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HIMĀL

SOUTHASIAN

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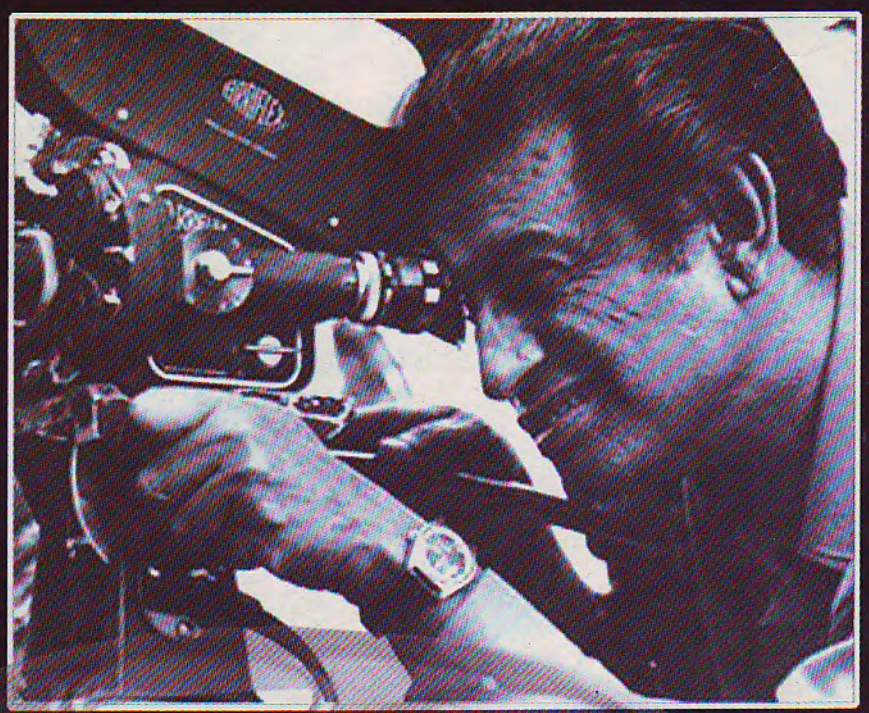

Satyajitér Sansar

The life and work of a humanist

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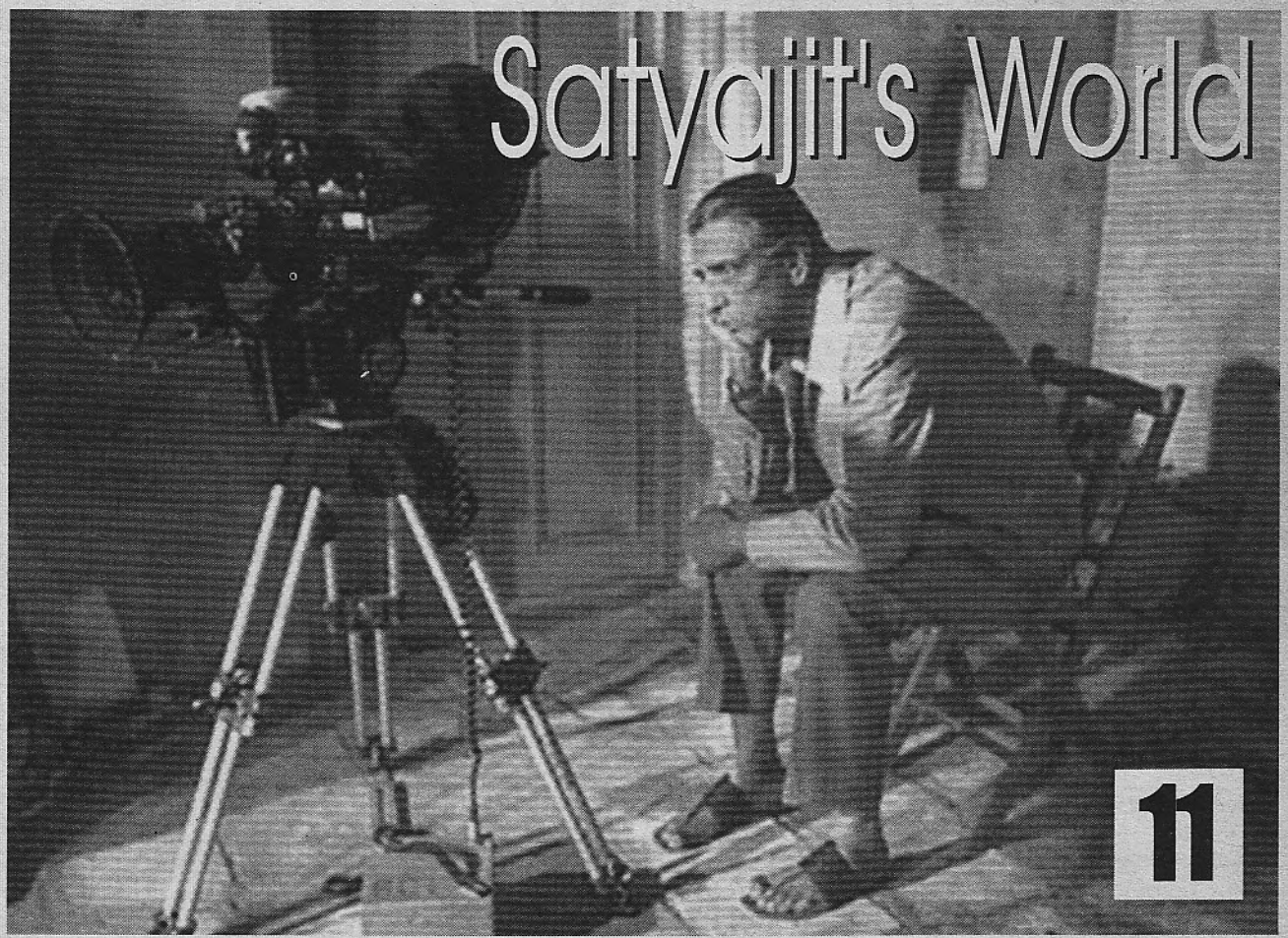

Satyajit's World

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HIMAL
SOUTHASIAN
editors@himalmag.com

Editor
Kanak Mani Dixit

Assistant Editor
Joe Thomas K

Contributing Editors
CALCUTTA Rajashri Dasgupta
COLOMBO Manik de Silva
DHAKA Afsan Chowdhury
KARACHI Beena Sarwar
NEW DELHI Mitu Varma

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

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar is a Rawalpindi activist involved with people's movements.

CK Lal is columnist with the weekly *Nepali Times*.

Devinder Sharma, a food and trade policy analyst, chairs the New Delhi-based Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security.

Jehan Perera is weekly columnist for the *Daily Mirror* and human rights activist based in Colombo.

Muhammad Zakir Khan Azmi is a writer on interfaith relations in Southasia.

Partha Chatterjee is a filmmaker and writer on cinema based in New Delhi.

Shoma A Chatterji, a freelance journalist and author based in Calcutta, is currently writing a book on the history of urban culture titled *Kali Kalkattewalli*.

Subir Bhaumik is BBC's Eastern India Correspondent and author of *Insurgent Crossfire: Northeast 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.

Yoginder Sikand is a researcher of Islamic history and a freelance writer based in Bangalore.

S Faizi is a consultant ecologist based in Trivandrum.

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UK & Ireland	Joti Giri H SAUK, 33 Tyers Terrace, London SE 11 5SE. *Fax: 0207 820-9915. e-mail: himaluk@talk21.com*
North America	Barbara Bella &Associates, 500 Sansome Street, Suite 101, PO Box: 470758, San Francisco, CA 94147. *Fax: +1-415-986 7860 email: Bba2@aol.com*

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FINDERS KEEPERS LOSERS WEEPERS

Time for goodbyes.

THE GENERAL elections in Sri Lanka in the first week of April 2004 have revealed Sri Lanka to be a fragmented polity, both politically and ethnically. The main political casualty has been Ranil Wickramasinghe's United National Party (UNP), which sought to lead the country to ethnic peace through compromise. The election results generally indicate that the UNP failed to keep its traditional urban Sinhala Buddhist middle-class base. The main electoral beneficiaries have been the parties that espoused ethnic nationalism without compromise. Foremost among these would be the Jana Vimukthi Perumana (JVP), which overshadowed its larger partner the Peoples Alliance, with JVP candidates getting on top of the list of candidates elected with the highest preferences in the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA). The JVP took an uncompromising stance against the peace process and the concessions made to the LTTE. In the north-east the LTTE's proxy party, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), swept the polls among the Tamil voters decimating its opponents, by virtue of LTTE assassinations and intimidation, by vote rigging and also quite possibly by choice.

The exit

The fact that the UNP fell into third place behind both the UPFA and the JHU in the suburbs of Colombo suggests that the Buddhist monks broke into the UNP's vote bank, rather into the UPFA's, as had been anticipated. The leeching away of the UNP's middle-class base cannot be attributed solely to economic factors. Much seems attributable to the unhappiness with the concessions made to Tamil nationalism in the course of the peace process by the UNP.

The most important lacuna in the UNP government was the aloofness of its top leadership from the concerns of the Sinhalese masses, whether in respect of the peace process or economic hardships. The perception of rigidity with which the UNP government sought to implement structural adjustment requirements, such as cutting back on welfare and agriculture subsidies, served to alienate the people from the government. For instance, the government preferred to repay the Treasury's overdraft of SLR 38 billion that it inherited from the previous government in 2001, and bring it down to SLR 5 billion at the time of the present elections, rather than use the money for the people's direct welfare. This decision and others similar to it were justified on the basis of good governance, and were supported by the technocrats of the international donor community. But what was technically and economically a sound strategy was politically a disastrous one. The people wanted the economic benefits of peace immediately as they were poor and hungry, rather than wait for a future that might never come.

Where the peace process was concerned, the UNP failed to explain itself adequately to the populace. This was repeatedly told to the members of the erstwhile government by activists from civil society, who had many years of experience in working directly with the people. But the government seemed to think that the people would experience the fruits of peace for themselves, and find them very good. When the economic peace dividends did not materialise in the way the people anticipated, the UNP government should have gone to the people and explained the complexity of the situation. Instead, the UNP government seemed to want to leave this to civil society organisations, which were unequal to the task.

> The leeching away of the UNP's middle-class seems attributable to the unhappiness with the concessions made to Tamil nationalism in the course of the peace process

All smiles: President Chandrika Kumaratunga at the vote.

The LTTE also did much to erode the credibility of the UNP gover-nment by smuggling in weapons, recruiting children, assassinating its political opponents and the government's intelligence agents, and by boycotting the peace talks. Finally by coming up with an interim administration proposal for the north-east that had no role in it for the central government, the LTTE opened the door to President Chandrika Kumaratunga to take control of the defence ministry and dissolve Parliament in February 2004, a full four years before completion of its term. Now in negotiating with the UPFA, the LTTE will find that their hardline stance will have to be replied to with its own hardline stance. All this, to the likely detriment of the peace process.

The entry

There were three main promises made by the UPFA during its election campaigns. The first was to take a harder bargaining position in dealing with the LTTE. Second, to provide quick economic relief to the people. And third, to change the constitution. Unless it delivers soon on its promises, the new UPFA government will be found wanting by those who believed in their promises. Going by the results of these initial few weeks and public pronouncements, the priority task of the new government appears to be to redraft the constitution.

The start for the UPFA government have not been easy. Its two main component parties, President Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the JVP, continue to be at loggerheads over the allocation of ministerial portfolios and government departments. A power struggle such as this is perhaps inevitable in any new relationship between two powerful parties. What may make the differences harder to resolve is that both the SLFP and JVP are advocates of hard bargaining.

The challenge to the new government will be to find the resources to pay for the gigantic bill that its promises add up to.

There is in fact an irony in the new government's initial approach to the LTTE. Despite their criticism of the former government, the UPFA combine has behaved in much the same way in its dealing with the LTTE split in the east (after Karuna, the eastern commander broke away from the Tigers in March). Sections of Sinhalese opinion, reflected in the media as well, demanded that the government should exploit the differences within the LTTE, and seek to make the break in its ranks a permanent one. But the new government did not take any such action. It did not even to try to enforce the ceasefire agreement which the LTTE violated in mobilising its troops for combat with the breakaway group.

On providing immediate economic relief to the people, among the UPFA's promises was increasing the salary of public sector employees by 70 percent, creating 30,000 new jobs, and subsidising farmers and other needy groups — all of this within the space of three months. Numerous studies have shown that the economy is the most important issue to people outside the war zones of the north-east. The UPFA was politically astute in capitalising on this reality, but now it faces the challenge of delivering on the promises. The challenge to the new government will be to find the resources to pay for the gigantic bill that the promises add up to. The largest cost, by far, would be to increase the salaries of the public sector employees, who number one million. Either the government will have to cut government expenditures elsewhere, or it will have to raise new revenues from somewhere.

Sri Lanka's public sector is the largest in the world, in relation to the size of its population. Most of those who work in the public sector are paid salaries inadequate for dignified maintenance of family and the self. The December 2001 Tissa Devendra Commission recommended salary increases coupled with a phased reduction in the numbers employed in the government sector. While this would have made the increase in the salary bill an affordable one to the Treasury, the new government is promising both a large salary increase and a further increase in the size of the public sector.

The question is of finding the additional funds to honour the promises. The government has no savings in the Treasury that can be used, as the annual budget deficit is 8 percent. In order to borrow locally or internationally, the government will have to renegotiate agreements with the international financial institutions. While the government has a sophisticated negotiator

in Sarath Amunugama, the new finance minister, who is an advocate of hard bargaining, whether he can convince the international lenders that spending more money on salaries and subsidies is good economics remains to be seen. The financial and economic skills of the new leadership are yet to be proven.

The difficulties that the new government is experiencing in delivering on its promises with regard to the LTTE and the economy may be the reason why its main area of advocacy and propaganda at this time is constitutional change, which requires a two-thirds majority in Parliament. At the recently concluded general election, the UPFA obtained 46 percent of the popular vote and won 105 seats out of 225 in Parliament. It certainly does not have the required majority on its own, and not even a simple majority. However, achieving two-thirds majority is not an impossible task. The consensual manner in which the 17th Amendment to the constitution (to make provisions for the Constitutional Council and Independent Commissions) was passed in Parliament in October 2001 would indicate this. But it is also true that if constitutional change is seen by other political parties to have a partisan dimension to it, they are unlikely to support it. And indeed, the UPFA's attempt to tinker with the constitution is coming across as a partisan effort to serve its interests rather than those of the country as a whole. So far, no political party represented in Parliament outside the UPFA has welcomed the proposed scheme of constitutional change. On the contrary, they have questioned the appropriateness of focusing on the issue of the executive presidency.

The UPFA's constitutional proposals had not been finalised at the time of writing. However, it is said to envisage, as a first step, the abolition of the executive presidency and changing the electoral system. But the issue that has divided the country is the ethnic conflict and not the executive presidency or the electoral system. It is therefore the ethnic conflict that needs to receive priority in the UPFA's scheme of things. After all, the ethnic conflict pre-dates the executive presidency. It was in 1977, under the prime ministerial system of the 1972 Constitution that the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) asked for its mandate for Tamil Eelam. There is no doubt that the priority issue for the UPFA in its initiative for constitutional change should be the need for a federal system of governance. As changing the constitution is about changing the sovereign law of the country, the representatives of all ethnic communities need to participate in the making of the new document. Whether or not there should be an executive presidency in a federal system can be considered at the same time.

–Jehan Perera

COMPROMISE AND COHABITATION

GEORGE W Bush and General Pervez Musharraf are reportedly good friends. They are also both, at least apparently, on the hot-seat. George Bush is dealing with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Iraq, with resistance to the American occupation growing by the day. Meanwhile, Musharraf has opened himself up on many fronts - from the National Security Council (NSC) (chaired by the president, the council gives the military a legal role in governance with powers of vetting decisions affecting national 'interest') to refusing to commit to taking off his uniform at the end of the year - and therefore remains under intense pressure and scrutiny. Bush and his team of neo-cons continue to harp on Musharraf's stellar performance since September 11, while Musharraf continues to do America's bidding, the recent 'successful' 12-day military offensive in South Waziristan (on the

The structuring of the NSC once and for all will institutionalise the army's grip over state affairs.

Do we have a general or president?

border with Afghanistan) the most visible example.

On the whole, the victimisation of political opponents that the Musharraf government has engaged in consistently since its takeover four and a half years ago has remained largely outside the purview of criticism from the Bush administration. As a gesture of tokenism, the US State Department did issue a statement expressing "regret" at the sentencing of prominent opposition leader Javed Hashmi - also the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) president and staunch critic of Musharraf's 1999 coup - to 23 years in jail with hard labour. Similarly, as most other pliant allies of the United States have done, Musharraf's government has tiptoed around the flagrant violations of democratic and human ethics that have characterised US actions in the war on terror.

Ironically, while Bush could be ousted from the White House by the popular vote come November, Musharraf remains largely unaccountable to anyone within Pakistan. Perhaps more importantly, the geo-political situation in Southwest Asia and the strategic needs of the United States - regardless of whether Bush is in power or not - is what is likely to be the determinant of Musharraf's fate.

Despite the unquestionably frightening amount of power that he wields, Bush is dealing with burgeoning crises, including the unprecedented rise in price of petroleum. Meanwhile, his initiatives in Iraq and Afghanistan, undertaken precisely to maintain the preposterous levels of cheap oil consumption in the US, are beginning at long last to backfire drastically. Then there are the continuing accusations that a lot more was known about September 11 than has been consistently claimed over the past two and-a-half years. Levels of dissent within the United States remain abnormally high, even if not immediately visible through the prism of the mainstream media.

As Bush plunges into his re-election bid,

The 12 days of South Waziristan

HOME TO a population of under a million (mostly Pashtoon), the hilly and mountainous region of South Waziristan in Pakistan shares an 80 kilometre-long border with Afghanistan. Seen as a largely anarchic region, it was in the news recently when a military offensive was launched by Pakistani security forces starting 16 March to capture Al-Qaeda militants, mostly Chechen, Uzbek and Arab, along with supportive local tribesmen suspected of hiding there.

Forces from the Pakistani Army and the Frontier Corps used heavy artillery and gunship helicopters in the 50 sq km area near the regional capital of Wana, around the villages of Schin Warsak, Daza Gundai, Kalusha, Ghaw Khawa and Kari Kot. The firepower from the side of the militants was equally heavy, leaving 16 paramilitary troops dead on the first day. At the end of the 12-day operation 63 militants, mostly Chechen and Uzbek, 93 Pakistani tribesmen and 73 'foreigners' had been killed. The 'successful' operation left 46 military and paramilitary troops dead and another 26 injured. Faux intelligence inputs regarding big 'catches' from the Al-Qaeda were seen to have triggered off the entire operation.

one feels that Musharraf will play a significant role in determining his fate. The much awaited captures of Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden will have much to do with Musharraf's resolve, which, as has been proven in Waziristan, is not lacking. But Musharraf has problems of his own, and continues to create more for himself even as he seeks desperately to consolidate his hold on power. Between the NSC and the uniform issue, at least one thing has become reassuringly clear to Musharraf and his aides - that the mullahs are now firmly on board and are definitely not inclined to rock the boat. And given the absence of any other popular political force on the scene, Musharraf might even consider himself to be sitting pretty.

And why not? The structuring of the NSC once and for all will institutionalise the army's grip over state affairs. The ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Q and the defectors from the Pakistan People's Party that helped create the present majority in parliament required to form a government, have conveniently insisted that Musharraf stay in uniform. And for the time being, the overseas imperial power is patronising the army with no holds barred. The Musharraf bandwagon, meanwhile, keeps rolling along with more and more turncoats and opportunists jumping on board. Incredibly, there are now over 20 sitting ministers in the federal cabinet, not to mention the fact that each provincial cabinet is also bursting at the seams. The rationale is straightforward — in exchange for support this government needs to continue creating patronage-distribution opportunities for 'independents' and opposition deserters. It hardly matters that there is absolutely no need for state ministers for every second portfolio. Furthermore, there is the burden on the national exchequer of the inordinate number of sitting ministers. Rather than dismantling the decadent, patronage-based political culture that prevails in the country, the Musharraf years have in fact reinforced it to a very large extent.

Catching up with the president.

Jamali & Co.

Of course, none of this is happening without the support and international 'legitimacy' that the Bush administration has provided Musharraf, in spite of major potential crises such as the Qadeer Khan nuclear proliferation fiasco ('Inside the nuclear closet', March-April 2004 *Himal*). What concerns the principled few who continue to demand democratisation of state and society in Pakistan is the possibility that, sooner or later, a far more convincing political face than that of Prime Minister Jamali & Co. will be restored to the seat of government because of the imperatives of international 'legitimacy' - to be dictated by the United States, of course. In particular, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the only large political party in this country that has actively refrained from criticising the US in recent times, would be the most obvious candidate to take on this job if and when the need arises.

But then, as they say this is deja vu all over again! The political elite of Pakistan have always settled for second best at the hands of the army, and there should be little doubt that this dynamic has ensured that both the political process and the people of Pakistan remain in suspended animation as the economic and power elite cohabit with the military. The political elite may be completely unrepresentative of the people of this country, but it is definitely more representative than a hierarchical institution such as the army ever can be, which is why it needs to be brought in and compromised. Regardless of how strong or weak the opposition to military rule has been, Pakistan's political elite have never wilfully challenged the army's monopoly over state affairs when perhaps it could. In the 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in spite of coming to power riding the crest

Rather than dismantling the decadent, patronage-based political culture, the Musharraf years have reinforced it.

of an anti-establishment wave, gave the army the option to come back into the political fold after the ignominy of East Pakistan. In 1988, his daughter Benazir had the option to defy the military establishment after returning to mainstream politics on the back of considerable popular support, but she too compromised at an early stage of her comeback, thereby setting the stage for the debacle of the 1990s.

On this occasion, should Bush — or John Kerry depending on the outcome of the November presidential election in the US — decide that the image of Musharraf's military rule needs to be tempered by the populist liberalism of Benazir's PPP, some might consider this a victory for democracy. But it would not be, because once again Pakistani political elite would be compromising basic democratic principles to come to power. And what kind of power would the PPP wield in such a dispensation? The situation since October 2002 has provided a glimpse of just how independent puppet civilian rule is.

The political elite may be completely unrepresentative of the people of Pakistan, but it is definitely more representative than a hierarchical institution such as the army.

So let us hope that Pakistan's politicians do not make a mess of things again. Not because they are "bloody civilians" as military masters are so keen to categorise those who are not privileged enough to wear a uniform. Not because their supposed constituents - the people – compel them to make a mess of things. But because they are short-sighted, opportunists, and because their class interests simply do not permit them to do any differently. It is not often that the nexus between global imperialism, the state elite and multinational capital is exposed in the manner that it has been over the past two years ('Fauji's foundation', November 2003 *Himal*). Ordinary Pakistanis have come to realise that the army is hardly the country's great defender as it claims to be, but should the PPP be so foolish as to come back to power at the behest of the United States, the army will once again get itself out of a very tight jam.

–Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

'MONOLITH INDIA' AND THE VOTE BANK

VOTE BANK politics has come to become an Indian reality and democracy in India has come to be the fine art of balancing different vote banks with very little exception. Some political parties may openly denounce the politics of cultivating vote banks but overtly or covertly they practice it in their own constituencies, for political survival and advancement.

It has been said that democratic processes would put an end to India's unique divisions, which were wilfully exploited by

the colonial masters to perpetuate their rule. It was reasoned that periodic elections would gradually diminish the divisions based on caste, creed and religion. However, in the process of empowering the masses, democracy has sharpened the diversity by transforming them into vote banks and important 'variables' in the political process.

The trend is most prominent in caste categories within the majority Hindu community. Political parties exploit the aspirations of caste groups which differ from one another, or are at least made to think that they differ in significant ways. In fact, many political parties have become synonymous with certain caste categories. The Bahujan Samaj party and the Samajwadi party in Uttar Pradesh represent 'lower' and intermediary castes as do the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) and the Pattali Makkal Katchi

(PMK) in Tamil Nadu

Religion is the other broad category on which hinges the survival of several political parties. The leading party of the ruling National Democratic Alliance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is primarily a Hindu party trying to market Hinduism in the cloak of nationalism. Even its secular face is Hindutva. The Akali Dal in Punjab and the Muslim League in Kerala espouse the cause of the Sikhs and Muslims interests at the provincial level.

Language is another category in the diversity among the peoples of India. Various political parties have cultivated linguistic constituencies. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu, as well as the Assam Gon Parishad in Assam, all flaunt their linguistic constituencies.

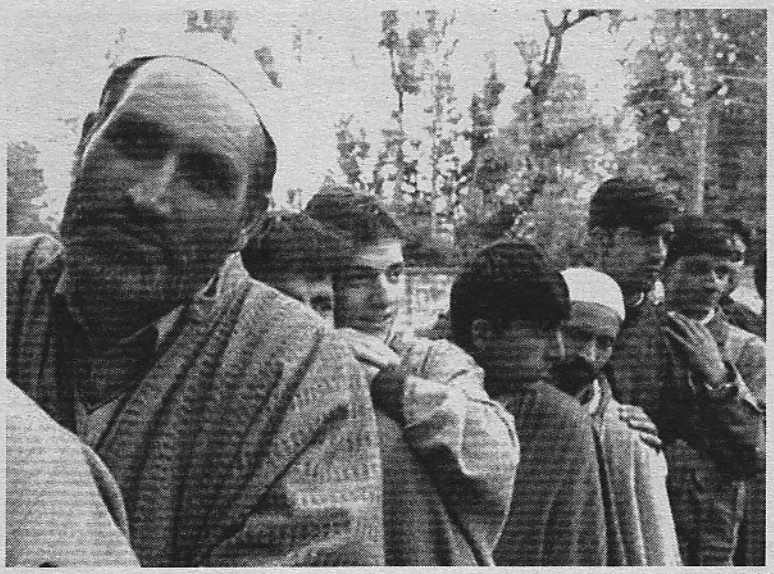
The other category for political mobilisation is ethnicity. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) in the tribal-dominated Jharkhand and some other political parties in the Northeast and the hills and tribal regions elsewhere have ethnic groups as their vote banks. Provincialism also forms the basis of political divisions with political parties like the Shiv Sena, DMK, AIADMK, Biju Janta Dal, Assam Gon Prashid, Haryana Vikas Party being province-based political parties. Then there are parties which have farmers as their constituency. Ajit Singh's Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh and Om Prakash Chautala's Harayana Vikas Party fall in this category.

The left parties, CPI and CPI (M), are ideology-based political entities and have a committed ideological cadre as their constituency. West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura are the few states where these parties are strong.

Centrifugal forces

Even during the British days there existed the religious, the left, the pro-Raj, the pro-worker, the pro-farmer, and the pro-landed class political parties, among many others, which espoused the cause of these myriad groups thus creating their separate vote banks. The general elections in 1936 and 1946 brought to fore the choices of vote banks for different political parties in India.

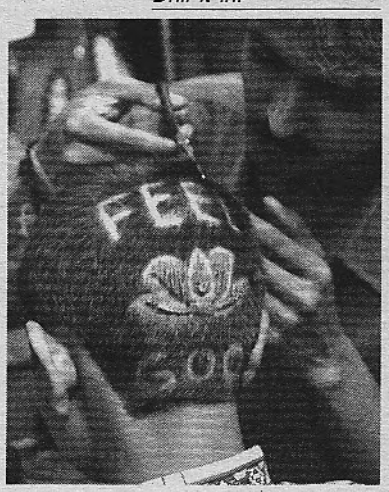
The Congress, which had a pivotal role in the freedom struggle, was the natural choice of many Indians for at least the first



three general elections after Independence. The Congress vote bank comprised upper caste Hindus, Dalits and Muslims. The party had a smooth run till 1967, when for the first time it lost its majority not in one but in nine states of the country. That year is considered to be a watershed in Indian politics. Since then two sets of political forces emerged in India – one that challenged the all-India supremacy of the Congress and the other that tried to break free from the centralised structure of the state.

In fact, from 1967 onwards there has been a tug-of-war going on in Indian politics. Would political parties with overarching all-India characteristics govern the country or would regional satraps forge linkages to run the affairs of the country? The trajectory that has been emerging of late reveals that all the parties ruling at the centre have had to accommodate parties and groups representing different regional constituencies through coalition arrangements.

Drill it in!



The first non-Congress government was formed in 1977 - a coalition of several parties led by the Janata Party, an offshoot of popular socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia's Socialist Party. The hotchpotch coalition had sprung to challenge the supremacy of Indira Gandhi's Congress. It even included the BJP that emerged out of the Jan Sangh (formed in 1967 to represent Hindu aspirations). Since 1967, parties have

Hema Malini, 55, is one of the BJP's.

emerged left and right of the centre at the national level, and a flurry of political parties have come up at the regional and provincial level. The Shiv Sena in Maharastra, the Asam Gon Parishad in Assam, the Telugu Desam party in Andhra Pradesh mentioned earlier are some of them.

The other phase of political development began at the national level with the rise of the BJP since 1984 in the country. The party began cultivating the majority Hindu vote bank by espousing the cause of the Hindus of the country. It attacked the Congress for pampering minorities and cultivated its own constituency on the anti-Muslim platform.

The National Front government led by VP Singh, which drew inspiration from the Janata Party of 1977 and the Socialist Party of 1967, came up in a big way in 1989 by widening the net of the vote bank to other caste categories. Thus the Mandal Commission report which allowed 27 percent reservation for OBCs in government jobs in that year was another watershed event in Indian politics. As a result of the implementation of the Mandal report, intermediate castes like Yadavs and Kurmis came into the forefront in the Ganga plain. Parties like the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh, the Rashtriya Janta Dal and the Samata Party in Bihar and the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa are all post-Mandal offspring.

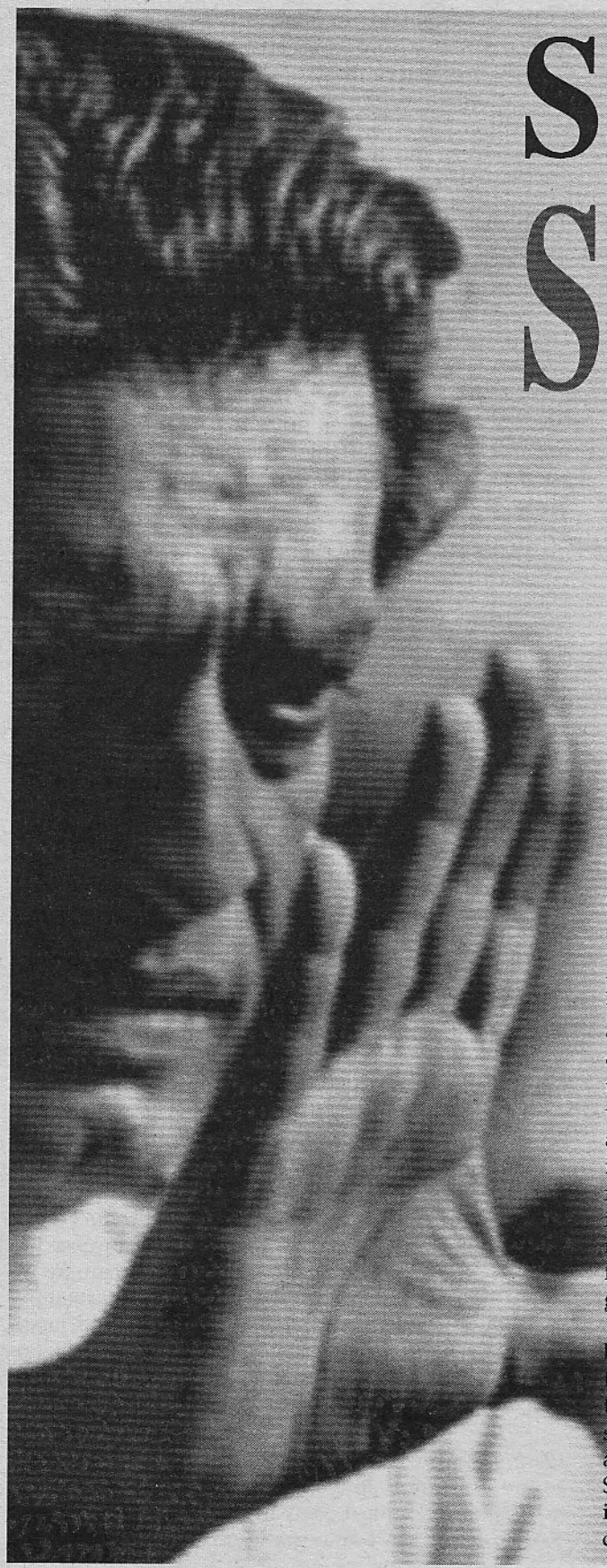
Even during the British days there existed the religious, the left, the pro-Raj, the pro-worker, the pro-farmer, and the pro-landed class political parties.

The United Front government led by Deve Gowda in 1996 was yet another attempt by left of centre forces to govern the country. The United Front government had regional and provincial coalition partners such as the TDP and DMK which played the major role in holding power at the centre in New Delhi. The formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1998 led by the BJP reinforces the evolution in Indian politics where regional and local political parties are increasing their influence at the national level by forging alliances with national parties to form governments at the centre.

While it is difficult to predict whether national parties will be overtaken by combinations, of provincial parties, all political parties will continue to draw sustenance from diverse categories within the Indian electorate. There is no end in sight to the phenomena of vote bank politics in India. As new groups come forward to demand space in politics, the creation of new vote banks is an accelerating process. There is emerging consciousness among various marginalised groups to get united in the course of political mobilisation.

The result is the emergence of newer political parties to espouse the cause of the differentiated, and often marginalised, of India. The fate of democracy is thus entwined with vote banks. However, in the process of new vote banks being created, it is also true that narrow and parochial agendas are gaining an upper hand even as the broad all-India vote banks lose ground. In the mushrooming of local-regional political parties some would see Indians discovering their political identity, with local and regional considerations gaining ground and it being harder to tie down voters as 'monolith Indians'? The answers open up a big debate — is India is a nation or a nation of nations. Political developments point to the latter.

–Syed Ali Mujtaba



Satyajit's SANSAR

There is more to the man than his films. Satyajit Ray's philosophy towards life and inter-personal relationships is etched in each frame of his movies, which eventually made him the prototypical Southasian humanist.

by ***Partha Chatterjee***

Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (The Song of The Little Road, 1955), was the turning point in Indian cinema. Before it, songs and villains were the two staples of Hindi commercial films of Bombay, and those in the other regional languages. If the lead characters known as the hero and the heroin felt happy, sad, perplexed or just foot-loose they burst into song. This courtesy was sometimes extended to other supporting players, usually to comment on the action of the plot. Then of course, there was the story, if it could at all be called that, hinged on the principle of blame. The characters were puppets in the hands of fate and its agents usually other members of the immediate or extended family or their own social group or quite another. The narrative was usually inspired by elements from two epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In short, Indian cinema before the advent of Satyajit was folk-theatre in film that drew sustenance from myth, legend and religion.

There had hardly been a more auspicious film debut anywhere since Orson Welles' epoch-making first film *Citizen Kane* in 1941, which did him more harm than good — a masterpiece at 26 and a life in exile since 1950, resulting from specious charges of extravagance and intransigence made by Hollywood. But Satyajit's career graph was the exact opposite: growing appreciation and fame, a reputation for always completing a project well within a frugal budget, con-

sistently making a reasonable profit for his producers and sometimes even more as in the case of eight of his films. Even the versatile and gifted Francois Truffaut of the French New-Wave who made as effective a first feature film as *Four Hundred Blows* ('Les Quatre cents Coups') in 1959 as did his iconoclast colleague Jean Luc Goddard a year earlier with *Breathless* ('A boute de soufflé'), could hardly have matched the sheer maturity of *Pather Panchali*.

The debut film was adapted from Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopahyaya's poetic saga of Bengali rural life in the early 1900s. The sprawling novel was pruned by the fledgling script writer, its essence retained with unusual skill. Satyajit had written a couple of feature film scripts earlier including the very 'Hollywoodish' – his own word – adaptation of Tagore's *Home and the World* or *Ghare-Baire* which he was to direct late in his career. There were no songs in *Pather Panchali* or, for that matter, villains. Life with its ebbs and flows and its enduring majesty was the real hero on screen. The tragedies and the lighter moments in the lives of the members of an impoverished Brahmin family had a truthfulness

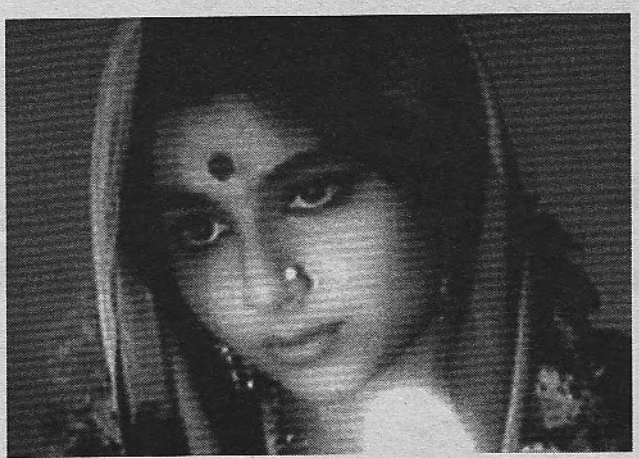
Apur Sansar (1959)

rarely seen in cinema. Time and its passage, a cardinal principle of the medium, were captured with unusual fidelity. The film's Wordsworthian tone, however unintentional, struck a chord in the hearts of Western audiences particularly in England and America. At home, too, *Pather Panchali* was a success with audiences in Calcutta even before it was awarded the prize for 'The Best Human Document' at the 1956 Cannes film festival. A young master had sprung full-grown from the head of Jove.

Panegyrics aside, it is necessary to point out that no other director had made a film of such quality without an actual apprenticeship in the craft of cinema. Ingmar Bergman had to direct 17 films before he made the excellent comedy *Smiles on a Summer Night* in 1956. Similarly, Fellini, Antonioni, Rossellini, de Sica, Ford, Renoir, Hawks, Mizoguchi, Murnau, Ophuls, Lang, Kurosawa, Ozu, Lubitsch, Hitchcock, Bresson and Resnais all had to graduate via lesser works to a truly ambitious one. Even Goddard, Truffaut and Rohmer had made shorts before they did longer fiction films. Ray was the only one who had never directed a film of any kind before.

As a boy and then later he had been a good still photographer. Along with Hari S Dasgupta, the America-returned pupil of the great Jean Renoir and another friend, Chidananda Dasgupta, Satyajit helped found the Calcutta Film Society in 1948. They screened foreign, mainly Russian classics. This experience supplemented the avid film-watching, usually of Hollywood fare in the earlier years. Then on a 1949 trip to London at the behest of his employers DJ Keymer, a prominent English advertising agency based in India, he saw 99 films in three months. Vittorio de Sica's neo-realist masterpiece *The Bicycle Thieves* made a deep impression and helped him choose filmmaking as his vocation in life.

Satyajit had, in 1950, been an observer on the sets of the Hindi film *Mashaal* (The Torch), directed by his famous cousin Nitin Bose in Bombay for matinee idol



Devi (1960)

Ashok Kumar's production company Filmistan. He wrote in the same year the script for *A Perfect Day*, an unusual ad film directed by Hari S Dasgupta, in which the consumption of a packet of Deluxe Tenor cigarettes is depicted with humour and, in the end, surreal wit. Those were more leisurely times and any product could be promoted on screen over 10 minutes as opposed to today's 30 seconds. The director had graciously allowed his inexperienced friend to attend the shooting and editing of the film to help him get a feel of the medium. Later in the years of celebrity he wrote for Dasgupta the scripts for two prestigious documentaries: the first a 50 minute Technicolor extravaganza for the Tatas that showed the production of steel at the company's plant in Jamshedpur and, the second, on the necessity of immunisation sponsored by Sandoz, the famous Swiss pharmaceutical company. These were not really written for money but as gratitude to a friend who had

helped him gather first-hand experience of cinema. Earlier, as chief assistant director on Renoir's *The River* shot in Barrackpore, near Calcutta, Dasgupta had introduced Satyajit to the great man. Dasgupta achieved eminence as a documentarist and had made a poetic, Flaherty-like reconstruction of a Bengali village bride's return home for the annual Durga Pooja celebration. The film, *Panchthupi*, had a seminal influence and indeed was the inspiration for *Pather Panchali*.

The only cinematic exercise the young Satyajit had undergone on his own was a vivid, accurate story board in ink and brush for a proposed documentary on the sitar virtuoso Ravi Shanker. His powers of observation were apparent even then, as was his understanding of music. He drew the finger positions on the sitar correctly to suggest the particular note being played in each frame. Ray's first film marked the beginning of other people's careers as well. The original choice to do the camera, Nemai Ghosh, a card-carrying communist, had had to leave Calcutta for Madras to earn a living after the Communist Party of India had been banned. Subrata Mitra, later to win enormous admiration from fellow professionals, especially abroad, had at age 21 never operated a cine camera before. He had been an observer on Renoir's *The River* and impressed the unit with his meticulously maintained lighting diary. As a still photographer, he had shown a flair for composition. A tyro director had talked a fellow tyro much younger than himself into filming a full-length feature!

Bansi Chandragupta, the art director, had assisted Eugene Lourie on the Renoir film and brought his newly acquired knowledge of set construction and dressing to his first independent assignment, which had to have almost all its sets built on location in a village near Calcutta. The end result was, in retrospect, exceptional. Dulal Dutta, the editor, was the only full-time professional in the team. Ravi Shanker came back after the fine cut to create a haunting background score. The sitar for the famous scene of the sweet seller being followed by Apu, his sister Durga and a dog was actually played by the cameraman Subrata Mitra. Amongst the actors, only Kanu Banerjee (Apu and Durga's Brahmin priest father), Chunibala Devi (Indir Thakur, the aged relative) and Tulsi Chakravarti (Prasanna, the village grocer-cum school teacher) were trained professionals.

Aparajito (1956)

Charulata (1964)

Seemabaddha (1971)

Jana Aranya (1975)

Agantuk (1991)

Satyajit's first venture set him off on a path of continuous artistic and commercial success. His films, modestly budgeted even by Indian standards, always earned money steadily for the producers over the long term. Tarun Majumdar, the very competent Bengali commercial filmmaker, always thought of his illustrious senior as the most bankable of Bengali directors, a man who succeeded in the international art house circuit and in the commercial set-up of Bengal, particularly Calcutta. This was possible because of the lucidity of expression in Satyajit's work that reached a wide variety of people. Subtlety in his case was a help and not a hindrance, contrary to the beliefs of the film distributors of Bombay who sabotaged the run of *Shatranj Ke Khilari* despite a respectable showing in Delhi and Lucknow: but that was much later, in 1977. The accessibility of his work meant continuous dignified employment and a middle-class existence, relatively free from financial worries.

It was a lonely life, though, with hardly a confidante to share his ideas with. The quick disappearance of the uniquely gifted Ritwik Ghatak (see *Himal*, November 2003) from the film scene was to Satyajit a personal loss. Between 1952 and '62 Ghatak had directed six films, and four of them, namely *Ajaantrik*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*, were destined to stand the test of time as was his penultimate film *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, made in 1972. Ritwik died of alcoholism and penury four years later.

Satyajit felt his absence continuously and said so in a long interview given in the early Seventies to *Calcutta*, a fine but short-lived magazine devoted to culture.

Satyajit and Ritwik were the two masters in Indian cinema born out of the nation-building energies inspired by the freedom struggle. Both possessed a healthy eclecticism and were clearly benefited by their knowledge of the English language. At the same time, each was rooted in the Bengali ethos and became a fine writer of Bengali prose (Ghatak, mainly in his early and late twenties and Satyajit in middle-age and later). Unlike his friend, Satyajit wrote his published prose exclusively for the teenager.

Pather Panchali (1955)

The mind's loneliness

Lack of competition can be dangerous for even the most protean of artistes; it can lead to all kinds of complications. In Satyajit's case, it was irritability and an inability to acknowledge the contribution to the success of his films by gifted collaborators like Subrata Mitra and Bansi Chandragupta. After Mitra left for good in 1966 following *Nayak*, his very able assistant Soumendu Roy took over. But Ray insisted on operating his own camera, and reduced a fine craftsman like Roy to a 'lighting man'. He too left after *Ghare-Baire* (1983-84), unable to take curt orders from Sandip Ray, the director's son, who he had looked upon as a nephew. Bansi Chandragupta had left much earlier only to return once, when requested by the director for *Shatranj Ke Khilari*.

> His films like his beliefs were both true because they were beautiful and beautiful because they were true, thus bringing together Tagore and Gandhi without intending to consciously.

Ghare-Baire was made when Ray, a habitual indoorsman and chain smoker, had the first of his three heart attacks. Son Sandip took over a part of the shooting and the entire post-production. Soumendu Roy and editor Dulal Dutta, despite being peremptorily ordered about by Ray Junior, stuck to their task with teeth gritted. But the film was uneven and even boring in places not being totally made by Satyajit himself. Ashok Bose's art direction was just about adequate and an unheard-of lapse in detail concerning a tonsured widow in white with tweezed eyebrows, did raise quite a few. Casting Shatilekha Chatterjee, a stolid actress in the pivotal role of Bimala was the only mistake the director made in casting a part during his long career. Apologists of course tried to find hidden gems of wisdom in a competent but dull narration. The one high point in the film was the surprisingly sensitive portrait of Nikhilesh, the reasonable, decent, wronged, loving husband etched by Victor Banerjee.

It was time to accept the fact that the mind was tiring sooner than before, because the body could no longer take the strain of a punishing work schedule Satyajit had maintained without a second thought since his mid-twenties. Apart from writing the script of his films and composing the music, he directed and held the camera. Then there was the additional responsibility of publishing *Sandesh* since its revival in 1961. The very entertaining and informative children's magazine had enjoyed immense popularity under the stewardship of his late father, Sukumar Ray, who gave it stature immediately after the Great War of 1914-18 until his untimely death in 1923. Satyajit, 38 years later, roped in friends to write and himself devised games and puzzles for the magazine and tried various stratagems to keep the costs down. Inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's immortal detective Sherlock Holmes and his indefatigable assistant Dr. Watson, Satyajit created the private investigator Pradosh Mitter, A.K.A. Feluda and his juvenile assistant Topshey to amuse middle and early senior school kids. Every year a who-done-it featuring this duo appeared like clock-work to coincide with the Durga Puja season in autumn. It was inevitable that health and quality would both be eventually affected. Satyajit was obviously working far too much, perhaps in a vain attempt to ward off loneliness.

There was from early youth a matter-of-fact acceptance of his many gifts, and at the same time a paradoxical shyness and diffidence in acknowledging them. Satyajit learned to draw very well as a student in 1940-41 at Shantiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's pastoral university. He also sang in a fine natural baritone and had an unusual ear for music, which became yet more receptive since his attachment to his cousin Bijoya in his adolescence. He was to marry her in 1949, and she, to be his best friend, most trusted associate and the one person who perhaps knew a little bit more about music than he did. She had been a child prodigy and was expected to be an outstanding exponent of Hindustani music. A curiosity about Western classical music led to a keen interest and then a surprising degree of proficiency, so much so that her barrister father saw in his daughter a future Galle Curci. It was Bijoya who taught the lad Satyajit how to read music. It was her coaxing that made him cut a private disc of an Atul Prasad (one

of the finer West Bengal musicians) song.

While at Shantiniketan, Satyajit made the acquaintance of Prof. Alex Aronson, a Jewish academic in exile from Hitler's Germany. Aronson had a formidable collection of 78 rpm discs of Western classical music. Together they discovered an old, unused piano in bad shape that had once belonged to Tagore. Satyajit tinkered on it and soon became a competent two-finger pianist. In the last years of his career, he was to use a Rowland Synthesizer to compose the music for his films. It was, in his case, both a compromise and a convenience, used as he was to the rounded tones of the acoustic piano. Apart from Bijoya, Adi Gazdar, a practicing medical doctor and a knowledgeable and skilful pianist, also helped Satyajit in his musical studies. Alok Nath De, the fine flautist and arranger in Bengali films, did pass on valuable tips on orchestration, tonal characteristics of various instruments, and about vocal colours.

Aparajito (1956)

Satyajit could apply everything he had learned to the music in his own productions. After a spirited first collaboration with Ravi Shanker in *Pather Panchali*, he found it increasingly difficult to work with him. One-time associations with Ustad Vilayat Khan and Ustad Ali Akbar, both famous instrumentalists in the Hindustani style, did not prove fruitful as they were unable to compose music to suit the limited time frame of a given scene. Ray's background score for *Kanchenjungha* (1962) was evocative. The film was an exceptionally successful experiment in using real time as screen time to give glimpses into the lives of various members of an upper-class Bengali family on vacation, spending an afternoon in picturesque Darjeeling. The music had to reflect the thoughts and desires of the characters and tacitly comment on them occasionally. The composer's efforts were commensurate with his ambitions.

Illustration from Sandesh.

The high point of Satyajit's career, one could say, were the songs in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha, 1968). The sparkling musical fantasy for children based on a story by Satyajit's grandfather Upendra Kishore Roy Choudhury, had catchy tunes with words to match. Every song was a hit and the album became a best seller. This was not the first time he had tasted success. Four years earlier, his music for Merchant Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* became very popular and the LP sold 500,000 copies. He grasped the intricacies of composing quickly and by the time he came to do the music for 'Satyajit Ray Presents', a TV serial based on his stories directed by his son Sandip, he was in full command of his abilities. The haunting signature tune to the initial thirteen episodes summed up the key theme linking all the stories -- that life is full of surprises and uncertainties.

An active desire to appreciate other kinds of artistic activity than his own also helped Satyajit have a generous world-view akin to Chekhov's. Like the Russian master, Ray was also a moralist with a strong sense of right and wrong. This awareness also informed his cinema. His Brahmo Samaj background and widowed mother Suprava Ray's loving but watchful upbringing in his formative years instilled in him a sense of independence. Satyajit realised early, the necessity of earning an honest living -- and enjoying it.

There was also a keen sense of the absurd in him. He laughed uproariously when he found that a certain viewer had caught his joke in the final shot of the Monihara episode in *Teen Kanya* (Three Daughters/ Two Daughters, 1961 -- only two of these three shorts were distributed in the West, hence the conflict in translating the title). The seedy looking narrator walks away after telling his story of a neurotic woman obsessed with jewellery who comes back as a spirit to drive her husband mad; the camera gently tilts down to his *ganja chillum* at the end of the scene, suggesting that the whole thing was the figment of the poor fellow's imagination.

Accidental happiness

Satyajit could sincerely appreciate a film even if it differed completely from his own style. Coming down the staircase of Archana cinema in New Delhi in 1977 after a screening of Andrei Tarkovski's immortal *Andrei Rublev* during the International Film Festival, he expressed his innermost feelings simply by saying "I wish I had made this film". Tarkovski's hymn to the human spirit had by some quirk of fate been funded by the rigid commissars of the Soviet Union in the mid-1960s. Satyajit's own attitude towards communism, especially its Indian version, was at best ambivalent. In artistic matters, he felt differently. Constantine Stanislavski, the aristocratic pioneer of poetic realism in early 20th century Russian theatre, was someone he admired. Sergei Eisenstein's silent masterpiece *Battle-*

ship Potenkin and his final film in 1946-48, the two-part *Ivan the Terrible*, the last one in colour, made a deep impression.

The director had genuine admiration for many of the members of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), the cultural wing of the undivided Communist Party of India. The organisation had come into being following the Bengal Famine of 1943 that killed five million people. It made farmers and industrial workers aware of their rights as citizens and at the same time made a dent in the consciousness of certain sections amongst the educated middle-class. Satyajit was impressed by the rousing vocals of the IPTA song squads, the pictures of Sunil Janah, the Party photographer, and the linocuts, drawings and paintings of Chittoprasad which passionately championed the cause of the have-nots. At the same time, he understood that the CPI, despite its best intentions, was completely incapable of ever taking charge of the Indian state.

Satyajit realised early the necessity of earning an honest living -- and enjoying it.

Satyajit's own predilections were broadly liberal and certainly humanist. His films, like his beliefs, were both true because they were beautiful and beautiful because they were true, thus bringing together Tagore and Gandhi without intending to do so consciously. This interplay of truth and beauty gave his best works an organic wholeness. To those who pursue extreme ideologies like rampant, violent capitalism or draconian communism, such clear, innocent faith and the promise of renewal might even seem embarrassing.

Starry-eyed lyricism was never a part of Satyajit's vision, as suggested by many a stilted critic of the times. There was from the beginning, alongside the idealism, deep knowledge about human nature and conduct in which kindness, cruelty, expediency and sacrifice overlap at certain moments. In *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished, 1956), for instance, Apu after having lost sister Durga and father Hari leaves his widowed mother Sarbajaya behind in their village home, to go to study in Calcutta after receiving a scholarship. What would be considered as 'taking wing' in the West, even now, in many quarters in India is seen as a grave dereliction of duty. However, Ray invests this moment in the film with an air of inevitability, rather than as a fall from grace.

Apu's destiny will take him away to a future full of discovery, uncertainty, even grief, where restlessness will hold sway over moments of respite, and happiness shall come as if by accident. He marries Aparna, his teenage bride fortuitously, having gone to attend her wedding in a village at the invitation of his friend who happens to be her cousin. Just before the ceremony, it is discovered that the prospective groom is an imbicile. Apu steps in gallantly to the rescue. The married life is a quiet delight but ends abruptly as Aparna dies in childbirth leaving behind their baby son, Kajol. Having been robbed of his happiness by this sudden twist of fate, Apu loses his sense of logic and refuses to see the child, born in the home of his maternal grand parents.

Wanderlust takes over and Apu travels to distant places carrying his sorrow and restlessness within him for the next fewyears. Wisdom ultimately prevails to restore balance. Apu is reconciled with his kindergarten-age son. Father and child become friends after some hesitation, and the end has them embarking on a journey of discovery. Life has extracted a heavy price before parting with one of its simplest truths—that loving and sharing is the key to happiness and contentment. By equating a human being's life with the four seasons, Satyajit brought to his early films a folk wisdom that has withstood the onslaught of the trends of critical analysis bent upon 'demystifying' every phenomena of existence, including the most difficult and complex of all, that of the relations between human beings.

Freudian anguish first made its appearance in *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970) to startle the director's admirers. His technique too had changed to accommodate his subject matter. The protagonist Siddhartha, caught in the process of trying to get a job to keep up appearances in an orphaned middle-class family with depleted resources, has to sacrifice his ego and his left-wing ideals. His process of growing up involves loosing all his illusions including his love for Keya, a girl from the Westernised upper-middle class that is deeply attached to social climbing and the benefits it brings. Ray used black and white negative images and abrupt jump cuts along with use of discordant sound to portray the alienation of the wounded Siddhartha. In a pivotal scene, he is asked in a job interview what he considers to be the most significant event of the times. "The war in Vietnam, Sir", replies Siddhartha to the surprise of the member of the selection committee. "Even

more important than the moon landing?" "Yes sir", he insists, saying that it was a logical outcome of the development of science in the 20th century, whereas Vietnam stood for the victory of a supremely courageous people who overcame their poverty to defeat the mightiest nation in the world. Siddhartha does not get the job and ends up as the representative of a small pharmaceutical company whose products he pushes in rural and small-town Bengal.

Chabi Biswas in Jalsaghar (1958)

Open anguish, even despair, is seen for the first time in the director's work was muted and even subtly diverted in the next film *Seemabaddha* (Company Limited, 1971). The film is an intimate set-piece about the gradual loss of values, and hence, humanity in the educated middle-class protagonist Shyamal Chatterjee's rise in the corporate world. The presence of the Naxalites so palpably felt in *Pratidwandi* is suggested through distant bomb blasts in the sound track and the gentle queries of Tutul, the sister-in-law from Patna on a brief visit to Calcutta. The ambitious lead character has to break a strike in the company's factory in order to get a leg up in the corporate ladder. He sells his soul without much ado, to the sorrow of the adoring Tutul, who silently takes note of his fall. The photography is grey, in keeping with the mood of the film.

When Chabi Biswas died in a car accident in 1962, Ray declared that it was no longer possible to write certain kinds of roles because there would not be an actor available to play them.

The folly of man's ambition and nature's benign bounty is juxtaposed in *Asani Sanket* (Distant Thunder, 1973), which revolves around the man-made famine of 1943. The verdant countryside with plants and flowers blooming and ripe paddy in the fields serves ultimately as an epiphany in the course of events soon to become tragic beyond comprehension. *Asani Sanket* came at a time before 'Development Studies' had taken hold, and it left many Ray admirers, especially in the West, uneasy with its deeply felt, dignified treatment of an overwhelming, senseless tragedy that could have been avoided.

Perhaps to recover from the emotional exhaustion of the previous film, Satyajit next made *Sonar Kella* (The Golden Fortress, 1974), a thriller for slightly older children between twelve and fifteen, featuring his detective Prodosh Mitter a.k.a. Feluda and his devoted assistant Topshey. The story is about a precocious little boy, Mukul, who recalls his previous birth in a desert town that has a golden fortress. A parapsychologist gets interested and takes him on a trip to investigate the matter. A pair of comical villains upset his plans thinking there is a huge treasure to be discovered, till Feluda and company come to the rescue. Made with the panache and joy that informed cinema in its formative years, *Sonar Kella* wore in its virtues lightly.

Satyajit Ray on the sets of Ghare–Baire (1984)

The next film *Jana Aranya* (The Middleman, 1975) marked a return to black and white and the despondence over the loss of basic values in contemporary Bengali/Indian society. This was the darkest film he had ever made, and Satyajit called it his most ruthless film. The nation had plunged into despair over the complete disregard for democracy by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of the ruling Congress Party, who had declared a state of national emergency to quell the gathering opposition to her lust for power and the institutionalisation of corruption.

Somnath, an educated young man, decides to open a small businessman after failing to get a reasonable job despite his best efforts. He is befriended by Bishuda who teaches him the ropes. The elderly fixer offers his protégé a banana on a particular occasion and without intended innuendo, asks him, "Have you ever tried eating your own banana?" Setting the tone for the story. The aspiring entrepreneur makes steady progress, to the amusement of his worldly-wise older brother and bewilderment of his retired, old, upright father.

The hour of reckoning arrives and Somnath is tested. His path to progress is blocked by a randy Marwari who can give him a profitable contract provided he gets him a girl to appease his appetite. At first Somnath does not understand what is required of him and seeks the advice of Adak Babu, a veteran of the commercial market and familiar with its codes. He promptly directs Somnath to one Natabar Mitra, a comic scoundrel by inclination, who advices acquiescence. But finding a girl for a libidinous tycoon is not easy.

The first attempt to rope in a comely, compliant housewife fails because her drunken husband returns unexpectedly. The second, ends in farce when Mitra and Somnath go to a respectable lady to find her two daughters 'otherwise occupied' and are set upon by a frolicsome dog, a big German Shepherd,

while she holds forth on a former boss of her elder one's who took her to Hong Kong on business and promptly put her to 'work'.

The third and final piece begins on a bizarre comic note with a pimp from rural Bengal reading from the Kirtibasi *Ramayana* about the betrayal of Sita and the coming of the cad and turncoat Vibhishana. It ends with Somnath escorting Kauna/Juthika, who happens to be his best friend Sukumar's sister, operating as a prostitute, to the hotel room of the businessman who shall help awaken the lad's sleeping destiny. When he returns home after the ordeal, Somnath tells his father that the contract is in the bag. The old man smiles in relief. But the audience has other ideas. An earlier scene comes to mind when his father asks him, "Tell me son why should they award you a contract? On what basis?" Bhombol, Somnath's elder brother promptly interjects, "On the basis of his bribe of course!"

Mahanagar (1963)

Jana Aranya is a story of innocence lost. It is also about the eclipse of stable middle-class values and the triumph of heartless materialism. Sometime at the beginning of the film, Somnath and Sukumar as young, frustrated job aspirants are seen sitting by the Ochterlony monument indulging in lighthearted banter.

Sukumar : "they ask irrelevant questions...."

Somnath : "for instance?"

Sukumar : "who was Ramachandra's sister? As if knowing the answer would guarantee the job".

Somnath : "I know the answer to that one. Shanta. Shanta was the name of Rama's sister".

By the time the story ends the characters have been swept away in a wave of existential despair. Satyajit, for all his Brahmo correctness including the use of a Rabindra Sangeet in counterpoint to the gradually unfolding tragedy, cannot ultimately avoid retaining, however reluctantly, the cynicism of a Bertold Brecht and the hopelessness of a Samuel Beckett in his tableaux of contemporary Bengali life.

Satyajit's characters do things. They are usually curious people.

Grand design

Satyajit's obvious versatility and ease along with the capability of doing consistently fine work, with of course a few exceptions, puzzled those looking for an auteur. Many such theorists saw him as a slightly more sophisticated version of a master craftsman like David Lean or Carol Reed. Unlike the two Englishmen, Ray was never a director for hire. Every project—except for the who-done-it *Chiriyakhana* (The Zoo, 1967) which he did for the financial benefit of his unit members – was chosen consciously.

It was difficult for the 'film society types' of his times, as it is for their successors in ours, to understand how a man could make so many films disparate in subject matter yet sublimally linked by a vision of the world. Clarity of thought and feeling were present in all of them, including the lesser ones. This classical trait is what flummoxes the post-modernists who usually tend to look upon life as a series of accidents on which to improvise. They forget that nature has its own rhythms and patterns that can be felt but not quite intellectually comprehended. There is indeed a grand design that holds together all living phenomenon and endows them with life and energy.

People still wonder how the same director could have made a profoundly moving comedy-fantasy like *Parash Pathar* (The Philosopher's Stone, 1951); a tragic study of crumbling feudalism, like *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room, 1958); *Kanchenjungha* (1962) an elegant, probing portrait of a Bengali upper-class family in real time; a *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963) that chronicles so sensitively the struggles of a barely middle-class conservative family in Calcutta trying to not slip down the social ladder by letting the daughter-in-law of the house go to work; *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife, 1964) and *Aranyer Din Ratri* (Days and Nights in the Forest, 1969) — the first, a period-piece about a neglected wife in an enlightened zamindar family at the end of the 19th century, and the second a contemporary serio-comedy, both films echoing the most positive of Chekovian sentiments; effervescent children's films like *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and *Sonar Kella;* moving shorts about the world of children, namely *Two* (a.k.a The Parable of Two, 1964) and *Pikoo* (a.k.a. Pikoo's Day, 1980); exemplary documentaries *The Inner Eye* (1972) on his teacher, the painter Binode Bihari Mukherjee, gone blind in late middle-age, and *Sukumar Ray* (1987) about his amazingly gifted father — both films object lessons in maintaining the right balance between intimacy and distance to convey essential facts about the subject; and, finally, his wise swan song *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1991), a last will and testament disguised as a story of a globe-trotter returning home after 35 years to a family (or its remnants) that is wary of acknowledging him.

The film 'scholahs' argue that only a maverick can be so profligate in his tastes and output, pointing out that filmmakers post-World War II, or even before, 'made' the same film over and over again. They trot out names like Renoir, Mizoguchi, Bunuel, Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Kurosawa, Godard, Tarkovski, Jansco; all of them, the pundits argue, had a vision of the world — but Ray? Yes, his work did share a likeness to those of the

three Hollywood masters John Ford, Howard Hawks and Billy Wilder. It was a difference of touch. Satyajit's, like theirs, was light, and his tone too was conversational. These days heaviness is often mistaken for profundity by the so-called cinephile.

In his public dealings, Satyajit was straight-forward-- a quality rarely seen in a celebrity in a Banana Republic, that too in a country like India, its largest and most repugnant example. He always valued work and this respect for honest effort permeates his cinema. Satyajit's characters do things. They are usually curious people. Even Bishambar Ray, the impecunious, egocentric zamindar in *Jalsaghar*, who is loathe to move, when the occasion demands is goaded into action. It was only understandable that Satyajit should have found the slow, showy, intellectual films of Kumar Shahani and Mani Kaul thoroughly pretentious. He had no use for a film or filmmaker who was unable to attract a paying audience, however small. He had himself after all proved in the course of a long career that it was possible to have one's cake and eat it too.


Aparajito (1956)

It is only understandable that Satyajit should have found the slow, showy, intellectual films of Kumar Shahani and Mani Kaul thoroughly pretentious.

Not since Renoir, Ophuls and Ford had there been a director who has got such harmonious, believable performances from his actors. He had a way of instilling confidence in them and making them perform beyond their capabilities.No one, save Vittorio de Sica and Francois Truffaut, equalled Satyajit's handling of children. Despite his height or perhaps because of it— he was six four-and-a-half — he was able to impress people.

Chabi Biswas, a mercurial but powerful actor and a 'difficult' man to get along with, gave three memorable performances in *Jalsaghar, Devi* (1960) and *Kanchenjungha*. Ray knew how to harness Biswas' creative energy. In all the three films, the actor played a tyrant with feet of clay, yet each one with distinct individuality. It was the writing as much as the direction that was responsible for such varied and rich performances. When the actor died in a car accident in 1962, Ray declared that it was no longer possible to write certain kinds of roles because there would not be an actor available to play them.

Soumitra Chatterjee, a young theatre enthusiast went to international fame working with Ray in fifteen films beginning in 1959 as an impressionable young man in *Apur Sansar* and ending with *Shakha Prashakha* (Branches of a Tree, 1990) in which he plays a brilliant man, brain-damaged in a road accident. Chatterjee did a range of entirely plausible characters from the droll bridegroom Amulya in *Samapti* (one of the shorts within *Teen Kanya)* to Narsingh the shabby cabdriver touched by romance in *Abhijan*; to the effete dabbler Amal in *Charulata*; graduating to even more complex characters like Asim, the inwardly insecure sophisticate in *Aranyer Din Ratri* and Prodosh Mitter, the tough, sharp but humane private investigator in *Sonar Kella.*

Satyajit always knew that his actors would have to behave in front of the camera rather than consciously act. His was a style of filmmaking where the energising happened below the surface, much like the steady flow of quiet waters. Similarly, his direction of children was never apparent. He would before every shot take them aside and talk to them in a conspirational whisper. He was their friend. Being able to gain the confidence of children was there from the beginning. Apu and Durga in *Pather Panchali* were perhaps the first children in Indian cinema who behaved their age. The roll call of natural, charming child performers in Satyajit's films is long: Uma Dasgupta and Subir Banerjee in *Pather Panchali*; Pinaki Sengupta (the adolescent Apu, *Aparajito*); Aloke Chakravarti (Kajol, *Apur Sansar*); Aparna Dasgupta (Mrin Moyee, *Samapti*); Prasenjit Sarkar (Pintu, *Mahanagar*); Kushal Chakravarti (Mukul, *Sonar Kella*); Shatanu Bagchi (Mistaken Mukul, *Sonar Kella*); Vikram Bhattacharya (Satyaki, *Agantuk*); and Arjan Guha Thakurta (Pikoo, *Pikoo's Day*)

Actresses like Sharmila Tagore in *Apur Sansar, Devi, Seemabaddha* and Madhavi Mukherjee in *Mahanagar, Charulata, Kapurush-O-Mahapurush,* gave Satyajit some of the finest performances of their careers. Robi Ghosh was amply rewarded with roles that enabled him to play comedy with different shades of emotion in *Abhijan, Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne, Aranyer Din Ratri, Jana Aranya* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe.* Tulsi Chakravarti, after playing Prasanna the village grocer turned school teacher in *Pather Panchali,* was unforgettable in the role of the bumbling, funny, pathetic, elderly clerk Paresh Chandra Dutta in *Parash Pathar.* The cameos too were cast meticulously: elderly musicians who turn up one evening at the village post master's house in *Post Master* (one of the *Teen Kanya* shorts) or the deaf old solicitor in *Agantuk* leave an indelible impression. Satyajit loved actors as much as de Sica, Fellini or Bergman, and his players, in turn, amply returned his affection.

The master's technique, including in the handling of actors, was subtle, unobtrusive. There was hardly any moment of sudden drama or emotional outbursts. Feelings and ideas always went through the process of distillation. Although he favoured Western musical struc-

tures to build his films on, for instance the rondo in *Charulata*, the quality of emotion that shaped the content was completely Indian; reminiscent of certain melodic structures that came alive through the judicious use of komal or soft swaras. Towards the end, Satyajit's film language became a shade too functional, restricted as he was by failing health, though he used this limitation to great advantage in his last film. *Agantuk* was pure cinema despite the heavy emphasis on dialogue. The ideas were expressed and carried forward through cinematic plasticity. The same cannot be said of *Gana Shatru* (An Enemy of the People, 1989) an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's 1904 play and *Shakha Proshakha*: both looked like competent TV plays although the latter did have moments of fine cinema.

Aparajito (1956)

The magnificent Rays

The concern for social and political transformation figured gently but strongly in Satyajit's films. He was never an overtly political man in his private life unlike Ritwik Ghatak, who was a card-carrying member of the CPI and a stalwart of IPTA. That, however, did not mean that Satyajitdid not care about what was happening to the society he lived in. He once said to his old friend Kironmoy Raha at a private meeting in 1977 after the end of the state of emergency at which this writer was present: "It is good that Jyoti Babu (the CPI-M leader) and his colleagues have decided to oppose the Congress, but why are they supporting the Janata Party?" He had been able to see right away that a coalition government with the Jana Sangh at its helm was bound to collapse sooner than later. Sure enough, Indira Gandhi and her Congress returned to power within two years, with the Janata government able neither to stick together nor to administer the country .

> These days heaviness is often mistaken for profundity by the so-called cinephile.

The director was fortunate enough to escape the fate of being a selfish, callous, debauched spendthrift like so many members of the Bengali feudal class. This can be ascribed to his family's unswerving dedication to artistic and scientific pursuits. His grandfather Upendra Kishore Roy Choudhury's versions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* for Bengali children still attract attention because of their verve and wit. When he died in 1915 at age 52, Upendra Kishore had made a reputation as an artist, photographer, author, illustrator, and founder-editor of the peerless children's magazine, *Sandesh*. His son Sukumar, Satyajit's father, became in his tragically short life of 34 years a master writer and illustrator for children, and an exponent of nonsense verse the equal of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Sukumar was also the inventor of the half-tone block in printing and had studied photography and printing technology in Manchester, England.

The Rays were truly enlightened representatives of the Bengali aristocracy whose finest representative was the great thinker-artiste Rabindranath Tagore. It was only natural that Satyajit should retain a curiosity about the decadent Indian feudal classes, with their refinement, love for music, of course painting and other pleasures of a leisurely life. At 37, he had done *Jalsaghar* on a dying, bankrupt Bengali zamindar, adapted from Tara Shankar Bandhopadhyaya's novella. Then, at 56, in 1977, he completed his first film in Hindi, *Shatranj ke Khilari* a many-layered satire based on a short story by Munshi Premchand. The story deals with the annexation of Avadh by the British in 1857 and the overthrow of the popular, artistically gifted Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

The two effete zamindars around whom the story revolves, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, are addicted to chess and continue to play the game even when the British forces march into Lucknow, the royal capital. They symbolise for the director the reason for the abject failure of the local elite to confront and neutralise the British. In a larger sense, beyond the immediate confines of the story and the film inspired by it, Satyajit appears to suggest the reasons for the success of British rule in India for a hundred and ninety years.

Man's place in a fast-changing, largely amoral world pre-occupied Satyajit, and this also is evident in his literary exercises. The one short-story that represents his deepest concerns is, "McKenzie Fruit", where perhaps we find the truest portrait of his inner self. Nishikanto Babu, a retired school master, goes to Karimganj in rural Bengal to his friend's for a holiday. One day, while out on a stroll, he discovers a tree growing in the compound of an abandoned bungalow formerly owned by an Englishman. He has never before seen the tree nor the kind of fruit growing in abundance on it. Out of sheer curiosity he plucks one. Eating it, he discovers to his delight that the nagging arthritic pain in the joints have disappeared. Nishikanto Babu offers the fruit to a scabied dog and it gets cured.

Unable to believe his luck, the school master writes to leading scientific organisations at home and abroad about the strange tree and, its miraculous fruit. They reply asking for details, and he sends samples of the fruit for laboratory analysis. The reports come back confirming his discovery: that, yes, indeed there are miraculous curative properties. He then makes the mistake of sharing the knowledge with his host, where a local acquaintance, a jolly landlord fallen on bad days, happens to be present.

Events quickly overtake Nishikanto Babu. The bungalow and its large compound of miracle trees is fenced off and now in the control of a city businessman who wants to export the fruit at a premium, in partnership with the formerly indigent landlord. Suddenly, nature's gift is appropriated for commercial gain by the unscrupulous. The school master can do nothing to prevent this monumental injustice; business after all is legitimately a part of democracy. He, however, has in the end a solitary fruit in his safe-keeping and it incredibly retains its freshness over time.


Aranyer Din Ratri (1969)


Jana Aranya (1975)

The tale of "McKenzie Fruit" has the simplicity, transparency and profundity of a fable. Satyajit had earlier written a film script that evoked a similar appreciation. "The Alien" was meant to be science fiction, but added the purity and lyricism associated with juvenile literature. The story was about an alien from outer space who comes to a remote Bengali village where Bajoria a wealthy Marwari businessman has engaged Devlin, an American expert, to drill for water during a period of drought in an attempt to prove his own piety. The visitor from 'outside' befriends Haba, an orphan and with him perceives what life is like in the world of humans.

The project of "The Alien" was destined not to take off, but the script was generously circulated by one of the prospective producers — Columbia British — and the executive producer Mike Wilson. Early in his career, Stephen Spielberg must have come across it to make his finest film *E.T.*, whose basis was the central idea of Satyajit's screenplay. "The Alien", as written, for its sheer breadth of vision and poetic intensity, promised to be a far greater film than any in the sci-fi genre and the only one in which knowledge was to be used for a positive, creative purpose. Had Peter Sellers and Marlon Brando not backed out after protracted negotiations, the film as made by Satyajit would in all probability have been a towering achievement.

FILMS DIRECTED BY SATYAJIT

Pather Panchali	(1955)
Aparajito	(1956)
Parash Pathar	(1958)
Jalsaghar	(1958)
Apur Sansar	(1959)
Devi	(1960)
Teen Kanya	(1961)
Rabindranath Tagore	(1961)
Kanchenjungha	(1962)
Abhijan	(1962)
Mahanagar	(1963)
Charulata	(1964)
Two	(1964)
Kapurush -O- Mahapurush	(1965)
Nayak	(1966)
Chiriyakhana	(1967)
Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne	(1968)
Aranyer Din Ratri	(1969)
Pratidwandi	(1970)
Seemabaddha	(1971)
Sikkim	(1971)
The Inner Eye	(1972)
Asani Sanket	(1973)
Sonar Kella	(1974)
Jana Aranya	(1975)
Bala	(1976)
Shantranj Ke Khilari	(1977)
Joi Baba Felunath	(1978)
Hirak Rajar Deshe	(1980)
Pikoo	(1980)
Sadgati	(1981)
Ghare-Baire	(1984)
Sukumar Ray	(1987)
Ganashatru	(1989)
Shakha Prashakha	(1990)
Agantuk	(1991)

The alien leaves the earth on his spaceship along with his human friend singing 'a simple folk-song about flowers, rivers and paddy fields taught to him by Haba', (writes Marie Seton in *Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray*). 'In a state of weightlessness and suspended animation, the boy floats in the cabin, together with the other earthly specimens he has helped his 'friend' collect – a frog, a firefly, a snake, a lotus, a squirrel and a bulbul bird all of which are also in a condition of suspension. Inevitably, the conception of The Alien suggests that only those who are as little children can enter another plane, or planetary existence'. In the same essay, the alien is described in his farewell to the earth as seen seated cross-legged on the floor of the cabin of his spaceship, Buddha-like with a glow of red sunlight on his face and a halo above it...

This striving for perfection in an imperfect world and fulfilment through purity of purpose was the hallmark of Satyajit's children's fiction and his best films. An uncompromising idealism and a healthy contempt for money and therefore capitalism marked his life and work. He never asked his producers to pay him separately for composing the music for his films and only charged a consolidated fee for writing and direction. His un-worldliness sometimes exasperated his wife Bijoya, who is known to have said, 'He does not understand how difficult it is to run a household'. All his life Satyajit lived in a rented flat and his most prized possessions were his books and records.

Royalties from his writings brought in enough to support him and the family for a year in case he did not make a film. He said so in an interview to Gowri Ram Narayan of *The Hindu*. Satyajit's greatest contribution as an artiste was to foster a healthy curiosity about the world and the pursuit of truth and beauty under the most trying conditions. He was, in that sense, a unique and whole individual in an increasingly fragmented world.

Divorce and the market economy

The behaviour and movement of consumer markets as a result of the phenomenon of divorce may be interesting, but the market potential from separated couples remains untapped.

by ***Shoma A Chatterji***

The urban world continues to mull over the impact of divorce on society, on the family, on the partners directly involved in the divorce, and specially, on children. What escapes most is the fact that the splintering of families underscores a rise in production levels in the economy. The extended family comprising of the male 'head of a family' with his wife, children, their families and grandchildren living under the same roof, eating out of the same kitchen and pooling in their labour and income resources to cover expenses is slowly on its way out in urban India. Exceptions are traditional business families where living under the same roof is directly linked to business interests and any split within is presumed to inevitably lead to a split in business interests to the detriment of all concerned. In this sphere too, however, the positive effect of such split on market forces has remained a grey area. When the joint family breaks up to create several nuclear families, the first outcome is a rise in the demand for housing. The entire housing sector – real estate, promoters of real estate, construction and recovery of unused land, expands in monetary and business terms. Traditional homes covering spacious footage of premium land fall under the promoter's axe and new skyscrapers take their place, mercilessly destroying a once-beautiful and expansive skyline.

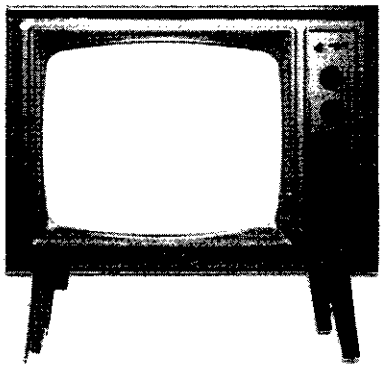
India does not have any social security scheme for divorced partners who suddenly find themselves at the wrong end of the stick if they are not employed.

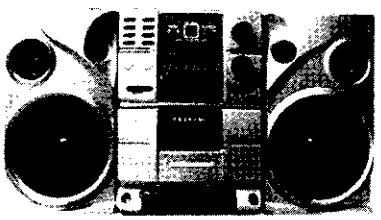
The environmental waste is taken for granted – lesser greenery in the cityscape, lesser land for children's parks and playgrounds, narrower pavements and more human waste to litter the streets. But a capitalist economy thrives on such ecological waste instead of lamenting it. Just so long as there is 'development' at the cost of ecology.

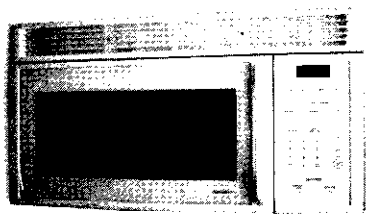
These market repercussions are multiplied when even the nuclear family breaks up as the result of separation or divorce. One of the partners must move out to seek accommodation elsewhere. Relocation means a rise in demand for housing all over again, notwithstanding the narrowing of the area of apartments to handkerchief-sized flats. There is an immediate rise in the demand for consumer durables – the partner who moves out with or without children, must get a set of consumer durables (a refrigerator, a mixer-grinder, a television set, furniture, a telephone connection, a gas connection, perhaps, a computer, and so on). This considerable rise in demand, directly contributes to production, distribution, exchange and employment through backward and forward linkages. The long-term and short-term effects when a couple split are a continuous rise in the demand for consumer perishables as well – cereals, pulses, vegetables, and so on. There is a

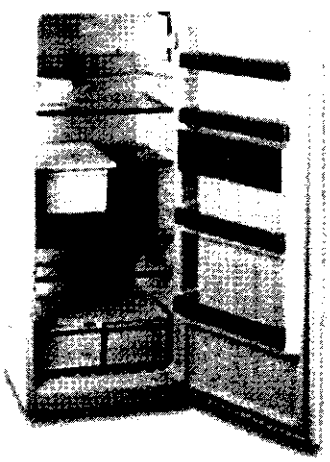
rise in the demand for domestic help too. Among other benefits – more money goes to the exchequer by way of taxes under different heads, more employment opportunities across the board, increased potential for home business such as home-made catering, telephone banking, car-pool and so on. The happiest of course is the legal fraternity. Meanwhile, the judiciary sees the possibilities of expansion of family courts in the country.

Sadly, neither the establishment at the central and state levels, nor the investment sector, have been able to tap the infinite potential inherent in the separation of families. The financial infrastructure has not been able to adjust to this new family structure in the Indian economy. Banking, insurance and public-issues have never bothered to create separate areas of savings and investment for separated couples. Till date, Indian investment companies and banks have no provision for housing loans for single partners of separated couples. This is a specific lack because re-partnering or remarriage after separation and divorce is not at all common. Loans for automobiles and two-wheelers have no provision for separated partners though this could lead to much greater revenues than at present.









Couples today, in general, have a much lower tolerance level within marriage than couples in their fifties and sixties. As a result, the divorce rates in India's urban sphere are shooting up. The question of who is guilty is not important because couples are now looking at it as a question of choice. In the US, studies have shown that women's increasing financial independence reduces their motivation to enter into and or to maintain relationships. Consistent with this hypothesis, early studies typically found that women with limited economic resources were more likely to remarry than other women. However, this pattern may have altered due to the following factors:

Changes in attitudes and values regarding gender roles — such as the greater value placed on women's economic achievements and men's involvement with children;

Changes in the labour market — such as reduced employment opportunities for older men;

Changes in consumption patterns — which may make two incomes seem increasingly necessary to achieve a desirable standard of living;

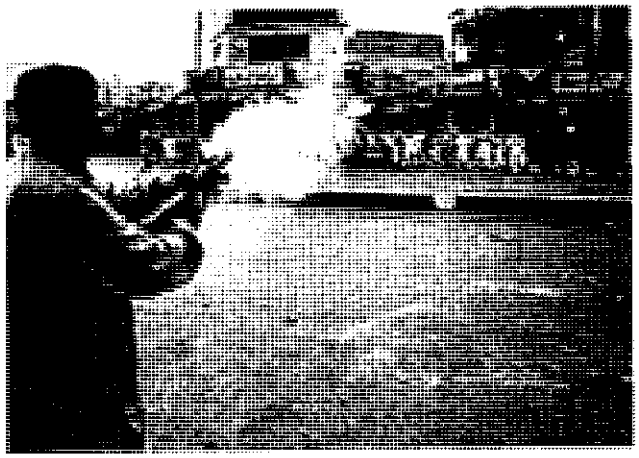
Changes in law and public policy — such as substantial increases in social security payments and more rigorous child support enforcement.

These changes reflect and reinforce the benefits for women of having independent financial resources, both in and out of relationships. In this context, re-partnering may not be perceived as a solution to the financial strain of divorce — even for women with few economic resources. Besides, the social stigma attached to re-partnering among women in India proves to be a big hurdle for young divorced women at a moment when they may need to choose remarriage both as a social and economic solution to their problem.

India does not have any social security scheme for divorced partners who suddenly find themselves at the wrong end of the stick if they are not employed. Prolonged litigation pending divorce places further pressure on their finances, thereby also delaying any plan of remarriage or re-partnering following divorce. Exchange theory conceptualises children as an economic appendage and as a barrier to new relationships due to the constraints on time and financial resources they impose. Looked at from a different perspective, children might be perceived as making up for a new relationship following divorce, particularly if sexual relationships are perceived as high risk and not reliable emotionally. At a minimum, children provide company and can act as the hub of an ongoing family life for the resident parent.

There is a need for the financial sector to respond to changing mores and realities. For example, banks, insurance companies and private financing agencies should make available provisions for loans on easy instalments and low interest to fund court cases, so as to provide security to the litigants. This might be done on a welfare-oriented basis, much like banks taking up rural development of remote areas. This will also automatically place hidden 'ceilings' on exorbitant fees charged by exploiting lawyers. Responses such as this would be a better alternative to shedding tears about the changing family scenario, for change, as the saying goes, is the only thing that remains constant.

Dialogue between Shia and Sunni



by ***Muhammad Zakir Khan Azmi***

Shia-Sunni sectarian conflicts have been a feature over most of Muslim history, and they have closely linked to the competition for power. It was this that led Syed Amir Ali (writer on Islamic history and society) to remark in his book, *The Spirit of Islam*, "Alas! That the religion of humanity and universal brotherhood should not have escaped the internecine strife and discord; that the faith which was to bring peace and rest to the distracted world should itself be torn to pieces by angry passions and the lust of power".

Shortly after the death of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), the early Muslim society was divided on the question of succession to the position of leadership of the community. A small group believed that the function must remain within the family of the Prophet, and backed 'Ali', whom they believed to have been designated for this role by appointment (ta'yin) and testament (nass). They believed that the spiritual heritage bequeathed by Mohammad (PBUH) devolved on Ali and his lineal descendants. Hence, they repudiated the authority of the jama'at (the people) to elect their leader. They became known as his 'partisans' (shi'ah). On the other hand, the majority agreed on Abu Bakr as the leader on the assumption that the Prophet left no instruction on this matter. They gained the name 'The People of Prophetic Tradition and consensus of opinion' (ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jama'ah).

For successful dialogue between Shias and Sunnis, the nature of differences between the two sects from the doctrinal, juristic, intellectual and political perspectives must be understood.

Besides the political dimension, there also existed a difference of opinion about the merits and functions of the successor to the Prophet. Sunni Islam considered the Khalifah to be a guardian of the *shariah* in the community, while Shi'ism saw in the 'successor' a spiritual function connected with the esoteric interpretation of the revelation and the inheritance to the Prophet's 'hidden' teachings. In contrast to the Sunnis, the institution of Imamate is fundamental to the Shias. The Imam, besides being a descendant of the Prophet, must possess certain qualities — he must be ma'sum or sinless, bear the purest and most unsullied character, and must be distinguished above all other men for truth and purity. On the other hand, the Sunnis believe that the Imamate is not restricted to the family of Mohammad (PBUH), that the Imam need not be irreproachable (ma'sum) in his life, and nor need he be the most excellent or eminent being of his time. So long as he is free, adult, sane, and possessed of the capacity to attend to the ordinary affairs of state, he is qualified for election.

In general, the Sunnis continued to support the established authority of Ummayads and Abbasides, though the later Sunni jurists accepted only the first four caliphs as full embodiments of the ideal of caliphate. For their part, various Shia groups continued to challenge the legitimacy of different caliphates for the most part of Muslim history. The Shias, however, enjoyed political power in the fourth century under the Buyides, who controlled all of Persia and wielded power in Baghdad, and later under the Fatimids in Egypt. Amongst the Shias, the Itna 'Asharis, followers of the twelve saintly Imams, reprehended the use of force, and maintained an attitude of complete withdrawal from temporal power until Shah Ismail, the great Safavi monarch, made Ithna 'Ashari Shi'ism the state religion of Persia. Under Shah Ismail a vigorous campaign was launched to convert the majority Sunni population to Shi'ism.

Consequently, one of the major developments during the Saffavid reign was the end of the mutual tolerance between Sunnis and Shias that existed in Iran from the time of the Mongols. A common form of Saffavid abuse was to curse Abu Bakr and Umar for having 'usurped' Ali's right to be caliph. This hatred served two purposes: it reinforced Shia sectarian identity as it underlined Persian against Arab ethnicity. Another development was the Shia rejection of Sufism, and a

growing concentration on law and the external observances of religion and ritual. Besides other factors, these anti-Sunni policies of Safavids were responsible for their deteriorating relations with the neighbouring Sunni powers such as the Mughals in India, the Ottomans in Turkey and the Uzbeks in Central Asia.

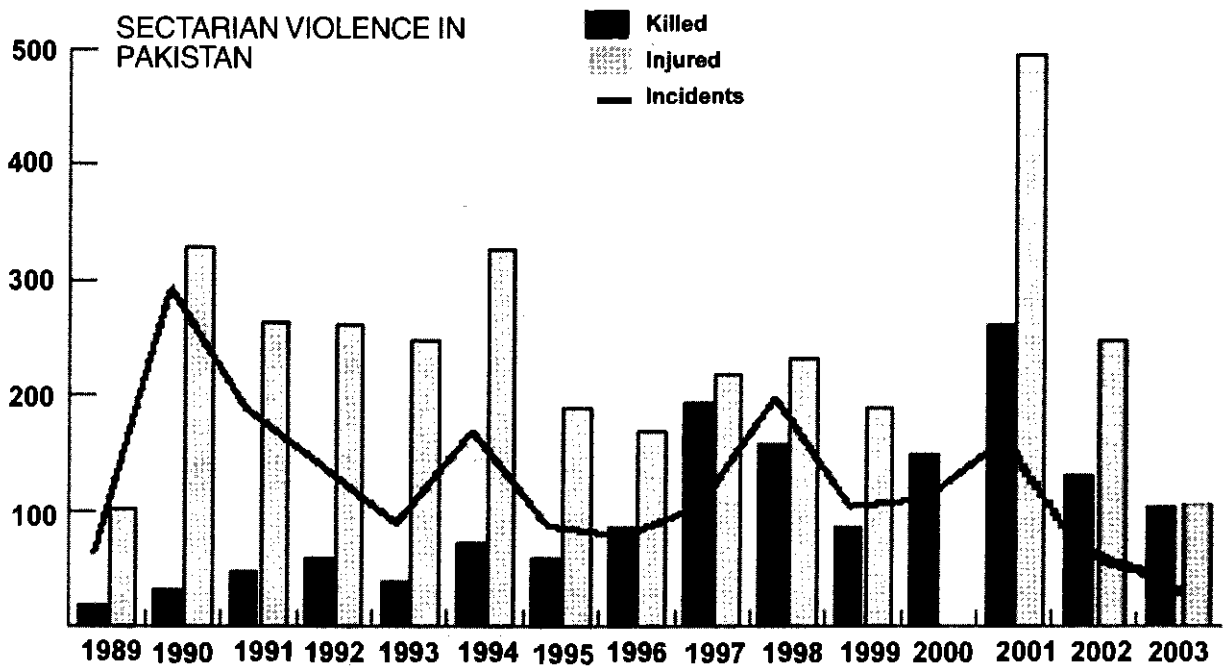
Dialogue on convergence

The frightening upsurge in Shia-Sunni sectarian violence in recent days in some countries that have left hundreds dead and thousands injured raises the question of whether there can be any possibility of dialogue between the two groups. Indeed, the deeply entrenched Shia-Sunni division remains the major obstacle to Muslim unity and the critics of Islam have consistently sought to play upon and fan the differences. Unfortunately, some Muslim 'scholars' have played into their hands, and through their bitterly sectarian speeches and writings have inflamed hatred between Shias and Sunnis on a massive scale.

For successful dialogue between Shias and Sunnis, it is essential to understand and analyse the nature of differences between the two sects from the doctrinal, juristic, intellectual and political perspectives. Furthermore, to be meaningful, the dialogue must take into consideration both the aspects of difference as well as of convergence between Shias and Sunnis. Most importantly, the dialogue should be restricted to intellectual level, and should not, at least at the outset, involve the masses. Furthermore, the dialogue should in its initial stages focus on issues of convergence rather than the divergences between the two groups.

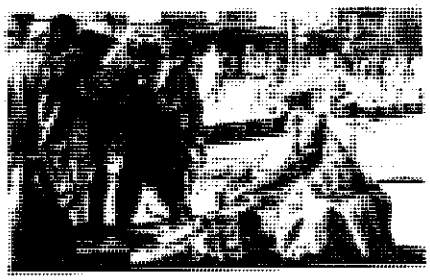
It is important in this regard to examine the terms used to refer to dialogue between Shias and Sunnis. Historically, the first term that seems to have been used was 'al-tasaluh' or reconciliation between the two groups. Later, it was replaced by 'tafahum' or mutual understanding. Later on another term was coined: 'al-taqarub' or convergence. This term emerged with the establishment of 'Dar al-Taqarub bain al-Mazahib al-Islamiyah' by Mohammad Taqi al-Qimmi in 1945 in Cairo. The term 'al-wahdah' or unity and 'hiwar' or dialogue appeared later, as in the writings of leading jurists like Mahdi Shamsuddin. It seems that the sensitivity of the subject of Shia-Sunni relations had a direct influence on the terminology used for dialogue between Shias and Sunnis.

The continuing efforts from the Shia side to convert the Sunnis to Shi'ism with an aim to expand the domain of Shia rule has played a key role in the failure of the dialogue in the past. It has also made for many Sunni scholars to view the proposal for 'convergence' with suspicion, seeing it as a covert means to spread Shi'ism. Some Sunni ulema who had initially accepted the 'convergence' invitation later withdrew from the process. To add to this was the question of 'taqqaiyah' (pious dissimulation) in Shi'ism, which remains a major obstacle in the process of dialogue. This raises doubts among many Sunnis about the actual intention of Shia offers of dialogue and creates endless confusion. Thus, it has provoked some Sunnis to believe that all statements issued by Shias that appear contrary to their original beliefs are actually a product of 'taqqaiyah' and are not sincerely meant. These issues have, therefore, led to



a stagnation of efforts to promote 'convergence', at least from the Sunni side. The establishment of a Shia state in Iran in 1979 further complicated and intensified the issue, especially because of the direct political involvement of the Iranian state in sponsoring the activities of Shi'ite missionary groups to convert Sunnis to the Shia fold.

Some advocates of Shia-Sunni 'convergence' have argued that differences between Sunnis and Shias are of the same nature as differences that exist among the various Sunni schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Confining his approach to the question of Shia-Sunni relations to discussion of differences of fiqh, the scholar Shamsuddin proposes a 'Board of Convergence and Unity Issues' comprising different Muslim groups, one of whose primary objectives would be 'to work on juristic openness' between them. On the other hand, some Salafi groups see the differences between Shias and Sunnis not simply as rooted in fiqh, but, rather, as fundamentally religious, based on the understanding that the faith of the Shias is tantamount to infidelity (*kufr*). This explains the absence of Salafi figures in seminars to promote 'convergence' or unity between Shias and Sunnis (Salafis advocate a radical worldview - strict return to the fundamentals of religion and rejection of any behaviour that was not specifically supported or enjoined by the Prophet Mohammed). For the Salafis, Shias can only be related to through 'munazara' or debate, in order to 'prove' the Shias as 'false' (*batil*) and the Salafis themselves as 'true' (*haq*).



Anti-Sunni policies of Safavids were responsible for their deteriorating relations with the neighbouring Sunni powers such as the Mughals in India, the Ottomans in Turkey and the Uzbeks in Central Asia.

Infallible Imams

It must be understood that the juristic differences between the Sunni schools of thought are not similar to the differences between Shias and Sunnis. The differences among the four major Sunni schools of jurisprudence are not in matters of faith (*aqidah*), and hence do not constitute a fundamental difference, unlike that between Sunnis as a whole and the Shias. One of the major differences between Shia and Sunni is in their definition of *Sunnah* (habit, practice or customary procedure) and *Hadith* (report or narration). There is a vital difference in the nature of acceptable Sunnah for both groups. The Shias accept only those hadith that have been reported by or attributed to the Ahl al-Bait or direct descendents of the Prophet (PBUH), whereas the Sunnis authenticate all the hadith reported by any of the Prophet's companions (PBUH). Further, Shias include in their hadith collections not only statements attributed to the Prophet (PBUH) but also statements attributed to their Imams, whom they regard as infallible. Unlike the Sunnis, the Shias therefore place, in effect, the authenticated sayings of their Imams on par with the sayings of the Prophet and of Allah as contained in the *Quran*. Sunnis have developed a specific method of 'criticism' to authenticate the hadith, which emerged soon after the death of the Prophet (PBUH). On the other hand, the collection of hadiths available with the Shias does not appear to have undergone the same sort of rigorous critical examination as is the case with Sunnis.

Despite these major differences, both Shias and Sunnis share certain fundamental beliefs, such as faith in one God (Allah) and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Both consider the *Quran* as God's last and final revelation. They both have a roughly similar method of prayer, both observe the prescribed fast in the month of Ramadan, and recognise the centrality of the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), and the payment of the *zakah* or poor-due. As far as the phenomenon of intellectual pluralism and differences of opinion is concerned, it should be noted that these are natural phenomenon that cannot be avoided in any religious community. There is nothing wrong with this unless it is associated with imposing dictatorship or intellectual extremism.

The Muslim ummah has for long suffered from sectarian and intellectual antagonisms that have severely affected it throughout its history. This antagonism is reflected in conflicts between various groups such as the Jabriyah and the Qadriyah, the Murjiyah and their foes, and the Ashairah and the Mutazila, in addition to the different schools of jurisprudence among the Sunnis, such as the Hanafis, Shafi'is, Hanbalis and Malikis. These differences still exercise a considerable intellectual impact on present-day Muslim social life but are no longer the source of serious conflict. On the other hand, Shia-Sunni differences still remain the cause of violent conflict. At the beginning of the last century, numerous reformist Shia and Sunni ulema attempted to seriously study this question. A significant effort in this regard was the establishment of the Dar al-Taqrib bain al-Mazahib al-Islamiya in Cairo in 1945 with the aim of promoting dialogue and resolving differences in line with jurisprudential (*fiqhi*) ijtehad. It sought to promote cooperation between different Muslim groups on the basis of mutual respect. Nevertheless, some hardliner chauvinists from both sides sabotaged the process of this mission.

Adding to the already strained relations between

the Shias and the Sunnis is the continuing conflictual relationship between Salafis and Shias, with the Salafis being vehemently opposed to Shi'ism. This is still reflected in many recent Salafi writings. Thus, Dr Nassir bin Abdullah Al-Gefari, in his recent two-volume study on 'mas'alat al-taqrib bain ahl al-sunnah' or 'The Issue of Convergence between Shiites and Sunnis', argues that, "The invitation of convergence is a bidat-i kubra (major sinful innovation) aiming at granting kufr and *zalal* (infidelity) legality in name of Islam. This talk of convergence has caused great loss to the ahl al-sunnah...". Some Shia scholars have responded by using somewhat similar language, mouthing scathing critiques of what they call as "al-wahabiyah", a term that the Salafis do not like for themselves.

Undoubtedly, today the Muslim ummah is facing a dangerous situation with few precedents in history. At this critical juncture, the Salafis have adopted an extremist approach toward Shias and should be held responsible for creating an atmosphere of differences among the ummah. The perception of the Salafis about the other sects, including the Shias, is based on the ruling of the Salaf ulema, and these are likely to entertain a certain degree of misconception. Hence, there is an urgent need for the ulema of different groups to understand each other, and to reach out in order to eradicate mutual misconceptions. In order to gain a proper understanding of Shi'ism it is essential for the Salafi ulema to study the thinking of the contemporary Shias as presented in their literature.

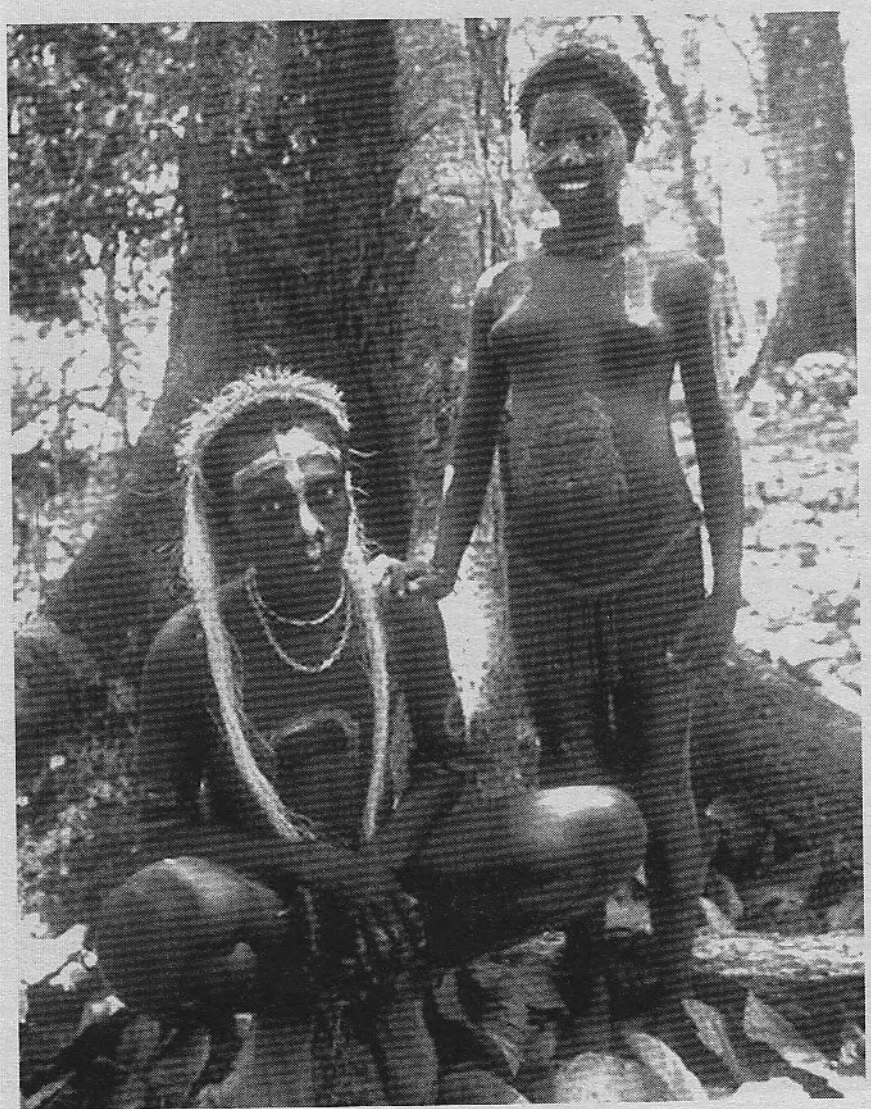
Intellectual pluralism and differences of opinion are natural phenomenon that cannot be avoided in any religious community.

It must be remembered that Shias and Sunnis have no differences whatsoever in what they regard as the main sources of their faith: the *Quran* and Sunnah, although the ways in which they interpret these are somewhat different. As for the juristic opinions of the Salaf (forbearers), while they are indeed to be respected, they represent ijtehadat that can be accepted or rejected. Therefore, considering the *Quran* and Sunnah as the main and direct criterion by the ulema of different schools might go a long way in promoting the acceptance of opinions of other schools, at least at the intellectual level. △

A 'primitive' national policy

What might be considered 'primitive' by the enlightened may not be a state of backwardness. Tribal knowledge-systems need not conform to 'mainstream' development notions.

by ***Sudhirendar Sharma***



The attitude of viewing the 'primitive' and 'tribal' as artefacts continues in the administrative echelons, even if some enlightened social scientists see it another way. As has been seen more than once in India, the attempts at reorienting the tribes' way of living, have been overwhelmingly un-intelligent. Locked up in the jungles of south and middle Andamans, the Jarawas are one of six tribes here who shun modern living. Anthropologists who spent five months between 1998 and 2001 with them found that the Jarawas maintain a lifestyle in total harmony with their environment. Much to their surprise, the researchers learnt that this aboriginal tribe is content with its hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Though bundled together with 698 other scheduled tribes in the country, the Jarawas by definition are considered 'primitive'. For their distinctive culture, shyness from public exposure, geographical isolation and socio-economic backwardness, Article 342 of the Indian Constitution characterises them as 'primitive'. There are 75 other tribes that are thus considered primitive; together they constitute 2.5 million primitive scheduled tribes-people representing 0.3 percent of the country's population.

Ever since the scheduled tribes were first 'notified' in 1950, they have been seen as those who live in a pre-agricultural stage of economy, have low literacy rates and whose populations are seen to be stagnant or declining. Reason enough for the government to launch schemes that could pull these tribes into the mainstream of development. However, after five decades of investing resources on the tribes, it is clear that a majority of them are still on the margins, de-rooted from their rich cultural and ecological past. What is more, attempts at bringing 'development' their way have left them socially and environmentally pauperised.

The Jarawas.

But if the draft National Policy on Tribals, released in early 2004, is any indication, no lessons seem to have been learnt. No wonder to find here a renewed emphasis on schemes that promise infrastructure and human-capital investment to bring a turnabout in their lives. Critical to this approach is the dominant understanding that the tribals are people with severe limitations, who lack power to make a case for themselves, and are limited by intellectual and financial capital. If this were not to be the assumption, how could the policy lay emphasis on strengthening the allopathic system of medicine in tribal areas while acknowledging the fact that tribal people have a well-developed system of medicine based on herbs and other natural products? Contradicting itself, the draft policy seeks to preserve and promote their traditional knowledge and wisdom as well. However, it fails on details when it comes to preserving the tribal knowledge-system and benefit-sharing in the event of knowledge transfer.

Jawaharlal Nehru's principles of defining the contours of progress for the tribals seem to have been ignored while drafting the policy. The late prime minister had maintained that tribal people 'possess a variety of cultures and are in many ways certainly not backward. There is no point in trying to make them a second rate copy of ourselves'. He had gone a step further to say that: ' The tribal people should be helped to grow according to their genius and tradition'.

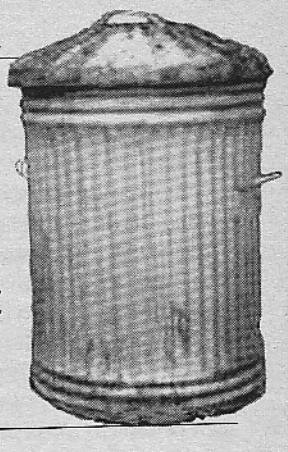
Conversely, the British had slapped them for their 'criminal tendencies' under the Criminal Tribes Act 1871. Whereas the Indian government has yet to do away with that piece of racist legislation completely, as the Habitual Offenders Act still apply to most of the tribes. Katkaris, the primitive tribe in Maharashtra, are periodically booked under this Act. Little does the system realise that it is the destruction of Acacia forests from which the Katkaris skillfully extracted kath or catechu for their livelihood that has led many to petty thieving.

Oblivious to such realities, the draft policy instead argues for getting the stigma of 'primitive' removed. Clearly, to ease administrative disbursement of funds, the policy favours merger of primitive tribal groups with the tribal mainstream. "This will erode the distinct identity of primitive tribes faster than expected", says Rajeev Khedkar of Academy of Development Science in Karjat, Maharashtra, that has been working amidst the Katkaris for over a decade.

Central to the entire debate is the continuous shrinking of the economic base of tribal populations. While the British safeguarded the tribes' isolation for the purpose of maximising revenue extraction, post-colonial policies have impinged upon their traditional rights and ownership over forests to do just about the same. With the tribal population constituting 55 percent of the total displaced people due to mega-projects in the country, it is clear that the tribals are seen as barriers to the process of development. Little wonder then that the draft policy considers displacement inevitable, though it does mention that displacement of tribals from their land amounts to violation of the 5th schedule of the Indian Constitution. Amusingly, the policy comforts the tribal communities by suggesting that in the event of displacement due to building of a large dam, they will have fishing rights in the new reservoir!

The various ongoing development schemes for primitive tribes amply prove that all are intended to alienate tribals from their traditional roots in the forests. The institutional mechanism of imparting education, of extending health services, and of development interventions is structured to distance the primitive tribes from their traditional vocations. Tragically, the rich repository of the knowledge base of the tribals is considered primitive and irrelevant by the modern yardstick.

Reports indicate that tribal children do not attend the schools setup for them; indication enough that the education imparted is irrelevant to their way of life. Yet, the state persuades them to go to school little realising that modern education will at the very least de-school the children of their rich knowledge and experience. The policy planners of India must realise that the 'tribal' have distinct biophysical characteristics and endurance skills, which must be understood if the tribes are not to be doomed to extinction.



India, the GM-trashbin

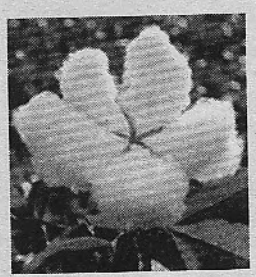
While the world wakes to the human health and environment nuisance of genetically modified crops, India is fast turning into a dustbin for the new technology.

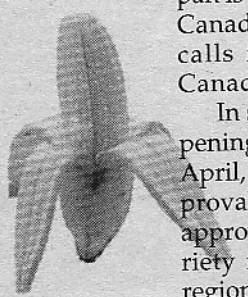
by ***Devinder Sharma***

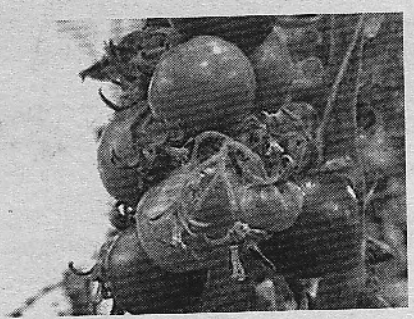
Not all GM decisions are taken in accordance with scientific principles. India, which has become a favoured destination for the biotechnology industry that is virtually on the run from the United States, European Union and Australia, is a case in point. Besides cotton, genetic engineering experiments are being conducted in India on maize, mustard, sugarcane, sorghum, pigeonpea, chickpea, rice, tomato, brinjal, potato, banana, papaya, cauliflower, oilseeds, castor, soybean and medicinal plants. The developments in the area of legislation with regard to GM foods in other parts of the world reveal a different trend.

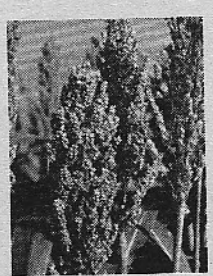
In March 2004, Western Australia became the first Australian state to ban outright planting of GM food crops. Within a few days of this decision, Victoria imposed a four year moratorium on the cultivation of GM oilseeds rape to 'protect its clean and green' image. South Australia and Tasmania have also banned GM crops. In the United States, Mendocino County of California became the country's first to ban the raising and keeping of genetically engineered crops or animals. In March, the state of Vermont, in a historic decision, voted overwhelmingly to support a bill to hold biotech corporations liable for unintended contamination of conventional or organic crops by genetically engineered plant materials.

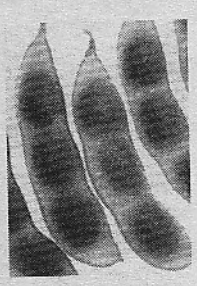
The trend is the same across the ocean, in the United Kingdom. The dramatic turnaround by Bayer Crop Science to give up attempts to commercialise GM maize, has ensured that the country remains GM free till at least 2008. Despite Tony Blair's blind love for industry, tough GM regulatory regime has come in the way of the adoption of the technology. In Japan, consumer groups announced their intention to present a petition signed by over a million to Canada's Agriculture and Agri-Food Minister, Bob Speller. Japan is one of the biggest markets for Canadian wheat, and the petition calls for a ban on GE wheat in Canada.











The victims from left to right: Maize, Bt cotton, Banana, Tomato, Sorghum and Soybean.

In sharp contrast to what is happening in the developed North, in April, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) in India approved yet another Bt cotton variety for the central and southern regions amidst reports that the go-ahead came without adequate scientific testing. The approval also comes at a time when the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is seeking public comment on petitions from Mycogen Seeds to deregulate two lines of genetically engineered insect-resistant cotton. APHIS is seeking public comment on whether these cotton lines pose a plant pest risk.

Fast buck

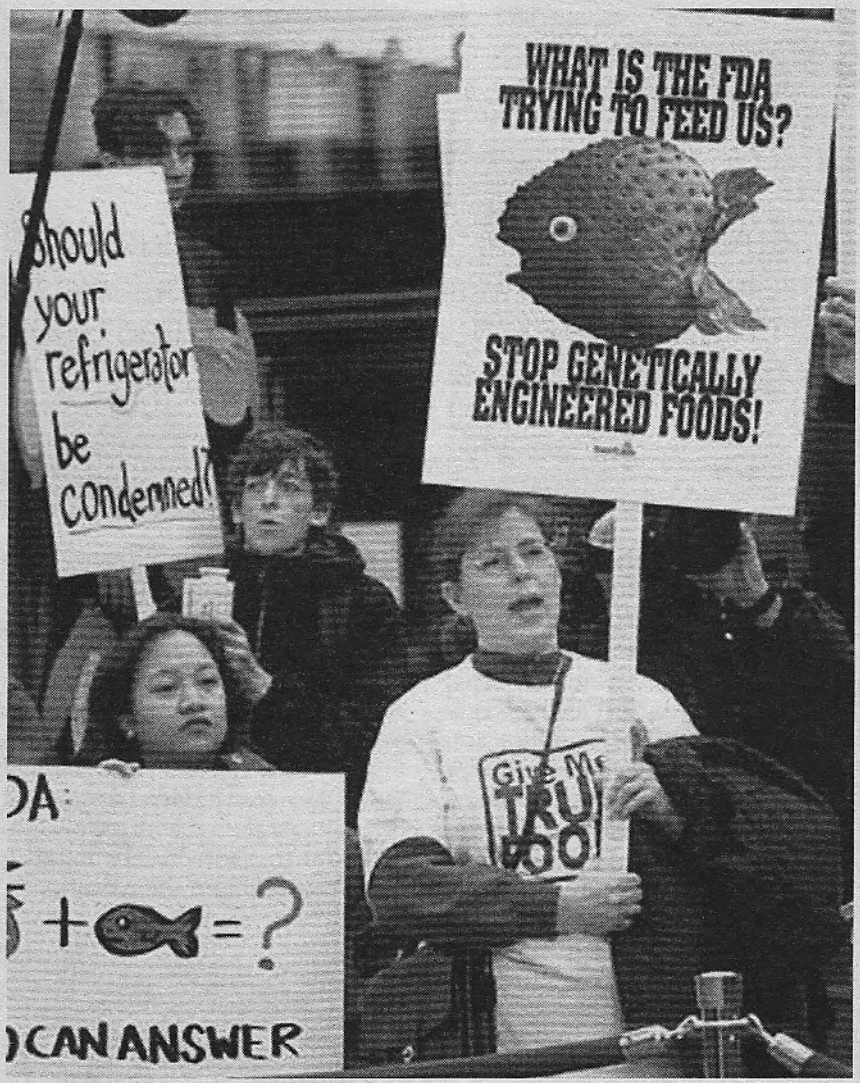
Such has been the casual approach to regulate this most controversial technology that it has become practically difficult to keep track of the new GEAC chief. They keep on changing at a pace faster than that expected from musical chairs. At the same time, while the UK has set in place a tough regulatory regime

making the companies liable for any environmental mishap, India continues to ignore this aspect. The regulations that the GEAC had announced at the time of according approval to Bt cotton in 2002 were only aimed at pacifying the media. The GEAC has not been held accountable for its deliberate attempts to obfuscate public opinion, and it all seems part of an effort to help the seed industry make a fast buck.

It is a widely accepted fact that the safety regulations, including the mandatory buffer zone or refuge around the Bt cotton fields, were not adhered to. Yet the Ministry of Environment and Forests in New Delhi refrained from penalising the seed company. Nor did it direct Mahyco-Monsanto to compensate crop losses that the farmers suffered in the very first year of planting Bt cotton in 2002-03. That the crop had failed to yield the desired results was even highlighted in a parliamentary committee report.

While an NGO petition before the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) seeking an enquiry into the entire monitoring, evaluation and approval process was ignored, the US authorities have launched an investigation into reports of alleged bribing of Indonesian government officials who approved Bt cotton. Both the US Department of Justice and the Securities and Exchange Commission are examining whether a former consultant to Monsanto made an improper USD 50,000 payment in early 2002. Reuters reports that the company is one of the world's leading developers of genetically modified seeds, but has had trouble getting some of its biotech crops approved in overseas, including biotech cotton introduced in Indonesia in 2001. Monsanto closed down the biotech cotton sales operations in 2003 after two unsuccessful years that came amid complaints over yields and pricing.

In Europe, a 2002 survey showed that 61 per cent of the private sector cancelled research and development activities as a result of moratorium actions. With highly critical



The North is not happy either.

reports of regulatory mechanisms coming in from respectable independent institutions, the trend in the US is also towards tougher regulations. This has forced biotechnology companies to even grow the next generation of GM crops in abandoned mines, using artificial lighting and air filtration to prevent pollen movement.

In India, however, experiments are even underway on several species of fish. In fact, such is the desperation that scientists are trying to insert Bt gene into any crop they can lay their hands on, not caring of any of the possible outcomes. The mad race for GM experiments is the outcome of more funding from biotech companies as well as support from the World Bank, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

Interestingly, while the rest of the world is stopping GM research in the tracks lest it destroy farm trade opportunities due to public rejection of genetically engineered food products, the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) merrily continues to sow a seeds of thorns for agricultural exports thereby jeopardising the future of domestic farming. But then, who cares for the farmers as long as GM research ensures the livelihood security for a few thousand agricultural scientists.

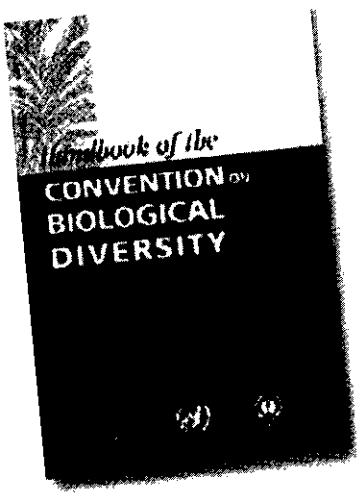
CBD: The unmaking of a treaty

A convention whose formulation brought together developing countries as a unified bloc now faces the unfortunate proposition of disjointed Southern representation.

by ***S Faizi***

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has been one of the hard negotiated international treaties as the negotiators from the South displayed unusual unity and negotiation skills. Negotiated amidst the global political ambience of the emerging unipolar world order and the unopposed Western war on Iraq; the result was a fairly balanced treaty that accommodates the legitimate interests of both the South and North. Formulated in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, this was touted as a comprehensive strategy for 'sustainable development'. The Convention establishes three main goals: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources.

But perhaps that is all that could be said of the Convention. More than a decade after its entry into force, its achievements remain volumes of repetitive documents, endless surrealistically named committees and fissiparous meetings. While the CBD process indulged in its own virtual world, in the real world biopiracy remained unabated. The proceedings of the recently held seventh meeting of the Conference of Parties (CoP) do not leave room for much hope either. The Kuala Lumpur meeting (February 2004), in fact, marked another retrogressive step in terms of enforcement. The Convention unequivocally recognises national sovereign rights over biodiversity, requires prior, informed consent for access to biodiversity and stresses that such access should be based on naturally agreed terms. CBD also stipulates that any commercial benefit derived out of the use of biodiversity should be equitably shared with the providing country, effectively making biopiracy an international offence, and setting the fundamental legal framework for providing access to biodiversity and benefit sharing.



Species after species have been misappropriated from the biorich South, worked on and patented, in violation of the treaty.

However, these hard negotiated provisions of the Convention were ingeniously undermined by the North, skilfully sidestepped by the Convention Secretariat, and blissfully ignored by the parties from the South. As a result species after species have been misappropriated from the biorich South, worked on and patented, all of it in violation of the treaty.

The centrepiece of the Kuala Lumpur meet was the decision to develop an 'international regime' for access to biodiversity and benefit sharing. Such a decision was the culmination of a lengthy process initiated at the third CoP. While the basis for access and benefit sharing has been clearly laid out in the convention and it unconditionally requires the parties to take 'legislative, administration or policy measures' to facilitate benefit sharing with the providing countries (Article 15.7), this new exercise would only help the developed countries to circumvent the legally binding requirements for benefit-sharing as provided in the convention, apart from providing an excuse for continued inaction on this count.

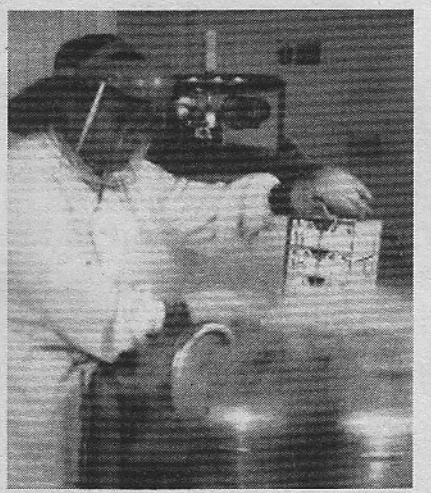
Article 15.7 reads:
Each Contracting Party shall take legislative, administrative or policy measures, as appropriate, and in accordance

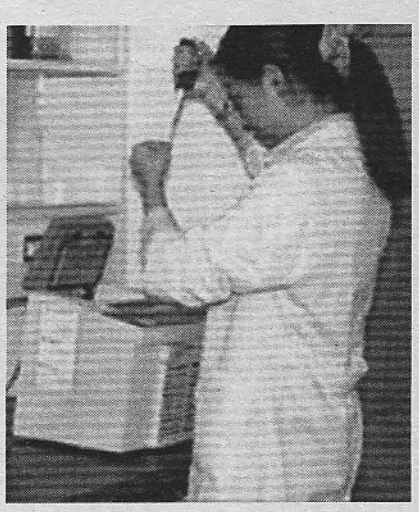
with Articles 16 and 19 and, where necessary, through the financial mechanism established by Articles 20 and 21 with the aim of sharing in a fair and equitable way the results of research and development and the benefits arising from the commercial and other utilization of genetic resources with the Contracting Party providing such resources. Such sharing shall be upon mutually agreed terms.

Developing countries have, in fact, been tricked into asking for an international regime, while they should actually have been asking the CoP to review the implementation (or lack of it) of the relevant articles on access and benefit sharing, especially Article 15.7. By agreeing to negotiate the international regime, developed countries hope to re-open issues that have already been settled in the convention. For instance, they already object to calling the proposed regime a 'legally binding' one, while indeed the Convention has provided legally binding provisions for Access and Benefit-sharing (ABS).

United South

There has been a drastic weakening of the negotiating position of the developing countries, which is disappointing considering the unusual strength maintained by them in the CBD formulation negotiations. In retrospect, it was this strength that enabled the developing countries to totally reject the IUCN (The World Conservation Union)–drafted articles and underlying notions that states are simply 'guardians or custodians' of biodiversity (and not owners); payment of a levy to a proposed international fund for biodiversity use within their territory; placing the principal emphasis on 'access' to biodiversity, and so on. In its clamouring for a convention on biodiversity in the late 80s, the key objective of the United States was to legalise free and open access to the biodiversity of the Southern countries before they could institute protective measures. It was indeed a remarkable achievement of the Southern negotiators that they were able to discard the IUCN draft articles and the notions contained therein that formed the broad Western negotiation position. It was the united and resourceful negotiations by the South that gave birth to a balanced CBD, eliminating the prospect of a treaty for subjugating the most important resource of the South (It is this North-South balance of CBD that prompted the US, the original initiator of the convention proposal, to stay away from the treaty).





Molecular biological research to study genetic resources for potential use.

It was indeed a remarkable achievement of the Southern negotiators that they were able to discard the IUCN draft articles and the notions contained therein that formed the broad Western negotiation position.

But such unity and efficiency have withered since the treaty has come into force. Developing countries have since remained largely reactive and at best defensive. At Kuala Lumpur, the G-77 arrangement was ineffective, due in part to the late decision on its chair. The half-minded partners did not have any significant technical support and the regional group meetings of Asia and Africa were largely composed of monologues.

The conference adopted new programmes of work on protected areas, mountain biodiversity and technology transfer. The protected areas programme is a means to achieve the 2010 target of significantly reducing the loss of biodiversity, set by the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa. Although the role of indigenous and local communities is factored in, there was no departure from the exclusionary doctrine of protected areas. While the programme on technology transfer seeks to promote ways to enable the transfer of appropriate technologies to developing countries, the debate on the subject did not address the issue of how the parties have complied with the obligation under the convention to 'take legislative, administrative or policy measures' to transfer technology including those protected by intellectual property rights, on mutually agreed terms, and to take exactly similar measures to facilitate such technology transfers from the private sector (Article 16.4). This is another instance of compromising on the convention's legally binding provisions. The conference adopted guidelines for the sustainable use of biodiversity, biodiversity-related tourism and environmental impact assessment

of development projects on the territories of indigenous peoples.

The West has never been comfortable with the CBD's recognition of national sovereign rights over biodiversity. In a panel discussion organised by the United Nations University and CBD Secretariat on the sidelines of the CoP, one was surprised to hear Vincent Sanchez, the former Chilean Ambassador who had fairly effectively chaired the negotiation to formulate the convention, expressing discomfort with the sovereignty provision. Supporting the expected argument of an American delegate on the subject, he observed that the sovereignty issue had 'suddenly cropped up' in the negotiations. One wonders as to when was it that the resources, and for that matter anything else, within the territory of a nation were regarded as a global resource, that is, in a post-colonial world.

At least for some, the global resource argument has been the result of confusing biodiversity with the subject of a prolonged debate within the FAO parlance wherein the subject was 'genetic resources appropriated from the South and held in the seed/gene banks in the North'. Within the FAO fora, the South took the lenient position of regarding these translocated genetic resources as a global resource, while the North opposed access for the South to these resources. And these resources remain untouchable to CBD too by having denied retrospective effect to CBD Article 15.3 which states:

For the purpose of this Convention, the genetic resources being provided by a Contracting Party, as referred to in this Article and Articles 16 and 19, are only those that are provided by Contracting Parties that are countries of origin of such resources or by the Parties that have acquired the genetic resources in accordance with this Convention.

However, the Nairobi Final Act that adopted the final text of CBD had regarded the issue of access to pre-CBD ex situ collections as an outstanding matter and hence called on the FAO system to address this issue (Resolution 3). But the subject of CBD's sovereignty provision is the opposite and simple: a country's own biodiversity within its territory.

The West has never been comfortable with the CBD's recognition of national sovereign rights over biodiversity.

The indigenous communities have come a long way in playing a significant role in the CBD process. They have turned out in fairly good numbers and were reasonably well organised. However, one was disappointed to see a small segment of indigenous groups being influenced by fund-wielding Western agencies in shaping their positions. India has the largest population of indigenous people (whom the minority ruling castes refuse to recognise as indigenous) yet there was none to represent them at the CoP. Several affluent Western NGOs are listed as collaborators in implementing the protected areas programme. This is obviously an arbitrary listing and may set an unpleasant precedent. In actual fact, these NGOs, though they operate on the international scale on the strength of their funds, do not have an open membership, democratic election of leadership or adequate representation of citizens from the South in their governance structures. One fervently hopes that such arbitrary recognition of NGOs will not set a precedent.

Emil Salim who chaired the UN preparatory meeting for the Johannesburg Summit asked his colleagues on the podium, in desperation, at the adjournment of an inconclusive session during the critical final meeting of the committee, "What shall we do with the US?" (Salim had forgotten to switch his microphone off and the next day NGO representatives appeared at the meeting venue wearing T-shirts with the quote printed). How could CBD achieve the 2010 target of substantially reducing the loss of biodiversity without bringing the country with the largest number of endangered reptilian, amphibian and fish species in the world into its ambit? Nobody has raised the issue of bringing the United States to accede to the convention, not even the Ministerial Declaration which has called on all countries to accede to the Biosafety Protocol. It may not be entirely true that delegates were happy not having the intimidating voice of the US in the negotiation halls. The United States can be brought into the fold of the treaty only if a forthcoming CoP decides not to provide access to biodiversity for non-parties.

The CBD represents a fair international legal mechanism available for the sustainable management of biodiversity, but its implementation would depend on the strength that a unified South could gather in the future negotiations. △

The Dam and the Tribal

The tribals of Tripura feel cheated of their land, and the hurt to the psyche is deep. By decommissioning a dam, reclaiming the land underwater, and distributing it to the landless tribals, a unique effort would be made to undo historical wrongs.

by ***Subir Bhaumik***

At 10,039 square kilometres, Tripura is northeast India's smallest state. But this was not always so. The Manikya rulers controlled much of East Bengal's Comilla region during medieval times, and later Maharaj Bijoy Manikya is said to have had the rein from the hills all the way west to present-day Dhaka. With royal patronage, tolerance and multiculturalism flourished in an area otherwise divided by ethnicity and religion. As late as the year 2000, readers of the Agartala-based daily *Tripura Observer* voted Maharaja Bir Bikram as 'Tripura's Man of the Millennium' in preference to those who have led the state since the end of the royal order.

Even after the advent of the British, when the Tripura kingdom was restricted to its present hill confines, Bengalis and indigenous tribes-people lived in peace. No riots, not even sporadic ethnic clashes were ever reported between Bengali settlers and the original populace of princely Tripura. If the Manikyas welcomed Bengali professionals or peasants to modernise their administration or increase their land revenue through the spread of settled wet-rice agriculture, they also created a tribal reserve, which, in many ways, is the precursor of today's Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council.

The Partition unleashed a wave of migration from East Pakistan to Tripura and other states on its borders. Though the indigenous tribes-people in the state had not enjoyed a decisive majority like in the neighbouring Chittagong Hill Tracts or the Mizo hills, they did account for up to 60 percent of the total population. In the first three decades after Partition, the indigenous people were reduced to below 30 percent of the state's population, a situation which left them completely marginalised in both self-perception and reality. This land alienation it is which has fuelled the violent insurgency that has eaten into the vitals of this once vibrant state.

> The present ethnic conflict that pits the Bengali settlers against the indigenous tribes-people in Tripura has much to do with the large scale land alienation of tribals.

The problem did not emerge as long as the tribals had enough land and the Bengali population was limited to certain urban or semi-urban pockets or rural areas around the capital. That changed with Independence and the merger of princely Tripura into the Indian Union. A state which in 1951 had a population of 6.5 lakh saw an influx between 1947 and 1971, of six lakh Bengalis displaced from East Pakistan. It is not difficult to gauge the enormous population pressure thus created. During this period the state government primarily resettled the refugees on land under different schemes, some enabling the refugees to settle down with financial assistance and some just helping them to buy land.

The operation of these schemes accelerated the process of large-scale loss of tribal lands. The pauperisation of the tribals can also be discerned in the growing number of tribal agricultural labourers in the three decades since the Partition. In 1951, cultivators constituted close to 63 percent of the total tribal workforce, while only nine percent were in the category of agricultural labourers. By 1981, only 43 percent of the tribal workforce were cultivators and 24 percent were agricultural labourers.

But it would be wrong to assume that tribals alone became landless paupers, with their lands were taken over by Bengali settlers who grew at their expense – a stereotype that tribal extremist groups seek to create. For while it is true that tribals today account for 41 percent of the agricultural landless labourers in Tripura, the rest are non-tribals, almost wholly Bengalis. In fact, the percentage of landless agricultural labourers in Tripura's rural workforce is largely in keeping with

Settler dwellings were razed by NLFT militants in Bagber village (2000)

Fleeing the violence in Khowai subdivision.

the population ratio of the two communities in the state.

While the Bengalis who arrived were accustomed to sharp class differences in their erstwhile homeland, East Bengal, the tribes-people of Tripura were not. At an individual level, the indigenous people lost lands mostly to Bengalis, rich or poor. Nevertheless, studies made by the Law Research Institute in Guwahati in certain areas of Tripura show the huge land loss suffered by the tribes-people at the hands of the Bengali settlers. The study analysed the land transfer pattern in seven 'non-scheduled' and an equal number of 'scheduled' villages in south and west Tripura. In the former 60 percent of the land transfers were from tribals to non-tribals. In the latter the position was worse, with 68 percent of the total land transfers made from tribals to non-tribals. Of the villages under study, the heaviest tribal to non-tribal transfer took place at Hawaibari on the Assam-Agartala road.

Sengkrak

One has to go to Teliamura, once a small village but now a vital road junction connecting west, north and south Tripura. Gunomoni Sardar is grandfather of the Indigenous National Party of Tripura (INPT) leader Debabrata Koloi and former Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) military-wing chief, Chuni Koloi. He used to own almost seventy percent of the lands in Teliamura. In 30 years, his descendants have hardly got a few hectares left for themselves by the side of the Tripura Road Transport Corporation (TRTC) bus stand on the Assam-Agartala Road.

Under the Congress administration, some Bengali refugee leaders even set up 'land cooperatives' like the Swasti Samity in north Tripura. These cooperatives violated the Tribal Reserves regulations, taking over large swathes of land, a process that was legitimised by conniving bureaucrats. The Communist Party mobilised the tribesmen and even took the matter to courts to secure a favourable verdict that was not honoured by the bureaucracy. Angry at such collusion, and frustrated by the lack of institutional support to undo the damage, many tribal youth took to the jungles. The first significant underground group in post-merger Tripura was born — the Sengkrak or 'clenched fist'.

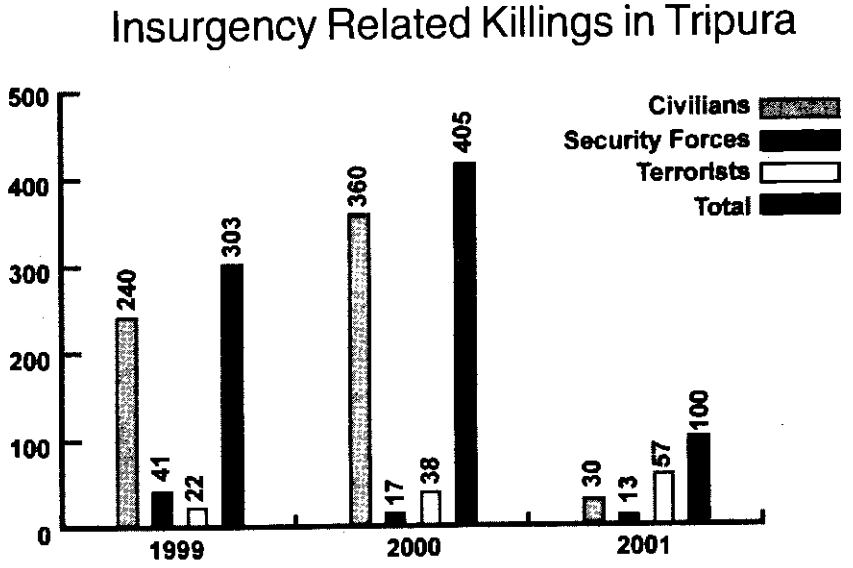
The Sengkrak movement, as the first manifestation of overt ethnic militancy, started in 1967 as a direct fallout of the large scale loss of land, abetted by the state. The ruling Congress government backed the occupation of tribal lands in the Deo valley by Bengali settlers grouped under the Swasti Samity, while the Reang tribesmen organised themselves into a militant group to hit back at the new Bengali settlers.

This writer had conducted a correlation analysis between land alienation and tribal insurgency in August 1984 by choosing to interview the family members of 84 extremists of the Tribal National Volunteers. They had been gathered at a government hostel as part of Chief Minister Nripen Chakrabarti's 'motivation drive' to facilitate the return of the guerrillas to normal life. Fully 64 percent of the families had suffered loss of land to Bengalis while 32 percent of them were from families of *jhumias* or shifting cultivators who were under increasing pressure to find fresh lands for cultivation due to the growing occupation of hill stretches by Bengali refugees. Only four percent were from families with enough land that had not been lost to the settlers.

Official records suggest 2558 families were ousted from the Gumti project area – these were families who could produce land deeds and were officially owners of the land.

In settled agricultural areas like Khowai and Sadar, all within a hundred kilometres of the state's capital Agartala, between 20 to 40 percent of the tribal lands had been alienated by the end of the 1970s, when tribal insurgency gathered momentum. In some parts of south Tripura, as much as 60 percent of the tribal lands were alienated — sold in distress conditions as a sequel to an unequal economic competition with the Bengali settlers. The land loss at the level of the individual was further compounded by large scale loss of tribal lands to huge government projects such as the Dumbur Hydroelectric project, where an estimated 5000 to 8000 families lost their holdings with only a small percentage of them possessing title deeds to prove ownership for the sake of rehabilitation. The pauperisation of Dumbur's once prosperous tribal peasantry contrasted with the huge benefits that Bengali urban dwellers gained by electricity and Bengali fishermen gained by being able to fish in the large reservoir. This was not lost on a generation of angry tribal youth who took up arms and left for the jungles to fight an administration they felt was only working in the interests of the Bengali refugees alone. Insurgent leader Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl, now back to mainstream politics after his TNV returned to normal

life following an accord in 1988, used to refer to Nripen Chakrabarty as the 'refugee chief minister' of Tripura.



Catchment of resentment

The heartburn over steady land loss on a one-to-one basis was further exacerbated by the submergence of huge swathes of arable lands owned by the tribals in the Raima Valley as a result of the commissioning of the Gumti hydel project in south Tripura. This project not only disturbed the fragile ecology of the Raima Valley, but also introduced a permanent sense of loss into the tribal psyche. All tribal organisations including the Communist-backed Gana Mukti Parishad fiercely protested the commissioning of the Gumti hydro-electric project in 1976. But the Congress government crushed the protests. The project was determined to augment Tripura's deficit power supply but it ended up augmenting the catchment area of tribal unrest by dispossessing thousands of them of their only economic resource and collective symbol — their land.

A 30 metre high gravity dam was constructed across the river Gumti about 3.5 kilometres upstream of Tirthamukh in south Tripura district for generating 8.6 megawatts of power from an installed capacity of 10 MW. The dam submerged a valley area of 46 sq km. This was one of the most fertile valleys in an otherwise hilly state, where arable flatlands suitable for wet rice agriculture are extremely limited. Official records suggest 2558 families were ousted from the Gumti project area – these were families who could produce land deeds and were officially owners of the land they were ousted from. Unofficial estimates varied between 8000 to 10,000 families or about 60 to 70 thousand tribes-people displaced.

In the tribal societies of the Northeast, ownership of land is rarely personal and the system of recording land deeds against individual names is a recent phenomenon. Most of those ousted by the Dumbur failed to get any rehabilitation grant and were forced to settle in the hills around the project, returning to slash-and-burn agriculture called *jhum*. The present Left government has recently announced that all Dumbur ousted, wherever they are, will be covered under the 'Kutir Jyoti' electrification programme. A list of 500 Dumbur ousted families was supplied to the Power Department, which has provided electricity connections to 114 families under the Kutir Jyoti programme. But what these families need more than free electricity is arable land and resources to earn a livelihood.

The dam destroyed the once surplus tribal peasant economy of the state. Tripura's leading economist Malabika Dasgupta has shown in her study on the Gumti hydel project that "attempts either to protect the environment to the exclusion of considerations for the well being of the people or to improve their level of well being without consideration for the environmental impact of such policies can neither protect the environment nor improve the standard of living of the people".

> While the Bengalis who arrived were accustomed to sharp class differences in their erstwhile homeland, East Bengal, the tribes-people of Tripura were not.

The Gumti, Tripura's principal river, is formed by the confluence of two small rivers, Raima and Sarma, the former flowing out of the Longtharai range, the latter originating from the Atharamura range. Prior to the dam, the river Gumti flowed southwards through a gorge in the Atharamura range, beyond the confluence point of the Raima and Sarma. It spilled over a series of rapids which were locally known as the Dumbur falls at the point of Tirthamukh (literally 'pilgrim's point'), a place considered holy by the tribals as well as the Bengali settlers, who would bathe in the river during the pious Sankranti every winter. Beyond Tirthamukh, the Gumti flows westwards up to Malbassa village and then changes direction again, cutting through the Deotamura range. After crossing the Deotamura, it flows for another 60 kilometres before it enters Bangladesh. After flowing about 80 kilometres through eastern Bangladesh, it joins the Meghna river which flows into the Bay of Bengal.

The upper catchment of the Gumti comprises of 11 Gaon Sabhas - nearly 60 villages in all – in the Gan-

dacherra block of Tripura's newly formed Dhalai district. The upper reaches of the catchment area is steep and hilly, but as it flows towards Tirthamukh it is flanked by small flat-topped hills locally called *tillas* with many *lungas* or lowlands between them. As the river comes down to Tirthamukh, the Gumti waters huge flatlands all the way along its course into Bangladesh. Before the commissioning of the hydel project, the upper catchments supported a small population of tribals. The small Bengali population practised wet-rice cultivation around Boloungbassa and Raima and some were into trading while the tribals, originally almost all slash-and-burn agriculturists called *jhumias*, had began to settle down to wet-rice cultivation, having learnt it from the Bengali farmers. The Kings of Tripura had settled some Bengali farmers even in such remote areas to encourage tribals to pick up wet-rice cultivation and abandon jhum, which is ecologically damaging.

Before the dam, the hills around the present project area were sparsely populated and the area was almost wholly under dense forest cover supporting wildlife. The *Tripura Gazetteer* of 1975 talked of sighting 'large herds of Indian elephants in the Raima-Sarma region along with some tigers and bears in the dense forests'. Dasgupta writes that the area "was an abode of deers, bears, wild boars, tigers, elephants and a wide variety jungle cats". The region was rich in flora and fauna.

However, after the hydel project was commissioned, not only did almost half of the tribal families displaced by the Dam move into the hills in the river's upper catchment area, but the roads built to first transport construction material and then to support the Hydel project opened up the rich forests of the area to illegal logging. The surplus-producing tribal peasantry were not only angry for having lost their rich flatlands and lungas – they were forced to revert back to slash-and-burn jhum cultivation that has caused irreparable damage to the ecology of the upper Gumti catchment. Illegal logging by businessmen backed by politicians has further damaged the ecology. During two extensive trips into the Gumti valley in 1985 and 1998, this writer found extensive felling of trees and no presence of forest guards.

The tribal insurgents of the National Liberation Front of Tripura, or the NLFT, have not banned tree felling, as has been done by some rebel groups in the Northeast such as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Instead, NLFT has encouraged it. In large parts of the Gumti valley upstream of Tirthamukh, tribal villagers report that the insurgents have allowed loggers to operate freely so long as they made their payments. In fact, relatives of some insurgent leaders were in the business, entering partnership deals with the Bengali-owned saw mills of Amarpur, Udaipur and Sonamura. Thus, the tribal insurgents who had capitalised on the community's anger at the large scale displacement in Gumti were now collaborating with the most exploitative segments of the settler society.

The present ethnic conflict that pits the Bengali settlers against the indigenous tribes-people in Tripura has much to do with the large scale land alienation of tribals because land is seen not only as the prime economic resource in a rather backward pre-capitalist agrarian society like Tripura but also as the symbol of the 'ethnic space'. Secondly, the psychological pressure felt by the tribes-people has been further aggravated by the Dumbur hydel project which, in one stroke, has contributed the most to the ongoing process of land alienation. The project has caused huge damage not only to the ecology of the Raima-Sarma valley but also to inter-community relations in the state. Finally, it is this writer's contention that this white elephant project should be decommissioned to make way for large scale land reclamation that can be used to resettle landless tribes-people in a major gesture of undoing injustice.

Never before has a development project been dismantled to preserve the interests of the indigenous peoples.

Decommission the dam!

The Gumti hydel project must be decommissioned for four reasons:

Firstly, the Gumti hydel project is now producing not more than seven MW of power even in the peak monsoon season. The state government claims that by investing INR 11.8 million, it has been able to restore the output to the original installed capacity of 10 MW. It also says that while the running cost of the project is around INR 30 million per annum, it rakes in nearly INR 210 million through sale of electricity. Officials in the Tripura power department describe the project as "very profitable". But experts say the siltation levels would continue to increase unless the reservoir can be dredged, there can in fact be no increase in output. The power production from Gumti is expected to diminish progressively.

Secondly, with huge natural gas reserves now discovered in Tripura and major gas thermal power projects in the pipeline (including one with the capacity to generate 500 MW against the state's current peak demand of 125 MW), it is wasteful to invest in the Gumti hydel project. If the state can produce three times more electricity than it now uses, there is a strong case for decommissioning a dam, a process that would free a huge area for other pressing needs. An ideal power strategy for Tripura would be to produce around 500-600 MW of electricity, feed half of that into the Northeast-

ern Grid, use 150 to 200 MW within the state keeping in mind the rising demand, and sell the balance of 100 MW to Bangladesh. This has been the suggestion of PK Chatterji former chairman of the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO). In the long run, as Bangladesh augments its own power capacity, the surplus Tripura power could be used locally in the event of major industrialisation or fed into the regional grid for neighbouring perpetually power deficient states such as Mizoram which lack the gas reserves of Tripura.

Thirdly, since more than 45 sq km can be reclaimed from under water if the Gumti hydel project is decommissioned, huge fertile tracts of flatland would be opened up for farming and resettlement of the landless tribal peasantry. The fertility of this land – already good before inundation — is likely to increase after so many years siltation. At least 30,000 tribal families, perhaps the whole of the state's landless population, can be gainfully resettled on this fertile tract. Before the dam the area's fertility was a talking point in the state. Tripura is a food deficit state, and turning this valley into a modern agrarian zone would also help in solving the state's food problems.

During resettlement, each family can be given at least one hectare of prime agricultural land – thrice the average land holding size in Tripura. The problem of tribal land alienation would thus be tackled realistically. Solution of the deep seated conflict between the tribals and Bengalis needs both symbols and substance – and this gesture would provide both. Never before has a development project been dismantled to preserve the interests of the indigenous peoples. A white elephant project would thus be decommissioned in view of its potential to solve the problem of tribal landlessness.

Fourthly, if the entire or almost the entire tribal landless population can be gainfully resettled in the Gumti project area, this would free the hilly forest regions in the upper catchment of human pressure. Since most of the landless tribals practise jhum, it is essential to settle this entire population in wet plains in Gumti. The hills cannot take the high pressure of human settlements, while the plains can. So, from the ecological viewpoint as well, the resettlement of the landless tribals of Tripura in the Gumti project area would be a welcome initiative. The state's forest cover, now receding, would improve; degraded forests would be reclaimed for nature, and plantations would be developed where possible. A word of caution: the area likely to be reclaimed in Gumti project area should be used only for resettling tribal landless – a compact area in keeping with Maharaja Bir Bikram's tribal reserve concept.

The tribal population must be reminded that the insurgents never address grassroots development issues such as land.

Empty stomachs, angry minds

The Gumti decommissioning proposal should be implemented before ethnic polarisation between Bengali settlers and indigenous tribes-people snowballs beyond control. The state is still ruled by the CPI (M)-led Left Front, a left-of-centre coalition which has support both amongst Bengalis and tribes-people. Tribal parties and militant groups will support the dam's decommissioning, and Bengali extremist groups have not yet emerged to resist it. A political dialogue can be initiated to create the proper climate for decommissioning and the creation of an alternative economy for Tripura.

Even the security agencies stand to benefit from this settlement – a happily settled tribal population, easily 'monitored', is less of a headache for the police than if it is spread out over a huge hill region with a poor economy that creates empty stomachs and angry minds. Otherwise the incidence of insurgent violence in Tripura, very considerable for such a tiny state, would be hard to control. According to police statistics, more than 3000 people including 158 schoolteachers were kidnapped and 1697 people (including security personnel) were killed in the decade between 1993 and 2003. The trend of violence has accelerated in the last year.

One would argue that the Bengalis can buy peace through the process of ethnic reconciliation that the decommissioning of the Dumbur hydel project and redistribution of the lands reclaimed can start off. The root cause of the tribal insurgency would have been addressed. The tribal peasantry can be substantially empowered through this relocation of priorities. If the dam goes, some Bengali fishermen in the area will feel the loss of the Dumbur Lake (as the Gumti reservoir is popularly known), but the rehabilitation of a few families would not pose an insurmountable hurdle. In the larger interest of ethnic reconciliation in Tripura, the dam ought to go.

Tribal insurgency in Tripura, now largely criminalised, must be fought relentlessly. The tribal population must be reminded that the insurgents never address grassroots development issues such as land. Till now, they have focused only on power-sharing or resorted to mafia-style extortions. The insurgents have not sought strategies for the empowerment of the tribal peasantry. In one stroke, decommissioning the dam would change the face of Tripura and hold out hope for many communities and regions elsewhere on India and Southasia. △

Note: See also 'Tripura's brutal cul de sac' by Anindita Dasgupta in December 2001 Himal *(http://www.himalmag.com/december2001/essay.htm)*

Replicating Kerala and Sri Lanka

TWO YEARS turned the Indian subcontinent into Southasia. Between 14 August 1947 and 4 February 1948, India, Pakistan (its eastern part would later become Bangladesh), and Sri Lanka all gained independence from the British Empire. Amid the optimism of independence, the new states were comparable in population health and development indicators. Their progress since has been different.

Non-communicable and communicable diseases ravage Southasia. Tobacco and pharmaceutical industries are exploiting weak legislation to nurture new markets. There is little pride in the progress of surgery, health research, or postgraduate education. Yet one challenge dwarfs all these: the desperate state of maternal and child health. The scale of morbidity and mortality caused by neglect of mothers and children is driving the region to disaster. And unless regional priorities switch from nuclear weapons to maternal and child health the progress that is being made in community development, by integrating care in refugee camps, by the creators of the Jaipur foot and the Karachi ambulance service, and on cricket fields will count for nothing.

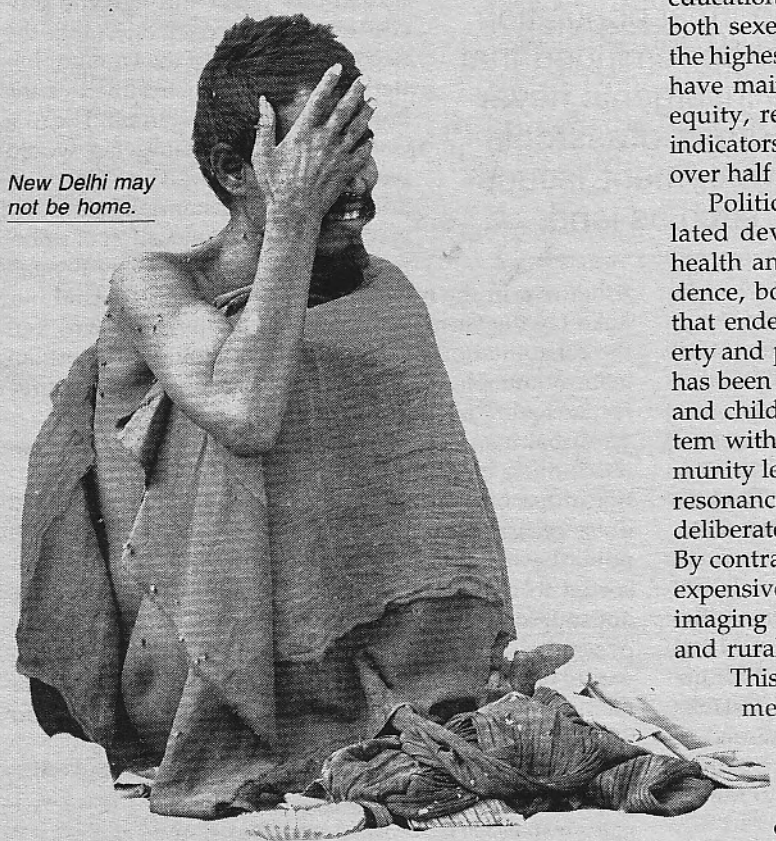
The answers to the region's problems may already be with us. Despite a civil war, Sri Lanka has the best health indicators in the region (also beating those of most other countries with comparable incomes), with average life expectancy at 73 years, infant mortality at 16 per 1000, and maternal mortality at 30 per 100 000 live births. India's Kerala state has achieved health and demographic indicators far ahead of Indian national averages, with similar levels to Sri Lanka; over 80 percent of infants receive all routine vaccines by one year, use of family planning services is high, and population growth is steady at replacement levels.

Kerala tides over basic human indices.

The genesis of this success is an object lesson for the entire region. Soon after independence Sri Lanka decided to invest heavily in education and health as a cornerstone of socioeconomic development. Gains in education have been impressive, with literacy rates for both sexes exceeding 90 percent. Similarly, Kerala has the highest literacy rates among all Indian states. Both have maintained policies to achieve gender and social equity, reflected in outstanding health and economic indicators for women. In Sri Lanka, women constitute over half the work force.

Political will and grassroots support have stimulated development, underpinning largely consistent health and investment strategies. Soon after independence, both governments introduced agrarian reform that ended feudal land holdings, thus alleviating poverty and promoting equity. An important policy plank has been a focus on primary care —especially maternal and child health — through a multilayered health system with adequate provision of basic services at community level. Sri Lanka does not have a single magnetic resonance scanner in the public sector, epitomising a deliberate public focus on primary and secondary care. By contrast, many other countries in Southasia boast expensive tertiary care institutions (where sophisticated imaging is to be found), with low funding of primary and rural care.

This progress has not gone unchecked. Improvements in socioeconomic conditions prompted growth of the private sector in Kerala, as public institutions failed to keep up with the population's demand for quality care. A recent review of community health workers found



New Delhi may not be home.

Sri Lanka outperforms the neighbours.

gaps in their ability to adapt from implementing vertical national programmes to problem solving at local level. Others have criticised health in Kerala as "low mortality high morbidity", with little attention paid to diseases of transition. Local communities, in typical fashion, have assumed the responsibility for resolving these issues.

What can the rest of Southasia learn from Kerala and Sri Lanka? Firstly, given leadership, investments in education and primary care can provide a framework for human development. Secondly, gains have been achieved against a background of participatory democracy; indeed, social consciousness is crucial in overcoming the menace of corruption. Thirdly, maternal and child health is critical to development.

Can the rest of Southasia follow this lead? Yes, but doing so requires setting aside political differences, resolving regional conflicts, and creating an atmosphere that reduces spending on defence and nuclear arsenals. This may sound like wishful thinking but how else will we create hope from the despair of untold child death, wanton neglect of girls and women, and a rich elite feasting on the misery of millions in poverty? Health professionals in the region have an opportunity to join hands across national boundaries, cast aside historic divisions that suffocate progress, and begin to realise this vision of something better — a vision crystal clear in the heady days of independence, since lost in the intervening years of poverty, conflict, and nationalism. △

Zulfiqar *Bhutta*, *Samiran Nundy* and *Kamran Abbasi*
In the *British Medical Journal*
(online edition at http://www.bmj.com)

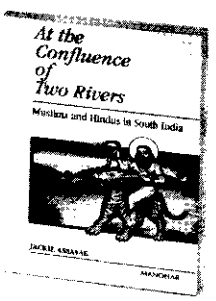
The theological 'other'

'Hindus' and 'Muslims' may not exactly be the distinct monolithic identities, as is made out in political rhetoric. The Hindus and Muslims of South India are a case in point.

Compared to North India, relatively little has been written on the social history of Islam and Hindu-Muslim relations in the southern states of India. This is particularly unfortunate, given that Islam arrived on coastal South India considerably before it made its appearance in the north. The spread of Islam in most of South India, in contrast to much of the north, was not accompanied by Muslim political expansion, being, instead, mainly the result of the peaceful missionary efforts of the Sufis and traders. Furthermore, and again unlike the situation in much of the north, Hindu-Muslim relations in most parts of South India have been fairly tension-free, and continue to be so, although things are now changing with the rise in recent years of aggressive Hindutva organisations in the peninsula.

This book sets out to explore various aspects of Hindu-Muslim relations in Karnataka state. In doing so, it seriously challenges several key assumptions that underlie both commonsensical notions as well as scholarly writings on the vexed issue of the Hindu-Muslim encounter. Examining various shared religious traditions, cults and shrines in rural Karnataka with which many Hindus and Muslims are associated, Assayag questions the notion of 'Islam' and 'Hinduism' as practiced religions, two monolithic entities, neatly defined and clearly set apart, if not opposed to each other. He challenges the understanding of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' as two distinct communities that have little or nothing in common at the level of social practice and religious beliefs and rituals. Assayag thus challenges the grossly simplistic and misleading notion of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' as being inherently and necessarily the theological 'other' for either.

The shared religious traditions in which many Muslims and Hindus in present-day Karnataka jointly participate form the main focus of this book. Assayag provides interesting anthropological details of the beliefs and practices associated with the traditions within the cults of various Sufis and local deities, revealing how the common participation of both Hindus and Muslims in these cults helps to promote a shared tradition and culture. Thus, Hindus flock in large numbers to Sufi shrines; village Muslims often visit Hindu temples where some of them even 'experience' being 'possessed' by the local goddess; Hindus enrol as disciples of a certain Muslim saint; Muslims and Hindus jointly participate in rituals on the day of Ashura in the month of Muharram; a Hindu chooses a Muslim as the custodian of a Hindu shrine and vice versa.



At the Confluence of Two Rivers—Muslims and Hindus in South India

Author: Jackie Assayag
Publisher: Manohar, New Delhi
Year: 2004
Pages: 313

reviewed by
Yoginder Sikand

They jointly participate in rituals on the day of Ashura in the month of Muharram; a Hindu chooses a Muslim as the custodian of a Hindu shrine and vice versa.

Such shared traditions owe their existence in part to the nature of the process of the spread of Islam in the region. Islamisation, typically, took the form not of a sudden and drastic conversion but, rather, of a long and gradual process of religio-cultural transformation that was limited in its impact, and left many aspects of the converts' pre-Islamic tradition largely unchanged. Plus, the Sufi saints used several local traditions and motifs in their missionary work so that much of the local tradition came to be understood as 'Islamic' by the converts. The belief in the power of the local Hindu deities as well as Sufis as powerful beings, being able to cure ailments or grant wishes, attracted Hindus as well as Muslims to their shrines, a phenomenon that is still observable in many parts of Karnataka.

Yet, while all of this undoubtedly helped bring Hindus and Muslims into a shared cultural universe and into closer contact with each other, the bond of shared tradition has not been entirely devoid of tension. In the case of several shared shrines and cults, the coexistence between Hindus and Muslims could, Assayag argues, be better described as 'competitive sharing', 'competitive syncretism' or even 'antagonistic tolerance'. This is re-

flected in myths and counter-myths about commonly revered figures through which each community seeks to stress its superiority over the other, in the process fashioning an identity for itself based on a re-written collective memory.

Increasingly, this antagonistic aspect is becoming particularly pronounced as reflected, for instance, in the current dispute over the shrine of the Sufi Raja Bagh Sawar, whom many Hindus now claim to have been a Brahmin, Chang Dev, or the case of the shrine of Baba Budhan in Chikamagalur, which Hindutva militants now seek to convert into a full-fledged Hindu temple, denying its Islamic roots and associations altogether. Assayag discusses these new challenges to the shared Hindu-Muslim tradition in Karnataka in the wider context of the process of urbanisation, the rise of Hindutva militancy in the region in recent years and the consequent heightening of Muslim insecurities. The author also discusses the emergence of Islamic reformist movements and the role of the state in defining fixed religious identities and policing community borders.

Reverence vs. worship

As an anthropological study of Hindu-Muslim relations, focusing on the complex nature of shared or 'syncretistic' religious traditions, this book poses the important question of how local Muslims and Hindus identify themselves and relate to each other. In that sense, it rightly critiques the notion of Hindus and Muslims as monolithic communities inherently opposed to each other. Not everyone will agree with everything that Assayag has to say, however. Some readers might find his language at times dull and heavy. Most crucially, his understanding of Islam and local Islamic traditions can be faulted. Thus, while he refers to the emergence of the Mapilla Muslims of the Malabar coast as a result of mut'a or temporary marriages contracted by Arab Shafi'i Muslim traders, he does not provide any evidence of this, and it is unlikely that this is correct, since mut'a is not recognised by the Shafi'i school. He refers to the great Deccani Sufi Hazrat Bandanawaz Gesudaraz as 'Bandanamaz', and claims that his tomb is 'worshipped' by many Muslims. This, of course, is incorrect, as the devotees of the Sufis do not worship their tombs at all.

Assayag confuses reverence for worship. He refers to the panjah, a hand-shaped metal object often displayed at village shrines during the month of Muharram, as generally having only three fingers, explaining this as 'in keeping with the Sunni creed which recognises only the first three Caliphs'. This is quite untrue. The panjahs almost inevitably have five fingers, representing the panjatan pak, the five members of the 'holy family' of the Prophet. Further, as anyone even familiar with Islam and Islamic history would know, it is absurd to claim that the Sunnis recognise only the first three 'rightly guided' caliphs. At several points the author makes sweeping statements, not backed by evidence, such as when he refers to the 'masochistic character to which the austere piety of the Shi'ites is so inclined', or when he refers to the rulers of various Sultanates in the Deccan as 'waging war' to convert Hindus to Islam, or when he speaks of 'Islamist militants' (instead of 'Islamic reformists') seeking to purge the local religious tradition of various superstitious practices and beliefs.

Despite these obvious flaws, the book serves a valuable purpose, providing a fascinating glimpse into the little-known world of village-level communities that are generally ignored in 'standard' works on Hindu-Muslim relations in India. △

Kashmiriyat and Islam

The conflict in Kashmir may be projected as the 'militant Islamic' assault on the state. But the origins of Kashmiriyat were never built on inter-religious antagonism.

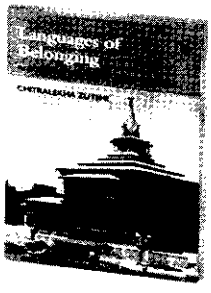
Standard Indian journalistic and even purportedly 'scholarly' accounts of the emergence of the mass uprising in Kashmir tend to portray it as an externally inspired 'Islamic fundamentalist' movement against the supposedly secular Indian state. This is course a misreading of a very complex phenomenon. While the religious aspect obviously cannot be ignored, the Kashmiri Muslim resentment against Indian rule cannot be said to be simply a result of inherent antagonism between Islam and Hinduism or between Muslims and Hindus as such. For one thing, the very notion of the Indian state (against which the Kashmiri movement for self-determination defines itself) as 'secular' is questionable. Furthermore, the argument that the Kashmiri movement is in essence an 'Islamic' or a Muslim 'communal' one ignores the fact that long before the Islamists entered the scene, the movement was led largely by secular elements, such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, who, while advocating independence for Kashmir, were opposed to the notion of an 'Islamic' state, at least of the kind proposed by Islamists active in Kashmir today, such as the Lashkar-i Tayyeba and the Jama'at-i Islami.

Understanding the roots of the Kashmiri movement requires one to take a historical perspective, exam-

ining the changing contours of Kashmiri identity over time. This is precisely what author Chitralekha Zutshi sets out to do in this well-researched book. She questions the notion of 'Kashmiriyat' as a unified cohesive vision of Kashmir's past that ignores, perhaps deliberately, crucial internal differences and contradictions of religion, sect, caste, class, region, language and ethnicity. Zutshi's particular focus is on how the notion of Kashmiriyat came to be developed over time in response to wider social, cultural, economic and political developments in Kashmir. In the process, she examines how key Kashmiri leaders sought to balance their commitment to Islam, on the one hand, and to the notion of a Kashmiri nation, on the other.

The notion of a well-defined Kashmiri identity, Zutshi argues, was not the original product of Kashmiri nationalist minds, but, instead, owed much to colonial discourses on Kashmir pre-dating the rise of Kashmiri nationalism. From the 17th century, European travellers wrote about the 'happy vale' of Kashmir where, as they saw it, Muslims and Hindus alike were rather lax in their religious commitments and where, unlike in other parts of the subcontinent, the two communities lived amicably together. Zutshi claims that this romanticised picture, while true to some extent, ignored crucial internal differences that seriously challenge the notion of Kashmiri religious syncretism and the argument that communitarian differences were relatively marginal in Kashmir.

Closely examining pre-colonial, colonial and Dogra records, as well as the writings of Kashmiri Pundits and Muslim spokesmen, Zutshi traces the complex process of the construction of a distinct Kashmiri Muslim identity. She argues that Sikh rule in Kashmir, under which the Muslim peasantry suffered considerable hardship, naturally led to a growing stress on the Muslim aspect of the identity of the Kashmiri Muslim majority which, in turn, functioned as a means to articulate dissent and protest. This was carried further under the Dogra regime, which increasingly relied on orthodox Brahminical Hinduism to claim sanction for itself. As Zutshi writes, the growing salience of the specifically 'Muslim' aspect of the identity of the Kashmiri Muslims was 'a direct result of the overtly Hindu nature of the Dogras' apparatus of legitimacy'. Under the Dogras, the Kashmiri Muslims, as a whole, suffered heavy privations. Top government posts and large estates were almost entirely monopolised by Dogras, Punjabis and Kashmiri



Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir

By Chitralekha Zutshi
Publisher: Permanent Black, Delhi
Year: 2003
Pages: 359
Price: Rs. 695
ISBN: 81-7824-060-2

reviewed by
Yoginder Sikand

Pundits. As a consequence, Islam and Islamic consciousness served as a crucial vehicle for the Kashmiri Muslims to express protest against their marginalisation and oppression. In this sense, as Zutshi says, the emerging Kashmiri Muslim identity cannot be said to have been 'communal' in the narrow sense of the term.

From the late 19th century onwards, in the context of Dogra rule, remarkable changes began to emerge in the ways that Kashmiris, Muslims and Pundits, defined themselves, their religious identities, their inter-relationships and their understanding of Kashmir. Kashmiri Pundits who, although a relatively tiny minority, were over-represented in the government services, leaned heavily on the Dogra regime and, some notable exceptions apart, were hostile to the movement for democracy and the end of Dogra rule that was gradually emerging among the Kashmiri Muslims. Faced with growing resentment among the Muslims against the oppressive 'Hindu' Dogra regime, many Pundits moved in the direction of a more distinctly 'orthodox' Hinduism or to the Arya Samaj, with its characteristic hostility towards Islam and Muslims. For their part, the Muslims witnessed the emergence of new Islamic reformist stirrings emanating from outside Kashmir which were then articulated by the new, albeit miniscule, Muslim middle-class. The Kashmiri Muslim reformists were influenced by a range of new voices, including the Aligarh movement, the madrassa at Deoband, various Punjabi Muslim organisations, and the heterodox Ahmadi community. Many of them were in the forefront of advocating modern as well as Islamic education among the Muslims of the state, and played the role of leaders in demanding Muslim rights and in opposing the Dogra regime. Through their writings, speeches and organisational efforts they developed a discourse on the rights of the Kashmiri Muslims based on an Islamic vision of a just society.

This growing salience of Islam as the defining element of Kashmiri Muslim identity did not mean, however, that internal differences were somehow solved. In fact, in some respects they were only further exacerbated, with the emergence of new intra-Muslim religious differences. Zutshi describes how Muslim reformists bitterly critiqued the custodians of the Sufi shrines for making a living off the credulous, for various un-Islamic beliefs and practices that they upheld, for ignoring the real-world plight of the common Muslims and, in the case of some, for collaborating with the

Dogra regime. In turn, many custodians of the shrines attacked the reformists as 'anti-Islamic' or 'Wahhabi', appealing to the authorities to ban their activities. In addition to the 'sectarian' differences were personality clashes, such as between the Mirwaiz of the Jami'a Masjid in Srinagar and the Mirwaiz of the Shah-i Hamadan shrine, both of whom sought to present themselves as the true representatives of the Muslims of the region.

The movement for self-determination of the Kashmiris entered a new stage in the 1930s, with the setting up of the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, and then the National Conference. Zutshi critically examines the politics of these two groups and the differing agendas that they proposed, looking particularly at their different understandings of Islam and Kashmiri identity. She then draws her study to a conclusion by examining the dilemmas facing the Kashmiris and their relationship to Islam and national identity in the aftermath of the Partition. Distancing herself from any particular 'nationalist' position, she highlights the pressing necessity to 'resolve the uneasy historical relationship between religion, region, nation and [...] nation-states' in the case of Kashmir. The Kashmiris, she says, 'became citizens of India and Pakistan without acquiring the concomitant social, economic and political rights on either side of the border'. This being the case, she argues, a lasting solution to the Kashmir question requires policymakers and scholars in Pakistan, India and elsewhere to 'deconstruct Indian and Pakistani nationalist narratives and agendas in relation to Kashmir' and to examine the question afresh from the viewpoint of the Kashmiris themselves. ▲

Dogra monarch, Maharaja Hari Singh with Maharani Tara Devi.

Under the Dogras, the Kashmiri Muslims suffered heavy privations. Top government posts and large estates were almost entirely monopolised by Dogras, Punjabis and Kashmiri Pundits.

The empire of reckless depoliticisation

When allegiance to Power was demanded,
Those who said 'yes' and those who said 'no',
Were both considered offenders.
—Faiz Ahmad Faiz

TO BUILD and hold their empire, the Romans built roads. Portuguese spice-traders and Spanish speculators became emperors by exploring shorter and safer sea lanes. The defeat of the Spanish Armada might have helped the rise of Pax Britannia, but to hold itself together, the latter had to extend its penetration inland, which it did through river navigation and later by building railways. But the dominance of these emperors of the Old World came to be challenged with the laying of submarine cables. Communication networks became the new tool of control over the 'colonies'. Emperors of the New World could sit in the climate-controlled offices of Langley and Foggy Bottom and direct the course of events in distant lands. Thus arose a string of puppet dictators throughout Asia, Africa, and South America in the decades after the Second World War.

The 'decolonisation' process worked well in very few countries; for most, all that happened was that the centre shifted from London and Paris to Washington and New York. In later years, satellite television began to rock the Russian Bear, which fell from its pedestal in the wake of a showdown with the *jehadis* in the desert wilderness of Afghanistan. Instead of real warriors, the Americans sent in the Rambo video to try and manage the ensuing chaos; and in place of shipment of manufactured goods for basic commodities, the new colonies had to make do with loans to pay for the services of 'consultants' that bred corrupt regimes everywhere, and branded soda which helped create depoliticised zombies mortally afraid of questioning conventional wisdom.

The high-priests of the Bretton Woods orthodoxy have been so successful in instituting the dogma of the free-market that the very process of legitimating of political regimes has fundamentally changed. No contestant in the recent elections of Sri Lanka challenged the WTO worldview. In India that is said to be 'shining' with its 'feel good' factor (spins manufactured by the wordsmiths of the free-market), there is very little to choose between the political economy of the two claimants to the throne in New Delhi—the Bhartiya Janata Party and the Congress (I). The result? Whatever be the outcome of the political contest, the legitimacy of the regime shall remain clouded for large sections of the electorate.

No contestant in the recent elections of Sri Lanka challenged the WTO worldview.

Rather than looking inward to sustain the base, the ruling elite of Southasia are recklessly de-legitimising themselves by depending upon the power of Empire to keep themselves comfortably ensconced. They do not even want to try. The dissonance between the aspirations of the people who hold the legitimating power and the ruling regimes who have bought the free-market propaganda wholesale, is so large that the region can implode from within without advance warning.

Loyal Regimes, Middle India

In Afghanistan, US Marines can guard Karzai, but they cannot make him either popular or effective. There are four ways of acquiring authority—ancestry, elections, guns or propaganda. Karzai has no claim to any of them. When the Americans decide to dump him, as they sure will sooner or later, Afghanistan will still be bereft of institutions capable of producing a successor from within.

For the moment, Gen Pervez Musharraf has succeeded in taming the American eagle to do his bidding, but what will happen when he sheds his uniform? Gen Zia-ul Haq was no less effective in making the US treasury pay for his Islamisation agenda, but it did not save Pakistan from acute humiliation in Afghanistan. There is no guarantee that Gen Musharraf's Kashmir policy will not meet the same fate despite the non-NATO ally status that his regime is gloating over. A parliament made impotent by the overbearing presence of a non-elected body like the National Security Council is sure to fail, and the thought of a nuclear-power with a failing military is frightening.

The Empire operates in the Indian mind through subtler but more insidious means. Through concerted propaganda, an entire generation of the Indian middle-class has been brainwashed into believing that political freedom is the root of all evil, and free-market fundamentalism its sole panacea - entire Middle India is breathlessly waiting to board the globalisation bandwagon. But the free market, which is not really all that free, has no space for the marginalised, disadvantaged, silent majority. To assert their rights, the *real* majority have to either opt for the centripetal forces of left insurgency or join ethnic insurgencies, of centrifugal tendency, that are erupting everywhere, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Kuchh to Kohima. They have no other choice, for as a non-market actor the majority is left to its own devices.

Justice Allybon defined ruler-subject relations back in 1688 thus: "It is the business of the government to

manage matters relating to the government; it is the business of subjects to mind their own properties and interests". This doctrine still holds in Thimpu where democracy remains a detested concept. But the majority will not always meekly allow the pelf and privileges of the ruling Ngalong nobility. When that happens—the doubting 'if' is not necessary any longer—will the nobility sink as easily as Sikkim's, is the question.

In Bangladesh, the elite are too cultured to nurse the grudge of pre-independence excesses—soldiers of West Pakistan ravaged their land, but the real overlords were the Americans—but the people in the street may not limit themselves to dawn-to-dusk hartals if the current stagnation continues for long. Similarly, the abruptly interrupted peace process in Sri Lanka cannot resume as long as the Empire continues to play its games of weakening the LTTE insurgency from within and strengthening the Colombo regime from without.

The crisis of legitimacy haunts all the loyal regimes of the Empire in Southasia, but nowhere is it as intense as in Nepal, where King Gyanendra holds that, "The days of monarchy being seen but not heard, watching the people's difficulties but not addressing them, and being a silent spectator to their tear-stained faces are over". So his majesty flies around the country in full military regalia—emerging from the helicopter to hug babies, engage elders and grant autographs to eager teenagers who call him 'sir'. Meanwhile, the country continues to bear the burnt of a raging Maoist insurgency that has already claimed 10,000 lives.

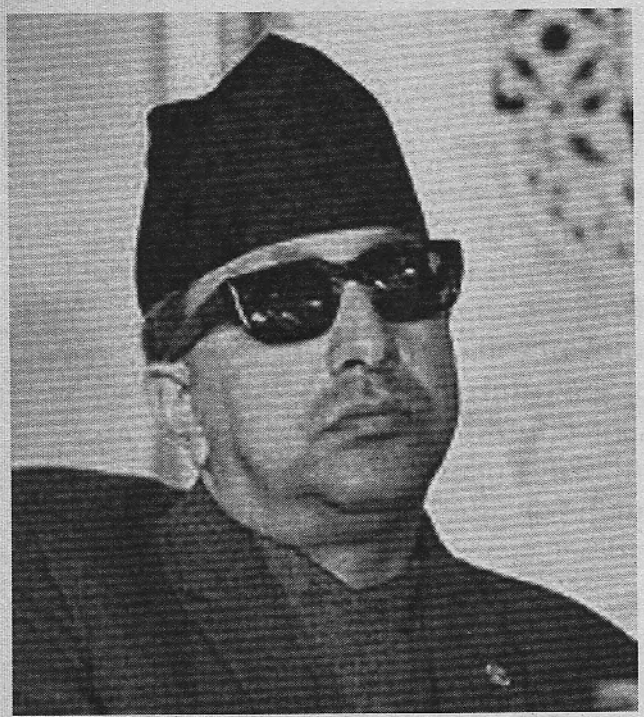
To assert their rights, the real majority have to either opt for the centripetal forces of left insurgency or join ethnic insurgencies of centrifugal nature that are erupting everywhere.

Royal Model

Historically, Nepal has remained loyal to the British Crown ever since Jang Bahadur helped quell the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. After the partition of British India, Nepal continued to remain a faithful ally of the West and allowed Israel to open its first embassy in Southasia. Whether under the short-lived democratic government of BP Koirala (within 18 months of its election, King Mahendra staged a coup to oust it from power) or the 30-year long Panchayat autocracy, the establishment in Kathmandu never wavered in its commitment to the policies of the West.

The democratic governments in place after the restoration of democracy in 1990 were only too willing to give continuity to the traditional loyalty of the Kathmandu establishment. Even the minority government of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxists and Leninist) -- which is as 'communist' as North Korea is 'democratic' and insists on keeping the name merely for its 'brand' value -- has never questioned the loyalty of the royal regime to the Western alliance. But the rise of Maobadi insurgency began to challenge this cosy multi-nodal relationship. Perhaps the need of a new royal model of democracy to keep Nepal under tight leash was felt soon after the first local elections that threw up young leaders not content with the status quo of unquestioned commitment of the establishment to the policy prescriptions of the Empire.

Following the 1 June 2001 Narayanhiti Massacre, Prince Gyanendra became king, and suddenly the monarchy began to assert itself. After the royal takeover of October Four 2003, when the king sacked an elected prime minister, its yesterday once again. King Gyanendra is busy re-enacting the drama of the early 1960s, when his father Mahendra turned the kingdom into a political laboratory seeking to replicate General Ayub Khan's Pakistani model of 'basic democracy'. But King Mahendra did not have a restive population to reckon with back then, the political parties were still nascent, and the urban middle-class was almost non-existent. Geopolitics has changed too much in the intervening period to allow an unpopular system propped up, even with unlimited supply of funds and overseas advice. The present king will, however, try his best to experiment with a hybrid political sys-



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Is it already yesterday ?: King Mahendra, son Gyanendra.

tem of semi-authoritarianism that is high on rhetoric and low in substance. Such a system will be easier for the West to handle, now that Nepal has become first among the 'poorest of the poor' countries of the world to join the World Trade Organisation.

King Gyanendra has three proven models of military-dominated polity for his alchemy:

- Six principles from the Western Turkey of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk—republicanism, populism, revolutionarism, nationalism, statism, and secularism—can provide him the basis to centralise all authority.
- The "guided democracy" of Suharto's Indonesia can give lessons in the establishment of crony capitalism.
- Musharrafism of Pakistan offers useful lessons in institutionalising the dominance of the military in the affairs of the state.

But all these models are tools to produce and exercise state power. None of them can provide the legitimacy that modern regimes need. Perhaps that is the reason the monarch has been insisting for an election to legitimise the October Four Takeover -- something his father Mahendra did not really have to worry about. King Gyanendra wants to play a 'constructive' role within the framework of a constitutional monarchy, a monarch who in his own words not only listens and talks but acts as well. To this end, he has been desperately experimenting with all kinds of ministries and ministers to ensure discreet "pre-poll rigging" in the manner of General Musharraf. But Nepalis have tasted freedom for much longer than their Pakistani counterparts, fortunately, and are unlikely to be taken in.

Free-market without fundamental freedoms, private enterprise without representative government, and globalisation without universal human rights are no more possible in a country where the parties are agitating on the streets while insurgents are fighting with the forces of the state in the countryside. This time, the Empire and its cohorts the international financial institutions will not have their way unless they support the forces of change. There are hints of late that this realisation may finally be setting in. People are no longer afraid to be offenders. The Maobaadis may never succeed in unfurling the hammer-and-sickle atop Mount Everest, but the legitimacy of unrepresentative loyal regimes of the Empire is openly being challenged in Nepal. And, make no mistake, a bugle blown from up in the Himalaya is sure to resound throughout Southasia.

A bugle blown from up in the Himalaya is sure to resound throughout Southasia.

The rise of the New Empire gave birth to corruption and CCOMPOSA (the as-yet-nascent roundtable of the Maobaadis of Southasia). Its fall has the potential of heralding a new wave of democratisation of the region, one which should not be allowed to kill its own offspring. From the crisis of the present chaos, a new Southasia will arise to take its rightful place on the world stage. Sings Ralph Waldo Emerson in 'Circles', "In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred". △

–CK Lal

Monday 12 April 2004

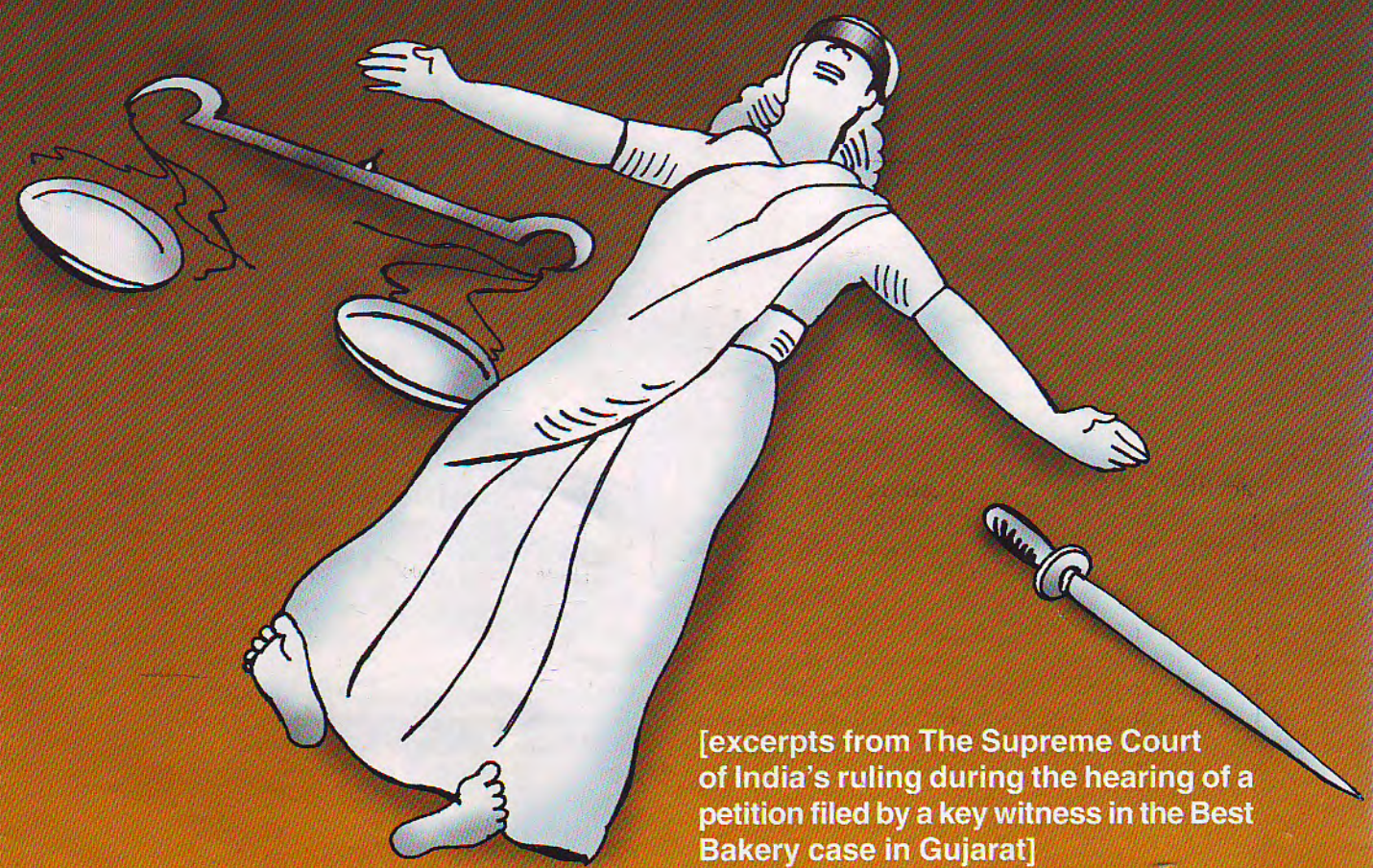
"The modern day Neros were looking elsewhere when Best Bakery and innocent children and helpless women were burning and were probably deliberating on how the perpetrators of the crime could be saved or protected

♦♦♦

The public prosecutor appears to have acted more as a defence counsel than one whose duty was to present the truth before the court

♦♦♦

The court in turn appeared to be a silent spectator, mute to the manipulations and preferred to be indifferent to the sacrilege being committed to justice"



[excerpts from The Supreme Court of India's ruling during the hearing of a petition filed by a key witness in the Best Bakery case in Gujarat]

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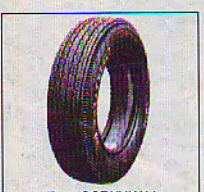
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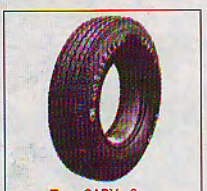
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