August 2003

HIMĀL

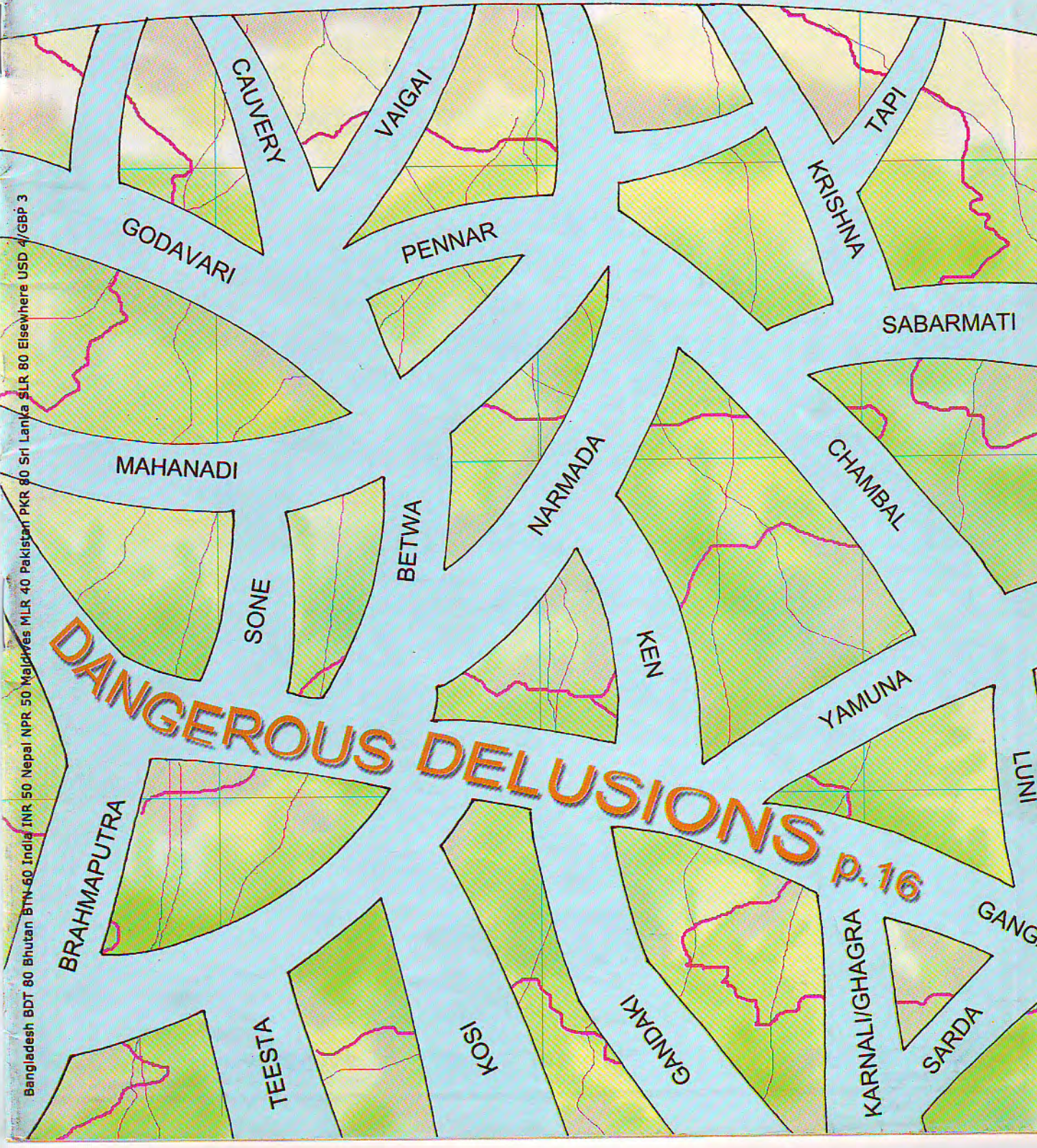
SOUTH ASIAN

Afghan anomalies

Abandoned in exile

Soldier of '71

Bangladesh BDT 80 Bhutan BTN 60 India INR 50 Nepal NPR 50 Maldives MLR 40 Pakistan PKR 80 Sri Lanka SLR 80 Elsewhere USD 4/GBP 3



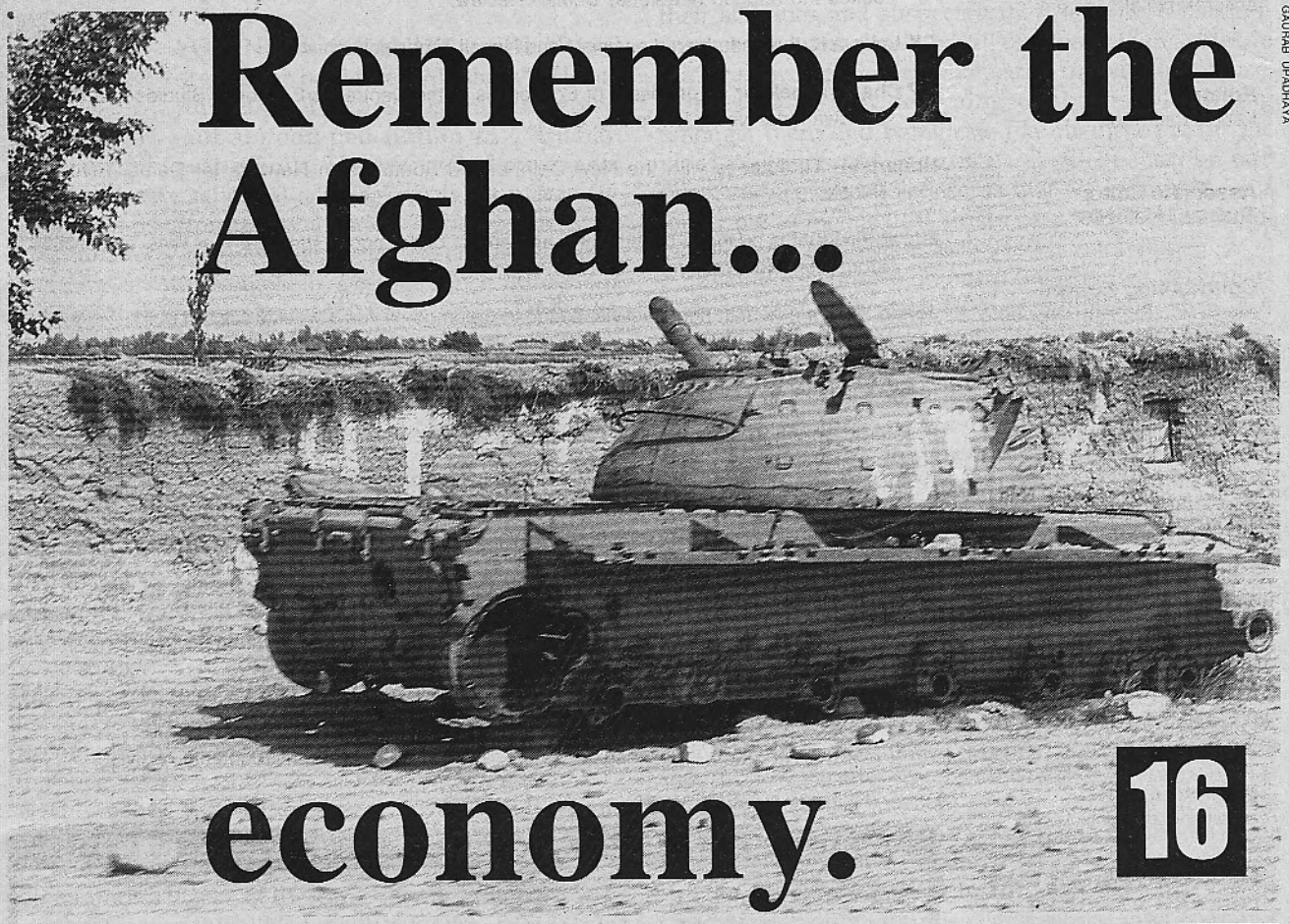
DANGEROUS DELUSIONS

P. 16

HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

Vol 16 No 8 August 2003

Remember the Afghan... economy.



GAURAB UPADHAYA

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SOUTH ASIAN

editors@himalmag.com

Editor
Kanak Mani Dixit

Associate Editor
Thomas J Mathew

Contributing Editors
CALCUTTA Rajashri Dasgupta
COLOMBO Manik de Silva
DHAKA Afsan Chowdhury
KARACHI Beena Sarwar
NEW DELHI Mitu Varma
N. AMERICA Amitava Kumar

Editorial Assistant
Joe Thomas K

Design Team
Indra Shrestha
Kam Singh Chepang
Suresh Neupane
Bilash Rai (Graphics)
Bhushan Shilpakar (Website)

Marketing
advertising@himalmedia.com

Subscription/Overseas Sales
Anil Karki
subscription@himalmedia.com

Nepal/Northeast India Sales
Sudan Bista
sales@himalmedia.com

Marketing Office, Karachi
Ajmal Kamal
City Press
316 Madina City Mall
Abdullah Haroon Road
Saddar, Karachi 74400
Ph. +92-21-5650623/5213916
email: cp@citypress.cc

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Himal was a Himalayan journal from 1987 to March of 1996, when it became a South Asian magazine.

Contributors to this issue

Bhim Subba was a senior Bhutanese government official before he became a refugee. He has also edited the refugee newsletter *Bhutan Review*.

CK Lal is a Kathmandu-based engineer and Nepali Times columnist

CP Chandrashekhar is professor of Economics at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

Himanshu Thakkar is with the New Delhi-based South Asian Network for Dams, Rivers and People.

Ishrat Firdousi is a Dhaka-based writer and author of the book, *The Year that Was*, a collection of stories on the experiences of 1971.

Jehan Perera a human rights activist based in Colombo, writes a weekly column in the *Daily Mirror*.

Pradeep Adhikary is a water resource engineer working with the Center for Technical and Vocational Education in Kathmandu.

Prashant Bhushan based in Delhi, is a member of the Council for Public Interest Litigation and counsel for the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Pratyoush Onta is a Kathmandu-based historian affiliated with the public forum Martin Chautari and the Centre for Social Research and Development.

Ramaswamy R Iyer was Secretary of Water Resources, Government of India.

Sudhirendar Sharma is a water expert and a development analyst with the Delhi-based Ecological Foundation.

Syed Ali Mujtaba is a broadcast journalist based in Madras.

Venu Madhav Govindu is a Vishakapatnam-based scientist and environmental activist.

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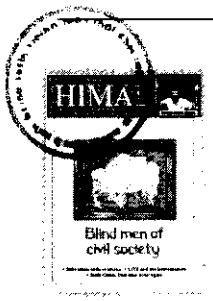


Too many stereotypes

YOGINDER SIKAND'S article "Word of god for benighted Muslims" (*Himal*, July 2003) betrays his misconceived and stereotyped notion of Christian evangelicals. The evangelical movement is a worldwide religious activity involving many different groups informed by a variety of perspectives. Its denominations include black, white, Asian, African and Latin-American evangelism, besides those influenced by more recent currents in social and political thought, such as feminist evangelical groups. There are more evangelicals in third world countries than there are in entire West.

Given that there are so many different varieties of evangelicals, it is only proper to first lay out what is common to them. Evangelicals simply believe in Jesus but that does not mean that they believe in the superiority of the American way of life, as Sikand seems to infer. Even in North America the evangelical movement is not a monolithic entity. On political issues, it is as divided as any other group, and the right-wing tendency constitutes only a small minority. The *Time* magazine story, referred to in the article, and similar others elsewhere have only served to give them a prominence disproportionate to their actual numerical presence.

The reality is that there are numerous individuals and groups among the evangelical who have opposed the war in Iraq. Black evangelicals, the largest organisation among blacks in the US, overwhelmingly do not support George Bush. Nor for that matter does Jimmy Carter, the former president of US and a well-known evangelical. Philip Yancey, one of the most popular evangelical writers, has consistently opposed the questionable foreign policy decisions of the US. And if further proof were needed of the diversity of opinion in the movement and the presence of progressive forces within it, it is to be found in the fact that there are several groups who oppose the US policy towards Israel.

If Sikand directs his attention to the Witherspoon website, at the URL http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/evangelicals_to_bush.htm, in particular to the article by Alexa Smith of the Presbyterian News Service, he will realise that all evangelism is not aligned to right-wing US policy. In fact, this article, filed on 16 July begins, "Five evangelical Presbyterians have sent a letter to President George W Bush pointing out that the Christian right's uncritical support of Israel is not the position of all US evangelicals". According to Craig Barnes, pastor of the National Church in Washington, DC, and one of the signatories to the document, the letter was intended to inform the US president "that evangelicals are a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, and that the pro-Israeli Zionists' voices do not speak for all evangelicals".

Sikand's errors do not stop at his mistaken notions about the movement at large. He has also misconstrued their activities and suspected their intentions. His references to evangelicals who "disguise" themselves in the local "way of life" possibly arise from his ignorance. Contextualisation, ie, going to the people, living amongst them and being one like them to preach the word of god is not "disguise". Contextualisation and social service are two concepts that were debated for a long time in evangelical circles. A positive attitude towards these concepts is now slowly evolving.

Sikand's examples do not show him in a particularly good light. If the statues of Mary in India show her dressed in a sari, the reasons for it do not necessarily add up to some sinister conspiracy hatched by missionaries, as he seems to believe. Surely there is nothing wrong in making the symbols of the faith more relevant to the society in which it is practised. After all, is not the sari the dress of the majority of women Christians in India? This is particularly significant in the context of the Hindutva argument that Christianity, like Islam, is a faith alien to the India. Long before Hindutva emerged as an entrenched fact of Indian politics, Christianity had partaken of the ethos of Indian society.

On the issue of social work, Sikand ought to remember that its history is as old as the evangelical tradition. Granted there are many who do social work with the intention of earning goodwill. But that again does not translate into a diabolical plot for conversion. While Sikand may wish to decry evangelism on the basis of his examples from Bangalore, perhaps he should also remember the numerous institutions in that city and elsewhere that missionaries have set up, which are not platforms for conversion, as so many proponents of majoritarian politics, who otherwise have no time for the plight of their co-religionists, are always ready to allege. The writer should have balanced his study by examining neighbouring states as well where the pattern of conversion among sections of the population (especially in Andhra Pradesh) gives a totally different picture. It was an indigenous movement among the people- never enforced but always embraced. The numerous *adivasi* churches by the marginalised people in Andhra Pradesh stand are witness to this trend.

Since I do not believe that Sikand subscribes to the politics of Hindutva, I will conclude with a query to him. Is he speaking on behalf of all the citizens of India. Or is he speaking for Muslims of India? Or is it for the benefit of the 'outcastes' of *varna* society. The grandiose tone implied in the sweep of his claims is something I have heard many times, but it has always been from the same source - the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS). Perhaps Sikand should clarify how his stand differs from that of the RSS.

Jerry Thomas
Secunderabad

INDIA

CONTEMPTIBLE JUSTICE

THE SPATE of scams involving some members of the Indian higher judiciary in corruption, bribery, sex, nepotism and abuse of power has again drawn attention to the long overdue need for reform of the judicial system. The image of the judiciary and its credibility are perhaps at an all-time low. The problem of corruption comes on top of the problem of judicial inertia and the prohibitively expensive nature of the process of securing justice. This has effectively ensured that the judicial system cannot deliver justice to the ordinary citizen. All this suits the ruling establishment just fine, since those who have the power of force or money do not need the courts to get justice. It is the poor and the oppressed, the common people who need a properly working system for the administration of justice. This is also why those who have the power to reform the system have failed to do so despite knowing the problems and the solutions. It has become clear that judicial reforms will only come when the general public, who are the consumers of justice, put together a strong and powerful movement on this issue.

No criminal investigation against a judge can be initated without the prior consent of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

There are enough indications that corruption in the higher judiciary has reached unacceptable levels. For instance, in March this year, Justice Shamit Mukherjee of the Delhi High Court had to tender his resignation, following which he was arrested by the Central Bureau of Investigation under sections of the Anti-corruption Act, 1988 and sections of the Criminal Procedure Code for criminal conspiracy. Rampant corruption, which has steadily undermined the credibility of and popular faith in the judicial mechanism, was clearly to be expected in a situation where the higher judiciary enjoys enormous powers without accountability.

Power sans accountability inevitably breeds corruption and abuse. Consider the situation. Once appointed, a judge of a high court (the highest judicial mechanism in the states) or the Supreme Court, cannot be touched except by a complicated procedure of impeachment. As per the constitutional provisions, a judge of a high court or the Supreme Court can only be removed by impeachment after 100 members of the Lok Sabha (the lower house) or 50 members of the Rajya Sabha (the upper house) move the speaker, who may refer the charges to a committee of judges whose verdict is put up before both the houses of Parliament. The judge can only be removed if a two third-majority of members present and voting approve the verdict of the committee.

Today impeachment remains the only option since the judicial system has insulated itself from criminal investigation through a Supreme Court ruling. This happened in 1991 in a case arising from the discovery of huge quantities of money in the residence of Justice K Veeraswamy, then Chief Justice of the Madras High Court. When the Central Bureau of Investigation prosecuted for corruption, the Supreme Court ruled that no First Information Report can be registered against a judge, nor a criminal investigation be initated, without prior consent of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. This effectively excluded the higher judiciary from the ordinary laws of the land, since there is no possible circumstance under which an investigating agency can approach the Chief Justice for consent to investigate a judge without any concrete evidence against him. This is the reason why no judge has ever been subjected to a criminal investigation after the Veeraswamy judgment. In the meanwhile, armed with this legal immunity judicial corruption has continued to flourish.

This immunity is doubly reinforced by the fact that the procedure for impeachment of judges is not only cumbersome, it is also eminently susceptible to political interference. The existing system of impeachment was found to be practically unworkable in the V Ramaswamy case, where the judge survived in office despite being found guilty on several serious charges of corruption by a statutory committee of three fellow judges. This was because members of the Congress, then in power during the prime ministership of PV Narasimha Rao, abstained from voting due to a whip issued by the party leadership when the impeachment motion was put to vote in Parliament in May 1993. In that particular case,

however, it was at least possible to initiate the process, because the charges against the judge dealt with irregularities in purchases made in his official capacity. These purchases were audited by the Accountant General and it was in that process that the evidence of corruption came out. As a result, it was possible to frame charges for his impeachment and have the relevant procedural motions signed by 100 members of Parliament. In normal cases of judicial corruption however, it is difficult to produce evidence of the judge's corruption in the absence of official investigation. Thus, it is not possible to even initiate the process of impeachment, let alone carry one through to the bitter end.

Judges' sellout

Apart from enjoying immunity from removal and investigation, the higher judiciary further enjoys virtually unlimited powers of punishing people for contempt of court. Any person making any allegation of corruption against a sitting judge can be charged and punished for contempt, even if he is in a position to substantiate the charge. The contempt proceedings are so biased in favour of the judicial system that the very judge against whom the allegation of corruption has been made can prosecute the charge for contempt. The judge can even sit in judgment on his or her own case, and can actually refuse to permit the alleged contemnor to lead evidence to prove the charge. This is such a vast and unchecked power that it can easily be and has been misused by the judiciary.

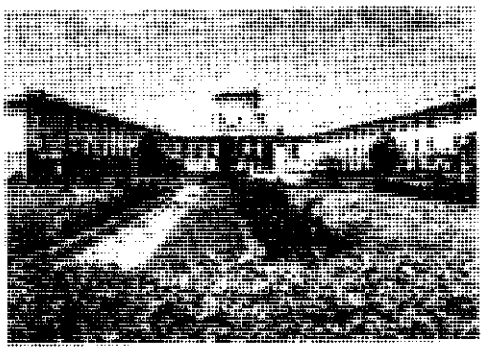
The excessive power that the judiciary wields in respect of contempt is in reality a way of shielding itself from legitimate criticism, even when such criticism does not otherwise prejudice or obstruct the administration of justice. The existence of this arbitrary power is undoubtedly one of the main reasons why public exposure of judicial corruption has been few and far between and even routine criticism of the judiciary is muted.

Beyond the matter of public scrutiny, the Indian judiciary has been steadily increasing its other powers over the years, adding vast and arbitrary authority ostensibly for enforcing the fundamental rights of citizens. However, these powers are usually exercised in the interests of the ruling establishment. More and more instances are being witnessed where, by judicial fiat, the constitutional mandate is flouted and even the fundamental rights of liberty, equality and right to work are rendered nugatory when ordinary citizens are pitted against the state and powerful sections of society. This is how, for instance, in the interest of cleaning up Delhi's air by reducing the levels of pollution, the Supreme Court ordered the closure and relocation of several small industries in the city, leading to the loss of livelihood of several thousand workers.

As it is, the state has a long record of enacting anti-democratic and draconian laws. Not only have the courts usually put their seal of approval on these laws, but they have sanctified action taken under them, such as the dismissal of employees en-masse from industrial jobs. The judiciary has also recently been playing a leading role in upholding the sellout of public enterprises by disinvestments carried out under the cover of globalisation. Lately, it has played a retrograde role in curbing the rights of workers to protest and go on strike, endorsing several anti-democratic measures to restrict their rights. Meanwhile, the proliferation of public interest litigations has encouraged unrestrained judicial activism. Though judicial activism through public interest litigations can be a healthy check on an executive which has failed and become corrupt, it can become a menace in the hands of a corrupt and unaccountable judiciary.

The excessive power that the judiciary wields in respect of contempt is in reality a way of shielding itself from legitimate criticism.

The problems with the higher judiciary, however, begin with the process of appointment itself. Quite apart from the fact that the method of selection of judges itself is defective, the entire process is kept under a cloak of secrecy. Thus, before an appointment is actually made, the general public does not have any idea about who are the candidates being considered for the post. Many persons whose integrity was known to be suspect and those who had been found guilty of professional misconduct during their legal career have come to be appointed to high office through this secretive system. The selection process has undergone some change over the years, but it has not reduced the spate of undesirable and positively harmful appointments. While earlier the selection was made by the government itself (after consultations with the Chief Justice), now, by a process of


India's Supreme Court: Far away from scrutiny.

judicial interpretation, the power has been transferred to a collegium of three to five judges of the Supreme Court. This has managed to reduce the government's monopoly over appointments, but the system has not change significantly. The patronage system has simply become more fraternal, since senior judges of the Supreme Court now wield the power of appointment of their junior colleagues. The proof is in the results, and there has not been a noticeable difference in the quality of appointments.

National commission

In an attempt to tackle the problem relating to appointments and accountability of judges, the Committee on Judicial Accountability (COJA), consisting of members of the legal profession, almost a decade ago forwarded a detailed proposal for a high-powered, full-time and independent National Judicial Commission (NJC). This commission would make appointments as also have disciplinary powers over judges of the higher judiciary. The commission would also be responsible for appointments to various commissions and quasi-judicial bodies. The NJC would comprise a nominee each of the Supreme Court, the chief justices of the high courts, the central cabinet, the opposition in Parliament, and the bar. It would also have an investigative machinery of its own to inquire into complaints against members of the judiciary. Members of the NJC would have the same status as that of Supreme Court judges and a guaranteed tenure of five years, after which they would be ineligible for any other similar post.

This proposal would have brought transparency into the system of appointment of judges. But even though nearly every political party included the proposal in its election manifesto, the National Judicial Commission is yet to become reality. The reasons are not far to seek. But now, after the spate of highly publicised judicial scandals, particularly the Shamit Mukherjee case, the government has come up with a proposal to constitute a somewhat truncated NJC. This commission is to be a part-time body of three senior sitting judges of the Supreme Court, the law minister and a nominee of the prime minister. This NJC will not have the power of removal of judges and the present impracticable system of impeachment will continue. The government's proposal will merely institutionalise the system of sharing the spoils of appointment between the government and the senior members of the judiciary.

Since under the circumstances the judiciary cannot be expected to reform itself, and since the main political parties have reneged on their electoral commitment as expressed in their manifestos, only a strong public campaign can provide the impetus to put in place an independent and responsible body for the appointment and removal of judges. Popular pressure is the only force that can get the 1991 Veerasamy judgment overruled, whether legislatively or judicially, to ensure that judges can be investigated like any other class of citizens. Civic mobilisation is necessary to force change in the contempt law so as to ensure that citizens cannot be prosecuted for making allegations against judges, unless they have done so recklessly or in bad faith. The law must be changed so that judges cannot sit in judgement of their own contempt cases. If the judicial mechanism has to be rescued from its own infirmities, citizens and civil society in India must put together a strong movement to force accountability in the judiciary.

–Prashant Bhushan

SRI LANKA

NORTH AND SOUTH

THERE HAVE been apprehensions in Colombo and the rest of the south of Sri Lanka that the peace process, being stuck these past three months, may not last much longer. Incidents such as the destruction of LTTE ships by the navy, the organisation's own refusal to attend the Tokyo donor conference, and now its defiance of a directive by the international monitors of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission to dismantle their newly established military camp in government-controlled territory – these loom large in the minds of many

Sinhalese and also among the international community. The campaign carried out by a section of the opposition against the ceasefire agreement also add to these apprehensions in the south.

But in the north of the country, neither in the LTTE-controlled Wanni nor in government-controlled Jaffna, are there similar apprehensions about an imminent or impending return to war. Prices of land in Jaffna have registered sharp increases compared to what they were two years ago, going up five to ten times in some locations, due to increased demand by expatriate Tamils who wish to provide for their families remaining in Jaffna, and also due to the arrival of international NGOs. Along the A-9 highway that connects north and south, new construction is on. People are returning to their homes and rebuilding them, investing in their futures. These are significant indexes to prospective peace.

More than any other community, the Tamil people of the north and east have reason to dread the return of the war which had broken up their homes and flattened their houses. Nearly every person who lives in Jaffna has a horror to tell. Take the case of P Selvarajah, who is President of the Guardian Association of Arrested and Disappeared Persons in the North. He lost his son when the army took him in for questioning, and his desperate desire in his old age is to find a job for his daughter. Mr. Selvarajah wants peace.

While they do not wish the LTTE to return to war, many in Jaffna believe it is the LTTE's effort to keep up its military strength that is the mainstay of Tamil bargaining strength. Where democratic leaders of the calibre of SJV Chelvanayakam, founder of the Federal Party could not succeed, the militant leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran has succeeded in forcing the Colombo government to take the Tamil negotiating position seriously. There is no doubt that the LTTE is using the period of the ceasefire to continue to strengthen itself politically and militarily. But there is no apprehension in Jaffna that the military build up at this time is for the purpose of launching a new war.

LTTE's task

Wresting Tamil rights and autonomy away from Sinhalese nationalism and governmental domination is the task that the northern population has bequeathed to the LTTE. Therefore, as a community they will not oppose the Tigers' military build-up, even as they try and keep their children from being recruited by the LTTE. And underlying their acquiescence, of course, is the factor of fear –the LTTE's undemocratic nature that has it eliminate rivals and those they term traitors. Whatever the inadequacies of the peace process, however, the people of Jaffna have gained greatly from it, materially and psychologically. They do not feel weakened as a community as a result of the ceasefire agreement, which is why virtually all of them view it positively. Of course there are apprehensions about the future. But these revolve not around the possibilities of a resumption of war, but the makeup and work of the proposed interim administration.

They are more confident in Jaffna.

Where the Tigers' military interest and the people's humanitarian demands converge, as in the case of resettlement in the High Security Zones, we find that the people's voice is strong enough to be heard. But where the LTTE's military interest do not necessarily tie in with the public's desires, as in the case of child recruitment or taxation, there is silence. What the people want from the LTTE leadership is a sign that they will be able to deliver democracy, including the freedom to speak and to oppose what they deem to be harmful. Without this sign of democracy, there are sections who are apprehensive of the coming interim administration.

The people of the north want the same freedoms as those enjoyed by those in the south of the island. The past 18 months of ceasefire have made the people of Jaffna

impatient for a rapid restoration of their lost rights. People who stayed on in Jaffna over the past 20 years of war are worried about an LTTE which deems itslef to be the sole representative of the Tamil people. They are concerned that under a Tigers-dominated interim administration there may be no place for those who are not LTTE members or supporters. They fear marginalisation once the LTTE takes charge. Those who worry thus may be few in number, but they constitute the most educated people left in Jaffna.

As for the larger public in the north, their concern is with being able to live in their own homes and leading dignified lives. People from all walks of life complain bitterly that their houses are still inaccessible for being demarcated within the High Security Zones. Further, most of the houses in the High Security Zones are in various stages of collapse, having been abandoned 10 to 15 years ago. The bitterness among the people who have lost their homes or seen an army in occupation of their family lands provides a reservoir of support for the LTTE because of its to promise to get the army out.

The people of the north want the same freedoms as those enjoyed by those in the south of the island

Resource shortage

One of the problems that the future interim administration is likely to encounter is a shortage of resources relative to its needs. This is particularly true in the case of resettling people in their original places. Most of the homes have been almost completely destroyed and would require SLR 1 to 3 million to rebuild. The interim administration that is set up is unlikely to be able to raise such a sum of money to provide tens of thousands of people who have lost their homes. The donor community could play a crucial role to ease the problem in this regard.

Another problem is that many of the houses of displaced persons are located within the High Security Zones that are not limited simply to the area around the Palali airport or Kankasanthurai naval port. An area is considered out-of-bounds pretty much wherever an army camp decides it is to be so. Until the people are permitted to resettle in their original homesteads, and adequate resources are made available to them to rebuild and refurbish, this is likely to be a focal point of tension. The Colombo authorities and the Tigers' leadership should address these issues sooner rather than later, and try to find a reasonable balance between security needs and basic human requirements. In the end, progress is sought so that there will no longer be a need for high security zones.

Unless there is close cooperation between the Colombo government and LTTE, the proposed LTTE-dominated interim administration may not be able to tackle all the problems at the speed at and in the manner in which the people want them to. Without close cooperation, it is also likely that the interim administration will have neither the money nor the institutional competence to deliver on the hopes and expectations of the people. This can lead to a dangerous situation where the government and LTTE begin blaming each other for failure of delivery. From a civil society point of view, the interim administration should also be seen as a stepping-stone to federalism, democracy, freedom of speech and elections. These factors need to be carefully considered when the structure, powers and composition of the interim administration are negotiated.

–Jehan Perera

SOUTH ASIA

PREDATORY GLOBALISATION

FOR AN institution that seeks to introduce a rule-based regime of global trade, ostensibly through civilised consensus between member states, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) provokes a fair degree of organised acrimony. The protests that routinely accompany WTO meetings are largely due to the unequal access of different groups to the negotiating process. Groups of people who do not belong to the economic mainstream are deemed to have their interests represented by the official delegates of their respective countries to the global trade body. On the other hand, a substantial volume of global trade, particularly in the services economy, today, is overwhelmingly dominated by gigantic transnational corporations, which constitute a systematic lobby with privileged access to the negotiating

process. Consequently they are able to influence the agendas of WTO elites like the EU, the US, Canada and Japan.

There is of, course, no guarantee that equal access will produce equitable outcomes. On the other hand, the preponderant influence of oligarchic cartels is guaranteed to rig global trade policy in ways that threaten the already fragile livelihood environment of large numbers of people. The diehard supporters of the global order, like *The Economist* and the bulk of the mainstream Western press tend to focus all their attention on the 'theatrics' of the protests against multilateral bodies. The reasons are obviously self-serving. Well-off Western protestors present an easy target for caricaturing the criticism against corporate-driven globalisation. By stressing on the 'idiosyncrasies' of these globally-publicised agitators, including the alleged paradox of affluent first-worlders protesting on behalf of poor third-world natives, the need to examine in any detail the effects of the multilateral policy regime is dispensed with.

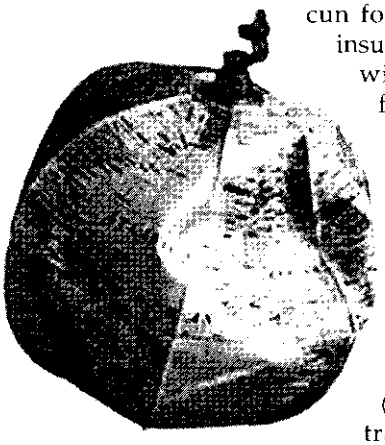
This trivialisation is necessary to sustain the fiction that predatory globalisation will bring universal benefits. Multilateral elites professing so much concern for the poverty-stricken cannot afford to dwell at any great length on the numerous protests their laboured magnanimity evokes among the natives of the underdeveloped world. Though they do not get their share of attention in the international media, there have been militant protests in several countries in Africa and Latin America against domestic policy changes, prescribed by donors and willingly accepted by client-regimes. These policy changes have been substantially along the lines envisaged under the WTO's liberalisation of services agenda, which is merely an euphemism for handing over the supply of essential services, unhindered by regulation, to private corporations. Such protests have taken a combative turn as states attempt to quell popular agitations through armed force and clear the way for corporate control.

For South Asia, there are lessons to be learnt from recent developments in Africa and Latin America, where the consequences of the surrender of essential services to corporate interests have been drastic. Water has been one of the main targets of corporate attention and Africa has been at the receiving end of some cutthroat multi-lateral intervention. Both Mozambique and Tanzania have privatised water supply under threat from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 1999 Mozambique had to sell off 70 percent of its water services to European multinationals as a precondition for debt relief. Water utilities across Africa have been brought under the "full cost recovery" model, under which those who cannot pay their water bills are left out of the supply loop, besides also being evicted from their homes. Since 1994, in South Africa alone, over 10 million people have been denied water services and some 2 million have been ousted from their homes for non-payment of water dues. This failure to pay is not unusual since tariffs have increased dramatically ever since water was privatised. For instance, between 1994 and 1996, in the black townships of Fort Beaufort, service charges have increased by 600 percent. As a result of such extortionary rates the consumption of drinking water from unsafe sources has increased.

In Ghana, World Bank conditionalities for assistance required the sale of water services. Five multinationals, among them Vivendi and Bi-water, whose annual turnovers exceed the GDP of Ghana, bid for providing water services. Interestingly, the proposed Private Sector Participation, gives the corporate participants the responsibility to only operate and manage the water systems without requiring them to extend services, a task that has been left to the public sector. Latin America too has seen its share of water-profiteering. In 1999, Bolivia privatised water supply and the resulting 200 percent hike in tariffs led to an eight-month long agitation in Cochabamba, the country's third largest city, that eventually forced the cancellation of the private contracts.

> By stressing on the 'idiosyncrasies' of anti-globalisation protests, the multilateral regime diverts attention from the effects of its own policies

These are the compelling realities of liberalisation of services in many third world countries over the last few years to which South Asia needs to play close attention. But these awkward facts are unlikely to trouble trade negotiators when they convene this September at the Mexican tourist resort of Can-



cun for its fifth ministerial. Instead, insulated from the real world, they will attempt to introduce these failed measures on a more extensive scale by making it part of the global regimen of liberalised trade. Back in 1994, the WTO's precursor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), had put in place a separate multilateral agreement, titled the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The agreement covers trade in 161 activities and like other international trade and investment agreements, is based on a complex set of rules. Since one of the major issues on the anvil at Cancun is the further liberalisation of trade in services, midwives, nurses, municipal refuse workers, tourist guides, teachers and other such service providers who normally play a negligible role in global commerce are likely to figure prominently on the agenda for negotiations.

Under GATS, trade in services is divided into four modes or categories. The first of these is "cross-border trade in services", which covers the flow of services from the territory of one member-country into the territory of another member-country. These include subjects like banking or architectural services performed via telecommunication or mail channels. The rubric "consumption of services abroad" is the second category and covers those situations where a service consumer, for example a tourist or a medical patient goes to another member-country's territory to obtain a service. The third category of trade in services is "commercial presence". This concerns those situations where a service supplier of one member-state establishes a territorial presence, including through ownership or lease of premises, in another member-state's territory to provide a service. The last and perhaps most contentious category is "movement of people" and deals with persons of one member-country entering the territory of another to supply services.

Groups that will benefit belong to the class that has been free riding on liberalisation

As the pre-GATS experience of Africa and Latin America suggest, the liberalisation of essential services under WTO mandate is a sensitive matter for developing countries. Critics fear that the GATS will allow global service delivery corporations to engage in smash and grab operations in the arena of public services once the push for privatisation gains momentum. The ramifications of this are grave especially for South Asia whose large populations and a feckless elite, always on the lookout for easy commissions, makes it a soft target for global conglomerates. These are countries with between a third and a half of the population living below the poverty line and therefore will not to be able to afford privatised services. It is imperative therefore to debate the issue as South Asian economies take a decisive step towards finalising the opening up of different services sectors for negotiations. This is all the more important, given the place this sector occupies in the national economies.

India will be a particularly appealing target given the size of its market. In India, the services sector accounted for 49 percent of the GDP in 2001-02. The world trade in services amounted to USD 1.440 trillion in 2001, of which India's share was about 1.4 percent. India has received requests from several countries, whose businesses are interested in providing services, especially by establishing their units on Indian soil. The Trade Policy Division of the Department of Commerce is tightlipped about the issue, restricting itself to the terse, laconic and therefore suspicious comment that "India has been asked to take commitments with regard to transparency in domestic regulations, simplify procedures, eliminate differential treatment of foreign service suppliers and facilitate the movement of natural persons under Mode 4" (ie, movement of people). The Trade Policy Division goes on to say that, "The categories of professionals on which commitments have been sought include intra-corporate transferees, contractual service suppliers and specialists (tradespersons, associate professionals, professionals and managers)".

It is interesting to note that that the requests that have been made to India actually target full market access in the areas of health, social services, education and environment. It is also clear that the groups that will benefit from the policy, if it comes into force, will be the same class of white collar professionals that has been free riding on economic liberalisation for the last decade and more. And it appears that Government of India's concerns are restricted exclusively to safeguarding the

interests of this section.

On 5 June, in preparation for the Cancun ministerial, New Delhi's Cabinet Committee on the WTO met to approve a Commerce Ministry plan for the upcoming negotiations. Although there have been conflicting reports about what exactly was decided at the meeting, on 27 June, speaking at an informal meeting of trade ministers in Egypt, Commerce and Industry Minister, Arun Jaitley stated that India's "main area of interest" at Cancun would be liberalising the "Mode 4" category of the GATS – "movement of natural persons". According to Jaitley, India has little to gain in pushing for liberalisation in modes two and three, but helping Indian nationals travel to service markets abroad and, to a lesser extent, increasing India's service exports are critical for the country's further integration into the global economy.

Going by past experience, with the government having been consistently secretive about WTO negotiations, Jaitley's posturing may ultimately be just that. If so, such a cavalier attitude is not going to yield any tangible benefit once heavy bargaining begins at the negotiating table. This is where the belief that official delegations represent the interests of ordinary citizens comes a cropper. If the Indian delegation to Cancun presents its case without adequate preparation and effective co-ordination with other countries similarly affected, there is every likelihood that the interests of the vast majority of the people will be sold short. In fact, there is ground for suspicion, given Jaitley's emphasis on Mode 4 negotiations, that in the interest of securing the free movement of the professional class to the hard currency zones, the official delegation may hand over far too many concessions in the essential services sector to plundering corporates, domestic or foreign .

In the countries of South Asia, water, health, transportation, education and food security are essential services which have traditionally been provided by the state. By their very nature, such services need to be subject to democratic public control. But democratic control requires transparency in official processes and its corollary, the free flow of information. Both these are so patently absent that on 10 June, in a joint letter to the Prime Minister's Office, many social organisations were compelled to point out the shortcomings in the decision-making process adopted by the Cabinet Committee as well as the Department of Commerce. A key issue raised in the letter was the lack of transparency, specifically, the failure to disclose all the liberalisation requests the government has received. These organisations have demanded that copies of such documents should be made available to all state governments and union territories, and that citizens must have adequate opportunity to examine and comment on the requests.

These are not extraordinary demands. They are well within existing constitutional provisions. New Delhi's approach to the GATS negotiations can be read as a contravention of the constitutional commitment to federalism, specifically in fact undermining the 73rd and 74th amendment acts, which envisage decentralisation of decision-making. This has prompted concerned citizen's groups to demand that government of India's possible offers under GATS should be debated in parliament, as well as in state assemblies and at the panchayat and municipal level. There is also concern over the data deficit and the absence of research on the fallout of services liberali-sation, which also has been emphasised in the joint letter to the prime minister.

At Cancun, trade ministers are expected to give much-needed political direction to the ongoing Doha round of trade liberalisation talks, and taking stock of the GATS negotiations is an im-portant part of the agenda. Given the importance of the services sector in meeting the needs of people whose interests are rarely ever represented either nationally or internationally, there is a compelling need to democratise the internal process of formulating trade perspectives. Decisions affecting ordinary people cannot be taken at tourist resorts solely by coteries serving the 'native' elite.

New Delhi's approach to the negotiations contravene the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian Constitution.

BHUTAN

LAW, HUMANITY AND 'CATEGORISATION'

WHEN THE Joint Verification Team (JVT), set up by the governments of Bhutan and

Nepal after seven years of dialogue, first set foot in the Lhotshampa refugee camps in January 2001, there was widespread elation. The refugees believed that their deliverance was close at hand. The donor governments and aid agencies, which had collectively brought pressure to bear on the process, were excited that they were finally witnessing the beginning of the end of the decade-old refugee problem. The team's brief was to verify the bona fides of the refugees in the camps, and their claim of being from Bhutan. *Himal*, however, had a word of caution ("Indeed, if the Bhutanese side does not drop its insistence on this sticky and messy issue, the verification exercise cannot be expected to go far. (Unless, of course, Nepal is willing to go by anything that Bhutan says.)", 'Dark Clouds Behind the Silver Lining?' – March 2001)] Sadly, more than two long years later, the caution, especially about Kathmandu's willingness to sign on the dotted line as requested by Thimphu, has proved well-founded.

In an interminably slow process, between 10 March and 15 December 2001, the JVT managed to complete the verification of refugees in just one of the smaller camps, known as Khudunabari in Jhapa district. It took forever to interview the camp's 12,183 inmates, frustrating them as well as the larger refugee community. With more than a hundred thousand refugees living in six camps, simple calculation showed that the interview process alone would take eight years to complete.

But worse was to follow. For more than a year after that there was no further JVT activity. No thought was given to informing the refugees interviewed as to the outcome, a case of human rights abuse that went unremarked. The Nepali side sat back, letting the Bhutanese take the proactive role. For the latter, this was yet one more occasion to equivocate as has been its practice ever since the international community awoke to the need to address the Lhotshampa refugee problem more than a decade ago.

It was only after Bhutan came under pressure once again at the Eighth Round-table Meeting of Bhutan's donors, held in Geneva in mid February this year, that the team sat down to its task. The JVT released its report on 17 June following its approval by the 14th Ministerial Joint Committee (MJC), which met in Kathmandu between 19 and 22 May 2003.

The report stunned everyone, other than perhaps the JVT members with foreknowledge, and dismayed of refugees and the international community (even those who have been generally supportive of the Thimphu government). The JVT announced that of the 12,183 refugees interviewed in the Khudunabari camp, only 2.4 per cent (293) had been slotted under 'category one' (Bhutanese who had been forcibly evicted) and had the right to return home; 70.5 per cent were categorised as Bhutanese that had emigrated voluntarily and who would have a chance to return and reapply for Bhutanese citizenship after two years; 24 per cent were categorised as non-Bhutanese and would be returned to their respective countries; and 3 per cent (375) as 'criminals' who would have to stand trial in Bhutanese courts.

The first travesty was for Kathmandu to agree to go through with the verification exercise at all, but the final blow was concurring with Thimphu that the overwhelming majority of refugees had left Bhutan voluntarily, which means that under Bhutan's what-can-only-be-called medieval laws they would *ipso facto* lose citizenship.

The release of categorization figures was accompanied by the announcement of some startling agreements between the two governments. Among them, first, Kathmandu agreed with Thimphu's pre-conditions attached to their willingness to take back 'voluntary emigrants' (that they would be allowed to reapply for Bhutanese citizenship after two years of waiting). Second, in the event that these refugees did not wish to return to Bhutan, Nepal would grant them Nepali citizenship. Third, the appeals process only allowed for 15 days and involved going back to the same JVT which had made the decision in the first place.

Not surprisingly, the categorisation results and joint agreement have been met with disbelief and a spate of criticism. While refugees are incensed with the categorisation process itself, commentators in Nepal have taken strong objection to and questioned the validity of Kathmandu's agreement to grant nationality to refugees. The international community, meanwhile, has focused its attention on the pre-conditions and the appeals process.

In a joint statement, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Lutheran World Federation, Refugees International,

the U.S. Committee for Refugees, and the Bhutanese Refugee Support Group, called on donor governments and governments in the region to increase pressure on the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to find a just and fair solution to this long-standing refugee crisis.

"This decision sends a message to other governments that it is legally acceptable to arbitrarily deprive a whole ethnic group of their nationality, expel them from their country, and then refuse to accept them back," said Ingrid Massage, interim director of the Asia and Pacific program at Amnesty International.

Western diplomats in Kathmandu were also unusually outspoken in their criticism of the agreement and advised that it be reviewed by the two governments. The ambassadors of the United States and Germany were blunt in their reactions. In a strongly-worded declaration from Brussels, on 18 July 2003, the European Union expressed serious concerns over the procedures and verification results, particularly over the citizenship rights of those declared to be 'voluntary emigrants'. It recommended the involvement of UNHCR or other equally experienced international organisation as an independent and impartial monitor for all remaining verification cases and of all appeals, and reinforced the need for both Bhutan and Nepal to respect international law and human rights.

Ever since Kathmandu agreed, very foolishly, in 1993 to Thimphu's proposal to categorise people in the camps into four categories, Lhotshampas in exile have objected to the process, questioning the rationale and legality of one government (Nepal) getting involved in determining the status of citizens of another country (Bhutan). It seems inconceivable that a ruse thrown up by Bhutan merely to prolong the bilateral talks should have been so spectacularly successful. Even the Bhutanese must have been shocked when the Nepali delegation, back in 1993, readily agreed to the categorisation. Besides the fact that it was used effectively to delay the start of the verification process for seven long years – because skillfully inserted into the agreement by the Bhutanese was a pre-condition requiring the two sides to "harmonise" their positions on what would happen to each of the four categories before start of field verifications – the JVT results for Khudunabari highlight all the problems that the exiled community has warned about from the very beginning.

The JVT HQ, Jhapa, Nepal.

It is reported that members of the same family have been slotted into different categories, infants have been categorised as 'criminals', and children have been labeled as non-Bhutanese because the committee of village elders (back in Bhutan!) were not in a position to vouch for them. It is unclear how the Nepali team members were satisfied that they had come to a fair conclusion. How did they determine there was no force, threat or coercion, what evidence convinced them that a particular individual had committed an alleged crime, what was the basis upon which a person was determined not to be a Bhutanese national? But as long as the Nepali members of the team were willing to be mere accomplices, the large percentage of 'voluntary emigrants' was also always on the cards and anyone the Bhutanese side wanted to label a criminal could be slotted into that category.

Much as this farcical exercise has hurt the cause of refugees, for whom chances of an early repatriation still seem remote, one can now at least see the silver lining behind the dark clouds. The international community which has treated Thimphu with kid gloves so far is finally seeing its darker, deceptive side. Up until now, Thimphu had succeeded in fooling the world into believing a delicate culture and simple people

are under threat in a Shangrila governed by an honest regime. By pushing through an outrageous agreement that threatens to render most of the hundred thousand-plus refugees stateless it has shown it has both guile and ruthlessness, and that it is the refugees, after all, who need protection.

The major concern is with the 75 percent refugees in the Khundunabari camp identified as voluntary migrants, who are therefore not Bhutanese in Thimphu's eyes. By extrapolation, the refugees in the other camps will also be categorised in roughly the same proportion. Two points are critically important on this score: First, why should any other country (including Nepal) accept these people just because Bhutanese laws make them illegal? Second, does the fact that they have been categorised as voluntary departures not prove that the Lhotshampas in 'category two' were actually legitimate residents of Bhutan till the time of their departure? International legality and humanitarian principles clearly require Bhutan, therefore, to take these people back without pre-conditions.

It seems that an over-confidence in its dealings with Kathmandu's interlocutors has made the Bhutanese leadership make a critical slip, i.e. agree that there were voluntary departures. Since Nepal's government itself is now complicit with Bhutan on the verification results, it is now up to the international community to build pressure on Thimphu.

Meanwhile, what of the silent, looming presence of India throughout the dozen years of the Bhutanese refugee crisis? It does not do for New Delhi to remain aloof from this problem any more; for many reasons, the most important of which is India's own commitment to international legality and humanitarian principles. How long will realpolitic take precedence in geopolitics? △

INDIA ● PAKISTAN

THE INDIAPAKISTANI CITIZEN

AN INDIAN from Kerala becomes Pakistani by happenstance, gets a Pakistani passport in order to get back home to India, is found by the police two decades later, is taken to the Wagah-Attari border to be deported to Pakistan, and is refused exit by Indian immigration because he lacks papers to prove he is Pakistani. He returns to Kerala.

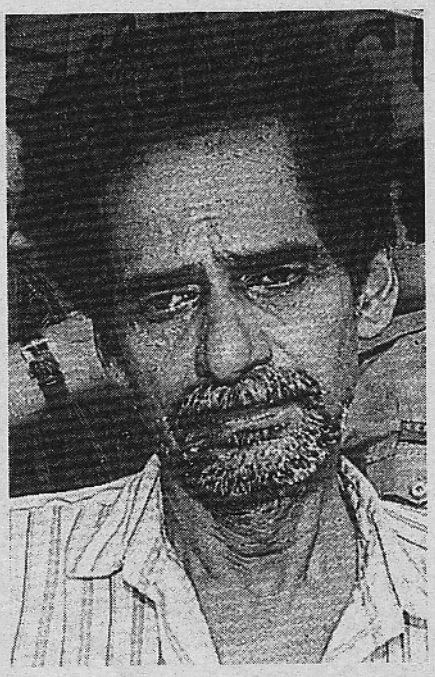
And Kerala is where C Ibrahim is today, waiting for the authorities —including an Indian Home Ministry that is keen to ferret out Pakistanis in hiding and send them packing – to decide what to do with him.

Ibrahim, 55-years old, was suffering from arthritis and infection when the police took him by train all the way to Wagah and brought him back. But his terminally harrassed look in the picture (courtesy *The Hindu*) exposes not only his physical condition but also his state of mind as a long-time fugitive Indiapakistani.

Back in 1970 or so, then 22, Ibrahim boarded a boat to go to work in the Gulf, but was left stranded in Karachi. He spent nine years in Pakistan working as a labourer, realised it was easier to return home if he got himself a Pakistani passport. He succeeded in getting back to his native Malabar, married, had two daughters, and worked as a fish vendor. Until the police came calling.

Ibrahim told The Hindu, "My family is here... My roots are here in Malabar... I am not an agent of the enemy country. Neither am I a spy from Pakistan... Permit me to stay in my land, or hang me. This is all I have to request (of) the government".

Every so often comes a newspaper story that shows the folly of the sharp delienation of the frontiers of South Asia. Even though he is from the south of India, which means he is further from Pakistan's Sindh and Punjab provinces than north Indians, Ibrahim looks and acts 'Indian' and he looks and acts 'Pakistani'. That is because there is very little to separate the two. India and Pakistan are countries whose generals, when they go to war, speak with the same accents to the BBC television interviewer.



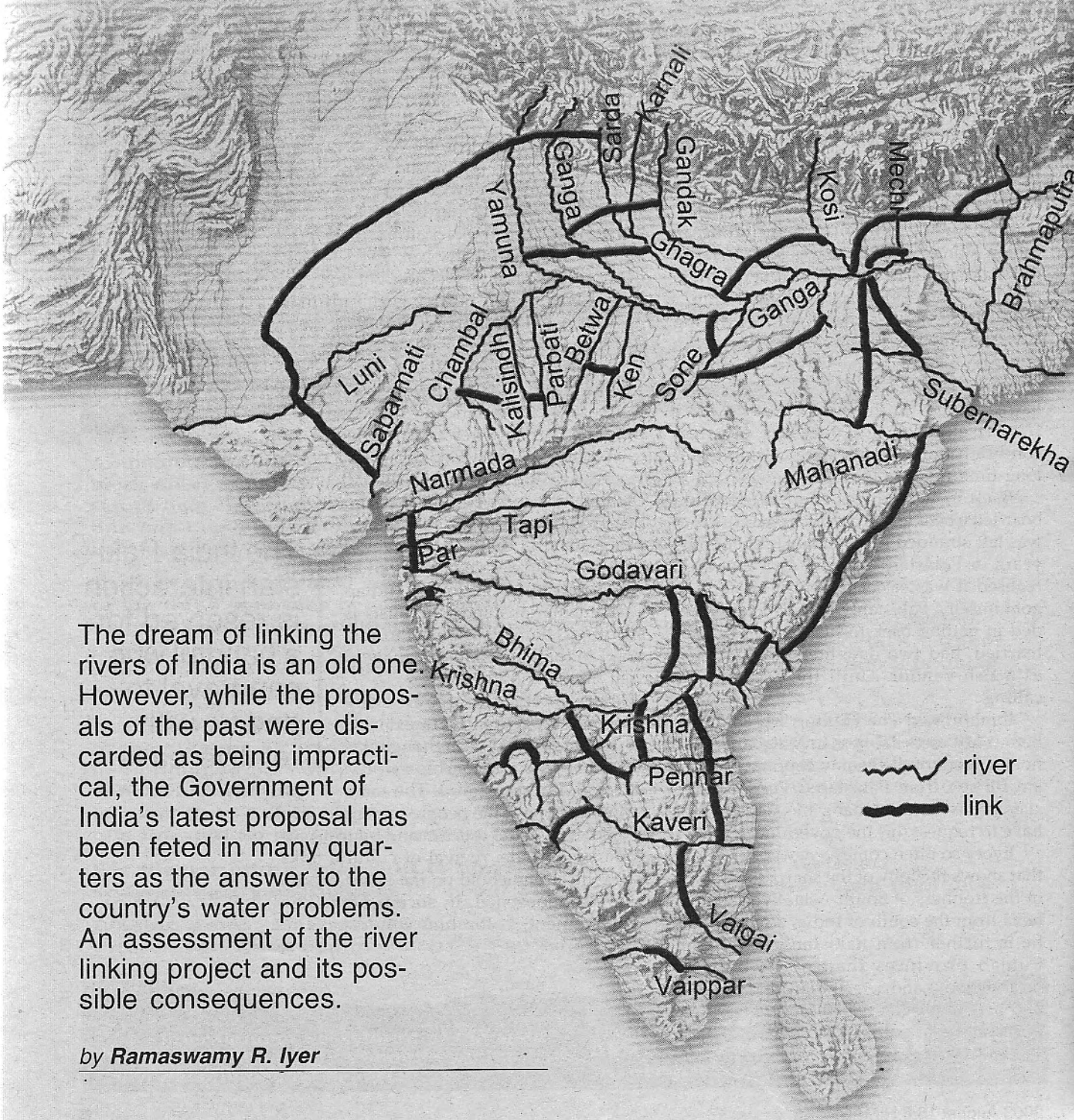
What is sought is not one South Asia, which may or may not become a reality. Instead, what we need is a South Asia where there is easy travel between the existing nation states. The fact is that none of these exisiting states would disappear if the borders were open rather than closed. The proof of this lies in Nepal, a member of SAARC which has an open and also unregulated border with the much larger and more powerful India. This fact has hardly done away with the Nepali sense of sovereignty or economic exclusivity. The Nepal-India open border is the ultimate answer for all of the land borders of South Asia, meaning India-Pakistan and India-Bangladesh. Instead, these countries are traveling the other way, desperately trying to freeze their borders and lock each other out with barbed wires and floodlights.

Today, the India-Pakistan interaction is reserved for the powerful, the lucky few who can get visas and a seat on the Lahore-Delhi bus, and a handful of 'Track Two' peace activists that get to travel to and fro with relative ease. Even as we speak, a delegation of Indian parliamentarians and journalists is scouting Islamabad, quick to respond to the faint Indo-Pak thaw to visit the Land of the Pure.

> The India-Pakistan interaction is reserved for a handful who can travel to and fro with relative ease

But the people at large are being kept out the picture. They are unable to visit each other, even though it is here that true relationships would develop, links nurtured. The mass of interactions at the people-to-people level would evolve into tourism and pilgrimages, commerce, trade, revival of cultural links. The elite stranglehold on the peace process would be loosened. In such a brave new Subcontinent, C Ibrahim would have no problem.

Making of a subcontinental fiasco



The dream of linking the rivers of India is an old one. However, while the proposals of the past were discarded as being impractical, the Government of India's latest proposal has been feted in many quarters as the answer to the country's water problems. An assessment of the river linking project and its possible consequences.

by ***Ramaswamy R. Iyer***

Editors' note

TOYING WITH RIVERS

A frighteningly grandiose plan that proposes to modify nature has suddenly gathered steam in India. The misapplied vision is to transfer water on a subcontinental scale from wet areas to dry. The people who will suffer under this extravagantly stupid idea will be, before anyone else, the people of India, which in any case makes up most of South Asia by population and size. Under the existing political preoccupations in the Indian capital, an idea that has not even been thought through, and which even government scientists secretly pooh pooh, is being allowed to dazzle the masses under the guidance of a Bharatiya Janata Party ideologue who earlier led its youth wing, Suresh Prabhu. Confronted by his bluster, the entire phalanx of proud and self-confident professionals in India's bureaucracy, diplomacy and scientific academia have decided to fall silent, if not in line. Their hope is that someone will call the bluff. In [March 2003], Himal published an investigation on how interventions with the rivers' flow may be contributing to the winter fog over the Indus-Ganga, affecting millions of South Asia's poorest. The fact is scientists have yet to study the impact of the run of canals and embankments built over the last half century. And yet, here we are, silent spectators while political cheerleaders sell cart-before-the-horse visions of the Ganga waters reaching the wastes of Rajasthan and beyond. This is not about the debate between small versus large, or being pro- or anti-development (and by extension, being nationalist or anti-national). The three articles in this issue of Himal by Ramaswamy Iyer, Himanshu Thakkar and Sudhirendar Sharma – all of them written from inside the Ring Road in New Delhi – seek to burst the bubble of the river-linking scheme. Unlike less populated regions of the world, where too engineers have been allowed to tinker with nature, South Asia with its 1.4 billion population just cannot afford to toy with a plan that can go horribly, annihilatingly wrong.

There is a project to link the rivers of the Indian peninsula as well as the rivers that have their origins in the Himalayas. The plan is to transfer water from 'surplus' areas to 'deficit' areas on a Subcontinent-wide scale, something that would be of interest not only within India but to the world at large because of the sheer magnitude and the issues that it gives rise to.

The project has been presented as a major initiative, and as the definitive answer to India's future problems and needs. Accepting that claim, many have welcomed the idea. On the other hand, many others have expressed serious doubts about it. The public opinion in the country is probably in favour of the project, but there is a fairly significant body of opinion which is unconvinced that the project is a good idea. A letter and memorandum urging a reconsideration of the project was submitted to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee two months ago, signed by nearly sixty persons of diverse disciplines and backgrounds.

Superficially, given the variability in the endowment of water in the country, the proposition that there should be transfers from areas where it is abundant to those where it is scarce seems convincing. Why then are so many fairly knowledgeable persons so worried about this project? Why are they opposing what seems prima facie to be a good idea? There are many reasons, to be set forth briefly in this article, drawing to a significant extent upon the memorandum to the prime minister, to which this writer is also a signatory.

Outline of the project

The notion of the linking of the rivers in the Subcontinent is an old one. In the 19th Century, Sir Arthur Cotton had thought of a plan to link rivers in southern India for inland navigation. Though partially implemented, the idea was later abandoned because inland navigation lost ground to the railways. In more recent times, the 'Ganga-Cauvery Link' proposal mooted by former Irrigation Minister K.L.Rao was examined and found impracticable because of the very large financial and energy costs involved, and the 'Garland Canal' idea put forward by airline pilot Captain Dinshaw Dastur was rejected as technically unsound. The proposal now being taken up is based on the work that India's National Water Development Agency (NWDA) has been doing over the last two decades after its establishment in 1982 in pursuance of the 'National Water Perspectives' brought out by the Ministry of Irrigation in 1980.

The account of the river-linking project that follows is based on information provided in the Report of the National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development Plan (1999), as well as the official presentations that are currently being made. However, one awaits a definitive account of the project from the Government.

The Himalayan Rivers component and the Peninsular Rivers component constitute the two parts of the river-linking project. The Himalayan segment envisages a number of links, including some within the Ganga system (Kosi-Ghagra (Karnali), Gandak-Ganga, Ghagra-Yamuna, Sarda-Yamuna, and so on); some links between neighbouring rivers in the Brahmaputra system (Manas-Sankosh-Teesta); a couple between those two systems (Teesta-Ganga or an alternative Brahmaputra-Ganga link); one long link from Sarda to Sabarmati through the Yamuna and Rajasthan; one from the Ganga to Subernarekha via Damodar and then on to the Mahanadi; and a few others. The general idea is to transfer waters from 'surplus' eastern rivers to 'defi-

cit' central, western and southern regions.

The peninsular segment again involves a number of links, of which the most important would be those connecting Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna, Pennar and Cauvery. The idea is to transfer the surpluses estimated to exist in the Mahanadi and the Godavari to the deficit southern basins (of the Cauvery, Vaigai). Other links in the Peninsula would include Ken-Betwa, Parbati-Kalisindh-Chambal, Par-Tapi-Narmada, Damanganga-Pinjal, and so on. Another plan is the partial diversion of certain rivers flowing into the Arabian Sea eastwards to connect with rivers flowing into the Bay of Bengal (Bedti-Varda, Netravati-Hemavati, Pamba-Achankovil-Vaippar).

Sudden emergence

The project has emerged in a strange manner. The National Water Development Agency had been working on the subject for the last two decades, but its proposals were non-starters for various reasons. That the Government of India was not seriously thinking of any river-linking project would be clear from the absence of any reference to it in the Ninth Plan (1997-2002); Prime Minister Vajpayee's failure to mention any such initiative in his address to the National Water Resources Council on 1 April 2002; and the silence of the Tenth Plan (2002-2007).

An irrigation network is...

It is significant that the National Commission for Integrated Water Resource Development Plan in its September 1999 report urged caution with regard to the NWDA's studies. The terms of reference of this high-level commission had specifically included the matter of 'inter-basin transfers'. The report did not discuss the proposed Himalayan links in detail because the data are classified as confidential, but did observe that the costs involved and the environmental problems would be enormous; that the further expansion of irrigation in the desert areas of Rajasthan would need examination from all angles; that the NWDA's Himalayan component would require more detailed study; and that the actual implementation was unlikely to be undertaken in the immediate coming decades. On the Peninsular Component, after a careful examination of the water balances of the various basins, the Commission observed: "Thus there seems to be no imperative necessity for massive water transfers. The assessed needs of the basins could be met from full development and efficient utilization of intra-basin resources except in the case of Cauvery and Vaigai basins..." The Commission then takes note of some uncertainties that may affect the above judgment and says that further studies are required as to the future possibilities of inter-basin transfers.

That 'non-project' has suddenly become the most important undertaking of the Government of India, as a result of the Supreme Court's direction (if its observations can be so regarded) on a writ petition, and the Government's enthusiastic response to it. This intriguing development has not been satisfactorily explained by anyone in government.

Three questions arise:

Was the Supreme Court right in doing what it did?

Why did the Government of India at the political level respond so enthusiastically?

Why is the Central bureaucracy (that includes the technocracy) so excited about this project?

The present writer has discussed these matters elsewhere (see Economic and Political Weekly, 16 November 2002; Frontline, Chennai, 20 December 2002; and his book Water: Perspectives, Issues, Concerns, Sage, 2003), and in this article the focus will be the project itself.

The provided rationale

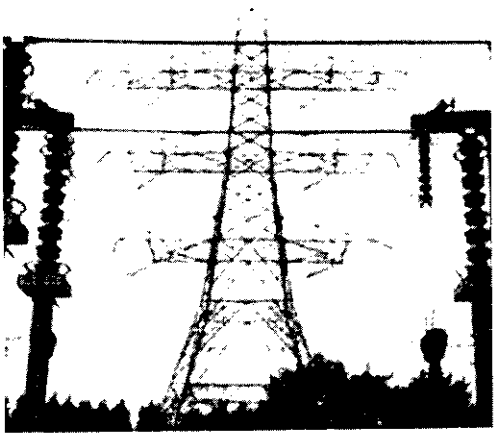
Flood control, power generation. The principal justification put forward for the linking of rivers is that it answers the problem of recurring flood and drought, and that it will generate large quantities of electricity. While the idea of flood control or the need for hydroelectric power may result in the formulation of particular projects in specific locations, they would not by themselves lead to the idea of linking rivers. There is a difference of opinion on the efficacy of large dams and storage projects as flood-control measures, but leaving that aside, it is not quite clear how the linking of rivers will contribute to the objective of flood control. Even if all the river-linking proposals are implemented, the contribution that this will make to the mitigation of the flood problem will not be substantial. Dr. Bharat Singh, a distinguished engineer and member of the National Commission mentioned above, has observed categorically in an article in The Hindustan Times (9 March 2003) that "any water resources engineer will immediately discard the idea of the inter-linking of rivers as a flood control measure".

As for electric power, one would normally expect projects for inter-basin transfers to require large quantities of energy (for lifting, tunnelling, pumping to long distances, and so on). How a project of this kind will be a net generator of upwards of 30,000 megawatt of electric power is not very clear. (There is the related claim

that the inter-linking be largely be done through use of gravity, with a few modest lifts; we shall return to this.) If 30,000 MW is the net generation, there will presumably be a higher gross generation in certain locations, and some of that energy will be consumed by the river-linking process itself. If so, the generation of power is attributable to the large dams and storage projects and not to the linking of rivers. Or is it the claim that some of the generation will actually arise from river-linking? This needs careful examination.

Answer to drought

That leaves drought, and it is primarily here that the project might appear to be warranted. However, two points must be noted. In the first place, river-linking is no answer at all to the needs of areas unserved by rivers. The transfer of water from river 'A' to river 'B' may at best provide some additional water to areas already served to some extent by river 'B'. If the intention is to take water from 'surplus' to water-starved areas, then the project should really transfer water from rivers to riverless areas i.e. to the uplands and dry lands of India. That is not the nature of the project envisaged. The second and complementary point is that, fortunately, no such transfer is necessary because enough alternatives have been tried.



...different from a power grid.

Rajendra Singh (the well-known 'Waterman' of Rajasthan and Magsaysay Award winner) has shown in Alwar District in Rajasthan that rainwater-harvesting can be practised successfully even in low rainfall areas. Earlier, Anna Hazare had brought about a transformation through water-harvesting (along with other measures) in Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra, which also receives low rainfall. The Madhya Pradesh Government has initiated large statewide programmes of water-harvesting and conservation. In the water-scarce parts of Gujarat, some non-governmental initiatives have registered remarkable achievements in this regard to their credit. The Dhan Foundation has been doing good work in the southern States in promoting water-harvesting and tank-rehabilitation. The large numbers of tanks in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were part of remarkable water-management systems that have gone into decline, but efforts are on to restore and rehabilitate them. Similar efforts are also in progress, or are needed, in respect of other traditional systems such as *ahars* and *pynes* in Bihar, *johads* in Rajasthan, and so on.

In brief, the primary answer to drought has to be local; it is only thereafter, and in some very unpromising places where rainwater-harvesting are not feasible or may yield meagre results, that the bringing in of some external water may need to be considered. Besides, the river-linking project, if implemented, will take water only to a small part of the arid or drought-prone areas; large parts of such areas will remain unserved (as already explained) and will have to meet their needs through the local augmentation of water availability. It was in recognition of the importance of such local, community-led initiatives of rainwater-harvesting and watershed-development that Prime Minister Vajpayee strongly urged the promotion of such initiatives on a nationwide basis in his address to the National Water Resources Council on 1 April 2002.

The question of irrigation

It is not primarily drinking water needs but the large demands of irrigation that lead to proposals for long-distance water transfers through canals, though the water so transferred may also be used to meet drinking water requirements. Water transfers for irrigation may be proposed either for providing additional water to areas already under irrigation or for extending irrigation to arid or 'rainfed' areas. In both cases, difficult questions arise.

In irrigated areas (for instance, the Cauvery basin), the question is whether large demands for additional irrigation water should be unquestioningly accepted and met through 'supply-side' solutions such as large dams or inter-basin transfers. Rather, the focus should be on improving water-use efficiency in irrigated agriculture, getting more value out of a given quantum of water, reducing water-demand, and minimizing the need for supply-side projects. In the context of the prevailing low efficiency of water-conveyance in canal systems and water-use in irrigated agriculture, bringing in more water from another basin would really amount to providing more water to be wasted. It would also mean that there would be no motivation at all for changing cropping patterns and shifting from water-intensive crops to crops that need less water; on the contrary, the tendency to grow water-consuming crops would be strongly encouraged.

In arid or drought-prone areas, the introduction of irrigated agriculture of a kind appropriate to wet areas may be unwise. 'Development' in arid areas should surely take other, less water-intensive forms. The slogan of 'making the desert bloom' is not necessarily a sound one. It can be (and has been) argued that the Rajasthan Canal project was not a good idea but a misconceived one. The National Commission cited above had observed that, "the further expansion of irrigation

Nepal and Bangladesh

INDIA'S RIVER-LINKING project has generated interest as well as concern in Nepal and Bangladesh. If the project envisages any storage reservoirs or diversion structures in the upstream countries such as Nepal or Bhutan, it is obvious that such activities can only be undertaken with the involvement, consent and participation of those countries. If the structures are to be in India but have the potential of causing certain consequences (inundation, backwater effects, and so on) in an upstream country, then again prior information to and consultation will be called for.

At the other end, if any part of the river-linking scheme is likely to have implications for the downstream country, such as a reduction of flows or environmental consequences, then prior intimation to and consultation with Bangladesh will be necessary.

However, if a link is far away from the India-Nepal border, and if it is unlikely to have any impact on Bangladesh, then the project would be a purely an internal matter for India. All this is self-evident, and when attention is drawn to these aspects, the Government of India's response is that they are well aware of these international dimensions. Nothing more needs to be said on this aspect at this stage. While not forgetting these possible regional and international dimensions, the accompanying article deals with the river-linking project essentially as a national project.

in the desert areas of Rajasthan would need examination from all angles", which seems to indicate some such doubts.

In both irrigated and rainfed areas, the importation of 'external water' can bring secondary consequences, such as: settling of farmers from elsewhere resulting in social tensions (as in Rajasthan); increased incidence of water-logging and salinity (a development that has followed irrigated agriculture in many places); and repetition of the 'Green Revolution' patterns of agricultural development. These relate to the problems associated with monoculture; loss of biodiversity (disappearance of indigenous varieties of seeds of plants and grains); problems arising from use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides; loss of micro-nutrients from soils; replacement of healthy indigenous varieties of foodcrops by high-yielding, commercially viable, but nutritionally deficient crops; and social inequities of many kinds that have characterised 'major' and 'medium' canal irrigation projects. These are not unavoidable consequences of providing additional water to a region, but they are dangers that have to be kept in mind. Given more water, there would be a natural tendency to slip into familiar and unsustainable agricultural practices.

Employment

One of the benefits claimed for the river-linking project is that it will give employment to tens of thousands of people. This seems a strange justification. Any large-scale construction activity is bound to generate some employment, even if the construction itself is completely pointless. The mere fact that an activity will involve the employment of people cannot warrant undertaking it; the purpose of the activity is all-important. Besides, given the magnitude of the project and the accelerated time-frame, it seems likely that advanced, sophisticated technologies (probably from foreign sources) will be used; and these are unlikely to be labour-intensive.

The serious concerns

The various justifications put forward for the project thus seem unpersuasive. Nevertheless, the idea of taking water from 'surplus' to 'deficit' areas may still seem prima facie a good one. That, indeed, is the principal driving force behind the project, and that is also what gives it popular appeal in the water-scarce states of India, particularly those in the south. However, there are many serious difficulties with that plausible-sounding proposition.

Gigantism. To start with, there is the fundamental objection, not to the idea of 'inter-basin transfer' per se (though that aspect does need consideration), but to the grandiose nature of the undertaking – the gigantism behind the idea. The river-linking project will be a massive intervention in the natural process, an ambitious attempt to alter nature. That it is to be compressed into a short span of time (ten to fifteen years) may aggravate the intervention but that is a secondary point, the main one being that it amounts to nothing less than the redrawing of the geography of the country. Can the basic features of the Indian landscape and its geography be manipulated at will by our bureaucrats, technocrats and politicians? Is nothing sacred? The project seems to represent a severe case of technological hubris – Prometheanism - of a kind that one had thought had been roundly discredited.

This kind of criticism elicits two different answers. One response is to say that there is nothing wrong with changing geography, and that other countries have done so; to dismiss any talk of the sacred dimension as romantic nonsense; and to assert that Prometheanism is what we do need. This raises questions of the meaning of 'development' and the right relationship between humanity and nature. In any case, the more usual response is to say that no gigantism is intended; that 'river-linking' is a concept consisting of a number of projects and not a single large project; that it will proceed carefully and slowly, piecemeal, from the minor and relatively less problematic links to the more difficult and ambitious ones.

However, is such a careful, exploratory, step-by-step approach in fact now intended? This explanation seems inconsistent with what we have been seeing and hear-

ing in recent months: the Supreme Court's desire that the project be accelerated and the time-frame compressed; the prime minister's announcement that the project will be taken up on a war-footing; the setting up of a task force; the references to the order of investments involved; the publicity surrounding the project; and so on. There is either a lack of clarity here or a deliberate ambiguity. Is this merely a 'concept' as stated by some, or is it a major undertaking? Are we talking about a big ambitious project or about a series of relatively modest ones? The general impression in the country is certainly that a massive project has been undertaken. If that is not the case, the Government should make the position clear. Obfuscation on this point is indefensible.

Water Grid

There is, in fact, an oddity about the proposition of river-linking that we tend not to notice at first glance. One can understand if the planners start from an identification of the needs of particular areas, proceed through a consideration of options and alternatives, and finally arrive at a decision to link two or more rivers as the only or best option in a given case. Instead, the present project starts with the proposition that the rivers of India must be linked, and then proceeds to consider possibilities of storages, links and transfers. What is the basis for such an a priori proposition – even if it is an old one? How did we arrive at this strange notion that all the rivers of India – or the major ones – must be linked?

References are often made to a 'national water grid' on the analogy of a power grid or the network of highways. The analogy is inapt and misleading. In a power-grid or a highway-link, the movement can be in both directions, but in the case of a river-link water will flow only one way. Apart from that, highways and power lines are human creations and can be manipulated by humans. Rivers are not human artefacts; they are natural phenomena, integral components of ecological systems. Additionally, they are inextricably part of the cultural, social, economic, spiritual lives of the communities concerned. They are not pipelines to be cut, turned around, rejoined and welded.

'Inter-basin transfers', by their very definition, involve the carrying of water across the natural barrier between basins (which is what makes them 'basins') by lifting, or by tunnelling through, or by a long circuitous routing around the highlands if such a possibility exists. Rivers or streams may also have to be crossed in some cases. All this could mean heavy capital investments and continuing energy costs in operation. Such apprehensions have been sought to be set at rest with the explanation that the flows will be largely by gravity with lifts (not exceeding 120 metres) at a few selected points, and that the need for a transfer of water through natural barriers will be obviated.

Two issues arise. First, such an approach (that is, gravity links with minimum lifts) may be possible in some cases, but its feasibility in some thirty projects seems doubtful. This, like the claim that the project will be a net generator of large quantities of electricity, needs to be looked at very carefully, case by case. Secondly, if indeed the links are to work largely by force of gravity with a few modest lifts, will not such an approach limit the extent of water transfers and the scope of the project? Can large claims be made for the project, in that case? It appears clear that we must either incur the perils and costs of gigantism or settle for limited and modest aims. If we are prepared to do the latter, why should we not

Memorandum

AMONG OTHER things, the memorandum presented to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in its concluding section makes the following suggestions* to the Government of India:

take people into confidence as to what the Government plans to do; publish a White Paper;

make the various studies and pre-feasibility and feasibility reports of the NWDA widely and easily available to the public;

hold hearings, invite comments; make the declared commitment to the principles of 'people's participation' and 'stakeholder consultation' real;

hold discussions with knowledgeable people and institutions outside the Government and pay serious attention to their questions and apprehensions;

instead of starting from an a priori proposition about the linking of rivers, proceed from the water needs of each area, consider all the available options, and choose the best;

focus on efficient, harmonious, sustainable intra-basin water management first before thinking of importing external water;

where a river-linking or long-distance water-transfer proposal seems prima facie worth considering, get a thorough, professional feasibility report prepared in a fully inter-disciplinary manner, internalizing not merely techno-economic but also environmental, human, social, equity, 'gender' and other relevant aspects and concerns, and put it through a comprehensive, intér-disciplinary, rigorous and stringent process of detailed examination, appraisal and approval; and

take up "on a war-footing" (in the Prime Minister's words) a national project of extensive, community-led rainwater-harvesting (wherever feasible) and watershed development, as also of the revival and re-activation of traditional systems of water harvesting, conservation and management (tanks, ahars and pynes, johads, etc), in pursuance of the Prime Minister's clarion call at the meeting of the NWRC on 1 April 2002.

* *this a selective reproduction.*

go one step further and consider alternatives to river-linking, such as those mentioned earlier?

Impact and consequence

The project is fraught with serious consequences. It will necessarily involve dams, reservoirs, diversion of waters, canal systems, and so on. We know from past experience what such large water projects entail. They bring with them the violent disturbance of pristine areas and of the lives of old (in many instances, tribal) communities; disruption of the habitats and movement routes of wildlife; loss of biodiversity (flora and fauna); changes in river morphology and water quality (arising from the stilling of flowing waters); submergence of forests and agricultural lands; changes in the microclimate; public health consequences; and displacement of people and their livestock with the related problems of resettlement and rehabilitation.

Such projects also lead to the reduction of downstream flows and the consequent alteration of the river regime, including a lessening of the capacity of the river to cope with pollutants and regenerate itself; a reduction in nutrient content in downstream flows; the diminution of groundwater-recharging; and a reduction in freshwater outflows into the sea. All this has an impact on aquatic life as well as on riparian communities and livelihoods such as agriculture or boat-plying. Further downstream, there are impacts on the estuarine ecology (including estuarine fish populations), and possibly salinity incursion from the sea. These impacts and consequences have been observed in many projects, and will need to be studied carefully in the case of each of the proposed links.

Incidentally, much harm has been done in the past by the tendency to regard only water taken from the stream as 'used' and water flowing in the stream and particularly into the sea as 'wasted'. To minds so conditioned, the fact that floods occur in some areas and drought is experienced elsewhere immediately suggests that water must be transferred from the former to the latter places. Behind this lies an ignorance of the multiple purposes served by flowing water – even floods – and the importance of water flowing into the sea, and a failure to recognise the consequences of a diversion of flows. Before diverting waters and reducing downstream flows, we must make sure that devastating consequences will not follow.

It has been argued that similar projects have been undertaken elsewhere without catastrophic results, but that is a question-begging statement. Large water-resource projects are part of the kind of 'development' that the world has been pursuing, which has indeed had many catastrophic consequences. The earlier confidence in the conquest of nature with the assistance of science and technology has given way to some doubts. The world has gone too far in the wrong direction, and is now desperately trying to alter course. It was concerns of that kind which lay behind the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the Johannesburg meeting a decade later.

Leaving aside the larger debate and confining ourselves to projects on rivers, it is well-known that old-style planning in the former Soviet Union led to the diversion of two rivers that were flowing into the Aral Sea, resulting in the virtual death of that body of water. That is now recognised as a great environmental disaster, perhaps the greatest ever, and desperate attempts are being made to reverse it. With the 'linking of rivers' project we may be similarly headed for unforeseen disasters and may discover this too late. A degree of caution seems warranted before the Government of India embarks on this enterprise. (Incidentally, in some countries, there is a move away from the past history of interference with the natural flows of rivers and towards a restoration of the original flows to the extent feasible.)

Those who thus advocate caution are likely to be accused of timidity and exhorted to look at China. However, the fact that the Beijing government has been able to push through the massive Three Gorges project on the Yangtze river does not prove that it is a good project. Only the future can tell us whether Three Gorges will be a boon or a man-made disaster. The opposition to the project is muted because dissent is not easy in China. Those who are envious of Beijing's ability to 'get things done' must reflect on how far they are prepared to go in emulating the Chinese system.

'Pre-clearance'

This writer and others who are worried over India's own 'mega' project are merely urging that the river-linking plan and the various elements that comprise its parts, should be very carefully studied. They also urge: that there should be a readiness to accept the findings, even if adverse; that all options and alternatives should be examined and the best chosen in each case; and that there should be no advance commitment to an unexamined project, as if it were an ideological cause.

Unfortunately, that is precisely what is happening. This is a 'concept' that consists of some twenty or thirty projects. For each project, some small and some big, a proper feasibility study will have to be prepared as an inter-disciplinary exercise, fully internalising economic, social, sociological, human, environmental and other aspects from the very beginning. Thereafter, the projects will have to be examined and evaluated, again in an inter-disciplinary manner, and cleared by the appropriate agencies. Thorough environmental impact assessments will need to be undertaken, followed by comprehensive cost-benefit analyses covering direct and indirect financial, economic, environmental, ecological, social and human costs and benefits (quantifying these wherever possible), and qualitative assessments of non-quantifiable considerations. Based on these, there must be rigorous investment appraisals.

We do not know what the outcome of that process will be: all projects may pass the test; all may fail; or some may survive a stringent scrutiny while others may

not. What has happened, however, is that in advance of that process, the entire scheme has been announced and the public's expectations raised. The presumption seems to be that the project or projects will be found acceptable and cleared. This reduces the whole process of examination, evaluation and clearance to a mere formality, a mockery. With the conclusions already presumed and announced at the highest level, it seems difficult to believe that the government agencies concerned will be able to undertake a serious and objective examination. These include the Central Water Commission, the Technical Advisory Committee, the Ministry of Environment and Forests and its committees, the Planning Commission and the Task Force that has now been set up. The pressure on these agencies to be 'positive' will be great.

We are told that these are needless worries, that everything will be properly studied, and that it is presumptuous to suppose otherwise. Such reassurances may be noted, but past experience does not warrant much confidence. Incidentally, we are repeatedly told that NWDA has prepared feasibility studies for eight links, and that these have been "ratified by engineers, sociologists and economists". But the fact is that these studies have not been made available to the public. If indeed there are feasibility studies of some of the proposed links, they should be put into the public domain for engineers, geographers, environmentalists, economists, agronomists, soil scientists, sociologists, social anthropologists, financial analysts, and others outside the government to examine. This is too important a matter to be left entirely to the internal official procedures.

Is it necessary to strain India's federal structure by generating several new inter-state conflicts?

New conflicts

The Constitution of India talks about inter-state rivers but makes no reference to inter-basin transfers. It neither permits nor prohibits them. Leaving that question aside, it is evident that such transfers can be made only with the consent of the states concerned. Here again there are two points to consider. The first is that we have not so far been able to persuade states within a basin to share river waters, the Cauvery dispute being a clear example of this. Why would we want to bring water from another and more distant basin, in the place of resolving such intra-basin disputes through the better, more economical and more cooperative management of the resources within the basin? Secondly, even if we assume that the conflict within a 'water-short' river-basin will be eased by the importing external water, such an effort may initiate new conflicts between basins. The 'donor' states cannot be expected to he enthusiastic about sparing their 'surpluses' or even to agree that there are any surpluses.

The project has already led to strong objections from several States. The NWDA's assessment that surpluses are available in the Mahanadi and Godavari basins (and accepted by the National Commission referred to above) is not shared by the Orissa and Andhra Pradesh governments. There is irony in the proposition that the answer to the difficulty of persuading co-riparians Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to share the Cauvery waters equitably lies in the even more difficult course of persuading Orissa to spare Mahanadi waters for non-riparians! Several other state governments are also opposed to, or lukewarm about, the river-linking project. Bihar, West Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra are examples. There is also some opposition on the part of Kerala (and perhaps Karnataka) to the idea of the eastward diversion of west-flowing rivers. It may be argued that the Government of India should not allow itself to be deterred by such political difficulties, but is it really necessary to strain the federal structure by generating several new inter-state conflicts?

Efforts are now being made to bring about a political consensus on the river-linking project. This is one of the prime tasks of the Task Force. One hopes that this is not being looked at as a matter of compromises to be brought about through political bargaining, or quid pro quo, or the use of inducements. Any short-term 'political consensus' brought about through such means may not be sustainable in the long run. What is needed is a genuine harmonisation of long-term interests, needs and concerns.

Incidentally, the determination of what is and is not a water 'surplus' has to be gone into carefully. Each of the so-called water-surplus states has distress-prone areas: for instance, Orissa has Kalahandi, and Andhra Pradesh has Rayalaseema and Telengana. If indeed the flood-waters of the rivers of those states can be stored, should the stored waters not be used first to mitigate the people's distress in such areas? In that case, will there still be a surplus for transfer outside the State? Secondly, will diversions from a river cause difficulties downstream of the diversion-points? Will the attempt to solve the difficulties of a distant state result in the creation of difficulties in the `donor' state?

This is not a hypothetical question. In the April 2003 issue of the Journal of the Indian Water Resources Society, in an article, "Physical Choices for Integrated Water Management in Sabarmati Basin", M Dinesh Kumar and Om Prakash Singh write, "As regards surface water, indiscriminate building of reservoirs and diversion structures (13 large and medium sized structures) in the basin has led to re-allocation of available water from one area to another, making previously 'wet' areas 'dry' and previously 'dry' areas 'wet'. This is leading to widespread conflicts over water use."

North-south waters

The NWDA proposals include a Brahmaputra–Teesta

(or alternatively, a Brahmaputra-Ganga) link, but major diversions from the Brahmaputra seem unlikely because of the physical difficulties and costs involved. We need not discuss the Brahmaputra further, except to say that the sensitivities of India's northeastern states must be kept in mind. It seems hardly necessary to add one more element of discord in an already difficult situation in that region.

A link between the Himalayan and Peninsular components seems to be planned (Ganga-Damodar-Subarnarekha-Mahanadi). Bangladesh is likely to view this with apprehensions, whether well-founded or not. Within India, Bihar has a strong sense of grievance that its interests in respect of the waters of the Ganga system have not been given due consideration; and West Bengal has only reluctantly agreed to the large allocations to Bangladesh under the Ganga Treaty and has been pressing the needs of Calcutta Port. Neither Bihar nor West Bengal will look kindly upon any diversion of the Ganga waters.

Perhaps this is a non-issue, as it was recently stated by a senior official of the Ministry of Water Resources that "at no point would waters of the Ganga be transferred to any of the Himalayan or Peninsular rivers." If no transfers are envisaged, there is nothing more to be said. However, as we saw earlier, the proposals of the NWDA did include some transfers from the Himalayan rivers westwards and southwards. It is that kind of expectation that gives the project its popular appeal, particularly in the south.

Here again there is some (perhaps inadvertent) ambiguity. Does the river-linking project include any diversion from the Ganga, and if so, how are the apprehensions of Bangladesh, Bihar and West Bengal going to be set at rest? If no such diversions are intended, how is the Government of India going to disabuse the southern states of the wrong impression that waters from the north will flow to the south in large quantities under this project?

Plans and plans

As stated earlier, it is not proper to announce a project in advance of the usual decision-making processes. Among other things, this would preempt resources and distract attention from the things that need to be done. The outlays in the Five-Year Plans are barely adequate even for the completion of projects already undertaken. One estimate – that of the National Commission in 1999 – of amounts needed for completing 'spillover projects' was INR 70,000 crore in the Tenth Plan (2002-2007) and INR 110,000 crore in the Eleventh Plan (2007-2012). This already necessitates a severe selectivity with regard to what are called 'on-going projects', and leaves no scope for new major projects.

From the Sixth Plan (1981-1985) onwards, the stress has been on consolidation rather than on new starts. Against that background, it seems extraordinary to embark on a major river-linking undertaking. The rough figure mentioned in the Supreme Court in this context was INR 560,000 crore. That figure is likely to go up in two ways. First, a thorough and comprehensive investment appraisal would require the addition of all costs, direct and indirect, including the environmental remedial and compensatory measures and the costs of resettlement and rehabilitation of project-affected people. That may take the cost of the project far beyond the figure now mentioned. (What this would do to the viability of the project, one does not know.) Secondly, if past experience is any guide, time and cost over-runs may make the final project cost on completion substantially higher than the initial estimate. However, even if we ignore such increases and keep to the figure of INR 560,000 crores, the pre-empting of resources of that magnitude for this project will render the whole planning process meaningless.

> Each of the so-called water-surplus states has its own distress-prone areas.

We may be wasting a good deal of time in pursuing this chimera of a river-linking project, and distracting ourselves from finding time and money for more modest, worthwhile and urgent activities, such as extensive water-harvesting all over the country (wherever feasible) and the onerous but important task of rehabilitation of tanks in South India and other similar traditional systems elsewhere. Even more important is effective demand management through improved efficiency and economy in water use, whether in agriculture or in industry or in domestic and municipal uses, so as to minimise the need for supply-side solutions. These ought to be our priorities, but none of this is likely to receive much attention, given the preoccupation with the gigantic river-linking project.

Incidentally, apart from the pre-empting of resources, the huge costs involved in the linkmg of rivers and long-distance water transfers will make the water at the receiving end very expensive indeed. There is hardly any possibility of recovering even a fraction of the costs from the users, who will doubtless argue that this is infrastructure development whose cost must be borne by the state. However, the possibility of private sector investment is also being explored, and the question arises whether the investors will be able (or should be allowed) to charge full commercial prices. The Enron case comes to mind. Moreover, the question of private sector investment also raises the issue of entrustment of control over natural resources to private (and perhaps even foreign or multinational) corporate hands. These aspects and dangers can only be flagged at this stage. There is not enough information at the moment for a proper discussion of these matters.

Flood of nonsense

How to manufacture consensus for river-linking

by ***Himanshu Thakkar***

The current debate in India on the government's river linking proposal is occurring when the coa lition in power at the centre is preparing to face general elections next year. On the issue of water, agriculture, food and energy resources' development and management, the coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party could not have done much worse. The clearest evidence of under-achievement comes from the way the coalition managed the droughts of 2000 and again in 2002-3, and the way it is managing floods this monsoon. There has been a comprehensive failure to regulate releases from dams, to adequately forecast floods and to provide timely flood warning and relief. The river linking proposal is a way to divert attention away from real performance. The proposal found support in the suggestion made by the Supreme Court on 31 October 2002 without really going into the merits of the project, following rather an unscientific mention of the proposal by India's scientist President in his speech to the nation on 14 August 2002. The supporting cast of the charade was made up of a gullible political opposition, an uncritical section of the media and scientific community.

The events are unfolding at a rapid pace. The megalomaniac water resources establishment in India suddenly found a new reason to reassert its reason to exist. The emergence of the World Bank's new Water Resources Sector Strategy where it has said that it is again time to back High Risk High Reward projects like large dams and long distance water transfer projects was, we are told, only coincidental. Suresh Prabhu, the former Power Minister from India's right wing Shiv Sena Party who had to leave the Power Ministry last year following his party leadership's unhappiness with his performance, got what he thinks to be a fitting new role as Chairman of the Task Force for River Linking Proposal. His over confidence notwithstanding, it must be a unique event in the history of development planning, when all concerned authorities are swearing by the completion date of a project whose feasibility, even they admit, is yet to be established. Come to think of it, even the need and optimality of the proposal are yet to be ascertained.

> Clearly, the President was not told that large parts of the very areas that seem to have too much water in one season have too little of it in another

Proposals to the linking of watercourses are not new in the Subcontinent. More than a century ago, Arthur Cotton of the British Government proposed the linking of India's rivers to provide navigation as an alternative to the railways that were being planned. In more recent times, it was in 1972 that K L Rao came forward with the Ganga Cauvery Link proposal, which was dumped by the Ministry of Water Resources after the Central Water Commission found it to be "grossly under-estimated". Earlier, Captain Dastur had proposed a garland of canals connecting Himalayan rivers and the Peninsular rivers, which the Ministry declared "technically unsound and economically prohibitive".

The latest episode in the run of river linking proposals started on 14 August 2002 when India's President A P J Kalam, in his speech to the nation on the eve of Independence Day said, "It is paradoxical to see floods in one part of our country while some other parts face drought. This drought - flood phenomenon is a recurring feature". Kalam went on to recommend a water mission. " One major part of the water mission would be networking of our rivers". This seemingly rather compelling logic of transferring water from "flood affected" and "surplus" areas to "drought affected" and "deficit" areas has been repeatedly used to justify river-linking proposals.

Unfortunately, the President was not told that large parts of the very areas that seem to have too much water in one season have too little of it in another. Neither was he told that just because a river appears to be overflowing and in flood does not mean that the river has too much water. Often, it can mean silted riverbeds with reduced carrying capacity, caused by the destructive embankment of rivers which keeps the silt from spreading over the plain. Moreover, terms like "surplus" and "wasteful flow" in rivers do not have any scientific basis.

At the other end of the illogic, the apparent drought could be due to a number of man-made reasons including the destruction of local water systems, the destruction of forests in the catchment,the overexploitation of groundwater and the diversion of water in the upstream

areas. The solution would lie in reversing the reasons at the roots of the crisis. Rejuvenation of a number of rivers by the communities in large parts of Alwar and adjoining districts in Rajasthan is proof that it is feasible to solve drought related problems through local effort.

Court intervention

Soon after President Kalam's speech, an intervention petition was filed in the Supreme Court of India in the ongoing Yamuna Pollution Case. The Supreme Court converted it into a public interest petition and issued notices to the union and various state governments seeking responses to the river-linking proposal. Only two responses were received, one from the Union Water Resources Ministry and another from the Tamil Nadu government. It is noteworthy that at least 25 states did not even bother to reply to the Supreme Court. Oddly, the justices assumed that this meant the states had no objections to the river linking idea, an assumption that has subsequently been proven to be unfounded.

In its response submitted to the apex court in September 2002, the Water Resources Ministry said that the feasibility reports of the proposal were yet to be completed. Only thereafter can Detailed Project Reports be taken up, after which legal and policy issues of interstate water allocations outside basins will have to be addressed, as well as availability of financial resources and environmental issues. In any case, the government said that it would take about 45 years to complete the links.

The only other response received by the judges was from Tamil Nadu, which would be the recipient basin from all directions and hence did not have any objection to the project.

Rather than give the other states more time to consider the matter, as would be normal, the Supreme Court decided that the states had no objection: "The presumption therefore clearly is that they do not oppose the prayer made in this writ petition". On 31 October 2002, a bench headed by the then chief justice, BN Kirpal, made an order that many jurists have criticised for having exceeding the mandate. That order "suggested" that the government take up the river linking proposal expeditiously and complete it in 10 years. That the bench did not dispose off the case, choosing to oversee the further actions in the matter, was not found as a convincing course of action by many jurists.

Justice Kirpal retired the day after making the order. When a few weeks later he was asked at a public meeting if the policy decisions were not the mandate of the executive, he clarified that his order on river linking was indeed only a "suggestion". This clarification has had no impact on the ongoing case in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court continues to be seized of the matter and has fixed the next date of hearing in November 2003.

The Supreme Court assumed that lack of response from the states indicated consensus, but paradoxically, the terms of reference of the task force for river-linking set up by the union government following the court order changed it to "go into the modalities for bringing consensus among the states". That presumption of consensus has already proven to be erroneous. So far, the states that have opposed the river-linking proposition include Kerala, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Punjab, Chhatisgarh and Goa. Others such as Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Maharashtra have shown only conditional agreement – agreeing to links where they would be recipients of water and opposing others where they would be 'donors'. Only Haryana and Tamil Nadu have unconditionally supported the proposal, as they would he only receiving water from outside the states.

How then will the task force build consensus? The signs are ominous, for the body has already missed an important deadline, namely to call a meeting of the chief ministers of all the states to discuss river linking in May/June 2003. That meeting has not happened till the beginning of August, and the task force has instead gone about dealing with the states individually, and away from the public eye.

> The National Water Development Agency has not released any of its studies and reports to the public.

From the statements emanating from the various states so far, the prospects for consensus do not look bright. Water is an emotive issue, and politicians will think hard before compromising the water rights of their state. Even a supposedly water-surplus state like Assam has seen the banks of the Manas river reverberating with shouts of *tej dim pani nidim* (we will give blood, not water) by activists of the All Assam Student Union protesting the centre's river-linking designs.

Consensus building, arm twisting

While the job of the Task Force looks difficult, however, past experience indicates that the centre has not been above arm-twisting to get the states to fall in line with projects against their self interest. This is clear from the examples of the water treaty between Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the Narmada agreement, Sutlej – Yamuna Link Project, Mahadayi – Krishna Proposal and others, some of them described below.

One of the earliest known attempts at river linking was the transferring of waters from Periyar, Chalakudy and Bharathapuzha river basins of Kerala to the Bharathapuzha basin and beyond in Tamil Nadu. There was opposition to this in Kerala, yet with the help of the centre, Tamil Nadu was able to achieve what many consider to be an unjust agreement. Papers presented at a July 2003 workshop at Thrissur on river-

linking (organised by the Chalakudy River Protection Committee and the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People) showed that the centre made the approval of Idukki Hydroelectric Project in Kerala conditional to it signing the Parambikulam Aliyar Project (PAP) treaty with Tamil Nadu. The approval of Idukki and signing of the PAP treaty which happened in quick succession in 1970, only substantiates the possibility of this being a quid pro quo arrangement. The fact that Tamil Nadu has not followed releases of water into Kerala as per the PAP treaty should provide lessons for other state governments, but that is another story.

An interesting aspect of the entire PAP episode was that the various dams that were used to transfer the water from Kerala had been built much before the treaty was actually signed in 1970. In the current river-linking plan, it is proposed to transfer water from the Pampa and Achankovil rivers of Kerala to Vaippar Basin in Tamil Nadu. As if history were repeating itself, Tamil Nadu has already completed the Mekkara Dam, which is to be used in the proposed link, even as Kerala is vociferously opposing any further river-linking proposal, and claiming that there are is no surplus water in the two basins in question. Suspecting Tamil Nadu to have already diverted water, a Kerala Assembly committee has been asked to investigate the matter.

An example of 'consensus building' comes from the Narmada Valley, where in the 1970s the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal was adjudicating a quarrel between the riparian states. Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra were opposing Gujarat's plans for a high dam on the Narmada river. The Tribunal was also asked to decide the claim of Rajasthan, a non-riparian state as far as Narmada River was concerned. Both Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh opposed the claim of Rajasthan. However, Gujarat supported Rajasthan's claim as it would allow for a bigger dam.

The Tribunal, in one of its interim orders decided against Rajasthan, but on appeal the Supreme Court stayed the Tribunal's proceedings in 1972. An agreement signed under the good offices of the then Prime Minister in July 1974 between the Chief Ministers of the four concerned states, stated among other things that Rajasthan would be allotted 0.5 million acre feet of water annually from the Narmada River. How an agreement was arrived at when two of the three concerned states were not in agreement, remains unanswered. Pressure tactics were clearly used by the centre against the states, a reason why we should not be surprised if agreements are also obtained through non-transparent means with regard to the river-linking proposal.

Agreement sans due process

The Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal was part of the Rajiv Longowal accord signed in 1986, when many of the constitutional institutions were not in any position to be effective in Punjab. The project sought to transfer water from the Sutlej in Punjab for the irrigation of southern Haryana, which lies in the Yamuna basin. Punjab subsequently became reluctant to share the water, and Haryana went to the Supreme Court. The court, in January 2001, ordered that the Link Canal be completed in one year – again, a peremptory deadline not unlike the ten year stipulation handed down by the bench headed by Justice Kirpal. It is six months since the one-year deadline has expired and there is no sign of the Sutlej water for the South Haryana as yet, even as the Supreme Court is hearing the contempt petition by Haryana. In this instance, there was 'agreement' without due process: though there was no consensus, one was assumed in the absence of proper working of the constitutional machinery at the state level in Punjab.

'Consensus' can also be achieved through manipulation, as was seen recently when Karnataka wanted to divert water from Mahadayi to the Krishna basin. Goa was opposed to this move, contending that the Mahadayi does not have surplus water. In early 2002, the Central Water Commission (CWC) in Delhi was asked to decide on whether the river had surplus water for diverting to the Krishna basin. Even as the commission was seized of the matter, the then Union Water Resources Secretary, BN Navalawala, issued a letter to Karnataka, saying that Karnataka could divert 7.56 Thousand Million Cubic Feet of water. Goa's chief minister was angry enough to charge Navalawala of corruption and to demand from the Prime Minister that Navalawala be removed from his post. The Karnataka-Goa spat shows yet another instance where consensus can be attempted and 'surpluses' manufactured through the help of friendly institutions. It was only the pro active stance of Goa that subverted this attempt and in fact Navalawala had to lose his post, and the letter saying Mahadayi had surplus water was withdrawn.

> As the opposition among the public begins to gather steam, Prabhu is seeking to bring in other players on his side

Already, the current river-linking project has seen an about-turn by one key player. At first, Bihar strongman and husband of the current chief minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav, declared that not a drop of water would be allowed to be taken away from the Ganga basin. Just because Bihar had not been able to make adequate use of the Ganga waters, he said, did not imply that the river had a 'surplus'. A person who is hungry today because he lacks purchasing power does not mean that he would have no use for food in future, said Yadav with his characteristic flair. Next, he warned that not a glass of water will be allowed to be diverted from the Ganga basin. A few more days, however, and the de facto ruler of Bihar declared that water was like oil – if the right price was offered, he may be ready to

RUPA JOSHI

The Aral, which was once a sea.

sell. What went on between Yadav and Suresh Prabhu of the Task Force to deliver the former's about-turn is not clear. What is apparent is that such a transition is possible and 'consensus' can be arrived at even if Bihar remains a state that has been deprived of adequate use of the Ganga waters.

Another way that Prabhu is seeking to achieve consensus for the river-linking project is by expanding the scope of the proposals. For example, when Maharashtra, his home state, said it did not find anything beneficial in the scheme and hence would oppose the proposal, Prabhu asked the state to prepare schemes that would benefit it. Now, Maharashtra has set up its own committee to explore the river linking proposals within the state, but could also be involving inter state rivers, that would benefit it. Karnataka has also now set up a committee to give such a report in three months. Something similar could be done with other states, including all-important Gujarat.

Common to all the examples of consensus building on river-linking projects of the past described above, is that in no case have the people been asked. In the river-linking project currently on the table, as well, people have been kept out. This is glaringly visible from the fact that after more than two decades in existence, the National Water Development Agency which functions under the central Water Resources Ministry has not been able to release any of its studies and reports to the public. These include all the pre-feasibility and feasibility studies related to the river-linking proposals. The task force under the media savvy Prabhu has yet to place any document, including pre-feasibility or feasibility reports, on the table for public scrutiny. And it is already eight months since its formation.

The only option left in the hands of the public therefore is to question the projects, demand information and oppose the projects till it is proved in a participatory way to be in public interest. If such information is not forthcoming, the only option is to oppose the linking of rivers where they will be affected. As has been done by the people of Bundelkhand in the Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh border region, for example. There, at a Jal Sansad (Water Parliament) on 23 July 2003, they rejected the Ken Betwa link being proposed as one of the first undertakings of the river-linking project. Similarly, earlier in the month, at Thrissur, the Pampa Achankovil Proposal was rejected almost unanimously, including by representatives of the Kerala government.

Prabhu's partners

As the opposition among the public begins to gather steam, Prabhu is seeking to bring in other players on his side. He has already had a number of meetings with the World Bank officials, including one on 27 March 2003 with the objective, according to the Water Resources Ministry, of requesting them "to share their expertise and experience on mega projects implemented elsewhere in the world." The Bank has not been lacking in enthusiasm, and an advisor to the Bank president, during a meeting in early March in Washington DC, spoke highly of India's river-linking proposals. The fact that the Bank is supporting open-ended water resources projects (these are sector wide projects in which potentially anything in water sector in the state can be included) in a number of states (including Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and also a forthcoming project in Madhya Pradesh) would give it extra leverage to help out Prabhu. Meanwhile, the Asian Development Bank and the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation are other possible collaborators, going by their interests and past record. While on a trip to Germany recently, Prabhu requested support from his hosts and it is reported that help is on the way.

Not to neglect the in-country players, Prabhu has also been wooing big-business represented in the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The meetings he has held with them have raised obvious questions (and worries) about private sector involvement in the river-linking agenda. Prabhu's numerous state-

ments saying that private funds would be invited for river linking projects have only added strength to these suspicions. However, the Task Force Chairman's attempt to bring over the non-governmental sector over to his side has thus far failed to achieve credible results.

For management on the environment side, the Task Force has roped in what may be termed the usual suspects, including the Central Pollution Control Board (a government agency and hence compromised *ab initio*), The Energy Research Institute (TERI - formerly the Tata Energy Research Institute) and the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), both of which are outside of government but lack requisite credibility. Among other things, TERI has earned a bad name after an episode regarding the plagiarising of an environmental impact assessment for the Dandeli Hydro Project on the Kali river in Karnataka. NEERI's performance has been strongly criticised when its own environmental impact assessment for the proposed Karcham Wangtoo Hydro Project on the Sutlej river in Himachal Pradesh was found by a number of environmentalists and even local people to be biased, incomplete and shoddy. Earlier NEERI had faced public criticism in relation to its reports on pollution of the Taj Mahal and Delhi's polluting industries. Another agency that Prabhu has sought to rope in is the National Council for Applied Economic Research, an organisation whose performance in socio-economic research with respect to the Rajghat Dam on the Betwa river on Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh border, as well as in the case of the proposed Tipaimukh Dam in Manipur, was found by independent commentators to be biased and inadequate.

Cost of inaction

Many proponents of the river-linking plan are fond of confronting sceptics with the question, "What is the cost of not taking up the project?" The reference is to opportunity lost. It may be worthwhile asking the proponents some relevant questions in turn, as long as the subject is 'costs'.

- What is the cost of neglecting rainwater harvesting potential in the river basins of India, including groundwater recharging?
- What is the cost of not assessing and realising the benefits of watershed development in any of the river basins in India? (While watershed development is happening at a number of places across the country, comprehensive and participatory planning and implementation at a river basin level is not happening in any river basin.)
- What is the cost of not maintaining and rejuvenating the existing local water systems (including tanks, ponds, wetlands and so on) in any of the river basins in India? (This is not the same as rainwater harvesting or watershed development. India has a large number of local water systems, which are in bad shape due to neglect over the decades.)
- What is the cost of not arresting the siltation in existing reservoirs, which are filling up at much higher rates than the design assumptions?
- What is the cost of not getting optimum results from the existing irrigation infrastructure in India, the largest in the world but performing far from its optimum levels?
- What is the cost of not creating and maintaining drainage systems in irrigation command areas and other agricultural areas?
- What is the cost of not arresting the pollution of India's freshwater systems?
- What is the cost of not assessing and realising demand-side management options in water and energy systems?
- What is the cost of not arresting the transmission and distribution losses from our water and energy supply systems, stopping thefts and making the elites pay for the services they use?
- What is the cost of not stopping implied export of water with huge subsidies that India is indulging in at the moment in terms of sugar and foodgrains export? The attitude of robbing the poor to subsidise supplies abroad is most clearly exemplified by the case of Maharashtra. Maharashtra is the state in India with the highest number of dams, highest production in sugar, lowest irrigated area in proportion to its cultivable area and also the dismal distinction of having the highest number of villages supplied water by tankers almost every summer. In stead of using the scarce water for cultivation of water guzzling crops like sugarcane, and then subsidising export of sugar so produced, that water can be more appropriately used to fulfil the basic needs of drinking water and protective irrigation at many places. Instead, now the state is looking for long distance water transfers.
- What is the cost of not managing peak power demands, not charging higher tariff during peak periods and not using the existing hydro capacities for peak power supply?
- What is the cost of not allowing adequate freshwater flows in the rivers downstream of dams and consumptive cities and also destroying the navigation potential in the process?

If the measures listed above can take care of needs for years to come, as has also been concluded by the report (1999) of the Governmentt of India appointed National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development Plan and others, why is there any need for projects like river linking with all its huge social, environmental, economic and financial costs?

Which *prabhu** will answer these questions?

*deity

Suresh Prabhu

the art of selling delusions

by ***Sudhirendar Sharma***

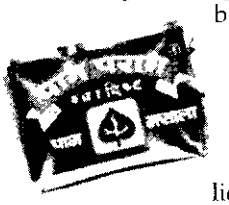
It is akin to the pan parag* ad on television. The smiling salesman has one for everyone. With 30 possible river links up his sleeve, Suresh Prabhu, the chairperson of the Task Force on Interlinking of Rivers, can satisfy a billion people. From a single river link to an incredible long chain, the miracle salesman can cater to every taste. Heedless of the inherent dangers of the product, the salesman makes you believe that this is the next best thing after independence that could indeed happen to the country.

Suresh Prabhu's zeal to market the idea is evidently inexhaustible. In a gathering of the devout at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), which was wholehearted in its endorsement of the government's stance, Prabhu said, "The interlinking of rivers will change the shape of India". Unmindful of whether this scheme defaces the geography of the country irreversibly or infringes the riparian rights of communities permanently; Prabhu only looks at it as an irresistible opportunity to integrate the country.

It is indeed remarkable that an idea that is as powerful as the government claims it to be, based as it is on an allegedly rigorous 'need assessment', needs any marketing at all let alone a vigorous one of the kind that the minister has undertaken. Clearly, it is an *a priori* proposition that is now being legitimised. How else can one explain the need to link rivers in order, as is also suggested, to provide potable water when official data suggests that 80 per cent of the population is already being supplied drinking water? Can the proposal be justified on the grounds of creating additional irrigation capacity when there are no buyers in the country for some 48 million tonnes of grain harvest?

Interestingly, the proposal starts with the assumption that the rivers must be linked to tame recurring droughts, and then proceeds to justify links and transfers. Expectedly, additional features like inland navigation, power generation and enhanced growth rate are thrown in for good measure, to add more substance to the sales pitch. Indeed, the spin on the river-linking proposal is loaded with such a variety of benefits that no one in a population of more than a billion is likely to feel left out of the game.

Though the government is at pains to peddle its many virtues, the proposal is seriously wanting on technical grounds. The director-general of the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), Radha Singh and former water resources secretary of the government of India, Ramaswamy Iyer (see accompanying article) have locked horns on these technical questions on quite a few occasions with the former resorting to uncivil language as a substitute for informed debate. NWDA is the lead agency for the project and such unseemly conduct and ill-informed sloganeering reflect poorly on the people behind the project.



Radha Singh, no doubt, has reasons to savour her newfound prominence. Though in existence for two decades now, NWDA has shot into public attention because the government enthusiastically lapped up the Supreme Court's directive to link the Himalayan rivers with the peninsular rivers in a record timeframe of 10 years. Aimed at drought-proofing the country, the project has received unstinted support from most political parties.

Political opportunism more than technical feasibility is the driving force behind the project. Two earlier suggestions of the 1960s, for a "Garland Canal" and a "Ganga-Cauvery link" had never commanded the serious attention of expert opinion. Ironically the ideas that

* *Pan Parag is a stimulant of blended betel nuts, catechu, cardamom and lime*

were rejected on technical grounds then, have in a new and more grandiose incarnation now been suddenly found technically feasible.

Even the binding aspects of inter-country river-water sharing do not seem to disturb the proponents of the project. Their cheery optimism is so unshakeable that Radha Singh has, in fact, found additional international merits in the scheme. In her view, the interlinking would bury the Ganga water sharing controversy once and for all. Under the refurbished riparian dispensation, Bangladesh will get guaranteed flows once the waters of the Teesta and Mahananda are transferred to the Ganga. Bangladesh, however, is not amused and they have reason not to be. Similar assurances were given when the Ganga water-sharing treaty was signed in December 1996.

Statutory warning

Unlike the pan parag sachet, which carries a statutory warning about risk to human health, the river linking package steers clear of even the most cursory reference to the potential hazards. Its patrons in fact do not admit that there are any, making it perhaps the first engineering venture in human history that has only benefits and no shortcomings. Ask Suresh Prabhu and he brushes aside the economic, ecological and technical pitfalls of the project as "non-issues". However, according to the recently-released *World Water Development Report* of the UN, the linking of world's most polluted rivers may even spread disease and misery amongst an unsuspecting population.

The report says quite clearly that the Indian rivers are the most polluted in the world, with three times as many bacteria from human waste as the global average. Further, these rivers carry 20 times more lead than those of the industrialised countries. The Task Force has nothing to say about these matters. Since the linking of rivers will not be preceded by a reduction in pollution levels, the proposal is not only aimed at the equitable distribution of water but will also guarantee equal access to pollutants across the country as well.

As if to make up for the silence on such immediate issues, the advocates of the scheme are vocal about the projected increase in the country's stagnant GDP growth. Clearly, this is the bait that is to meant to enthuse all those who care about the national interest. By utilising just about 1 per cent of GDP each year, the INR 560,000 crore project will yield a 4 percent increase in the GDP. Never before has such an astounding rate of return on investment ever been achieved anywhere!

But is this expected growth of GDP believable? Even if the anticipated rate of GDP growth is achieved, what is the guarantee that poverty will be eradicated? Economists who study these things have now started questioning the direct correlation between economic growth and poverty reduction. Every fractional gain in GDP has in reality been accompanied by a quantum increase in the population below poverty line. How else can one explain the rising population of the poor each year?

Even the World Bank's *Global Economic Prospects and the Developing Countries 2000* conceded that there are only pockets of plenty in an environment of unrelieved hunger, deprivation and poverty in India. Says the report: "...these areas will not see much impact on poverty even with higher growth rates". Instead of repeating these well-worn shibboleths about reducing the shamefully high-level of poverty through economic growth, the poor will be better served if one addresses the issue of poverty through direct measures of alleviation.

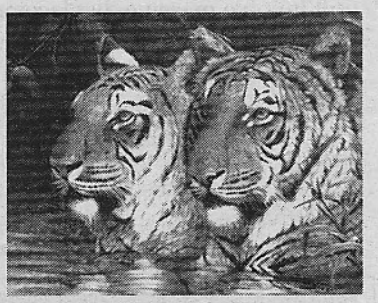
Brushing aside all apprehensions, Prabhu's Task Force is pursuing the proposal on a war footing without examining the serious social, economic and ecological implications. Asset creation on the scale anticipated will involve massive displacement of people, unquantifiable disruption of regional water systems, irreversible degradation of land, and anticipated changes in micro-climate across river basins.

But like a true salesman of spurious items, Prabhu tries to convince that the inherent strengths of the product far outweigh its potential dangers. The poor can only hope that he can be held accountable to his words, if indeed he manages to sell his unhealthy vision. △

NEW AGE is the new newspaer in Dhaka's already crowded English newspaper market, billing itself as "dynamic, daring, daily". Published by Enayatullah Khan of Holiday weekly, a journalist with long innings, New Age enters the fray with a crew of young, energetic reporters and editors. For some reason, though, the editorial desk seems attached to the term 'futurity'. Khan himself lovingly uses it in his opening editorial, and there is also an earnest piece by Sirajul Islam, an article titled "Futurity in Bangladesh history", in which he tries to answer question, "The future has always been an enigma. But isn't there a way of seeing it coming?" Ahh.

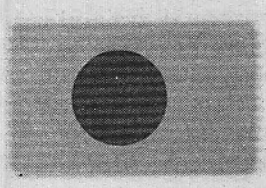
■

CULLING THE first month's issues of *New Age*, one finds quite a few reports on issues related to the immediate South Asian neighbourhood. I will list just a few.



*India and Bangladesh plan joint census of tigers on the Sunderban mangroves that extends through to West Bengal. Fair enough, says Chhetria Patrakar, for if the beast is named the Royal Bengal Tiger, then both sides of the border better take care of its habitat and survival. "An exact headcount of tigers is not possible without a joint census as the unmanned and open international border is not at all a barrier to the big cats to roam freely". At least the border remains open, elsewhere in India-Bangladesh and Pakistan-India, you now have fences, barbed wire, floodlights.

* Reports *New Age*, the Foreign Ministry in Dhaka is hopeful that the Dhaka-Agartala bus service will begin to run by 9 August. The decision to commence the bus service between Dhaka and the capital of Tripura was agreed upon at the end of the recent meeting of the bilateral Joint Economic Commission. The bus fare will be USD 10 (why in this *firangi* currency was the fare set – CP) and the service will be run by the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) and Tripura Road Transport Corporation (TRTC). Now that the Lahore-Delhi bus is running in the west and the Agartala-Dhaka service is about to start in the east, how about Shillong-Chittagong, Chandigarh-Islamabad, Karachi-Ahmedabad, and a ferry service from Chennai to Trinco-malee?



* On 24 July, Bangladesh gave Pakistan a plot of 10 *bighas* of land at the Baridhara neighbourhood in Dhaka while Pakistan gave Bangladesh a plot of 15 *bighas* in the Pakistani capital Islamabad. The plots of land are meant to build chancery buildings for the respective Bangladeshi and Pakistani diplomatic missions. "Accepting the documents of the land, the acting High Commissioner expressed the hope that the exchange of plots would help cement the ties between the two SAARC countries". Nothing more to be said on that.

■

BEGUM KHALEDA Zia is in a tough spot, for having strenuously opposed export of Bangladeshi gas to India. Now as Prime Minister she will have to explain why the gas industry has failed to take off. According to *New Age*, she believes that the international oil companies (IOCs) have begun to lose interest in exploring gas in Bangladesh because they are unable to sell the gas from wells that are already operational. "The international oil companies are not getting interested in exploring gas in Bangladesh these days, because they are not being able to sell the already-explored gas," she observed during the Prime Minister's question hour in Parliament. The Prime Minister then added, "But we need to explore more gas in the next 10 years. So we need to encourage them to do so". On the other hand, the Prime Minister told the House that her government "has not yet got any plans to export gas". Then she said that her government was "considering" two expert-committee reports on the unexplored gas reserves and the recommendations concerned. Such is the way of Bangladeshi gas, discovered, pumped and unexportable.

■

FOLLOWING A ferry disaster in early July, there was a sudden flurry of media study of Bangladeshi shipping. But Dhaka's Shipping Minister, Akbar Hossain, who has witnessed over 1050 deaths in seven major ferry capsizes in the last two years, shrugged off responsibility for the mishaps, reports *New Age*. Passing the buck, he declared, "All these (faulty) launches were not built during the present prime minister's regime. We took action against 40 unfit launches, but none of the previous governments took action against them".

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NOW, MOVING ON beyond Bangladesh, it requires

the *Financial Times* of London to provide a sweet story about the challenge of selling chocolates in the hot and humid Indian plains even while the two multinational giants Cadbury and Nestle jostle with each other to get market share. Writes Khozem Merchant in the 24 July issue of *FT*, Indians swallowed 22,000 tonnes of chocolate last year and consumption is growing at 10-12 percent annually. However, almost all of this consumption is in the cities, and rural India is nearly 'chocolate-free'. But the fact is that three quarters of consumers live there. What to do, as they say in Darbhanga. "Average summertime temperatures reach 43 degrees Celsius in India. Chocolate melts at body temperature of 36 degrees. India does not have controlled, refrigerated distribution. Air-condition supermarkets are rare". Here are some other facts. Cadbury loses 1.5 percent of annual sales of INR 6.8 billion to heat damage. Both companies revise ingredients to make chocolate withstand heat, and so Indian chocolates are more resilient to heat than Eurupean chocolates by a factor of 2 degrees. Ironically, the chocolate market has grown recently because smaller retailers have stuffed fridges and coolers supplied by the cola companies Coke and Pepsi with chocolates. Nestle and Cadbury have tried to provide loans for retailers to buy fridges, but to hold down power costs the shopkeeepers switch off the fridges at night. "As a result the cocoa fat melts and migrates to the main body of the chocolate bar. When the cooling is switched on in the morning, the cocoa fat solidifies and turns white, presenting a bizarre, unsellable white on black form". Nestle tried to provide fridges with see-through doors, but was appalled to see its chocolates sandwiched between dead chicken, butter and vegetables.

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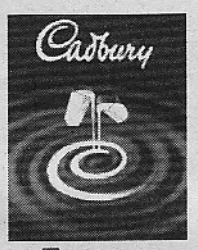
HERE IS some tidbit you may otherwise never have known, but now you do courtesy CP and *FT* – Cadbury sells 895 million Eclairs ("a sweet confectionary") a year. Interestingly, these are said to be sold in 895 million individual transactions at one rupee each.



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REPORTS THE *Times of India* from Chennai, Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalitha has opposed the proposal to build a bridge between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, terming it a threat to national security. Writing to Prime Minister AB Vajpayee, she said the proposal sounded terrible because of "the terrorism culture espoused by the LTTE". The proposal had been discussed earlier between Vajpayee and his Colombo counterpart Ranil Wickremesinghe. A kind of pre-feasibility on the bridge which would 'do a Hanuman' across the shallow Palk Strait has already been done, and comments were being sought from the Tamil Nadu state government. Said Madame, "The issue should not be viewed as one of economic cooperation between India and Sri Lanka but as a vital issue concerning the security of Tamil Nadu and India". She even opposed the starting of a ferry service between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka.

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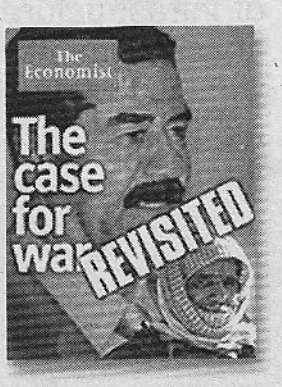


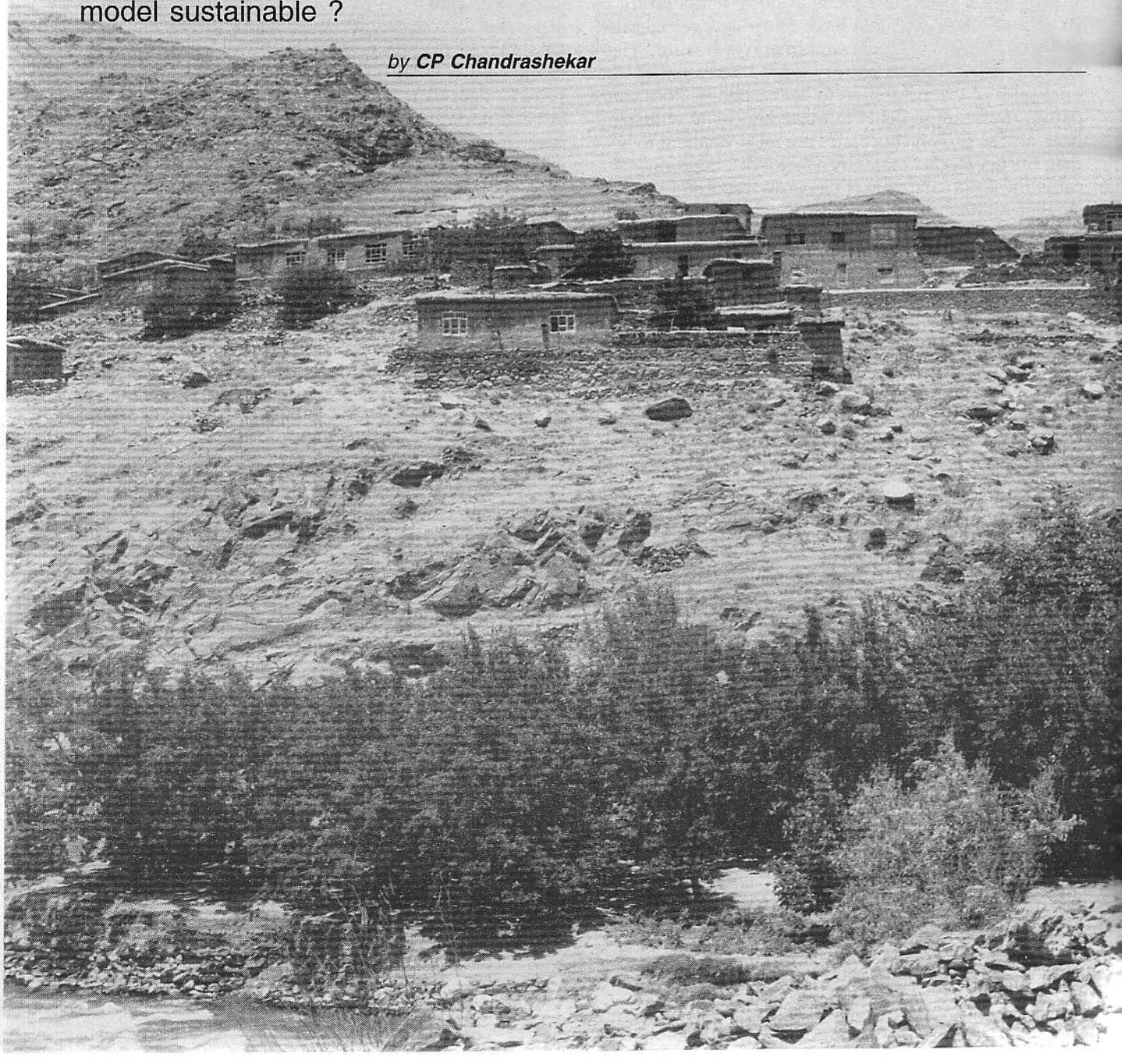
THE ECONOMIST, which from its high perch had decided that an Anglo-American war on Iraq was justified, after the war and with the weapons of mass destruction resolutely unwilling to be found, has written a rather lame editorial ("The case for war revisited") in which it says it still believes the invasion of Saddam's fief was in principle okay. Most unconvincing. Now, *The Guardian*'s Paul Foot has come out with an expose, but not before giving the 'gentlemen' of the magazine a swipe. First, the swipe: "Economist leaders are the authentic voice of good old British empiricism. Not for them any awkward distinction between armies of liberation – which the British and US forces in Iraq plainly are not – and armies of occupation, which they plainly are. Not for them the rather obvious fact that you cannot invade and steal other people's territory, swipe and exploit their natural resources and at the same time pretend to liberate them. Such ideological arguments are anathema to the smooth-talking, complacent, and essentially empirical ladies and gentlemen who run the *Economist*." And then the expose: Admiral John Poindexter, as we all know, had this hairbrained scheme of in which the Pentagon would invite 'investors' to bet their millions on the likelihood of political developments and of terrorist atrocities. Reports Foot: "As soon as his crazy Policy Analysis Market was exposed, it was shut down in some embarrassment and Poindexter was sacked. What has all this to do with the *Economist*? The Policy Analysis Market website disclosed that it was a joint programme between the Pentagon and two private companies – Net Exchange, a technologies company, and the Economist Intelligence Unit, business information arm of the Economist." Well, well, sirs!

–Chhetria Patrakar

Aid, expatriates and the Afghan economy

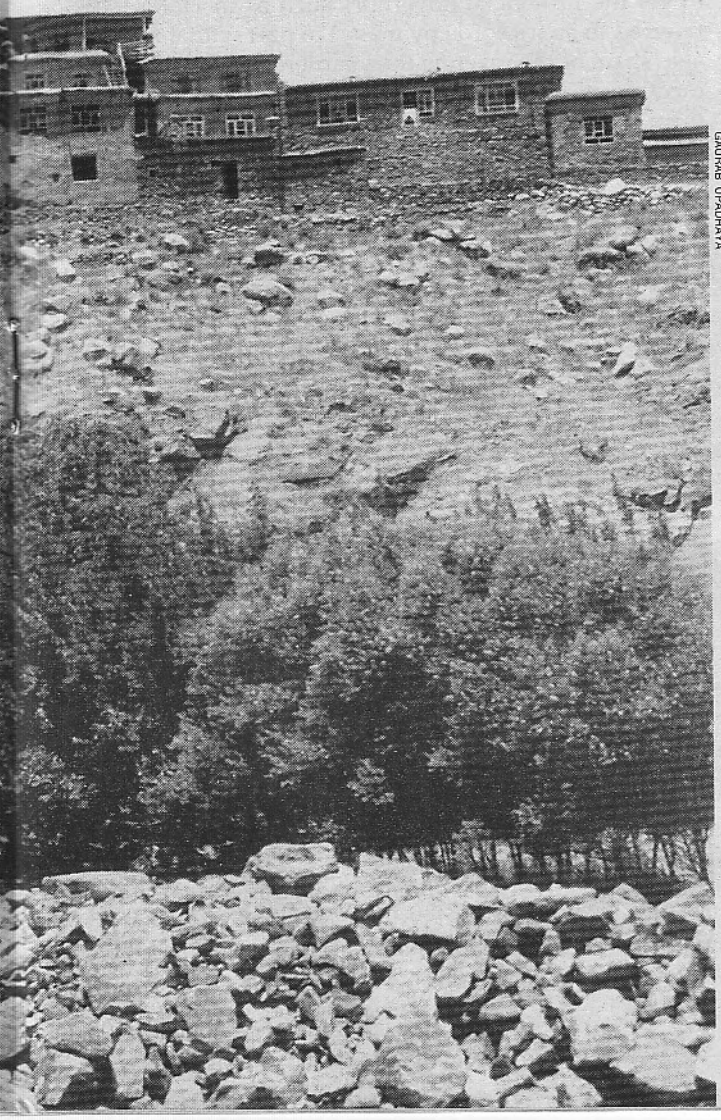
The reconstruction of the Afghan economy hinges on the development of infrastructure, the restoration of the institutions of state and the economic space within which they can pursue a national development agenda. But what is the reality of aid-supported development in the country? Is the present model sustainable ?

by ***CP Chandrashekar***



On December 22, 2001, an interim administration under Hamid Karzai mandated from above under the Bonn peace argeement took charge of Afghanistan. The country's economy had already disintegrated at the time of formation of the interim administration. The economy in 2002 was seen to be structurally at an early stage of modern development with 85 percent of the population reportedly dependent on agriculture and 53 percent of the GDP estimated to be originating in agricultural, livestock and forestry. As against this, light industry contributed 28 percent, trade 8 percent and construction 6 percent. Extremely rough estimates quoted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) suggest that in 2002, Afghanistan's GDP amounted to USD 4.4 billion. Per capita this works out to an abysmally low USD 170 per head.

These figures, however, could overstate the level of backwardness implicit in the initial conditions from which Afghanistan must begin its process of reconstruction and revival. Two factors have contributed to the high "aggregate poverty" indicated by a per capita income that is less than half of the international poverty norm of a dollar per day per head by 2001. The first is the war that led to the ouster of the Taliban. An earlier estimate, also quoted by the ADB, relating to 1989, placed Afghanistan's GDP at a much higher USD 6.9 billion and its per capita income at around USD 300. The situation could have further improved in the years following 1989, since reports indicate that at least in regions fully occupied by the Taliban, economic conditions were stable during the early and the mid-1990s.



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Underlying the subsequent massive contraction of the economy was the war which devastated the limited infrastructure of the country, triggered the exodus of more than 3 million refugees to Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere and displaced a large number of people within the country. This disrupted or even brought to a standstill much of the economic activity within the country. A corollary of this role of the late 1990s war in worsening economic condition is that a concerted reconstruction effort focused on quick-impact projects combined with the observed large-scale return of refugees to Afghanistan, could have ensured a sharp rise in GDP and per capita income to levels in the early 1990s.

Secondly, nature added to the woes of an already war ravaged economy, with a protracted drought that began in 1999 and lasted till 2001. According to estimates by the World Bank, crop production during this period was halved and livestock herds substantially depleted, making the situation desperate by 2002. According to a March 2002 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) survey, the livestock count in the country had declined by 60 percent due to the distress sale of livestock herds in the summer and autumn of 2001 triggered by the persisting drought. The crucial role of the drought in worsening economic conditions is indicated by an FAO and World Food Programme estimate that agricultural production in 2002 rose by 82 percent, following better rainfall conditions. However, even for that year cereal production was estimated at 4 percent below its 1998 level. Given the importance of agriculture for employment and GDP, these figures suggest that the rough GDP estimates relating to 2002 may be exaggerating the poor state of the economy.

The unaccounted economy

These real factors that may be exaggerating the extent of backwardness of the economy could have been compounded by statistical errors that remain uncorrected because of the temporary closure of the statistical system. It is known that GDP and revenue estimates in Afghanistan are quite unreliable given the large role of the unaccounted, underground economy in the country. Two factors contribute to the magnitude of the unaccounted segments of the economy. To start with, Afghanistan, being a landlocked country, is also a transit hub for trade between some of its larger neighbours. Such trade flows occur through its porous borders with Pakistan (2,450 km), Tajikistan (1206 km), Iran (936 km), Turkmenistan (744 km), Uzbekistan (137 km) and China (76 km).

Unfortunately, accurate data on Afghanistan's domestically oriented as well as re-export trade are not

Puppet amidst warlordism.

available. A June 2000-February 2001 UNDP study, based on an investigative survey of border crossings and major trading centres, estimated that "indigenous exports" at USD 130 million constituted just 10.6 percent of total exports, while re-exports totalled USD 1097 million *(see chart 1)*. Similarly, imports for domestic consumption, based on types of commodities, amounted to USD 396 million or 33 percent of the total, whereas imports that were potentially for re-export totalled USD 806 million *(see chart 2)*.

It is to be expected that the huge volume of transit or re-export trade would sustain an economy whose activities are not fully captured in estimates of GDP tracking the real economy. It is a well known fact that much of this trade is not officially accounted for. Therefore, the profits accruing to Afghan nationals from such trade (in which exports account for more than a quarter of estimated 2002 GDP) are also likely to be inadequately captured by national income figures.

The second reason why the magnitude of the unaccounted economy is likely to be great is the historically important role of poppy cultivation and opium production in the rural Afghan economy. According to an estimate by the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, land under poppy cultivation amounted to 82,171 hectares in 2000 and opium production in 2002 was 3,400 tons, which was similar to levels that prevailed in the mid- to late-1990s. With the Taliban having imposed a ban on opium production and the Karzai government having declared a ban on poppy cultivation in 2002, inevitably a large part of this activity will occur in the underground economy. The cultivation of poppy, the production of opium and its trade will be generating a significant income, which again goes substantially unrecorded.

Disregarding the potential areas for rapid reconstruction of war-damaged assets, the effect of the prolonged drought and the important role of the unrecorded economy, tends to exaggerate the poor initial conditions, which are then attributed solely to the long years of conflict. This is not to say that the two-decade long war had no serious consequences. To start with, it did have damaging implications for the country's infrastructure, in the creation of which foreign aid had a historically important role to play because of Afghanistan's strategic location and transit trade importance.

This reduction in infrastructural capacity made agriculture more climate dependent, besides also fragmenting the economy by raising transportation and communications barriers and creating bottlenecks in sectors like energy. Secondly, by driving out large sections of the population and weakening the state it undermined public institutions, including the central bank, the financial system, tax collection and customs machinery, the statistical apparatus, the civil service, and the law and order and judicial system. Finally, it undermined the ability of the state to collect a share of the surplus being generated within the economy to finance the expenditures necessary to take on crucial governance and development responsibilities.

With regard to the last of these effects, it must be recalled that local revenue in Afghanistan comes from the taxes on trade, much of which occurs by land across the extensive borders with its neighbours. A major problem being faced by the current government in Kabul is to get the provincial governors such as in Herat (still referred to as warlords by many) to part with a reasonable share of the revenue thus garnered. Even though a meeting in May saw 12 governors signing an agreement to do so (and one of them delivered USD 20 million immediately thereafter) it is unclear as to how much of the provincially realised revenue will finally accrue to the central government.

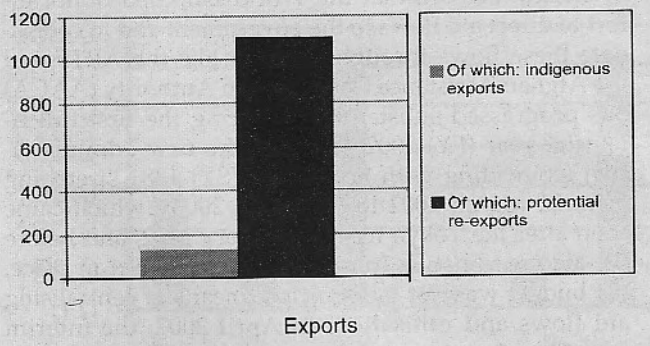
Pillars of reconstruction

Once these features of the Afghan economy are understood and the unwarranted pessimism that springs from reports and perceptions of near complete devastation and penury is set aside, the direction of the aid-supported reconstruction effort and its likely consequences can be easily deduced. There are three pillars on which that effort should rest: (i) restoration of the infrastructure with initial focus on quick-impact projects that can yield substantial benefits in a short period; (ii) restoration of the institutions of state and their powers so that the state can mobilise revenues and undertake crucial developmental expenditures, which only it can pursue since low per capita income levels imply inadequate incentives for private investment in many areas; and (iii) restoration of the "economic space" within which the new state can pursue a national development agenda.

A range of specific initiatives can be identified within this overall framework. To begin with, a greater degree of security and an end to periodic local conflict must be ensured. This must build on the intense and conspicuous desire of the Afghan people to get on with their lives. Only an international, UN-mandated force

Trade estimates for Afghanistan, 2000 (USD million)

Chart 1



Exports

Chart 2

Imports

that is seen as a source of support and not an instrument of occupation can secure this. Second, the damaged and destroyed infrastructure must be immediately reconstructed, with a large proportion of aid diverted for the purpose, so that the economy is reintegrated and rendered functional.

Third, the ability of the state to the mobilise resources needed to finance crucial developmental responsibilities must be restored, for which an appropriate monitoring, tax collection and revenue sharing system must be worked out. Given the fact that Iran and Pakistan account for a substantial share of Afghanistan's trade, and that trade revenues constitute a large share of the total, the initial task should not be too difficult. But over time, it will be necessary to widen the tax base and obtain resources from internal direct and indirect taxation, particularly the former.

Fourth, it will be necessary to rebuild the financial system with a two-fold purpose: that of mobilising household savings and of channelising those savings to priority areas, using mechanisms such as directed credit and differential interest rates. This implies that an overemphasis on microfinance and any neglect of the task of creating a well-regulated formal banking system will be misplaced. Fifth, the rural infrastructure needed to restore dynamism to agriculture, reduce dependence on rainfall for irrigation and encourage growth of non-agricultural activities needs to be created by the state.

Poppy goes underground

Finally, Afghanistan needs to move out of being a mere transit hub for trade between its neighbours and must seek to develop activities which add value to imported inputs to produce outputs for export and benefit to a greater extent from its crucial role in regional trade. The problem with the transit trade is not that it adversely affects the balance of payments. The field survey-based estimates quoted above show that though there was a small deficit in terms of the indigenously directed and originating trade, Afghanistan did not suffer from a trade imbalance that needed significant external financing. The real difficulty is that the unregulated growth of such trade creates disincentives for investment aimed at increasing domestic employment and value-added through processing and production activities within Afghanistan.

Is this the direction in which the ostensibly UN-coordinated reconstruction effort is moving? Expectation were high when, soon after the Bonn agreement that brought the peace, a meeting of donors in Tokyo in January 2002 pledged to deliver sums estimated at an aggregate of USD 4.5 billion within a 30-month period, to kick-start the reconstruction effort. A year-and-a-half thereafter, even in Kabul, the capital city and therefore the executive headquarters of development, the process of reconstruction has been slow. The inadequacy of the reconstruction effort is all the more puzzling since even the limited and scattered information on aid transfers does suggest that inflows have been significant, if not actually massive.

The mechanics of aid

Aid flows take many forms. They occur directly to the government, through the World Bank administered Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the Law and Order Trust Fund (LOTF, which funds the police), the Afghanistan Trust Fund (that pays for the army) and a number of other channels. They occur through routes indirectly linked to the government, inasmuch as local and international NGOs are supported by donors to undertake projects that are in keeping with the National Development Framework adopted by the government in consultation with the donor community. And they also flow in completely outside the governmental framework since US "coalition forces", other than the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and international NGOs bring in their own funds besides those provided by donors abroad for activities that are not necessarily reported in full.

The most easily accessed information is that on sums contributed directly to the government. To coordinate these flows, donors constituted the ARTF in response to a government request that the budget be made the central instrument to identify and allocate funds for projects. From the government's point of view, linking donor funds with the budget would help it both guide and take credit for the reconstruction financed by aid. It would also ensure that aid could be used to meet the recurrent expenditure of the government, including a large part of its wage and salary bill. This request was, in turn, acceptable to the donor community, because it ensured "national ownership" of the policies that open or covert aid conditionality prescribed and it ensured a degree of transparency about the allocation and use of aid flows.

Moreover, the ARTF is being administered, for a fee, by the World Bank. The bank sees the fund as a means of appropriating the policy leverage that the combined aid of numerous donors provides. Meanwhile, powerful groups within developed-country donors could be reassured that their interests would be protected. In principle, the mandate of the ARTF is extremely wide. Besides funding the government's recurrent expenditure, including its salary bill (which though it goes against the grain of the World Bank's perspective is a source of substantial leverage over a resource-starved state), the ARTF can finance investment activities and programmes, including quick-impact recovery projects, capacity-building projects and payments made to Afghan experts resident abroad who are willing to temporarily or permanently relocate to their home country. The control over expenditure on the last two categories is also a major means of influencing government decision-making.

Indications are that the World Bank-led donor effort to direct aid flows to the government and to coordinate these flows through agencies like the ARTF and the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority (AACA) has progressed substantially. During the first full financial year (FY) 2002-03 under the new administration (coinciding with Solar Year (SY) 1381 stretching from 21 March 2002 to 20 March 2003), which came soon after the Tokyo meet in January 2002, and before the aid coordination framework could be put in place, the budget was not the principal means of centralising aid flows and utilisation. In April 2002, the interim administration adopted a recurrent budget for FY2002 involving expenditures of USD 483 million, including USD 23 million for clearance of wage arrears.

With domestic revenues estimated at USD 83 million, aid was expected to finance USD 400 million or 83 percent of the budget. However, figures collated by the AACA indicate that total grant disbursements during the last quarter of SY 1380 and the full SY 1381 (FY 2002) amounted to USD 1.8 billion, of which USD 295.9 went to the government through the budget, the ARTF, the Law and Order Trust Fund and other channels. The channels of disbursement and the local target agency for the remaining money are unclear, but a substantial part (USD 700 million according to one estimate) reportedly went to finance humanitarian assistance to ameliorate the effects of the drought.

The process of coordinating aid flows began to be consolidated only in the financial year starting 21 March, 2003 (SY 1382). In March 2003, the Transitional

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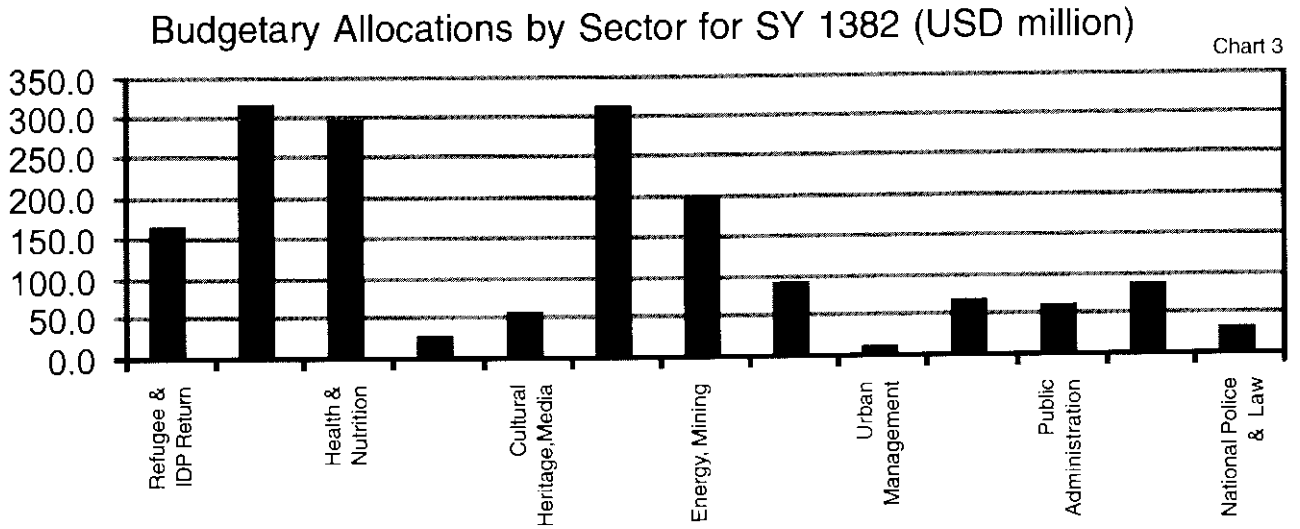
Kabul and Kabul River.



Government of Afghanistan announced a comprehensive budget for FY2003 — comprising an ordinary (recurrent) budget of USD 550 million, of which USD 200 million is expected to be financed through local revenues and USD 350 million by external assistance, and a development budget of about USD 1.7 billion. According to AACA, by June, financing from donors to the tune of USD 211.2 million for the recurrent budget and USD 1.2 billion for the development budget had been confirmed.

Interestingly, only the USD 211.2 million for the recurrent budget has been channelled through the ARTF, the LOTF and the Afghanistan Trust Fund, whereas grant funding for development programmes in the national budget has come through other channels. The process of using the World Bank to enforce conditionality appears to work through a mechanism in which the bank controls funding for the crucial and politically sensitive recurrent budget. Thereby it is able to influence both the government's policies and its utilisation of the remaining aid directly provided to the government.

Given that the funding for FY 2003 is confirmed so far, expectations are that the budgetary target for external financing is likely to be fulfilled. Thus, the evidence collated by the AACA suggests that aid to the government through various channels would amount to USD 3.4 billion by the end of FY 2003. Thus, over a period of 26 months after the Tokyo meeting in January 2002, grants disbursed to the government would cover 87 percent of the pledges made for a 30 month period after the meeting and 75 percent of the total pledges made at and after the Tokyo meeting. According to AACA sources, it is this high rate of disbursement that has made the Karzai administration bid for a USD 15-20 billion aid package over a five-year period.

Though information on the flows through channels not directed at the budget and monitored by the AACA is as yet difficult to come by, the actual disbursement of aid is likely to have been substantially more than the figures mentioned above. Even though a variety of sources in Kabul believe that the sums involved would not be as large as that provided to the budget, it is likely that such flows would significantly add to the total. Thus clearly, overall disbursements have been in keeping with the expectations generated at Tokyo.

The investment deficit

What then accounts for the picture of a slow and clearly inadequate pace of reconstruction? There are two obvious reasons why aid flows have not worked to refurbish the infrastructure even in Kabul. For one, a large part of the flow that occurred prior to FY 2003 went to support the humanitarian assistance programme to deal with the consequences of the drought between 1999 and 2001. This took the form of food aid, much of which neither involved any capital spending nor entailed expenditures inside Afghanistan, since the food was imported. Additionally, a large part of the grant disbursement, even in FY 2003 has gone to support the recurrent expenditures of the government, especially its wage and salary bill, which while spurring domestic consumption spending, has not contributed to savings and investment.

This use of aid to support the recurrent expenditures of the state, including its wage bill, has a number of implications. The inability of the government to finance its own recurrent expenditures reflects the fact that the government in Kabul does not as yet have the legitimacy or the power to garner a large enough share of revenues which are reportedly being collected at the provincial level. A very large proportion of the government's 240,000 non-military personnel are located in Kabul. This creates an environment in which, in a direct sense, the government in Kabul is supported by the donor community, whose leverage is therefore substantial.

Simultaneously, the expatriate presence and spending in Kabul has generated a services and construction

boom there, which is bound to widen differentials between Kabul and the rest of the country. In a country riven with ethnic and other divisions, this distancing of Kabul and its identification with a foreign presence could further undermine the legitimacy of the Kabul government, making it difficult for it to garner the revenues it needs to do away with dependence on aid. A consequence is that the cycle of dependence of the government on aid would only be strengthened.

The second set of reasons why aid does not seem to be having the expected impact is related to allocation decisions. As Chart 3 indicates, budgetary allocations for SY 1382 (FY 2003) show that while social sectors like education, health and refugee rehabilitation are allocated a total of USD 775 million and another USD 210 million is to be spent on foreign investment promotion, technical assistance and capacity-building in the areas of trade and investment, public administration and economic management and justice, only USD 509 million has been allocated to the crucial areas of transport and energy, mining and telecommunications. When seen in terms of aid commitments to finance these expenditures as of June 2003, this bias appears even greater *(Chart 4)*. Thus part of the reason for slow reconstruction of infrastructure is that only a small part of even the development budget is being allocated for the purpose.

This overemphasis on technical assistance and capacity building is being justified in the name of reconstituting the damaged Afghan state. Much of the money under these heads goes to institutions like the Adam Smith Institute and expatriate professionals who are paid huge consultancy fees in foreign currency, not all of which is being spent in Afghanistan. A constant refrain heard among the expatriate population in Kabul is that Afghans lack the capacity to manage their own affairs. Despite the fact that these institutions and most NGOs manage their programmes, especially those outside Kabul, with the aid of local partners, and though many skilled personnel who left as refugees to Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere have returned, this line of thought overwhelmingly influences the management of aid-financed programmes.

It almost appears that the "lack of capacity" discourse supports a nexus of aid-financed professionals, who find in such arguments the justification for their own dollar-funded presence in the country, and of aid donors, especially agencies such as the World Bank, which can use those arguments to prevent the entry of more nationalist orientated people into the decision-making and implementation process. This is not a fact that goes unnoticed among the Afghan population. Interviews with Afghan professionals and members of the faculty at the University of Kabul inevitably generate comments to the effect that Afghan talent, more attuned to the socio-cultural and economic context of the country, is being ignored, while expatriate and non-resident Afghan "experts" are imported even when not required.

The still-evolving policy framework in Afghanistan provides reasons why nationalist perceptions may be considered dispensable. It is to be expected that with government expenditure substantially driven by aid disbursements, explicit and implicit aid conditionality is bound to influence the policy framework. The effort, therefore, is to ensure that those manning the govern-

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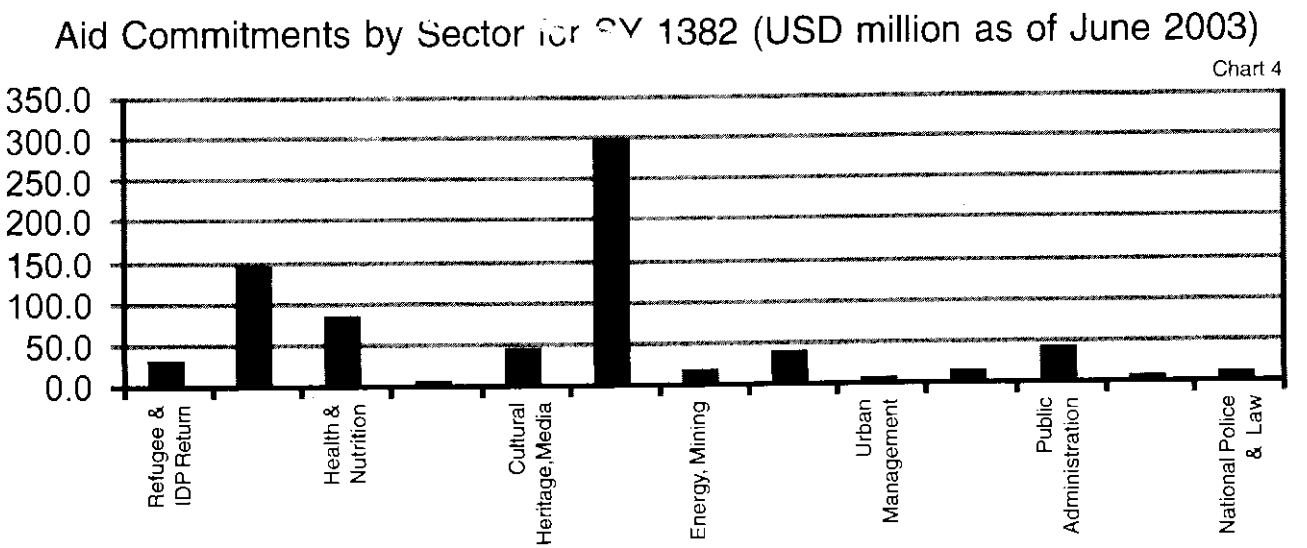

ment "own" the policies that such conditionality implies. Unfortunately that policy framework is not of a kind that could support the creation of a "domestic economic space" within which the Afghan state can fashion a nationally beneficial and egalitarian development strategy. Though the government's donor-driven strategy is yet in the making, it is clear that the inevitable import dependence of a war-devastated economy is being intensified, by encouraging an open trade policy that would discourage domestic industrial investment. Crucial social sector areas like health provision are being handed over to private entities and NGOs to run at a price, which though currently subsidised by aid, could easily be charged to the user at a later date.

Structuring dependence

The state has adopted as law the principle that the central bank cannot lend to the government. Thus, deficit-financed expenditure to revive the economy is ruled out, resulting in a near-complete dependence on aid for budgetary finance. The battered, publicly-owned financial sector, rather than being supported and strengthened, in order to be leveraged for domestic industrial financing, is soon to be subjected to competition from private, especially foreign, players. Since the need for a banking system that can mobilise local savings and channelise it to priority investments crucial to domestic private sector development is great, this shift can be disastrous. Foreign banks will only wean away the most lucrative (mainly expatriate) businesses from the local, publicly owned banking sector, while refusing to take any responsibility for development. Finally, though the new Afghani is formally the national currency, aid flows and the expatriate presence is dollarising the economy, with the dollar being traded on the streets and many service establishments quoting dollar prices and expecting payment in dollars.

These developments continue unchallenged partly because the vocal, urban domestic elite is being incorporated into the aid economy. Not only are salaries paid on time with the help of aid, the demand for services from the expatriate population is also on the rise. Rents quoted in dollars are rising fast because of the expatriate rush into Kabul and some other cities. These and other opportunities are resulting in the emergence of a new class of richer Afghans, living off the aid economy, which is happy with the freedom that an open, dollarised economy provides.

All this is fine for the moment since aid flows are leading to foreign exchange reserve accumulation with the central bank, which can use those reserves when required to prop up the new Afghani and prevent local prices of imported commodities from rising. But in the medium term, aid, import-dependence and dollarisation can all prove a burden. If the pace of aid inflow slows, not only will the just-reviving economy contract, but the Afghani would depreciate pushing up the prices of essentials in that segment of the economy still earning and living off the local currency. Stagflation, in an already depressed economy, will be the result. On the other hand, if aid inflows continue at present levels or rise in volume, inequalities between Kabul and the rest of the country, across differentially endowed regions and between income classes are bound to increase. That can have dangerous implications in a country that is still scarred by a complex chain of civil strife influenced by ethnic and religious divides.

The current model of development in Afghanistan is clearly unsustainable. But for those present in the country with short-term military and economic interests in mind, who are protected by the façade of altruism that a small dose of aid to a poor and devastated nation helps provide, this appears to be of no concern. △

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Sex work in the south

A detailed survey profiles the grey world of sex workers in Madras

by ***Syed Ali Mujtaba***

In recent times, prompted by the concern over the spread of HIV/AIDS, commercial sex workers have been the focus of a great deal of attention, primarily with the aim of promoting safe sex as a method of preventing disease. Despite the numerous groups active among sex workers, and despite the government's professed interest in the matter, there has been no accurate assessment of the total number of people practising the profession in India. Rough estimates suggest that there are well over ten million sex workers in the country, with the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu being considered "high supply zones".

If matters related to the safety of sex work and the rights of sex workers are to be addressed, it is important first to know the extent of the industry, its demography as well as the conditions of work. One of the most systematic and coherent studies of the industry was recently carried out in Madras, a city of about six million people and the capital of Tamil Nadu, the state with the highest incidence of HIV cases in the country.

Madras has a conservative profile unlike the more cosmopolitan metros like Bombay, Delhi or Calcutta. But as the HIV figures suggest, and as the survey confirms, the conservative image is only a veneer behind which lurk many clandestine transactions. The survey conducted by the Indian Community Welfare Organisation (ICWO), an NGO that has been working with sex workers and the gay community in Madras for close to 15 years, estimates that there are over ten thousand commercial sex-workers in Madras. The ICWO survey actually maps 6300 of these sex workers in the city.

The survey updates the 1992 figures of the World Health Organisation (WHO) which had then identified 3000 sex workers in Madras. The secretary of the ICWO AJ Hariharan, who was part of the WHO survey, says the Madras sex industry stands on four pillars — sex workers, clients, brokers and the law enforcing agencies. According to him it is a chicken and egg syndrome where it is difficult to say who surfaces first in the cycle of sex work. The ICWO conducts general health camps once in three months where sex workers are treated for STDs. According to him Madras needs 11,111 condoms a day, or 40,55515 condoms annually.

Categories of sex workers

The ICWO survey focuses on the attitude, behaviour and practice of commercial sex workers in Madras and classifies them into four categories. They are the family-based, street-based, brothel-based and mobile sex workers.

Of the total sample of 6300 people, 4500 belong to the family category. People of this category live in residential areas and operate from their homes often without the knowledge of anyone, including their neighbours. Run by aged sex workers, with their own network of regular clients, new entrants soliciting services come to these family establishments only through special contacts and they are only allowed admission after their identity has been fully verified.

The street workers, who number about 1360, are the next largest category. They get their clients by waiting on the streets. Most of them carry on their work independently, though some rely on brokers for help in getting clients. The preferred method of work is to wait on crowded streets, which provides more custom as well as relative anonymity to the transaction, as opposed to the less frequented localities. Bus stops, railway stations, cinema halls and beaches are the usual venues where the transaction is negotiated, from where they go to cheap hotels and lodges with their clients.

The third category consists of sex workers are those who work in

Rallying for their rights.

brothels. In the survey sample, 365 belong to this category. Madras does not have any distinctly identifiable sex work localities, as there are in Bombay,Delhi or Calcutta. However, there are brothels which function discreetly and openly in the residential areas of the city. Women from the latter segment of the trade work at fixed establishments but those working at the former kind of brothels change their addresses frequently. Both types of brothels are heavily dependent on brokers for their clients.

The fourth category is made up of mobile sex workers, who only number between 90 and110. They also depend on brokers. Every evening, some five or six girls are taken out in a car or a van by brokers on particular routes to visit particular points. Typically these girls are sent to the clients only on the basis of prior appointments. Certain hotels and resorts in and around the city are closely associated with this arrangement, since it forms part of their hospitality services. Under this system, the hotels procure the girls for their customers through brokers who even make arrangements to transport them if needed. In this category of the profession, the girls generally have a different profile from those in the other categories. Most of their clients are short-term business visitors to the city. Given the nature of their clientele and the locales at which they provide services they are expected to be more 'polished' and well dressed. Consequently, their rates are higher.

The majority of the women in the profession come from outside the state, with Andhra Pradesh accounting for 53 percent. Next is Tamil Nadu, with 23 percent, while the other two neighbouring states of Karnataka and Kerala account for 14 and 10 percent. There is a fairly well-organised and systematic method of recruiting the women into the city's sex trade. Most are picked up from regular conduit points in the adjoining states at prices ranging from INR 100,000 to 300,000. Prices vary according to looks, according to a full time broker named Kandasamy. The colour of skin is very important, and dark skin is at a discount.

The arrangement

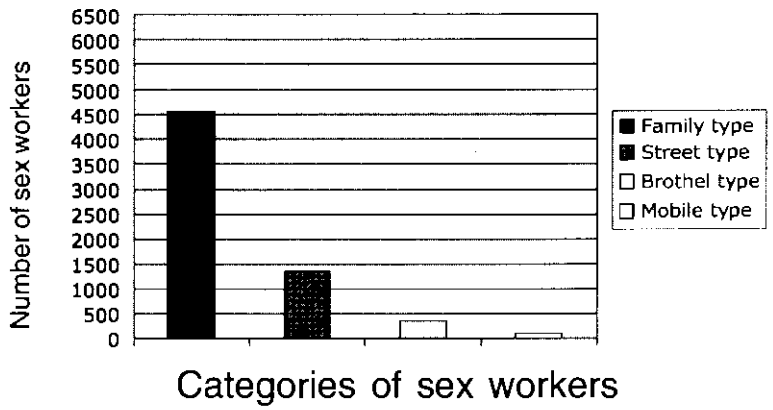
The relationship between the broker and the newly recruited sex worker is governed by a contract. Brokers go periodically to the recruitment points and procure girls on 37-day contracts. The girls are paid 50 percent of the contracted sum up front as an advance while the remaining dues are paid on their return after the completion of the contract. For those who are set up at brothels, owners provide breakfast and lunch during their stay, while dinners are normally the clients' responsibility. Though the sex workers are on contract for 37 days, they eventually end up getting paid for only 30 days. Menstruation and travel time are cited as reasons for cutting a week's salary. Since regular clients are always on the lookout for new faces, the brokers take one set of girls back and return with a fresh set. There are, however, many who end up staying back in the city after their contract expires for lack of opportunities elsewhere and this is what accounts for the large numbers of sex workers.

The number of working days is variable across the different categories. Brothel-based sex workers have a more demanding regimen since they work on all 30 days of the calendar month. As a result they deal with the maximum number of clients. Typically, since a sex worker attached to a brothel has to work without a break through the year, she has to cater to about 270 customers. On the other hand, for those in the street-based, mobile and residential categories work is relatively less demanding. On average, in a month they work for roughly 22, 16 and nine days, respectively.

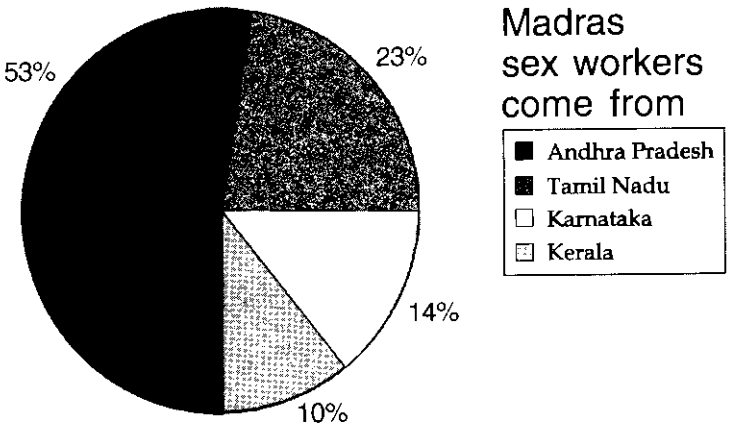
Earnings likewise are highly variable. The highest income earners are those in the mobile category, whose higher rates ensure an income of INR 6000 a month though they work the least. Those who are attached to brothels earn in the vicinity of INR 4000 for a full month's work. The residential and street-based women earn the least, having to settle for average monthly incomes of INR 3000 rupees and 1500 respectively. Reportedly, and expectedly, given that they have the maximum degree of physical contact, those who work in brothels belong to the medically high risk group.

For those who service clients outside their homes or brothels, the preferred venue for the majority is the client's residence. Hotels and lodges are the next most utilised places. As far as the residential category, brothel and street sex worker categories are concerned, given the clandestine nature of the work, there are frequent changes of addresses and venues of transaction. Those attached to brothels change their addresses most frequently, even as often as once a month.

As far as clients are concerned,



the majority approach sex workers directly. At any given time, the majority of them are new comers and only 30 percent are regulars. Interestingly, only 22 percent of the clients stated that the reasons for soliciting the services of sex workers was "immediate satisfaction of the sexual urge". Some 11 percent even claimed lack of domestic privacy, primarily the presence of grown up children in crowded households.



The usual suspects

In the city, there are 150 full time sex brokers and 4500 part-timers. Brokers engage in two types of activity – procuring girls for brothels and serving as intermediaries between sex workers and clients. They get a 30 percent commission from the brothel owners for the supply of girls, besides a separate cut for bringing clients to the brothels. Most of the part time brokers are drivers of auto-rickshaws and taxis and rickshaw pullers, as well as tour and travel trade operators, bartenders, waiters and even watchmen. Some of them graduate from being brokers to full fledged brothel owners.

The entire sex industry in Madras, it is said, flourishes under police protection, something not entirely unbelievable given that many 'prominent' middle-men and brokers have been around in this business for quite some time. Owners of brothels that function openly and street sex workers pay a fixed amount of money to the police to avoid arrest and harassment. Given this nexus between the industry and the police, the latter periodically go through the motions of brothel-busting and arrests, but only to meet the requirement of the minimum number of 'cases'. There is a pattern to the arrests of sex workers. The street based workers are arrested about twice a month, brothel-based workers once a month, whereas those from the mobile and residential categories are hauled up once in two months. Girls caught in such raids are produced before a magistrate where they pay a fine and after which they are set free.

The city police, however, is quick to distance itself from such facts about the trade and its unofficial connections with police personnel. A Joint Commissioner of Police claims that the anti-vice squads have been systematically working to eliminate 'sex crimes' in the city. He also disagrees with the study's estimate of sex workers in Madras, claiming that the figures are much lower.

A choice or a compromise

Despite the precarious conditions of the work, the sex profession continues to attract a steady stream of girls. Most join the profession because of poverty and financial obligations, mainly family debt. Others land into this following failed marriage. In fact, as many as a third of the respondent said they came into the profession because their husbands had abandoned them. Social factors also have a role to play, as is evident from the fact that 9 percent say they entered the trade because their lovers had deserted them.

Significantly, the majority of sex workers have primary education, are married, have children and are in the 26-35 age group. Half of the respondents have a single child, 41 percent have two, and 10 percent have three children to look after. The women's main priority is the child's future, and more than 75 percent do not want their children to follow in their own footsteps. More than 30 percent wanted to send their children to boarding schools while 14 percent thought it safer to deposit them with relatives. Tragically, however, more than one fifth are convinced that they will be unable to stop their children from entering the profession.

The level of awareness about sexually transmitted diseases is reasonably high, perhaps as a consequence of the numerous HIV prevention programmes that have been initiated. More than two thirds of the interviewees are aware of being in a HIV high risk group. Fully 68 percent of the sex workers reported regular condom use. The remaining 22 percent do not practice safe sex for various reasons, while quite a few do not use condoms because of misconceptions. Some feel that they cannot contract HIV or other STDs because they are clean and healthy and have regular medical check ups. Others feel secure because they cater to regular clients whom they believe to be healthy. Some believe that washing themselves with soda immediately after every encounter ensures safety. Then there are those who think that they are safe from HIV because they do not do oral sex.

More such empirical surveys are required if sex workers are to get even a semblance of the right to live and work in conditions that are less hazardous and demanding. Till then this one could serve as guide to policies that make their life a shade more comfortable.

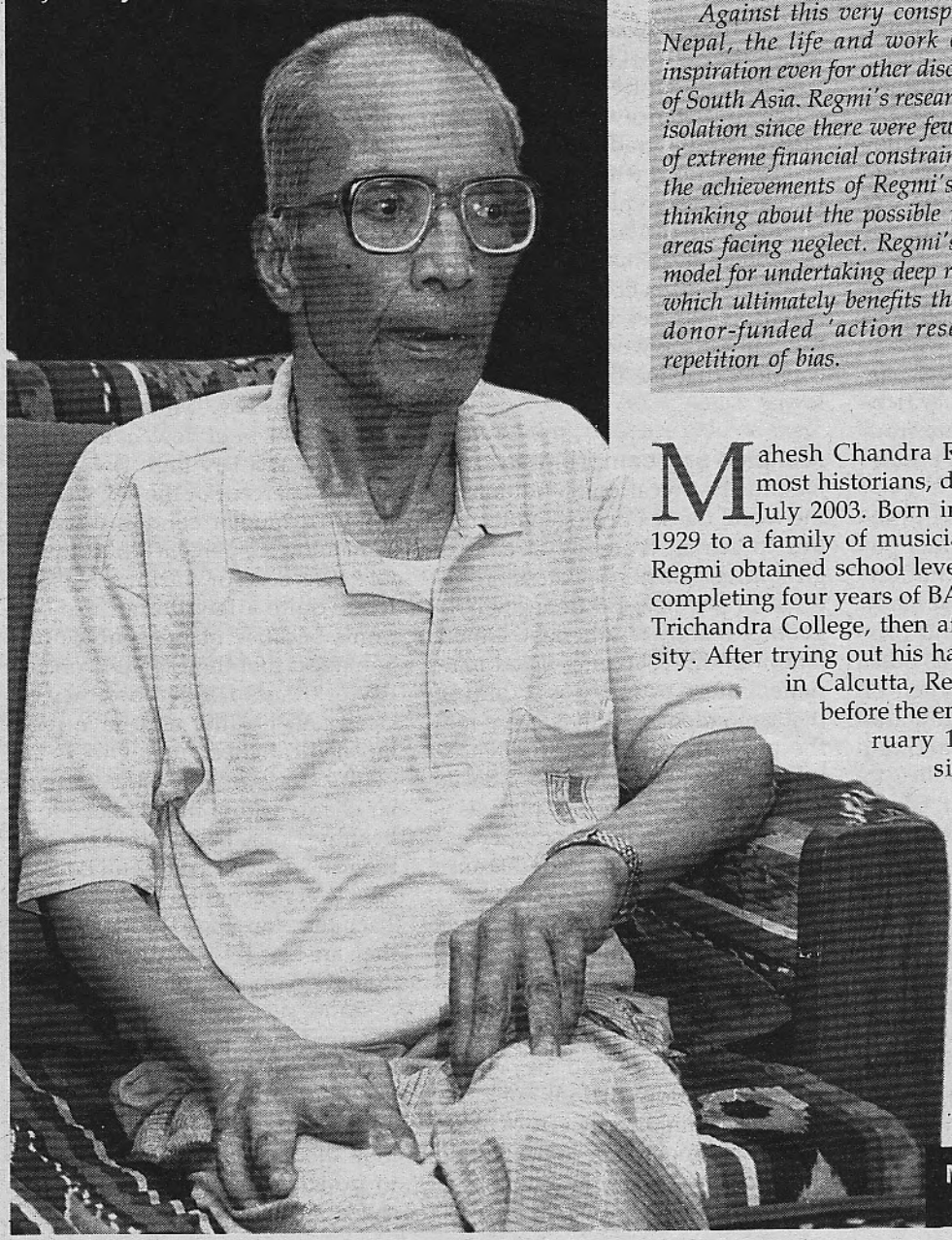
The death of a People's Historian

by **Pratyoush Onta**

Editors' note

Academic activity in the social sciences in South Asia commands a very low premium. Barring economics, the value of the other disciplines is inadequately recognised since they are not deemed to have immediate and tangible utility. Consequently, some disciplines are accorded a higher priority than others because of their perceived benefits to the financiers of research. In India and Pakistan, for evident ideological reasons connected with the colonial past and the partitioned present, the study of history acquired a certain salience. In Nepal on the other, the study of history languished even as the anthropological study of the culture of its peoples flourished, with support of Western universities.

Against this very conspicuous neglect of history in Nepal, the life and work of MC Regmi provides an inspiration even for other disciplines and in other countries of South Asia. Regmi's research was undertaken in relative isolation since there were few peers if any, and in the face of extreme financial constraints. It is instructive to survey the achievements of Regmi's historical work as a way of thinking about the possible models for doing research in areas facing neglect. Regmi's career offers insights into a model for undertaking deep research in the social sciences, which ultimately benefits the people more than a host of donor-funded 'action research', or state-supported repetition of bias.



Mahesh Chandra Regmi
1929-2003

Mahesh Chandra Regmi, one of Nepal's fore most historians, died in the early hours of 10 July 2003. Born in Kathmandu in December 1929 to a family of musicians (who played the sitar), Regmi obtained school level education at home before completing four years of BA education at Kathmandu's Trichandra College, then affiliated with Patna University. After trying out his hand in book and cloth trade in Calcutta, Regmi returned to Nepal just before the end of the Rana regime in February 1951. He began his professional life with the Nepali government in the immediate aftermath of the demise of the Rana oligarchy. He worked for the Department of Industries for several years before being dismissed for unspecified reasons in late 1955. Looking for something to do, he met an American academic who was researching the agricultural system

of Nepal and was looking for someone to translate some documents into English. In an interview done in August 1992 by the German anthropologist Martin Gaenszle, Regmi recalled, "These were mainly reports of the land reforms commission of 1952-53. I tried to translate them and I got interested in this thing, one thing led to another and in 1957 I started this thing". The 'thing' he was referring to was the Regmi Research Centre Pvt Ltd.

As the University of California scholar Leo E Rose remarked in the mid-1970s, Regmi's decision to start a private research centre, "was almost inconceivable in Nepal at that time", especially because there were no "assured sources of financial support from either the government of Nepal, a Nepali educational institution, or a foreign foundation". Regmi's initiative, Rose continued, "was indicative not only of a proclivity for entrepreneurship rare in Nepal but also of an independence of mind and a dedication to scholarship". In the 46 years between taking that important decision and his death, Regmi demonstrated that independence and dedication with ample evidence. He contributed immensely to the field of historical research in Nepal, a field in which he had arrived accidentally and for which he was not formally trained.

The Magsasay Award, 1977.

Regmi functioned as a solitary historian at the Regmi Research Centre (sometimes called Institute), administratively helped by a small group of non-academic assistants, including, in the later years, his brother Rabish C Regmi and son Suresh C Regmi. Individuals such as Shankar M Amatya and Krishna M Arjyal helped Regmi go through thousands of documents held at the Records Office ('Lagat Phant') of the Department of Land Revenue in the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the library of the Ministry of Law and Justice, the Department of Survey, offices under the Guthi Corporation which look after the lands that once paid for the upkeep of Kathmandu's temples and other public structures, and the Pashupatinath Temple. Documents from the above-mentioned sources were collected most intensively in the 1960s and the 1970s and were transcribed into thick volumes. These volumes, which were later referred to as the Regmi Research Collections, filled up the shelf space in his study and became Regmi's personal archive based on which he produced 14 books on the economic and political history of 18th and 19th century Nepal.

The first of these books was *Some Aspects of Land Reform in Nepal* (1960). It was followed by the four-volume study entitled *Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal* (1963, 1964, 1965, 1968, Institute of International Studies, University of California at Berkeley; reprinted in a single volume in 1978 by Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu). In 1971, Regmi published "A Study in Nepali Economic History 1768-1846" in the *Bibliotheca Himalayica series* (started by late HK Kuloy) of the Manjusri Publishing House and five years later, the University of California Press published his *Landownership in Nepal*. These two works along with the earlier four-volume study established Regmi as a world-class scholar and in 1977 he became the first Nepali to receive the Ramon Magsaysay Award, receiving it for the "journalism, literature, and creative communication arts" category. The award was granted to him in recognition of his "chronicling of Nepal's past and present, enabling his people to discover their origins and delineating national options".

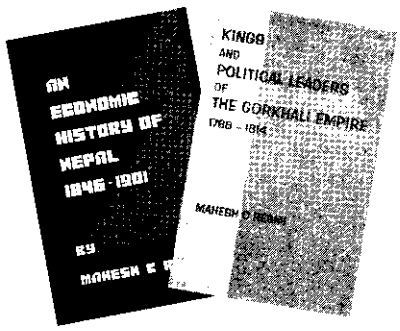
Regmi published two books in the next two years: *Thatched Huts & Stucco Palaces: Peasants and Landlords in 19th Century Nepal* (1978, Vikas) and *Readings in Nepali Economic History* (1979, Kishor Vidya Niketan). In the decade of the 1980s, he published *The State and Economic Surplus* (1984, Nath Publishing House) and *An Economic History of Nepal, 1846-1901* (1988, Nath Publishing House). In the following decade Regmi published *Kings and Political Leaders of the Gorkhali Empire 1768-1814* (1995, Orient Longman), and *Imperial Gorkha: An Account of Gorkhali Rule in Kumaun 1791-1815* (1999, Adroit). His last book *Nepal: An Historical Miscellany* (2002, Adroit) is a collection of various primary and secondary texts, translated into English from the original Nepali with additional commentary. At least ten of Regmi's books are of outstanding quality and it is certain that they will continue to be the most influential texts of economic history of 18th and 19th century Nepal for at least another generation.

Contributions to Nepali History

In the aftermath of the end of the Rana regime in 1951, historical studies of Nepal had emerged from a variety of knowledge-production sites. The dominant trend was to write political history, a situation that was no different than in the rest of the Subcontinent or elsewhere. It was only in the 1960s that history-writing internationally broke away from an obsession with narrowly-defined political history as the subject of historical inquiry. Regmi chose to join this new international trend. As he stated in the preface to his 1971

book, in not confining his "attention to wars, dynastic chronologies and political intrigues in Kathmandu as a fitting, and indeed, the only subject-matter of historical study" he had "set up a precedent in Nepali historiography".

Regmi's inquiry into the economic aspects of the Nepali people's lives during the 18th and 19th centuries began with a focus on the territorial expansion of the principality of Gorkha from the 1740s. By the early 19th century, Gorkha rulers had managed to expand their territories by many hundred-folds and Regmi attributed their success to the clever strategy of linking the new lands acquired through conquest to the sustainability of their army. The land-military complex forged during the expansion period lasting up to 1814 had different intriguing aspects that Regmi proceeded to describe in many of his books.



Regmi's corpus has helped bring out the politics of Nepal's rulers from the 1740s to the early 1900s and their impact on the lives of the ordinary people.

The variety of schemes under which the state owned, appropriated and distributed land and its resources was Regmi's main subject of detailed study in the 1960s, which resulted in the four volumes on land tenure and taxation. In the next decade, he extended this work by producing an updated succinct volume in the form of his 1976 book, *Landownership in Nepal* where he also presented his preliminary views on the impact of land reform policies enacted by King Mahendra's Panchayati state in the 1960s. In the other two full-length studies published in the 1970s, Regmi was concerned with, first, the "the economic policies and programs followed by the Gorkhali rulers to mobilize human and material resources" for territorial acquisition (1971), and, second, the agrarian relations developed by the Ranas during the first half of their century-plus rule between 1846 and 1951 (1978). In combination, they described the complexity of an agriculture-based polity and the rise of the centralised agrarian bureaucracy, and suggested why the Nepali peasantry, burdened with fulfilling the exploitative designs of the ruling elites and their functionaries, was poor. In other words, these three books by Regmi became the master texts for anyone trying to find the answer to the question, "Why is Nepal poor?"

In the two full-length studies he published in the 1980s, Regmi continued his description of the state's mechanisms for resource extraction through production and trade in the early part of the 19th century (the 1984 book) and the various fiscal measures enacted by it in the second half of the same century (1998). In the 1990s however, we saw a small shift in his focus and he admitted as much. After reminding his readers in the prologue to his 1995 work that he had begun his historical inquiries by focusing on the economic aspects of the Nepali polity, he stated: "A quarter-century of on-going research and meditation has led me to modify that belief. The overarching importance of the economy is, no doubt, a truth, but nevertheless only a partial truth. I now realize that too exclusive an attention to economic history can be as misleading as too much concentration on politics".

Accordingly in the last two full studies that he published, Regmi proceeded to examine the political class that took the decision to expand the kingdom of Gorkha into what eventually became an empire. In *Kings and Political Leaders* (1995) Regmi explored the motivations of the leadership for the expansion of the Gorkhali kingdom, and in Imperial Gorkha (1999) he delved into the "policies and programmes followed by the Gorkhali rulers to control and administer the provinces of that Empire", in places like Kumaon which remained under Gorkhali control for 25 years.

All in all, Regmi's corpus has helped us to understand the politics of Nepal's rulers from the 1740s to the early 1900s on the one hand, and the impact their policies had on the lives of the ordinary people of Nepal, on the other. In helping us comprehend the poverty of Nepal's peasantry and the 'Stucco Palaces' of its "parasitic groups" of rulers, Regmi firmly established himself as a people's historian.

That is not to say that his work does not have limitations. His work, completely based on official sources, relies too heavily on the extractive categories of the Shah state and Rana agrarian bureaucracy. As this writer noted in an article in 1994, when viewed from below and begun with the experiences of people occupying various social positions, possibly radically different understandings of the effects of Gorkhali and Rana structures of power and institutions of rule could emerge. Regmi was aware of the possibility of this criticism and tried to forestall it by writing in the preface to his 1971 book, "It is, of course, true that these records are wholly official, so that they present the official rather than the people's point of view on socio-economic questions. But this defect is more apparent than real, for frankness is an outstanding characteristic of most of these documents".

Apart from his works, Regmi's contribution to producing raw materials necessary for further historical research is immense. This would be obvious to any reader of the Regmi Research Series and some of his

other periodicals in which he identified and provided translations of Nepali source materials. The documents archived in Regmi Research Collections were all microfilmed as part of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project and are now accessible to researchers at the National Archives of Nepal and also in Germany. The value of these documents has increased since the massive fire at the Singha Darbar secretariat in 1973 destroyed some of the originals.

As he pioneered the field of economic history in Nepal, there is no reason to look for native intellectual sources that preceded Regmi (both scholars and works) and may have influenced his work. In terms of his analytic orientation, he clearly preferred to distinguish himself from those Nepali historians who were obsessed with recording facts in the "history as it really happened" mode. He argued that the main business of history was interpretation. In his early works, to elaborate this position, he often quoted from philosophers of history such as RG Collingwood and EH Carr. One also finds many references in his books to works by international scholars on the peasantry. It is also possible, from the way Regmi conceptualised the growth of the central agrarian bureaucracy in Nepal, that he was influenced by Irfan Habib's 1963 classic *The Agrarian Sytem of Mughal India.*

He could provide historical narratives of uncharted aspects of Nepal's past precisely because he had no interest in the gimmickry of medals and national honours.

Paying for His Work

Regmi's decision to open a private research institute in Nepal of the late 1950s was definitely extremely bold. So the question remains, how did he finance his scholarly operation? Regmi's lifetime work was mainly supported through the sale of several services, most of which have by now been abandoned. These included the *Nepal Press Digest* (weekly summaries in English from the Nepali language press), the *Nepal Press Report* (daily summaries of the Nepali press), the *Nepal Recorder* (translations of Nepali laws), *Nepal Miscellaneous Series* and the monthly *Regmi Research Series.*

Among these, the first four contained information that was useful to both native and foreign academics and members of the expatriate 'development' community in Nepal. *The Series*, which lasted from 1969 to 1989 contained English translations of important historical documents from the Regmi Research Collection and short historical analyses - often drafts of narratives that later appeared elsewhere - written by Regmi himself. It also contained short articles written by others, often translated from their original Nepali into English. This periodical was of interest mainly to serious researchers of Nepali society. In the 1992 interview by Gaenszle, Regmi justified his decision to discontinue the Series in December 1989: "Well, the first thing was that it was selling only about forty copies, forty subscriptions. It did not generate enough resources to hire people, assistants, things like that. That was the main problem. Another problem was that I couldn't find anyone with the competence to translate the old documents in the style I used. So it was a one-man show". After crossing the age of 60, he added, he didn't "want to work nine hours a day. That's not the goal of life. And then I decided to concentrate on my own writing, not just to give up the *Regmi Research Series* and sit quietly, playing with my grandchildren. What I want to do is spend more time on my own work".

In the beginning of his career, Regmi's work was supported by the University of California at Berkeley through facilitation by Leo E Rose. The latter had come into contact with Regmi in 1957 when he had come to Nepal to do research on its diplomatic history. Berkeley's grant to Regmi in 1960 was processed through its Institute of International Studies and it allowed him to work on the magisterial four-volume study of land-tenure and taxation. These volumes were published by the Institute between 1963 and 1968. However this connection also brought some controversy for Regmi when it was revealed that the Institute's Himalayan Border Country Research Project through which Rose had channeled funds to him in the mid-1960s was funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the US Defense Department. This sinister university-government connection was discovered in India in 1968. The revelation led the Indian government to immediately terminate the Project's involvement in its Himalayan regions.

When asked about this connection by Gaenszle in 1992, Regmi said, 'I said: look, I don't know, I get paid for doing research on Nepal, I don't care where the money comes from....They gave me a grant, they never told me what to do. They said: You (can) do what you want to do. And I said I want to do land tenure and taxation in Nepal. It started with a one volume project, one became two, two became three, three became four. So they financed all that". The Institute's grant for Regmi was discontinued in 1969 when the Himalayan borders project was scrapped. However Regmi continued to cherish his friendship with Rose long after this controversy and thanked him on numerous occasions in many of his books for the support given.

The 1977 Ramon Magsaysay Award, granted to Regmi near the middle of his career as a historian, also came at a crucial juncture in his life. Apart from the international recognition which, as Regmi has acknowledged, "bolstered both his self-confidence and his credibility", the award carried a grant of USD 20,000. This gave him enough economic security to continue with his research and publications, including his 1979 book

Readings in Nepali Economic History and some of his periodicals. As Regmi told this writer, but for the Magsaysay Award, the *Regmi Research Series* would have been discontinued even earlier than 1989.

The Legacy

Although at times Regmi allowed certain historians such as Fr Ludwig F Stiller, (celebrated author of, among others, *The Rise of the House of Gorkha* (1973) and *The Silent Cry: The People of Nepal, 1816-1839* (1976)) to make extensive use of his original document collection, it seems fair to say that Regmi was not particularly interested in reproducing his "school" of Nepali historiography. It is not clear whether he ever sought to mentor members from the next generation of Nepali historians, but it seemed clear that by the early 1990s, when this writer met him, he seemed little interested. Neither was he interested in socialising with other Nepali academics, some of whom he thought did not deserve the reputation they had garnered on the basis of pedestrian work.

Regmi resisted most invitations to participate in other academic forums or seminars, and he rarely contributed articles to journals other than his own. As far as this writer knows, apart from an article published in *Asian Survey* in the early 1960s, and two articles published in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* in 1975 and 1976, Regmi did not publish elsewhere, preferring instead to invest his energies in writing his books and producing his periodicals. Scholars (including this writer) who approached him for contributions often felt frustrated by his unwillingness to accede. In later years, it was also difficult to engage him in conversation, for Parkinson's disease had begun to take its toll. He would answer specific questions and then revert back to recalling his past work and current obsessions.

In a rare appearance in a 1990 seminar entitled Kathmandu city and the *Guthi* system today, Regmi presented a paper highlighting the adverse impact on the civic life of Kathmandu resulting from the disappearance or institutional violations of this native mode of endowment-based philanthropy. But this presentation by the foremost scholar of the Guthi system began and ended with an apology. He stated, "The research has been inadequate and the presentation sketchy. The saving grace is that my aim in this paper has been to stimulate thought, not to present cut and dried solutions. If, therefore, the points I have made here provoke you to sit up and think on how we may be able to preserve and build on the initiative and liberality of our ancestors in using a portion of their wealth to construct and maintain temples, shrines, and other public assets in this city of ours, my efforts will not have gone waste".

Some of the obituaries published since his death have lamented the fact that the wealth of insights Regmi had produced in his research works had not been used by the Nepali state. But Regmi hiimself was much more modest about the use of his work for Nepal's development. This he made clear in a short write-up in Himal in 1993 titled "Why I write Economic History": "I do not feel that there is any need for me to make an attempt to justify my research and writings on the economic history of Nepal in terms of their relevance to the mundane issues of economic development and political evolution. For me, far more inspiring and ennobling has been the feeling of participation, at whatsoever elementary level it may be, in the eternal quest for knowledge. In the course of exploring and recording a previously unknown and uncharted aspect of the history of the Nepali people and, therefore, of mankind as a whole, I have the feeling of having left my footprints on the sands of time".

Regmi could provide us with historical narratives of previously uncharted aspects of Nepal's past precisely because he showed no interest in the gimmickry embedded in medals and national honours. His spiritual quest in academia was made possible in part by his fierce independence of mind and dedication, and in part by the fact that he could work in his modest study without the distractions provided by vacuous honours and recognitions. Regmi's footprints will be with us for a long time to come.

Bahauddins' war

by **Ishrat Firdousi**

Corporal Kazi Bahauddin, 24
Bengali soldier in Pakistan Army
November, 1971
The Western Front

"Is it true that you're in love with the old girl's daughter?"

I told the clowns the old woman treated me like a son and since I was going to get bloody killed any day I didn't exactly mind a mother waiting on me. Not only was she kind and affectionate, she also brought me a glass of milk every day, though I forced her to accept payment. We had money on us, not being able to send any home. But those bastards didn't like it and finally stopped her from visiting, with stuff like "The place is restricted", or, "Why bring the milk? Do you want him to marry your daughter and take her to Bangal Mulk (Bangladesh)?"

The old woman lived in a nearby village with her beautiful young daughter who I had met but once.

The (West) Pakistanis had to trust us. Many senior non-coms in the unit were Bengalis. The div also had a Bengali infantry battalion (not sure about the unit) and we knew all along we were heading for a war but we were powerless to do anything openly. We could only pray to Allah to make Bangladesh independent, but on the ground we had to fight against India. Being stationed in (West) Pakistan, what worked was that we were Muslims and Indians were Hindus, at least most of them were, and we had fought before so if we have to fight again what was there to think about? If we were stationed in Bangladesh it would be different, but here we forced ourselves to think we were there to assist the Pakistanis. We decided not to desert them. We'd speak freely and tell them that now there was this conflict with India, this has to come to an end, one way or another.

"As Bengalis we'd naturally want Bangladesh to be free", we told them. "Didn't Muhammad Ali Jinnah want Pakistan? Didn't he get it? Now Bengalis want to be free from Pakistan so if you give us our freedom the problem will be solved. But we'll certainly fight the Indians here! Send us to the front and see! If we betray you we'll have to answer some day. We recite the same *kalemas*".

And they'd grin nervously. They had faith in us.

The div was to move at 8:00 that night and I was responsible for an area ten-mile square. I was there primarily to direct military traffic as all road signs had been removed. It was bush, brush and desert country and I was stationed near a bridge. Flares were going up all around and my Military Police armband could be seen from far. The border was three to four miles away and I knew that commandos were already in each other's territory. I was shaking with fear and praying. Work was going on under the bridge 70-80 feet below. I could see their fires, even smell their dinner.

Then, regiment after regiment with their artillery, tanks and trucks began moving to their battalion locations. Passing drivers would mutter, "Is he one of ours?"

And I'd assure them" *"Apna admi hai yaar*, from 1 MP unit of Lahore. Don't be scared. That's the road you take. You'll find another MP so many miles ahead and he'll change your direction a bit. Don't go over ten miles an hour..." et cetera. During a lull in the traffic a jackal almost gave me a heart attack. At 5:00 in the morning the MP jeep picked me up. Our camp was in a guava orchard.

That evening, people were at dinner or waiting their turn. We had almost finished eating when we heard this guy ask another beside him, "You've got meat in your plate so how come I don't have any, sisterf...? Are you the cook's father?"

Another was staring at a piece of meat in his lentils as his neighbour said, "The cook sure knows who to give meat to! So is he getting paid? How much is he getting?" (Cook told us later he was as bewildered because if there was meat he didn't put it; meatless day it was as far as he knew.) Then someone shrieked, "Aye, what's this in my plate?!" Something long and black, like a tail. And someone found a head. Looked like a rat.

There were horrified shouts and some people started getting sick. A few tough bastards however were still shoveling it down as their iron-stomached friends exhorted, "Come on, serve us! What's happened's happened. Now, let's eat!"

I was a bit shaken but didn't get sick or hysterical. As we were coming out of the tent, the quartermaster found me.

"What happened, Bahauddin?"

"Don't know, Major Saab," I said. "Seems like some

got meat and others didn't and didn't like it. But I didn't get any—"

The cooking fires were under a tree and a big fat rat had fallen into our dinner. The quartermaster ordered the cook to run around the orchard ten times—with the pot of lentils on his head. The cook almost died.

I was attached to Div HQ and at 4:00 in the afternoon they said we'd commence firing at 6:00, two hours away. I shivered involuntarily. I had never seen war. Training was one thing. I went and got half a dozen eggs and quickly boiled them and some *chola* (*chanay ka dal*) as well. I checked the rest of my gear. Everything was in place.

Our artillery opened up on time and continued until 8:00 at night. Four hours later, the Indians opened their account. It was hell. Shells and bombs began descending on us. A 500 pounder landed a couple of hundred yards away and made a huge crater—my bunker collapsed and I was being buried alive! I raised my head from under the sand and began hollering at Shafayat, a Bengali from Comilla, in the nearest bunker. He must have been very occupied and I managed to scramble out on my own but everything else—haversack, clothes, boiled eggs, lentils, water, even my rifle—was under a ton of sand. I could only curse the Indians.

The following evening, the first prisoners arrived—four Sikh soldiers. We had made a pen with barbed wire and they continued to deliver them until there were eighteen. And there were three of us—a Punjabi driver, a Pathan guard and I but we assured the prisoners we'd shoot only the troublemakers. They swore they wouldn't try anything.

We were then told to take the lot to Chhanga Manga a huge forest more than a hundred miles away where they had an underground prison. We loaded the prisoners in a three-ton lorry. The Punjabi and the Pathan sat in front and I was the lone guard at the back. Perhaps the two had conspired that if the prisoners made a break it'd be the Bengali who'd get hurt. The prisoners assured me repeatedly that they would give me no trouble. It was very cold and their condition was bad. Many were wounded. Let alone escape, I thought some might die on the way. I had a blanket top of the overcoat and with a prayer to Allah to protect me from the elements I gave it to them saying, "huddle together and put this on top. It'll ease the cold a bit".

As we rumbled along, I noticed a young Indian sitting nearby. His name was Makhan Sheel and he was a good athlete of the Indian army. He had caught a bursting in one shoulder. They had plugged him and patched him up but only just. He seemed like a nice guy so I tried a conversation.

"Achcha, Makhan, tell me truthfully. Do you want that our two countries should fight and destroy each other?"

In obvious pain he grinned thoughtfully and said, "What can I say, bhaiya? I swear, my heart never wishes that we fight Pakistan for a single day. Look at the result. I'm hurt and a prisoner. Likewise, many more of your comrades are our prisoners in the east. Why should we fight? It's true that I'm a Hindu and you're a Muslim. In the end, a Hindu and a Muslim are brothers. It's not as if you're from Europe and I'm from Africa. Pakistan and India are together (meaning side by side). The places have not moved after independence. So, why was there a war? Can anyone explain with satisfaction? But what can you and I do? Our officers command us and we have to obey and so we have to fight each other or for sure they'll shoot us!" He said that laughingly. Both armies had once been the same British Indian Army.

"Are you actually going to kill us", he asked after a long pause.

"Of course not!" I retorted. "They'd have done it earlier if they wanted. Now the Red Cross know about you. No father's son has the power to kill any of you .

I added I'd see to it that they got medical attention when we reached. Then, I revealed that I was a Bengali from Dakha. His face brightened up as he whispered, "What can I do for you?" And he was a prisoner! He shook my hands but there was a tinge of sadness in his voice when he said, "That's why you're so kind to us".

I didn't know what to say, so after a while I shouted out to the Pathan in front; "Khan, come over! I'm dying of cold!"

"Bhai, I'll join you. Give me a couple of minutes".

When the lorry stopped I got down to stretch. The Pathan sidled up and whispered., "If anyone tries to escape, don't make it hard for him, let him go". He was shaking like a leaf with the cold or fear I don't know.

"Son of a sisterf...!" I hissed. "If any escape they're going to blame the Bengali first—me! They'll shoot me and you'll get off! If you do any hanky-panky, I'll shoot you!!'

"No yaar, I was just joking!"

Didn't sound like joking when he proposed it. We reached at five in the morning. The prisoners were half-dead.

"See that they get their puree and tea", I told the regimental cook. "After all they're human beings. Maybe because of our kindness Almighty Allah will forgive our sins".

The cook gave me a curious look.

"They are allocated rations, aren't they?" I asked him, meaning the prisoners.

He nodded.

"They too have many of our men", I said gently. "Maybe Allah will ease their troubles a bit over there if we do our bit over here".

And the man agreed.

The Pakistanis laid waste Cussre Hind and Fuckre Hind, twin Indian townships. The place was a pilgrimage spot and the Indians had thick concrete bunkers that the Pakistanis couldn't dent in '65, but now they were a mess. The Indians retreated beyond the river and then destroyed the bridge. And everything that

could be taken, was carted away by the Pakistanis, including railway tracks. The Indians were doing the same in other fronts.

We knew Bangladesh was almost free. In the west, Pakistan had been beaten almost everywhere and only our div had actually captured Indian territory, Allah knows how, something like five miles deep by ten miles across, I think.

I saw a forest that was the place of a terrible battle. Ten to fifteen thousand soldiers had fought in a small area. Big trees had been torn up and blown to matchsticks. I also saw lots of dead animals. Vultures were circling near and far but for man or animal there was no way to know.

The Indian soldiers were not that courageous, but their officers were a different thing altogether and were usually out charging in front. Captured Indian officers had often remarked that soldiers of Pakistan officered by Indians could beat any army in the world. Remarkably, many Pakistani soldiers agree, privately of course.

Once, a second lieutenant's mother and sister were visiting him when a shell landed in their midst killing all three. The only other casualties near me were villagers, old people who were also sickly, seven or eight of them, all victims of shelling.

No one wanted to leave his bunker because of the artillery and the planes. If you missed chow-time you missed for good for the day. What was left, and little was, they'd bury immediately afterwards.

On 8 December, I was coming from the *langar-khaana* with a flask of tea when Indian planes arrived over us! In a flash, I was on my knees with my nose pressed to the ground. But I still held the flask aloft with my left hand and with my right, I frantically tore handfuls of grass from a nearby clump and showered them over my backside. *Camouflage, little bit.*

Just then, the div commander came out and saw me. The motherf...began laughing like he was going insane. "Look, sisterf...s, look at the Bengali's wits!" he screamed. "Come out of your bunkers! Even if you get killed you must see this!! *Dekho Bangali ka halath dekho! Dekho uska dimagh kasia kam kiya*!" (Look at the Bengali's state! See how his brain worked!).

Some bastards laughed so hard they almost got sick.

Next morning I was feeling terrible. From the day the war started, a week earlier, I had not washed or changed. I couldn't dig my stuff out because I couldn't get any help in that "*Ya Nafsi, Allah, Allah*" situation. I was itchy and icky all over and stinking. I finally decided, come what may, I'll take a bath. After a crap, I went to a large bush near the canal's edge and stripped. Stark naked, I glanced around. Three Indian warplanes came darting in, straight at me, and the sons of bitches were firing!

Like a turtle I dove and disappeared under the water! The pilots must have seen me because I'd seen them. Underwater, I could hear the slugs coming in all around me though not in the immediate vicinity. A minute later I had to come up for air. The planes were still circling. I scrambled ashore but had a hard time pulling on my clothes over my wet body (try it sometimes). A gale of laughter greeted me from other bunkers but I jumped into my trench before the sons of bitches in the sky came in for another strafing run. Then Pakistani aircraft came and chased them away.

Thousands of civilians arrived to see the captured territory. Many had come from as far as Karachi. One family in a car stood parked nearby for a long time and it was our duty to move them along so I walked up.

"Are you waiting for something, sir?" I asked the man at the wheels.

"Yes", he said. "Just to speak to you."

"Why, sir?"

"Because you're a soldier of the nation. My two children (boy and a girl) would like to shake your hands".

"Okay", I said.

They came out of the car.

"Do you just want to shake hands or do you want a meeting of hearts?", I asked.

The kids grinned as I hugged them and the man wept.

"Why're you crying?", I asked.

"Out of pride and happiness", he replied.

I was moved but told them soldiers couldn't fraternise too much and MPs even less. The kids touched my feet in reverence before they left.

A squirrel had jumped and startled a jackal, or it was the other way round, but lance corporal Lal Khan decided Indian commandos were paying a call. He opened fire and the entire brigade came alive to possibilities.

"Couldn't you realise...?" they asked later.

"What's there to realise" Lal Khan demanded with some heat. "Where there's not supposed be any noise, this bloody jackal's making like commando, so what do I know?"

You really couldn't blame him much but later we'd tease him about Indian commando jackals.

Firing had eased; the war had stopped officially. One day, Hav Maj Mohammad Hossain called me over.

"Yaar, leave now and I'll personally see that no one shoots at you", he said pointing at the border. "Go! Bangladesh is already free!"

I didn't accept his offer, wasn't sure everyone would follow the drill. But other Bengalis were crossing over and without invitation.

My monsoons

by **Venu Madhav Govindu**

May is the hottest month when the unrelenting heat is punctuated by the only pleasure to be had, bouts of mango eating. But one evening in the middle of the month, it rained. The mugginess that had steadily increased over the day meant that my usual jog in the evening was a sweaty affair giving the impression of having been more vigorous than usual. But all of the discomfort melted away as the rain lashed against me, almost painfully. It was obviously a brief affair and the next day the sun returned with its immense, fiery rage to torment us for some more time. But while it lasted, the air was cool and gave a sense of satiation.

A few hours after these showers, my room was suddenly filled with dozens of winged insects fatefully flinging themselves at the fluorescent lamp. Their ancient biological clocks triggered by the unseasonal rain, in a brief hour or so a whole frenzied cycle of life and death was enacted. The resident lizards were probably confused at this unexpected feast, but by the next morning it was all over. The only visible reminders were the hundreds of translucent wings that dappled the wet earth outside my window. Wings shaped to perfection for flight, like the airflows in textbooks that explained streamline flow and lift due to Bernoulli's principle.

These rains had arrived due to a depression in the Bay of Bengal and one was acutely aware of the possible damage this cyclone could inflict on the coastal areas and its people. Over a week the cyclone had built up over the bay and made its way towards us on the eastern coast in Visakhapatnam. Thankfully it petered out without causing any damage and the heat came back with a vengeance. So while I had relished this brief munificence of the weather gods, I also looked forward to the real rains.

In early June, I travelled westwards to Goa on the other coast and the rains had just about arrived here. On the western coast of India, the monsoon is a particularly striking, often overwhelming experience. Watching the endless sheets of rain pour down is exhilarating and refreshing but experiencing it for a whole month is also a sobering reminder of the immense power of nature. It is mid-July and the heavens have literally opened up here. The river Mandovi is swollen and roiled and even on a short bus-ride through Goa's peculiar landscape where urban and rural areas intrude onto each other, one encounters in quick succession fully flooded emerald-green rice fields juxtaposed with damp, urban areas. The beauty of the natural landscape is unfortunately marred by clusters of ugly advertisement hoardings. And in a more mundane sense, the perennial wetness also means that clothes take forever to dry and it's a hopeless task trying to keep your house free of insects and fungi.

In the landmass defined in ancient texts as *Himavat-Setu-Paryantam* - from the Himalaya to Rameshwaram - two natural factors have played an immensely significant role. The geographic girding of the sub-continent, in the north, by the high ranges of the Himalaya strung as a geographical barrier on the one hand and the immense waters surrounding peninsular India on the other has meant that its ecology, history, social and cultural life would acquire a distinct flavour. All of this is dealt with élan by scholar-diplomat KM Panikkar in his many essays on geographical history, primarily *The Himalayas in Indian Life* and *India and the Indian Ocean*. While the Himalayas acted as a historic barrier to people and the winds, thereby contributing to the region's uniqueness, the oceans carried trading ships and colonisers to our shores. And both have worked in tandem every year to create the defining feature of India's climate - the monsoons.

The monsoon builds up slowly over a period of months. The intense summer heat is absorbed to different extents by the land and the oceans resulting in an energy imbalance. Like any imbalance abhorred by nature, this energy differential results in a seasonal shift in wind direction and the moisture sucked up from the

oceans is carried landwards by south-westerlies resulting in the monsoon, a term derived from the Arabic word mausim meaning season. The arrival of the monsoon has been a much awaited event. The very pulse of the region's life depends on it. Breaking out after a long, harsh summer the monsoon is life giving. On its timeliness and generosity hinges the hopes and lives of millions of people. The subcontinent gets almost all its rain in a short spell of a few months and the flora, fauna and people have had to adapt to this invariant of our annual weather. Thus the entire agricultural cycle and consequently, the life of a farming community is synchronised to the arrival of the monsoon. The development of irrigation networks in modern times has mitigated this dependence to some extent but only by that much, for there are few rivers with perennial sources. And the acute stress on our water resources, due to rampant over-use, coupled with the absence of even minimal social security means that for the rural poor, untold misery is always a real threat as demonstrated by the failure of the monsoons last year. A good monsoon on the other hand implies a measure of prosperity to many and has, what economists like to call, a 'multiplier effect' on all our lives. Thus the imprint of the monsoon is visible everywhere, in every aspect of our life - from the vagaries of our predominantly rain-fed agricultural economy to our joyful music and arts. But it is also significant in ways that are not so obvious.

The grandeur and significance of the monsoons is recognised by CV Seshadri, a scientist whose sweep of pioneering work included a path-breaking "alternate way" of looking at energy, as opposed to alternative energy sources which do not address the political economy of energy. This finds expression in "Development and Thermodynamics", a seminal essay whose social and intellectual implications are neither fully understood nor widely appreciated. Scientific definitions are assumed to be value-free, but Seshadri incisively points to their inherent anthropocentric bias. Originally, entropy was developed as a concept in thermodynamics to capture the notion that everyday transformations are unidirectional in nature, eg. the melting of ice or the wilting of a flower. However the accepted scientific definition of useful work (derived from the entropy idea) deems industrial processes (eg. combustion engines or industrial furnaces) to be more `efficient' compared to natural processes based on a lower rate of energy transfer. Seshadri uses the monsoon as a perfect illustration of this for "the monsoon over Asia and Africa carries billions of tons of water across the continents, performing countless gigajoules of work but the [scientific] definition makes this work of low quality because it is done across small gradients at ambient temperatures". The first squalls of the monsoon make landfall on the western coast in early June although its regularity and intensity is affected by a host of factors including the distant ocean current known as the El Nino. Over the next few weeks as an anxious nation watches, it advances over the entire region, soaking us in its riches.

Despite dramatic changes in our economic and social organisation in recent years, the fundamental importance of the monsoons remains unchanged. And for once even the chattering classes and the media take notice. While they might not care too much about starvation deaths (except when it embarasses them abroad), the Indian business class craving integration into the global market cannot ignore the fact that a good monsoon means disposable income in rural hands which would feed the giant engine of the Indian economy. Consequently, over the years predicting the monsoon's arrival and estimating its volume has become a ritual laden with significance. Stuffy meteorologists make prime-time news when they announce the arrival date of the monsoon. And steeped in human hubris, the rains that arrive earlier than predicted are stubbornly put down in the category of 'pre-monsoon showers'.

Given the complex nature of weather and the lack of historical data, developing accurate predictions is obviously hard, a problem made worse in a world where the impact of a couple of centuries of pell-mell industrialisation in the West is increasingly visible in the unpredictability of global climatic conditions. But since the monsoon is so critical, failing to predict it accurately generates its own share of controversy. The Indian Meteorological Department had for some years used a statistical model for predicting the total quantity of monsoon rainfall. This model was a power regression performed using 16 different observed meteorological quantities like temperature, pressure, wind speed etc. measured in different regions of the world. However, the prediction for last year's monsoon was way off the mark, consequently the statistical model was drastically pared down to ten variables, perhaps proving once again the importance of Occam's Razor in science - a principle that holds that simpler explanations are preferable over more complex ones.

Important as it is, the monsoon is not just about agriculture and economics. It also plays a fundamental role in the sub-continents' cultural and social imagination. Indian literature, music and almost every form of artistic expression is full of allusions to the rains, the most famous literary celebration of the monsoons being the poem *Meghadutam* by Kalidasa who is presumed to have lived around the fifth century. In this masterpiece, a *yaksha* in exile in the Vindhyas, implores the megha-dutam (cloud-messenger as essayists usefully point out) to carry his message of love and longing to his beloved in the Himalayas. In *Meghadutam*, considered by many to be unsurpassed in its lyrical beauty, Kalidasa uses this simple literary device as an excuse to describe the many captivating sights during the northward journey of the cloud. According to one writer the poem is said to be plentiful in "unvarying freshness of inspiration and charm" and marked by "delightful imagery", "profound insight into our emotions" and demonstrating "oneness with the phenomena of nature".

Our music is also replete with allusions to the rains as exemplified by the many *Malhars* in *khayal*. For me the most accessible of them is the traditional bandish '*Barkha Ritu Aayi*' in *Rag Megh* which immediately brings to mind Ustad Amir Khan's soulful rendering in the difficult *jhoomra taal* that he made his own. Also fascinating is the cascade of onomatopoeic *taans* by Ustad Fateh Ali Khan who belongs to what is left of the Patiala *Gharana* in Pakistan.

The rains do dramatically transform a parched landscape and can be both exhilarating and life-giving. No wonder it has the rich subtext of the erotic as amply depicted in the finely crafted miniature paintings of the Punjab and Himachal foothills of India. Amongst the finest expressions of the Indian ideational aesthetic, these paintings often have a jewel-like finish and a frequent theme is that of the monsoons. Exquisitely crammed in an area the size of your palm, elegant cranes arch upwards, the sky is filled with billows of blue-black clouds and forks of lightning snake down towards the lush, fecund garden where peacocks delight in their dance and the dark-limbed Krishna seduces Radha.

There are myriad expressions of the sub-continents' sense of the monsoons but you would not know that if you read Alexander Frater's *Chasing the Monsoon*. Frater's very original idea of following the trajectory of the monsoon, literally chasing it, is marred by a remarkable degree of philistinism (Not a single reference is made to the cultural dimensions of our rains). He approaches the monsoon with the eye and nostalgia of an *angrezi sahib* and chases it by plane with intermittent pit stops in the swankiest of hotels. Thus, although useful, being marked by characteristic British peevishness makes *Chasing* an exercise in self-indulgence and fails to capture the real aroma of the monsoon and its effect on the minds of us Indians.

My childhood memories of rain are from Bengal. As anyone familiar with Bengal would tell you, *Kal Boisakhi* meant large, dark and ominous clouds bursting with moisture. It also meant lots of dust whipped up by the winds followed by a fierce and spectacular *son et lumiere*. Sometimes the scorching heat of the summers was dramatically quenched by sudden hailstorms. Occasionally the hail was big enough to tear through umbrellas and we children avidly collected them with whelps of joy. However the romance of natural ice died one year with the arrival of our fridge, till years later, as a student I moved to snowy Boston. It was only after spending a couple of years there that I began to appreciate the West's perception of rain, in particular about how it differed so much from ours. Till then the image of the dark figure with a big hat and upturned raincoat-collar did not make much sense to me and some Americans were quite puzzled when their Indian friends waxed nostalgic about the rains. The rains in the temperate areas are slow, ubiquitous, dark and brooding inducing melancholy feelings. Seattle on the West Coast of the United States was of course the butt of our jokes as it received rain pretty much year round. This obviously also explained the stunningly crisp, fresh feel of its bright summers.

Given this ceaseless, gloomy rain it also makes sense that Seattle is the birthplace of the coffee boom in America which was a real blessing for it introduced a few ringing notes of taste to Americans otherwise used to downing a concoction that we foreigners labelled "office coffee" - tepid, tasteless dishwater made worse with a noxious non-dairy creamer extruded out of plentiful American corn. Of course the real dreariness is supposed to be in the English weather which led me into a pop-history hypothesis that it is this intolerable weather which explains the English going crazy enough to want to leave their island home and colonise the rest of us. This also segues, however imperfectly, into one of my pet gripes - our uncritical acceptance of the English language. It is downright silly for people in the subcontinent to be using proverbs like "Saving for a rainy day" or "Make hay while the sun shines" in their daily usage.

Of course the monsoons are a mixed blessing. Its failure wreaks havoc with people's lives and an excess of it creates untold misery in the form of floods and landslides. This vulnerability of our rural society is often invisible to city-dwellers who quickly tire of the rains once the summer heat abates and the drains start spilling over. Personally, the monsoons have also taken on a bitter-sweet taste since I acquainted myself with the Narmada valley and its people a few years ago. With the notorious Sardar Sarovar dam rising even higher this year, while the rest of the country rejoices in the rains, the adivasis of Domkhedi, Jalsindhi and many other hamlets are again at the mercy of our collective, national indifference coupled with the quirkiness of the monsoon. Every September or so when the Narmada is swollen with months of rain, without warning engineers upstream release megatonnes of water to save their dams. It takes almost two anxious days for these massive sheets of water to make their way downstream and the activist bush-telegraph works round the clock with unverified and alarming measurements of the waterlevels at Rajghat and other locations. As the swirling waters leave destruction in their wake, there is much anxiety as to the safety of steadfast satyagrahis who in the face of tremendous injustice cling to their lands. Every year their brave enactment of moral protest is repeated and hardly noticed by a society preoccupied with other ideas of progress, development and nationhood. And slowly the news trickles in with the poignancy of the loss of an intimate world - that mahua tree, you know the one we had the meeting under last year, that's gone; Luharia's hut too...

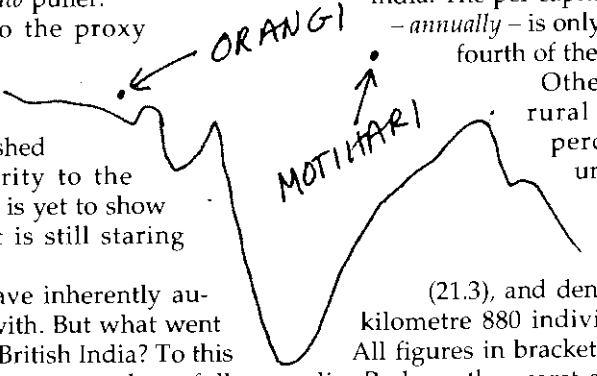
With this knowledge, I can never listen to the exquisite Rag Megh without a touch of sadness. For me the monsoons have lost their innocence and I long to regain it.

Trapped in history, remembered in poetry

This town after all
Why doesn't it say something
This town after all
Why does it lie
In the map of our Hindostan
— Rahul Rajesh in Hindi poem, *"Yah Shahar"*

THE FIVE Freedoms that Amartya Sen so eloquently talks about – political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security – are conspicuous by their absence in most parts of South Asia. The dreams of the midnight children of August 14 in Pakistan and August 15 in India lie shattered – only their shards glisten in the sun, competing for attention with the sweat on the brows of the likes of Pappu the *rickshaw* puller.

Afghanistan fell victim to the proxy war of Cold War powers. The *karma* of Burma is to endure the misrule of its military. The tyranny of the majority has pushed Sri Lanka's territorial integrity to the precipice. The elite of Serendib is yet to show the courage to step back – it is still staring vacantly into the abyss.



Even Bhutan and Nepal have inherently authoritarian regimes to reckon with. But what went wrong with the three pieces of British India? To this day, neither India nor Pakistan seems to have fully recovered from the parting kick of the departing imperialists. Their ignoble ranking in the recently published *Human Development Report* of the UNDP clearly show that the promises made during the midnight "tryst with destiny" have not been kept.

Failure of political freedom to usher in any of the other vital freedoms is common to all South Asian countries, but nowhere is its absence as stark as in Bihar. This state has become such an embarrassment for the netizens of resurgent upper-class India that they prefer not to see, hear, or talk about it anymore. The plight of Bihar does not make news, except when national channels need an earthy soundbite from Laloo Prasad Yadav to enliven their 'human interest' stories.

State of anarchy

In a state where a popular song declaring "now that Jharkhand has separated, you would have to survive on roots" is being sought to be banned, the Minister of Tourism is planning "Root Tourism" for the Bihari diaspora from Mauritius, Fiji, and Suriname. The government hopes that the prosperous progenies of Girmitiya labour would be interested in visiting the villages of their ancestors. But if some of them were actually to respond to such a scheme, they would have to travel exactly the way their forefathers did as they were leaving for indentured labour overseas – in rowboats along the banks of several tributaries of Ganga. Roads in Bihar are an insult to the discipline of civil engineering.

Despite being the third most-populous state of the union, Bihar is on the verge of falling off the map of India. The per capita income of an average Bihari – *annually* – is only INR 2193, which is about one fourth of the national average of INR 8399. Other indicators are as bleak – rural poverty 43 percent (27.1 percent for India as a whole), urban poverty 41.2 (23.6), literacy 47.5 (65.4), female literacy 33.6 (54.2), increase in population over the decade 28.4 (21.3), and density of population per square kilometre 880 individuals (324, Indian average). All figures in brackets are national averages of India. Perhaps the worst showing is in electricity consumption , an indicator of the economic sickness of the state – as against the national average of 334.3, an average Bihari consumes only 54.9 units of electricity per year.

Once you hear a student in Motihari reel off these figures, you do not blame him if he says that his sole aim in life is to get away from here. Not unlike some of his ancestors, Ram Ashray says that he wouldn't mind being sold and resettled as Girmitiya in some unknown land. It must be difficult to get any more desperate than that.

When desperation is so extreme, it is but natural that crime rules the roost. After dowry, kidnapping for ransom is the second biggest 'industry' of Bihar, with annual turnover in billions of rupees, providing direct and indirect employment to thousands of pappus and ram ashrays. Recently, a nephew of a state minister

was abducted in broad daylight from the main thoroughfare of Patna where the boy was waiting for his school bus in the company of his grandfather. All that the minister could do was wail in grief, just like every one else whose child gets abducted, and wait for the ransom note to arrive.

Doctors stopped work for almost a week in July to protest the abductions that plague their profession. Bankers did the same for a few days. Businessmen find it more convenient to pay up and pass on the cost to their customers. It is easier to pay the criminals, and a lot safer, than to rely on the law. "But doesn't the government do something?" My educated interlocutor throws up his hand in despair, "What can you expect from a kitchen-trained political novice who is fronting for her husband enmeshed in corruption charges?" Rabri Devi has lasted as the *de jure* chief minister for more than seven years.

Biharis may want to flee, but they still want to marry Biharis. The same is true for Laloo Prasad Yadav who prefers Biharis from outside his state.

Biharis are similar to other subcontinetals who thrive as soon as they go out of the region and settle elsewhere. Only more so. Biharis have not done so badly at all for themselves, as soon as they cross over into Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, or Maharastra. In the central services of Government of India, the presence of Biharis belies the backwardness of their state. This has never been explained adequately – why Bihar produces the most successful civil servants [(after a particular breed of Tamil Brahmins)] who by way of thank you refuse to lift a helping finger for the *ghar* state.

Waiting to flee the land of the their birth.

Champaran is where Mahtma Gandhi first tested his *satyagraha* technique of non-cooperation on Indian soil, in 1917, to champion the cause of labour against the exploitatative indigo planters. When served a notice, Gandhi defied the order and was arrested and tried. Pleading guilty, Gandhi submitted that he violated the order "not for the want of respect for lawful authority but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience". In the humid, listlessness of the North Ganga Maidaan, nobody hears such a voice anymore.

Motihari town is close to Ramnagar and Sugauli, and is located on the banks of a muddy monsoon-fed lake. This where George Orwell was born as Eric Arthur Blair, on 25 June 1903, to a superintendent of the opium warehouse. His house still survives, and in June quite a few visitors came from England to mark his anniversary. Unfortunately, neither the Mahatma nor the Orwell connections are enough to jump-start tourism to Motihari. Unable to find anything else that is worth showing to a visitor, my host suggests that we go see a film. Nothing to do with the movie, which is the kind that is shown at the B-class towns of north India, but because "the theatre is air-conditioned, with a generator in case the electricity goes".

Stateless forever

The lot of Biharis in Motihari may not be enviable, but some of their unfortunate neighbours who opted for East Pakistan in 1947 would still be envious if they were to know that their brethren back in Bihar are free to go wherever they want, whenever they want. Confined to about 70 camps in Bangladesh, are some 240,000 stranded Biharis who by nationality are now Pakistani. They continue to exist in the camps in Dhaka and across the country as what Dhaka-based journalist Ekram Kabir calls "the leftover unfortunates of distant past".

These are 'Biharis' the way a South Asian in Fiji is 'Indian'. The link to the land of origin is torn completely, even though it is just a few hundred kilometers up the Ganga/Padma. Back in 1947, their parents and grandparents left Bihar for their ideal nation and dream destination – the Land of the Pure. But Pakistan denies their existence. They refused to 'behave' like Bangladeshis in the 1970s, and for the Dhaka establishment it was too late for them to make amends. So the Bihari Pakistanis of Bangladesh are about the most stateless as it is possible to get anywhere (the Bhutanese refugees in the Nepal camps also make the grade, but they have suffered two decades less than the Biharis, and they make the grade for UNHCR assistance which the camp-dwellers of Dhaka do not).

Pakistan happily accepted and integrated wealthy *mohajirs* from United Provinces. Bengali Muslims from West Bengal relocated and merged into the society of East Bengal with relative ease. But Biharis who had responded to the Mohammad Ali Jinnah's call for "Direct Action Day" on 16 August 1946 were not to find much of a future in their Promised Land. The curse of statelessness befell only on them. The lucky ones made it to Islamabad and Karachi. Those from Bihar, however, are trapped in the debris of history, with the collapse of "two nation theory" of the Indian Muslim League.

In the words of Kabir:

Steeped in inertia, enmeshed in poverty,
they are waiting because
waiting is the only thing that they can do.

As in the past, grateful tributes will once again be paid this year to Qaid-e-Azam on 14 August in Kara-

chi, Islamabad and Lahore. Members of the Pakistani elite, at least, will be smug within the embrace of the country that they have got to rule since 1947. They will not be worrying about the Biharis languishing in the Bangladesh camps. But they should be. If the creation of Pakistan is justified, then the rehabilitation of all its loyal citizens from its earlier wing in the east is even more important than the *jihad* in Kashmir.

Just as the Mahatma – wherever he is, his soul is unlikely to be resting in peace – must be shedding tears at the plight of Biharis in India, the Qaid too must be grieving for the promises to his most ardent followers – the Biharis in the camps of Bangladesh and those who made it across to the Orangi slums of Karachi – that he could not keep.

Unification of the Subcontinent is a pipe dream of Indian saffronites hallucinating about a non-existent Akhand Bharat. But that does not deny the reality that both India and Pakistan are artificial constructs run by the well-to-do inheritors of the Raj. Indians have been comparatively more fortunate, for they have not yet fallen prey to those who wear the uniform and institute martial law. But India is too big a country to be run from New Delhi and Pakistan is too diverse to be directed from Islamabad cantonment. The imperial pattern of centrally controlled territory has to give way to truly self-ruled states.

On 14 August, Pakistanis will salute their flag – to them *Azadi Mubarak* and *Pakistan Zindabad*. The following day, from the ramparts of the Red Fort, Premier Atal Bihari Vajpayee will in all likelihood read out a couplet (given his latest pronouncements on the issue) valorising the 'martyrs' of Ayodhya and Gujarat on 15 August. As likely is President Abdul Kalam dwelling upon the virtues of vegetarianism in his address to the nation. To the Indians, *Swatantrata Diwas ki Shubhkamnayen* (that's quite a mouthful, Hindi is indeed not even a patch on Urdu) and *Jai Hind*. We all love our countries, even though it seldom translates into love for our less fortunate countrymen.

This independence day, General Musharraf is unlikely to spare a thought for stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh who do not qualify even as refugees. Forget Vajpayee, East and West Champaran – the two distressed districts among so many of rump Bihar – will probably not even be in the thoughts of Rabri Devi, Chief Minister.

Meanwhile, the Qaid is an icon, and the Mahatma is yet another deity of the Hindu pantheon. Let's pray not to them, but for them, because their inheritors have failed to deliver on their promises.

On 14 August 1947, Jinnah was burdened with the worry of building a new nation from the country that he had received after a bitter and bloody struggle. This year, inheritors of his legacy have been busy bartering the sovereignty of their country for a few billion dollars in aid. On 15 August 1947, Mahatma Gandhi spent the day in Calcutta fasting and spinning. This year, the rulers of Hindustan in New Delhi will probably spend feasting and giving a Ramjanmbhoomi spin to Babri Mosque controversy.

Orangi will not reply to Rahul Rajesh's query, *"This town/ Why doesn't it sleep all night long"* and Motihari will be too afraid to answer him when he asks, *"This town/ Why is it so scared/ Why is it so dead"*.

Salute Aristotle, for he says: "Poetry is something more philosophical and of graver import than history". Despite the ordeal of Biharis in Bangladesh, Biharis in Bihar, Pandits in Kashmir, and Muslims in Gujarat, poetry will survive. And towns revive once again. Of that, Rahul Rajesh, in Jharkhand, can rest assured.

Pappu the riksapuller

FROM MOTIHARI in Bihar, New Delhi is a long way — *Dilli door ast*. 'Nearer' is Birgunj in Nepal where there is electricity all night long and the roads are paved. The street lights work. School buildings are clean. Temples are properly maintained. And pulling the rickshaw is remunerative. Incessantly complaining about their fate, middle-class Nepalis need to visit Motihari to be told how blessed they are.

Pappu the rickshaw-puller had once been to Birgunj to listen to a Hindu seer. He has nothing but praise for the *Hindu Rashtra* and blames secularism for all ills besetting his Hindustan. But he does not know that despite his government's public avowal of secularism, places of worship vastly outnumber schools, colleges and hospitals in India. Though many of these temples and mosques date back centuries, quite a few of them have been built after the partition. Pappu does not even know that the single most important agenda for his rulers in New Delhi still is to build a temple on the exact spot where an ancient mosque had previously been pulled down by a frenzied mob of politicised Hindu zealots.

You do not expect Pappu to know that the poor in Birgunj do not use fans despite the searing heat, in order to minimise the electricity consumption. He would not know that the per unit rate of power in Nepal is one of the highest in the world, despite the abundance of hydroelectric potential, and that only 15 percent of Nepal's people have access to electricity. Neither would he know that rickshaw-pulling in Birgunj is not as lucrative as it seems, because unlike in Motihari, very few peddlers in Nepal own their vehicles and the rest of them have to submit a substantial share of the day's earning to their owners.

Each one of the working class in South Asia is unhappy in his own way just as every member of the Subcontinental elite is so much like the other.

The other side of Bhutan

Bhutan may have become accessible by road and air but getting into the kingdom is still difficult; visas are granted to only a select few. For scholars and others who do manage to wangle an invitation, it is a privilege with many attendant rewards. Wealthy tourists who pay hefty fees to visit the country might get guided tours and bragging rights, but lucky scholars invited by the regime get all this plus access to restricted information and hard-to-meet sources, interviews with ministers and top officials, and an audience with the monarch. Understandably, not many are willing to give up these hard-won privileges easily and foreigners invited to visit Bhutan to hear (and tell) the government's version of any story will seldom destroy their chances for repeat visits by coming away with a conscience and the urge to listen to what the 'other side' has to say. Michael Hutt chose to be an exception.

There are over 100,000 refugees from southern Bhutan languishing in UNHCR-administered refugee camps in southwestern Nepal. The majority was forced out or fled Bhutan in mid-1992 "when as many as 600 people arrived every day". It was in September of that year when the exodus from southern Bhutan was at its peak, that Hutt, who was then planning the first-ever international conference on Bhutan (Bhutan: A Traditional Order and the Forces of Change, SOAS, London, March 1993), spent two weeks in the kingdom as a special guest of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB). The preface in *Unbecoming Citizens* has some vignettes of this trip. In Chirang district, the authorities conveniently arranged witnesses as evidence of 'voluntary' emigration': "They would even dismantle their houses, the dzongda* claimed, in order to re-use the timber in refugee camps in Jhapa". But Hutt wondered if people could leave behind their homes and simply, "if the dzongda was to be believed, pick up sticks and disappear?"

The tour, courtesy the RGOB, raised questions in the author's mind and subsequently led to his wanting to visit the refugee camps in Nepal to seek answers. Till then, he had not met a single refugee. It is

UNBECOMING CITIZENS

Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan
Michael Hutt
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reviewed by Bhim Subba

to Hutt's credit that he chose to follow his instincts to find out who the refugees were and why they left their homes and country. *Unbecoming Citizens* is the result. The book does not point fingers nor does it propose a real solution - what it does is trace the history of the Lhotshampa (the Southern Bhutanese) 'minority' in Bhutan and the changing definition of nationalism by a 'majority' which sought to exclude them and eventually caused their departure.

The single quotes above are necessary because the composition of the Bhutanese population is contested terrain. Even though the government has had an excellent system of counting heads (because of the labour contribution system) census data has always remained a closely guarded secret resulting in wide fluctuations in population breakdown estimates. The range for the percentage of ngalongs from the western part of the country - politically dominant but an acknowledged minority - varies from 10 to 28 but probably lies closer to 16-18 per cent; figures for sharchops in the eastern half of the kingdom, including the central region east of the Black Mountain range, vary between 30 and 44 and probably is around 38-40 per cent; estimates of the Southern Bhutanese population fluctuates between 25 and 53 but was probably around 42-44 percent before the refugee problem. The first officially published total population figure was 930,614 in 1969, but it was the figure of 1.035 million that was officially submitted that year to the UN,while joining the organisation, that grew annually to reflect the growth rate to reach nearly one and a half million by 1990. Everyone knew this was not true and in 1990 (before the exodus of refugees), the king disclosed in an interview that the actual population of the country was closer to 600,000. Tellingly, Bhutan's *Human Development Report, 2000*, puts the Bhutanese population in 1998 at 636,499, a figure that would fall short by approximately the number of refugees if 600,000 were to rise at a growth rate of around 2.6 per cent.

This review of *Unbecoming Citizens* must be read with one thing in mind - it is written by someone the government of Bhutan has labeled a criminal who has betrayed the trust of the king, country and government. This blemish might not matter much in any case, however, because the book would have already failed the regime's tests of loyalty and truth, even from a foreigner. By repeatedly refusing to grant a visa to the author once he

**Dzongda or dzongdag is the district administrator.*

had made clear his intentions to hear out the refugees (other academics/journalists who have committed the same mistake have faced a similar fate) the government made known its own position: you are now against 'us' because you have chosen to listen to 'them'. For the regime in Bhutan there are clearly no two sides to a coin - anyone trying to attempt a balanced analysis by listening to both sides is totally shut out. Sadly, it is this attitude which stands in the way of more inclusive policies in the kingdom and the resolution of the refugee problem.

But despite certain government disapproval over some of the findings of the author and the views expressed by many of the informants in the book, *Unbecoming Citizens* will undoubtedly be read widely in Thimphu. Every Bhutanese is aware that past Western scholarship on Bhutan has tended towards "essentialization, exoticization and totalization" and deliberately "focused almost exclusively on [Drukpa Kagyu Buddhist] culture". Hutt provides evidence of this by referring to the 260-page school history textbook commissioned by the government in 1980. The textbook makes a single reference to the Nepali-speaking population in southern Bhutan which, it says, constitutes 'about 25 per cent of the population' and, Hutt observes, "never mentions them again".

Scholars and journalists dependent on the RGOB's goodwill for research in Bhutan have carefully crafted their work to suit the regime's needs and expectations. Even the Berkeley scholar Leo E Rose who made some very astute observations about southern Bhutan and Southern Bhutanese in his excellent book, Politics of Bhutan (1977), was compelled to immediately qualify these with explanatory comments. Michael Hutt, who is a Reader in Nepali and Himalayan Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, is not similarly constrained. Written outside of the polite parameters - or '*laxmanrekha*' - defined by the regime, it is the first authoritative work that looks at the history of the country's large but neglected population in its South. It is unfortunate that because of the circumstances it had to be constructed within the refugee context but the book will, nevertheless, become a must-read for anyone professing an interest in Bhutan and Bhutanese matters.

A sitdown with His Majesty is appreciated.

Land receipts and subjecthood

Hutt depends mostly on records from British India stocked in London to date and unravels the story of the migration and settlement of Nepalis in southern Bhutan. He weaves this information around the legend of Garjaman Gurung, who, together with his father Dalchan Gurung, was jointly granted settlement rights to most of present-day Samchi district in perpetuity in 1887 by the then ruler of Western Bhutan in Paro. Hutt also delves into the composite memory of many refugees and old documents in their possession to explore the conditions in Bhutan and the changing relationship between the new settlers and the rulers. The book moves chronologically to cover the events and history of southern Bhutan as its people are seen at first merely as a means to generate revenue for the rulers and are kept at arms length, then as equal citizens and partners in nation-building, and finally a threat to the nation's survival.

As Nepali settlers filled up Samchi during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and Chirang in the first few decades of the twentieth, the former was administered by the Gurung family on behalf of the Paro Ponlop and the latter by the Dorje family, from Haa in western Bhutan but based in Kalimpong in India, for the Tongsa Ponlop. Ponlop or penlop, literally 'lord-teacher', were regional administrators in a theocratic system of administration established in the seventeenth century by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651) the unifier of the country who fled from Ralung monastery in Tibet and entered Bhutan following a reincarnation/succession dispute in 1616. After his death, the news of which was kept secret for five decades, the country went through years of instability and turmoil as different families sought to take control. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Paro and Tongsa ponlops were the only dominant forces. But with the help of Ugen Dorje in Kalimpong (Bhutanese territory ceded to the British in 1865 following the Duars War), the Tongsa Ponlop Ugen Wangchuck was able to forge ties with the powerful British who eventually helped him ascend the throne as the first hereditary monarch on Decemeber 17, 1907. The administration of the country was through "a three-

tiered system" which "was designed primarily for the purposes of taxation". Even after the country was unified under the Wangchucks in 1907, this system continued until the 1960s. Justice was imparted and revenue collected at the local level by *thekadars* (contractors) with the help of *mandals* (village headmen), *karbaris* (headmen's assistants) and *baidars* (clerks). This administrative system was quite distinct from the rest of the country and involved detailed censuses and record-keeping. Unlike in the North, taxes were paid in cash and many of the refugees have in their possession to this day receipts issued during the early part of the twentieth century. The survival of these old documents "among illiterate farming communities in a monsoon climate is evidence of an early bureaucratization of this administrative system and the settlers' cognizance of the importance of such documents".

In the absence of literature on Bhutan generally ("the ordinary people of the north were under-represented in the accounts of Bhutanese history and culture") and southern Bhutan in particular ("the people of the south were practically invisible"), old tax receipts could perhaps be used as windows to the past, their detailed scrutiny allowing a rough reconstruction of the history of South Bhutan. In his own brief survey of such documents in the refugee camps, Hutt saw "at least seven different varieties of tax receipts, each of which could be assigned to a distinct period". For instance, the oldest receipt he identified was for an amount of Rs 8 as house tax dated 1907, the year hereditary monarchy was first established. This says three things: at the time the first king was crowned on December 17, 1907, there were permanent tax-paying Nepali settlers in the South ; there was an effective bureaucracy in control in the South (in the North taxes were collected only in kind until 1954 and total conversion to a cash system was accomplished only in 1964); the tax rate was significant considering that the entire annual non-tax revenue of the country at that time amounted to just Rs 50,000 granted as a 'subsidy' by British India following the annexation of the Duars plains in 1865.

The tax receipts which appear to have been generally standardised by the 1920s had provisions for household tax, tax on irrigated and dry fields, cows, buffalo, sheep, gun license fee, other fines, and so on. These may also tell their story indicating where, for example, animal husbandry might have been more common than agriculture. For instance, on the basis of such receipts the author is able to date the introduction of southern Bhutan's main cash crops, orange and cardamom, to the early 1950s. Taxes were collected and receipts issued by mandals under the authority of individuals/families wielding the real power. Thus, even though all of Bhutan came under hereditary monarchy in 1907, for half a century the kings seemed to have had little influence or control over the South. The perception in the South of the relative ranks of the Dorjes and the king "seems to have mirrored the situation in Nepal where a Rana Maharaja was effectively in control of the kingdom from 1846 to 1951 while the king's role was largely ceremonial".

Receipts in Chirang continued to be issued under the authority of the Dorjes while those in Samchi were issued by the Gurung family. Revenue was deposited in Kalimpong and Paro (where a supporter/representative of the Wangchucks had replaced the earlier ruling family around 1906) until 1958 when the central government finally began collecting taxes directly. The language used for receipts and other official documents in South Bhutan tell one more significant story - reflecting the changing attitudes of the government, Nepali gave way to Nepali/English which in turn was replaced by English/Dzongkha and finally Dzongkha became the language in use for official communication by the 1990s.

Conditions for belonging

The story of southern Bhutan is the story of Nepalis in Bhutan. The ethnic boundary with an imaginary line delineating a Nepali zone in the south exclusively for Nepalese settlers, Hutt says, is an accident of history and reflects a "competition over natural resources" which "has since been invested with a loftier role" of protecting an endangered Buddhist state. The near-total isolation of the two communities was convenient in the pre-modern era when new settlers wanted nothing more than the right to live peacefully off the land and, in turn, the rulers were satisfied with the taxes they received. In the absence of a welfare system, there were no additional obligations or expectations on either side (although the settlers also formed a buffer zone that was mutually beneficial to both Bhutan and the British). Indeed, in an era when citizens were merely a means to earn revenue, Kathmandu's government initiated a campaign offering free land, tax exemptions and amnesties to entice Nepalis from southern Bhutan to return to settle in the newly opened up areas in the southeastern area of Morang. This compelled Bhutan to complain to the British that Nepal was wooing its 'subjects'. Half a century later these same 'subjects' were being forced to leave.

Between the intervening period of wanting the Southern Bhutanese to stay and leave, Bhutan went from being an undeveloped country without schools, hospitals, electricity, telephone or a single kilometre of motorable road to a country with all the modern trappings - education and public health facilities, a network of roads, an airline, and electricity to spare. The development process that transformed the kingdom was initiated by the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1928-1972). It was during his reign that the main institutions of state were established, beginning with the Tshongdu, or national assembly, in 1953. This was followed by other changes including land reforms, abolishing of serfdom, introduction

of education and health facilities, setting up of a modern administrative machinery and a cabinet of ministers, and so on.

Starting in the early 1960s, the country as a whole began to be governed as one with a common administrative system although different provisions were still retained where needed for the special requirements of the South. But the most significant reform was the granting of nationality by royal decree at the end of 1958 to all Southern Bhutanese. No doubt the third King was a visionary leader, but Hutt may have done a disservice by ignoring the role of his brother-in-law and Prime Minister Jigmi Palden Dorje, the son of Raja ST Dorje and grandson of Ugen Dorje, the Bhutan Agents for the British in Kalimpong, considered by many to be the principal architect of these reforms.

Southern Bhutanese contributed to the nation-building process. The 173-km road from the Indian border to Thimphu, the capital, will always remain in the collective memory of Southern Bhutanese. Building the infrastructure for a modern state needed workers, and in a form of labour conscription where one in every three adults was required to be at the government worksite, between 1961 and 1966, every person between 17 and 55 years had to spend four months each year working on this road. The rotation was decided by the mandals and karbaris. It was the responsibility of anyone unable to report for work for whatever reason to send a replacement. The people living in the refugee camps remember this highway as the material evidence of their contribution to the building of modern Bhutan.

Within two and a half decades from the time Southern Bhutanese were granted nationality, Bhutan was transformed. The spurt of development activities brought the North in contact with a region and people with whom it had till then been deliberately kept apart. During this relatively brief period the three communities came closer. In the first half of the 1980s, the government even actively promoted a process of accelerated assimilation to nurture a sense of belonging among the Southern Bhutanese. But even as this modern Bhutan was taking shape, Hutt writes, "the Lhotshampas' growing confidence and influence came to be seen as a threat to the ethicized order of power" and the "nature of its likely sociopolitical consequences came clearly into view" forcing the government to "adjust the constitution and consistency of the pluralism upon which the modernizing forces were beginning to act". Hutt explores the resultant changing "conditions for belonging" that were gradually introduced and analyses "the process of decay".

The Lhotshampa exiles remember the road to Thimpu.

Nationism

The decision to construct a protective shell around one culture meant that the 'other' had to subjugated - or expelled. The die was cast once the rulers in Thimphu adopted such a policy, "labeled 'nationism' and defined as 'the desire of a state to have a nation of its own', as distinct from nationalism, 'the desire of a nation to have a state of its own'". Conditions for citizenship were gradually made more restrictive with each new Citizenship Act and this largely affected the new immigrants in the South (under the 1958 Act - a child born of a Bhutanese parent was a citizen; 1977 - a child born of a Bhutanese father was a citizen; 1985 - a child born of Bhutanese parents was a citizen). At the same time the state also adopted the dangerous concept of homogenised nationalism where some Bhutanese came to be seen as more authentic than the rest. The culture of the North was promoted at the cost of all others. This had a greater impact on the lives of people in southern Bhutan where the language, culture and traditions are completely different. (The culture in the East is the same as that in the West even though the language is different.) Together, the two formed a lethal combination as far as the Southern Bhutanese were concerned.

The retroactive application of the different Citizenship Acts and impossible requirements set out during the census exercise of 1988 to prove their bona fides (submission of 1958 tax receipts) in tandem with strict enforcement of the government's new cultural policies naturally led to resistance in the South. At a time when their right to nationality seemed to be under threat, the introduction of a compulsory dress code as part of Driglam Namzha (which Michael Aris, the renowned Bhutan scholar, described as 'elaborate choreography of deference'), removal of the Nepali language from the primary school curriculum, and a proposal for a green belt along the border that would have made at least a third of all Southern Bhutanese homeless, appeared to be deliberately timed. "Thus, by 1990 the Lhotshampas found themselves subject to a range of cultural rules and restrictions regarding dress, language, ceremonial etiquette and many other aspects of everyday life".

In September-October 1990, Bhutan witnessed the first-ever mass uprising when thousands of protestors converged on administrative offices across the South. Both sides, however, played up the size of the revolt, the government to indicate how it was being threatened and the dissidents to claim it had everyone's support. If there was any hope that

this show of strength would lead to a change in government policy, these were belied when a total clampdown followed, destroying any chance of rapprochement. By the end of the year, the flow of refugees had begun, first to Assam and West Bengal in India and later into Nepal.

Unbecoming Citizens also covers ground touched by more recent literature, looking at the events prior to and following the demonstrations, the dissident 'movement', and the role of the main actors involved. It will be difficult to find a better analysis of these sensitive latter-day developments anywhere else, but it is for the historical construction of the migration of Nepalis into South Bhutan and the recording of their history from their settlement to expulsion that the book is valuable. The story of a people, many of them now in their thirteenth year of exile, is pieced together from the impersonal writings of British Indian civil servants, the legend of Garjaman Gurung, the life history of 70-year-old Dil Maya (not her real name), and a huge cast of unnamed refugees who shared their memories of the land they call home.

Many of his informants, Hutt says, were anxious to tell their story in the hope that somehow this would solve their problems. Unfortunately, no book, however powerful, can compel a government to change its policies or a people to change their attitudes, particularly when these attitudes have hardened. But a book can spark debate and can make the reader reflect. It is this reviewer's hope that friends in Bhutan in high places who engendered or contributed to building this new, non-inclusive Bhutan, and who will quite certainly find the time to read *Unbecoming Citizens*, will learn from this book and see why, where and how they might have gone wrong. Perhaps there is still time to try and repair the "tear in the fabric". △

The decolonisation of water

An engineer-turned-social auditor produces a book for the classroom that comprehensively critiques the certitudes of the global and South Asian water technocracy.

Basic Water Science
by Ajaya Dixit
Water Conservation Foundation (NWCF), Kathmandu, Nepal.
Price NR 600.00 (for hard cover), NR 450.00 (for soft cover) 2002, pp 420+11

reviewed by
Pradeep Adhikary

Water has stimulated a great many feats of grandiose engineering. The exploits of antiquity in conveying water across long distances and using the force of gravity indicate that the harnessing of water is not an exclusively modern preoccupation. What distinguishes the imposing engineering feats of the past from those of the present is the scale on which science is now applied to water to tap its potential for commercial ends. This difference in scale was made possible by the advances in technology that accelerated after the European scientific revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries. And what amplified the commercial potential of water was that this new-found technological sophistication coincided and combined with the steady growth of markets and the new forms of organising production introduced by the capitalism as the first truly global system in history. Together, this advent of machines and the pursuit of the large-scale that it facilitated, produced a distinctively modern psyche supremely confident of its capacity to conquer, domesticate and orient nature to the convenience of man. Modern water science, unlike ancient large-scale water science that was geared to the limited needs of a numerically small elite, is a product of this industrial psyche.

The external combustion engine gave water more than a predominantly agricultural use. Water from then on became one of the most crucial factors of industrial activity, be it in the manufacture of cloth or the transport of goods. The age of steam introduced a new ethic in the use of water that the water mills and other run-of- river technologies, which also harnessed the force of water, did not need. Henceforth, in the seemingly endless drive to exploit its inherent properties, new and engineered environments had to be continuously created for water. This could range from the boiler for making steam to large dams for generating electricity, from extensively altering drainage patterns to creating new ways of discarding the enormous quantities of liquid effluvium that industrial society managed to produce. The sum total of all these interventions entailed a necessary modification in the natural dynamics and mechanics of water.

The need for the efficient exploitation of water led to the emergence of a scientific discipline with its complex of research institutions and

retinue of trained personnel. The peer group that emerged from this system created and reinforced the consensus about the possibilities of unlimited intervention. Gathering momentum in the 19th century, the world saw increasingly daring hydraulic accomplishments, culminating in the construction of the Hoover Dam in 1936 which served as a model for mega-water engineering. The next few decades saw a flurry of dam building activity that has only now begun to abate. The institutionalised disciplinary foundations on which the exploitation of water rested become more sophisticated as they enlarged in scope to include the knowledge of various other related disciplines like material science, soil mechanics and geology. As sophistication in the practical knowledge of water engineering increased, so did the certitudes.

Ironically, just as water engineering seemed to be at the peak of achievement, difficulties began to crop up at the doorstep of the global water establishment. By the 1960s, a new tradition of dissent against the mega-engineering paradigm had begun to emerge, documenting the adverse consequences of the unremitting colonisation of water. By the late 1980s this counter-current had forced on the world the realisation that all the hydraulic activity of the previous century and a half had actually unleashed a crisis of immense magnitude on the planet. The realisation of the crisis set off its own chain of reactions prompted by the need to mitigate the damaging effects of past interventions and minimise the damaging possibilities of future interventions of the same kind.

In a sense, *Basic Water Science*, written by a water engineer with an impeccable orthodox training in fluid mechanics, is a product of this crisis. Trained in the institutions of South Asia and Europe that actually were party to the emerging crisis of excessive intervention in the natural process, the author for many years taught to prospective engineers all that he explicitly renounces in this book. And yet, that renunciation is not just a naïve or uncritical rejection of water science, as the book amply illustrates. It is informed by a philosophy of the role of water in society based on an understanding of the place of water in history, and motivated by well-defined principles of the place of people in water without neglecting its science. This is a matter of some siginificance, since, as a reaction to the anti-humanist nihilism of hyper-science there has been a tendency among some lapsed scientists and engineers to go to the other extreme and denounce all intervention in nature as being fundamentally repugnant.

Avoiding such extremes, the author, now a researcher of inter-disciplinary water management, provides a magisterial survey of the evolution of the scientific knowledge on water. For a book of reasonably intimidating thickness it is reassuringly accessible in the style of its exposition, so that it is a useful manual not only for students pursuing water science professionally, for whom it is perhaps intended, but also for lay persons interested in water as a phenomenon crucial importance for the planet. *Basic Water Science* therefore serves a particularly useful function. Despite all the critiques against the orthodox model of water 'development', as an establishment that has entrenched itself over a century and a half, the water technocracy still commands immense power in the sphere of policy making and project implementation, globally as well as in the individual countries of South Asia. This technocracy continues to wield this influence because of a lack of transparency in water-related decision making, which in turn is made possible by the fact that awareness of water is generally very low among the non-scientific community.

Polycentric resource

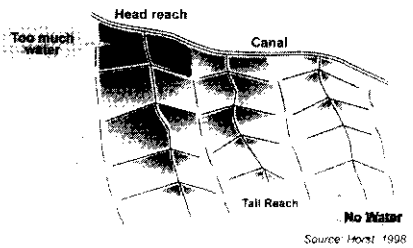
Water education, particularly in South Asia, is technologically guided. It is restricted by and large to those who pursue it as a specialisation, and is provided by institutions whose curricula are designed to reproduce the development model based on the exploitation of commodified natural resources. Ajaya Dixit's *Basic Water Science*, informed by the principles of locally relevant and participatory management of resources therefore serves as a persuasive textbook of the alternative, polycentric view of water. The accessibility of the book comes both from the way its content is organised and the simplicity with which the argument is expressed. The work is divided into 11 chapters, and interspersed with boxes that punctuate the main body of the text with arresting facts about water, brief biographical sketches of prominent scientists who enunciated principles that contributed to development of water science, and historical information about techniques of water use over time.

The opening two chapters of the book set out the essentials of water as a naturally occurring phenomenon and a socially appropriated necessity. The first chapter is particularly useful for lay readers, since it describes the various dimensions of water in nature and discusses the basic elements of hydrology as a discipline that embraces the life history of water on earth. These include the 'forms' of water, the formations these give rise to, the processes it unleashes, and the techniques of measuring them. The second chapter is a concise history of the principles and processes that gave rise to the water exploitation model. It traces the discovery of the various principles relating to water, the different organisational forms in which research on water was conducted, the emergence of the socio-economic system under which the technological water regime developed, and the convergence of institutions and interests that brought together the disciplines of hydrology, hydrostatics, fluid mechanics, civil engineering, geology, soil mechanics, material science and a host of other specialisations to bear on the exploitation of water through hydraulic engineering.

This is a process that began a few centuries ago, through discrete and independent developments and discoveries, all of which converged with rapid momentum in response to the new economic rationale that accompanied and bolstered the industrial revolution. Dixit provides fascinating sidelights on water-related developments in Asia, which were of a different order during the pre-industrial period. This brings out in sharp relief the global dominance of the Western water establishment in a few decades starting from the mid-19th century. The author locates this creeping influence not just in terms of the spread of these ideas through the institutions of learning established under colonial rule, but also in terms of the active role played by governments of developed countries in encouraging the application of big technologies of water control. Brief though this account is, it nevertheless sets out with clarity the historical process by which local communities lost the control of water management to centralised and distant organs of the state representing the interests, everywhere be it Europe or South Asia, of an oligarchic elite.

The next four chapters and chapter eight are more technical in content and style. Geared for students of engineering, they deal with the established sub-divisions and principles of hydaulics, such as hydrostatics, hydrokinetics and hydrokinematics. The effort in these chapters is to relate these hydraulic theories to real life situations, with examples of ballast tanks for explaining the Archimedes principle, of drawing kerosene from a large drum using a siphon, of tap water flow to illustrate the difference between laminar flows and turbulent flows, of the *sancho*, a water allocating device used in the hills of Nepal.

Chapter seven again reverts to the non-technical mode to discuss domestic supply systems and the process by which useful water is converted into a waste. In addition to the dynamics of this transformation, the author evaluates the different techniques of drawing water, the social responses to groundwater deficits, rainwater harvesting and community participation and socio-economic factors in water supply management, and outlines the historical development of technology and organisation in meeting urban drinking water. Chapter nine addresses the dominant consumptive user of water, which is agriculture. Even as late as the commencement of the new millennium, agriculture accounted for 67 percent all global water use, with industry accounting for 19 percent and domestic use 9 percent. Irrigation is clearly the most crucial area as far as water management is concerned. Accordingly, Dixit focuses on irrigation systems built by external agents as well as local farmer-built and managed systems. This inevitably raises issues of conflicts, water rights and legal arrangements.



An explanatory diagram from Basic Water Science.

In examining the social aspects and institutions of water use for irrigation, the author emphasises the importance of the choice of technique. Millions of small landowners and asset-poor families in South Asian countries depend on groundwater for irrigation and use technologies such as the treadle pump. But the policy environment is skewed in favour of methods rooted in the colonial model, the history of which is traced in this chapter.

The last chapter on hydro-power completes the book's own 'cycle', and reverts to the hydrological issues that are raised in the first chapter, of the course and dynamics of water in nature, linking it to the creation of hydraulic structures that obstruct its flow and impound it for the purposes of economic development. The process of harnessing water plays havoc with ecological and hydrological mechanisms and in this context Dixit effectively raises fundamental questions about the relationship between big science and decision-making in the context of the direct and indirect costs of such decisions. In evaluating quantitative benefits for a vaguely defined national economy, he writes, very little attention is paid either to the qualitative disadvantages or to the quantitative costs to poor and marginalised people who can neither enter the decision-making process nor influence it from outside.

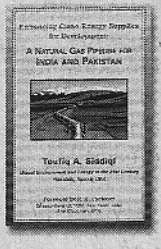
This, in a sense, is the culminating proof of the main argument of the book, that local, relevant, participatory systems function better socially and have lower costs environmentally than projects conceived of, designed and implemented by outside agents for the benefit of limited numbers who live elsewhere, both spatially and socially. The structure of the book and its multi-disciplinary approach both justify the purpose for which it was written, namely to introduce social science to engineering. And the effortless translation of a technical science into lay language has also ensured that the book has introduced engineering into social science. This book is a unique contribution to the study of and debate over the use of water in modern times, and is of global relevance. For having balanced the technical aspects of water with the ethical aspects of a social understanding , this is a work useful for readers across a broad range of disciplines, from bureaucracy and diplomacy to social activism. But most certainly it should be assigned as essential reading for engineering and social science students in all the regions of South Asia, as a region where scarce water is increasingly going to be an area generating conflict across territorial, class and demographic boundaries.

Resources and Population
A study of the Gurungs of Nepal
By Alan Macfarlane
Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 2003
pp xxvi+364, no recommended price
ISBN 99933-0-377-1

This is the second edition of the 1976 classic originally published by Cambridge University Press. Written from a perspective that combines the tools of anthropology and population studies, this work is based on extensive field work among the Gurung community in the Annapurna range in the central Himalaya. Primarily this is a study of resource use, growth of rice cultivation and the depletion of forests and the consequences of these trends. A new preface to the current edition records the changes that Macfarlane observed in the thirty years that elapsed between his first visit in 1968 and now. Reissued by a Kathmandu publisher, the book is of interest to students of Himalayan societies, development professionals and cultural activists, apart from professional anthropologists of Nepal.

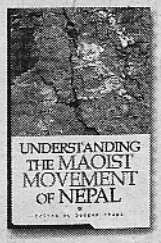
Against Ecological Romanticism
Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity
By Archana Prasad
Three Essays, New Delhi, 2003
pp xxiv+118, INR 140
ISBN 81-88789-02-X

Between the 1930s and mid-1940s, Verrier Elwin, a pioneer anthropologist of India, emerged as an influential voice in the debate on the tribal question with his scathing critique of the modernist view of tribal development. His critique of civilisation and celebration of cultural primitivism was a reaction to the negative consequences of capitalism and colonialism. Elwin's views had a significant impact in shaping the romantic view of tribal life, identity and ecology in both academic scholarships and everyday perception. The three essays in this book makes a systematic critique of this romanticism. Prasad argues that Elwin's legacy was transformed in subsequent years, and eventually appropriated by the Hindu revivalist in India to further their own interests.



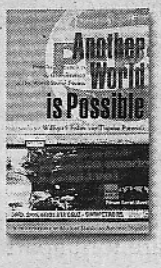
Enhancing Clean Energy Supply for Development
A Natural Gas Pipeline For India and Pakistan
By Toufiq A Siddiqi
BALUSA, 2003
pp x+77, no recommended price

The BALUSA group, under whose aegis this slim tract has been published, is made up of senior Indian, Pakistani and US leaders who are supporting a series of projects that could lead to a reduction in tensions in the region; the boldest of the projects involves a natural gas pipeline through Pakistan to India, which would bring large economic benefits to people in both countries. Proceeding from the assumption that the adequate availability of energy at reasonable cost is a prerequisite for economic development, Toufiq Siddiqi examines the energy requirements of Pakistan and India and the extent of demand for natural gas as the basis for providing the rationale for a common gas pipeline to supply the energy requirements of both countries. A useful and informative book for policy makers and peace activists.



Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal
Edited by Deepak Thapa
Martin Chautari, Kathmandu, 2003
pp xx+395, NR 475
ISBN 99933-782-7-5

The people's war in Nepal was launched in February, 1996. In six years it has become a movement that attracts global attention. This volume brings together a collection of articles written during this period from different political perspectives. The contributors include Nepali and foreign scholars and journalists who have been grappling with a phenomenon that has still not been adequately explained or understood in rigorous terms. The fact that these have been written at various points over the course of the movement's history help in bringing out the shifts and changes that have informed both the movement and the state's response to it. By bringing together the extent work on Maoism in Nepal the volume helps identify the gaps in research and points to the areas that merit more study.



Another World is Possible
Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum
Edited by William F Fisher and Thomas Ponniah
Zed Books, London , 2003
pp xx+364, no recommended price
ISBN 1-84277-329-1

This book brings together the voice of the opposition to corporate globalisation through the writings of some of the most well-known intellectuals, social activists and organisations. Essential reading for activists and students of globalisation, both pro- and anti-globalisation.

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.

death and class

On the night of 8 July, more than seven hundred persons died in the swirling, turbid waters of the Meghna river southeast of Dhaka. The ferry, the *Nasrin-1*, sank to the muddy depths just below the point where the Meghna is joined by the Padma (Ganga). Only a handful of bodies were found. The knowledge of impending death as the triple-storey ship tilted and filled with water would have left the children, women and men screaming in the darkness.

Ferryboat deaths in Bangladesh, as we all know, fail to hold attention. The same as landslide deaths in Nepal, Andhra fishermen lost at sea, Bihar miners buried underground, or Karachi pedestrians killed in a hail of bullets. But when it comes to the case of Bangladeshis lost in the sea or river, the numbers are so much more. The ship that capsized on 8 July carried twice as many passengers as a fully loaded Boeing 747.

Once, a Unicef chief - James Grant - tried to shake up his Kathmandu audience by graphically describing child mortality in the country as equivalent to so many widebody aircrafts crashing into the mountains every day.

News coverage of death is a class thing. When there are too many lives, life is cheap. And when the lives are poor, it becomes cheaper still. Supply and demand in the reporting of the dead and dying.

When Nepali, Jharkhandi or Andhra villagers die by the score, or Karachi's street citizen's are torn apart by bomb blasts, or when police *havaldars* - the lowest in the totem pole of all security agencies - are liquidated by revolutionaries, the column inches are niggardly indeed.

Everywhere, of course, there are fewer rich people than poor. But the top of the pyramid is even more cramped here in South Asia, and you can imagine how incestuous it is. This affluent class is part of a trans-Subcontinental and trans-global network, so the reverberations from their meeting the maker carry further.

The news of rich folks meeting their doom is news across local markets and territories. When a Rajdhani or a Shatabdi express rushing between India's large metros meets with disaster, it makes more news than the *choti line* carrying small town and village people. The dead of the *Nasrin-1* would have hailed mostly from rural southeast Bangladesh, around the town of Chandpur. The chances that someone from Karachi, Kathmandu or Kolkota would be in any way connected with the poor souls that went down are minimal, even though they number in the hundreds. Whereas if a Boeing or Airbus were to go down, it would touch lives in living rooms in every capital of South Asia. Despite the closed borders and overflight bans, there is only two degrees of separation among the elite of South Asia.

If things had evolved differently in our region, there would have been be more coverage of the *Nasrin-1*, say in the Assam or West Bengal press. But our societies and economies are increasingly being pulled apart, and this dehumanises us enough that we are not interested in disasters in the deep Bangladeshi interior. Before 1947, Calcutta would have felt a tremor when a ship with seven hundred went down in the delta. But now, that part of the delta is 'Bangladesh'.

So it is left to those who are closest to mourn the poor. Mahtab Haider, reporting from Chandpur for Dhaka's *New Age*:

> "There was Sadek who had lost his wife and a child of six months.
> There was the widowed Rizia who had now lost her only son to these waters.
> There was Khurshid, who had spent the most part of the last three days walking from village to village along the banks of the Meghna looking for his son.
> Their grief came in waves, as many left in these restless waters their only reasons to go back home."

Kanak Dixit

Monsoon Deaths

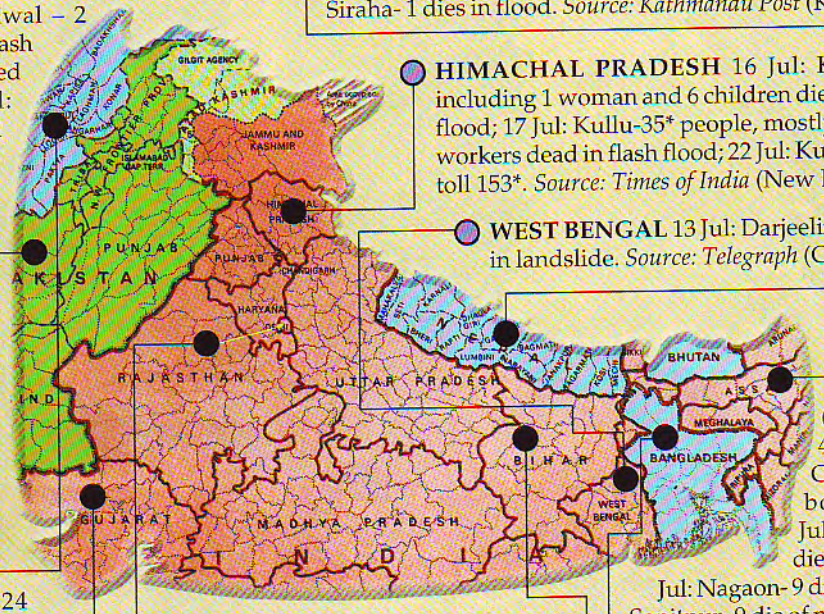
A Partial count of rain related deaths in South Asia in July.

PAKISTAN 7 Jul: Shikarpur- 1 electrocuted, 2 die as house caves in, Jacobabad- 1 man electrocuted, Sanghar- 2 die as house caves in; Dadu- 2 children killed as huts collapse; 8 Jul: Khairpur- 1 woman and 1 boy electrocuted, Dadu- 2 boys killed after walls collapsed on them, Karachi- 5 including 1 child electrocuted, Khairpur- 10yr old and 1 woman electrocuted; 9 Jul: Karachi- 4 girls swept away, 2 electrocuted, Mirkhaspur- 1 electrocuted, 1 drowns in drain, 1 man dies as wall collapses in; 10 Jul: Nawabshah- 1 boy dies in house collapse, 1 boy electrocuted, 2 boys die from dirty drinking water, 1 girl dies in house collapse; 18 Jul: Lahore- 2 electrocuted, Karachi- 3 die of accidents on slippery roads, 2 electrocuted, Sukkur- 2 die as house collapses, 1 boy electrocuted, Nawabshah- 1 die as roof collapses; 19 Jul: Nawabshah-1 dies of gastro-enteritis; 20 Jul: Karachi-1 boy drowns in storm water drain, 1 boy swept away in violent currents, 1 man dies as house caves in, 4 electrocuted; 23 Jul: Sahiwal – 2 electrocuted, Sukkur- 2 killed in flash flood; 25 Jul: Lahore- 1 girl killed as roof collapses; 26 Jul: Hyderabad- 2 in rain related accidents; 29 Jul: Pisin- 5 children die in flash flood, Badin- 35 bodies recovered from flooded areas; 30 Jul: Karachi- 7 electrocuted, 4 drown, 1 man trapped in collapsed house, Badin- 60* deaths in flood and rain related incidents; 31 Jul: Karachi- 3 drown in storm water drain, Badin- death toll 100*; 1 Aug: Dadu- 8 children die of gastro-enteritis drinking contaminated rain water. *Source: Dawn* (Karachi)

NEPAL 3 Jul: Taplejung- 1 dies in landslide, Biratnagar- 1 swept away in turbulent stream; 6 Jul: Biratnagar- 2 washed away; 7 Jul: Dhading- 3 die in landslide, Butwal- 2 children drown in swollen canal; 8 Jul: Udaypur- 4 killed by dysentery; 9 Jul: Morang- 2 swept away, Taplejung- 1 killed in landslide, Udaypur- 2 swept away by swollen local stream, Rautahat- 1 swept away; 10 Jul: Lamjung- 2 dead in landslide, Baglung- 1 woman swept away; 11 Jul:Tanahun-3 buried, 30 cattle dead in mudslide, Myagdi- 2 children buried in mudslide, Dhanusha- 1 girl drowns; 15 Jul: Udaypur- 6 die in landslide; 16 Jul: Dolakha- 1person dead in landslide as house collapses; 25 Jul: Kapilvastu- 1 boy drowns; 26 Jul: Damak- 2 crushed to death by gale uprooting trees; 29 Jul: Gulmi- 5 die in landslide; 31 July: Chitwan- 8 die in landslide, 1 Aug: Gorkha- 22 die in landslide, Chitwan- 11 die in landslide and flood, Nawalparasi- 9 flood related deaths, Makwanpur- 7 die in landslide, Rupandehi- 1 dies in flood, Bara- 1 dies in flood, Siraha- 1 dies in flood. *Source: Kathmandu Post* (Kathmandu)

HIMACHAL PRADESH 16 Jul: Kullu- 15 including 1 woman and 6 children die in a flash flood; 17 Jul: Kullu-35* people, mostly migrant workers dead in flash flood; 22 Jul: Kullu- death toll 153*. *Source: Times of India* (New Delhi)

WEST BENGAL 13 Jul: Darjeeling- 25 die in landslide. *Source: Telegraph* (Calcutta)



ASSAM 4 Jul: Kobu-Chapori- 1 boy dead; 5 Jul: Itakhola- 5 die of malaria; 6 Jul: Nagaon- 9 die of malaria, Sonitpur- 9 die of malaria; 8 Jul: Goalpara- 1 man drowns, Nalbari- 3 drown; 10 Jul: Dhemaji- 1 drowns; 11 Jul: 4 flood related deaths; 16 Jul: Kamrup- 1 dead, Darang- 1 dead, Sipajhar- 1 boy drowns; 17 Jul: Assam-22* deaths; 19 Jul:Assam- 25* deaths, Dibrugarh- 3 drown; 21 Jul: Nalbari- 5 die of diarrhoea; 22 Jul: Nalbari- 26* die of diarrhoea, 9* die of dysentery, 16* die of malaria, Barkshetri revenue circle- 6 die of dysentery; 23 Jul: Sonari revenue circle- 2 woman and 1 youth washed away, Morigaon- 2 die, Assam-27* deaths; 28 Jul: Narengi- 1 killed in landslide, Jorabat-1 swept away. *Source: Assam Tribune* (Guwahati)

AFGHANISTAN 10 Jul: 24 including 9 children die in heavy rains. *Source: Times of India* (New Delhi)

DELHI 6 Jul: North Delhi- 4 die as wall collapses due to heavy rain. *Source: Telegraph* (Calcutta)

BANGLADESH 8 Jul: Rajabari- 3 children, 1 adult die of diarrhoea; 9 Jul: Nilphamari- 1 dies of diarrhoea; 12 Jul: Sirajganj- 3 drown; 13 Jul: Gaibandha- 3 yr old drowns; 14 Jul: Sirajganj- 5 including children washed away; Jul 15: Nilphamari- 2 children die of diarrhoea, 70 cattle due to lack of fodder; Jul 16: Gaibandha- 3 children drown, Lalmonirhat- 1 boy dies of diarrhoea, Nilphamari- 7* dead; Jul 17: Pabna- 2 men die in flood swollen field, 2 men killed when a motor boat hit electric pole in strong currents, Gaibandha- 3 drown, 2 die of snakebite, 3 die of diarrhoea; 18 Jul: Manikganj- 47 cattle die; 21 Jul: Kurigram- 2 children drown, Sirajganj- 1 baby dies of diarrhoea; 22 Jul: Sariatpur- 4 drown and 1 dies of snakebite, Lalmonirhat- 3 children drown and 1 man dies of snakebite, Gaibandha- 2 children drown; 23 Jul: Nilphamari- 2 children die of diarrhoea; 27 Jul: Sirajganj- 4* deaths, Nilphamari- 11* deaths, Chalan Beel- 6 die as country boat capsizes in a storm; 30 Jul: Moheskali- 2 men drown; 31 Jul: Cox's Bazar- 6 die in landslide. *Source: Daily Star* (Dhaka)

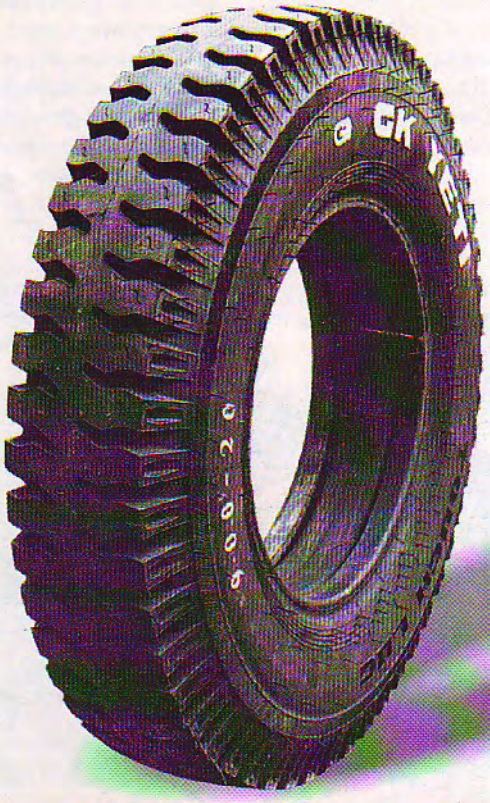
GUJARAT 14 Jul: 19 die of heavy rains of whom 3 were electrocuted; 29 Jul: 3 electrocuted, 4 drown, state toll 66* *Source: Times of India* (New Delhi)

BIHAR 10 Jul: 11* dead in floods; 18 Jul: 11* dead in floods; 19 Jul: 11* dead in floods; 24 Jul: 26* dead in floods; Jul 31: 32* dead including 5 cattle. *Source: Times of India* (New Delhi)

** cumulative count since the beginning of the monsoons or monsoon related incident when specified.*
- Dates reflect the day on which the deaths were reported in the respective daily newspaper (between Jul 2- Aug 1).
- In individual countries, the place of occurance is located at the district level as far as possible.

MAP FROM, A HISTORICAL ATLAS OF SOUTH ASIA, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK, 1992; APPROPRIATED FOR RELEVANCE. COMPILED BY HIMAL INTERN JUI SHRESTHA

NEPAL'S NO. 1



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