standing refutation of the notion of Asia.

There is a landmass called Asia. There are also billions of people called Asians. But these lands or these people have no common conception of Asia. Such notions of Asia as they have do not affect their daily life or their mutual relationships. 'Asians' remain as distant from each other as possible.

The first step in the European exercise of the creation of the myth of an externally defined Asia (in order perhaps to define, in turn, a distinct European identity)

Move away from notions of landmasses, retrieve the civilisations of these landmasses

was to establish the myth of Asia. The second step was to sever the historical link between Greece and West Asia. Modern Europe thus became a distinct Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian civilisation, which has now come to achieve a remarkable economic and political union. Asia was denied this chance of defining itself. The post-colonial dominance of Asia continues precisely

because the conception of Asia as 'dominance' persists. Whatever strength the Asian consciousness might have had during anti-colonial times, it has lost it completely during our globalised times. Europe (naturally inclusive of North America as it is but an extension of Europe) is a unified reality; Asia is a divided landmass, a myth constantly challenged by its unreality.

It is also arguable that the myth of Asia in reality weakened the more palpable realities of its civilisations. Europe needed this to happen. Europe does not wish to survive only as a strong economic and political union. It wishes to survive also as the dominating and, preferably, the only civilisation. We can think of the traditional world as made of many civilisations. Perhaps it is time to move away from the notions of landmasses and retrieve the civilisations of these landmasses. There has to be a consolidation of the sense of the Arab-Persian civilisation or the Hindu-Bauddha-Indian Islamic civilisation. The world from the Mediterranean to China has lost its civilisational perspective, which needs retrieving. That fundamentalism of one variety or the other dominates this area is in itself an indication of the amnesia that this world suffers from.

Curiously, fundamentalism is a Western invention, with the West having carefully nurtured the relevant notions and practices. The West has attacked these fundamentalist notions only when they have worked

against its interests. The American tolerance of Saudi Arabian fundamentalism and its impatience with Iranian fundamentalism is a good example to prove the point. We have here a strange but interesting chain of developments. The myth of Asia also turned the history of Asia into a myth.

Fundamentalism denies historical specificity. It does not see the difference between, shall we say, the Muslims of Pakistan and those of Arabia. Nor will it recognise the difference between the Christians of the Philippines and of, say, Brazil. In the case of Europe, the totality of civilisation brings the European people together and cements them together into a prosperous union. In the case of the so-called Asian lands, faith is the only arbiter of identity and as such is used to divide the Asian people irreparably.

It would be foolhardy to deny the importance of faith. But it is not and need not be the only decisive element of identity. It is the orientalist logic, which described the Eastern (read Asian) people and traditions as essentially 'spiritual', that has been now thoroughly internalised and has been responsible for the loss of our historical memory. The ongoing march of globalisation only worsens the amnesia.

The so-called Asian people thus live among the ruins of their civilisations. Their main battle is one of identity and where to locate it. The Islamic and the Hindu-Buddha worlds are far from victory in this battle, if they have not already lost it. From the Taliban to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, it is a long and painful story. But it would be an error to ignore its historical and political roots. Equally, one should not forget the fact that the reconstruction of Asia under the aegis of colonising Europeans was at least partially responsible for the present denouement. The earlier we give up the myth of Asia the better it will be for the people who inhabit the continent.

China is China

China seems to have escaped this self-defeating identity crisis. It appears as if the Confucian civilisation has been eminently successful in determining who the Chinese are and, perhaps more importantly, who they are not. There is no decline of faith in China (attacks on

groups such as the Falun Gong notwithstanding), and yet faith is not a *sine qua non* of being Chinese. The Confucian civilisation is better able to face the challenges of globalisation and Western civilisation precisely because of its historicist view of itself. It would appear that the Chinese have matched the Hegelian and historicist views of the Europeans themselves. The Persians and the Arabs or the Indians and the Pakistanis have not managed to do it, at least as yet. Indeed, vague notions of this sort do exist everywhere, but so unformed as to appear more often than not in a distorted manner.

It is very instructive to see the difference between the Chinese world and, shall we say, the South Asian world. During the heyday of empire, the myth of Asia had penetrated the world of ideas within South Asia. This was the reason that ideas such as pan-Asianism or pan-Islamism held such sway in the Subcontinent. China has never shared this perspective on Asia. There has been no 'Asia' as a decisive idea in the Chinese mind. There have only been China and the Chinese civilisation.

Does this mean that the Chinese subscribe to the idea of 'clash of civilisations'? They do not. This is not the place to go into the thesis of 'the clash of civilisations'. But, we should note

that the theory at least partially serves the purpose of inducing such a clash, of course, to the immeasurable and inevitable advantage of the West. The current crisis involving Iraq is a case in point. If the concept of Asia served a purpose for imperialism and colonialism at one time, the concept of 'the clash of civilisations' serves the same purpose today. It would appear that the Chinese leadership has grasped this fundamental truth.

We may be at the end of the period of Asia, 'Asia' as a playground of Western dominance that is. Such 'Asian' states and people as see this clearly stand a chance of surviving the current Western drive of new initiatives at domination. If China is not alone in its undertaking and in fact is joined, for example, by the people of South Asia, we might actually see an emergence of Asia, an Asia which is neither an area of Western dominance nor merely a concept that is a part of the Western repertoire of concepts as 'dominance'. ▽

The myth of Asia turned the history of Asia into a myth

South Asian Classifieds

Research Awards

Mahbub ul Haq (MUH) Research Awards for Collaborative Research 2003
Regional Centre for Strategic Studies
COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

This grant is designed for collaborative research for two participants from different South Asian countries on the topic security with respect to governance, environment and/or globalisation. Application deadline 28 Feb 2003, more information available at www.rcss.org

Fellowships

Rockefeller Humanities Fellowships, 2003-04
University of Kentucky
LEXINGTON, KY, USA

The University of Kentucky encourages applicants from the global South to apply for three-year fellowships on topics including globalisation, democracy, equity and sustainability. Application deadline 3 Feb 2003, more information available at www.appalachiancenter.org

Fellowships

Institute for the Advanced Study of India (UPIASI)
DELHI, INDIA

Young and mid-career South Asian scholars are invited to submit proposals on six-to-nine month research projects. Application deadline 10 Jan 2003, more information available at www.asianscholarship.org

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Manto

IT DOES not matter to Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), who died almost 50 years ago this January, who has been elevated to be the new Pakistani prime minister: nobody is going to give him state honour, for that has been reserved for the mediocre. While all the worthy think-tanks were trying to keep a tab on Islamabad's horse traders, over at the American University in Washington DC, Mustafa Kamal Pasha, the renowned social scientist, was organising a seminar on Manto under the auspices of the South Asia Project. The featured speaker was Khalid Hasan, who translated Manto from Urdu into English for Penguin's five collections. He gave a passionate account of Manto's life and the miseries and insults the great writer had to bear, moving the newly initiated audience with passages from Manto's short stories.

Manto, born on 11 May in the



Punjabi village of Papraudi on the Samrala-Chawa-Payal road, in Ludhiana district, did not have a happy childhood. Considered an under-achiever in school, particularly in Urdu, in MAO College, he was in Faiz Ahmad Faiz's English class. He did not complete college though, choosing instead to get on with the business of experimenting with life. In Bombay, he made a good living from the film industry, scripting over a dozen films, and film magazines for which he wrote – this was probably the most comfortable period of his life. In Lahore post-partition, he never found a regular job, spent his time drinking and lived impoverished.

From all accounts, Manto lived in abject poverty in Lahore. He wrote short stories for 10-20 rupees to buy liquor, and liquor was all that he bought. It was not long before Manto's mind, like his liver, gave way. At one point, he was interned at the mental hospital only to be released when he demanded improvements in the hospital in-

frastructure. His masterpiece, *Toba Tek Singh*, which describes the exchange of mental asylum inmates between two countries, was written after this episode.

Manto's close friends claim that his wife, the late Safia Begum, and his in-laws constantly mistreated him. The literary magazine, *Nairangi-Khial*, published the transcript of a dialogue between Urdu critics Muzaffar Ali Syed, Munir Ahmad Sheikh and Professor GM Asar, a close friend and neighbour of Manto, in which Asar asserted that Mrs Manto was fed up with her husband and wished him dead.

Great creative personalities often burn themselves to illuminate the world. Shiv Kumar Batalvi is reported to have said, "We don't do PhDs; other people will do PhDs on us". Such great artists come as a blessing to the world. But, not for themselves or their families, and one can hardly blame their families or the monotonous world for making their lives difficult.

However, sometimes individuals try to ease the artist's pain. Qudarat-Ullah Hahab gave Manto an ice factory for his bread and butter

which Indians constitute the greatest number) make up 25 percent of all teachers, 55 percent of pharmacists, 80 percent of nurses and 84 percent of doctors.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as oil profits fuelled huge gains in wealth, many gulf states began contracting out low-level jobs to people from the poorer countries to the east

across the Indian Ocean and hiring overseas servants for their homes. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, an estimated three million migrant workers resided in those two states. Nearly all of them fled to their countries of origin, in many cases losing their posses-

without legal protection, workers from the Subcontinent form the backbone of the West Asian oil industry. And while Europe and North America remain the most coveted destinations for skilled emigrants, the Arab world is now home to tens of thousands of South Asian professionals as well. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, migrant workers (of



Up in smoke: A 1991 Kuwaiti oil rig fire.

Working around war

AS THE possibility of a US-led war against Iraq has grown during the past four months, much attention has been paid to the concerns and opinions of Arab governments and peoples that would likely be affected, directly or indirectly, by the conflict. Considerably less concern, however, has been expressed about the fate of the millions of migrant labourers working in oil, domestic service, information technology and medical professions in West Asia.

While there are no authoritative counts, unofficial estimates of the number of South Asian migrant workers in the Persian gulf states hover around three million. In Kuwait, the South Asian population totals more than 750,000 – greater than the population of Kuwaitis. Because South Asian labour is cheap, eagerly mobile and largely

earning. And, often Manto would walk away from the dock with some unnamed admirer having paid the 300-rupee fine for him. Many admirers of Manto lament his untimely death at the age of 42. But, one should focus on what he created in that short period. Short stories, a novel, radio plays, essays, personal sketches and film scripts, Manto was as prolific as he was gifted.

Manto had a unique insight into the world. He looked at society with a consciousness uncoloured by nationalism, religion or other institutional societal biases. Challenging the most sacrosanct norms that impinge on human creativity, he negated narrow definitions of nationalism, exposing hypocrisy and morbid sexuality in masterpieces such as *Toba Tek Singh*, *Tetwal ka Kutta*, *Khol do* and *Dhuwan*.

Manto was fortunate to have escaped heavy persecution for writing what his heart desired. Had he been born in today's Pakistan, he might have had a difficult time. Just as well that the bigots and the hypocrites do not honour him. ▽

*Manzur Ejaz
Washington DC*

sions and savings. Not all, however, succeeded in escaping the hostilities or in gaining the protection of their host governments. A reported 35,000 Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan housemaids remained in Kuwait throughout the occupation and war. In Saudi Arabia, the government initially refused to distribute gas masks to migrant workers.

Some attempts have been made in recent years to protect the rights of migrant labourers, although these efforts remain incomplete. In 1990, the UN General Assembly approved the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Resolution 45/158), which calls on governments to provide equitable treatment to migrants. None of the resolution's 93 articles, however, deal with the responsibility of host or home countries for migrants in the event of war, and, inci-

Cops and robbers

THE COMPETITION to be the most corrupt country in South Asia in 2002 drew to an official close in December, with Transparency International awarding that tarnished trophy to Bangladesh. With a corruption perception score of 1.2 on a 0-10 scale (0 being highly corrupt, 10 being highly clean), Dhaka easily retained its 2001 crown and left Pakistan, at second place with a 2.6 score, wallowing in its relative institutional integrity.

The survey, which involved more than 16,000 interviews in five countries, named Sri Lanka (3.7) as the least corrupt country in the region, and India (2.7) pulled in almost even with its western neighbour. Nepal did not receive an overall score, and the survey did not include Bhutan or the Maldives.

According to survey data, the sector that is by far perceived as the most corrupt in South Asia is the police, with an astounding 100 percent of respondents in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka who had had some interaction with the cops saying that corruption was involved.

dentally, no Western government or gulf state has signed or ratified the convention. Since 1990, a 'December 18 Movement' has emerged to advocate for the rights of migrants, and in 2000, it succeeded in getting the UN to declare an international day of migrants.

If a war against Iraq does begin in the coming months, the lives of millions of South Asian migrants living and working in the gulf states could be adversely affected. The lessons of 1990-91 appear not have been learned, judging from the persisting lack of international legal protections and the dearth of government or media interest in the issue back here in South Asia, in the home countries of many of the migrants. If the bombs do start to fall, it is clear that these migrants will have to fend for themselves to protect their savings, possessions and lives. ▽



But while police problems were ubiquitous, the most frequent specific complaint varied: bribes paid to get released from false arrest (Bangladesh), political interference to subvert normal process (India), bribes paid for first information reports (Nepal and Pakistan), and bribes paid to avoid arrest (Sri Lanka).

The only country whose respondents did not place cop corruption at the top of the list was Nepal, where complaints against land administration and customs outnumbered those against the police. Even so, police bribes in the Hindu kingdom are not paltry; the average payment stands at USD 22, significantly above Sri Lanka (USD 14) and India (USD 16). But if the cost of a bribe increases with the latitude, avoid at all costs paying off policeman in the Subcon's west or east – the average bribe in Pakistan is USD 42, and Bangladesh is home to the incredible USD 173 payoff.

As a matter of etiquette, it is important to note that while in most parts of South Asia bribes are extorted by police officers, in Sri Lanka it is more common to voluntarily offer a payment. Given that the southern island sits atop the development hierarchy in South Asia, perhaps other South Asians should aspire to one day actively participate in corruption rather than be its passive victims. Just a thought to keep in mind as the 2003 corruption season opens. ▽

Carter cometh

PERHAPS TO atone for some unreported misdemeanours of his peanut-farming youth, former United States president Jimmy Carter has spent the past two decades of post-presidency on one continuous, meandering virtuous crusade. He first founded Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit that builds houses for the poor, and then decided to globalise it. And after Carter bounded onto the world stage as a president-reincarnate-altruist, he has been difficult to remove from it, materialising like a phantasm in the world's seemingly intractable con-

flicts that even the Pentagon is afraid of sticking its warheads into.

So it should come as no surprise that America's 39th president is now said to be heading for South Asian shores, where conflict can be relied on to be in perennial need of solving. The mission statement of the Carter Centre, based in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, includes a Biblical-sounding mandate to work for the eradication of "disease, hunger, poverty, conflict and oppression".



How Carter sees himself...

Given that at least two or three of those items can probably be tied into the India-Pakistan feud, Carter has announced he is heading Wagah way to broker peace and, perhaps, make a bid for a Nobel repeat. During the past few months, the Carter Centre has hosted several meetings of Indians, Pakistanis and – Kashmiris! – to lay the groundwork for a peace assault, and rumours emanating from the Georgian locale suggest that laure-

Khumbu's Sherpa: community and coping

THE OPPORTUNITIES generated by the tourism industry in Nepal have not gone unnoticed by the Sherpas' former trading partners. While earlier Sherpas used to cross the 19,000-foot Nangpa La pass to Tibet, now Tibetan traders, driven by the financial opportunities tourists bring to the Khumbu region, come to Namche in droves bearing Chinese manufactured goods.

With this influx of merchants has come many problems. Yaks carrying Tibetan goods compete with the local livestock for fodder, and the Khumbu pastures are beginning to show the effects of overgrazing. The increase in traffic has also led to the damage of trekking trails and bridges, with the expense and burden of repair falling on the local population. Unlike the previous trading relationship where food, animals and other valuable products were brought into the Khumbu region, the Tibetan merchants now bring trinkets to sell to tourists.

The overall Sherpa economy benefits little from this new trade run by Tibetans. However, Sherpas who are not part of the tourism industry are interested in cultivating mutually supportive cross-border trade relationships with Tibet. Wary of the vagaries of tourism, they are

also beginning to see the benefits of a more diverse economy. To countervail some of the negative trends, the Sherpas suggest the establishment of a trading post/camping site for Tibetan traders, charging reciprocal grazing fees, and a tax on yak brought into the area.

The Sherpas are an ethnic group that lives in the high-altitude valleys of eastern Nepal. The Khumbu region is said to have been settled around 1540 CE. Sherpas man the gateway to the southern approach to Mount Everest, or Chomolongma.

The upper belt of Khumbu valley includes the Namche, Khumjung, Khunde, Thame, Phortse and Pangboche villages, and is inhabited by a population of about 3500 Sherpas. However, although the Khumbu region is recognised as the original Sherpa home – certainly it is the most famous due to Everest – more than 250,000 Sherpas live in the eastern mountain rimland of Nepal, including the regions of Rolwaling and Helambu.

Sherpas are Tibetan Buddhists of the Nyingma sect. They were probably nomadic herders before the British introduced the potato (a native of the Andes) in the early 1800s. Even today, Sherpas mostly farm potatoes and agriculture is at subsistence level; they herd yaks and naks (male yaks). Potatoes, which grow at altitudes up to 14,000 feet, are a

significant portion of the diet. Traditionally, yaks and naks provide dairy products, meat, hide for leather, wool, dung for fuel and fertiliser, and were used to carry products from village to village.

Trade is a historically significant aspect of Sherpa economic life. Straddling one of the main trade routes across the central Himalaya, the Nangpa La pass to Tibet, Sherpas were for centuries middlemen in the trade between Tibet and the lower regions of Nepal. Accustomed to living at high altitude, the high pass was not difficult for Sherpas and their yak trains. Sherpas would transport grain, clarified butter, dried potatoes, unrefined sugar, vegetable dyes, incense, handmade paper, buffalo hides and cotton cloth to Tibet. In exchange, they would return with tea, salt, sheepskin, fur, woollen clothes, carpets, Chinese silk, hats and boots, silver ornaments, porcelain cups, hand-printed religious books and various ritual objects. Livestock were also exchanged, with hybrid cattle known as *zopkios* going up and the *nak* coming down from Tibet.

Thus, successful business between Nepal and Tibet brought much wealth to the Khumbu region. But the Nepal-Tibet trading system broke down with the Chinese occupation, and it hit the Sherpas hard. Eventually, the Chinese authorities reopened the frontier, allowing lim-

ate James Earl himself will be arriving in South Asia sometime in early 2003.

Of course, sceptics of the Carter peace drive point out that the former White House resident is at least partially responsible for much of the past and continuing bellicosity in South Asia, given that it was his administration that first poured weapons into Afghanistan to tie down Moscow in a Soviet Vietnam war. And, given that a Nobel repeat is highly unlikely, perhaps Carter's peace hopping is one step in a Machiavellian power play to gain other lofty honours, that friendly, teething smile notwithstanding. ▽

ited trade of a few basic commodities. The Sherpa, however, were not permitted to trade directly with Tibetans; they were instead to turn over their wares at the Chinese trade depot in Dingri where prices were unpredictable and bargaining non-existent.

When 'forbidden Nepal' opened to the outside world in the 1950s, the Khumbu populace found a new niche in the rapid development of tourism and mountaineering. With their unmatched prowess, they had been the backbone of climbing expeditions since the first British expedition in 1921. Over the last 50 years, climbing and trekking have become the twin pillars of the Sherpa economy.

Namche Bazaar is a major Sherpa village as well as a centre of economic activity in the Khumbu region. When the trade with Tibet was no longer viable, the business acumen of Sherpa merchants enabled them to reorient their trading activities to Kathmandu. Manufactured goods were flown to Lukla and then carried by porters or zopkios to Namche Bazaar. Gradually, Nam-che merchants expanded their commercial contacts in Kathmandu, filling the void left by the abandoning of trade relations with Tibet. Now that trade with Tibet has been re-established, the Sherpas face new challenges. ▽

*Ang Rita Sherpa
Kathmandu*

SAARC interrupted

THE MINISTRY of External Affairs in South Block might get a sense of how the rest of South Asia looks at its reluctance to go to the Islamabad South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit if it read something more than the New Delhi English dailies. If Mr Yashwant Sinha were to call for the papers from the other countries from 10 December, the day after Pakistan announced that it was indefinitely postponing the 12th SAARC summit because of Indian dithering, he would find coverage somewhat different.

In the Indian English dailies, amidst the confusion of the Gujarat elections and the uproar over an absconding bandit, SAARC merited barely a mention. The papers in all the other countries of South Asia, some of them resignedly, reported the story on the front page. While Mr Sinha tried smartly to lay the blame for the scuttling on Islamabad, the rest of South Asia was not buying. The results of an Internet poll published in the *Nepali Times* weekly (20-26 December) revealed that 52 percent respondents believed that India was solely responsible for the postponement of the summit, nearly 20 percent more than believed that both it and Pakistan were accountable. Only 13.6 percent voted that Pakistan was to blame.

India was burnt badly in the last summit, where it lost the public relations round to Pakistan when Musharraf, unscripted, proffered his hand to a reluctant Vajpayee on stage in front of international media. Besides not wanting to offer the flamboyant general one more opportunity to strut about (with him needing the good press more now than last year, given the downturn in his image), India let it be known that the prime minister would not meet the general until and unless Pakistan stopped cross-border terrorism

across the LOC.

Now there is a bit of illogic there. If India so wants to follow the SAARC charter to the letter and not discuss bilateral issues at SAARC meetings, how come it is willing to use a bilateral issue (cross-border terrorism) to not meet multilaterally? For future reference, let us use this line of argument – if we cannot meet because of a bilateral problem, then by all means let us discuss bilateral issues when we do meet.

If India will continue to shrug away SAARC summits with the uncaring attitude that is evident now, we may find the organisation losing relevance as the member states seek other richer pastures. Bangladesh is looking for a zero tariff trade agreement with China, and is committed to a road link between Dhaka and Rangoon to promote business and people-to-people contact. Pakistan is discussing pipelines with Afghanistan, Iran and Turkmenistan, which will make it think more 'central' and 'west' Asian than 'south'. Sri Lanka continues to eye longingly the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Nepal wants membership in the Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

So what is the disconsolate staff at the secretariat to do when the *hakims*, the heads of state and government, are unable to convene a summit? Around the time Pakistan announced the postponement, Secretary General QAMA Rahim was busy putting up a 'peace pole' at the secretariat. The pole is courtesy a Japanese religious organisation that does not seem to have much to do other than put up peace poles, hoping that peace will follow.

Good wish. Now only if wishes were horses, Atalji would stride up to General *sahab* and at the next summit, pump his hands, and take the wind off the latter's hubris. And that would be the first indication that SAARC was back on track. ▽



MINI BAGIJOHARANA

The war in the west



Mansaraa focuses on survival day-to-day.

In mid-December, Amnesty International (AI) released a report holding state security forces accountable for the wide use of summary execution, torture and disappearance in the past year; AI also questioned the legality of half the deaths of 4050 alleged Maoists in state counter-insurgency operations. The report equally condemned the CPN (Maoist) for its killings, kidnappings, torture and use of children, and called for international action to address the human rights crisis in Nepal.

A look at Nepalgunj town in Banke district reveals the experience of ordinary people and members of civil society as the seventh – and by far the bloodiest – year of the insurgency renders communities in the western tarai fearful and suspicious, and leaves a trail of widows and orphans in its wake.

text and photos by *Manjushree Thapa*

Nepalgunj is more peaceful than Kathmandu”, a local woman says. “Other than one or two bombs, there has been nothing”. Indeed, night time curfews are imposed only sporadically, shops and offices are bustling, and the bazaar swarms with people going about their lives on foot, push-pedal *riksaa*, pony-driven *tangaa*, car, jeep, bus and bullock-led *bayal gaadaa*. The town has long been a launching ground for state and NGO development work in west Nepal. Since last year’s reinforcement of the Chisapani Barracks, it has also become a strategic – and violent – staging ground for security operations. In the span of a year, Banke district has seen 99 insurgency-related deaths – as compared to nine deaths in the six previous years of the insurgency. In the same period, 29 people were allegedly disappeared by the state – the highest number

in any district. None of this turbulence is at first evident. The harvested fields near the town look idyllic, dotted with haystacks and crops of mustard and pulses. Development workers are even flocking to Nepalgunj, displaced from war-torn project areas. The pricier hotels see a constant flow of customers.

But a visit to the Bheri Zonal Hospital reveals the proximity of war. On any given day, there are 20 to 25 patients in a special ward for insurgency victims. The patients eye all visitors warily. A skinny woman is a heap of bones in one bed. Two men have had both legs broken by Maoists. Others have broken arms, or burns, or burns to the eyes and forehead. Some men turn away, in no mood to expose their wounds or their stories to strangers.

The hospital’s superintendent, Dr Durga Prasad Pradhan, says that many insurgency victims have nowhere to go after they recover. “In the past year I have come to realise the extent of our poverty”, he says. “The

This article has been made available by the Centre for Investigative Journalism (KhoPaKay), Patan.

men have fled the villages. The women cannot farm the fields alone. Some patients beg to stay on because they cannot go anywhere else".

Within the hospital's compound ward stands a police constable, posted here to report insurgency victims. Dr Pradhan says that the police have never interfered in the treatment of such patients. He does not say much else on the subject. He does not need to. It is obvious that police presence prevents those affiliated with the Maoists – and those fitting Maoist profiles – from seeking medical care here.

The war in the countryside is embodied by the exodus of people making their way to the nearby Indian border posts. Local people say that up to 500 people from all over the western hills are daily leaving the country via Nepalgunj – some to take part in the seasonal migration of labour, but many to sit out the insurgency. "There is another group of displaced families", says a man, pointing at a bus stop. He can recognise them by their baggage, which includes clothes and bedding, pots and pans and other telltale objects. Looking at the sheer numbers of people heading southward, one gets the feeling that the villages of the west are emptying.

Of those who do remain are growing numbers of widows and their economically vulnerable, psychologically scarred children.

Bhandariya is a cluster of three settlements in the open expanses of Bageshwari VDC (Village Development Committee), Banke district, a mixed settlement that came into being in the 1970s, as official policies encouraging migration from the hills made neighbours of hill and tarai castes, majority and minority religions and many small ethnic groups. Most residents farm their own small plots and sharecrop the lands of those better off.

On the front porch of Mansaraa Budha's house, the teenage daughter of the house is urging bullocks to mill around in circles, threshing grains from the hay underfoot. She is a dishevelled girl with hard, watchful eyes. She has good reason to be mistrustful. It was the visit of four Maoists six months ago that left her bereft of a father, and of the will to better her life.

On the evening of 2 June 2002, four unarmed Maoists had asked for shelter at Mansaraa's house. "Maoists would pass by here often", says a villager. "They would come and go as they please". They had never stayed before at this particular house, but like other villagers before them, Mansaraa and her husband Prem Bahadur could not turn away these unwelcome guests: who, after all, would protect them if the Maoists turned on them?

The family's clay house consists of two rooms, an alcove, and an attached cowshed. Mansaraa's youngest son, studying in class eight, slept on the porch with the visitors. Prem Bahadur, Mansaraa, their two daughters and their daughter-in-law, six months pregnant with her first child, slept indoors.

Villagers say that a large convoy of security forces drove into Bhandariya in the dead of the night and surrounded the nearby houses. In the dark, they dragged those sleeping on Mansaraa's porch to the front courtyard, making them all face down. They also stormed neighbouring houses, asking everyone to identify themselves and the men on Mansaraa's courtyard.

Villagers say that the uniforms worn by the security forces belonged to the army. Some of the army men were visibly drunk, they say. When one of the Maoists tried to run away, he was shot dead. Mansaraa's daughter – the one leading bullocks in the courtyard today – rushed out to see what was happening, only to be kicked and slapped around. "Are you a Maoist girl?" asked two army men. Maoists had in the past held cultural programmes in the area to attract young cadres. The men asked, "Do you know how to sing and dance?"

They let her go after her family identified her, but her face was marked and bruised. She was in

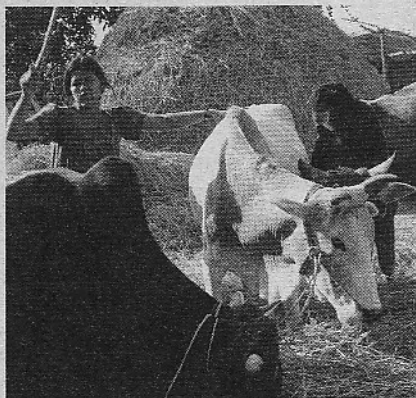
such shock she did not notice that the army men were beating her brother along with the Maoists. According to villagers, they beat the three Maoists to death. They spared Mansaraa's younger son's life, but left him badly injured.

By this time Mansaraa had fainted. Her husband, convinced that he would be killed for housing Maoists, hid in a narrow space between the shingle roof and a tin sheet over the cowshed. There is just enough space there for one person to squeeze into. Army men hunted for him through the house, checking every grain vessel. When they found him, they killed him with two shots to the back.

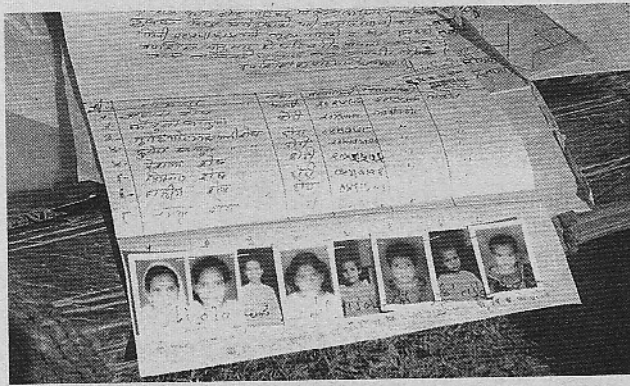
They then hauled the bodies into an ambulance accompanying their convoy, and left.

The family was in utter shock. "What could we do?" Mansaraa says. "We stayed, we cried. No, we could not even cry. We were afraid someone else might come, something else might happen". She is bewildered: nobody from any of the other houses came to see how her family was doing. The next morning, some villagers said that they had not heard a thing. They were too afraid to get involved.

The concept that citizens have rights – even if they are suspected Maoists – is clearly unfamiliar here. "If the Maoists had not stayed at our house, none of this would have happened", says Mansaraa, unable to



Mansaraa's older daughter, no longer on school rolls.



On Shahzad Ali's death certificate: Zaahraa and her seven.

blame the army for what, by all accounts, amounted to her husband's summary execution. AI's report maintains that there may be a policy, among some units of the security forces, to deliberately kill suspected Maoists and villagers who house them. All execution is illegal in Nepal.

But Mansaraa does not work the legal niceties into her calculations. Instead, she focuses on day-to-day survival. Her husband's death has robbed her family of two bread-earners; for her youngest son left the village soon after his father's death. Her daughter-in-law gave birth to a breached baby four months after that night. Word was sent to her husband, Mansaraa's oldest son in India, but he did not bother to visit.

Mansaraa's youngest daughter is just five, a girl more serious than most children her age. As for her older teenage daughter, who was studying in class seven at the time of her father's death, she stopped going to school the day after the incident. She will not explain why. Yet she is emphatic about her decision: "I will not go", she insists. "I just will not".

It is as though she wants to spite herself as a way of responding to what happened. That is all the power she has.

Immediately after striking a defiant pose, her hard look wears off. She lays her head on her forearm and suddenly begins to cry. And the mother, who has so far been stoic, also breaks down to see her daughter crying.

Double-edged *khukuri*

Across a stretch of fields is the home of Zaahraa Ali, another woman widowed by the insurgency. In her early 30s, Zaahraa must now support her five sons and two daughters, as well as her blind father-in-law and aged mother-in-law. Her house is as humble as Mansaraa's. Her economic challenges are the same. Her emotional trauma is similar. But it is the Maoists who are to blame for her sorrows.

Some four months after the execution of their comrades in Mansaraa's front porch, the Maoists set out to

exact revenge on suspected informants. Villagers say that 35 to 40 Maoists, of whom five or six were armed and uniformed, entered this part of Bhandariya at 8:30 at night on 21 September. Amid blows and cuffs, they rounded up 14 men from the settlement's Baniya, Sekh, Sharma and *Mussalman* families. The women were told to stay at home.

The insurgents made the men sit in the 'chicken position', with the arms looped under the knees and hands holding the ears. They shouted, "*Saalaa*, do you know who we are? We are Maoists. We will kill you all". They asked if everyone understood Nepali.

A few of the villagers replied, "Only a little".

Their captors announced that they were fighting for poor Nepalis, and that three rogues among them had caused the deaths of four of their comrades. They did not mention the names of the 'rogues'. One by one, they stood each man up and wrote down his name, and checked his face by torchlight. They then told the men to go home and sleep.

This they did with relief. But the Maoists had rounded up six men beforehand, and had taken them to a road outside the settlement. From their homes the villagers listened in horror to the sounds of *laathi* beatings and hacks of the *khukuri*. They also heard gunshots in the night.

They came out of their homes after the Maoists left, and found that the gunshots had been reserved for 35 years-old Shahzad Ali and 45 years-old Tribeni Prasad Baniya. Both men's hands had been tied behind their backs before they were shot in the eye. Their skulls had shattered from the impact of the bullet. Baniya's right leg had also been broken.

The villagers carried the four other tortured men back to their homes, and they took 70 years-old Chet Prasad Sharma, whose

leg had been broken by *laathi* blows, to the Bheri Zonal Hospital.

Today the villagers do not speak much about what happened, though they insist that the murdered men had no political affiliations, and had no links to security forces. Baniya and Ali both operated rice mills, now closed. Their families are at a loss about how to make ends meet. Baniya left behind aged parents, a widow, four young sons and two young daughters. The youngest girl was just eight months old. Ali left behind a blind father, an aged mother, a widow, five young daughters and two young sons.

One harrowing night, spinning off from an earlier brutal night, has left 18 villagers bereaved and a whole village in shock. In this part of the countryside, this is what the 'People's War' looks like.

It becomes chillingly obvious, visiting other nearby villages, that the past year's sudden escalation of violence has polarised communities and strained social cohesion to breaking point. Living under siege, villag-

**"When the
dogs bark at
night we
know that it's
either the
Maoists or
the army"**

ers now hesitate to get involved in the affairs of others, or to help neighbours in need, as they once would have. "When the dogs bark at night we know that either the Maoists or the army have come to the village", says one villager, with an embarrassed smile. "But even if we hear someone calling we do not go out. We stay in our houses and keep quiet".

Local people say that mistrust and suspicion is especially rife in 'new' communities created by hill migration, where families have shorter histories of living side by side. But even in the older Mussalman and Tharu communities, village parlance is peppered with terms such as 'informants' and 'CID' (shorthand for the Criminal Investigation Department). It sounds, from the tones that people take and the uncertainties that they express, that everyone is watching everyone else here, living with the terrible knowledge that by mistake or by design, personal, economic, social or political rivalries can be harnessed to fatal effect by those close to the Maoists or the state.

It is not hard, after all, to sow discord in villages. In Naulopur village of Naubasta VDC, Bhumisaraa Thapa, an aged widow, blames village 'CIDs' for the murder of her eldest son Dal Bahadur and daughter-in-law Parvati in a raid at their home on 10 September that villagers maintain was carried out by the Armed Police Force. Fellow villagers had tagged them as Maoists. Bhumisaraa says that villagers had also petitioned the government that her youngest son be killed because he was a Maoist. Now he, as well as another adult son and adult daughter are on the run, afraid that they too will be killed.

Bhumisaraa now lives in penury with her youngest daughter and her orphaned grandchildren, one of whom was wounded by a bullet when her parents were killed. She swears that villagers are acting on personal grudges in turning against her children. "If he wanted to join the Maoists, he would have done so long ago", she says of her youngest son. She especially regrets that he has had to flee. He used to want to go and work in India, she says. "But I told him: do not leave me. Your path will clear when I die. You can leave the village then".

"Even if he has joined the Maoists now, it is because he has been given no choice". She cries bitterly as she says this, cursing her fate and her enemies. And she mutters, more to herself than to us, "Where have all the friendships gone? We used to have friends amid the Jumlis from Jumla, the *pahadias* from the hills and the *deshis* from the plains. Where have all these friendships gone?"

Red tape

After the state of emergency ended in August 2002, state security forces have come under increasing pressure from civil society – scattered journalists and editors, human rights activists, intellectuals and political workers – to stop resorting to extra-judicial remedies, and to



Bombed by the Maoists in Nibuwa.

admit to mistakes made in combat. The fact that 73 percent of nationwide insurgency-related deaths have been caused by the state has led many to question the tactics being used; and the impunity with which security forces are operating is also highlighted in AI's report as a "longstanding problem".

This mounting cry against state excesses may allow idealists to hold onto the stubborn illusion that the Maoists, for their part, are purely out to empower the disadvantaged. The fact is, though Maoist excesses are fewer – and seemingly more targeted – they are particularly barbaric, involving cruel forms of torture. It is as though merely killing someone were not enough.

Nari Devi Chand's house, a modest brick structure with a tin roof, stands on the dusty road running through Nibuwa village of Kohalpur VDC. She and her mother-in-law had gone next door to watch television on the night of 5 June, leaving her husband Bhoj Bahadur at home with their daughter and sons, when 30 to 40 Maoists swarmed the family house.

Villagers say that they included young children, teens, men and women – some armed and uniformed. They spoke in an unintelligible tongue. "It may have been a code", says a villager who heard them say only, "khol, khol, khol" and two other words. "Or maybe they were speaking Kham". They broke a streetlamp and warned everyone in the nearby houses to stay indoors.

Nari Devi's teenage daughter, in the family house, heard people at the door, and asked, "Who is it?" The family did not know that Maoists were simultaneously attacking three other families in the village, bombing one house, beating a man from another house, and killing a man from a third house.

Here, the insurgents broke down the door, heading straight for Bhoj Bahadur. His daughter saw him crying, and she shouted, "Father, father!" He was pleading: "I will give you money, spare me". The Maoists said that they did not want his money, just his life. "They tied his hands behind his back with mummy's sari", the daughter now says, with sadness but without anger.

They dragged 39 years-old Bhoj Bahadur out of the house, and announced that he was an informant who had caused the arrest – and subsequent death – of two

comrades by security forces six days earlier. They chanted, "Kill the informants", and "Long live Maoism" before taking him behind the house, where they shot him through the heart – but not before cutting off his ears, nose and face. The Maoists also pocketed a gold chain that he was wearing.

"My son was a simple man, he had not studied much", says Bhoj Bahadur's wizened mother Kalaasi, who cannot control the flow of tears from her eyes. "He never argued with anyone. We later heard that one or two villagers had turned against us, but we do not know if it is true".

Bhoj Bahadur had been so badly battered that his brain lay exposed. His mother says, "There was no face. We recognised him by the chip on one of his teeth".

The government has allotted compensation for this and the other families attacked that night, but the scars remain. "Every night I think they will come back and kill us", says Nari Devi. She has placed two of her sons in an orphanage in Nepalgunj. Her daughter faints often these days, she says. "She is changed".

Her daughter, sitting beside her, keeps her eyes trained down, revealing nothing. But a page of her school notebook, lying open nearby, says much: it is filled with poems copied in her neat handwriting, each one expressing a vast adult melancholy.

The brutality of the Maoists prevents even those who feel that social and economic transformation is long overdue in Nepal from supporting them. Working out of Nepalgunj, human rights advocate, Govinda Bandi, is emphatic about the culpability of the insurgents: "Their methods are especially cruel. There is no question that the state should control their violence". But those means must be legal, he argues. "That is the only demand of human rights activists. We are not saying that the state must not fight Maoist violence. We are just saying that the state must observe rules, even in war".

Yet talking to the town's journalists, it becomes clear that the state has found it inconvenient, even unnecessary, to uphold civil standards. To begin with, by propping up the defence ministry as the only authoritative source of news on the insurgency, the government has made it harder for journalists to come by information. "Official sources do not talk openly any more", says Ganga Sharma of *Today Nepal*, "and villagers are afraid to tell us what is happening".

Added to this is the harassment and threats meted out by the army. One journalist says he was summoned to the Chisapani Barracks – described by AI as a camp "notorious for torture" – and threatened at gunpoint by

a major there. Photographer Krishna Khanal says that he has destroyed photographs and negatives under pressure. A few reporters laugh – nervously, without mirth – about a colleague who would turn off the road whenever he saw the same major from Chisapani driving: he honestly believed that the man might run him over.

And do the Maoists ever threaten the journalists? "Sometimes we hear that they wished we had not written such-and-such", says one journalist. "But it is mostly the army that obstructs our work".

The journalists say that district government offices do little to protect them from the security forces. They also complain about the complacency of those in Kathmandu, including their own editors, who often do not publish what they write or edit it beyond recognition. Rudra Khadka of *Kantipur* says that he feels relatively safe, but those working for the smaller media houses feel vulnerable. "*Kantipur* and *Himal Khabarpatrika* will speak out if their own journalists are arrested", says Krishna Adhikari of *Spacetime*, "but will they speak out for journalists from other papers?"

Janak Nepal of *Samacharpatra* says irately, "Look, we have said all this to people from Kathmandu many times before. We are sick of saying this again and again. Nobody is doing anything for us. Nobody".

It is largely because local civil society is operating under such constraints that Kathmandu has remained confused – and largely silent – amid the bloodshed of the past year. How, if not through a free media, could Kathmandu's civil society find out that underneath the surface calm Nepalgunj's bazaar is abuzz with rumours

of rape, torture and execution allegedly taking place at the Chisapani Barracks? How, if not through the unimpeded work of human rights activists, could Kathmandu investigate such allegations and form educated opinions? AI holds that 66 people have been disappeared by security forces in the past year, in what is a "pattern" of disappearances and unacknowledged long-term detention. By the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) count, the country is now 6781 deaths into the insurgency. How, except through open debate, can Kathmandu decide if this is the course it wants to follow?

Just as CPN (Maoist)'s Baburam Bhattarai's recent claim to *The Washington Times* that the Maoists are practicing democracy among "millions of different classes, nationalities, regions, castes and gender" sounds like a whitewash, the ministry of home affairs' claim that 93 percent of the 4366 people killed last year were Maoists sounds patently untrue. Maoists, being, well, Maoists, are not accountable to tell the truth to civil society.

Everyone is watching everyone else, living with the knowledge that village rivalries can be harnessed to fatal effect

But is it really tenable for a legitimate government to falsify its excesses and lie about its mistakes?

The bulk of civil society is not, after all, keen to demoralise the security forces: this could only prove dangerous to the country. Their desire is to ensure that the state observes the tenets laid out in the 1990 constitution, and in the international treaties that Nepal has either acceded to, ratified or signed, which are: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969); the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (1976); the Convention in the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976); the Convention Against Torture (1987); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

And the fact is that for better and sometimes for worse, Nepalis are a forgiving lot. If the state security forces did not, as a matter of course, resort to extrajudicial remedies, people could exonerate genuine mistakes made in combat. If the army, armed police force and police stopped committing execution, illegal detention, torture and disappearances, they could even garner genuine community support.

How can this do anything but boost the morale of the security forces?

It is human nature, after all, to rankle at injustice. Seven months after they were subjected to mass torture by security forces, the men of Chaudhariya village, Sumsheregunj VDC, still bristle at the memory. Early in the morning on 16 May, two trucks, one jeep and a motorcycle of army men surrounded the village and raided the houses of three suspected Maoists. They found Jhurra Tharu and Munshi Tharu bathing at the local stream. Unable to locate Hari Ram Tharu – he had gone to the fields to defecate – they rounded up every man from the nearby houses and fields.

They made these 70-odd men kneel, and one by one stood them up, asking if they were Maoists. "If you did not know how to reply properly, they would set you aside", says one villager indignantly. "They checked our knees to see if they were callused, to see if we had taken Maoist training. They kicked and hit us. Maybe 10 in a 100 were spared a beating".

After an hour of this, the convoy left with the three suspects. A week later, another convoy returned and raided five or six houses, tying and blindfolding the men and beating them in the process of identifying and arresting Faggu Tharu.

The villagers should be glad, one would think, that the suspects were merely apprehended, and not executed. But Chaudhariya is still smarting from the mass torture its men were subjected to.

How does this help the state's counterinsurgency efforts?

Excerpts from the AI report:

SINCE NOVEMBER 2001, the people of Nepal have experienced unprecedented levels of political violence. By the end of October 2002, according to figures made public by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Royal Nepal Army, the number of people killed in the conflict since November 2001 had reached 4366. This compares to around 2700 people killed in the previous five years. According to the same sources, 4050 of the 4366 were "Maoists".

Amnesty International believes that at least half of these killings may have been unlawful. The vast majority of the victims were civilians targeted for their real or perceived support to the CPN (Maoist); others were Maoists deliberately killed after they were taken prisoner or killed instead of being arrested. In addition, torture is widespread and at least 66 people are reported to have "disappeared" since November 2001 after they were seen being taken into custody by the security forces. The total number of "disappearances" reported to Amnesty International in the context of the "people's war" is over 200.

Human rights abuses by the Maoists have included deliberate killings of an estimated 800 civilians considered "enemies of the revolution", hostage-taking for ransom, torture of people taken captive and deliberate killings of members of the security forces after they were taken captive. The Maoists have also been responsible for recruiting children into their ranks and using them in combat situations.

(The complete report is available at www.amnesty.org)

How anomalous

Other such stories abound, unfortunately. 15 men from Sumsheregunj were tortured by Maoists on 9 July; two were killed. Two sisters that AI documented as having been raped at the Chisapani Barracks in April were allegedly threatened after the AI report came out. Villagers claim that official reports of certain 'encounters' have been faked, and that evidence has been planted in their houses by security forces.

Banke is 13th on a list of districts with the highest insurgency-related deaths. INSEC puts the death toll here as of November 2002 at 108: 99 of these deaths were caused by the state, and 9 by the Maoists. An alarming 99 of these deaths took place in the last year.

In nearby districts, the fighting is more intense, and the methods more desperate. Rolpa district, the heartland of the insurgency, suffers the highest death toll, with 1168 dead as of November. Rukum comes second on this macabre list, with 749 dead. Dang's death toll is 340; Kalikot's is 278; Arghakhanchi's is 261; Salyan's is 220; Achhaam's is 219; Bardiya's is 207, and Kailali's is 173. Gorkha – place of origin of the Shah dynasty

The Banke landscape at dawn.

– is 10th on this list, with 169 dead. All these districts lie in the western half of the country. Killings by the state account for 78 percent of these deaths.

The destruction that lies further afield becomes grimly clear from a short trip to Bardiya district, just west of Nepalgunj, large parts of which are under Maoist control.

Of the 188 people killed by the state here is Rupa Tharu of Jagatiyaa village, Saurahawaa VDC. Rupa's mother says she was nine; her father says she was 10; villagers say at most she was 12. She studied in class two at the village school, not far from the VDC building gutted in a Maoist attack.

At around 10 at night on 21 July, hundreds of army and policemen stormed Jagatiyaa, 'ambush' style. (Local people say that the security forces do not otherwise stray from the pitched roads of these regions). They surrounded a portion of the 100-house village, and for reasons that the villagers cannot guess at, headed straight for Rupa's house, breaking down the door to the room where their family was sleeping, as well as the door to an adjacent room, where relatives were sleeping. The security forces then blindfolded Rupa and took her to an open area near the village well, and, according to villagers, shot her dead". They did not even ask her name", says a relative, as Rupa's mother, Laksmi Kumari, listens on with a look of anxiety on her face. The relative says, "They just took her".

The rest of the village awoke to the sound of the gunshots, but nobody left their homes. The army and policemen knocked down some doors and made four village men carry Rupa's body, on a wooden bed, as far as her school. From there they must have carried the body to a convoy; the villagers did not see the vehicles.

Rupa's family regrets that they did not even get to perform a proper funeral. Traditional Tharu rites would have food and money buried alongside the deceased to aid the soul's journey across new realms. Two days after her death, Rupa's decomposing body was released by the Guleriya district police, and lowered into the ground by two policemen in a grave they dug for her at an unmarked spot in the Bansī forest near the Indian border.

Rupa's brother, Fulsing, four, and sister, Lauti, one and a half, have nothing to remember their older sister by save for a passport-picture negative that their father possesses. They will grow up to learn that their sister's death was officially reported as the death of a 17 years-old Maoist as she tried to flee captivity.

How does this help to quell the Maoist insurgency?

In a paper published out of Nepalgunj, *How Anomalous*, a poem for the times written by Nishant Malla "Shuvechhuk" of Sitapur village:

Life seems anomalous, hard to describe
Like black smoke flying without aim
Like white dandelions drifting in the wind
Like a reckless bet placed at festival time
Like a flower that has withered without budding
Like a huge error committed on purpose
Like a tiny flower parched by a drought

Not that the area is paralysed by melancholy. Doctors at the 100-bed Bheri Zonal Hospital are treating twice as many patients, and despite budget cuts they have reserved six free beds for the poor. In the legal field, Advocacy Forum is working to ensure the rights of insurgency-affected families. Advocate Mandira Sharma says, "There just are not enough human rights lawyers in the country to activate the available national provisions and international treaties". Still, her team is filing for compensation of torture victims and the

families of those killed unlawfully, and habeas corpus writs for those who have been disappeared. Journalists, too, are testing the limits of what they can write, despite the risk this entails. And social workers are seeking ways by which they might slowly set things right. These are small efforts, to be sure – but they do point at ways in which the country may work towards truth and reconciliation.

Smack in the middle of town is a sunny house with rooms lined with new beds and warm blankets: this



Missing from the family picture: Rupa Tharu.

is a new orphanage – opened by an NGO called Social Awareness and Helping Activities in Rural Areas (SAHARA) – for children who have lost their parents to the insurgency, killed either by Maoists or by the state.

The orphanage's in-charge, Rameshwar Shah, says that SAHARA raises funds through a combination of individual donations and through a widespread 'mutthi-daan' system, or 'the donation of a handful'. The organisation distributes collection boxes, asking that people place five rupees in them every day – the cost of a cup of tea. By adding to its initial run of 300 boxes in Nepalgunj, SAHARA hopes to eventually house 50 insurgency-affected children.

The first eight children – ranging from five to nine in age – are sitting in a room, now, horsing around in their time off from school. Some are alert and bright-eyed, others are bashful, yet others are screeching, laughing, throwing tantrums. They all have come from families headed by war widows. They have told the staff that when they grow up they want to be engineers, professors, doctors, lawyers, even journalists and social workers.

They do not, at this age, hold their families' politics against each other. The SAHARA staff says that it will make sure they never do.

Frozen lives

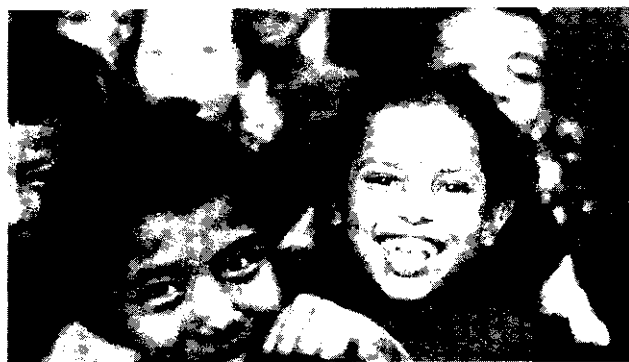
The Bhutanese refugees of southeast Nepal after more than a decade of exile

by **Andrew Nash**

The road leading north from the town of Damak to the three clustered Beldangi refugee camps in southeast Nepal is paved until it reaches the police post marking the camps' entrance. After that, it becomes an uneven surface that eventually tapers off into a maze of dirt pathways. The lack of paved surfaces is only one example of the ephemeral character of infrastructure in the Bhutanese refugee camps, of which there are seven in Nepal. Most buildings are made of bamboo and thatch, and none have electricity, despite the misleading presence of power lines just outside the camp boundaries serving local Nepali citizens. Though the camps were not built for permanent residency, they are now in their second decade of existence.

The Beldangi camps in Nepal's Jhapa district house just under 50,000 Bhutanese refugees, most of whom have been in exile since 1992. The camps are remarkably well kept and free of litter and are laid out in an ordered grid. Just outside their boundary, a row of makeshift shops sells booze, which is forbidden in the camps, and car batteries that refugees with a little money can purchase to power low-wattage items in their homes. Given the population density, as many as eight people crowd into 12-foot by 18-foot houses, in between which young children play in the afternoons. Four other camps in Nepal – Sanischare, Goldhap, Timai and Khudunabari – together house roughly the same number as the Beldangi camps, and another estimated 30,000 Bhutanese exiles live in India.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which began providing services to the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal in September 1991, operates with a USD 5.35 million annual budget and partners with four NGOs that operate in the camps. Because the refugees are not legally allowed to work in Nepal, UNHCR and its partners provide essential food and non-food items, shelter, medical care and education. The refugees left Bhutan in the first couple of years of the 1990s in the face of ethnic discrimination and repression, and despite a dozen meetings between Kathmandu and Thimphu to resolve the issue, they remain essentially stateless people. Officially, UNHCR says the camps are not permanent settlements, although in May 2000 the UNHCR chief, Sadako Ogata, said she was not "very optimistic" about the refugees' repatriation.



Although some political dissidents were leaving Bhutan in the late 1980s, substantial numbers of Nepali-speakers did not arrive in Nepal until 1991. By August of that year, an estimated 2500 refugees were residing illegally in Nepal, and by the close of 1991 their numbers had more than doubled to 6000. By August 1992, this flow had become a flood, with 62,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, growing to 80,000 by June 1993, after which time few new refugees arrived. As of November 2002, there were 101,644 refugees registered in the camps, with the increase since 1993 almost totally accounted for by births.

Diplomats leading an EU delegation to the camps in July 2002 noted the "serious frustration among the refugees, especially youths" over the failure to initiate the repatriation procedure. A nine-month verification process was completed at one of the seven camps, Khudunabari, in December 2001, but the Bhutanese representatives of the Joint Verification Team have not returned to Nepal since departing with the refugees' completed forms more than a year ago. Nepal and Bhutan did not take any public steps forward on the issue in 2002, and in the fall of 2002 a sex abuse scandal involving women and children as young as seven led to allegations against two camp officials, in addition to 16 others, further dampening spirits in the camps.

Wait and see

While the refugees now live in densely populated, fenced-off camps in Nepal, most of them hail from small villages in agriculture-based southern Bhutan. For the older refugees, camp conditions represent a major disruption in life patterns to which adjustment has been difficult. For children who were born in the camps or who entered them at a young age, there loom the challenges of identity-formation and the lack of future prospects. Moreover, camp residents are plagued by the psychological toll of living a full 10 years and more in interim circumstances while awaiting a return to their homesteads in Bhutan, a return that may never be possible.

An aid worker who has spent more than five years working in Jhapa says the refugees face three primary problems in the camps: the burgeoning youth population, donor fatigue, and tension with the local community. More than 23,500 children have been born in the

camps since 1992, and while schools have been established, there is little opportunity for young people. At the current population growth rate of 2.3 percent, there will be more than 127,000 refugees in the camps by 2012, more than a third under the age of 20. Some attempts have been made to provide technical training for refugee youth, including a World Food Programme-Caritas Nepal project involving several hundred refugees, but long-term employment prospects are dim. In addition, refugee children receive scant training in agricultural practices, suggesting a potential problem if they do return to Bhutan, where 90 percent of people make a livelihood from farming.

"We do apprehend difficulties in integrating them into physical work like farming on repatriation, as no child is use to hard work", explains SB Subba, chairman of the Bhutanese Refugees Representative Repatriation Committee (BRRRC). But, he adds, "Gradually they should become accustomed, provided the repatriation takes place before they become adults, after which it will be difficult as they may feel ashamed to work in the field".

The second and third problems are not as serious as the first, but could destabilise the camps in the future. In the fall of 2002, several reports appeared in the Nepali media that UNHCR was considering closing down the camps, a rumour since denied by UNHCR officials. (The UNHRC Global Appeal 2003 states that the agency will continue to provide assistance "so long as they [Bhutanese refugees] are not allowed to work and remain dependent on external sources".) But the problem of donor fatigue remains, in part because most donors offered aid under the assumption that it was a short-term fill-gap to a problem that would be resolved within a reasonable period of time. With the refugee crisis now in its second decade, and the verification process stalled, refugees worry that assistance will be cut back.

The third problem, tension with local people, arises from two sources: competition in the labour pool and resentment over handouts. Refugee leaders' informal estimates suggest that most young men living in the camps work illegally outside them, making a daily wage of about NPR 60 (USD 0.8) for unskilled jobs and NPR 130 (USD 1.7) for skilled ones, saturating an already impoverished labour pool of Nepali citizens. And with Nepal's dire economic situation, some local residents resent the assistance meted out to the refugees. There is a perception that "refugees are getting everything", sums up one aid worker.

Other than working within the camp as adjuncts for relief agencies, the only employment legally available to the refugees is serving as camp teachers or medical workers. With a starting monthly "incentive" – the word 'salary' is not used – of NPR 937 (USD 12.2), the applicant pool for these positions is highly competitive. While refugees complain of insufficient medical services and lack of access to doctors, the schools run

with remarkable efficiency. At the extension-IV school of Green Vale Academy in Beldangi-I camp, 29 teachers oversee 1222 middle school students. The classes are crowded and take place in thatch huts with dirt floors, but the students are orderly and diligent. The curriculum centres on life in Bhutan, and Dzonga, the language of Bhutan's politically dominant ethnic group, is taught for six years beginning in class three. As most of the teachers lack formal training – many of them were students themselves when they left Bhutan – they admit that the schools provide a less than ideal education. Caritas provides some teacher training, but as Tara Nepal, a 25-year-old social studies teacher, says, "the education is not of the highest quality".

In an article about the camps that appeared in UNHCR's *Refugees* magazine, Jennifer Ashton, an Australian UNHCR officer working in Jhapa, says that, "In terms of camp set-up and services, these are really nice places – in large part due to the refugees themselves". The residents of the camps are not as laudatory in their descriptions of camp conditions, but there is a strong sense of community responsibility among them. When asked about their future, most students in the camp classrooms say they want to serve "my country" – Bhutan – as teachers or social workers, and many say they think they will move to Bhutan within one or two years. Whether they will be able to do so, or instead stay in Nepal indefinitely, remains to be seen. ▷

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Commitment, and the Himalayan climber



On 4 December 2002, Doug Scott, legendary Himalayan alpinist, delivered a keynote address at a symposium on 'Directions in Himalayan Climbing', organised as part of the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival. In the excerpts from Scott's speech below, he discusses the primordial connection of mankind to climbing, the psychology of mountaineering, his own experience pioneering a route up the southwest face of Mount Everest in 1975, and, above all, the need for "commitment" to the mountain while climbing it.

Humanity

To have any understanding about the future of mountaineering, we had better first look back to have an idea of how we got to where we are now. It has been about 200,000 years since *homo sapiens* first emerged and began hunting-gathering in small groups for mutual aid, though there are just a few remnants of hunter-gatherers left in the world. But they were everywhere 10,000 years ago before the first urbanisation. The chief characteristics of this lengthy period experienced by our ancestors involved mainly facing uncertainty and risk. And to survive in those frugal times they had to be resourceful, imaginative, exploratory and cooperative.

Climbers might just be catching my drift here and making parallel connections. It was not survival of the fittest, as Darwin was supposed to have said but did not, but survival of the most social. Life was not one constant quest for the next mouthful of food. For these hunter-gatherers, it seems, did have leisure time, probably more than most of us here have. They had time to paint and carve. We know from their cave paintings and the figurines carved out of rock and ivory that they had the ability to develop the level of everyday consciousness that we experience and connect with the subconscious. In other words, they naturally developed spirituality, and got into religion.

Such people we call 'primitive', but in many ways they were more mature than advanced societies today. I had an opportunity in 1999 to visit Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India and meet tribal people who are still hunter-gatherers. I thought I was seeing a snapshot of perhaps how all our ancestors once were. These people led a partner and myself for 18 days through a primary rainforest during a dreadful monsoon. We were totally out of our depth in this jungle, coming in three or four hours after them every night by head torch, to find that

they had already lit our fire and cleared a sleeping space for us. They would do all that before they would do anything for themselves. They did not have to do it, because we were not going to give them more money, and money did not seem to mean much to them anyway. I think it was that their hearts just went out to these totally inept foreigners stumbling about their jungle, completely out of depth. And through the trip they were full of spontaneous humour and goodwill and kindness. So when I say we are seeing a snapshot of how all our ancestors once were, I think it is quite important to note that underneath our veneer of civilisation and conditioning, at heart we are very much like that.

The nature of climbing

It is such a good symbol, mountaineering. Reaching up in the right direction, and in the process shedding all the superfluous and material ways. You just cannot carry anything superfluous to actual survival. And at the same time, there is a shedding of all superfluous thought – psychologically, you get more and more prepared as you climb, as you strip away everything that is superfluous to being there on the climb. It was the Roman Cicero who said, "That which has always fascinated man most is the unknown". I am sure all climbers would concur with that.

This is why the Himalaya are so important to climbers from the West, where all our mountains have been climbed. In the Alps, for instance, every major face has been climbed. In contrast, I would say that there are more peaks over 6000 metres in the Himalaya and Central Asia that have not been climbed than have been climbed. You only have to fly over parts of Tibet to see how many peaks there are out there. And of the peaks that have been climbed, apart of course from Everest,

Peace glacier

ALSO SPEAKING at the symposium was Harish Kapadia, mountaineer, explorer and honorary editor of the Bombay-based *Himalayan Journal*. In recent years, Kapadia has lobbied for India and Pakistan to declare the disputed Siachen glacier a peace park. With troops stationed as high as 22,000 feet, Siachen has been dubbed the 'world's highest battlefield'. The low-burn Siachen war has led to hundreds of combat and cold-weather casualties, as well as many Pakistani and Indian soldiers succumbing to Acute Mountain Sickness. Troops from the two sides have been eyeball-to-eyeball on the glacier since April 1984, fighting for control of a sparsely populated but strategically significant chunk of ice and rock that overlooks the eastern Karakoram mountain range, which forms the meeting point of China, India and Pakistan. (See *Himal*, December 1998.)

The 76-km long, 2-to-8-km wide glacier is threatened not only by daily shelling, but also by the strain of stationing thousands of troops on an ice ledge unsuitable for human habitation. On the Indian side, barrels of human excrement are dumped into glacier crevasses each day, and hundreds of litres of kerosene oil are piped up every 24 hours to keep the camps operational. Worse still, periodic shifts in the glacier lead the military inhabitants to continuously spoil new areas. "They establish a camp, then the glacier moves – so you have to move everything and build a whole new base", explains Kapadia.

As of 2002, there were 169 trans-frontier parks on the borders of 98 countries, so Kapadia's plan has numerous precedents. The Indian defence minister, George Fernandes, was informally approached and filled in on the need for the project, which Kapadia has suggested calling the Rose Peace Park ('Sia' in Balti means 'rose'). Kapadia has even climbed in the Alps with Pakistani mountaineers to promote goodwill between the two countries. Given that 97 percent of military deaths in Siachen result from environmental conditions and altitude rather than military confrontation, Kapadia seems to have settled on a smart and humanitarian way to protect the environment, save lives and promote interest in the glacier. It remains to be seen, however, if Delhi and Islamabad are willing to come out of the cold and agree on the park. ▽

there are major features still to be climbed.

I would like to stress the importance of going where no one has gone before. I think that Harish Kapadia and his Bombay mountaineers, who for years have wandered up remote valleys and climbed small peaks in the Himalaya, have done something more important

than climbing old ways, even up Everest. It is intrinsically interesting to be on a new climb, to wonder about that line you are following. About three or four years ago, I ascended an unclimbed peak near Kanchenjunga in northeast Nepal, with just one partner. For four days we were on it, working up our line of weakness, every pitch, every day wondering if that line of weakness was going to connect with another line. What is around the next corner? Facing up to that uncertainty really puts an edge on the climb and makes it so exhilarating. It is hard to explain to non-climbers why this is so fascinating, but I can assure you that it is. Just to be facing up to all that uncertainty.

Everest

All Everest climbers, in my opinion and experience, are very ambitious. Certainly I was very ambitious to attempt the southwest face of Everest in 1975. And there is nothing wrong with ambition, so long as you are not going to harm anyone else along the way. But on the southwest face, above Camp Six, it seemed like Dougal Haston and I climbed beyond ego, hardly aware of any expectant public back home, hardly aware of family and friends, hardly aware of each other. We were just focused on that patch of rock-ice in front, totally focused. And yet, I do recall a calm prescience that this was going to work out. That feeling really comes upon you when everything is right for you to be there – you have got the required experience, you are with a partner who is supportive, you have waited until snow conditions are reasonable. And then at such times when you are going for it, cruising, it is really exhilarating. It does imply that it is worth the wait.

The best time on any climb is when you are off it, after the danger is over, but before you have engaged with the rest of your life. The longer you can remain in that in-between period, the better, just to savour a great climb. When you are focused on the climb, it has the effect of slowing down the thought process, so that by the time you are down at the bottom, after danger, you feel so at peace with yourself for having done the climb, for having gone to your limit. But then you notice that thoughts do come in, but more slowly than usual, and they come rolling in from the periphery. They come in so slowly, you can recognise the thoughts, and with the recognition, the thought – that thought – will evaporate if you let go of it, and then there is a wider space between that thought and the next one that comes along. And it is in that space that there is the peace, and you find that you are becoming more aware of yourself and your friends around you, the environment you are in, and everything else for that matter. This explains why we go back from these climbs with more enthusiasm to do all it is we have to do back home and perhaps tackle everything with a little more objectivity – from having stepped out of our habitual routines, and even become a little more tolerant of others, more compassionate. In my case, I have to admit that it does not last long, so I

find myself going back to the mountains for another quick fix.

Everest will always be the ultimate superlative. Being the highest, it is always assumed to be the best. And of course it is the highest, and the ultimate climbs have to encounter the full array of problems, not just verticality, harsh winds, low temperatures, but also dealing with this lack of oxygen. You see from Everest the progression that occurs with mountains. It came late to Everest because Nepal did not allow anyone in until about 1949. But in 1953, the easiest climb was done, the southeast ridge. In 1960, the Chinese did the north ridge, the next easiest. And then we have the Americans doing the west ridge in 1963 – that was one of the finest things ever done in the Himalaya. It was a huge step, because they actually traversed over the mountain and went down the other side. There were people sent up to support them, to rescue them if they got into trouble, but the summiteers ended up rescuing the frost-bitten rescuers and helping them down.



That was Tom Horbein and William Unsoeld. I think that was the finest thing ever done on Everest, and perhaps in the Himalaya. That was just a fantastic step into the unknown at the time. Then came our southwest face climb, which obviously was much steeper than the others, but not necessarily harder. Long ridges are generally more difficult than steep face climbs, because the face is going to be shorter and protected, because faces are generally concave, so you are protected from winds. Being on a long ridge is like being on a summit all day, so you are exposed to the elements. Then came the south approach by the Russians, which was much, much more technically difficult than our southwest face climb. And that was about the end of that.

Alpine style climbing

About style, one thing you can say that climbers are doing all the time without really thinking about it is trying to keep the margin of safety satisfyingly narrow

Himalayan standards

FOUNDED IN 1965, the Union Internationale des Associations de Guides de Montagne (UIAGM) administers a uniform course of professional mountaineering training with partners in 22 countries. The UIAGM curriculum, which is updated to keep pace with advancements in mountaineering techniques, ensures that graduates receive proper training and certification to lead climbs in Europe, the Americas, Japan and New Zealand.

Tashi Jangbu, a participant in the symposium and a former president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association, would like Nepal to develop uniform national training and certification standards in cooperation with UIAGM. Because UIAGM's mountaineering course typi-

without closing the gap and going over the edge and getting themselves killed. There is a mountain in Bhutan that is only about 7500 feet in vertical height that the Japanese have climbed by using 14,000 feet of rope. Now, if you want to use that much rope, you are going to have to keep going back down, because it is very heavy. So you will get into a yo-yo situation where you keep going down, bringing more rope back up, tying it to the mountain, putting in fixed camps. That becomes very boring, as we found on the southwest face of Everest. It also means that you are not really committing yourself to the mountain. How can you have committed yourself if you know that at any time if there is a storm, or you feel ill, or there is an accident, or exhaustion, you can scuttle down to complete safety? There cannot be commitment, because when you are roped in that way, you are still attached to the ground – you have really brought the ground up with you. That is the problem with the big siege-style expeditions, the fact that the fixed rope takes out those essential ingredients:

the facing up to uncertainty and risk. And as you come down from a climb like that, that margin of safety can be so wide as to leave you a bit unsatisfied.

There is something so fantastic about going alpine style – going for it, cutting loose. Commitment. It means feeling a million miles from home, out on a limb, going for it. Exhilarating. Compared to the opposite, which is this laborious kind of construction exercise of the siege-style. And it is only when we do commit ourselves to anything in life that we find ourselves going beyond ourselves. On the mountain, certainly, once you have committed, it is surprising how you get a second wind, an extra burst of super-human energy you did not know you had.

I think you can think of your own lives, where you have to really take a risk, perhaps in business or in relationships, and it is only when you took a risk and faced up to total uncertainty for a time that then, magically, you shot off ahead. Everything worked out much better than you thought. △

cally requires four years of training and includes an emphasis on skiing, a skill non-applicable to Himalayan mountaineering, Tashi argues that the course would have to be tailored to Nepal's unique needs. Ideally, he says, training centres would rise up near local climbing areas, allowing mountaineers to train around and familiarise themselves with specific local conditions.

"This would also allow local populations at the base of the various mountain massifs to benefit more directly from the mountaineering industry", says Tashi. "As things stand, the economic benefits from climbing tend to be concentrated away from the mountain communities themselves, except in the case of the Khumbu Sherpas". As of now, there are no uniform mountaineering guide standards in Nepal. △

THERE IS an organisation based in Hyderabad, Sindh, which seems to do several things right. Its name is Trust for Rural Development (see logo), and its goals are enshrined in the three terms, 'truth, non-violence, self-realisation'. Among the things I like is the fact that its quarterly *News and Opinion* is published both in English and in Sindhi (in the Arabic script). Thus, the goal seems to be to convey its message, related to human rights, social empowerment and world affairs, to both the English readership and the local intelligentsia. The most recent issue, in English as well as in Sindhi, includes an interview with the Palestinian scholar Edward W Said, and a review of a biography of Indian supercop, Kiran Bedi. A message from the editors, titled 'Harvest of another kind', denounces the "merciless killing of seven Christian workers" and calls it the "undying continuation of orthodoxy and fanaticism that has been nourished and patronised". Perhaps it is not necessary to go into 'nourished and patronised' by whom...



SINDH, AS we know even from the writings in *Himal*, faces a grave water crisis with the drying up of the Indus main stream by the time it reaches the province after passing through Punjab. So, do the people rise in protest? Evidently, from an interesting exercise carried out by the Trust for Rural Development, which was to "document the protests and demonstrations by the people of Sindh during the time-span of July, August and September 2002". The compilation, done by Zulfiqar Shah for TRD, is taken from reports in the *Kawish* and *Irbat* Sindhi dailies and *Dawn*, an English daily based in Karachi. In the mid-quarter of 2002, it turns out, there were 167 protests reported. "The nature of the protests falls in three categories: 1) peaceful, 2) less peaceful, 3) violent. Most of the protests belong to the second and third categories". Perhaps because of the political sensitivity of the subject, the booklet does not provide analysis of the reasons and decisions behind the protests, and so we also do not know why the graphical representation shows the protests decreasing dramatically from July to September. Is this due to action by the authorities, or is July when there is highest demand for water? If you want to know more, write to trd@hyd.paknet.com.pk

THE COMPILATION of water protests in Sindh shows a deep-rooted problem in the province that the rest of South Asia mostly does not even know exists. Just a sampler:

2 July, Larkana: About 100 growers, some of them holding the Holy Quran in their hands, protested against water shortage in Saeedo Minor, a waterway, in front of Larkana press club.

5 July, Moen-jo-daro: A large number of growers belonging to the 50 different villages of Dokri *taluka*, demonstrated against the shortage in local waterways. They blocked Moen-jo-daro road by staging a sit-in. Local

police and growers exchanged blows.

11 August, Khipro: Some 400 growers and peasants protested and staged a sit-in on Khipro-Sanghar road, near Khipro, against water shortage in Lal Khan canal. The road remained blocked for four hours due to the demonstration. The growers ended the agitation as the executive engineer of the irrigation department assured them of the release of water.

17 August, Pakachang: A complete strike was observed in Faiz Gunj town because of water shortage in Faiz Gunj and Weehu waterways. The bazaar and shops remained closed. Two growers and one policeman were injured in the scuffle. The Faiz Gunj police lodged cases against 22 growers.

24 September, Hyderabad: Over a 100 tail-ender growers held a protest demo outside the irrigation office and staged a sit-in against water shortage in the Khokhar distributary. Activists of the Sindh Hari Committee, communist party and the local growers observed a token strike in front of the Hyderabad press club.

FROM THE latest of the irregular e-despatches of the American South Asianist, Stephen P Cohen: "For those interested in new insights into past such efforts, a number (46) of remarkable US documents generated by the 1971 war are now on a web site: 'The South Asian Crisis of 1971' (www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/), run by the National Security Archives in Washington. Especially interesting is that these are reproductions of the original documents, including a strong (and rather gutsy) protest of US policy by a group of American diplomats — which anticipated the formal 'dissent' channel that state later instituted. Kissinger makes an appearance, as does Nixon".

WHILE WE have been spared the *Lagaan* type of hype thus far, as the Oscar event draws near you can expect a big volume of hot air to be spent on the nomination of *Devdas* for best foreign film. Do not expect to hear too much about a Bangladeshi film that too has thus been nominated, *Matir Moina*, by the ace documentary filmmaker Tareq Masud (who with his spouse, Catherine Masud, made the controversial classic, *Muktir Gaan*, reviving quarter-century-old celluloid from a New Jersey basement and giving it a story and a pace). The couple's next film, *Muktir Kotha* (which delved into the memories of those who fought the 1971 war and then were forgotten) was less successful, but *Matir Moina* (clay bird) marks Tareq Masud's debut in feature film. The film delves into the world of the *madrassa*, and is semi-autobiographical in that Masud himself is also a product of Islamic schooling. The word from the Tehran Film Festival was that *Matir Moina* was an ace, and it became the first Bangladeshi film to win the international critics prize at Cannes. And yet, the film remains banned by the Bangladesh government, which seems to believe that it hurts religious sensibilities. (To sign a

petition calling for the repeal of the ban, go to www.petitiononline.com/moina.)

■
SHABNAM NADIYA, writing in the website of Mukto Mona has this to say, satirically, "People keep on blaming the government for being narrow minded, bigoted and philistines. They have blamed the Awami League government for banning Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*, they have blamed the past BNP government for banning that contentious issue of *Desh* magazine, and now they are blaming the current BNP government for banning Tareq Masud's *Matir Moina*. (Of course, the Ershad government banned practically everybody and everything they could lay their hands on, but people don't really blame them for that because hey, the guy was a military dictator, what else can you expect?)" Nadiya's point is that the present government of Khaleda Zia, by banning the film, has given *Matir Moina* the kind of publicity that cannot be bought, the same holding true for the earlier banned creations.

■
OUR PENTAGON watchdog reports, quoting *The New York Times* in a story datelined Washington DC: "The Defence Department is considering issuing a secret directive to the American military to conduct covert operations aimed at influencing public opinion and policy makers in friendly and neutral countries, senior Pentagon and administration officials say". Apparently, there is a 'fierce' battle on within the Bush administration over whether the military should carry out secret propaganda missions in countries as different as Germany and Pakistan. You can be sure that the rest of us are included as well. Such a programme, listen to this, could even include "setting up schools with secret American financing to teach a moderate Islamic position laced with sympathetic depictions of how the religion is practiced in America". Apparently, Donald Rumsfeld is distressed by "the inability of the US government to mould public opinion worldwide in favour of America in its global campaign against terrorism and militancy". Just so that you remember, all this is contained in a classified US Department of Defence directive, titled '3600.1: Information Operations'.



■
HERE IS Chhetria Patrakar's advice to Rummy, if he has time to read this in between the press briefings that he loves so much. Listen, there is no need to run a hearts and minds programme to make journalists and other 'gatekeepers' understand the 'American way'. With American culture penetrating the deepest madrasas of Arabia and the highest monasteries of Tibet, the battle is already won. Save the money, use it to educate your own college students on the rest of the world, for the rest of the world already knows you and (without conceding it) loves you. Besides, you know it will not work. You will simply attract the corrupt and the crude, who

will turn on you the way a certain Saudi cleric already has. Finally, what makes you think that America is always right that it needs to export its truth to the rest of the world? What if America is wrong? Think it over, Rummy.

■
GRASSROOTS SOUTH Asia in protest is never big news in the metropolitan press, be it in Pakistan, India or elsewhere in South Asia. But, as with the demonstrations in Sindh, one needs to keep track of the farmers of Chhattisgarh at the centre of India agitating against the loot of seed germplasm by a multinational corporation. We learn that the farmers, women and youth of Chhattisgarh started a 'seed *satyagraha*' on 10 December 2002 in protest of the decision taken by the Indira Gandhi Agriculture University, Raipur, to sell the 22,972 varieties of paddy germplasm collected by its scientists, which is in their custody, to an MNC called Syngenta. The news bulletin from the activists, titled 'The Great Gene Robbery', says that on 10 December, 4000 people participated in the seed satyagraha at various places, covering Mahasamund, Pithora, Basna, Saraipalli, Kasdol and Raipur. More follows:

'11 December 2002

On the second day of the "jail *bhara andolan*", people gathered in large numbers to court arrest at various places but the administration in spite of having prior information refused to arrest the people saying that they were demonstrating in a peaceful manner. A letter has been written to the administration protesting against this uncooperative attitude of the police and a warning

has also been issued stating that this might lead to the development of some grave situation in the future. In spite of this, people gathered in large numbers and sat on a daylong *dharna*, distributed pamphlets and also shouted slogans and sang revolutionary songs. A total of 1261 people had gathered in various villages of Basna, Pithora, Kasdol, Saraipalli and Mahasamund blocks.

'12 December 2002

On the third day also peasants, workers, women and youth gathered in large numbers in their villages and protested against the Syngenta issue. A total of 994 people had gathered in various villages of Basna, Pithora, Kasdol, Saraipalli and Mahasamund blocks. Along with the protest campaign, we are also making a conscious effort to spread awareness about the sale of the rare varieties of paddy germplasm and also about the sale of Sheonath river by the state government to a private company called Radius Water Ltd.

"We will keep you posted about the progress of the Chhattisgarh Seed Satyagraha", writes Akshay Sail of the Chhattisgarh Labour Institute'.

—Chhetria Patrakar

Nepal's scholar-statesman Rishikesh Shaha (1929-2002)

by Deepak Thapa

If the old adage is true, in the 52 years since Nepal entered the modern era, there certainly have been personalities who were born 'great', even more have had 'greatness' thrust upon them, while very few have achieved greatness. Rishikesh Shaha, who died of lung cancer on 15 November 2002, definitely belonged to the last category. Politician, diplomat, scholar and human rights activist, he strode the Nepali national stage with a presence as large as his physical self and though there may have been reasons to disagree with him, he was someone who could certainly not be ignored.

Born in 1925 into the 'ruling' house of Bhirkot, one of the few mid-hills principalities then still given nominal recognition by the Nepali state, Shaha's accomplishments had very little to do with his relatively privileged background. It was through sheer force of talent, and sagacity in his later years, that he was able to carve a place for himself in Nepal's history.

While I was working in this magazine, we used to describe Shaha as Nepal's scholar-statesman, and I doubt if there is any other Nepali who can share that designation with him. His career graph tells it all. Politically, he had reached the pinnacle at a very young age. He was a founding member of the Nepal Democratic Congress, one of the constituents of what later became the Nepali Congress, the party that spearheaded the 1950-51 revolution against the Rana oligarchy to usher democracy into Nepal.

During the first half of the turbulent 1950s, Shaha was in the thick of things. He became leader of the opposition in the 1952 Advisory Assembly (the 'little parliament') and was embroiled in the hurly burly of politicking that characterised the entire decade. But despite his deep involvement in the unprincipled politics of that period, he had already made a name for

himself for his integrity and scholarship.

In 1956, he left for New York to set up Nepal's permanent mission to the United Nations (and also to serve as the country's first resident ambassador to the US). Shaha plunged into the business of his UN work with a vengeance even as he tried to adjust to life in the West. (An unfortunate incident during his tenure was a stabbing in New York's Central Park. But his sanguine nature was not to be affected by that. Recalling the incident, he wrote: "From this incident I received more publicity than I had at any time before. I was featured on page 1 of *The New York Times* for several days in a row. Also, I had the unique privilege of receiving, in pajamas, no less a person than Mr John Foster Dulles, then the US Secretary of State".)

That was an era when the third world was trying to maintain an equidistance between the two superpowers; the Bandung summit had just been concluded; and Panchsheel was being bandied about as the mantra of the South. By the time the Non-Aligned Movement had come into being in 1961, with Nepal as a founding member, the workhorses who did much of the adroit footwork were recognised by *Time* magazine thus: "The year 1960 may come to be known as the year neutralism became respectable... The Big Five of neutralism - Tito of Yugoslavia, Nehru of India, Nkrumah of Ghana, Nasser of Egypt, Sukarno of Indonesia - are

magnetic, colourful and messianic personalities, but too much so. The most effective work has often been done by second-echelon diplomats: men like Burma's U Thant, Nepal's Rishikesh Shaha and Tunisia's Mongi Slim".

It is a measure of the great respect that he was able to garner for Nepal and for himself within the world body that just five years later he was appointed chairman of the international commission to investigate the



MIN BAHRACHARYA

death of Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN secretary-general who died in a plane crash in Zambia in 1961. There were even attempts in certain quarters to advance Shaha as a candidate for UN secretary generalship. It is believed King Mahendra cold-shouldered the proposal. But that this was a possibility can be inferred from the *Time* story, which had written of him in the same breath as U Thant, and the latter did end up as SG of the UN.

King Mahendra had other plans for Shaha. He was brought back to Nepal after Mahendra's December 1960 'royal coup' that dissolved parliament and ended parliamentary democracy. Shaha was appointed to the king's new cabinet on the very day of his arrival in Kathmandu. He was later appointed chairman of the commission to draft the Panchayat constitution that governed the country from 1962 to 1990. He was made foreign minister and special ambassador to the UN in those first years of direct rule by the king. Shaha was also made chairman of the Standing Committee of the Raj Sabha (Nepal's equivalent of the Privy Council). But his deep belief in the inviolability of the then suspended fundamental rights led him to express views that were not palatable to King Mahendra, and his tenure was soon terminated.

Unshackled from public office, he soon became an active member of what political scientist, Lok Raj Baral, has called the 'systemic opposition' within the king-led Panchayat system. He won a seat in the national legislature from the 'graduates' constituency' in 1967, and his statement calling for a more representative and responsible political system landed him a 14-month prison sentence.

That was the end of his political career, but one that led to a prolific one as a scholar. He taught at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University, served as visiting professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and was Regents' Professor at the University of California at Berkeley. His books, most notably, *Nepali Politics: Retrospect and Prospect, Essays in the Practice of Government in Nepal* and *Modern Nepal: A Political History* have become standard reference works, while his *Introduction to Nepal* provides perhaps the best all-round introduction to the country. It is somewhat surprising that in none of his works does Shaha criticise any of the three kings he knew personally, Tribhuvan, Mahendra and Birendra, although he does not mince words when it comes to their policies. It was perhaps the gentleman in him that realised that given his proximity to the monarchy any deprecatory comments against them would be hitting below the belt.

Rishikesh Shaha's firm commitment on the issue of personal freedom led him to be a founding member of the Nepal chapter of Amnesty International (AI).

This was during the Panchayat period when even recipients of AI newsletters were viewed suspiciously by the powers that be. In 1988, he became the founder-president of the Human Rights Organisation of Nepal (HURON), and was active during the 1990 movement against the Panchayat system to restore democracy.

He later left HURON but did not let up in his own personal crusade against injustice. One of the most significant instances of these was the case of Amar Lama, the driver of the jeep that killed Madan Bhandari, general-secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) in 1993. Despite two investigating commissions having absolved Lama of any conspiratorial involvement in Bhandari's death, as alleged by the CPN (UML), the largest communist party in the country, Lama was jailed. None of the human rights organisations dared take on the communists, who were bent on making political capital by using Lama as a scapegoat, but Rishikesh Shaha persevered with his appeals and write-ups until Lama was freed.

In the last few years, he faced accusations of being an apologist of the Maoists as well as being an advocate of an active monarchy. The first charge was leveled because of his friendship with the leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), Baburam Bhattarai, with whom he had worked in HURON. A firm friendship had grown between the two, and the correspon-

dence that continued for some time between the two even after the latter went underground was not something Shaha kept hidden from anyone. Similarly, after the Maoist 'People's War' began, he publicly called on the king to 'take back' the 1990 constitution since it was one that he had 'given' in the first place. This was a very unpopular stance to take but not many preferred to hear the second part of his argument, that only then would an election to a constituent assembly, a key Maoist demand, be possible. Events by now have pushed the country very much towards that possibility.

Above all Shaha was a humanist, and it was the state of the country he loved most that moved him to say unpopular things. Writing in these pages in 1996 after a visit to the Maoist heartland of Rolpa in western Nepal, only months after the 'people's war' began, he had warned: "The signs of an imminent legitimacy crisis are already visible in Nepal's fledgling democracy, and the immateriality accorded to the civilian deaths in Rolpa is a foretaste of difficult days ahead". Seven years later, his prescient observation has proved vindicated.

One of Rishikesh Shaha's better-known books is *Heroes and Builders of Nepal*. If someone were to update the text, its pantheon would be quite incomplete without Shaha himself. ▽

**Above all Shaha
was a humanist,
and it was the state
of the country he
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moved him to say
unpopular things**

Nowhere to go

The collapse of the SAARC summit, and why no one particularly cares.

It's only right that you should
 Play the way you feel it
 But listen carefully to the sound
 Of your loneliness
 – *Dreams* by Fleetwood Mac

NEW DELHI has lived up to the worst fears of the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu. By refusing to confirm the date of the 12th SAARC summit, South Block has made it clear that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is not a priority for the biggest country of the region. Pervez Musharraf will have to wait indefinitely for Atal Behari Vajpayee to accept his extended hand this time.

Strange as it may seem, nobody seems to be unduly perturbed by the unceremonious postponement of the ceremonial summit that should have taken place in Islamabad in January. In fact, just the opposite has happened; despite the customary noises made about the future of the regional group, a collective sigh of relief can be heard from the various capitals of South Asia. Political correctness may prevent them from saying so publicly, but the prime ministers and presidents do not seem too eager to see each other for various reasons.

Mood swing

Begum Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh is hardly in a mood to explain the reported rise in Islamic militancy in her country. Even though she has let loose the army to nab 'criminals' (and in the process netted opposition party politicians, among others), she has very little to show for this drastic measure of using the military in a civilian agenda. So when the Pakistan SAARC trip got called off, she headed for Beijing where Jiang Zemin would give her a patient hearing.

Up north from Bangladesh, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan is busy scrutinising a constitution that he hopes will make his regime look a little less archaic. Given the panache with which Thimphu's politico-bureaucracy accomplishes everything (including depopulation), perhaps one can expect something innovative, involving the key words 'participation' and 'democracy'. Only question is, will the ruling Ngalong elite really want to share power with the numerically superior Sarchop of the east and the sullen Lhotshampa of the south? My suggestion is that it will take some watching, or rather, watchdogging.

The ruling party in New Delhi is gloating at the success of the Godhra experiment in Gujarat. Narendra Modi has delivered the state to the party by riding a

wave of hate against all that he considers the 'other'. Which, for the Ahmedabad *Hindubaadi*, are the so-called pseudo-secularists, human rights groups as well as non-Hindus of every hue. On the foreign policy front, minister Yaswant Sinha is too busy courting the United States to bother much about the neighbourhood. A ceremonial SAARC summit in Pakistan is the last thing that South Block wants at this stage. Mostly important, Messrs Lal Krishna Advani and company need to keep beating the drums of war over cross-border terrorism to further consolidate their hold over the Indian middle class.

Even the Maldives would not be too keen to be seen anywhere near Islamabad. Given the speed at which Bush junior's 'axis of evil' is expanding, it should not take long for Pakistan to find itself being with Iraq, North Korea and Iran. The Centre for Strategic and International Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has already declared Pakistan as one of the 'failed or failing' states "whose central government no longer controls major parts of [its] territory". It is almost as if they were talking of Afghanistan, and President Abdool Gayoom, of an Islamic state please note, knows when not to get involved with controversial neighbours.

Nepali premier Lokendra Bahadur Chand, the current chair of SAARC, is too enmeshed in his own crisis of legitimacy at home to take on the added responsibility of taking the initiative a la Chandrika Kumaratunga, when she was the previous chair, in trying to resuscitate the organisation. The king's brief to the Chand cabinet does not contain a word about SAARC, and it is unlikely that the monarch's handpicked ministers have the will or the wherewithal to pursue a foreign policy agenda at this juncture. The cabinet is just too busy proving its own constitutionality, dealing with the challenge of the *Maobaadi* and the tussle between the mainstream political parties and the palace to have the time for the association.

One would have thought that Pakistan would be anxious to chair a regional organisation, even one with little international credibility. Heading a community of nations would be a matter of prestige for a third world nuclear power. However, notwithstanding the charges flung at New Delhi for unnecessarily scuttling the summit, the Pakistanis do not seem too exercised about it. Courting the US, cultivating the new regime in Afghanistan, improving the relationship with Tehran, keeping the Kashmir controversy alive – these are some of the more pressing preoccupations. So where is the space

for regionalism? Had India and Bhutan not dithered in confirming their attendance, Islamabad would have been hard put to manufacture an excuse for not rushing into the chair of a toothless organisation.

Perhaps the only person who would have loved to socialise at the summit retreat would have been Ranil Wickremesinghe, the ebullient prime minister of Sri Lanka. Fresh from the flush of success in peace negotiations with the Tamil Tigers, Wickremesinghe would have been looking to build his image in the region – if only to spite Chandrika Kumaratunga who built her own international image on the vehicle of SAARC. If Chandrika were to attend, however (given the ongoing tussle for primacy between the premier and president), she could be expected to try and undermine Ranil in her turn. Which leads to the other ponderable – can we expect a time when Prabakaran may find a place at the SAARC table? If so, then let there be representatives of federal units from all the countries of South Asia at SAARC meetings, even if not at the head table. That would, truly, be a South Asian organisation.

The growing irreverence towards the supposedly annual summit shows the irrelevance of SAARC. Constructed on a feeble framework, the organisation has failed to even indicate a potential of emerging as an effective forum for solidarity creation, let alone conflict prevention. In an age when almost any issue can be interpreted as being bilateral, no institution can survive for long by engaging itself with purely multilateral issues. When the purpose of an annual event is nothing more than socialising – getting the odd handshake in to grab the limelight – how much can one expect from the association? What we need is not socialising, but finding a way in which India and Pakistan (to begin with) can become more sociable towards each other. The ruling elites of the two countries are so alike that it is no wonder that they do not get along. Perhaps South India and the province of Sindh should take the lead in promoting SAARC. Let this be a proposal for the SAARC summit when it meets next – in Islamabad, of course. But future SAARC summits must not be held captive by the capital city elites; they should move to Karachi, Chittagong, Bangalore and – of course – Jaffna.

Let federal units from member countries come to the SAARC table; forget China

Lost cause

Last month, the China Study Centre in Kathmandu was a talk-shop to deliberate the possibility of bringing China into SAARC. Completely oblivious of the futility of adding a new member to the organisation when even the existing ones are sceptical, speaker after speaker droned on about the importance of the 'China card' in South Asia. Apparently, the Indians were not amused; and even the Chinese were embarrassed by the audacity of the suggestion.

Nepal's request to be admitted into Bangladesh, In-

dia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is another example of the disenchantment with SAARC. Pakistan prefers to present itself as a country (allegedly) strategically located between West, Central and South Asia rather than as a South Asian country.

New Delhi was never too keen on SAARC; and now, incredible though it may seem, fully grown men and women in India's politico-military establishment have no hesitation in envisioning South Asian solidarity without Pakistan! Now that South Block has opted for the shortcut to regional hegemony by hanging on to the coat tails of Globocop Bush II, SAARC means even less to it.

Since so little seems to be going right for SAARC right now, disbanding it amicably may appear a tempting option. After all, why have an organisation that does not ensure regional security, has not grown into an economic group, and has no potential of evolving into a forum for bilateral dialogue between member countries? Many South Asians do not even know why it exists. That said, what is also true is that the mercy killing of an organisation such as SAARC is no less difficult than creating it. The real challenge, actually, lies in re-engineering the enterprise.

One way to revive SAARC could be through *reverse adaptation*, or 'the adjustment of human needs to match the character of available means'. In practical terms, this implies finding suitable functions for an organisation that has stopped having value. This involves a reassessment of the core competencies of the enterprise, and then maximising its use-value.

Let us begin by thinking the unthinkable: what would happen if SAARC were to down its shutters? Nothing that one can easily speculate. Now, a corollary: can it do anything that another organisation in the region cannot do? Perhaps there we have more promising answers. SAARC exists, it has earned legitimacy, and even though it has less visibility than it should, it is quite well known by just having being around for so long, since 1985. These are soft strengths, more useful in areas less contested than economics and security. Can one such function be the production of a distinctive South Asian culture, reaching back to the history of the Subcontinent?

It is either that or end of the road for SAARC. A parliament of poets, a platform for philosophers, a forum for freethinkers, a retreat for artists – hardly the stuff that can hold the attention of security analysts. But if it is the arts that connect the dead with those yet unborn, the manufacture of a distinct South Asian identity has to begin right there. Let SAARC stop barking up the wrong tree and begin the march up the Tower of Babel instead.

▷
-CK Lal

Such long journeys of silence and forgiveness

Bangladesh is now being imagined outside, it has been externalised, and there is no longer the trickle-down of hope.

by *Afsan Chowdhury*

“You pray therefore you are”

TWO JOURNALISTS from the British Channel 4, Zaiba Malik and Bruno Sorrentino, along with producer Ruchira Gupta, came to Bangladesh in early November to produce a documentary on what they have said variously was the political situation, issue of identities, and other topics. However, their original visa application said they wanted to find out why a country that had secularism as one of its constitutional pillars had moved so far from its institutional ideal and become a sanctuary for Islamic extremists. They were denied visas twice by the government at the London embassy but managed to get tourist visas from the Bangladesh embassy in Italy. Once in Bangladesh, they hired a number of people to act as assistants and interpreters. Saleem Samad, a freelance journalist, professional ‘fixer’ for foreign media and representative of Reporters Sans Frontieres, was their point man.

While in Bangladesh, they went about shooting without bothering to hide their identity, although foreign journalists are not allowed into the country except on a special visa. Entering the country under false pretext constitutes an offence; the same law is in force in India and Pakistan. The focus of the filming team was on the rise of the ‘Islamist trend’, something being reported extensively by the Western and the Indian media. After shooting in various parts of Bangladesh, Malik and Sorrentino moved towards Jessore. Gupta had flown out earlier. Probably underestimating the tracking ability of the Bangladesh police, the two tried to cross over to India at the Benapole border. They were arrested along with Pricilla Raj, an NGO activist who has written extensively on development issues. This was 25 November.

Saleem Samad went into hiding but a phone call to his brother was traced and he was picked up from his hiding place and remanded by the police. According to evidence given by Raj, she was tortured and a confession was forced out of her, which she retracted in court. Samad too was reportedly tortured in custody.

Due to pressure from the Western world, Malik and Sorrentino were released on 11 December. They gave an undertaking that they would not say anything derogatory about Bangladesh and also dissociated themselves from the public information campaign carried out on their behalf internationally by Ruchira Gupta. In jail, they were treated well and put into ‘division’ or a privileged section. Samad and Raj, charged with sedition, were kept with the local inmates.

Raj’s bail application was rejected by the Magistrate’s Court, but she was granted bail by the High Court, although it took another four days before she was released on 22 December. Since the principal two accused had already left the country, it seemed patently unjust that the local journalists continued to be held in custody. Saleem Samad was also granted bail on the same grounds but on 24 December, before the order could reach the jail, he was handed a month’s detention under the Special Powers Act by the government.

Meanwhile, most of Bangladesh’s top criminals have taken shelter in Calcutta, where some were arrested and reported by the Indian media to be Al Qaeda activists.



Muntasir Mamun, Shariyar Kabir, Saleem Samad, Pricilla Raj

This was later denied and the criminals were let go. Bangladesh has demanded they be handed over; they have prices – Taka 50,000 to one lakh – on their heads. The Indian media has generally been

accusing Bangladesh of being a haven for anti-Indian terrorists and Al Qaeda operatives, a charge Dhaka vociferously denies.

The current dispensation in Bangladesh is an alliance of four right wing parties: the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a fringe Islamist party and the breakaway faction of another party. The JI is in fact a United States ally, the typical Islamist US ally which fights ‘commies’. In 1971, with Pakistani army support, it spawned the two groups of Al Badr and Al Shams, which killed a large number of people, including intellectuals, in late December 1971.

When the Channel 4 journalists were arrested, a controversial law and order restoration campaign was on in Bangladesh. It still is, with the army leading the show. Many people welcomed the crackdown as the

situation in the country had reached extreme levels of distress with political thugs having near total control of public life. Since the army crackdown, the law and order situation has improved significantly, but human rights abuse has escalated tremendously. Almost 30 people have died in custody or in hospitals following interrogation by the military. Amnesty International (AI), has severely criticised the move and its chief Irene Khan was in Dhaka in late December where she attended a seminar organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) where the BISS had a birthday party for her much to her surprise, we are told.

Meanwhile, the arrests of Awami League (AL) sup-

Somebody calculates the time it takes the release order to travel from the court to the jailer's office. The magistrate has to inform the court that a bail has been granted in the sedition case. He has to call the jail and say so, just the paper will not do. Why? Arrests and releases have to be confirmed.. made sure.

You have to be official so you exist... the phone doesn't work he says. It keeps being cut off he says. Have you no sense of.. unsaid words.. "this is the third day after being granted bail but Pricilla is still inside in post-electric shock state".. she's a toast... yap..yap..yap. "I have screamed like a mad woman at the officials for delaying the release", the woman says on the phone... she has taken on the task of getting Raj released along with a few others.. an assorted bunch of her friends from assorted lives... Such a long journey... she has been rewarded by nasty pieces in the establishment media... such a strange journey... I do not care if they arrest me. Travelogues on staying alive.. not safety.. not risks.. just being oneself one didn't know one was... you look different today.. Scared?... past that traffic light... hello.. hello.. Pricilla is free on bail.. get the copy moving.. come on... I need a smoke.. Christ man, it's counting time.

We walk hand in hand with torture and its hand is warmer than our own. You tortured man? you tortured someone.. ha..ha..ahhh.. love to hear the bones break.. the muscles jump in unexpected fright as electric impulses hit them.. like.. like custom-made thunder bolts.. raining down from the remanded skies.. this is *parampara*.. haven't we done it to all before.. get real, torture is part of investigation.. this is police culture. Explanations have no remorse, not even for the burn marks that are painted like *mehendi* on bridal skin... No no she is single... want to hear a dirty joke about her. A drunken man weeps on the phone.. haven't met Saleem *bhai* in years.. they will get his knees.. they will get his knees... Liquor

porters and activists continue. The well-known iconoclast and writer, Shariyar Kabir, and author and columnist, Professor Muntasir Mamun, are now behind bars. They were granted bail only to be detained under the Public Safety Act which was passed, ironically, by the AL when it was in power to silence dissidents. Justice Habibur Rahman, retired chief justice, *littérateur* and grammarian, jurist and chief advisor to the president of the Neutral Caretaker Government under which national elections are held has written a poem on the recent military crackdown which was carried by *The Daily Star*. While most people are happy, some are not but too scared to speak out, and only a few have voiced protest.

drowns the eyes that watch the past fly by in distant newsrooms in faded memories... are you blind man.. we gonna get ya... Saleem sat bleeding in a waiting room in the jail.. the person who saw him is too scared to report... QED.

Saleem Samad is granted bail but it takes four days to push the order from the court to the jail... slow

motion justice.. justice delayed is a slow motion journey... but the state moves swiftly and a detention order is signed before the family can hurry the papers through... the bail hangs in mid-air like a torn trouser hanging from ropes and flapping in the wind... Saleem can't make the journey home.. such a long journey...

Travelogue.. travelogue.. it's all about journeys... Shariyar Kabir and Muntasir Mamun, two AL-leaning intellectuals are moved from Dhaka to Rangpur to Comilla to nowhere to somewhere as lawyers and family members watch the map to find out.. such reluctant explorers and their

nameless diaries.. bail orders can't keep up with jail move orders... this winter is no different than the other ones.. three dead and two have gone nuts from cold.. this is cold.. cold as flesh.. *thanda ghosth*...

They too are accused of having been in touch.. encouraged the Channel 4 crew to come to Dhaka to film fundamentalism... bombs go off a day after Eid in Mymensingh killing two dozen and injuring more.. rumours of links rush faster than bomb blasts...

You Bingos are always writing poems, even protest is written in poems... Justice Habibur Rahman, the eminence grise of Bangla society sends a poem to *The Daily Star*...

Death in a custody

Death in a custody
Wherever it may be, and
In custody of whomsoever it may be

Official history is the memories of two leaders only.. both martyred; the families clash in ancient rituals of remembrances and contemporary memories of hostility...

Is a parody
Of the man's right to life.
Hands tied in the back
Eyes covered with a sack
Is a parody
Of the man's right to liberty,
An arrested is entitled to
Till he is accused and found guilty.
The interrogator's heart is made of stone
That of the accused is the exact clone
Of an ordinary human heart
A man gets a heart condition
Soon after he is arrested.
But to keep going
He may not need a doctor.
He may suffer the violence
Of His Eminence the Inquisitor
Or of His Highness the Interrogator.
He badly, however, needs a lawyer
Who may advise him to keep silence.
An interrogator is deaf.

He was the chief justice and then headed the caretaker government steering it through the troubled waters of a near coup attempt.. a poet.. a Bangla.. grammarian.. historian.. turning to poems in English to protest arrest without order.. investigation without legal cover.. custody without jurisdiction.. death without explanation.

Birthday balloons

Happy birthday to you.. happy birthday to you..
happy birthday dear Irene.. happy birthday to you...
Irene Khan, Director General of Amnesty International while attending a seminar on human rights at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies.. BIIS.. they celebrate her birthday on the premises where she is discussing human rights... Surprise.. surprise... oh, so unexpected... something rich and strange as officers of the official crest observe the birthday of Amnesty's chief cutting a cake taking a few minutes off from the rigours of discussing human rights in a country abusing it... what did she wish for as she blew the candles in the wind?

Such a long journey from the days when men disappeared from bus stops and the courts were told they never existed. Mothers are liars too. Nobody gave birth to so and so. So, they don't exist. Even criminals are concerned. Who are we? Yesterday I belonged to the party in power. Before that I was in the other party in power. And before that to another but now am hiding in Calcutta. The Indian media says I am Al Qaeda. Is it the Indian media or Bangladeshi politics or both? I

can't go home?

A lovely fashion model's body is found under a bridge.. thanda ghosth... She was married to one and had a kid in tow, sleeping with another.. some say more.. who was member of the parliament who supposedly made a blue flick with himself in the stellar role... till the last report came in, almost every star, starlet, hero, producer, make up man, hanger-on, aspirant singer.. dancer.. lover.. has been interrogated but not Ovee, the once gifted student moonlighting as the leading *mastan* of Dhaka University... later hounded, arrested, released.. contested in the polls, became an MP and then under the wings of a fragment which slowly cracked into shards.. "he aspired to be in the shoes of a mafia don in the film world"... a magazine splashes pics from the porno.. a man's back.. a woman lying without the knowledge of the electronic gaze that has captured her lust without shame... sold in Dhaka's sleaze market at decent prices... Only he can't be caught.. no remand for the big boy.. it is only middle-aged academics who are so easy to find... teachers parade and protest... middle-aged protest for a middle-aged man...

I am cobbling together a radio series on a distant and half-forgotten history.. of 1971 when people hoped of better times... I realise how terrifyingly trickle-down is this thing called hope.. more than the words that spring across rooms.. "you still not arrested yet.. shame..shame"... somebody bangs down the phone.. you have no standards... yes there are no standards even in jails.. this is increasingly becoming the only equal space.. when you are locked up...

In 32 years, since it all began something very deep has gone wrong and we don't know what... just as nobody can really say what went wrong in Africa and dust powered winds blew across freshly baked plains made out of homesteads...

**India-bashing
is Hindu-hating..
Hindu-hating, anti-
India.. anti-India
means pro-Paki-
stan.. pro-Pakistan
is ISI.. ISI,
Al Qaeda.. and
so QED**

Official history has been reduced to the memories of two leaders only.. both martyred in internal wars and their families continue to clash in ancient rituals of remembrances and contemporary memories of hostility...

Not only is history being stolen in strange episodes of forgetfulness, new and unknown histories are taking its place... The West insists and even the mightier in the East... East in the shape of India insists on a history that

is not ours and those who deny speak like denied sons.. in rage and anger and end up seeking the same histories others wish on them... It becomes a journey of circles.. India-bashing means Hindu-hating.. Hindu-hating means anti-India.. anti-India means pro-Pakistan.. pro-Pakistan means ISI.. ISI means Al Qaeda... and so QED... denial of Al Qaeda becomes tirade against India and the hand that holds the

goblet of rage is mirrored in the crystal glass of Hindutva venom...

Yet the bottom line is that of identity, and like for the characters of a Le Carre novel the present begins so long ago... Somewhere else.. in some other war... Arab nationalism versus Western nationalism becomes a confused but convenient war for so many... You are a Muslim.. you can't go to the US to see your son... the old man with a progeny in Princeton has to live on a long line of emails alone.. his son even now doesn't plan to come back.. suppose he can't go back.. he is a prisoner in US eyes.. in the eyes of his future he imagined and went West to look for.. he can't come home anymore.

Compass

I tell the ever-eager that long before Al Qaeda was born, there was Al Badr in Bangladesh; but the international news agency lady just giggles.. joke right...?... Al Badr killed more of our professional elite than anyone, even the many soldiers in 1971.. hey, just give us Al Qaeda stuff she is saying... But how can you say there is no Al Qaeda, the news team from India says exasperatedly.. the US has reported this... We now share unpronounceable names of unknown desert storms and rages... you pray therefore you are.. not who you think you are... history repeating itself.. we can have no identity except that which the West chooses for us.. like the Jews of Europe under Hitler were no longer Europeans but Jews even as they insisted otherwise.. the Serbians of European lineage were only Muslims there.. "we are not a third world country.. not refugees.. we are Europeans.. we are Yugoslavs..."... all conflicts need to fit a religious definition for the benefit of the copy desk.. no time for compound sentences...

Bangladeshis are condemned to be Muslims and nothing else... A few are happy to be part of Arab nationalism.. most are not... Western media doesn't want to know about how its consumerist policies are drowning Bangladesh.. global warming will too... They just want bearded Muslims alighting from midnight boats to deliver arms... hard pressed fringe journalists have to bid for a story that barely exists... too complex for the simple black and white mind seen through the blue eyes of the Western media... who will take such a long journey...

Saleem has to take whatever comes his way... plumbers are fixers too.. they can't let an offer go... Pricilla.. needs money barely a few days before Eid and gets recommended by Miti who can't take it and passes it on and soon the wheels are set rolling for another journey...

It comes at a time when the government is feeling the heat... US.. India.. the scene within.. crumbling

law and order... the Channel 4 team on dishonest visas are a God-send for the government... set the story as the market wants.. every media person knows what the market is.. Zaiba Malik and Sorrentino knows what Channel 4 wants.. Saleem knows what Z&S wants... and nobody thinks the government might know what they want.. are they so stupid that they won't take advantage of such a silly adventure.. as they go shooting scenes without permissions... "You may not like the law but you can't break it", the minister patiently explains... Al Qaeda becomes a distant image as the government cracks down under the sky the colour of the camouflaged shirts of law enforcers... of law and order and discipline and arresting and sedition and treachery and confessions and torture and suddenly.. suddenly.. the Channel 4 team says sorry, is released, and is gone.. hurray.

Pricilla Raj is given bail a week later by the High Court – which is part of the judiciary but not the magistracy which is part of the executive – Saleem gets bail but not out. He can't even begin the journey home.. before he can get to the gates he is served a detention order...

Conflicts must fit religious definition for the copy desk.. no compound sentences...

In all these random events there appears to be no little connection but there is a link. It seems not a description of a series of events but a diary of travels... of many people and in different directions who met at various junctions of time and space and met explosions and chatted over soft drinks and tea and had encounters which some had control, most had none... Like the body parts of innocent moviegoers in a cinema hall in remote Mymensingh as distant as it could be imagined from ground zero... Body parts that travelled in many strange and unknown directions but could be traced back to the blasts that shook the merry-makers in a hick town in impoverished Bangladesh... The blasts were real but the journey of the dismembered limbs left no travelogue behind... Western media wants to know about the blasts and not the bodies... That's where the story begins.

Oil in the Middle East and gas in Bangladesh speak in the languages of politics... As the US looks at its erstwhile enemies who are also its present friends and in a supreme irony, the other as well, history seems to spread like a deadly oil spill into other lands... Osama bin Laden, paid contributor of CIA versions is now the biggest enemy and makes history happen for other people... In a way, both Bush and Osama need Islam, the religion of the Arabs, more than anybody else... Islam, Judaism and Christianity are brothers.. all born of the same desert mother... Just as India and Pakistan need Kashmir to define the people through the lenses of religion... You can't be a Kashmiri anymore, you can only be an

enemy to someone if you talk of Kashmir.. either Pakistan or India will be on your side.. Kashmir is not the imagination of the Kashmiris anymore. It belongs to the foreign, the defence and intelligence offices of other countries. Kashmir has been externalised, its history constructed through the nationalist aspirations of other people... good-bye..good-bye..good-bye..

As I read a newspaper, various pages on various themes, I can feel the world delicately balanced on each... "Bangladesh is only good for disasters and fanatics and international media wants only that.. one of the last countries which is not part of Arab nationalist problems but full of Muslims.. no strategic borders like Pakistan.. not worth a correspondent.. it has to have Al Qaeda.. eight percent voters said "yes" to Islamists.. Myanmar border.. drugs.. Indian border.. are you crazy... Find me some fanatics..please.. what flavour would you like.. we pay in dollars... in 30 years, the number of fanatics hasn't risen but some of them have made

connections... But bombs are always anonymous and if the secret armies of Islam are waging a war here.. unlike elsewhere they haven't said anything even once in Bangladesh".

...law, order,
discipline, sedition,
treachery, confes-
sions, torture.. sud-
denly, the Channel 4
team says sorry, is
released, and
gone.. hurray

But Bangladesh is now being imagined outside, its identity externalised. Helpless, inept and unable to manage itself in any sector, it can turn only against its own kind...

With the foreign media, it is groveling and ham fisted at the same time... Osama has created opportunities to make smaller countries of uncertain identities more uncertain.. has also allowed the fist that denies freedom to act easily against its own flesh. The identity crisis of the Bangladeshi people, its most obvious heritage is now its worst enemy... Neither only Bengali nor only Muslim... Its land, the richest once in entire India hasn't supported its people in the last 200 years. The nation of migrants can neither return to its vagrant home nor go elsewhere to seek that because others will now decide who it is that lives here anyway.

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NOBODIES TO SOMEBODIES
The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka
Kumari Jayawardena

Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka

By Kumari Jayawardena
Zed Books, London and New Delhi, 2002

pp xxx+412, INR 650
ISBN 1 84277 228 7

Beginning with early 19th century agricultural production and accelerating in the following decades with urban commercial enterprises, a Sri Lankan bourgeoisie emerged in the colonial period as facilitators of proto-capitalism. This 'modern' economic elite did not fully divest itself of its feudal legacies however, although it did engage in capitalism. The resultant socio-economic transitional period witnessed, for example, the retreat of caste from public discussions of occupation, although caste beliefs continued to be held by large sections of the bourgeoisie privately. As the class of wealthy Sri Lankans consolidated its position, it invested heavily in plantations and eagerly sought titles. The author, in her study of the rise of the colonial bourgeoisie, concludes that it was essentially created and co-opted by the British rulers.



Social Welfare in Pakistan
Shireen Rehmatullah

Social Welfare in Pakistan

By Shireen Rehmatullah

OUP, Karachi, 2002
pp 491, PKR 595/USD 22
ISBN 0 19 579632 2

Drawing on five decades of experience in social work, Shireen Rehmatullah describes how the concept of charity has evolved in Pakistan from a moral and local concept to a scientific and

bureaucratic exercise. She draws on a wide range of topics – from child welfare and education to urban planning and administration – to argue that Pakistani social workers need to develop new, indigenous methods for approaching social problems.



Savarkar and Hindutva: The Godse Connection

By AG Noorani

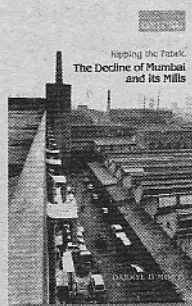
LeftWord, New Delhi, 2002

pp x+159, INR 295
ISBN 81 87496 28 2

Speaking at Port Blair in May 2002, Indian home minister, Lal Krishna Advani, praised Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the independence-era author

of the term 'Hindutva' who was arrested in connection with Gandhi's January 1948 assassination. Advani called Savarkar a "pioneer" who had helped India gain independence. This

public embrace of Savarkar, Noorani argues, is only the latest evidence of the persisting influence of Savarkar on Hindu-right politics. Testifying during his murder trial, Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin, referred to the ideologue Savarkar as "the most faithful advocate of the Hindu cause". Advani's parallel comments about Savarkar, coming as they did immediately after the worst pogrom against Muslims in a decade, testify to the enduring stamp of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar on Indian politics.



Ripping the Fabric: The Decline of Mumbai and its Mills

By Darryl D'Monte

OUP, New Delhi, 2002

pp xii+291, INR 595
ISBN 01 9566 111 5

At their peak in the 1970s, Bombay's mills employed 250,000 people. Today, with only 50,000 workers remaining and the industry suffering from a two-decade-long slump, many owners are attempting to sell off portions of the 500 acres of mill property in mid-town Bombay. The fate of the mills – and of the mill workers – was determined by a convergence of factors in the 1980s and 1990s: increased mechanisation, heightened competition among Asian rivals, and economic liberalisation after 1991. The author, who has reported on labour and industrial issues in Bombay for more than two decades, contextualises the plight of the mill workers within these broader economic shifts and seeks to chart a path that balances the interests of the workers, mill proprietors and the city.



Capital and Labour Redefined: India and the Third World

By Amiya Kumar Bagchi

Tulika, New Delhi, 2002

pp xxxi+336, INR 575
ISBN 81 85229 54 6

In this collection of essays, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, one of India's leading economic historians, lays out his critiques of colonial economic development, post-colonial global economic integration, and the socio-political effects of economic change in contemporary India. Bagchi argues that communal/caste tensions are in many cases facilitated by the deliberate strategies of capitalists to undermine worker power, and attempts to situate concepts of 'Indian culture' within appropriate historical and economic models.

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

Note to publishers: new titles can be sent to GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal. Books are mentioned in this section before they are sent for detailed review.

HATE

GANESHALINGAM

Since we Subcontinentals hate each other everywhere all the time, there is nothing new to report there. But it may be useful to try and do a survey of the category that we dislike the most. And I know which variety of South Asian I dislike more than all the other that I disdain to the fullest. The child artiste. The Master Tinkus and Baby Guddus of the silver screen.

Yes, you know those little creatures who come on screen to make us squirm and despair for South Asian cinema. As younger brother of the heroine, as a pathetic waif who sings to the voice of an adult woman (most likely Asha Bhonsle), as invariably the most annoyingly earnest member of the cast, the child artiste is the horror, respectively, of Bollywood, Kollywood, Dollywood and Lollywood.

Sure, sure I know there were some good child actors and actresses out there as well. And I do need to situate Master Tinku and Baby Guddu in a context where even adult actors were wooden-faced and sported blank stares – think Manoj Kumar and Nanda rather than Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. And I will pause a moment, certainly, and recollect Ray's Apu in *Apur Sansar* and Mukul in *Sonar Kella*, or Rahul in *Masoom*, and even reach back and remember Rishi Kapoor in *Mera Naam Joker*.

But all the fine child actors in the Subcon will not be able to undo the damage done by the bad ones foisted upon hundreds of millions of moviegoers all over this great land of ours. The human rights abuse by these kids is on a scale that requires the creation of an RNGO (regional non-governmental organisation) to carry out a monitoring exercise and suggest ameliorative action, including counselling on a mass scale.

Imagine the scene. I forget which film it was, but it goes back to the early 1970s at least. There is this – waif – who has been blind since childhood. And a more pathetic sight-impaired you could not find. He is always teary eyed, staring blindly into space (except when occasionally his attention wanders and he actually focuses on something – after many retakes and wasted film stock, the director said in exasperation, "Just can it, they won't know the difference with an actor as bad as this!").

Well, so, this child, call him Ganeshalingam, has been waiting for his sight to be restored. Everything is tried, doctors are visited, voodoo methods employed, all to no avail. The kid just cannot see. Meanwhile, we

have the interludes in which the sister (Mumtaz or Sadhana) is wooed by Dharmendra or Vinod Khanna, minister for tourism in the current dispensation. The villain (possibly Shatrughan Sinha, currently minister of health) comes along to abduct Mumtaz or Sadhana. Just to bring the child actor back into the story line, which has meandered to depict the cavorting lovers in Gulmarg, Shatrughan kidnaps Ganeshalingam.

More glycerine wells up in the child actors' eyes as he is taken away, and from within the cinema halls of

Pilibhit, Purnea, Muzaffarpur, Bareilly and Raipur, a flood of tears emerges to augment the flow of *Gangamaa* and her tributaries – such is the ability of the North South Asian Hindi audience to weep for lost childhood. But soon the flood of tears will stop, as we all well know. For it is ordained that Ganeshalingam's sight be restored, and we weep for that moment to come soon.

The drama is heightened as a grandfather figure, looking very much like Rabindranath in his halo of silver, leads the child up a slope, and shouts (in song) to the heavens a la Moses on the mount, ending with the entreaty to the almighty, "Aaaankh dilaaaa!! Aaaankh dilaaaa!!"

Now comes the worst part of the film. Camera pans from heaven to child. A twisted smile comes to Ganeshalingam's lips, he looks vacantly skywards, reaches up with an unsure hand to grandpappy, and says in the most icky dialogue delivered in the history of filmmaking in the occident or orient, "Abba jaan, main dekh sakta hoon! Abba jaan, main dekh sakta hoon!"

(Do not, please, complicate matters by asking why a child of Hindu Tamil lineage goes around saying abba jaan.)

It is terrible, the scene, the story, the acting, and the child. You have to leave the hall, which means swimming through the raging torrent of saltwater emerging from the cinema hall. As you run away, and as the wind dries your clothes and cakes of dried salt flake off your skin, you promise never ever to go see another movie with a child actor.

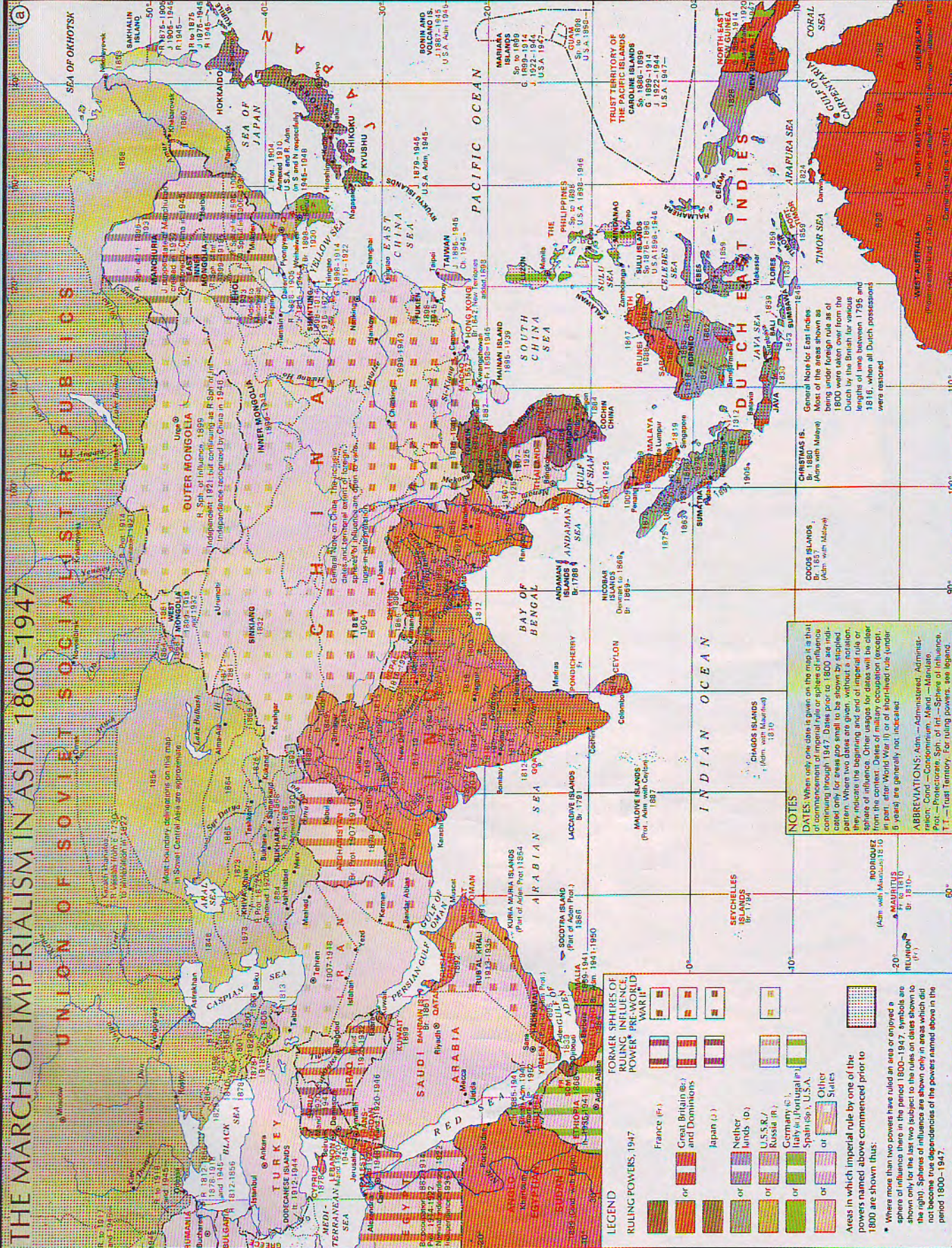
Three decades later, I still wake up in cold sweat, hearing Ganeshalingam shouting into my ears, "Abba jaan, main dekh sakta hoon! Abba jaan, main dekh sakta hoon!"

Such is the power of badly made Hindustani cinema.

Kamakhya Dixit



Master Ganeshalingam can see.



FROM A HISTORICAL ATLAS OF SOUTH ASIA, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK, 1992.



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