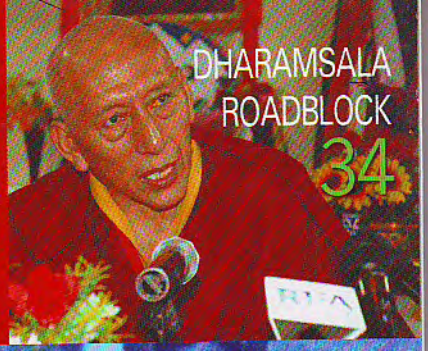
December 2006 Vol 19 No 9

HIMĀL SOUTHASIAN



DHARAMSALA ROADBLOCK 34

BUT FOR DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN

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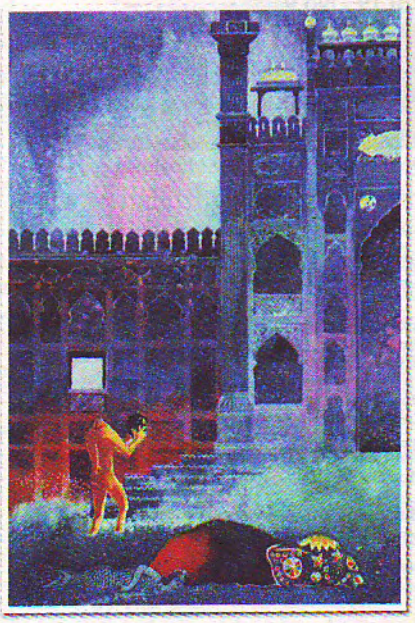
But for democracy in Pakistan

The cover theme for this issue is the complexity that surrounds Pakistan's relationship with pluralism and democracy. **Ejaz Haider** discusses the continuous centrality of the military, **Nadeem Omar Tarar** challenges notions of cultural determinism, and **Beena Sarwar** engages with the issue through the lens of the anti-woman Hudood Ordinances. For the cover image, we have chosen "Sarmad", a watercolour by Lahore-based artist **Sabir Nazar**. The scene refers to the beheading of the mystic Sheikh Sarmad by emperor Aurangzeb on charge of heresy. The artist has moved the setting from the Jama Masjid of Old Delhi to the Badshahi Masjid in Lahore, built by Aurangzeb himself. Says Sabir Nazar: "The beheading symbolises every autocrat's wish to separate the people from their consciousness; but as with Sheikh Sarmad, it just does not work."



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HIMAL SOUTHASIAN

December 2006 | www.himalmag.com

Himal Southasian is published by **The Southasia Trust, Lalitpur, Nepal**

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Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal

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info@himalmag.com
www.himalmag.com
ISSN 10129804
Library of Congress Control number
88 912882

Image setting: ScanPro
Printed at: Jagadamba Press, Lalitpur, Nepal
+977-1-5547017/5547018

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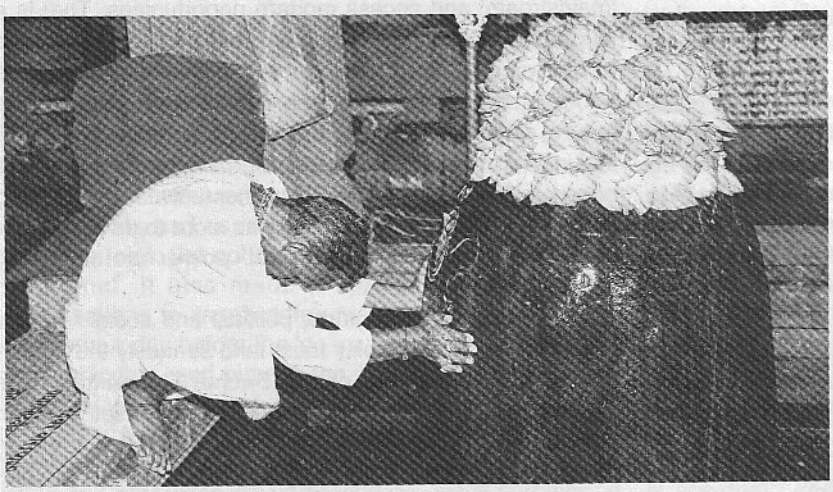
The language of apartheid



I found your recent photo feature, "Stones of Benaras" *(See Himal October 2006)* intriguing, both the title and the pictures. The lead photograph shows a man worshipping what the title suggests are "stones". Clearly for that man, they were more than stones. So why not recognise that fact? It seems petty to me to call them stones.

Faith transcends nomenclature, which is just as well, for faith is the essence of a man. What is a man who has no faith? And here I don't mean faith as in belief in God, but in the larger sense. And while it may be fashionable from time to time to make light of the faith of some – especially those who are not organised enough or sophisticated enough to realise what is going on – doing so does a disservice to all humanity, whether it is running down a child's dreams of a better future or of a man's way of worship.

I am familiar with the arguments around self censorship, over-sensitivity, the fact that 'stone' is not a pejorative, freedom of speech, etcetera, and they all have merit, particularly this last. Yes, it's even good to blaspheme from time to time. But in this instance, it just seems pointless to me. Perhaps the editor of *Himal* thought it was a catchy line, and that's about it. But for a long time I will carry in my head the image of the man praying devoutly, and someone calling the object of his worship 'stones'. It's not fair to him – he probably does not speak English, will probably never see his picture or the way his faith was labelled.

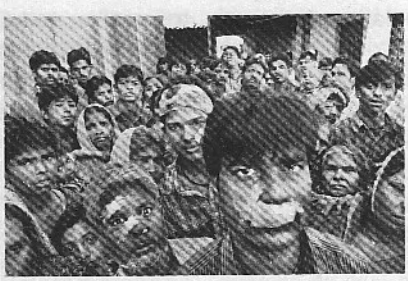
I think I would concede a point about 'stone' not being denigration if a Devanagri issue of *Himal* (in the month of Kartik) had a photo essay titled "Varanasi kay Patthar". It is much easier to write this kind of thing in English, because of the language apartheid that goes on in the Subcontinent.

Dipika Damerla
Canada

Uniform civil code

The problems that you have described in your cover article on Gujarat *(See Himal September 2006, "Gujarat as another country")* are not due to the Hindus, but to the attitude of the Muslims toward Hindus. Look, for instance, at Kashmir, and what happened to the Kashmiri Pandits. Gujaratis are just being proactive in ensuring that what happened in Kashmir does not happen to them. Even the law grants the right to every citizen to protect himself. Muslims are the aggressors here. They do not want to secularise their affairs; they talk about jihad and *kafirs* and want to Islamise the whole world, including India. What is wrong in defending and exercising one's right to resist aggressive designs?

If *Himal Southasian* is concerned with secularism, you should ask the



Muslims to accept a Uniform Civil Code that will help to secularise their affairs. As long as communities are governed by laws, conventions and ideas such as kafir and jihad, there will be strife. Peace between communities and religions requires that old ideas that are propagated by religion be given a decent and well-publicised burial, and that new liberal ideas be adopted in their place. That can happen only if we have a Uniform Civil Code in place.

Vivek L Dev
(via email)

Secularist lies

Half your story on Gujarat was fiction. Where did you get the Babu Bajrangi character from? And Sauyajya – what an unrealistic conversation. You secularists have to finally resort to lies to prove your case. Even if it had been the truth, what is wrong with it? This is the Modi model of dealing with Muslims, and the world should learn from it. All Muslims may not be terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims. It is important to keep them down. And that is what happening in Gujarat. We will be eternally grateful to Narendrabhai Modi for saving us from the menace of Muslim terrorism.

Udit Joshi
Delhi

Send your comments, questions and corrections – or anything else – to editorial@himalmag.com

INDIA

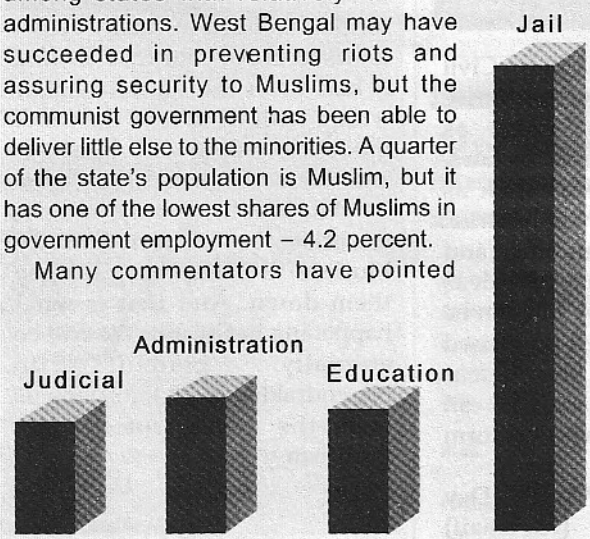
Sachar's damning report

Muslims remain the silent underclass of secular India. From lack of access to education to negligible representation in public employment, they lag behind on all socio-economic indicators. A new report, released by a government committee headed by former Chief Justice Rajinder Sachar, has thrown up striking data about the dismal social, economic and educational status of Indian Muslims.

Consider this: Muslims rank below what are known as the Other Backward Classes and even Scheduled Castes on a variety of indicators. The share of Muslims in higher governmental positions in states where their population is at least 15 percent is no more than six percent; in a dozen states with large Muslim populations, their presence in judiciary positions averages to just 7.8 percent. In the national bureaucracy, the figures are even more stunning – the share of Muslims in the Indian Foreign Service is just 1.6 percent, while they constitute less than 2.2 percent in the Indian Administrative Service. Muslims make up 12 percent of the population. The poverty level of urban Muslims, meanwhile, is 44 percent, compared to a national average of 28 percent. The one space where Muslims are represented significantly above their population share is in India's prisons – in Maharashtra, the community makes up 10.6 percent of the population, while the percentage of Muslim inmates is as high as 40 percent. Muslims are just over nine percent of the Gujarati population, but they constitute a quarter of its prisoners.

The results should not come as a surprise, for the Hunter Commission appointed during the colonial era and the Gopal Singh Committee two decades ago came up with similar conclusions. What is shocking, however, is that the poor status of Muslims spans the entire country, even among states with relatively 'secular' administrations. West Bengal may have succeeded in preventing riots and assuring security to Muslims, but the communist government has been able to deliver little else to the minorities. A quarter of the state's population is Muslim, but it has one of the lowest shares of Muslims in government employment – 4.2 percent.

Many commentators have pointed fingers at the community itself, claiming that Muslims have refused to get out of their ghettoes, engage with the 'mainstream' and access modern opportunities. That is a laughably unintelligent argument, but one that continues to be heard. Such a view ignores institutional prejudices and systemic flaws, for these figures represent not the failure of Muslims but of the Indian state to create an inclusive framework. It would be grossly unfair to put the onus on the victimised Muslims themselves, overlooking the fact that this marginalisation has more to do with larger social attitudes, ground-level power politics and administrative priorities.



% of Muslims in various sectors

There are pressing moral, political and social reasons as to why the Indian polity must take seriously the figures and recommendations of the Sachar Committee. It is incumbent upon a state that still deigns to call itself 'secular' and 'socialist', and on a society that prides itself on tolerance, to address the matter head-on and to provide the excluded religious minority an equitable place and share in national life. The ruling elites must recognise that they cannot maintain eight percent growth rates if more than 12 percent of the country's billion-plus population are educationally and economically deprived. Indeed, Muslim distress is a tinderbox. If India wants to retain any level of stability and social cohesion, there is no choice but to address this glaring gap.

Equal opportunities

There is already a healthy debate raging in the Indian press and intelligentsia on the mechanisms to remedy this situation. Some political leaders have made the case for reservation and quotas for Muslims in education and jobs. We believe there are other enabling measures which ought to be implemented. Besides the fact that reservation is a polarising issue, and its effectiveness questionable, there are practical hurdles to its implementation. The Indian Constitution does not allow for religion-based reservations, and the ceiling of 50 percent reserved quota set by the judiciary has already been used up. Additionally, several Muslim communities have already been classified as OBCs and given concessions.

What is needed are innovative ways to ensure that Muslims occupy their rightful place in public life, as well as the growing private sector. The Sachar Committee recommendations are a good start. These include setting up an Equal Opportunities Commission, promotion of the Urdu language, reforms of madrassas and their affiliation to state higher education boards, increased flow of credit, and enhanced participation of Muslims in governance.

Recognising the nature and extent of this problem, and mobilising the political will to address it, is among the foremost challenge Indian democracy faces in the coming years. At a time when the disenfranchisement among the Dalits, the tribals, the 'other' backward communities are already at the centre of the discussion, the Sachar Committee has done good work to bring India's beleaguered Muslims under the purview of public scrutiny.

SRI LANKA

Hope amidst explosions

President Mahinda Rajapakse's decision to open the A9 Highway to Jaffna as a one-time measure to send humanitarian supplies to Jaffna has come as a surprise, albeit a welcome one. For weeks, humanitarian organisations had been pleading with the government to open the road. But not only did the government keep the door shut, it also made it more difficult for those organisations to reach different parts of the northeast. However, a day before the 'donor co-chairs' were to meet in Washington, and prior to the president's visit to India, the locks were released.

There is positive news that the Panel of Experts appointed by President Rajapakse to assist the work of the All Party Conference will be coming out with a progressive scheme of devolution of power and internal self-determination. It is also reported that the power-sharing envisaged in this proposal would exceed that proposed in the draft constitution of 2000, which was the farthest that any government has gotten in terms of a concrete proposal for devolution of power. These proposals are to be put before all the political parties, and thereafter presented for discussion to the LTTE.

There are many hurdles to be crossed before these proposals become a reality. They may become diluted, in the same manner that the draft constitution of 2000 was diluted. On the other hand, almost all political parties in the country accept the need for the devolution of power and power-sharing as the solution to the ethnic conflict. The memorandum of understanding signed last month between the ruling party and the main opposition, headed by former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, will come in useful at the stage of obtaining an all-party consensus.

The draft constitution of 2000, which was put forward by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, was scuttled by the then-opposition of Wickremesinghe in tandem with other nationalist parties. On this occasion, however, the new agreement is likely to prevail. Wickremesinghe has been steadfast in his commitment to a federal solution, after his government and the LTTE reached a historic agreement on exploring a federal solution in December 2002.

President Rajapakse has made it clear that he will proceed to negotiate a political solution on the basis of the decision made by the All Party Conference. The uniqueness of the president's position is that he is willing to accept whatever the consensus turns out to be. If there is no consensus, he will most likely choose the majority opinion, which is in favour of the power-sharing proposal. Therefore, the major question mark will be over the LTTE's reaction to the proposal.

At the moment, relations between the government and LTTE are extremely hostile. While the government has indicated its willingness to equal the LTTE in fighting fire with fire, for the first time in a long while the Colombo government is facing the reality of being reprimanded in parallel to the LTTE by the international community. This is due to the international perception that the government is not doing enough to prevent human-rights abuses. So even while a compromise solution is being sought in the political realm, simultaneously both sides appear to be preparing for a long and difficult war of attrition against the other.

At present the only real pressure on the government and the LTTE is coming from the international community, although this does not appear to be having a positive impact on either side. Both the government and LTTE have shown a readiness to challenge the international community and to disregard both their criticisms and sanctions. Ultimately a change in the behaviour of the government and LTTE is most likely to come about if they make the decisions themselves. If there is to be a reduction in violence and human-rights abuses, it has to come from decisions freely taken by the government and LTTE.

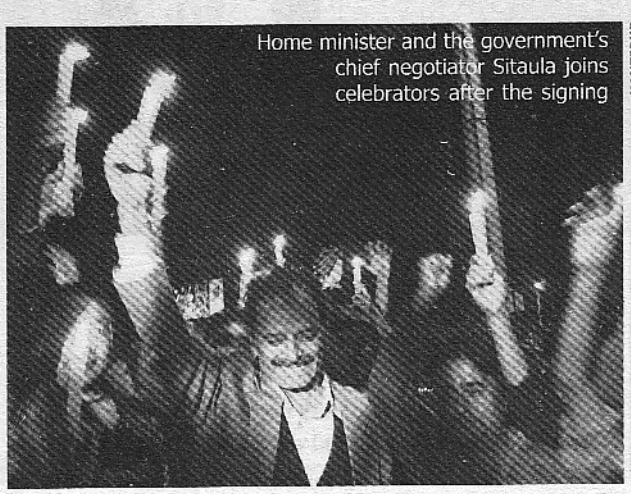
The Panel of Constitutional Experts is now reported to be on the verge of proposing a new scheme of power-sharing that is the best that Sri Lanka has seen. The president's readiness to open the A9 Highway may be seen as a herald of better days ahead. But both of these positive initiatives can flop unless sincerely intended and reciprocated. If the LTTE can rise to the occasion and express its own readiness to deal constructively with the openings to peace, however slender, a better future for Sri Lanka may yet be possible.

NEPAL

The revival of Nepali politics

The political agreement reached by the Seven-Party Alliance on 9 November and a peace agreement signed between the two sides on 21 November, besides committing the Maoists to abandoning their 'people's war' and paving the way for a constituent assembly, is most importantly a means for the revival of politics in Nepal.

Under the agreements, the political parties have decided to make space for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in an interim Cabinet and interim legislature in the same proportion as the mainstream Communist Party



Home minister and the government's chief negotiator Sitaula joins celebrators after the signing KANTIPUR

of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) and the Nepali Congress. The Maoist fighters are committed to entering cantonments, where their guns would be kept in boxes which they will guard themselves; the entire exercise will be monitored by the United Nations, however. The carriage of arms in public will now be deemed an offence, all abductions and extortions will have undersigned commitment to cease, and the Maoists will begin their conversion into a political party.

All systems are now 'go' for a constituent assembly, for which a 'mixed' electoral system has been envisaged, with 205 seats to be elected according to the old 'first-past-the-post' system, and 204 members to be elected as per the proportional representation system on the basis of votes won by the political parties.

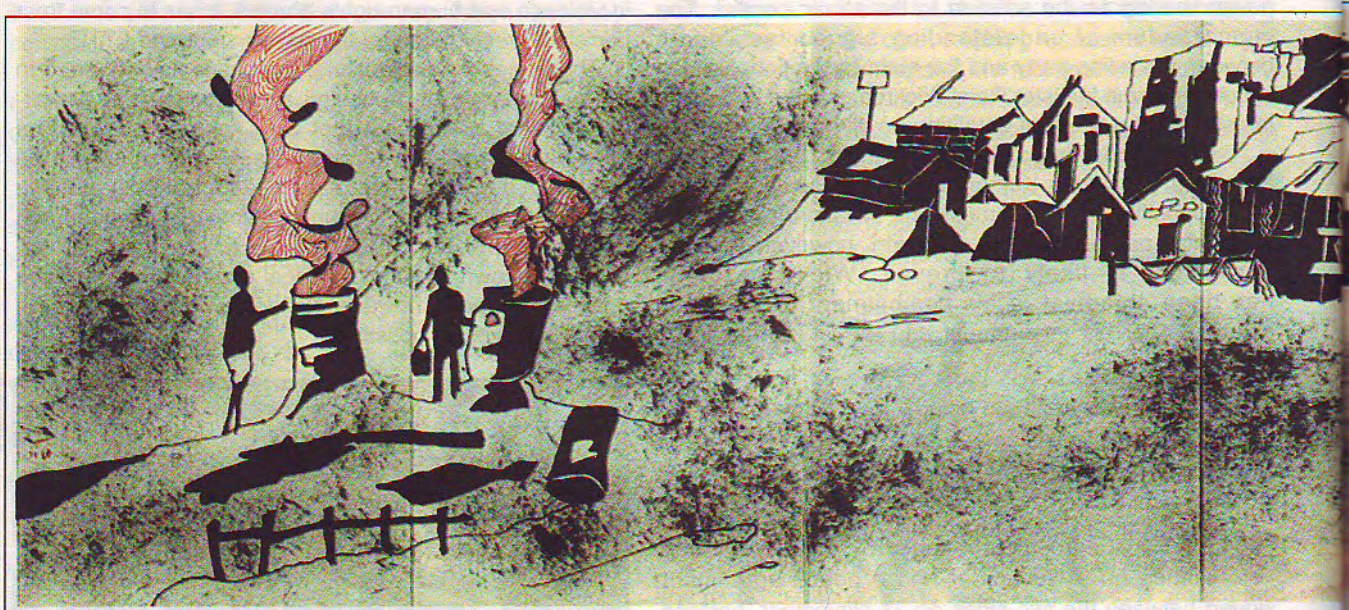
The pace at which myriad issues have been addressed and decisions taken in Kathmandu over the past month has been nothing less than dizzying. These include: the decision giving many disfranchised of the tarai region the right to citizenship, a right to information bill placed before the House, a new law put in place to control the Nepal Army, and an agreement to nationalise all royal properties. Doubtless, many other issues remain pending, and some mistakes will have been made in the rush, but there is no denying that the political process is on the up and up.

Challenges and hope

While uncertainties still abound, there are now important demands to be made of the Maoists, the state and the political parties. As far as the rebels are concerned, in a matter of days, as they join the government and the interim legislature, they will have to shed their radical demands, insistence on which would needlessly bring gridlock to the government and rekindle hopes in the royal palace and army of making some kind of comeback. With the regulars of the 'People's Liberation Army' in the cantonments, there are hopes of psychological relief across the countryside. Even though the Maoist militia is not addressed in the agreements of November, it is hoped that extortions, abductions and use of threat of physical violence – with or without arms – will cease over the course of December.

The state's responsibility is to energetically re-establish its presence across the country, right down to the Village Development Committee level, and in particular to fill the vacuum in law and order. Besides motivating the Nepal Police and reinstating the hundreds of posts abandoned in the course of the war, there is the challenge of state administration, governance and development. The danger of a rightist royalist revival will come not only if there is political collapse, but also from the public's disenchantment with the long interregnum between now and the end of the constituent assembly process in a year. There must be a massive effort for reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure, revival of the economy, and delivery of services to the people.

As far as the political parties are concerned, they must



'East of the Railway Tracks, Section 2'

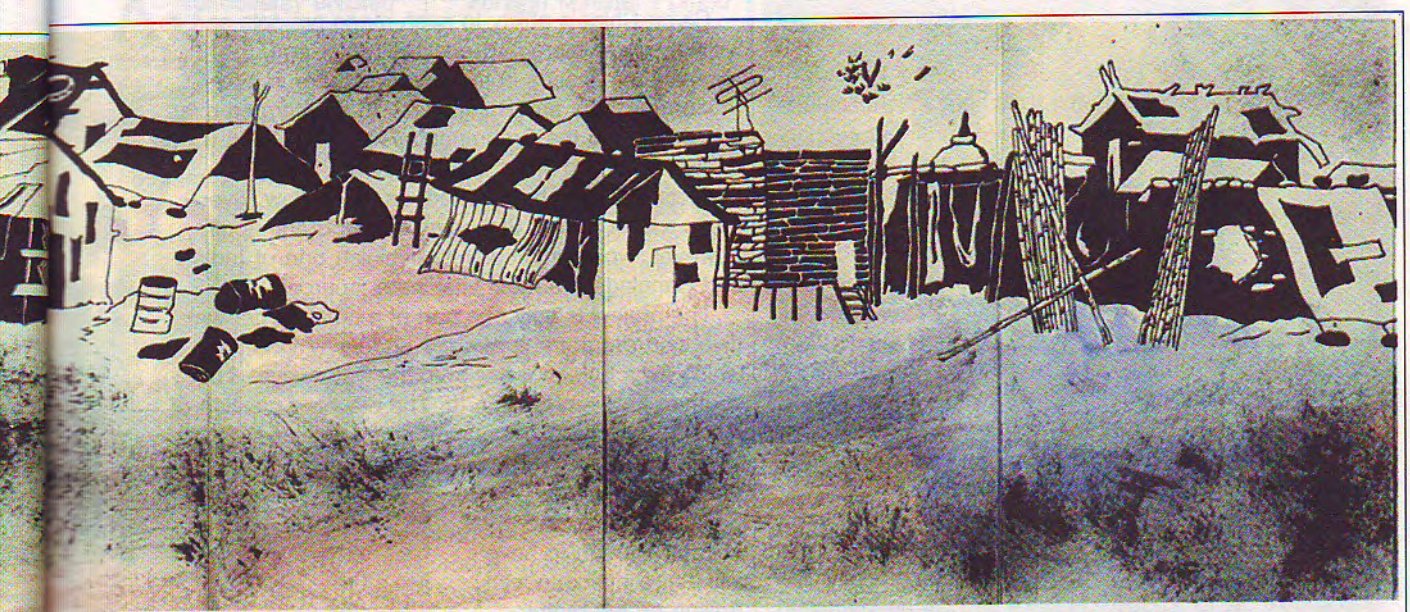
In this section of a larger panorama, **Venantius J Pinto** shows us a village that may be the epitome of decrepit. Ramshackle structures stand with walls cracked and doors off-hinge. Weathered tin roofs are patched with whatever material is closest at hand. Something is wrong in this town. Will nothing happen to change this bleak scene? The village seems empty. Where are all the people? At far left we see two of them, busy at a pair of big tin drums. They tend carefully, and out of the barrels rise tall,

hasten to re-establish themselves in the villages of Nepal, which will also goad the local Maoist leadership to convert from high-handed commissars to politicians relying on argumentation rather than on the rifle in the closet. Indications are that, because of the maturity of the countrywide political class and the ground-level wisdom of the populace, there will not be violent attacks on Maoist cadre all over the country as the guns come down. In many parts, district-level Maoists have maintained a level of goodwill by allowing development activities to continue, and for standing up against nasty local feudals – in such areas the Maoists will find it relatively easy to transform into a political force. It is in areas where the rebels have taken on local bullies and bandits as part of their fast-paced expansion of the early 2000s that there will be villager reaction. The government has to guard against vigilante action, and ensure that the legal process is observed.

As far as the constituent assembly process is concerned, the dangers are manifold, and not least the need to explain the intricacies of the mixed electoral system to the populace. Additionally, one of the grievances with the recent agreements is that the demands of various ethnic, regional and other marginalised communities have not been adequately addressed. To do so, the political players must prove their commitment to an inclusive Nepal, and ensure that there is full representation of the country's diverse population groups among the candidates, as well as in the broader political process.

Elections mean polarisation, as the various political parties compete for votes. The process has already begun in Nepal, and it can be expected that the two parties most at loggerheads would be the CPN (Maoist) and the CPN (UML), who would presumably be battling for the same ideological space. Given that the elections are not even for a Parliament but a constitution-making body, there is an urgent need for a code of conduct that binds the political parties to minimum standards of good behaviour. This is absolutely crucial. A highly charged and potentially violent campaigning period over the spring of 2007 would be one more cause for the reactionaries of Nepal to try to flex their muscle. This must be avoided at all costs, and the answer lies in a campaign low on adrenalin and high on reasoning. The most significant demand for moderation, then, would have to be made with the CPN (Maoist), which is traveling the greatest ideological distance and does not even have the experience of pluralistic and parliamentary practice the other parties do.

The Nepali ship of state has already shown an ability to astound Southasia and the world with the relentless pace in its political advance over the past half-year, all of which was triggered by the uniquely participatory – and glorious – People's Movement of April 2006. The political parties and the Maobaadi of Nepal are now asked to live up to the people's expectations, by reviving politics of the kind that is representative and inclusive in the run-up to the constituent assembly. ▲

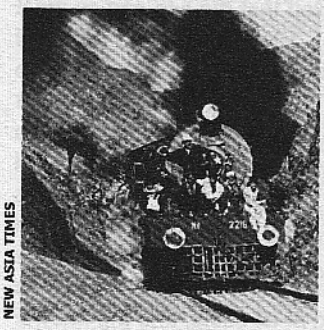


magnificent sheets of red fire, dancing strips of bright colour in an otherwise dreary sky. What have they found to burn in the village, that the flames should stand so spectacular and so high? How much of it did they have to throw in to create something this wonderful, this warming? How much will it take to achieve real change? ▲

This is part of a regular series of *Himal's* editorial commentary on artwork by Venantius J Pinto. Enogu (Japanese pigments); Inks: Shellac, Walnut, Sumi; and Photocolor. Moleskine Japanese accordion book. 31 panels (each 9 x 14 cm (3½ x 5½"), including back of front cover.

INDIA/PAKISTAN

More trains, not too many



NEW ASIA TIMES

New Delhi and Islamabad have given signals recently that they are keen to build on the initial success of their crossborder train lines. In October, they made preliminary agreements to introduce a freight-train service between Munabao and Khokhrapar, and to step up the number of freight trains running between Attari and Wagah.

The decision was made following three days of talks in pursuance of agreements made in March during the third round of Composite Dialogue talks. Around 20 trains currently ply the tracks between Attari and Wagah every month, and the new agreement would increase that number to around two a day. Also discussed were plans to ease immigration procedures on the Thar Express line in the Sindh-Rajasthan sector.

Islamabad seems a bit wary of too much of a good thing, however. During the week the agreement was signed, the Pakistani government rejected an Indian plan to start a train service between Amritsar and the Sikh holy town of Nankana Sahib. Currently there is only a bus service between the two. Although the Railways Ministry had recently found the proposal to be economically viable, the government dismissed the scheme after the Interior Ministry raised concerns. Over in New Delhi, South Block is said to be wary about the Punjab government being overly enthusiastic about developing cultural links with Pakistani Punjab on its own (see accompanying story). Δ

THE MALDIVES/INDIA

Help wanted: democracy, military

New Delhi has promised to help the Maldives make revisions to its Constitution and judicial system. The pledge came at the end of a week-long trip to India by the Maldivian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Shaheed. During a meeting with Manmohan Singh, Shaheed delivered a letter from President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom requesting a "closer engagement" between the two countries. The letter also explained President Gayoom's contentious reforms roadmap, which includes the modernisation of the country's electoral and security infrastructure, as well as its media and judiciary.

Prime Minister Singh subsequently promised India's fullest cooperation, cautioning that the atolls' reforms must be sought peacefully. The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), the main opposition, meanwhile, has been increasingly critical of the government for trying to stall any meaningful democratic progress. A pro-democracy rally in Male sponsored by the MDP, slated for 10 November, was called off in advance due to worries that the government was planning a violent crackdown.

In addition to seeking help on democratic reforms, Foreign Affairs Minister Shaheed also met with then-Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee (he now heads Foreign Affairs), and pushed for greater military ties with India. One of the primary emphases of Shaheed's trip was reportedly to reassure New Delhi that the Maldives' growing relationship with Beijing is not an attempt to play the two powers off one another. Saying that the Male government "sees the world through the Southasian perspective", the foreign minister dismissed as "a canard" reports that China has been allowed to build a naval installation on land leased by the Maldivian government. Δ

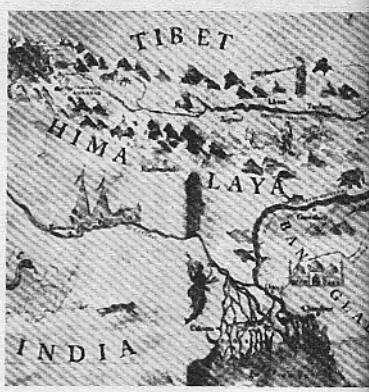
REGION

Siphoning Brahmaputra

Reports have been surfacing of a preliminary plan by the Beijing government to dam the Brahmaputra (Tsangpo), diverting roughly 200 billion cubic metres of water per year into the Yellow River. Dubbed the Greater Western Water Diversion Project, the plan reportedly has the blessing of President Hu Jintao, himself trained as a water engineer.

Given China's ability to push mega projects and its willingness to disregard environmental and humanitarian issues in the process, there is every reason for India and Bangladesh to be alarmed over this design on the Brahmaputra/Jamuna. China wants to divert water to areas in its northeast, which it projects will soon be parched, as the Yellow River faces a drier future. Siphoning off the Brahmaputra, however, would immediately diminish one of India and Bangladesh's most vital water sources.

The project is only one part of a much larger water-diversion programme already underway in China, which aims to take water from the waterways of the south to the semi-arid north. The elevated position of Tibet in this context becomes an immediate geo-strategic advantage for the People's Republic.



New Delhi is said to be worried enough to have initiated a dialogue with Beijing on the matter. Meanwhile, this is much more of a clear and present danger for Bangladesh than would be India's 'river-linking' scheme, which has caused such bad blood with New Delhi. Δ

NEPAL

A new **hub**?

Recent months have seen a sudden spate of planning of potential flights between Nepal and other Southasian countries. Late in October China Southern Airlines had sought permission to fly between Guangzhou and Kathmandu. It expects to tap the Chinese tourism market, given that Nepal is approaching peace, and also because the Chinese authorities have designated it an 'approved country' for its touring citizens. Meanwhile, G M G Bangladesh Airlines, which began flying internationally in 2004, is set to begin flying between Kathmandu and Dhaka thrice weekly. In mid-September, the newly renamed 'Indian' resumed its Kathmandu-Benaras-Kathmandu flights after an 18-month break.

Authorities in India and Nepal are also looking to increase the number of seats available on flights between the two countries. Sri Lankan Air has announced its intention to start flights to Nepal in the near future, as have more airlines from the Gulf, Korea and Thailand.

With so much expatriate flying, the news about Nepal's own airlines is not so good. The country's first budget airline, Cosmic Air, suspended operation of its single remaining Fokker jet (down from four) in mid-October for maintenance reasons.

INDIA/TIBET

'South **Tibet**'

A controversy erupted on 14 November over the long-simmering bilateral issue of Arunachal Pradesh, just a week before the much-heralded arrival of Chinese President Hu Jintao in India. In a televised interview, Chinese ambassador to India Sun Yuxi stated: "In our position, the whole of what you call the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory, and Tawang is only one place in it and we are claiming all of that. That's our position."

Tawang is AP's northwestern district, and for the past half-century has been considered by Beijing to be part of Shannan Prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region. AP itself is referred to in China as South Tibet.

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee responded the same day, saying that Arunachal Pradesh is an "integral" part of India. With warming relations between the two superpowers, optimism had surfaced in recent months that the border dispute between China and India may have seen progress before President Hu's visit. Sun's statement, however, showed that there is enough that has been pushed under the carpet for things like this to surface at odd times and add turbulence to developing Hindi-Chini bonhomie.

Incidentally, New Delhi is currently planning to build roughly 3000 km of new roads in Arunachal Pradesh, to strengthen both its connection and its claim to the state.

INDIA/BHUTAN

Menon to **Bhutan**

THE HINDU

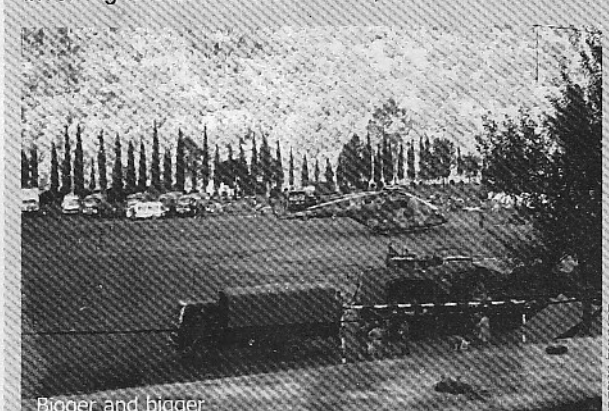
The new Indian Foreign Secretary, Shiv Shankar Menon, made his first trip abroad as the country's top diplomat to Bhutan. During his three-day visit, Menon brought up New Delhi's desire to revise the 1949 treaty between Bhutan and India, particularly in the context of the Druk Yul's slated unveiling of a new Constitution in 2008. Among other things, the 1949 agreement includes a clause, dating back to 1910, that gives India direct influence over Bhutan's foreign policy. We wish we could report what it was that Menon proposed. While it is clear that Thimphu would want to wriggle out of that particular clause, could it be that New Delhi too wants to let go?

INDIA

Indian army, landowner

There are around six lakh soldiers of the Indian Army stationed in Jammu & Kashmir, making it the most militarised corner of Southasia. We now know that the military is also owner of a large amount of land in the state. The military recently purchased 5000 *kanals* (about 625 acres) of land in Kupwara District, just one kilometre's distance from a military camp that stands on 10,000 kanals of land. There is a third camp about three kilometres away.

All in all, villagers say that the army's occupation of roughly 25,000 kanals of land within the three-kilometre radius has kept them from building any new houses or tilling any new soil. Similar complaints are being made elsewhere in the Kashmir Valley. According to official figures, Indian military and paramilitary forces currently occupy around 150 sq km of land in J & K. Land acquisition is currently in progress in 51 additional cases, involving a total of more than 13,000 acres.



ZOHAIRE HAIDER

Bigger and bigger

INDIA/BANGLADESH

An obvious **market**

Over the past financial year Bangladeshi exports to India have risen sharply, narrowing the trade deficit between the two countries to an all-time low of around 14 percent. Current annual exports from Bangladesh to India total nearly USD 242 million, compared to less than USD 144 million last year. Indian exports to Bangladesh, meanwhile, dropped eight percent during the same period.

The 68 percent climb in Bangladeshi exports has come about mainly because of Dhaka's reaching out to the states of the Indian Northeast. A recent report out of Dhaka suggested that this market had remained untapped by Bangladeshi traders until now largely due to Indian bureaucracy and foot-dragging. One factor that particularly aided Bangladesh's entrance into the Northeastern market was the new ability of Indian banks to open lines of credit to traders from the neighbouring country. If all this is indeed true, then we can conclude that relationships in the east will improve, as trade oils the inter-state connections through shared economies and trades-people's interactions.

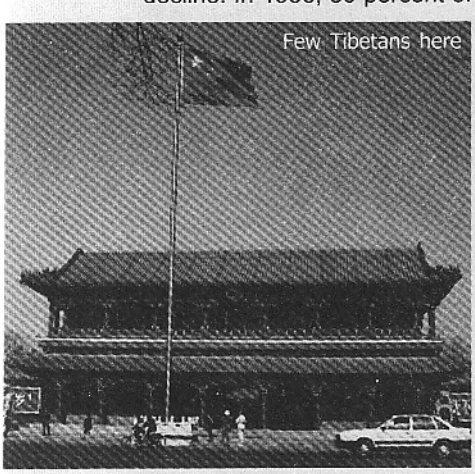
TIBET

Fewer and fewer

Under a new decision by the Chinese government, the amount of direct participation by Tibetans in administering the Tibet Autonomous Region is now set to be lower than at any time in the past 40 years. For the first time since 1980, the Communist Party committee in Lhasa will be overseen by an ethnic Han Chinese, Qin Yizhi.

The Chinese Constitution stipulates that a majority of representatives of the government and ruling Peoples Congresses of a particular area must be members of that area's ethnic majority. Such laws do not apply to the Communist Party apparatus, however, which effectively controls all other governmental bodies.

The new move is merely a continuation of a long decline. In 1986, 80 percent of the Lhasa party committee were Tibetan; by 1997, that number had dropped to around 55 percent. With only eight out of 30 members of the new party board being Tibetans – around 26 percent – the new composition will have the lowest Tibetan represen-tation since 1966. The further we go, the sadder it gets. . .


Few Tibetans here

INDIA/TIBET

Tidying up


Tsundue

PHILIP BLENKINSOP

Ahead of a visit by Chinese President Hu Jintao to India, New Delhi threatened a prominent Tibetan activist with deportation to Tibet if he left the confines of Dharamsala before 25 November. President Hu is slated to be in India from 20-23 November. Tenzin Tsundue is the general-secretary of the pressure group Friends of Tibet, and has led several high-profile protests during the visits of other Chinese premiers, including prime ministers Wen Jiabao and Zhu Rongji.

Tsundue, who was born a refugee in India, was served with the warning from the office of the Superintendent of Police, and threatened with prosecution under the Foreigners Act of 1946. Among other things, this Act gives the government broad powers over anyone deemed to be a foreigner, including "requiring him to reside in a particular place" or "imposing any restrictions on his movements".

REGION

Take your **money** elsewhere

If you thought the government of Manmohan Singh would always opt for economic openness and liberalisation, you may wonder how he is going to react to some regressive suggestions made by India's National Security Council (NSC). New Delhi in fact is said to be planning legislation that would discourage foreign investment from several countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and China. The move came following a recent meeting by the NSC, which took note of Chinese investments in the telecom sector and recommended limiting future Chinese FDI.

Similar recommendations have been made against the three Southasian neighbours, as well as Taiwan, North Korea, Macau and Hong Kong. The NSC warned that foreign direct investment under the present set-up could pose an opportunity for both money laundering and unregulated *hawala* money transfer – both of which the NSC considers threatening to India's economic stability. More likely, however, some businesses are using this back door entry to block competition. On a Southasian scale, this discrimination could be seen as an unfriendly act that goes against the SAARC ethos.

Her **highness**


BBC

A state government ruling in Madhya Pradesh recently brought an end – some would say a wrong-headed one – to a longstanding feud between the state's tourism minister, Yashodhara Raje Scindia, and her civil-service underlings.

The Scindias are the former royal rulers of Gwalior, which later became part of Madhya Pradesh. Despite the fact that the Indian Constitution outlawed royal titles more than a half-century ago, Minister Scindia has reportedly been refusing to show up at official functions and meetings when invitation cards do not address her as *shrimant*, which can be translated as 'highness'. And despite that ban, the Madhya Pradesh government ruled in her favour. Meanwhile, the minister (who has Nepali blood from her mother's side) said, "All over the world and in Europe, royalty is given due recognition."

Even while politicians of all stripes deride the BJP government's ruling, the government says that it sees the issue merely as an official name-change. Scindia will simply be known by the name she put on her nomination documents for the state's most recent polls. Δ

Don't fence me in

India has built border fences along its Pakistan and Bangladesh frontiers. This has given Pakistan ideas, and Islamabad now wants to fence its frontier with Afghanistan. A spokesman for Hamid Karzai in early November said that Afghanistan would "never" allow its border to be fenced. Amidst increasing militant activity in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, which has resulted in increased tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, the Pakistani government had again raised the issue, by way of Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri.

The exact location of the 2500 km-long border, the so-called Durand Line, has long been disputed by Afghanistan, which remains anxious about any attempt to internationally standardise the frontier. Besides its other functions, that is what a fence would achieve.

Kabul said that fencing of the border would not effect a "rooting out" of militant organisations. On that front, it put out in the same week a general call to militants to turn away from violence and come to the negotiating table. No pre-conditions would be placed on the talks. The offer, which was also extended to one of the country's most notorious warlords, former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, follows similar offers made last month to Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Δ

A cautious forum

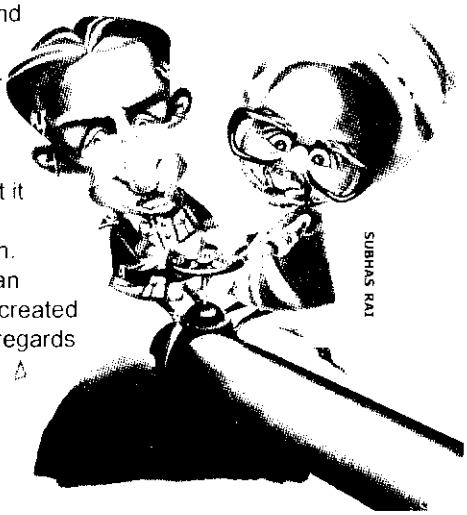
More than a year after the idea was mooted, the India-Pakistan Forum of Parliamentarians is finally set to begin working at the end of the year. While the Indian part of the forum was set up last year, the Pakistani side has now been created and will reportedly begin work in December. The two committees are supposed to act as a high-level go-between, bringing the executives in the two countries closer together. Indeed, the parliamentarians are expected to provide a great back-up to what is agreed to between the governments, for they have a greater ability to generate public acceptability. So, good that the MPs have joined the gig, and may the forum meet often – unrestricted by visas and city-specific reporting problems. Δ

Pipeline knots

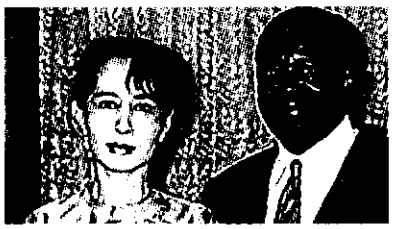
In what many admit is a last-ditch effort, an international consultant was trilaterally appointed in mid-October to study the gas-pricing issue on the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. The UK-based Singaporean consultant, Gaffney Cline, is scheduled to submit a report ahead of a working-group meeting in Tehran before the end of the year. The plan, thought to be sure-fire just two years ago, was to have Iranian gas from the South Pars field brought to the Indian market via Pakistan, which would also get to partake of the supply.

While Tehran wants to sell its gas to its eastern neighbours at international prices, Islamabad and New Delhi have made offers of roughly half that figure. The pricing issue has held up all progress on the USD 7.4 billion gasline for nearly a half a year. By early November, however, a new player had solidly entered the fray – Russia's mammoth Gazprom, which is offering both technical and financial assistance. Gazprom's involvement was welcomed by the petroleum ministries of both India and Pakistan.

By and large, however, regional pipelines are facing dire problems. Two current projects are being slowed down by violence along the routes, including the IPI and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan line. A third, which would run between Qatar and Pakistan, was recently halted after Qatar said that it did not have enough gas reserves to sell to Pakistan. Meanwhile, the Balochistan problems have suddenly created further uncertainties with regards to the Iranian pipeline. Δ


SUBHAS RAI

Gambari returns



United Nations Undersecretary General Ibrahim Gambari returned to Burma in early November, nearly six months after he last visited the country. At the time of his previous visit, he became the first foreigner and the highest-ranking member of the UN to be allowed to meet opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in more than two years. During Gambari's four-day visit this time around, he met again with Suu Kyi, as well as with junta leader Than Shwe.

Gambari's last trip set in motion some of the most concrete actions ever undertaken by the international community with regard to Burma. The country was officially added to the Security Council's agenda in a move led by the US, which is now also pushing for a Security Council resolution on Burma. Gambari's last trip had little immediate effect within the country, however. Immediately following his departure in May, the junta had again extended Suu Kyi's house arrest sentence for another year.

Nonetheless, some observers have noted that by allowing Gambari to return, Rangoon may be preparing to offer some concessions. The junta, meanwhile, will be hoping that the Undersecretary General endorses its recently re-started National Convention, the first step in its highly criticised seven-step roadmap to democracy. "The first meeting was diplomatic, an opening," Gambari noted after his four-day mission ended. "But now there is hard bargaining and give-and-take." Δ

Frowning upon **Punjab-Punjab** games

The Indian External Affairs Ministry has castigated the Chandigarh government for going forward with plans to step up crossborder relations with Punjab province in Pakistan without first informing the ministry's desk officers in Delhi. South Block took umbrage at the recent unilateral visit by chief parliamentary secretary Rana Gurmeet Sodhi to Pakistan to finalise plans for the Punjab-Punjab games, scheduled to take place later this year.

The ministry also noted its displeasure at the September attempts by Punjab Minister of Transport Mohinder Singh Kaypee to look into the possibility of adding more crossborder bus lines to Sikh holy places in Pakistan. All confidence-building measures, the ministry warned, must have prior approval by the Centre. Might we add that some such measures are needed between the state and union governments? Why not leave Punjab alone when it seeks to build relations with Punjab? Δ

Northeast merger 'illegal'

On 16 October, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court ruled that the merger between the northern and eastern provinces of the island is in fact illegal. The two provinces, both with a Tamil-speaking majority, were 'temporarily' merged in 1987, following the peace accord brokered by India. But the agreement by which this was done also stipulated that the LTTE militants would subsequently have to lay down their arms, something that has still not taken place.

The case, brought to court by two MPs of the radical Sinhala Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, subsequently considered whether the deal could now be nullified given that intransigence. The judgment "knocks the bottom out of the peace process", noted a member of an opposition group in Parliament, "as a merged northeastern province must be the basis for any peace negotiations".

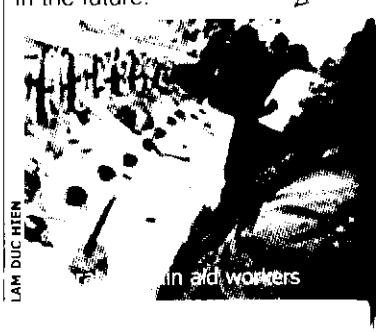
Critics also argued that the court had not allowed any Tamil testimony during the case. President Mahinda Rajapakse, meanwhile, has stressed that the issue needs to be resolved through a referendum, as the original Indo-Lankan accord had stipulated. This judgement seems to be one more addition to a process of relentless polarisation in the island. Δ

Atrocities **investigation**

In early November the Colombo government reversed its previous stance, officially announcing that it would launch investigations into 15 cases of alleged human-rights abuse that have taken place in the country since August 2005, perpetrated by both the government and LTTE rebels.

A committee will be appointed that will be headed by a Supreme Court judge and overseen by representatives of the international community, including the EU, US, England and Japan. Among the incidents the committee will look into will be two that took place this past August: the highly contentious killing of 17 Tamil aid workers in Muttur town, and an air strike that reportedly killed 61 schoolchildren.

The committee will also investigate the June 2006 mine attack that killed 64 people, and the October 2006 killing of 99 people, including a group of Sri Lankan sailors. The committee will report back within a year. A look at this brief timespan alone indicates how the violence has escalated in Sri Lanka, and why any action to demand accountability is welcome. While the dead are gone, at least this may help control excesses in the future. Δ



LAM DUC HIEN

...in aid workers

Trying times for the Bangladeshi democrat

BBC

Notwithstanding the current electoral chaos, Bangladesh is trying its best to furnish a functional democracy. The next few months will be crucial ones.

BY **MAHFUZ SADIQUE**

It has been a month of high drama in Bangladeshi politics – things have been melodramatic, in fact, even for election season. The storm that has been gathering over many months of tension – political and civil – over issues as disparate as the workings of the Election Commission, electricity and workers' wages, finally arrived at the end of October. Right on schedule, many observers noted.

As a modern democracy no more than 15 years old, dogged by a cynical, egocentric, bipartisan political mechanism shared almost exclusively between the two main political camps, change of power was never going to be a smooth deal. On one side of the divide sits the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which held a two-thirds majority as part of a four-party alliance in the immediate past Parliament. This was partly courtesy of the catalytic Islamic vote-bank effect of its allies – the mainstay Jamaat-e-Islami and the splintered Islami Oikya Jote. On the other side of the gulf stands the Awami League (AL), the main opposition in the last house, which presently leads a 14-party combine camp of left-leaning political groups, including the recent addition of the Liberal Democratic Party, a breakaway of the BNP's disgruntled old-school core. Through months of political somersaults, backstabbing and finger-pointing, political soothsayers have been prophesising anything and everything under the sun: *no elections, rigged elections, violent elections, military rule!*

By late November, just weeks from the 'constitutional provision' (a term frequently used and blatantly abused in political talk these days) for elections in mid-January, the country seemed to be stuck in a labyrinth deeper than anyone had anticipated. Meanwhile, with more than 30 deaths from political violence and repeated shutdowns of economic activity, everyday life for Bangladesh's citizens had been put on hold.

While October's street violence and November's political drama played out as the lay-up to the elections, they were set into motion almost a year ago. It was on 12 February, in the dying days of last winter, when AL leader Sheikh Hasina tabled 34 reform proposals after months of boycotting the House. These included reconstituting the Election Commission and revising the voter roll. More broadly, however, the proposals raised questions about the form, representation and motives of the constitutionally stipulated caretaker government that was to be set up after the late October power handover. The AL latched onto the controversial choice of Justice M A Aziz as Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) as the critical issue, although this was more due to the need for a political effigy than from any actual political foresight.

The present political and constitutional situation was arrived at by the domino effect of those proposals of the AL. Nearly ten months later – after rounds of letter-swapping and further rounds of frantic political talks at the parties' secretary-general level throughout October over a revamped 31-point AL reform proposal – just days ahead of the scheduled handover, coming up with the right question about how to structure the caretaker government was still the issue. As the last days of the BNP government drew near, no party was ready to get serious about the negotiations, fearing blame for failure in the high-tension atmosphere. Fatalism was in the air.

Anticipatory calm

Talks collapsed just before Eid. On 26 October, 102 high-profile members of the BNP – including 12 members of Parliament, former state ministers and influential political leaders – led by renegade Oli Ahmed, a former army man and close aide to the late General Ziaur Rahman, defected to form a new party. The Liberal Democratic Party was formed by merging this group with an already existing BNP splinter party, the Bikalpadhara, led by former President A Q M Badruddoza Chowdhury. The

With surprising maturity, or perhaps due to the prospect of military intervention in the case of anarchy, the AL and its allies "conditionally accepted" the president's action.

first widespread political violence feared during election politicking started minutes after the announcement of the new party, and BNP activists burned houses and businesses of those who defected.

As outgoing Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia delivered the last lines of her farewell speech on the evening of 27 October, street agitations had already broken out across the country between activists of the opposing parties. During the following two days, with the power handover on a tightrope, dozens died in street violence, and a nationwide transport blockade halted the economy. Meanwhile, a high-stakes political game was being played behind the scenes.

While the AL-led 14-party alliance demanded the withdrawal of CEC Aziz and K M Hasan, the candidate to head the caretaker government, the BNP's political acumen showed signs of anticipatory calm. Amidst the brouhaha, President Iajuddin Ahmed, who had been widely considered a political appointee of the BNP, emerged as a mediator between the parties. Without much hype, the Hasan problem vanished on 28 October when he stepped aside. As the president's talks with both parties continued, and a farcical search was undertaken for "a politically acceptable man and yet maintaining constitutional sanctity", President Ahmed proposed his own name for the position of chief of the interim government. On 29 October, the job was done.

With surprising maturity, or perhaps due to the prospect of military intervention in the case of anarchy, the AL and its allies "conditionally accepted" the president's action, quelling fears of another eruption of political violence. The AL's condition – that President Ahmed had to "prove neutrality" within three days – was put off by another week, but had little effect on the president's actions. At the time of writing, the AL was pushing an 11-point ultimatum, with the removal of M A Aziz as the most definitive demand. The threat: a non-stop blockade.

In the course of the next two days, ten advisors, chosen from lists provided by the two main political parties, were sworn in and given multiple portfolios. Not helping to quell the brooding suspicion with regard to his intentions, President Ahmed kept a range of sensitive ministries tied to the election process under his own purview. More worryingly, weeks after the interim government was put in place, the country was still awaiting an overhaul of the administration.

On track?

Bangladesh suffered blockades throughout November, enforced by the AL and with later support from the new Liberal Democratic Party. Aziz's removal became a near national obsession, with such comical announcements as the country's largest body of grocers' deciding to stop providing supplies in protest of the CEC. Meanwhile, for the first time since the political impasse began, the representatives of the European Commission and the United States clarified their own positions. Just days before Aziz's inevitable 'departure', both the EC and the US made clear that he had to go. Then, in a late night address to the nation on 22 November, Aziz's decision to go on a 90-day 'leave' was announced – much to the discontent of the AL and its allies, and an apparent crack within the panel of ten advisers on the president's final decision.

While his exit may silence some of the political activism, the political gridlock and the dark clouds over the 2007 elections will remain. Pre-poll politicking has remained in full swing even through these turbulent times, and as winter's discontent broods into the coming year, elections might just turn out to be a means to an end. While political parties continue partisan games with little thought for stability, the bigger question is whether the AL will participate in the polls at all – or, if they do, who will accept the results.

With an economy clocking above 5.5 percent annual growth for several years now, Bangladesh is still on track – even though the current political instability will surely curtail the projected growth of above 6 percent for the current fiscal year. While many observers note with some spite that the country has become a 'corrupt democracy', smoothing the pains of growth and furnishing a functioning democracy for a populace of 150 million is no easy calculus.

While the current political crisis brews, looming in the background is an ever-deepening mistrust by the populace of both the political process and players. Over the years, radical Islamists have gained ground given the lack of long-term vision among any of the major political camps. As they have slowly increased their ability to draw votes, the past five years have seen a significant rise in their political, economic and social clout. This process has been expedited by the fact that two Islamic parties have shared power in government for the past five years. Their role in and impact on the future, particularly on the still unsure elections, will be observed with some trepidation.

Be it the provision for a caretaker government or the reservation of seats for women in Parliament, Bangladesh is a country still experimenting with its democracy in all possible manners. What will most likely save the day is the widely held notion that Bangladesh's electorate is a resilient lot, and hopefully will not loose their sense of belonging. The onus lies on the country's mainstream political establishment to get the political process back on track. Otherwise, the path they tread could lead to that place that signifies the death of any democracy, mature or infant: indifference.

Bangladeshi standoff

After three relatively successful elections, democracy in Bangladesh has run aground.

BY **ZAFAR SOBHAN**

The political situation in Bangladesh has become so volatile that anything a reporter writes runs the risk of being out of date by the time it gets to print. The country is currently in the midst of a political standoff, the likes of which even this most unpredictable and explosive of countries has never before seen. In the run-up to the January elections, one would have to be a bolder man than this writer to predict how everything will turn out in the coming weeks.

For the past 15 years, Bangladesh has had a more or less functional democracy. Despite crippling political infighting, the country has muddled through to post impressive gains, both economically and socially. Governance has remained extremely poor, and democratic institutions such as the Parliament have remained largely dysfunctional. Nevertheless, the country has been moving in the right direction, with changes of government following more or less acceptable elections in 1991, 1996 and 2001. The 1991 elections were held in the aftermath of the overthrow of H M Ershad's military autocracy, which came after a half-decade-long struggle for the reinstitution of democracy. This also marked the last time that the two main political parties, the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the opposition Awami League, cooperated on anything.

1991 brought the BNP to power, and the two subsequent general elections have delivered two changes of governments. First the AL took over in 1996, and then the BNP swept back to power as the head of a four-party alliance in 2001. Suddenly, this system of governance, which had sustained from 1991 to 2001, appears to have fallen apart.

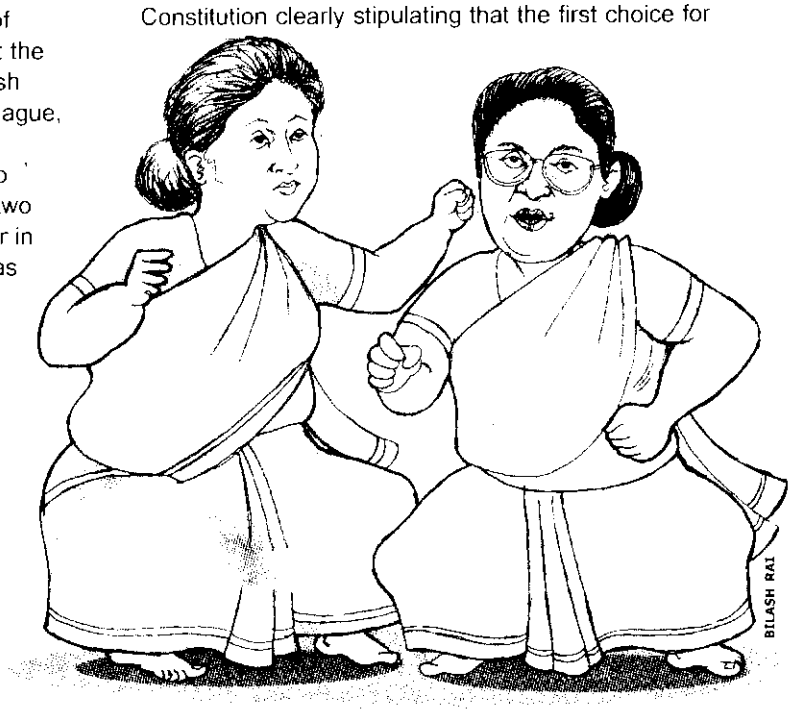
To understand why this situation has come about, one needs to go look at the country's system of caretaker governments, which was devised in 1991 to oversee the elections that were held after Ershad stepped down *(see Himal August 2006, "The crippled caretaker")*. This worked very well, and the 11 eminent citizens chosen by the president (ex-Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, who had been installed as president by the consensus of the political parties) to form the initial caretaker administration presided over what are generally seen as the most credible elections Bangladesh had ever seen.

In 1996, the combined opposition parties refused to contest elections under the BNP government, due to a well-founded apprehension that the BNP would use its incumbency to rig the polls. This apprehension was based in large part on that party's shenanigans in by-elections prior to the February 1996 general election, and was spectacularly borne out when the results of this election (boycotted by all major political parties except the BNP) were published. Following countrywide agitations, the BNP government was forced to step down and hand the reins of power to the second caretaker government, which presided over elections in June 1996 that saw the AL come to power with a slender majority in coalition with the Jatiya Party. In 2001, the BNP returned to power at the head of a four-party alliance that secured a thumping two-thirds majority in Parliament.

All goes haywire

Currently headed into the fourth general election since the restoration of democracy (not counting the bogus February 1996 polls), it would seem that the country's democratic institutions should have been in better shape than ever before. But this was not the case. The first electoral controversy was one that had been simmering for several years, and it came to a boil on 28 October, when the outgoing four-party alliance government had been mandated to hand over power to the incoming caretaker administration.

The disagreement centres on who is to be the 'Chief Adviser', the head of the caretaker administration. This issue had not caused controversy in the past, with the Constitution clearly stipulating that the first choice for



Currently going into the fourth general election since the restoration of democracy, it would seem that the country's democratic institutions should have been in better shape than ever. But this was not the case.

Chief Adviser should be the last retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Nonetheless, the debate in October came to a head due to the fact that, during its tenure in office, the BNP had amended the Constitution to raise the retirement age of judges from 65 to 67 – thus ensuring that in 2006 the last retired Chief Justice would be K M Hasan, a one-time BNP office-bearer. The opposition had long ago announced that it would not agree to Hasan becoming Chief Adviser, and endless dialogue between the opposition and the government yielded no compromise.

On 28 October, the AL took its argument to the streets. There, they were met with equal ferocity by the police and cadres of the four-party alliance. The vicious fighting that engulfed the country ended up leaving two dozen dead and thousands injured. Justice Hasan issued a hurried statement, declining the honour of becoming the Chief Adviser. The story then only got complicated.

Choosing not to follow the constitutionally mandated steps for appointment of the Chief Adviser, President Iajuddin Ahmed then proceeded to appoint himself to the position – an option the Constitution does indeed offer, but only as a last resort. For the opposition, this was not much of an improvement over Hasan, and, as matters have turned out, may end up looking much worse. President Ahmed had been elected by the BNP-dominated Parliament, and is well known to be a long-time BNP man. Nonetheless, the opposition halted its street-agitation programme, most likely due to apprehension that the armed forces would be called out to quell what was turning into an uncontrollable situation. They reluctantly issued a statement offering tepid conditional acceptance of the president as Chief Adviser.

Since he became Chief Adviser on 29 October, nothing the president has done has encouraged the belief that he is a neutral figure – as would befit the head of an administration that is vested solely with presiding over the conduct of free and fair elections. As opposed to the last caretaker chief – who transferred key officials from his first day in office, and imposed his authority with an iron first – the current Chief Adviser has done very little in the way of shuffling administrative and police personnel, which everyone would agree would be necessary to ensure credible elections. What is truly unprecedented is the Chief Adviser's split with the rest of the 11-person 'Council of Advisers', as the caretaker government is referred to. A significant gulf has grown between him and more than half of the council – who are said to be ready to tender their resignations, something that has never happened in the history of the chief advisorship. The main complaint is that decisions collectively made by the Council are subsequently unilaterally countermanded by the Chief Adviser, in clear contravention of the Constitution.

Perhaps what will be seen as the final straw came on 12 November, when the caretaker government put the armed forces on standby to lend support to the civil administration. This decision was made unilaterally by the Chief Adviser, without informing the rest of the Council.

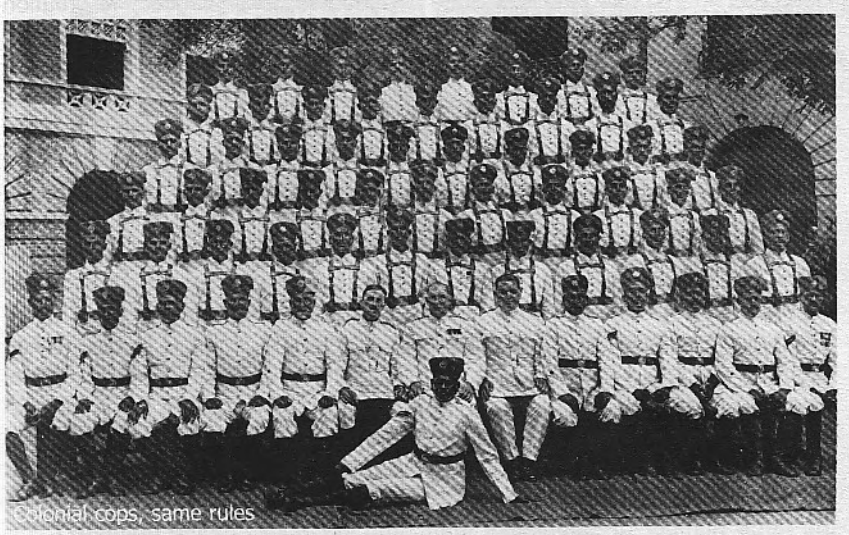
Stubborn partisan

That is not all. The next crisis centred on the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and the Election Commission, which had also been thoroughly politicised by the BNP government and staffed with its hand-picked people. The CEC, Justice M A Aziz, has alienated most members of the polity, with the exception of his boosters in the four-party alliance. He ignored judgments by both the High Court and the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court when he went about creating a bogus voter roll, which was prepared by politically partisan enumerators and allegedly contains well over one million fake voters.

The 14-party alliance led by the AL has insisted that no credible election can be held under Aziz's supervision, a sentiment that has widespread sympathy beyond the realm of party politics. Indeed, about the only people who want Hasan to remain in his post once again are the four-party alliance hardliners – and, it seems, the president/ Chief Adviser himself. The opposition has imposed periodic blockade programmes, apparently in the hope of shaming the CEC into relinquishing his position. This pressure, together with the near consensus in the country on the need for the CEC to go, finally persuaded Aziz to step aside on 22 November – though whether this will have the desired effect of allowing reconstitution of a credible Election Commission remains to be seen. Removal of the CEC without further steps to reconstitute and reform the Election Commission will solve little.

In this finely balanced situation, there is very real possibility that the army will be forced to step in and break the deadlock. In fact, the military has already been asked to do so, both by the BNP's four-party alliance government and the current caretaker government, but it has thus far resisted the call, showing great forbearance and maturity. At the same time, the army brass has indicated that if forced to enter the filed because of political chaos, it will not activate its ranks as the cat's paw of either the president and his BNP backers, or of the AL-led 14-party alliance. Rather, the army will be its own master.

Reforming Indian policing


HILARY PRESTON

Colonial cops, same rules

A groundbreaking decision by India's Supreme Court could speed up reforms in a police establishment governed by one of the world's most archaic laws.

BY **SWATI MEHTA**

On 22 September 2006, the Supreme Court of India, one of the most proactive courts in the world, directed the governments at the state and the union level to institutionalise 'best practices' in the country's police force. In the landmark judgment *Prakash Singh v Union of India*, the court stated that given the "gravity of the problem" and the "total uncertainty as to when police reforms would be introduced" if the government were left to its own devices, it felt compelled to issue "appropriate directions for immediate compliance". Those directions to the government are binding until the state legislatures enact a new Police Act.

Police in India continue to be governed by an archaic colonial law from 1861, making it one of the oldest such legislation anywhere. Enacted in the aftermath of the Mutiny of 1857, the Police Act of 1861 sought to create a force that would crush dissent, and in particular any movement for self-determination. The Constitution of Independent India makes policing a 'state subject', which means that state governments have the authority to pass more progressive policing legislation. Despite this freedom, most states continue to utilise the 19th century legislation, and even the few that have enacted their own laws have modelled them on the 1861 Act. Retaining outdated, regressive legislation has meant that policing has not kept up with the overall democratic development of Independent India; this has aided the continuing high incidence of custodial torture, extrajudicial killings, illegal detention and corruption.

The need for reform in the police force has long been recognised, and how such reform would be carried out is also fairly well understood. Though many committees and commissions have been set up to suggest reform since Independence, none of their recommendations have been implemented. The most recent such committee, headed by former Indian Attorney General Soli Sorabjee, was set up in 2005 to draft a new Police Act. It remains to be seen if its recommendations, submitted to the government in October 2006 in the immediate aftermath of *Prakash Singh*, will be implemented.

Lack of political will remains the greatest obstacle to police reform. Successive governments over the past half-century have retained and in fact encouraged colonial styles of policing. It suits the political elite to have subservient police who will do their bidding. Politicians in India have ensured compliance by retaining powers of appointment, transfer and promotion as potent tools by which to influence the police. The status quo also suits police officers, who realise that so long as they are pliant, they can get away with murder, sometimes literally. The experience of various communal riots across India has illustrated not only how political interference in the functioning of the police can result in huge loss of life and property, but also how police misconduct goes unpunished if the political masters are content.

In 2002, the involvement of the state police in the communal riots in Gujarat and their aftermath invited much criticism. The police refused to register complaints, conducted shoddy investigations and fudged evidence – all with impunity. Those officers who upheld the law and tried to stop the attacks on minority communities were punitively transferred by the state government. One police superintendent successfully thwarted an attack on a school, rescued 400 students and registered criminal cases against the attackers, despite pressure from local political leaders to turn a blind eye. He was subsequently transferred five times in a single year. On the other hand, Ahmedabad's police commissioner, widely believed to have played a biased and compliant role during the riots, was promoted to the position of the head of the state

police force's anti-corruption bureau.

The message has long been clear. For a police officer, enforcing the diktat of the politician can be much more rewarding than upholding the rule of law. Given such a scenario, it did not seem likely that the authorities would ever get around to reforming their police squads. With the *Prakash Singh* judgement, the Supreme Court may have changed this.

Autonomy, accountability

The Supreme Court's new directives recognise the need to achieve two basic principles of policing under a democratic system: functional autonomy and accountability. The former implies that the police are free to perform their functions without extraneous pressure. They cannot be directed, say, to arrest a particular person or to investigate a particular incident in a particular manner. Significantly, international norms indicate that appointment, transfer and promotion should all be handled within the police hierarchy, not by politicians.

As such, the September court ruling mandates that chiefs of police be selected through a transparent process, and that they, along with other specified officers, should enjoy the security of tenure. In addition, the authorities are directed to create an Establishment Board, comprising the chief of police and four other senior police officers, to decide on promotions and transfers. The court further directs each state government to set up a State Security Commission – comprising elected leaders from both the government and the opposition, the chief of police and others drawn from the government, judiciary or the public – to lay down policy guidelines for the police force, and to ensure that there is no interference with its functioning.

To ensure that the powers of the police are not abused, the court mandates that functional autonomy be tempered with accountability. As with any other public service, police must be responsible not only for the services that they are expected to provide and to be answerable for each and every action that affects the lives of citizens, but also for the public money that they spend. The Supreme Court has now directed the new State Security Commissions to evaluate the performances of the police in their respective states.

Perhaps more importantly, as an agency of the state entitled to use force against citizens, it is imperative that misconduct on the part of the police be met with consequences. Opaque and non-responsive internal disciplinary systems in India have long failed to inspire any faith in the country's citizens. While the National Human Rights Commission is empowered to inquire into complaints against the police, it lacks resources – both financial and human – to deal with the large number of complaints that are lodged against the police force as well as other government agencies every year. The *Prakash Singh* judgment now directs the state governments to put in place Police Complaint Authorities at both the state and district levels, to inquire specifically into complaints against the police.

Now for compliance

The directions of the Supreme Court are binding on all state governments, which must comply by the end of December. In prescribing such a short timeframe, the court must have been guided by the failure of past governments to implement measures to reform the police. But the proximity of the deadline will pose many challenges.

The state governments in India now must decide whether they will comply with the court's ruling through executive orders or through new legislation. Some of the directions, such as ensuring security of tenure and creating an internal Establishment Board for transfers and promotions, can be complied with immediately through executive instruction. Others, however, such as the creation of State Security Commissions and Police Complaints Authorities, will have to be enshrined in law in order to ensure their independent functioning.

In creating these bodies, the state governments will have to face some problems that are inherent in the judgment itself. The judgment mandates, for instance, the creation of a State Security Commission to ensure that "the state government does not exercise unwarranted influence or pressure on the state police". But in practice, how will the Commission ensure that there is no interference? What skills will the Commission possess by which to evaluate the police, and how will it go about performing this function? Similarly, will inquiries by the Police Complaints Authority lead to criminal charges, or will there be a parallel police investigation? What will be the relation between the criminal investigation undertaken by the police and the inquiry by the Authority?

These questions will require thorough consideration, and must be addressed by well-thought-out laws. The end-of-the-year deadline clearly does not provide enough time for the creation of such complex legislation. Governments must nevertheless take definitive steps towards such reform. Changes that do not require legislative basis should be introduced immediately, and a process must begin whereby comprehensive legislation will be enacted.

The legislative process is itself fraught with problems. There are dangers that the lack of political will to reform will be reflected in any eventual legislation. It is also possible that the new laws will not have mechanisms by which to ensure police accountability, or that they will create only pliant institutions. If a process of appointment is instituted that is again un-transparent, or if the new state bodies are denied resources, the new mechanisms will be crippled. As such, the onus will be on civil-society groups in each state to ensure that the new laws reflect the spirit of the judgment. A good template to adopt would be the Model Police Act, drafted recently by the Sorabjee Committee. In any case, governments in the process of legislating must be pressured to ensure that the public has the space to debate and present its views on the kind of policing it wants.

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But for democracy...

Pakistanis have everything going for them. A proud young ideology that can galvanise nation-building, a federalism that could work better than elsewhere in Southasia, a productive population and a vibrant intelligentsia that has sharpened its mind on the stone of continuous adversity. But for democracy in Paksitan...

The democratic uncertainty of Pakistan

For now, continuing civil-military partnership is the only thing that can save Pakistan from descending into the chaos of a 'mass praetorian' society. However, all actors must be careful to use the time they have to establish democratic norms and institutions.

BY **EJAZ HAIDER**

Everyone in Pakistan wants democracy; ironically, this includes the army, which intervenes every now and then to put the country back on the rails and introduce 'true' democracy. Just as every Western state defined peace differently in the 20 years between the world wars, democracy seems to have acquired various meanings within Pakistan, which depend on one's ideological and political leanings.

The Pakistan Army has repeatedly shown an inclination to place itself within the political system in an arbitrator's role. To this extent, it wants a 'controlled' rather than an unfettered democracy. At least two military generals – Ayub Khan and Pervez

While the army can be blamed for its interventions, there is empirical evidence that political forces themselves have repeatedly failed, during democratic intervals, to act prudently and develop a tradition of democracy.

Musharraf - have tried to wed the political conservatism of the military to liberal policies in the social and economic realms. Political parties have similarly tended to eschew any normative framework in the conduct of politics, and even centrist parties have shown a tendency to court political and social conservatism while pursuing - at least in the case of Mian Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) - economic liberalism. In the long run, the one negates the other. The religious right, meanwhile, agrees with the form of democracy - elections, Parliament, etcetera - but wants to grab power to further the spread of Islam in the country. It is also imbued with an all-pervasive conservatism in the spheres of politics and socio-economic relations.

Smaller nationalist parties, secular for the most part, do not have the capacity to impact national politics directly, and squander any ability they might have to liberalise the socio-political sphere by remaining confrontational on parochial issues such as the rights of the smaller provinces. Somewhat more nationalist in its approach, but still essentially a party with its basis in ethnicity, is the Mutahidda Qaumi Movement (MQM) in urban Sindh. It is secular, middle-class and progressive. But it has tended to act in violent ways, and retains the pathology of a small party. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is the only political entity with inroads into all four federal units. It is also the only party with an agenda that is liberal on all three counts: political, social and economic.

This scenario has put Pakistan in a quandary - not just when it comes to establishing and sustaining democracy, but also in terms of identifying and strengthening a norm that could characterise the functioning of various political actors and the relations between them. It is important to note that while the army can be blamed for its interventions, there is empirical evidence that political forces themselves have repeatedly failed, during democratic intervals, to act prudently and develop a tradition of democracy.

Not majority opinion

The philosopher Karl Popper termed public opinion "an irresponsible form of power", and warned liberals of its dangers. It was easy to understand and desirable to minimise the power of the state, but how, other than through the agency of the state, might the individual be saved from the tyranny of public opinion? And if the state is needed for such protection, how does one square these conflicting requirements? Through a "certain tradition", argued Popper. Of what tradition did Popper speak? As Project Democracy fails in several states, not just in Asia but also in Europe, it is important to revisit what he said.

> Democracy as such cannot confer any benefits upon the citizens and it should not be expected to do so. In fact, democracy can do nothing - only the citizens of the democracy can act (including, of course, those citizens who comprise the government). Democracy provides no more than a framework within which the citizens may act in a more or less organised and coherent way.
>
> We are democrats, not because the majority is always right, but because democratic traditions are the least evil ones which we know. If the majority (or 'public opinion') decides in favour of tyranny, a democrat need not therefore suppose that some fatal inconsistency in his views has been revealed. He will realise, rather, that the democratic tradition in his country was not strong enough.

Contained in this analysis are two crucial points. First, democracy is not only about the rule of majority opinion. Second, while it is vital to keep the state in check, it may in some situations be equally or more crucial to use the state's protection to safeguard and advance an eminently sensible course of action, which may not have the power of public opinion behind it.

The past few decades have seen the failure of people's power in various states. Flower and coloured revolutions in Eastern Europe have given way to the same old governmental lethargy and the lack of an internal norm so essential for preventing politics from degenerating into anarchy. The "certain tradition" Popper talked about seems missing. The incisive Alexis de Tocqueville expressed concern about precisely these circumstances when he wrote, his 1835 *Democracy in America*: "If men are to remain civilised or become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased."

Any discussion of democracy in Pakistan, as in other states that have seen its ebb and flow, must move away

Gen Musharraf's dilemma is a classic one. On the one hand, he genuinely wants to effect certain reforms to improve Pakistan's image as a moderate state. On the other, he is reluctant to broaden his political support-base in pursuit of this agenda.

Despite having engineered the system as he pleased, Gen Musharraf knows that his real power-base is the army, and not the office of president.

from a near-absolute faith in its dividends, and towards consideration of the paradoxes contained in the Popper quote above and of de Tocqueville's pre-condition of the "art of associating". Equally dangerous, however, is the reformist who comes to power, whether through a vote or a coup, and waves a blueprint of reforms that he and *only* he can deliver. Pakistan, as it stands today, is the story of these paradoxes. For this reason, any discussion or analysis of the country's politics must be watchful on the one hand of simplistic understandings of democracy (what political scientist Fareed Zakaria calls 'illiberal democracy'), and on the other of the proven inability of strongmen to determine the exit strategy from the hold they have put on democracy in the name of reform.

Praetorian fault-lines

Pakistan's 59-year-long history is replete with political uncertainty. Each brief run of democracy has ended in a military coup. For this reason, the country has remained unable to complete the transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one. While Pakistan has not seen mobilised violence, which drastically reduces the prospects of political democracy, it has suffered from an inability on the part of political actors during periods of transition to determine how and to what uses newly acquired democratic authority should be put. For the most part, this has resulted in political brinkmanship among leading political actors, which in turn leads to the breakdown, at some point, of the democratic cycle into another military coup.

This is why Pakistanis initially welcomed all the three coups d'etat (leaving aside the internal transition in 1969 from General Ayub Khan to Yahya Khan, and the 1993 'soft coup' by General Waheed Kakar) as respite from the uncertainty of poor political governance. It is a matter of record that when Pervez Musharraf mounted his coup - or what he calls the 'counter-coup' - on 12 October 1999, he was hailed by a large segment of the Pakistani people. The Pakistan People's Party, the country's largest political force, which the ousted Prime Minister Sharif had chased from pillar to post, was ecstatic. Many of its workers distributed sweets on the streets. The intelligentsia was relieved that Sharif had gone and the era of democratic totalitarianism had come to an end. The liberal-secular sections of society were glad that he could no longer fulfil his agenda of making Sharia the basis of legislation, which would arguably have converted Pakistan into a theocratic state.

At this stage we run into a paradox. It is important for a genuine political process to begin, in order to fill in the current fault-lines within the polity; yet, to open up the system by means of a vote would sharpen the salience of these fault-lines. What is the remedy? This is not a theoretical question. Last October, Anatol Lieven wrote in the *International Herald Tribune*:

> Most developing countries seem closer to the melancholy pattern of most of Latin America over the past century, of a cyclical movement between flawed democracies and ineffective dictatorships and back again - a process interspersed with numerous 'people-power revolutions' that turn out to have made no real difference whatsoever.

This assessment brings us to what Samuel Huntington posited in the late 1960s: some societies evince a praetorian strand. 'Praetorian' normally refers to a military that displays a tendency to mount coups. Huntington, however, used the term to describe societies in which, in the absence of a normative basis for political functioning, all groups, including the military, vie to capture state power for themselves. Looking at the issue of military interventions, Huntington dismissed the thesis that an explanation of these interventions would require an analysis of the military itself: "Military explanations do not explain military interventions ... because the most important causes of military intervention in politics are not military but political, and reflect not the social and organisational characteristics of the military establishment but the political and institutional structure of the society." Huntington sought to look for explanations in society itself, because countries grappling with the cycle that Lieven described show that the "society as a whole is out-of-joint, not just the military".

As such, the military usually wins. As Thomas Hobbes put it aptly, "When nothing else is turned up, clubs are trumps". The political interregnums are as bad as the military ones. In a praetorian society - Huntington lists three stages of praetorianism: oligarchical, radical and mass - political participation and modernisation do not result in political development but in political decay. This is why as a society graduates from oligarchical to radical and, finally, mass praetorianism, its chances of getting out of the cycle steadily diminish. Increased political participation in such a society, in the absence of

Be wary of the reformist who comes to power, whether through a vote or a coup, and waves a blueprint of reforms that he and only he can deliver.

political norms and "political institutions capable of mediating, refining and moderating group political action" means increased anarchy and chaos.

Huntington's thesis steadily lost adherents because, besides being culturally deterministic, it was also seen as an apology for military interventions. His praise for military dictators or reformers – in the case of Pakistan, Ayub Khan – was deemed inimical to a movement towards political participation and activity. Yet, when Pakistan finally managed its first national election in 1970, the exercise in political participation did not bring about national cohesion or an aggregation of interests. It tore the country asunder.

Furthermore, it may be noted that while accepting reformist or military rule in a praetorian society at a particular point in history, Huntington does not accept it as desirable beyond that point. He makes clear that military leaders or reformers need to take steps towards two goals. First, they must not allow oligarchical praetorianism to move towards radical praetorianism, or the latter to further degenerate into mass praetorianism – in which everyone enters into the political fray in the continuing lack of political evolution and the absence of acceptance of the rules of the game. Second, they need to break the praetorian cycle. If a country, despite a line of reformers and military leaders, has not broken the cycle, one can only say that the problem is even more complex than Huntington thought it was.

The third party

Pakistan's case also relates to the problem of military interventions and flawed democracies. In attempting to capture the country's political space, the two parties that alternated in power from 1988-99 failed to devise a code of conduct or a norm for political practice. Nawaz Sharif's PML-N, much more so than the PPP, had allied with the army to put down the opposition. But the 11-year opportunity to agree on an endogenous norm was squandered by both parties as each tried to pull the other down. On 14 May this year, when they signed the Charter of Democracy in London, the pressure to offer a mea culpa and the resolve to stay the democratic course in order to retain the legitimacy of the political opposition were born of the regret the two parties now feel, having been thrown into the political wilderness. However, given their conduct since then, it is clear that they agree on nothing beyond getting rid of General Musharraf.

In 1999, however, the situation was different. As per the past script – in which the decline in the fortunes of one party meant an automatic incline in the fortunes of the other – the PPP was confident that with Sharif and his League shown the door, the PPP was the natural candidate for the high table. But Gen Musharraf had other plans. The first thing he did was to chalk out a seven-point agenda for reform, which he announced before the country. The army, by this plan, would immediately get to work restructuring the political system – "total restructuring", as Gen Musharraf put it. Its first task was to cleanse the system of the two parties – PML-N and PPP – that had shared the spoils of power during the 11-year 'democratic' interregnum. This entailed the ouster of both the premiers who had also alternated during that period.

In his recently published autobiography *In the Line of Fire*, Gen Musharraf recounts:

> I set myself a seven-point agenda ... 1. Rebuild national confidence and morale. 2. Strengthen the federation, remove inter-provincial disharmony. 3. Revive the economy and restore investors' confidence. 4. Ensure law and order and dispense speedy justice. 5. Depoliticise state institutions. 6. Devolve power to the grassroots. 7. Ensure swift accountability across the board.

Having swept aside the two main political parties, he decided to embark on this programme in a political vacuum. As most military dictators are, Gen Musharraf was convinced of several things: the political system should be purged, corruption should be uprooted, the economy should be put in the fast

GG2

The contenders, Benazir and Nawaz


YAWAR

Shakily invincible

lane and, for all this to work, the country should be depoliticised. However, to make all this happen, the army needed to retain its primacy without having to constantly intervene in the system as an external player. In other words, the system needed to be engineered to bring the military in as the legitimate arbiter, rather than as an actor that must jump into the arena from the outside and then seek legitimacy through the highest court.

To this end, Gen Musharraf presented his epigram: if you want to keep the army out, bring it in. But alongside the military, of course, he needed a political partner, and got down to the task of creating a third, viable political force – an entity that would not only neutralise the two main political parties, but also give him the political legitimacy he needed to pursue his agenda. This party was created from Sharif's PML-N. He also brought into the loop some smaller political groups, and managed, after some initial difficulty, to wean from the PPP some of its members.

This project of creating an alternative political force severely compromised the idealism of the seven-point agenda. Most of the currently ruling PML – which began as the PML-Quaid-e-Azam and has since rechristened itself *the* Pakistan Muslim League – members are equally, if not more, corrupt than the opposition members that Gen Musharraf has since chosen to target. Simultaneously, to keep the PPP and the PML-N out of political reckoning, the general-president supported the six-party religious alliance, the Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA, the United Action Front), to become the official opposition in the National Assembly.

On the plus side, even before he decided to ally Pakistan with the United States following the events of 11 September 2001, Gen Musharraf was a cultural liberal. Before the 2002 elections, he ran government through a quasi-political arrangement that included liberal technocrats and members of NGOs. Since 9/11, he has coined and made famous the slogan of *'enlightened moderation'*. However, his cultural liberalism has not prevented him from pursuing a politics that is socially conservative. He supported the religious right not only in order to keep at bay the PPP, which shares his liberalism, but also because, with the MMA enjoying the spoils of the system, the federal government can more easily remain engaged in the pursuit of al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the North-West Frontier Province.

For Gen Musharraf, this has spelled a gradual break with liberal elements that have watched him with increasing suspicion, and now distrust his motives. This mistrust is exacerbated by the impunity with which Gen Musharraf has gone about amending the constitution while pussyfooting on issues such as the repeal of the Blasphemy Law and the Hudood Ordinances, the streamlining of the seminaries and the purging of textbooks. Indeed, it is only recently that the president has recovered a little of the ground he has lost with liberals, by pushing a reluctant ruling party to pass a Women's Protection Bill, which has taken some of the sting out of the Hudood Ordinances *(see accompanying story, "Fighting Hudood, protecting women")*. Since the PPP took a principled stand on the issue, it voted in favour of the government's passing of the bill. For Gen Musharraf, equally damaging as the lack of liberal support is the threat of resignations he now faces from the MMA, which is becoming increasingly strident and which also shows internal fault-lines.

Gen Musharraf's dilemma is a classic one. On the one hand, he genuinely wants to effect certain reforms to improve Pakistan's image as a moderate state. On the other, he is reluctant to broaden his political support-base in pursuit of this agenda, because doing so – especially if he co-opts the PPP – would mean allowing space to a political actor that could ultimately challenge the primacy of the Pakistan Army. Any clipping of the army's wings, he feels, could once again plunge the country into the old cycle. The fact that he still feels this way means that the institutionalisation he talks about (and is often downright boastful of) – whereby norms are

Yet, when Pakistan finally managed its first national election in 1970, the exercise in political participation did not bring about national cohesion or an aggregation of interests. It tore the country asunder.

If a premium is placed on the agenda for reform, Gen Musharraf will have to think about allying with the PPP. Reaching out to the PPP, however, would require making a deal with that party, and would also mean a major realignment of political forces in Pakistan.

developed on the basis of which politics is practiced, leading to an inclusive system of governance – is far from fruition. Nothing makes this more evident than the general's insistence on not doffing his uniform – because, he claims, to do so "is not in the country's interest".

A new alliance?

Two factors emerge from this. First, despite having engineered the system as he pleased, Gen Musharraf knows that his real power-base is the Pakistan Army, and not the office of president. Second, he knows that the opposition in Pakistan is waiting in the wings, and that if it were to smell blood, it would quickly move in for the kill. On both counts, and despite some of the good work he has done – bringing Pakistan out of isolation, improving the economy, normalising relations with India, making the press more free, referring to and promoting liberal values – the system atop which he sits remains fragile.

Equally, however, the political parties do not seem to have overcome the flaws that have led the country to the crises it has experienced, both past and present. The rightwing suffers from an intolerant ideology, and if elections were to bring to power certain elements within the MMA, Pakistan would lose whatever progress it might have made in the past seven years – at least in terms of the economic upturn and social liberalisation. The ruling PML has a natural affinity with the MMA, rather than with the PPP's liberal agenda. The PML-N is also much closer ideologically to the MMA than it is to its Charter of Democracy partner, the PPP. The MQM, despite its secularism and full support to Gen Musharraf, remains an ethnic party confined to urban Sindh.

Other secular parties are mostly NWFP- and Balochistan-based nationalist groupings. They may like Gen Musharraf's liberal agenda, but are completely out of tune with some of his policies; most feel that instead of devolving power, he has further centralised it. Decentralisation being the main plank of their provincial politics, they remain even more cut off from the federal government. Islamabad's development agenda for Balochistan has great economic, social and strategic significance for Pakistan. But the Baloch are not prepared to buy into these plans because the divisive nature of politics over the past six decades has ensured that national consensus remains elusive, even on issues of vital importance for everyone.

As the country moves towards the 2007 elections, the president will have to rethink some of his strategies in view of the response to the Women's Protection Bill by various political parties, including his own ruling PML. One third of the PML members abstained from voting on that bill, and it could not have been passed without the support of the PPP, which has yet to accept Gen Musharraf as the country's president. Meanwhile, his religious allies, the MMA, are increasingly seeking to distance themselves from the general-president, and may resign ahead of the elections so they can again campaign on the basis of Islam. The PML-N, despite its alliance with the PPP, opposed the Women's Protection Bill, reflecting the long-known truth that they hold nothing in common aside from their desire to oust Gen Musharraf.

The ruling PML, meanwhile, has shown itself incapable of carrying forward the president's liberal agenda. If a premium is placed on the agenda for reform, Gen Musharraf will have to think about allying with the PPP. Reaching out to the PPP, however, would require making a deal with that party, and would also mean a major realignment of political forces in Pakistan. If Gen Musharraf does extend a hand to the PPP, allowing that party to be a true political actor and to link up with other secular-liberal elements across the country, the next elections would be contested by the consolidated liberal camp against the culturally conservative and Islamist elements.

In some ways, such a changed dynamic would free Gen Musharraf of the conflict that has continued to run throughout his seven-year tenure. It would also, however, sharpen the fault-line between the liberals and the conservatives. Of course, this scenario presupposes that Gen Musharraf is likely to stay in the driver's seat for at least another five years. If that does come to pass, the political environment of Pakistan will depend on how effectively he can sell his policies by enlisting genuine political actors. The process of reform may slow down in such a case, but it will definitely acquire more legitimacy, and may become more acceptable to recalcitrant elements within the smaller provinces.

President Musharraf's review of his alliances will not automatically resolve the issue of the place of the army within the system. As such, it is difficult to see what kind of arrangement may evolve in the future. But until such time as the political parties come of age and the army loses its praetorian edge, the pattern of Pakistan's political experience suggests that a civil-military partnership may be the safest bet.

The compatibility of democracy

BILASH RAI

Pakistanis must not listen when told that democracy is something for which a society has to be prepared.

BY **NADEEM OMAR TARAR**

The Pakistani intelligentsia is used to bemoaning, in addition to the overdeveloped state structure, the disease of authoritarianism that threatens the future of democracy in Pakistan. This disease is nurtured, it is said, by a blend of retrogressive social values, which encourage submission to patriarchy and kill an individual's questioning spirit. Most importantly, it is argued that an essential structure of democratic norms, having evolved in the West through a long process of conflict between bourgeois and feudal elements, has not established itself in Pakistani culture. Going by the prevailing arguments, there are cultural prerequisites to democracy as a system of governance, and the absence of a particular moral and social fibre in the society inhibits the growth of democratic practice in Pakistan.

This argument of organic incompatibility and retrogressive cultural values assumes a certain democratic ideal with which political situations can be compared – an ideal that is both a theoretical and a historical fiction. Such an argument brings Western and non-Western societies into a parallel that is unwarranted and simplistic, given the vast amount of historical and cultural differences between and within the two. In this hypothesis, democracy is granted a fixed historical origin. Instead of viewing culture as a process of becoming, the argument looks for prerequisites, as if it were not the democratic process but rather the culture without democracy that gives rise to democracy. Instead of studying the shaping influence of historical experience, this argument sticks to the emblems of origins, and pins the failure of democracy on cultural values. It omits the local brand of democracy by committing itself to the professional humanist habits of seeing only evolution along Western historical lines as true evolution, and of interpreting non-Western societies by their placement along such an imagined timeline. In other words, by staring too much at 'History', the Pakistani intelligentsia loses sight of its country's own multiple, discrepant histories.

The argument of Pakistan's incompatibility with democracy testifies to the claims of British colonial historiography: that democracy was bestowed on India through colonialism. It supports the idea that it is thus an alien concept, one that runs only through the institutions of power that were put in place to colonise the native population. No doubt there is an element of historical credence to this point, but in the heat of argument we often forget that the grand narratives of democracy and enlightenment – as well as their institutional practices – mobilised people in the colonised world to rise up and throw off the yoke of imperial subjection. Aijaz Ahmad, a postcolonial critic and historian, has argued that the historical adequacy of such things as democracy and nationhood should

not be looked for by referring to their origins in Europe; rather, this needs to be established through reference to the practices of political subjects within a geo-political space.

Local democracy

The historically adequate referent for democracy exists in pre- and postcolonial India in the shape of the anti-colonial struggle. Internally this process was far more democratic than was the colonial state, and it mobilised some 20 million peasant households through the Quit India Movement. In a similar vein, various sub-national resistances against the internal colonialism of the nation state in Pakistan – such as those of Bengali, Sindhi, Pakhtun and Kashmiri nationalism, along with broad-based peasant and labour movements – are testimony to the fact that democracy is not the privilege of a few cultures, nor is it tied to a string of liberal cultural values. However, the sad fact is that official historians of state nationalism excised crucial chapters from the pages of subcontinental and Pakistani history: those of the unleashing of a democratic process by the anti-colonial struggle. They did so by splitting the struggle along communal and separatist lines, thus creating part of a story that puts the onus of responsibility for extended military dictatorships directly on the shoulders of the masses themselves.

Furthermore, the position that attributes the failure of democracy to certain archetypal features of Pakistani culture, such as family institutions and *baradai* networks, echoes the views of modernisation theorists who attribute underdevelopment to the internal backwardness of third-world societies rather than to historical and global circumstances. Such arguments, which emerge through the educated prisms of our intellectual elite, resonate with the paternalist arrogance of great fiction writers such as Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling, who, by insisting that the Indian reality required (indeed, beseeched) British tutelage more or less indefinitely, ultimately forecast the untenability of their own theories of organic backwardness. Though the Pakistani state may give its citizens democracy more in breach than in observance, it is worth recalling that nowhere in Europe or North America is adult franchise implemented with such low levels of literacy and material well-being as there are in Southasia. And nowhere in the West did women achieve the right to vote in the founding moments of electoral democracy, as happened in post-Independence India and Pakistan.

These observations are not intended to privilege feudal residues, patriarchy and gender oppression, or the presumed ills of social structure. Nor are they meant to play down the corrupting influences of martial law on Pakistan's fractured political process. Nevertheless, there is a need to register unease with the argument that ties democracy to a handful of Western liberal values. Democracy as a political practice must be read in the active struggle of political subjects in their political space. The institutional values of democracy should be separated from democracy as a set of cultural practices. When it comes to cultural practice, it is the active political struggle of a subject that can adduce a historically adequate referent for democracy, and not a squabble over the question of origins and endings.

However, the forms of democratic norms are bound to vary in different cultural spaces. It is in large part the colonial engineering of Pakistani society – which fostered a certain evolution of the social structure of the colonised – that is responsible for the fact that it is not individual ethos, but rather ethnic, religious and kin networks that will continue to provide the support for the electoral process. Those who think that democracy can only work where there is a pervasive philosophy of 'one man, one vote' – the individual existing free of kinship networks – are searching for an impossible ideal. If 'clientelism' (the generally exploitative relationship between a powerful 'patron' and a weaker 'client') of one sort or another pervades Pakistani society, then the point is not to disown customary practices by imagining a monolithic definition of feudalism, or to castigate them in a barrage of moral rhetoric. The task is to understand the sociological significance of the patron-client relationship, which provides an important nexus of electoral politics in Pakistan and elsewhere in Southasia.

British anthropologist Ernest Gellner once called politics based on clientelism "government-by-network". In this formation, formal institutional arrangements matter far less than do the informal connections of mutual trust – those based on past personal services, or on exchanges of protection from above for support from below. Pakistani society is ruled by networks, quasi-tribes, alliances forged on the basis of kin, services exchanged, groups of common regional and ethnic origins, and common institutional experiences. But even in this last case, the most important connections largely find their basis in personal trust, rather than in formal relations in a defined bureaucratic structure.

In our passionate yearning for democracy, it is important not to disavow what is often hastily dismissed as 'feudal residue'. Rather, we need to understand how this structure has been carefully put in place through colonial governance, and how it works in the postcolonial state. Radical research into the various forms and norms of local democracies is what is needed to provide an understanding of a local democratic order. It should not be forgotten that if Pakistani society is ever to reform itself, it has to do so on the bedrock and by the terms of its own local cultural ideals and aspirations. Democracy cannot be thought of as something borrowed from the outside, or as something credited to its pristine ideals.

Pakistan votes to amend rape laws

15 November 2006: Pakistan's national assembly votes to amend the country's strict Sharia laws on rape and adultery. Until now rape cases were dealt with in Sharia courts. Victims had to have four male witnesses to the crime – if not, they faced prosecution for adultery. Now civil courts will be able to try rape cases, assuming the upper house and the president ratify the move. The reform has been seen as a test of President Musharraf's stated commitment to a moderate form of Islam. Religious parties boycotted the vote saying the bill encouraged "free sex".

– BBC

Asma Jahangir continues the fight

Fighting Hudood, protecting women

Pervez Musharraf's amendment of Pakistan's Sharia laws represents only a partial victory against legislation that many have been battling for over two decades.

BY **BEENA SARWAR**

31 July 2006, it was a stiflingly hot afternoon in Islamabad. The entire audience at a packed seminar titled 'Hudood Ordinances: Time for Repeal' had moved out from the conference room to the street in front of the hotel to hold an impromptu demonstration. Women and some men brandished banners and shouted slogans. Many of the demonstrators had been fighting these laws since 1981. That year, activists had launched the Women's Action Forum (WAF), an umbrella organisation of women's groups. They had been galvanised into action by sentences of 80 lashes of the whip and death by stoning respectively for a young couple. Fehmida and Allah Baksh had eloped after Fehmida's father had refused to allow them to marry, and her father had filed a police report alleging that she had been abducted. The couple had gotten married two weeks after Fehmida became pregnant. The newly instituted Hudood laws made extramarital sex – *zina* – a crime, punishable by severe, supposedly Islamic, punishments. (The Supreme Court later overturned the conviction for lack of evidence. Many such appeals are also heard by Pakistan's Federal Shariat Court.)

One of WAF's founding members was Zohra Yusuf, the petite, steel-willed head of the *Star* weekend magazine in Karachi, where I was an intern fresh out of high school. I became a member too. During the 1980s, a time when public dissent was dangerous, WAF became a significant voice against military rule and for gender rights. Through demonstrations, seminars and letter-writing campaigns, this headquarters-less movement became a thorn in the side of the military regime. When the Hudood laws were imposed, only the WAF activists risked public protests.

One of those long-time activists, Nasreen Azhar, was at the 31 July Islamabad demonstration. I remembered her bold comment on a television talk show from earlier: "Whenever anything is done in the name of Islam, people keep quiet and are afraid to say anything." As usual at such demonstrations, dozens of policemen and -women blocked the street, official pistols and steel-tipped batons clearly visible. We all knew what would

happen if the demonstrators tried to move to a more public venue, such as the Supreme Court or National Assembly on nearby Constitution Avenue – sometimes called 'Dissolved Assembly' and 'Amended or Suspended Constitution Avenue'. Pakistan's political realities, after all, include a police force that is used to suppress political opposition rather than to protect the citizenry. It is quick to fire teargas or bullets, or use batons on unarmed protestors who move beyond the limits set by the authorities.

The Zia laws

One particular incident during General Zia-ul Haq's military regime, which stretched from 1977-88, catapulted the nascent women's movement into the political foreground. On 12 February 1983, the Punjab Women Lawyers Association in Lahore organised a public protest (one of its leaders was the prominent human-rights lawyer Asma Jahangir) against the proposed Law of Evidence that reduced the testimony of two women in court to that of just one reliable witness. Many WAF members were part of this first public demonstration by any group against a martial-law edict. Police fired teargas and baton-charged the women to stop them from marching towards the Lahore High Court, injuring several and arresting nearly 50.

Zia had grabbed power in a military coup during 1977. Two years later his regime hanged the elected prime minister, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, and crushed political dissent with arrests and disappearances, torture, military trials and executions, and strict censorship. Zia declared that he would hold elections in 90 days and 'Islamise' the country. "The motive behind these laws was political, not religious," says Aslam Khaki, a Supreme Court lawyer and honorary counsel to the Federal Shariat Court, which was established in 1980 with the exclusive jurisdiction to hear appeals against convictions under the Hudood Ordinances. "Gen Zia-ul Haq had come into power after toppling a popularly elected government, and he had to justify his act. The slogan of Islamisation was convenient for this purpose."

Zia never did get around to elections, but he began the process of Islamisation through media policies and various legislation, including the Hudood Ordinances and the Law of Evidence. The United States supported him because it needed Pakistan to help fight the Soviets in neighbouring Afghanistan. The use of religion to gain support for the Afghans' struggle for freedom from foreign invaders subsequently developed this fight into a jihad.

And in the name of religion, much harm was done in Pakistan. Zia enacted the Hudood Ordinances as a set of criminal laws for which *hadd* ('God's limit'; *Hudood* or *Hadood* is the plural of *hadd*) punishments could be prescribed, such as stoning to death and amputation of limbs. Fehmida and Allah Baksh had been charged under the Offence of Zina. *Zina* is an Arabic word that means 'fornication' or 'adultery', and was not in use in Pakistan before the introduction of these laws. The Offence of Zina encompassed rape, abduction of women, prostitution and adultery. Other Hudood offences relate to property (theft and armed robbery), *qazf* (bearing false witness or making false accusations) and prohibition (drug trafficking and alcohol consumption). The fifth Hudood law, the Execution of Punishment of Whipping Ordinance, prescribes the mode of whipping for those convicted under the Hudood laws.

The Zina law has most adversely affected women, particularly the poor and the illiterate. It criminalizes consensual sex between adults not married to each other (like Fehmida and Allah Baksh). It also blurs the distinction between adultery and rape, making fornication a criminal offence, and rape a private one in which the survivor has to prove her innocence – or risk being accused of having had illegal sex.

Hudood punishments carry stringent requirements of testimony, and can only be administered on confession of the accused, or if the act has been witnessed by four adult Muslim males who are 'truthful' and abstain from major sins. Non-Muslims can only bear witness if the accused is also a non-Muslim, and women's testimony is excluded by default. Hadd punishments cannot be prescribed if these requirements are not met, but the accused can be given a *tazir* punishment (*tazir* simply means punishment).

Many religious scholars have opposed these laws as un-Islamic. Even the Federal Shariat Court ruled that the punishment of death by stoning was not Islamic; but Zia changed the bench, and the new judges upheld the punishment as acceptable. At the anti-Hudood laws seminar in Islamabad this past July, Mohammad Farooq Khan, an Islamic scholar from Mardan in the North-West Frontier Province, called the laws "the biggest insult to Islam". The Council of Islamic Ideology, a constitutional body that advises Pakistan's legislature, recently reviewed these laws as well, and reported them to be flawed and not in keeping with the teachings of Islam.

Prior to the imposition of the Hudood Ordinances and the Zina law, the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) did not consider sex outside of marriage a criminal offence. Extra-marital intercourse involving a married woman was a private offence for which only the man could be punished. Only the husband of an adulteress could file a complaint against her, but women could not be punished under this law. When it came to an accused man, the offence was compoundable and bailable, and if the prosecution dropped the charges, criminal proceedings were automatically abandoned. The punishment was five years or a fine, or both. The state could not be a party to the case. According to a 1997 report by the Commission of Inquiry for Women:

In the pre-Zina Ordinance period, there were only a handful of reported cases of adultery. As soon as the law was changed to include women within the scope of its punishment, allegations of zina started to run into the thousands. This clearly indicates that as long as it was only the male who could be punished for adultery, there was a reluctance to prosecute. The Ordinance became a tool in the hands of those who wished to exploit women.

The Commission also noted that the number of women in prison had risen drastically since the imposition of the Hudood and Zina laws. In 1979, there were only 70 women in Pakistani prisons. A decade later, in 1988, this figure had risen to 6000, with zina complaints comprising the majority of cases against women and girls.

Tepid reform

After Zia died in a mysterious airplane explosion in 1988, general elections brought Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's daughter Benazir Bhutto to power as the world's first Muslim woman prime minister. However, her government did not have the necessary majority to overturn laws such as the Hudood Ordinances. She also faced fierce opposition from the religious parties that had gained strength during the Zia years. Post-Zia governments did not pursue Hudood cases with the same zeal, but thousands of women nevertheless continued to be prosecuted for zina. And more recently, their numbers increased from nearly 3300 in 2001 to more than 3800 in 2004. However, more cases ended in acquittal than in conviction.

In 2002, a district court in the town of Kohat sentenced a young woman, Zafran Bibi, to death by stoning for sex outside of marriage. Zafran had alleged rape by her husband's younger brother, as a result of which she had become pregnant. Because she could not prove that she was raped, and the pregnancy occurred while her husband was in prison, the district court took Zafran's pregnancy as proof of her guilt. Once again, Pakistan's women's-rights activists led a massive public outcry. In August of that year, the Federal Shariat Court acquitted Zafran, and re-established the principle that a woman's pregnancy could not be taken as proof of adultery.

Coverage by the newly established private television channels raised public awareness in a way that newspapers cannot in a country with a literacy rate of barely 40 percent. Meanwhile, the current head of state, General Pervez Musharraf, who had seized power in a military coup in 1999, was trying to undo Zia's legacy and 'de-Talibanise' Pakistan. He had already restored the provision of reserved seats for women in Pakistan's assemblies and at local councils.

In 2003, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) released its report* on the Hudood laws, recommending repeal. Majida Rizvi, Pakistan's first woman High Court judge, headed the commission and its 17-member Special Committee, which reviewed laws relating to women. The committee included members of the president-appointed Council of Islamic Ideology, as well as religious scholars, lawyers and retired judges. They agreed that these laws do not fulfil the criteria for providing justice under national, international or religious law. Two dissenting votes came from Sher Zaman, chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, and Farida Ahmad Siddiqui, president of the women's wing of the religious political party Jamiat Ulema Pakistan.

Again, private television channels reported on the proceedings, and viewers saw veiled women from the religious parties demonstrating in Islamabad in favour of retaining the Hudood laws, as well as women's-rights groups demonstrating in Islamabad and Karachi for their repeal. The NWFP assembly passed a unanimous resolution condemning the NCSW recommendation as a part of a "conspiracy against Islam". Working as a news producer at the time, I brought out a couple of documentaries on women in prisons and the Hudood laws - the first time that the issue had been presented on Pakistani television in this format. Not much had changed since the 1980s, when I first started writing about the issue.

Modest relief

Given two decades without public debate on the Hudood Ordinances - and with religious militancy increasing all the while - it was still only the women's- and human-rights activists that were willing to stick their necks out on this issue. Parveen Parvez, a lawyer in Karachi's City Courts, says that most zina cases are still "registered by parents against their daughters who have married of their own choice, or former husbands whose ex-wives re-married after the divorce". Khalida Parveen, of the anti-gender-violence organisation War Against Rape, says that rape victims who are unable to prove their 'innocence' still risk being accused of fornication and imprisoned for adultery, "just like Zafran Bibi".

On the other side, members of the religious parties continued to oppose any move to amend or repeal this law, even though some accepted that it was being misused. Farida Ahmad, one of the two dissenting voters in the NCSW Committee's recommendation to repeal the Hudood laws, even listed five categories of women whom she agreed are unjustly imprisoned: rape survivors, women who marry against their parents' wishes, divorced women contracting another marriage whose ex-husbands accuse them of zina, "Then there are prostitutes - but some *dalal* (pimp) or other gets them out. And fifth, girls are forced into this profession by their fathers and brothers. I have met such girls in jail myself, who say they were forced [into prostitution] and arrested during a police raid." So why did she oppose repealing these laws, which have sent

*Available online at *www.new.ncsw.gov.pk/index.php*

thousands of innocent women to jail? "But thousands of women have only been shut away in prison," she retorted in 2003. "No one has ever been punished under the Hudood laws, because of the condition requiring four witnesses. That is what has saved them."

"If there were only administrative problems, it would be another matter," said NCSW Committee member Shaiq Usmani, a retired Sindh High Court judge. "But the law itself is deeply flawed." He argues that the driving principle in Islam is the provision of justice, so any law which leads to injustice cannot be Islamic. Speaking at the Islamabad conference in July, he suggested that the Hudood laws be re-named the 'Zia Laws' in order to remove the religious connotation.

However, under pressure from the religious lobby, the President Musharraf-led government let slip the opportunity provided by the NCSW's recommendation to amend or repeal the Hudood laws. The issue lingered on until May 2006, when the channel Geo TV started a public awareness campaign about the Hudood laws, *Zara Sochiye* (Just Think). The Geo campaign included talk shows and interviews, featuring not those who had for years been campaigning against these laws, but religious scholars who admitted that the Hudood Ordinances and their associated legislation are not divine. For the first time since the Hudood laws were promulgated, the issue was being debated in the public arena.

Soon afterwards, on 7 July, President Musharraf issued a directive that allowed women detained for minor crimes other than terrorism and murder to post bail before trial, an option previously unavailable to zina prisoners. Around 1300 women in prison were immediately released on bail. While welcoming the step, human-rights activists noted that most under-trial prisoners are entitled to bail but cannot afford it. Nor did this step address the root cause of the problem – the Hudood Ordinances and the related laws, which kept sending women to prison.

The government promised to amend the Zina Ordinance through the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Rights Bill in the previous assembly session, starting in August 2006. Four months later, Parliament finally accepted this amendment on 15 November. "One drawback of the law [after amendment] is that adultery still remains 'a crime against the state'," comments Zohra Yusuf. It also is still punishable with stoning to death under the Hudood Ordinances. These amendments "are not a substitute for the repeal of the Hudood Ordinances," emphasises Supreme Court advocate Iqbal Haider, General Secretary of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. "However, this is a positive step, although much needs to be done."

It has been a long fight. But it is not over yet.

This article is based on a longer paper originally written for the Harvard South Asian Journal.

Roadblock on the Middle Path

Prime Minister-in-exile Samdhong Rinpoche

LOBSANG WANGYAL

Will Dharamsala's insistence on following the current form of the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach continue to hinder a return to Lhasa? Will China ever relent?

BY **TENZING SONAM**

The Chinese attacks on the Dalai Lama in recent months have been of an intensity and viciousness not seen for years. Among a host of accusations, he has been called a "false religious leader" and a "double dealer"; his Middle Way approach to finding a solution to the Tibet situation has meanwhile been roundly rejected, described as a "swindle". The new Communist Party secretary of Tibet, Zhang Qingli, who has been at the forefront of the new hardline approach, has described the battle against the Dalai Lama as a "fight to the death".

This latest round of vituperation from China is all the more surprising as it comes at a time when contact between the Dharamsala-based Tibetan government-in-exile and Beijing is, on the face of it, better than it has been for some time. Although the Chinese have never officially acknowledged the Dharamsala government's existence, five rounds of talks have been undertaken between the two sides since 2002, the latest taking place in February of this year. Moreover, in an effort to create the best possible environment for the discussions, the Tibetan side has been at its most conciliatory. For the first time, the Kashag – the executive body of the government-in-exile – has officially issued appeals to Tibetan exiles and their supporters to refrain from public demonstrations highlighting the cause of Tibet.

Why, then, when the Tibetans are officially doing everything possible to create what the Kashag's Prime Minister, Samdhong Rinpoche, calls a "conducive atmosphere", are the Chinese stepping up their campaign to vilify the Dalai Lama, and denouncing his overtures to find accommodation? More importantly, what does this imply for the future of a negotiated Tibetan settlement based on the Middle Way approach, which seeks autonomy for a Tibet that would remain within the People's Republic?

Let us go back to June 2005, soon after the fourth round of talks between representatives of the Dalai Lama and senior Chinese officials had concluded. Reporting on the status of these discussions to the Fourth World Parliamentarians' Convention on Tibet in Edinburgh, the Dalai Lama's envoy, Kelsang Gyaltsen, stated: "What is presently most disturbing and of great concern to us is that there have been no positive changes inside Tibet since the opening of direct contact with the Chinese leadership. On the contrary, repression inside Tibet has increased recently ... nor have there been any clear signs that the Chinese leadership is genuinely interested in beginning an honest dialogue."

Despite this pessimistic overview, the exile government continued its confidence-building measures. In the lead-up to the fifth round of talks this February, the Kashag made its strongest appeal yet to US-based Tibetans and Tibet support groups not to disrupt President Hu Jintao's visit to America by staging demonstrations. In keeping with the previous meetings, the substance of the talks was not revealed by either side. Special Envoy Lodi Gyari's press statement started with a positive spin: "Today there is a better and deeper understanding of each other's position and the fundamental differences that continue to exist in the positions held by the two parties."

But the statement went on to hint at a more serious impasse: "This round of discussion also made it clear that there is a major difference even in the approach in addressing the issue." Although Gyari did not elaborate, this most likely refers to China's rejection of the Middle Way approach. This dynamic was made amply evident in a recent article in Beijing's official mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, which explains why

the Chinese government sees the current negotiations as representing "the Dalai Lama's ulterior motive: eventually seeking Tibetan independence."

The article is the clearest indication yet from Beijing about its position with regard to the Middle Way approach, and comes hard on the heels of its renewed attack on the Dalai Lama. Despite this, Prime Minister-in-exile Samdhong Rinpoche stressed in a recent statement: "In order to resolve the issue of Tibet, which is the main objective of the Tibetan community in exile, we intend to make more efforts towards continuing the current Sino-Tibetan dialogue process, based on the mutually beneficial Middle Way approach." In a recent Australian documentary, Rinpoche also stated that, "Unless the Chinese prove they are not trustworthy, until then we will have to trust them." Pressed by the reporter as to whether the Chinese government had not already proven itself untrustworthy, he replied, "They have proved in the past ... [But] for the last few years we have been in dialogue, and they have not proved as yet." This implies that despite all evidence to the contrary, Dharamsala still believes that the Middle Way approach is not only a viable basis for dialogue with China, but is actually "mutually beneficial". But is this really the case?

Impossible pre-conditions

As outlined on the official website of the Tibetan government-in-exile, the main component of the Middle Way approach is that "Tibet would not seek separation from, and remain within, the People's Republic of China". By itself, this should be an attractive proposition to China. But this concession is predicated on three preconditions, which must first be agreed upon by Beijing:

1. Without seeking independence for Tibet, the Central Tibetan Administration strives for the creation of a political entity comprising the three traditional provinces of Tibet
2. Such an entity should enjoy a status of genuine national regional autonomy
3. This autonomy should be governed by the popularly-elected legislature and executive through a democratic process

The recent *People's Daily* article has made it clear that Beijing is deeply resistant to the idea of the creation of a greater Tibet, and sees it as a call for what it has previously termed "disguised independence". Before the Chinese invasion, the Lhasa government did not exercise control over the areas beyond what is roughly the central Tibetan province of U-Tsang, the region today demarcated as the Tibet Autonomous Region. While all Tibetans shared common cultural and religious traits, and Lhasa was unquestionably the spiritual heart of the country, most of the province of Kham and all of Amdo were de facto independent territories with shifting political loyalties – sometimes paying tribute to Lhasa, sometimes to the Chinese, and more often than not to neither. China immediately took advantage of these ground realities. The 17-Point Agreement, which it forced upon the Tibetan government in 1951, applied only to central Tibet, the area controlled by the Lhasa government. Amdo and most of Kham were appended to the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Szechwan and Yunnan.

It was only after coming into exile in 1959 that the concept of a greater Tibet – comprising U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo – evolved to reflect the aspirations of refugees from all three provinces who had fought together against the Chinese, and represented a renewed awareness of Tibet as a nation state. In recent years, anti-Chinese activities and expressions of Tibetan nationalism have taken place in both Kham and Amdo, pointing to the fact that the ideal of a united Tibet – forged in exile – has taken root inside Tibet. This is a worrying trend for Beijing; any move towards the unification of Tibet's traditional provinces would, in its estimation, further encourage such nationalist tendencies, posing an even greater threat to its rule. It is the contention of this writer that this fear alone will keep China from ever acceding to this key pre-condition to the Middle Way approach.

In a statement made earlier this year to commemorate the Lhasa uprising of 10 March 1959, the Kashag made the case that the demand to unite the three provinces of Tibet into one autonomous region conforms to the provisions of China's Regional National Autonomy Law (RNAL), which was set up to safeguard the culture and identity of minorities. Lobsang Sangay, a Tibetan legal expert, wrote recently that within the provisions of RNAL, the concept of 'unity' assumes greater importance than that of autonomy, "thereby creating paradoxical and contradictory approaches to autonomy for minorities".

The definition of 'unity' here includes both unity of the motherland and unity under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. But even if this ambiguity did not exist, we know that China has a very poor record of abiding by the strictures of its own Constitution. Time and again Beijing has shown that it does not tolerate anything that remotely threatens its power base, and has no hesitation in trampling even the most basic rights of its citizens. In the case of Tibet, what China sees as a threat to its 'unity' will always outweigh any concern about regional autonomy – indeed, this is the crux of the argument made in the *People's Daily* article. Therefore, presenting this demand as a legally viable option within Chinese law gives China more credibility than its record would suggest.

The other pre-condition set out

in the Middle Way approach is that even if China were to agree to an enlarged Tibet Autonomous Region within the meaning of the RNAL, this region must be "governed by the popularly-elected legislature and executive through a democratic process". Given that China is a totalitarian state, there is no way it can accept such a demand without first undergoing a major transformation. It has been argued that this demand has precedent in the 'One Country, Two Systems' approach operating in Hong Kong. But there is a significant difference in the situation between these two regions. The Basic Law under which Hong Kong retains its special characteristics was negotiated by the British as an integral component of their agreement to hand over the colony to China. Additionally, it was advantageous for China to maintain Hong Kong's uniquely capitalist set-up as part of its own burgeoning economic strategy. No such precedent or compulsion exists with regard to Tibet.

Next year in Lhasa?

While the Middle Way approach makes a huge sacrifice in terms of giving up the claim for Tibet's independence, it does so by placing pre-conditions that, as far as China is concerned, are no different from actually seeking independence, and are far from "mutually beneficial". This impression is not helped by the fact that Dharamsala continues to inadvertently send out mixed signals. For example, on the Dalai Lama's 71st birthday on 6 July this year, the Kashag strongly reaffirmed the "determination to engage in dialogue for resolving the issue of Tibet through the present Sino-Tibetan contacts". But it then concluded its statement by exhorting, "May the truth of the issue of Tibet prevail soon!" Most Tibetans would understand this "truth" to mean only one thing: Tibet's independence. The Chinese must surely recognise that this underlying sentiment exists in the hearts of all Tibetans, regardless of their official stance. Nowhere is this more starkly evident to Beijing than in the influence that the Dalai Lama continues to wield inside Tibet.

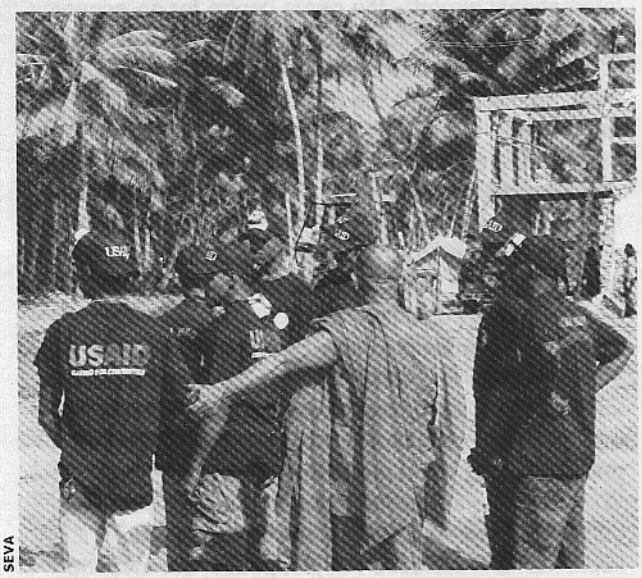
Beijing officials understand that it only takes one appeal from the Dalai Lama – for example, to stop using furs – and suddenly they are confronted with spontaneous public burnings of fur from Lhasa to Karze in Szechwan and Rebkong in Qinghai. They know that the destruction of a statue of Dorje Shugden, a Tibetan Buddhist protector deity, in Ganden monastery near Lhasa earlier this year by a group of monks was in direct response to the Dalai Lama's denouncement of the worship of this spirit. They have seen that even in the furthest reaches of Qinghai, it only takes a rumour of the Dalai Lama's return for thousands to gather in anticipation, as took place earlier this year. There are so many instances that demonstrate the Dalai Lama's pervasive influence throughout Tibet, and the continuing devotion and loyalty he commands there, that in order to truly consolidate their hold on Tibet, Beijing's battle with the Dalai Lama must necessarily be "a fight to the death".

This explains why the Beijing government is opting to escalate its anti-Dalai Lama diatribe, even at a time when it is supposedly engaged in talks with him. To the Chinese government, after all, the talks are not about discussing the Middle Way approach, but rather about how to neutralise the Dalai Lama's influence once and for all, both inside and outside Tibet. Gestures of goodwill on the part of the Kashag will ultimately mean nothing to China, other than to give its international image a public-relations boost. The only "conducive atmosphere", as far as Beijing is concerned, is one wherein the Dalai Lama ceases to exert influence of any sort in Tibet. And this, so long as he is alive, is impossible.

Given such a situation, unless there is a major change within China's political set-up, we can assume that as long as Dharamsala insists on the Middle Way approach in its present form as the basis for negotiations, Beijing's intransigence will continue. And if this remains the state of things until the Dalai Lama passes away – as China surely hopes – what then will be the fate of Tibet's national struggle? Will the Middle Way approach remain a viable option without the Dalai Lama to give it credibility? These are difficult questions, but ones Tibetans in exile must be prepared to ask and discuss while they still have the Dalai Lama to lead them.

In November 1996, when he was the chairman of the Tibetan People's Deputies, Samdhong Rinpoche proposed a programme to launch a Tibetan Satyagraha movement. He ended his proposal with an emotional appeal: "When Gandhiji gave the call to 'Do or Die' there was no other choice. As I propose my people to 'Do or Die' there is no other choice either. The return journey back to the homeland must commence here and now. Only then we can say, 'Next year in Lhasa'." That was ten years ago. Unless Tibetans seriously reconsider the direction of their struggle, the matter of a return to Lhasa will not only remain as elusive as ever, but will become increasingly irrelevant.

In recent years, anti-Chinese activities and expressions of Tibetan nationalism have taken place in both Kham and Amdo, pointing to the fact that the ideal of a united Tibet – forged in exile – has taken root inside Tibet.



SEVA

Sri Lanka's **international straitjacket**

The failure of Sri Lanka's peace process is partially due to the simplistic government-versus-LTTE formulation adopted by international mediators.

BY **SUNIL BASTIAN**

While the history of the current process of Sri Lanka's globalisation goes back to the colonial period, the opening up of the country's economy 40 years ago worked to intensify it. The civil war that has plagued the island nation for more than two decades has done almost nothing to undermine this dynamic. Rather, the conflict has brought the international system into affairs that had hitherto been protected on the basis of the nation's sovereignty. Today Sri Lanka is indeed a fragmented state, part of which is controlled by the LTTE, but all of which is now inextricably linked to the global politico-economic system.

Unfortunately, it is largely the contradictions of the global system that have exerted such influence on Sri Lanka, leading to pessimism in the context of the breakdown of the peace process. The dynamic today is relatively straightforward: on one side, violence and conflict; on the other, a framework for the peace process, dominated by international actors, that is not working. Even when the war was being fought at its highest intensity in the past, this had not been the case. For example, at the time of the People's Alliance regime's 'war for peace' strategy, war was a reality, but the space for peace was still open and available. Today that space is closed, given a procedural structure that seems ineffectual, while the violence continues.

Within Sri Lanka there have been diverse responses to the intervention of international actors in the country's peace process. The Sinhala nationalists and old-style leftists have been uncomfortable with it, and some have actively opposed it. Some liberal internationalists, on the other hand, view the world community as a bunch of do-gooders, eager to deliver peace to the island. They ignore the politics and power-play that are part and parcel of these interventions in a globalised world. The construction of the term 'international community' itself is a ploy to hide the politics inherent in this dynamic. What Sri Lanka needs today is an analysis that can highlight the politics of power in these interventions, so that its citizens can spot the contradictions, as well as the opportunities available to promote the cause of peace.

Growth in conflict

The liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy in 1977 was a turning point in the expansion of the involvement of international actors in the country's affairs. Sri Lanka was the first country in Southasia to liberalise, and the process generated a tremendous response from the aid agencies. At one time, Sri Lanka received one of the highest per capita levels of international aid in the world, both bilateral and multilateral. While the civil war has forced some donors to rethink their policies, Sri Lanka has consistently enjoyed the commitment of key donors, including Japan, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund. From around the mid-1980s, the latter three accounted for about 75 percent of foreign aid to the country.

Meanwhile, the implementation of Sri Lanka's economic-reform process has always been more important to these key donors than concerns over the civil war. Aid from them has regularly been reduced, adjusted or diverted to new projects depending on how

successful the Colombo government has been in carrying out the economic-reform agenda towards the further development of liberal capitalism on the island. The war was for a long time only of concern to these organisations to the extent that it impacted on the economic agenda. But the Sri Lankan economy has been performing reasonably well despite the conflict, with an average of four to five percent annual growth. This has not been the eight percent growth that mainstream economists have been hoping for in order to equal the East Asian miracle, and certainly Sri Lanka would have performed better had there been no civil war. But the fact remains that the conflict has not significantly affected the country's economy, which in turn has allowed donors to view the country as relatively 'stable'.

According to international indicators, Sri Lanka is no longer a 'poor' country, but rather a 'low middle income' one, with an annual per capita income of more than USD 1000. The economy has diversified from its agricultural base, and a significant portion of people now earn an income in sectors linked to the global economy. A large number also make use of global labour markets. Although Sri Lanka has a heavy burden of foreign debt, many believe that the debt-service ratio, meaning the proportion of export earnings spent on servicing foreign debt, is still at a manageable level. In addition, there is no danger of Sri Lanka defaulting on debt-service payments. Of course, this relative success does not mean that the country has solved its development problems. Both the economy and society show the usual social contradictions of a capitalist economy. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note the fact that, seen through the logic of capital, Sri Lanka has performed reasonably well in the midst of the civil war.

A number of factors explain this peculiar picture. First, the core of economic production has been confined to areas surrounding the capital. Close to 50 percent of the gross domestic product is now within the Western Province, close to Colombo. So long as the war is confined to the north and east – which were never particularly important economically, even before the conflict began – the economy can function perfectly well. Many sectors in Sri Lanka, not to mention the incomes of more and more of its people, depend on the health of the global economy. Hence, if the global economy performs better, so too does Sri Lanka's – regardless of the war. Finally, several other factors have helped Sri Lanka to achieve economic gains while simultaneously waging an expensive war: generous donor support, the reduction of the burden on the state coffers by getting rid of loss-making state enterprises, and the relative degree of autonomy that the central bank has maintained.

The entry of the Norwegians as mediators in the peace process coincided with the breakdown of this order. This took place during 2000 and 2001, years of a global economic recession. Then, in 2001, the same year that a severe drought struck the island, the LTTE carried out a devastating attack on the country's only international airport – the nerve centre for an economy that depends on global linkages. These factors combined to produce a negative economic growth in 2001 for the first time since Independence. The International Monetary fund came up with a rescue loan package, and the People's Alliance government of Chandrika Kumaratunga requested the Norwegians to act as mediators in negotiations with the LTTE.

However, it was the United National Front (UNF) government, elected in December 2001, that made use of the Norwegians' entry to sign a Ceasefire Agreement, embark on an extensive programme of economic reforms, consciously expand the internationalisation process, and include the US, EU and Japan as co-chairs of the peace process. The political objectives of the UNF strategy – led by Ranil Wickramasinghe, the nephew of former President Junius Jayawardene, the architect of Sri Lankan liberalisation – included not just peace, but also the pushing of the economic-reform agenda begun by President Jayawardene. This agenda, which developed independently of the peace process, had its sights on an extensive reform programme covering all aspects of the economy. The Wickramasinghe government consciously sought international support for both of these agendas. This strategy lasted for a very short period, however, and its neo-liberal peace was defeated by both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism, working side by side.

Two-sided stranglehold

The current situation is thus one wherein a war is being fought and fuelled by nationalist forces on both sides. At the same time, contradictions of the international set-up inherited from the Wickremasinghe period are not only complicating matters, but do not allow much hope for securing a long-term settlement.

The Norwegians, who are very much wedded to the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) secured during the UNF period, are working with a framework much more suited to an inter-state conflict based on a two-actor model. Hence, the CFA recognises only two sides, the LTTE and the Colombo government. There is an acceptance of the presence of two armies, rules of engagement and no-go areas between these two armies, and rules dictating how either side can withdraw from the agreement.

This set-up entirely ignores the complexities of conflicts that build on the basis of identity politics. It legitimises the demands of the LTTE as the sole representative of the Tamils, and undermines space for democracy within the Tamil population. It also forgets that there have always been struggles for political supremacy among Tamils, even while

The implementation of Sri Lanka's economic-reform process has always been more important to the key donors than concerns over the civil war.

simultaneously fighting the Sri Lankan state. The LTTE has taken care of this issue by eliminating its opponents. Meanwhile, the rights of the Muslim population have not been given due importance, thus pandering to a position among Tamil nationalists that has deliberately ignored Muslim rights by creating a notion of a Tamil-speaking people.

The two-actor structure of the CFA also cannot take into account the complexities of politics among the Sinhalese, which is fought through a problematic multi-party system. The Norwegian approach gives the impression of being based on 'primordialist' interpretations of identity conflict, where a monolithic group of Sinhalese, represented by the Colombo government, is fighting a monolithic group of Tamils, represented by the LTTE. As such, the Norwegians are involved as impartial mediators between these two 'underdeveloped' communities, to find a 'rational' solution that only Europeans can provide.

The formation of the 'co-chairs' group came about due to initiatives of the UNF government, and not the other way around. In order to understand the positions of the co-chairs, it is important first to focus on the individual policies of each of these countries. The fundamental objective of the Japanese, US and EU policies is one of security and stability, in order to continue work on the economic agenda, and promote capitalism in the island. At the very beginning of the peace process there were divergences from this position, mainly among EU countries. Pressure from the global 'war on terror', however, has pushed these countries into uniform alignment. The recent ban on the LTTE by the EU as a 'terror' group is a reflection of this policy convergence, made with the objective of establishing stability.

This position is strengthened by support given by multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, which work on the basis of a similar policy perspective. Of course, promoting negotiations is an important element in this strategy, with the aim of ensuring security. But the fundamental motivation of supporting negotiations is very different from the objectives behind the Norwegian two-actor, impartial-negotiator model. Suddenly what becomes more important is not balancing between warring parties, but rather the stability of an established state in order to promote capitalism.

Despite the presence of this fundamental position, it is not one that the ruling classes of Sri Lanka can take for granted. Continuation of this policy, after all, will depend on the good behaviour of those elites. Developments such as a stepped-up military strategy could worsen the humanitarian crisis, increase human-rights violations, instigate a greater flow of refugees and destabilise the core areas of the economy – evolutions that would clearly go against the policy objectives of the co-chair countries. Similarly, any significant reversal of the economic agenda, or any move to undermine the influence of the co-chairs by courting other international actors, could also bring about a change in the international approach.

As much as the two-actor model reveals contradictions that undermine the chance for long-term peace in Sri Lanka, the policies of the co-chairs have their own inconsistencies. For example, even while calling for negotiations, two of these actors – the EU and the US – have banned the LTTE as a 'terrorist' organisation. Though prescriptive statements are made about human rights, humanitarian crises and the like, there remains a continuous flow of foreign aid from these key donors, so long as the reform agenda is maintained by the Colombo authorities. Promotion of the private sector likewise continues unabated, with the support of many agencies. Finally, although security and stability are the underlying motives of this approach, there is very little commitment to actually support Sri Lanka through military means.

The contradictions of this international conundrum create complicated problems for those who accept that working with international actors is essential in the current context of global capitalism. This is relevant not only for Sri Lanka, but for other countries in Southasia as well – particularly in the situations of internal conflict that have become such an integral part of the region's socio-politics. Unfortunately, our dominant response to these complicated issues is generally one of two. We either remain within a framework of liberal internationalism that naively believes in the goodness of an 'international community'; or our response originates among nationalists of various guises, who believe in an ahistorical notion of sovereignty.

The time has come for us in the global south to break through this conceptual trap, which does not provide us a framework with which to deal with these international interventions. All our societies are now already a part of globalised capitalism. Our belief in the sovereignty of the nation-state will not isolate us from it. Neither can we afford to go along with liberal internationalism naively. Globalisation, while integrating the world, also brings out differences more sharply. How global factors affect South Asia will thus be a result of our own histories and social conditions. Only a much closer look at our specific historical situations will help us to identify spaces within global capitalism that we can make use of for our own purposes. And only in this lies the foundation for a new politics with which to deal with international intervention.

Refugees and agency

The UNHCR refugee agency has been oddly listless in addressing the problems faced by Burmese refugees in Delhi.

BY **RAVI NAIR**

While Burmese refugees living in Thailand and Bangladesh receive intermittent attention, the situation of those in India goes unnoticed both within India and internationally. The northeastern states, in particular Mizoram and Manipur, host the majority of the 50,000 Burmese refugees in India. Another 1800 or so lived in New Delhi during the summer of 2006, and every month dozens more arrive in the capital from other parts of the country. Far from finding the support they are looking for in Delhi, however, Burmese refugees are faced with what one report recently called an "urban nightmare".

Despite being directly under the nose of both the Indian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office, a recent survey has found that national and international systems have largely failed Delhi's Burmese refugees. Their continued inability to integrate in the capital is indicative of the problems faced by refugees throughout India – problems that will continue until the central government brings the country's legislation with regard to refugees in line with international conventions.

Most of the Burmese refugees in New Delhi are ethnic Chin from western Burma, a predominantly Christian group who have fled the country over the past decade citing religious persecution and other human-rights violations. The growth of Indo-Burmese relations over the last decade has contributed to a growing feeling of insecurity among the Burmese refugee community in Delhi, and makes the granting of legal rights to refugees even less likely – the formal placement of Burma on the United Nations Security Council agenda in September notwithstanding.

Although in the immediate aftermath of the 1988 democratic uprising in Burma, India allowed the establishment of refugee camps in Mizoram and Manipur, within seven years most of those were closed down, leaving the refugee community almost entirely without support. Exact figures are unknown, but in recent years, in part due to the increasingly friendly ties between New Delhi and Rangoon, Indian authorities at state and federal levels have undertaken campaigns of arrest and deportation of refugees. While many Burmese in Northeast India have been able to

integrate locally relatively successfully, many others face regular harassment, exploitation and persecution.

Although UNHCR has been in India for a long time, the Indian government has in recent decades worked to significantly diminish the agency's role. Largely due to foreign-policy considerations, New Delhi's attitude towards the organisation has been ambivalent. While UNHCR was invited into India in 1969 in order to assist Tibetan refugees in the country, the agency was forced to leave in 1975 due to its failure to protect refugees from East Pakistan. At that time, India was seen as a fellow traveler with the Soviet Union, while there was a pronounced Western tilt towards Pakistan led by the United States. Then-UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, who had dual Pakistani citizenship, was also not overly keen to help India deal with a massive influx of 10 million refugees. Ever since, India has been suspicious of UNHCR's selective appreciation of its mandate.

In 1979, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, large numbers of Afghan refugees began to arrive in India – which continued to be on friendly terms with the Soviet Union. So as not to support the refugees directly and thereby risk souring its relations with Moscow, the Indian government decided to hand over responsibility for the Afghans to the UN, and in 1981 the UNHCR office was re-established in New Delhi. Since that time, the agency has been responsible for the recognition and protection of urban refugees within the capital, but nowhere else in India.

New Delhi has continuously denied UNHCR a presence in any other part of the country, with the exception of a small office in Madras that nominally oversees Sri Lankan refugee repatriation. The agency has been refused access to refugees in camps, where they would normally provide or support international assistance. This includes the denial of access to the camps established in Manipur and Mizoram in 1988 for Burmese refugees. In 1994, UNHCR was also refused access to refugees being involuntarily repatriated to Bangladesh from the northeastern state of Tripura.

At the same time, however, UNHCR-Delhi has never adequately appealed to the Indian government, the United Nations or the international community for much-needed support – a critical breach of its mission to provide protection and seek long-term solutions for these refugees. In the absence of any domestic legislation for the recognition and protection of Burmese refugees generally, UNHCR is responsible for determining refugee status only for asylum seekers who find their way to New Delhi. Those near the Burmese borders remain at the mercy of the Indian Border Security Force.

Self-sufficient refugees

Increasing numbers of Burmese refugees have thus decided to make the long trip from the Northeast to New Delhi, often on the (mostly false) assumption that being in the capital will speed up their applications for refugee status. Attempts by UNHCR to make Burmese refugees in Delhi self-reliant – by providing vocational training courses through the YMCA and the Calcutta-based Don Bosco Ashalayam – have largely failed, for a variety of reasons. Most refugees in Delhi are not only unemployed but see little hope of finding work, let alone becoming financially 'self-reliant'. Those who do find jobs are often exploited by their employers, and often arbitrarily fired without receiving owed wages. Few urban refugees are able to hold a job for long. While Hindi or English language skills would improve their chances of finding employment, the fact remains that Burmese refugees in India are legally relegated to the informal sector: as for all foreigners except Nepalis and Bhutanis, it is illegal for them to work in the country without a permit.

Even though a UNHCR programme is available to supplement refugee salaries to ensure that they reach India's minimum wage of INR 3166 per month, the majority of refugees find it hard to sustain themselves. Large families are the worst affected, as are older refugees who do not fit the UN's definition of 'Extremely Vulnerable Individuals'. Finally, refugees who cannot obtain residential permits for reasons outside of their control – including reticent landlords and bribe-demanding officials – are not eligible to take part in the programme.

With UNHCR itself experiencing a significant global funding crunch, the Delhi office's budget was slashed by 20 percent for 2006. The gradual withdrawal of financial support by the refugee agency, along with the failure of the self-reliance strategy, has made the condition of Burmese refugees in Delhi even more precarious than it had been previously. Refugee safety in Delhi has long been compromised by discrimination by neighbours, employers and the judicial system. Over the past year, however, most refugees have been unable to pay their rent regularly or to send their children to school. Many families have accumulated large debts, and are forced to rely on the generosity of churches or friends for their survival.

Those Burmese recognised by UNHCR as refugees used to receive a monthly subsistence allowance. In 2003, however, the agency decided to discontinue this stipend after an initial one-year period, again as part of the attempt to make refugees self-reliant. Since the discontinuation of the living allowance, the number of evictions of Burmese refugees from their homes has increased significantly.

Burmese refugee families receive educational grants from UNHCR to

UNHCR has been accused of failing to effectively lobby third-country governments to accept and prioritise Burmese refugees for resettlement.

Although the exact number is unknown, studies estimate that 50 to 65 percent of Burmese students in Delhi were no longer in school by July 2005.

send their children to government schools. For most, however, this allowance does not cover the actual cost of a child's education – particularly at private schools, where admission standards are often more flexible. Since the discontinuation of the subsistence allowance, many parents have been unable to pay the monthly tuition fees. As a result, an alarmingly high number of children were expelled from school in 2004 and 2005. Although the exact number is unknown, studies estimate that 50 to 65 percent of Burmese students in Delhi were no longer in school by July 2005. UNHCR has subsequently urged Burmese refugee parents to enrol their children in government schools, where the tuition fees are minimal – despite the fact that many children are refused admission in these schools for lack of the required birth certificate.

Refugees also voice dissatisfaction with the medical services provided by the Voluntary Health Association of Delhi (VHAD), a public-health NGO tapped by UNHCR to oversee refugee health. Many refugees describe the experience of hasty examinations and prescriptions of the same medicine, particularly vitamins, for any and every health problem. Furthermore, UNHCR's policy of reimbursing for expenses related to medical care fails to meet the needs of many refugees. The computation of the reimbursement is neither transparent nor consistent, and many report being reimbursed only a fraction of the costs incurred at the stipulated government hospitals.

Finally, Burmese refugees in Delhi relate numerous difficulties in obtaining and renewing residential permits, documents required in order to take part in the Basic Salary Scheme, the UNHCR's minimum-wage top-up programme. To obtain the permit, refugees must show proof of residence, such as an electricity or water bill in their name. Landlords, however, frequently refuse to provide refugees with such documents, particularly because of tax liability. As a result, many refugees cannot benefit even from this basic safety-net scheme designed specifically for them.

Dwindling durable solutions

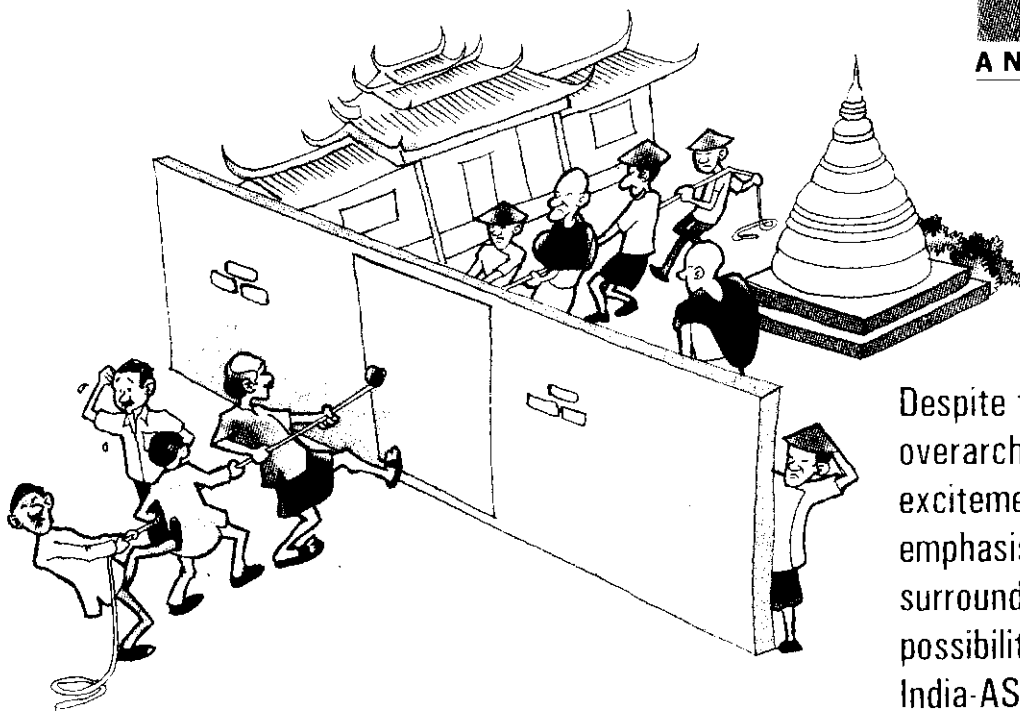
In the face of these and other problems of survival and integration, many Burmese refugees, both in Delhi and in India at large, see resettlement in third countries as the only realistic solution to their situation. Even here, however, refugees express frustration with UNHCR's lack of clarity and cooperation with regard to options and procedures. Furthermore, the agency has been accused of failing to effectively lobby third-country governments to accept and prioritise Burmese refugees for resettlement.

According to the findings of a recent survey, the Burmese refugee community in Delhi seems to have little trust in UNHCR. While there is no doubt that the agency has good intentions – in particular in its efforts to make the community 'self-sufficient' – its strategies are running into critical problems, particularly due to a lack of adequate consultation with the community itself.

The refugee community's decision to disband the New Delhi-based All Burma Refugee Committee (ABRC) in early 2006 was symptomatic of this failure of communication. Set up in 2001 by refugees based in Delhi, this organisation had until February of this year played a role in mediating between UNHCR and the Burmese refugee community. UNHCR had decided to fund ABRC's activities soon after its founding, under the condition that it refrained from any political activity. But part of the reason for its dissolution this year was the perception among various groups that the ABRC was a UNHCR creation, and that it did not effectively relay the concerns of the various groups within the Burmese community. As a result of its disbanding, UNHCR is now left with the difficult task of trying to strengthen communications with the refugee community in the absence of a unified representative group. While there exist numerous organisations, committees, councils and groups within the Burmese community in New Delhi, nearly all of these are political groups focusing on the situation within Burma, and take little or no action with regard to the community's welfare in the capital.

India has been a member of UNHCR's Executive Committee since 1994. In the dozen years since then, however, it has neither ratified the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention, nor enacted any domestic legal mechanism for the protection of refugees. As such, UNHCR's most critical responsibilities within India are twofold. First, the agency needs to actively lobby the New Delhi government at an international level to take immediate steps to conform to international standards on refugee recognition, protection, granting of legal status and assistance provision. New Delhi needs to allow all refugees to work, to provide them with travel documents, and to allow them freedom of movement within India. In addition, UNHCR must be given unrestricted access to refugees outside the capital.

Second, until such time as India gives refugees within its borders full legal recognition, local integration will not be a real possibility. As such, UNHCR must pursue the option of third-country resettlement. The agency needs to actively work towards convincing its member states to increase the number of Burmese refugees they accept for resettlement, and subsequently to assist individual refugees in the resettlement process. Until these two responsibilities are acted upon with real commitment, the condition of India's Burmese refugees will continue to worsen.



Back to their corners

BY **PARANJOY GUHA THAKURTA**

Despite the overarching excitement – and emphasis – that surrounds the possibility of an India-ASEAN free trade area, both sides are running into protectionist obstacles. At this point, meeting a 1 January 2007 deadline looks impossible.

The proposed free trade area agreement between India and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is unlikely to materialise in the near future. Deep divisions have crept up on both sides over the possible benefits from such an agreement. A section of India's policymakers are apprehensive about cheap imports flooding the market and how this would effect vulnerable sections of the population, particularly farmers and workers in labour-intensive industries such as textiles. Some within ASEAN also contend that India is unlikely to fully open its economy to duty-free imports, thereby diluting the potential effectiveness of any FTA.

The main bone of contention is the 'negative list', or those items that would be excluded from the proposed FTA agreement. These would have limited or no tariff concessions. Matters came to a head on 25 July this year, when Rafidah Aziz, Malaysia's Trade and Industries Minister, announced that ASEAN had suspended talks on an FTA agreement with India on account of the latter's reluctance to open up its markets. She pointed out that the negative list of 850-odd items comprised roughly 30 percent of the exports of ASEAN members to India.

Rao Inderjit Singh, India's Deputy Minister for Defence, who happened to be in Kuala Lumpur at the time, immediately undertook damage control. He told journalists that the fact that India had reduced the number of items to be placed on the negative list – from 1414 to around 850 – actually indicated its commitment to making the agreement work. He hinted that the list could be further reduced, and added that the talks were still very much alive. Singh also claimed that Aziz's views were not representative of the entire ASEAN, which at present comprises ten countries – Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Singapore's Foreign Minister, George Yeo, during a meeting with Indian negotiator Rajiv Sikri, even offered to draft a statement to the effect that Rafidah Aziz "was not speaking on behalf of ASEAN".

In August, India offered further concessions by again cutting the number of products on its negative list, bringing the total down from 850 to 560. The then-Special Secretary to India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Gopal K Pillai, stated that New Delhi was willing to offer tariff concessions for 94 percent of ASEAN exports to India. Such a plan would, for instance, reduce tariffs on refined palm oil from 90 to 60 percent, crude palm oil from 80 to 50 percent, black tea from 100 to 50 percent and pepper from 70 to 50 percent. However, New Delhi continued its refusal to give agricultural concessions, on the grounds that doing so could adversely affect the livelihoods of Indian subsistence farmers.

The concessions resulted in the resumption of negotiations, although Malaysia's Minister Aziz still felt that India's timetable for reducing tariffs was too slow.

Research assistance by Kaushiki Sanyal.

The Indian proposal to reduce tariffs on palm-oil products over 16 years also came under fire, with ASEAN officials arguing that New Delhi should offer concessions, such as cutting duties on palm oil gradually over a 10-year period after an initial five-year period. India has also offered to implement Tariff Rate Quotas, which apply a certain customs duty to a specified quantity of a particular import, and a different duty rate to imports above that quota. However, the negotiations are likely to hit another roadblock in the future, given the fairly uncompromising stances taken by both sides on other issues.

Reactive regionalism

The disagreement over India's negative list has served as a reality check on New Delhi's Look East policy. The impetus for wooing the Southeast Asian 'tigers' came from the repeated failure of multilateral talks at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) – in Seattle during 1999, Cancun in 2003, Hong Kong in 2005, and Geneva this past June. Those failures have spurred many countries, including India, to look towards regional cooperation and bilateral agreements as viable substitutes for time-consuming negotiations at the WTO. For New Delhi, an added impetus to forge closer economic ties with Southeast Asia came from the stiff competition posed by China. That has not stopped either country, however, from making efforts to engage the other as trading partners. Thus, regionalism has gained ground as a reaction to the failure of the multilateral process to put in place a rule-based international trading system.

India gained a foothold in the Asia-Pacific region after ASEAN and its dialogue partners recognised India's membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum. The first India-ASEAN Economic Ministers meet was held in 2002, and an initial regional cooperation agreement was signed in October 2003. This provided for an FTA arrangement among the countries, which would be implemented in a phased manner – by 2011 India would have such an arrangement with longstanding ASEAN countries, and by 2016 with the rest.

The 2003 agreement also included the Early Harvest Programme (EHP) of immediate deliverables, and unilateral trade preferences by India in favour of ASEAN's least developed countries, Cambodia, Laos and Burma. The EHP provided for tariff eliminations by 31 October 2007 for the older ASEAN countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Brunei – and by 31 October 2010 for the new member states. The agreement adopted by the ASEAN-India Partnership in 2004 reinforced the intentions of both parties to deepen their commercial links. Currently, India has bilateral agreements with Singapore and Thailand.

In 2005, it became evident that the proposed India-ASEAN FTA agreement would encounter major hurdles, because over half the exports to India of at least five ASEAN members – Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam – was limited to a single commodity, which was invariably from the agricultural sector. The Indian Ministry of Agriculture raised strong objections to the inclusion of farm products such as pepper, rubber, palm oil, coffee and tea in the tariff liberalisation programme. The ministry instead suggested that these commodities be included in a 'sensitive' or negative list. ASEAN members, including the single-product-exporting countries, opposed this measure, and wanted the tariffs on all goods to be reduced to zero at one go.

Free trade agreements generally work on the principle that at least 80 percent of a country's trade is covered under the agreement. ASEAN maintains that if these agricultural items are part of a sensitive list, single-product-exporting countries such as Malaysia (which mainly exports palm oil to India) and Thailand (a major exporter of rice) will not meet this criterion of substantial trade coverage. India's Agriculture Ministry contends that the commodities mentioned are on a list of special products in the WTO, and subsequently should not have zero tariffs slapped on them under any FTA.

The issues at stake do not pertain only to trade, of course, but also to the livelihoods of a large number of people. For instance, import of palm oil and pepper under the Indo-Sri Lankan FTA has adversely impacted farmers in South Indian states such as Kerala. In fact, the crucial stumbling block in completing the Doha round of talks at the WTO was on account of the developed countries themselves being unwilling to reduce their farm subsidies. Jairam Ramesh, India's Minister of State for Commerce, has said: "We cannot have an FTA just for the sake of having an FTA, especially if it negatively impacts the interests of our farmers. FTAs that result in macro-benefits can also cause micro-pains."

Hence, while the proposed FTA may result in macro-economic benefits to the country, it could grievously hurt large sections of farmers as well as local industry. The Indian government has officially acknowledged that at least 100,000 desperate farmers committed suicide in different parts of India between 1993 and 2003 – an average of 10,000 a year. Tariff reduction, especially of customs duties on imports of agricultural commodities, is an extremely sensitive issue in India.

Unbalanced trade area

Until India initiated economic reforms in 1991, its peak customs duty rate was as high as 150 percent. Since the United Progressive Alliance government in New Delhi is dependent on the 'outside' support of 61 MPs from the Left parties for a majority in the Lok Sabha – and these parties, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), are opposed to the government's agenda of economic liberalisation – political compulsions are bound to impinge on the Indo-ASEAN talks. Congress leader Sonia Gandhi has already warned both Manmohan Singh and Commerce Minster Kamal Nath about the

consequences of hurting the interests of those cultivating groundnuts, pepper, rubber, tea and coffee. Finance Minister P Chidambaram also pointed out to the Trade and Economic Relations Committee, which advises the prime minister, that if customs duties on palm oil were halved, the government's revenue loss would be around INR 14 billion per year on this item alone.

A look at the developing trade relationship between India and Thailand will help throw light on the broader dealings with ASEAN. Opposition to FTAs has also come from Indian industrialists, in particular leading the Ministry of Commerce to announce that it will re-evaluate certain bilateral commitments made in the India-Thailand FTA. This agreement was signed in 2003 during the previous National Democratic Alliance government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, and envisaged a process by which the two countries would progressively reduce taxes on 82 items over three years, and complete the creation of a tax-free zone for trade of 5000 items by 2010. There is considerable evidence to indicate that exporters in Thailand have benefited disproportionately from the FTA in comparison to Indian exporters. In 2004-05, Thai exports to India grew by nearly 37 percent, whereas India's exports to Thailand grew by a meagre 5.8 percent. A report by Thailand's Department of Foreign Trade on the first three months of the Indo-Thailand FTA agreement found that Thailand's trade surplus ratio with India was 400:1.

Under pressure from the business community, India now wants one-fifth of the 5000 tradable items to be placed on a negative list, on which there would be no tariff cuts. Indian industrialists claim that the current agreement is working against the interests of local industries. Power-cable manufacturers claim that this agreement would ruin their businesses in India, as it is not possible for them to compete with Thai companies unless internal fiscal, labour and infrastructure reforms are first implemented that would allow Indian firms to manufacture products at internationally competitive prices.

According to a recent survey by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the inverted duty structure that certain industries are facing may lead to Indian companies outsourcing products from Thailand, or setting up manufacturing bases in Thailand. The survey also reveals that internal cost disabilities are eroding the competitiveness of such industries vis-à-vis their Thai counterparts.

In addition, some observers feel that New Delhi has compromised on the issue of Rules of Origin (ROO) with ASEAN members. Rules of Origin refer to the fact that goods exported from a certain destination must have a minimum specified value addition in the country of origin. India has reportedly agreed to a 35 percent value addition and changes in tariffs at the level of 'sub-headings', whereas in the case of bilateral arrangements with individual countries like Thailand and Singapore, the rules specify 40 percent value addition and tariff changes at the level of 'headings'. When ROOs are worked out at the level of sub-headings, it implies that value-addition norms have been specified in an extremely detailed manner, down to the level of not just broad product categories (say, garments) but along specific product lines (women's blouses, skirts, trousers and so on). In other words, the value-addition norms that are incorporated in the ROOs are, in India's case, lower or more liberal in the proposed FTA with ASEAN, and more stringent or higher in bilateral agreements with Thailand and Singapore.

Rules of Origin are a major reason why negotiations are stalled between India and Thailand over expansion of items on the FTA list. New Delhi fears that further relaxation of the ROO could lead to imports from third countries via Thailand that would, in turn, antagonise Indian industry. The doubts expressed over the ROO are not without basis. According to a report by the Associated Chambers for Commerce and Industry in India, China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and even Taiwan were using Thailand as a preferred destination to route to India a wide variety of products such as textiles, engineering items, processed foods and electronic products.

Experts believe that the Indian farm and industry sectors desperately need infrastructural reforms in order to reap benefits from the FTAs. T S Viswanath, a senior adviser to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), has pointed out that Indian manufacturing has proven that it can be globally competitive, and is therefore not asking for protectionist measures. "All that we are saying is that lowering tariffs under FTAs should be accompanied with labour, fiscal and infrastructure reforms," he says. Indian companies are handicapped not only by acute infrastructural constraints, such as shortage of power and high tax rates, but also lack the flexibility enjoyed by some of their counterparts in Southeast Asia and China, particularly in terms of labour laws that make it easier for them to take on and dismiss workers.

In the medium term, there needs to be a fine balance between genuinely required protection and economic liberalisation. This, in turn, requires a high level of preparedness on the part of India's bureaucracy, and also calls on the country's political leadership to build an internal consensus on contentious issues. In the final analysis, when there is competition among unequal participants, there has to exist considerable political sagacity and a willingness to compromise on all sides to work out trading arrangements that can create a win-win situation for all.

One would need to be an incorrigible optimist to believe that the India-ASEAN FTA agreement would be implemented by the 1 January 2007 deadline. Negotiations are now at least one year behind schedule, and many issues currently appear intractable. Meanwhile, this failure will surely throw a wrench into India's plan to double its share of world trade to two percent by 2009.

Feet across the frontier

How a young Ladakhi shepherd in Baltistan learns and unlearns the importance of the inter-state frontiers.

BY **M HUSSANAN**

JEAN-LUC RAY

It was about three in the morning when Ali heard the rooster crowing. He was already awake. He had not slept well the previous night, contemplating the journey he would make today. As he looked around, he found the others still asleep. Hussain, Ali's best friend, was sick, and had been coughing irregularly for the past few days. Ali had lived with Hussain and his family for 12 years now. They had taken him in as one of the family after he had accidentally crossed the border and found himself stranded.

That was in 1971. At the time, India and Pakistan were engaged in a war over Bangladesh, which killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced many more. The war severely affected the people of Baltistan and Ladakh, and crippled local livelihoods. Thousands of people, separated from their loved ones as a result of the war, were now waiting for the border to re-open. Ali was among the refugees of Ladakh who had wandered across the boundary into the Kharmang Valley of Baltistan.

It all began on a sunny day when Ali was 16 years old. He was grazing his yaks and dzomos in the pastures near the Baltistani border. His favourite yak, named Dong-kar, White Face, sharpened his horns on the ground nearby. From where he sat under a willow tree, Ali could see the lush green pastures across the border. At the time, traders and shepherds found it easy to slip across the border. This summer, Balti traders had brought news of Pakistani soldiers fighting against Bengal's struggle for independence. In the Kargil bazaar of Ladakh, shopkeepers worried over the escalating tension between Pakistan and India. Farmers and shepherds like Ali had not paid much attention to the news, however, as their region remained peaceful.

Now these thoughts ran through Ali's mind as he crossed into Baltistan. He cautiously looked down the valley for Pakistani soldiers. Pakistan had stationed a large number of troops in Baltistan after occupying the region in 1948, and they remained. Ali reached a brook as the path wound through the lower gorges on the left side of Suru Chu River. It was a long and arduous journey. Through a cluster of trees, he saw houses on the other side of the brook. Smoke was coming out of the chimneys. On the rooftops, women had laid out apricots to dry for the winter. "This may be a place to spend the night," Ali thought with some relief. His feet moved faster as he hummed loudly. The yaks also lumbered faster, anticipating the fresh grass on the upper side of the pasture.

Ali stretched his legs in the soft grass while talking to his dzomos and yaks. "Rinmochhe Balang, your fate has brought you to Baltistani pastures today. Now eat as much as you can, so we can return to our home before it is dark and unsafe." As he lounged, he could see a Pakistani army camp in the distance. All the camps were in the valley west of the pastures, and the local villagers had shifted even further west when the Pakistan Army had seized their land. The farmland had gone fallow as soldiers turned the valley into a garrison. After the departure of locals from the valley, only wild ibex, deer and the cattle from Indian

villages grazed these pastures. Ali thought of Tsewang, a shepherd from his village who once could not control his sheep. A few had wandered into the army camp. Fearful of the soldiers, Tsewang did not fetch the stray sheep, instead leaving for his village with the remaining flock. Since then, Ali and the other shepherds had been cautious in controlling their cattle in these pastures.

Lost in thought, Ali pulled out some *khulak*, a snack made of roasted barley flour and salted yak-butter tea, and took small bites. He had a couple of *phating*, dried apricots, left in his pocket. As he nibbled, his thoughts came to rest on Gyalmo, his fiancée, who had given him the apricots that morning. Gyalmo would wait in front of her house with food for Ali as he went to the pasture every morning. Food was an excuse for them to see each other at least once a day. At different times, Gyalmo would give him dried fruit, some local bread called *khurba*, fresh walnuts and mulberries, dried yak meat and the local yogurt drink, *darba*. Today, she had not been in a good mood. She had stayed for just a few minutes, had not talked much, and had given him a few *phating* and nothing more. They argued about the dangers of the border crossing. Neither knew that they would wait decades to meet again.

As darkness spread, Ali herded his cattle towards the lower reaches of the pasture. The dzomos and yaks were docile after eating all day. But as he neared the brook, Ali saw soldiers moving about below. There was haphazard movement, suggesting panic and chaos. Ali drove his cattle behind a cliff, and waited there. He was still half an hour's distance from the border, and soldiers now stood in his way. He waited until it got dark, and then carefully moved his cattle towards the houses on the other side of the brook.

As he drew near, he could hear the army vehicles in the distance. When he reached the first house, he stumbled in without knocking. In the dark, he whispered fearfully, "Is there anyone here?" The room was empty but warm. He took the cattle to the barn and locked them inside. He did not understand why the barn door was ajar at that time of the night. Then he returned to the room and sat waiting for the owner. The howling wind and desolation scared him. He remembered how his mother had always forbid him to cross into Baltistan. Gyalmo too disliked his willingness to take risks for greener pastures. The warm room made him dizzy – a day of shepherding and emotional distress was catching up with him. He stretched his legs by the stove and quickly fell asleep.

"O Shazdechan-Ashi God, in the name of Rtsangma Rinchen Muhammad and his Rinmochhe family! Make my return possible. Unite me with my family and tribe. Help us overcome the barrier between Ladakh and Baltistan."

Ata Mutik

At dawn, Ali awoke to the noise of shelling and mortar fire. In the morning light, he now noticed that the room had been hastily abandoned. Utensils were scattered about, floor mats missing, and barley seeds were spilt near the door. It did not take him long to realise that the owners had fled with their valuables and cattle before his arrival. To his dismay, the barn door was broken, and his cattle had disappeared in the night. Amidst the shelling, Ali wandered around looking for his cattle. He was not very far from the brook when a soldier surprised him from behind. "Why are you still here?" the soldier demanded. "Don't you know that war has started in Baltistan? If you insist on staying here any longer, you will get killed."

The soldier had mistaken Ali for a local villager on his side of the frontier. He pushed him in the direction further west of the valley. Along the way, he hid behind boulders at the sounds of shelling. He saw smouldering homes across the Suru Chu. After a few hours of walking, he reached a village filled with refugees. He saw men carrying heavy loads on their backs, while women carried infants and dragged toddlers behind them. The wailing of children added a sense of panic and fear to the air. Men struggled to move cattle along with the people. Ali joined the caravan and moved west as the villagers followed the river. Some refugees stopped at Marol, a village at a safe distance from the border, while others kept walking.

Ali saw an old man stooping to find a place to rest. He was panting and seemed unable to support his weight. Ali grabbed him and took him to an empty house nearby. They found a mat, some pieces of chopped wood and some utensils in the room. It looked like the villagers here had also left in haste. When the old man recovered his breath, they introduced themselves. His name was Ata Mutik. He was with his sons, Hussain and little Shesrab. Hussain had gone back to look for Shesrab, who was lost in the crowd. They feared Shesrab had hidden himself along the way after losing sight of his family.

As Ata Mutik's condition improved, Ali went in search of water and food. Both of them were very hungry. He found some dried fruits and crumbs of bread in neighbouring houses, and used a tea-stained pot to fetch some water. Ata Mutik thanked him, and they both consumed the food ravenously. While they ate, Ali revealed his accidental arrival in Baltistan. He worried for his mother and Gyalmo, and feared that his village would be destroyed amidst attacks by Pakistani forces. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he thought about his family in danger. Ata Mutik patted his shoulder, "Ali, you are like a son. Please stay with us. We will take care of you. After the fighting ends, you can return to your village. Don't worry. No one will know you are from the other side." After eating, Ata Mutik and Ali walked to the road to wait for Hussain, who returned with Shesrab late in the evening. They assessed the situation and, after some discussion, decided to stay in one of the empty houses until it was safe to return to their village. Ali helped the family take their belongings into the house.

Despite his fortune in finding Ata Mutik and his family, destiny was not kind to Ali. As the war ended, the governments of India and Pakistan decided to permanently close the frontier, and stop all crossborder movement. Given these circumstances, Ali decided to stay on with Ata Mutik's family. When the ceasefire was declared, they moved back to Ata Mutik's ancestral village near the border. Ali felt at peace living with his adopted family, and being closer to his own village. Every evening, he visited the barber's shop for gossip, and to listen to the radio for news of Kargil. Reports came of several Baltistani villages in Gangche District being taken under Indian control. As a result, thousands of people became refugees and moved to Skardo, the capital of Baltistan.

After four months, Ali received a letter from home. His family was alive. They had moved 40 miles east of their ancestral village, after Pakistani attacks had destroyed the houses. "Your mother cries and prays for your safe return," uncle Zhangmo Anchan wrote. "If you fail to return soon, Gyalmo will marry someone else." Ali hastily replied, assuring them of his safe and speedy return. After dropping the letter off at the postman's house, he prayed that it would reach its destination swiftly.

Days passed quickly, as Ali anxiously waited for the border to re-open. Once at dawn and once before going to bed, he would stare at the mountain pass, the same pass over which he and his dzomos had descended into Baltistan. His life had stood still since he had come over that pass, like a stationary picture. His home and family seemed like a dream slipping further away every day.

With hope in his heart, he wrote letters to his mother and to Gyalmo every week. He also visited several holy Phyak-khangs, Khankahs and Imambaras, praying for a safe return. He prayed, "O Shazdechan-Ashi God, in the name of Rtsangma Rinchen Muhammad and his Rinmochhe family! Make my return possible. Unite me with my family and tribe. Help us overcome the barrier between Ladakh and Baltistan." One day he visited Shiekh Ibrahim of Ata Mutik's village, who wrote *smonlam*, the Quranic prayers, for Ali on a piece of birch bark. Ali washed the ink from the bark into a cup and drank the blessed water, hoping that God heard his prayers. To his right arm he tied the *dod-strung*, an amulet that the Shiekh had made with Quranic prayers. But as the months turned into years, Ali busied himself with work, helping to support Ata Mutik and his family. He was valuable to the family because of his shepherding and farming skills. On many occasions, Ata Mutik advised him to marry and settle down. But all his thoughts revolved around the girl who lived on the other side of the pass.

As the years passed, the relationship between India and Pakistan began to thaw, and both countries began what was known as confidence- and peace-building measures. There were rumours that the troops would return to the barracks, and life to normalcy. The border would open, allowing divided families to reunite. The rumours set a tempest brewing in Ali's mind. He visited government offices to confirm the stories. The village barber advised him to go to Tolti or Skardo, and register his name among the refugees to be sent back to their homes. Ali did not want to lose this chance after so many years, and followed every piece of advice. Ata Mutik was also a distant relative of the *tehsildar*, the district magistrate of Tolti. He approached Tehsildar Sahib and introduced Ali to him. Ali begged and offered presents to the man, and his emotional plea made everyone in the room tearful with sympathy. Tehsildar Sahib promised Ali that he would be one of the first to cross the border. He then kindly suggested that Ali take his presents back with him, and give them to his mother upon

returning to Ladakh.

A few weeks later, while Ali was grazing the yaks in the pasture, young Shesrab came running and yelling, "Ali Kaka! Ali Kaka!" Ali ran to him with anticipation. "Ali Kaka, father has just received news that you can go home," Shesrab panted. "He said you will leave within the week." Ali left Shesrab with the yaks and ran home. He collapsed onto Ata Mutik in a joyous embrace. From that moment, Ali became restless. His racing thoughts made sleep impossible. He lay wakeful, planning his future with his family. He did not know what to expect of Gyalmo after so many years. He also worried about saying farewell to Hussain and his family. Fear and confusion haunted him, while thoughts of seeing his mother thrilled him. He lost his appetite and interest in work. Suddenly, he felt he was living in strange surroundings. He was like a passenger at a railway station, desperately waiting for a delayed train. He knew that losing the chance to return to Ladakh would take away all meaning in his world.

The free cavalcade

On his last day, Ata Mutik saw Ali sitting on the bank of the river, staring at the mountain pass and throwing pebbles in the water. He was struggling with his conflicting emotions. Ata Mutik sat down and said, "Son, do you know, Ladakh and Baltistan were part of the same province before Partition in 1948?" While Ali stared at the ground dejectedly, Ata Mutik continued, "Our province was called Ladakh Wazarat. I was very young when Partition occurred. I used to travel to Leh, Kargil and Changthang with my father to sell fruit and other goods. At that time, the valley of Kharmang was part of Kargil District, like your village is now. When Tehsildar Sahib of Kargil would visit our village, the excitement and preparations caused a great commotion. At that time, Skardo was the winter capital of the province, while Leh was the summer capital. The provincial government spent six months in winter in Baltistan and six months in summer in Leh."

Ata Mutik's eyes searched the horizon. "Because of the capital transfer, the movement of the cavalcade ebbed and flowed," he continued, "creating a carnival atmosphere in Kharmang Valley. Accompanied by thousands of bureaucrats, workers and ordinary people, the Wazirs, Kalons, Lonpos and Trangpas passed through our villages on horseback. The village elders welcomed officials with gifts, cattle and prettied-up houses. As the cavalcade moved forward, it was a traveling festival from village to village. At night, fire dancers with flowers in their hats performed with smoking juniper twigs. Professional storytellers recited and performed sagas of Ling Gesar, Gyalbucho Lobzang and Yulstrung Karim with reverence, while the singers sang traditional Gyang-Lu and Barg-Lu songs. Villagers arranged polo matches, archery competitions and traditional feasts. Every household contributed food from their rations. The women spent the entire day making dishes of every kind, causing the children to run with excitement at the smell of meat and yak-butter tea. The entire village was involved, each person assigned a task to help pull the ceremony together." Ata Mutik continued wistfully, "We travelled freely between Skardo, Leh, Srinagar and Shimla. Peace prevailed everywhere."

Ali looked at Ata Mutik with new excitement. He had never heard him talk like this before. Ali had had no previous interest in history, but found himself listening to the old man with rapt attention. He remembered how his own father, Ata Sengge, used to tell similar stories to him as a child. His father spoke of his journeys to Skardo, and compared the vastness of the Zanskar and Shigar valleys. Impatient to play with the other boys in the courtyard, Ali would fidget and look for the first opportunity to escape. Now he wanted to know about the time without borders - when people traveled freely, and when communities co-existed so well.

Ali realised that people born after 1948 in both Ladakh and Baltistan accepted the border as set in stone. Like himself, they had compromised with the times. Today, for the first time, Ali escaped into a pre-1948 past. The existence of a border and travel restrictions suddenly pierced his soul. The more he learned about the past, the more suffocated he felt. This was the same frontier that had separated him from his parents and fiancée all these years. If he could, he would erase that line instantly, that artificial boundary that kept members of the same community physically so divided.

As he heard these stories, an idea planted itself in Ali's heart. He looked to Ata Mutik with hope and excitement and asked, "Don't you think that a border drawn so recently can be

Today he found a new understanding and purpose for his life – a mission to connect people across the mountains.

erased again?" Ata Mutik, who saw the light coming back to Ali's eyes, smiled thoughtfully and said, "Son, borders are manmade. They can be erased or changed. Ladakh and Baltistan share the same culture, language and customs. Several traditional trade routes connect us to each other. Our fate and economic prosperity is joined to that of Ladakh. Closing these trade routes has degraded us severely. If we understand this, then we should work together to erase this imaginary frontier." Ali nodded in agreement. Today he found a new understanding and purpose for his life - a mission to connect people across the mountains.

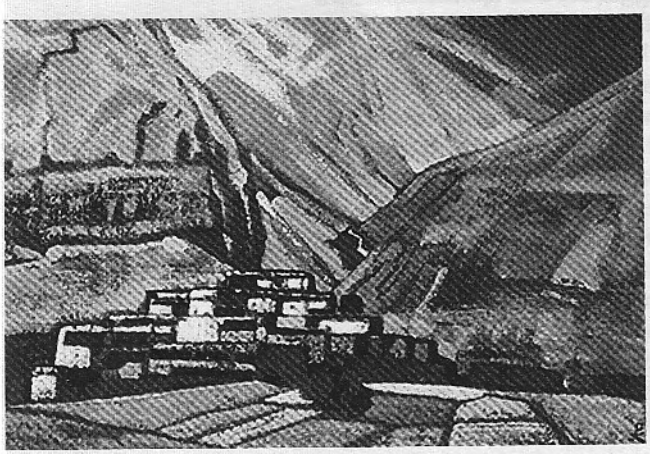
Controlling the line

It was well past dusk when they finally returned home. The young man was filled with energy. Ata Mutik had shown him a path with which to bridge his life of the last 12 years to his impending return home. It was as if a paralysis had been lifted, and replaced by the voice of ancestors saying that it was possible to rebuild a strong community. He dreamed of spreading the message of prosperity through a unified Ladakh and Baltistan. Now, he was hopeful about seeing Ata Mutik again. He envisioned a day when Ata Mutik and his family would visit him in his home. He imagined introducing the old man to his wife Gyalmo and their children. That night, Ali tossed and turned for hours. He was in deep contemplation when the rooster crowed the coming dawn. At last, the morning had arrived when he was to return home. The sadness of saying goodbye to a life of 12 years was made sweet by his eagerness to revolutionise people's thinking about the border.

Ali got out of bed and boiled some water for tea. He had packed his luggage earlier, including silver and turquoise jewellery for Gyalmo made by Awulu, the village silversmith. Sheikh Ibrahim had given him a string of Quranic *dod-strung* for his mother. The previous evening, Ata Mutik had presented Ali with a woolen *kaar*, the local shawl, which he had weaved himself on the house loom. Hussain added *khulak* and dried apricots for the journey. The knowledge that he was leaving those who had nurtured him left Ali heavy of heart. Everyone was gloomy. Hussain, whose early morning coughing calmed after drinking his first cup of tea, sat quietly in the corner and avoided looking into Ali's eyes. With strained cheer and a promise to see them soon, Ali hugged Ata Mutik and Shesrab. Ata Mutik found it difficult to say goodbye to Ali, who had been like a son to him. They wept quietly together for a while. After 12 years of holding back his tears, Ali finally let them all go. Hussain walked Ali to the road to see him off. Ali promised to bring Ata Mutik and Shesrab to Kargil after the next harvest.

After bidding Hussain farewell, Ali walked through the village he had called home for so long. He memorised how each house was set against the other, each field terraced against the next. As he navigated the streams of snowmelt for the last time, he thought of all the children who played along them on summer days. As he looked up at the mountains, he thought of all the days spent in the high pastures. As he passed the barbershop, the barber and his three boys came running up to say goodbye. Along the way, Awulu the silversmith intoned *smonlam*, for safe travel.

At the border checkpost, Ali joined the first group of people from Baltistan and Ladakh who gathered to return across the border. It was 11:00 am when the paperwork was finished, and the security officials ordered the refugees to cross. Everyone walked across the border on foot as a group. Ali felt his heartbeat rise as he neared the frontier. On the other side, his relatives recognised him and shouted his name in joy and celebration. But Ali's thoughts were concentrated on the Line of Control he was crossing. He wanted to record this moment in his mind forever. He dragged his feet across the ground, as if footsteps could erase the border. Once on the other side, he fell to his knees to thank god, Rgyalbachan Ldanchuk-khan. His relatives clustered around him, and cried in elation.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Through his journey, Ali had negated the very existence of the artificial boundary dividing his two homes. He saw himself as the first drop of rain, which leads to a drenching downpour and enriches the earth. Today, Ali laid the foundation of the unification of Ladakh and Baltistan with his feet.

Gatekeepers at the roundtable

The Panos-*Himal Southasian* media gatekeepers' roundtable, 11-12 November 2006.

Since May 2002, five gatekeepers' roundtables have been held on the India-Pakistan engagement, organised by Panos South Asia and *Himal Southasian*. These started with the understanding that rapprochement between New Delhi and Islamabad is all-important for a safe, secure and prosperous Southasia, and have subsequently addressed a series of critical bilateral topics between the two antagonists. The reports on the discussions, all of which have been printed in past issues of this magazine, are a barometer of the changing times and moods. We notice in them that, even amidst continuing domestic and international challenges, there is a permanent place for reasoned debate and mature deliberation in the India-Pakistan dialogue.

The fifth and latest roundtable was held on 11-12 November 2006 in Cairo. Under the theme "Are India and Pakistan really in control of the situation?", the meeting discussed the following issues:

- Internal factors in India influencing relations with Pakistan, including issues related to political equations, vote banks, radical groups, popular will, militancy and so on.
- Internal factors in Pakistan influencing relations with India, including the role of the military, radical groups, political factors, popular will, militancy and so on.
- External influences on bilateral relations vis-à-vis Pakistan, including the 'US factor', the West's positioning and the Islamic world, energy needs, the role of China and so on.
- External influences on bilateral relations vis-à-vis India, including the 'US factor', energy needs, the role of China and so on.

The discussants at Cairo were as follows. **From India:** Shahid Siddiqui, MP and General Secretary of the Samajwadi Party; Salman Haidar, former Foreign Secretary of India; A S Panneerselvan, Executive Director, Panos South Asia; Bharat Bhushan, Editor, *The Telegraph*; Madhuker Upadhyay, Editor, *Lokmat Samachar*; N Ram, Executive Editor, *The Hindu*; Ranjan Roy, Editor, Times News Network. **From Pakistan:** Tasneem Noorani, former Interior and Commerce Secretary for Pakistan; Aitzaz Ahsan, former Interior Minister, lawyer, author, from the Pakistan People's Party; Hameed Haroun, CEO, the Dawn Group of Publications; Talat Hussain, News Editor, Aaj TV; Mujibur Rehman Shami, Editor, *Daily Pakistan*; Shaheen Salahuddin, Editor, Indus TV; Aslam Kazi, Publisher, *Daily Kawish* and Chairman, KTN channel.

As in the previous four meetings, the Cairo roundtable was moderated by Kanak Mani Dixit, editor of *Himal Southasian*.

Within the given theme – whether or not the governments of India and Pakistan were in any position to guide the evolution of the bilateral relationship amidst competing and ever-changing internal and external pressures – the participants of the Cairo roundtable engaged in two days of intense and free-ranging discussion. What we present here is a summary of key presentations made extempore by participants, which provided grist for vigorous debate.

Gatekeepers' Roundtables

Conflict and the India-Pakistan media
Nagarkot, Nepal, May 2002

The nuclear weaponisation of Southasia
Bellagio, Italy, July 2003

The India-Pakistan 'Composite Dialogue'
Bentota, Sri Lanka, September 2004

The question of Kashmir
Istanbul, Turkey, December 2005

Are India and Pakistan really in control of the situation?
Cairo, Egypt, November 2006

The national-security state

Aitzaz Ahsan, former Interior Minister, the Pakistan People's Party

The pain of the Partition has left a legacy. There also persists in some quarters a fairly widespread fragility syndrome – as if Pakistan would revert one day to India, and that it is a fragile state. It was something that was attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru. This held the minds of Pakistani intellectuals, because there was a crisis or a certain inability to properly identify and realise one's own identity. The only way we could identify ourselves was that we were Muslims. But the presence of a large number of Muslims in India, the creation of Bangladesh, among other things, weakened this proposition. The fragility syndrome helped suppress these uncomfortable questions – you don't ask questions, you cannot seek answers because Pakistan is fragile, India is hostile.

Indian hostility was manifested quite early. The first issue was that water was held back after the monsoons in 1947. Secondly, the division of assets became a sore issue. Now in the context of this fragility syndrome, and the initial hostility, a third feature emerged very early in Pakistan's life. Pakistan adhered to a protectionist regime for its industrialisation. Imports were regulated very strictly. So we historically sealed out borders in a way regarding the exchange of goods and business with India.

The Pakistan Army took over in 1958. Gradually, but very perceptively and very surely, the very nature of the state changed, from what was initially to be a social-welfare state to a national-security state. In a welfare state, the first priority of the state is the citizen; in a national-security state, the first priority of the state is the soldier, and the intelligence agencies and the state establishment. To justify a military government, you also need to have palpable threats to national security. So you also tend to convert your neighbours to being your enemies.

Now, India's contribution itself to this national-security paradigm in Pakistan has been profound and continuous. If India blasts the Pokhran sands with a 'smiling Buddha' in 1974, Pakistan has no option but to say 'We'll eat grass, but we'll have the bomb'. If India blasts the Pokhran sands on 11 May 1998, we have no option but to shake the Chagai mountains on 28 May 1998. And India continues to raise its defence budget, which elicits a response from Pakistan.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was democratically elected, but was a continuum of the national-security state. He also sought to appease the mullahs with some gestures but it was during Zia's time that money, weapons, weapon trainers came into jihad and empowered fundamentalist units. This period also saw the Islamisation of the textbooks. Hate literature came into it. Our history began in 712 AD, when Mohammed bin Qasim came to Pakistan. It was not the history of the land we were teaching; it was the history of the religion.

When you start creating a national-security state and paradigm, then you are bound to get into adventures like we did in the so-called Afghan jihad, against the Soviet Union, where we were used as tools. In that process of the jihad against the Soviet Union, Pakistan became populist, weaponised and jihadised, intolerant and militarised. All these jihadis were unemployed after the withdrawal of the Soviets and the failure of the operation in Jalalabad in 1989. And the whole swath actually moved into the Kashmir front, so that became live. All these events reinforced what was a marginal faction in Pakistani politics – the faction that believed that Pakistan was an ideological state, just like Israel.

The cold war between India and Pakistan has continued through this period and created vested interests – for instance, the weapons suppliers who sit and lobby in the Defence Ministry, sit and lobby in the prime minister's house. The other problem is that our foreign offices are locked in reciprocity. Neither state has the imagination or the guts or the initiative to say, 'We don't care about reciprocity, we are going to open visas. We're going to open imports.'

At present, Pervez Musharraf is incapable of breaking away from the hold of the national-security structures of the state and the national-security establishment. In fact, at least three close calls on his life in December 2004 have made him even more a prisoner. He owes his continued uniform and the holding of two offices to them, as they voted for him in the 17th Amendment.

Having said that, I think India is wasting an opportunity. The solutions that a Pakistan Army chief can undertake with India are not those that political parties will be able to do even after full democracy is restored. We should look at a gamut of measures in different fields that can improve ties – from the defence-security options to the economic security, and look for avenues and work on that. Pakistan will not cut its defence budget if India is increasing its defence budget. Secondly, nobody is stopping people from issuing visas, people-to-people contact. There has been a certain amount of movement in that. I think the visa regime should be relaxed enormously because it really brings people together.

Pakistan must realise the immense potential out of trade with India – it gets a market seven times its size. India gets a huge market as well. And despite such an opportunity, our commerce minister goes around begging for an increase of 0.01 percent in textile quota in category 622 in Europe and the US. On the import side, why is it the fault of my 160 million consumers, that he should have to buy a cycle for 4000 rupees when can buy it for 2200 rupees coming across on trucks from Wagah?

The impact of fundamentalist groups on policy

Bharat Bhushan, editor, *The Telegraph*

Let us look at some internal factors. Does internal electoral compulsion affect India-Pakistan relations in India? Certainly it does, and it should. Because in an inclusive democracy, you must take the views of all constituents into account, irrespective of what we might call vote-bank politics. However, having said that, there are cynical politicians – and not only in the Congress, right across all kinds of parties – who see their policy towards Pakistan as an extension of their domestic compulsions. So, for example, the elections in Uttar Pradesh, which are due in February next year, before that you will see a certain kind of polarisation. There is a lot of guesswork involved in democratic politics, so there will be parties who think that being softer towards Pakistan, being reconciliatory, would help them with votes of certain communities or certain sections of society.

The second question is – do fundamentalist groups influence policy towards Pakistan? They certainly try to do that; sometimes they're effective, sometimes they're not. Fundamentalist Hindu groups like the RSS, Bajrang Dal, they're only anti-Muslim. They have a bias against Pakistan, to put it mildly. But they tend to have far greater influence on BJP-led governments. For other governments, they create communal tension, they create problems, law-and-order problems which can be dealt with. Are there Muslim fundamentalist groups in India which influence policy? We have an absolutely amazing organisation called Jamaat-e-Ulema-Hind, which took on Jinnah earlier with the two-nation theory. Exceptionally nationalist, even today they argue for moderation, particularly after the Bombay serial blasts; its influence on policy has been fairly remarkable. There is another element in the Muslim community that has emerged, but this is more a response to a lack of social and political justice. If I was a young Muslim kid living in Gujarat and I found that there was no justice for Muslims of Gujarat, I would turn towards extremism.

My next point is terrorist acts influencing policy. Some of these kids can get used by the powers that be to create terrorism in India. Are terrorist acts in India an internal problem in India? People suspect they are part of an external policy that Pakistan follows towards India. I've had very liberal Pakistani friends tell me that if we give up – not now, five years ago – if we give up using violence against India, you would never talk about Kashmir. I suspect they're right. But after every big terrorist act, whether it is the market blasts in Delhi, or Bombay, or Malegaon, it becomes that much more difficult for the leadership to pursue a line of reconciliation with Pakistan.

Popular will influences relationships. Popular will expresses itself in various ways – elections are one of them, and people by and large want peace with Pakistan, despite these aberrations and terrorist acts. The people-to-people contacts, which have gone up in the last five or six years, have had an amazing influence – the kind of warmth that has developed between the two peoples is amazing.

The media is a major problem, because in India it has become a force multiplier of the Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry, by and large. The best of our correspondents have become nothing more than stenographers, somebody who could go to the Foreign Office briefing and people would say, 'Sir could you go a bit slower, I missed that line.' We have internalised the national-security paradigm completely. There are very few newspapers which are outside of that paradigm. We do unsourced stories from Kashmir, we accept what the military intelligence says about Mr X being a Pakistani agent or his name being this or that – there is no way of cross-checking.

The Hindu-Muslim question

Shahid Siddiqui, MP and General Secretary, Samajwadi Party

I wish to place emphasis on some issues that have not been highlighted in the past, and realities which we have been pushing under the carpet for the last 60 years. India and Pakistan were born out of deep distrust. The two-nation theory stemmed from the strong belief that Hindus and Muslims of India could not live together as one people. Unfortunately, Partition did not solve the problem of communal and religious divide in the Subcontinent. Muslims and Hindus did not emerge as two separate nations – there were as many Muslims left behind in India as there were in the new nation of Pakistan.

This Hindu-Muslim question is the core issue between India and Pakistan. The second-largest population in India is the Muslim population, a fact which has influenced India's relationship with Pakistan, its own political and social character.

Despite pressure from various quarters, Indian leaders at that time realised that India could not and should not become a Hindu state. This pressure of creating a secular India, where minorities, especially Muslims, have equal rights, was at the back of the mind of Indian political leadership when conflict in Kashmir arose. The Congress party, Jawaharlal Nehru and all the leaders were seen to be soft on Muslims. The legitimate question raised by many in India was that if Kashmir belonged to Pakistan because it has a very large Muslim population, and there should be a referendum in Kashmir on this issue on religious grounds, then what was such a large Muslim population doing in India, and why should they have all these political and social and legal rights? People across party lines were articulating these ideas.

Indians therefore had to reject the two-nation theory in its entirety, if we wanted to build a secular state and give equal rights to our large Muslim population. This has created a situation where even secular and liberal political parties could not take a soft attitude towards Pakistan. On the one hand they had to defend Indian minorities, especially Indian Muslims. And in doing so, they were in competition with rightist Hindu parties, and pressure from within their own parties; therefore, they had to create a strong, rigid, sometimes even unreasonable stance towards Pakistan. This happened because nobody wanted to be seen as being soft both on Pakistan and on Muslims.

This situation continued till, say, the BJP came to power. A Hindu party was raising the issue of Muslims within Indian polity. The vote of Indian Muslims was extremely important, and has been wooed by a number of secular parties, while the Right Hindu parties realise that they cannot get this Muslim vote, and therefore they have been both anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan. They wanted to cater to voters on issues of Islam being a threat, Muslims being a threat, Muslims being responsible for the creation of Pakistan, and that with such a large Muslim population in India, a further threat remained which would again lead to division of India.

In the post-9/11 period, this anti-Pakistan sentiment got converted more to anti-Muslim sentiments, and Muslims are seen to be terrorists. Therefore, there is a competition between all of the political parties as to who is more anti-terrorist, who is more anti-jihadi. And in a way, who is more anti-Pakistani jihadi. This takes place even among the secular parties.

In such a context, the liberal and the secular parties played on the insecurity of the Indian Muslims. And the Right political parties, and also sometimes the Congress, played on the insecurities of the Hindus. The Muslim vote has never been influenced by what happens in Pakistan. And anybody who tries to do that doesn't know the ground realities. But what happens is that when Manmohan Singh talks about reservations for Muslims, within a short time he makes a strong statement on Pakistan. When they want to get the Muslim vote bank, they say something very nice for Indian Muslims – that they are backward, something should be done, come out with 15 or 20 or 25 points in their favour. Immediately these secular leaders say something about Pakistan, which can in a way appease the other constituency.

Pakistan was created in the name of Indian Muslims. It was created because they thought they were insecure here, they will have their security there; but it did not resolve the issue of Indian Muslims. The resolution of this tension, this conflict, this suspicion, can take place if we understand that Pakistan has been created as a nation, it remains as a nation, but it is not a nation in the name of Indian Muslims anymore. It was not and it is not. Until and unless we accept this reality – until the larger sections of the ruling elite in Pakistan accepts that we are two nations in the political sense, and we are territorially separate, but we are not two nations because of religion – we will not ultimately be able to come closer.

But there has been one immensely positive change – the creation of a national consensus on improving ties with Pakistan. Despite all its rhetoric, once the BJP came to power and it faced ground realities, it was

willing to engage with Pakistan. At the political level, the Hindu and Muslim debate is now getting separated from the issue of India-Pakistan relations.

Since even the Right Hindu parties in India have realised that there is a very large constituency for peace, a national consensus has emerged. And therefore, they have had to change their line. And since the pressure from those playing on the insecurities of the majority is not there on other so-called secular, liberal, democratic parties, this allows more space to negotiate with Pakistan.

There are some other factors that have contributed to better ties. Earlier, when a single party had to get a majority, all outfits played lots of games – and the foremost was the Hindu-Muslim card, or India-Pakistan card. With the emergence of coalitions, regional issues have become much more important. Regional parties are not interested in a confrontation with Pakistan. Economic growth has also influenced India-Pakistan relations. When it was not satisfactory, the Indian political leadership raised the threat of Pakistan, in order to divert the public attention. But now, in the post-liberalisation phase, Indian economic growth is taking us in a direction where political parties realise that we cannot have this eight to ten percent growth unless we have peace in the region, unless we have better relations with the neighbours, and unless our neighbours grow with us.

The media has made both sides aware of each other and helped in removing misconceptions. But at times, the competitive nature of the media, especially the electronic media, means that they can blow some issues out of proportion, which creates pressure on political leaders to be more aggressive.

The national-economic-security state

Talat Hussain, news editor, Aaj TV

Let's look at the fundamental factors influencing Pakistan's outlook, primarily towards India and generally towards the rest of the world. The 'national-security state' term can be modified to explain the pre-9/11 foreign policy of Pakistan. Pakistan has always been, ever since its creation, a national-border-security state. Its borders have been the drivers of Pakistan's defence and foreign policy – the desire to protect these borders, secure these borders, reinforce these borders, to defend these borders, and also I would daresay the desire to expand these borders. The ideological factor was there, but frankly, at one level, the speed with which we discarded the Taliban indicates that the ideological factor was not exactly a big factor.

Post-9/11, while the national-border-security state was still concerned with its border, there was an inner debate that was emerging. If you were to look at Pervez Musharraf's first seven points to begin the reform process, economic security was a fundamental point that he was raising then, and has been hammering every since. The national-security operators in Pakistan came to the conclusion after the Kargil war that the cost of war is a bit too much for them to take. Rebuilding the economy has been the central theme of Pakistan's outlook as far as foreign policy is concerned. Post-9/11, the national-border-security state is trying to now become the national-economic-security state. This means you have to have economic stability, you have to have the depth of the economy, enough foreign-exchange reserves, enough integration through trade in order for you to have not just a good international image, but also enough in your pocket to sustain your defence and foreign policy.

This has had a rather sobering effect on Pakistan's external conduct. If you look at the entire thrust of Pakistan's foreign policy after 9/11, there isn't a single speech that Musharraf has made, isn't a single statement that the prime minister has made, there isn't a single core commanders' meeting that has taken place after 2000 in which the economic factor is not debated thoroughly. In fact, even in the National Defence College, which deals with pure and hardcore defence, there is a whole new course that has been evolved on national security driven by the economic factors. The sobering effect is that it has made the military think, and analyse situations available to them. The other is that it has worked as a break on the controlled, resistant elements within Pakistan's security establishment, because their ambition cannot be funded anymore.

Let's also look at the anecdotal history post-9/11. Accepting the US cooperation in the 'war against terrorism', and before that starting with the dislodgement of the Taliban, had a lot to do with hard-nosed economic calculations and what Pakistan would get in return financially. Similarly, the entire peace process with India is now being posited in the overall context of the economic benefits. Yes, there is a border-security issue – with the Afghanistan border in the state that it is, it makes sense for a border-security state to stabilise the border. But it also makes eminent sense, for an economic-security state, to derive some economic benefits out of it.

China and the Middle East is another case in point. Pakistan's cooperation with China is increasingly

acquiring an economic dimension that needs to be figured out. The operation in Balochistan was undertaken not just to bump off an 80-year-old man, but to clear the path of the seeming obstacle in the way of bringing in investors who could utilise the remarkable natural resources of the area.

There is something happening in Pakistan that our friends in India need to look at. If we continue to use the old prisms of two different trajectories being developed by two different types of states, then we will fall easy prey to a cliché that hasn't taken us forward. India and Pakistan are potentially the most vibrant economies. There are immense opportunities, ranging from joint investment ventures to joint building of dams. Whether India and Pakistan will be able to make use of this change of the national-border-security state into a national-economic-security state or not hinges purely on the level of confidence.

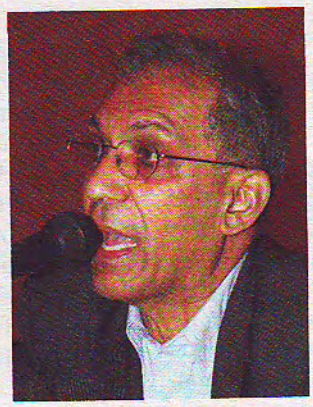
There are two flip-sides to it, and that is where we need to probably be more forthright in assessing each other's weaknesses and strengths. Only a higher level of mutual confidence and resolution of conflicts will allow both of the countries to maximally exploit this potentiality. So economic cooperation will depend on where our defence and foreign policies are going.

The more dangerous flip-side is that with economic stability comes arrogance. Both on the Pakistani and Indian side, there is the possibility of new wealth and new confidence in economic stability being channelled into challenging each other. Once you have money in your kitty, you can either spend it wisely, or you believe that now you have a license to slap each other on the face. I am a little fearful of this flip-side because of the international arms-purchase report which has just come out. This reports that while Asia is the biggest purchaser as a continent, India is the biggest arms purchaser in all of Asia, to the tune of USD 12 billion.

The opportunity of the current context

Salman Haidar, former Foreign Secretary of India

The international situation at this time is extremely conducive for India and Pakistan to resolve their differences. Nobody is playing heed anymore to complaints that India and Pakistan might make about the other. Traditional Southasian diplomacy in that sense is now obsolete. 'Dehyphenation' means that we can no longer hope to prevail by running down the other side. For instance, every advantage India gets in strengthening its ties with America should not be viewed as being against Pakistan. Instead of being pushed, we are being encouraged at most by the supreme superpower, the hyperpower. The US has been wise enough to do so in a discreet manner. There is no public presentation, no public expression of concern that these two countries should make stronger efforts to resolve their differences.



The US position about Southasia has gradually been changing. In the early 1990s, visits from the Pentagon started taking place. Then a political dimension to this relationship was established, with the highly successful visit of Bill Clinton. A little later we came across this notion of a strategic partnership between India and America. There is a general sense that these two countries have harmonious, broader interests. India is seen as a factor for stability by America. And its influence outside its borders is not seen in negative terms. This is in fact a reversal of a traditional perception. The conclusion that was reached and then pursued by the US was that India was an acceptable and useful potential partner at that stage.

Some dangers in this relationship are also fairly obvious. India is accused, within India, of accepting a second role, even a subordinate role vis-à-vis the superpower. There have been times when this seemed to go further than the public could accept. There was a very real move, for example, for a couple of Indian divisions to go to Iraq as part of the coalition forces. This was scotched by Parliament – there are enough correctives within the system.

There is a danger of complacency. Figure everything is going well; we are chums of America. We've got our external coordinates worked out, and now can go along smoothly and steadily on this established course. Events are now going in our favour, and all we have to do is hold steady. Such an attitude would support the view that Pakistan cannot do anything much to disturb this. But I believe that Manmohan Singh knows that a supportive neighbourhood, good neighbourhood relations, are necessary if India is going to make the strides forward.

Energy needs are important. Here India has been very active, gone global – in Central Asia, Latin America, Sudan. Even though oil and politics go together, these are essentially commercial issues, not geopolitical issues. The Iran gas pipeline has been mentioned in this context, also a pipeline from

Central Asia. It can be a major building block of good relations between India and Pakistan. I think that one should not think of the American position as unalterably opposed.

I do not see China anymore as a factor that promotes strife between India and Pakistan. China has been moving to a position of equidistance on Kashmir. However, if Indians are 'midnight's children', we're also children of 1962, and the memories and the lessons, the unabsorbed shocks of 1962 are still with us. There's an inclination in India to see Chinese assistance for the development of Gwadar port as a power-play on our doorstep, and as an attempt to establish a presence where it did not exist. Mutual disarmament between India and Pakistan has been discussed – it is a good idea, but it's not a simple idea, because from India's point of view, there is this other factor of China. We also have other naval responsibilities, and need to upgrade our equipment.

The war on terror does have difficult consequences. There is a perception and the sense that India is subjected to Pakistan-grown, Pakistan-trained terrorists. The 'war on terror' came long after our own concerns with terrorist activities in Kashmir and elsewhere. But it has reinforced those factors and increased the difficulty of India and Pakistan being able to come to a common cause. This knee-jerk reaction, blaming Pakistan every time something goes wrong, has to do with this history and present global environment. The fact that a lot has happened, especially in Kashmir, will provoke a certain type of reaction. Terrorism in India has been supported by Pakistan, which has trained terrorist in its own training camps.

There is no international bar to India and Pakistan sorting out their problems. Each will have to take into account many factors, but it is in their hands. The way forward is to be discerned. I think a process does exist. Autonomy is a big issue. We have already commenced the kind of activity that can permit a kind of statutory arrangement at the almost municipal, state-level arrangement between Azad Kashmir and Jammu & Kashmir. The other great area of concern is that of demilitarisation. Here again there is no dispute on the acceptability of it. But the notion of what demilitarisation is, where it leads, what it involves, is very different on the two sides of the Line of Control.

The external context

Tasneem Noorani, former Interior and Commerce Secretary, Pakistan

India was earlier aligned with the USSR, while Pakistan had the backing of the USA – the superior world power – and China, the strongest regional player. Now, India as a bigger regional player, a bigger economic force, a bigger consumer market and a bigger supplier of quality manpower, is wooed by the US, European Union and Russia. The relationship between China and India is also improving, with trade likely to go up to about USD 20 billion in the near future. China also now takes a softer stance on India, vis-à-vis Pakistan, than it used to.

India is currently the darling of the West. They're unwilling to push India to do anything against its will. India now perceives itself as a potential world power, and therefore wants a place on the high table – that's the Security Council. The goal of enhanced international support and pressure on India to find a solution to Kashmir has also reduced. The Indian statement on Balochistan recently indicates that it sees itself as a regional player.

Currently, the main concern of the US and EU is to avoid a conflict between India and Pakistan, not necessarily to look for a solution. The role of Bill Clinton in the Kargil issue was a case in point. The US agrees with India's stance that Kashmir is a bilateral issue, and needs not be internationalised. So, all matters pertaining to the Kashmir issue and other central issues are really more covertly handled than overtly handled. For its part, the Islamic world has only given moral support to Pakistan. There is no pressure on India from the Islamic world on this issue.

The one critical impediment for India could be energy. Many of these energy sources are available in Central Asia; but with strained ties with Pakistan, it will be difficult for New Delhi to access these areas. If you take a mature view, Balochistan is a site for many of these resources. There are problems in that region at present. But in the future, collaborative projects will benefit India as well, if it looks to improving ties with Pakistan.

What has changed for Pakistan? Post-9/11, Pakistan has become an important necessity of the US and its fights against terror. The US needs Pakistan's continued support in its fight in Afghanistan. The US, UK and EU understand the importance of solving the Kashmir issue in order to remove the main cause of the radicalisation of the Islamists in Pakistan, because this affects their war in Afghanistan and generally the 'war against terror'.

Are the governments of the two countries really in control? My perception is that in Pakistan, because it is in effect non-democratic, one man's decision makes a lot of difference. The government in Pakistan is in control in that sense, that if they were to enter into an agreement, they would certainly be able to deliver. But

one is not sure if the same can be said about the Indian side.

My last point is really on the future scenario. India is confident, it continues to grow, there is no major international pressure, it is engaging with Pakistan on its own terms, the wait-it-out policy is continuing. On the other hand, Pakistan continues to spend disproportionately high sums on defence with resultant pressures on the economy; the army in Pakistan enjoys the centre stage due to this; the chances of a sustainable growth of democratic institutions are dismal. The extremist jihadi elements are still gaining strength. They have a cause, and the public empathises with them.

At present, external factors, barring perhaps a need for energy resources and trade and investment expansion, are not prodding India to seek a solution to the problems. The powers that be in the world are really excessively favoured on one side, on an institutional basis. In the case of Pakistan, it's an incidental basis, based on individuals, based on incidents. That is a very significant difference between the partnerships that exist.

Is a scenario where one is a success and the other a failure likely to continue? Probably not. Silencing Pakistan is also an unlikely option because of the nuclearisation phenomenon. It's not something that can be wished away or bashed into the ground. So what is the possible scenario 15, 20 years from now? If there is this smug attitude in India that everything is going fine, Pakistan is not getting any assistance from anywhere else, there is a standoff because of nuclearisation, then something will give way. It is important that India takes a more mature and confident view of the situation and review the strategy.

Reality testing

N Ram, editor-in-chief, *The Hindu*

There is a need to do what many call 'reality testing' of the India-Pakistan relationship, with reference to both the internal and external factors. Reality testing in psychology is the technique of objective evaluation of an emotion or thoughts against real life – as a faculty present in normal individuals, but defective in others. There has been some attempt in India to do this. There are visions of India's future, on this whole issue of India's place in the sun. It is arranged from the extremely bullish and upbeat, rooted in extremely optimistic projections of Indian economic growth, and in uninhibited realpolitik. At the other end, they are rooted in preoccupation with basic livelihood and human-development issues, and of moral concerns over recent and current foreign-policy developments. I would just like to cite as evidence the remarkable result of the 2004 general election, our 14th, where the slogan of 'India Shining' bombed. As for the mass of deprivations, I think the government figures tend to underestimate them.

The play of external factors has its limits. Basically, it is my conviction as a journalist that the two countries need to settle it themselves. There'll be some pressure as during Kargil that works to the advantage of one or the other, depending on who is on the right side on that. But this kind of impatience for results coming from external pressure is not realistic.

There is a significant crossborder input, which must be recognised by all sides. The big point is that it should not be converted into a polemical exchange. I think all reasonable people in India would say, 'Don't link it to talks'. The process of dialogue must go forward. Even if there are some inputs from that side, do you cease dialogue, terminate the process of détente, threaten Pakistan with crossborder strikes? Of course, you can turn around and say public opinion will not accept it. This is often a euphemism for being timid. And this is our criticism against the Manmohan Singh government, as well as the Vajpayee government.

The second strand of criticism is about the abandonment of what was seen to be a dilution of a commitment to what were seen to be core values. I personally believe that there has been this loss – the passion to sit at the high table, and all this has taken Indian foreign policy off the track. It needs serious correction. Nuclear weaponisation has destabilised the situation. But on the Pakistan side, you cannot escape from one conclusion: that you cannot depend on anyone else to force the pace, to deliver anything, other than the well-known methods that have worked when you have tried them or when India has tried them. It is not fully correct to say that nothing has happened on Kashmir with the dialogue. Reality testing would demand that you recognise, at least as a discussable proposition, that this is the Indian political consensus.

And we know that the reality in Pakistan is that this cannot be sold to the political forces in Pakistan. Therefore it looks like an intractable problem or an intractable gap, which has to be lived with, tolerated, you have to be patient with it, and you have to work on it to narrow that gap. There must be agreement on one principle: non-use of force to alter the status quo along the Line of Control. This is the sacred principle in India-China relations, and this is the only principle that would work in India-Pakistan relations, whether anyone likes it or not. There is no way, there is no god from the machine, no external factor that can force the pace.

Changing ideology

Hameed Haroon, CEO, Dawn Group of Publications

What is important and critical is ideology, because we have changing ideologies in both India and Pakistan. We encounter the mechanics of changing ideology every day. Everybody says in Pakistan that Pakistan cannot change its policy on Kashmir significantly because of public opinion. Everybody in India says that India cannot significantly change its policy on Kashmir because of public opinion. Yet people will hold in history the governments of India and Pakistan, as past masters, on the arc of changing ideology in the short term.

Let's take India. India's leadership has steered its whole establishment, academia and public opinion, the schizophrenic heart of the India International Centre in Delhi also, away from its position as neutralist leader of the Third World to a pro-US stance, and to a subordinate relationship with Washington. Yes, of course, Indian academia is not dead, and Indian intelligentsia is not dead. But think of the enormity of the move, and how little has been said in response to it. Take Pakistan and its brigadiers. One day, they are pro-Taliban, and the next day they are told our policy has changed. So now you are going to be anti-Taliban and pro-Northern Alliance. This is the beginning of the change in Afghanistan, when the new government had turned over. Think of what the Pakistan government has gone through in order to ensure this change in implementation, the reining in of Kashmir militants. Maybe not successfully, but in a big way. How come India and Pakistan have both accomplished sea-changes in ideological perception? Overnight!

But when we say it's time for a change of mind on Kashmir, both sides throw up their hands and say, 'Hold on, this can't be done.' These are two candidates who change their ideologies and their policy positions quicker than a fickle man changes his garments to be noticed. How is it that Kashmir policies become so insubordinate to change, and we can't resolve Kashmir, but we can change everything else in our ideology, thinking, strategy, intelligence agencies, even in our morality – how is it we are able to accomplish this? I think this is the key question that needs to be addressed.

Five years of bilateral critique

A short assessment of Panos South Asia-*Himal Southasian*'s half a decade experience of India-Pakistan dialogue, which finds a heartening trend towards openness and self-questioning.

BY **A S PANNEERSELVAN**

In 2002, when Panos South Asia and *Himal Southasian* launched the first roundtable of senior journalists from India and Pakistan at Nagarkot in Nepal, we did not expect that our initiative would become an annual event, let alone have any sort of impact on the polity of the two states. It was a modest attempt to bring together influential sections of the media and help them to listen to each other.

The time of the Nagarkot meeting was when Islamabad and New Delhi were on the brink of war. There was massive mobilisation of forces along the border following the attack on the Indian Parliament, an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation; there were provocative statements from both sides, while self-righteousness and narrow patriotism governed the narrative of both countries' political and media discourses. Amidst such an atmosphere of heightened hate and mutual distrust, the participants at the very first meeting set the tone for all the sessions to follow Nagarkot, in Bentota, Bellagio, Istanbul and Cairo. They proved that the voice of sanity, reason and forbearance would be able to penetrate even ultra-nationalist chatter of the highest volume.

As the organisers started these series of meetings five years ago, media pundits and political scholars were sceptical of the result. In their view, the reasons for Partition had not disappeared, and in fact had become more complex over five decades. In their considered opinion, Kashmir remained an intractable issue because neither side could discuss it outside their stated state-side positions: that total possession of Jammu & Kashmir was vital for the two countries to complete their nation-building exercises according to their chosen paths; that Muslim-majority J & K had to be an integrated part of India to prove the latter's secular credentials; that Pakistan could not give up Kashmir because that would challenge the former's very rationale for existence under the two-nation theory.

Back then, the arguments in favour of war and confrontation were cast in a modern-scientific mould, while the articulations in favour of peace between India and Pakistan were ridiculed as naïve, emotional yearnings of

peaceniks woefully out of touch with reality. Against this background, in 2002 it looked like Panos South Asia and *Himal Southasian* were anachronistic sisters championing lost causes.

The security state

The new global political narrative after the attacks of 11 September 2001 was a significant impediment. In Southasia as elsewhere in the developing world, there was an attempt to force the focus away from the welfare state to the security state. Suddenly every requirement for a population's social and economic wellbeing was being viewed from a security paradigm, and the think tanks and geostrategic analysts quickly shifted gears to speak up for this new, exclusionist (some would say war-mongering) position.

The very use of language indicated this shift: what used to be termed 'food self-sufficiency' and 'energy needs' in discussions from the 1960s right up to the 1980s now began to be addressed as 'food security' and 'energy security'. The attempt to provide 'basic needs' was couched in the language of 'livelihood security'. Planning and implementation of welfare models were replaced by the notion of 'strategies' and 'execution'. The warmth of compassion was being substituted with the cold language of one society establishing 'strategic advantage' over another. All of this was given a market twist, and the pundits suggested that it was the demand of the market which required a hardening of stances.

But right from the first of our confabulations that brought together senior journalists and also politicians, analysts and former bureaucrats and diplomats, the organisers of the roundtable realised that the situation was not as hopeless as the sceptics in New Delhi and Islamabad wanted us to believe. Nor was it necessary to trudge down the path of confrontation they proposed. Through the dynamic of bringing together editors, media proprietors, columnists and politicians from the two countries to discuss the pitfalls and opportunities that lay before media in their coverage of bilateral issues, we found that space could be created for new possibilities.

At Nagarkot, participants discussed a variety of issues that determine the way India and Pakistan figure in each other's media. Also under discussion was the role that the media plays or can play in either reducing or inflaming the one conflict that has dominated all of Southasia for some time, Kashmir. Through these and various other exploratory discussions, a perhaps unprecedented exercise was carried out: one of Indian and Pakistani media on Indian and Pakistani media. The result was an illustration of the processes of journalism, and a revelation of the tensions that inform and emerge from the practise of this difficult trade in this difficult region.

Internal critiques

The myth that the market itself demanded a chauvinistic approach was exploded during the 2002 meet by Kalpana Sharma of *The Hindu*. She said: "*The Hindu* would not have been the second largest circulating newspaper if the market did not want to read the kind of things that it publishes. *The Hindu* is published from a very conservative part of the country, in the south, and the kind of news it has carried and its editorial criticism of the BJP has invited furious letters to the editor. But the paper's circulation did not decline for that reason. The market is therefore just an excuse behind which other kinds of priorities are being met."

One of India's dynamic ministers, former diplomat Mani Shankar Aiyar, was candid in explaining the problems of the state machinery and its understanding of the media. "I find this whole exercise of trying to either defend our own minds from the other side or inflicting our point of view on the other side so naïve. It assumes that you could very easily change what the other person's perception was or get your own perceptions so easily changed. The attempt to use intelligence information or the media for propaganda purposes is doomed to failure, especially in our countries."

Pakistani editor Rehana Hakeem brought out the pressures on media during intense conflict: "People do tend to take sides, and the media is not an exception. Besides, access to information is limited. Journalists are not allowed to investigate independently, and so they have to rely on the government. But usually – and of late, once the event is over – there is a fair bit of introspection, as happened in the case of the Kargil war."

By bringing such voices together and initiating an internal critique of both countries' media and governments, our roundtables have managed to energise and also be a part of a very important shift in perceptions among 'gatekeeper' practitioners in India and Pakistan. Instead of projecting the practitioners from the other country as part of the enemy camp, editors began looking at them as peers, besieged by the same set of problems. Over the years, we experienced increasing openness in the roundtables, and a willingness to set aside exclusive nationalist positions, and to question one's own state establishment.

Editors and media-house owners, once the floodgates were opened, were not hesitant to touch any tricky or sensitive issue. At Bellagio in Italy (2003), they discussed the wretched nuclear issue. At Bentota in Sri Lanka (2004), they took the discussion beyond the confidence-building measures, and scrutinised the Composite Dialogue between the two countries. The most inflammatory issue, Kashmir, was discussed amidst the presence of Kashmiri leadership at Istanbul in 2005. And at Cairo in November 2006, as reported in this issue of *Himal*, the media gatekeepers and policymakers of the two nuclear neighbours shared – with extraordinary candidness – their perspective on internal and external factors that affect the relations between the two countries. We believe that our modest but sustained initiative over the last five years has played a small role in keeping the process of détente on track, despite the many provocations we know so well.

India as subtle power, not superpower

A pot begins to warm
A face starts to redden
A brutal brightness
Begins to rise from tobacco fields
And circulate in the blood veins of the man
– Kedarnath Singh in *Surya*

Here in Japan, the land of the rising sun, the building boom continues unabated. In coastal areas, bridges are being retrofitted to withstand the force of tsunamis. The neighbourhood of Kobe is being encircled with all-steel expressways, in anticipation of massive tremors in a not so distant future.

The serenity of snow-capped Fuji-san has the menace of beauty buried in its womb. Although presently inactive, it is nonetheless a dormant volcano that could erupt without warning, instantly drowning the most productive region of Japan. The Japanese know these risks better than anyone. But in the manner of the super-breed envisioned by Friedrich Nietzsche, they continue erecting their own Pompeii apace. Beyond a point, there is not much that can be done to anticipate and control the quirks of nature.

If India can show that it has the determination to be a leader, it can gain some powerful friends in Japanese academia.


OHARA KOSON

Fear of human failings is an altogether different matter. So despite their apparent prosperity, Japanese strategists fear South Korean commercial competition, the North Korean nuclear threat, European economic resurgence and the unpredictability of the American military. Most of all, they fear the rise of the Chinese dragon in all spheres, and look towards the Southasian elephant as a possible counterforce. The sushi-loving and rice-eating Japanese have suddenly developed a liking for ready-to-eat curry and naan, which are now available even at small-town convenience stores.

Economic think-tankers in Tokyo are delighted that the Indians have begun to build their own expressways, to support an independent automobile industry, and to follow the capitalist road that the Europeans, Americans, Japanese, Koreans and Chinese passed through during the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s – the 1960s were decades lost to the American adventures in Korea and Vietnam – 1970s and 1980s respectively. But for policy analysts at academic institutions, the Indian promise is tinged with the fear of implosion caused by conflicting priorities. New Delhi needs to decide whether it wants to continue being a camp-follower – of the Soviets until the 1980s, and the Americans thereafter – or grow up and become an independent global player in its own right. That will decide its acceptability in the community of nations.

Despite the rise of radical conservatism in Japanese politics after the phenomenon of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi – who transformed Japan's economy and politics almost the way that Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan did in their own countries – most decision-makers here know that their country has little room to manoeuvre in the international arena. Ten years ago, it would have been sacrilegious to say so, but now even professors at the hallowed Tokyo University frankly admit that the best that Japan can aspire to be is an influential planet around some global star.

With all the limitations of its geography (a volcanic archipelago prone to earthquakes), history (a militarist polity defeated in the War), society (monocultural and hierarchical) and economy (import-based and export-led), Japan lacks the resilience to be an independent player. To make up for its own deficiencies in countering the Asian challenge from China, Tokyo wants India to emerge from its chosen orbit, and become an autonomous entity instead. Some Japanese thinkers even oppose the candidacy of their own country for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. "Of what use is offering another UK to wag its tail and make the US an owner of three votes in that crucial international body?" asks an eminent economics professor who wishes to remain unnamed. If India can show that it has the determination to be a leader, it may gain some powerful friends in Japanese academia.

The Asian century

The Asian Way proposed by Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammad was a non-starter, largely because the anglicised Chinese of the Indian Ocean island and the Americanised Muslims of the Malayan peninsula were possessed with the inherent insecurity of the colonised mind. Their alternative was an apology for the incomplete Western clones they had built in countries under their possession. In essence, Lee and Mahathir appeared to be saying that

while Western free-market systems were wholly replicable in Asia, free politics had better wait for the day Asians grew up to be sensible citizens, under their tutelage. It made them rich but it will never let them be powerful: power flows from the free will of the people, not from the barrels of guns, oil or merchant ships.

The Chinese, meanwhile, are trying to fashion a hybrid model of Soviet centralism and American mercantilism. Serious contradictions in this experiment have yet to emerge, but an economy driven by Special Economic Zones cannot pull a stagnant and authoritarian society to equity and prosperity. The Chinese economy is so big and so centralised that its collapse would have a cascading effect that would shake markets around the world. This is a fear that most multinationals want to ignore, but it is one that is nonetheless very present. No matter how big the country grows, China will never be 'important' in the way that, say, Norway or Switzerland or France is, it realises that global influence can neither be coerced nor bought. It has to be earned by being original and persuasive in the marketplace of ideas. Except for the trite irrelevance of the colour of the cat that catches mice, no original idea of global importance has emerged from China, once a cradle of creativity. No matter how hard they try, leaders in Beijing cannot build an Asian Century by themselves.

The Chinese have another albatross around their neck. Rightly or wrongly, Beijing is often perceived to be a backer of rogue regimes, just as the Soviets were blamed to be sponsors of terrorism during the 1960s. Right now, Islamphobia is keeping right-wingers occupied; but as soon as they get tired of Baghdad, Kabul and Tehran, their burning gaze will turn on Pyongyang and the satellite states of Africa that Beijing has been quietly cultivating, much to the muted chagrin of the Europeans. China wants to become a world player, and knows that it can only do so in association with countries other than American protégés in Asia. Therein lies the importance of being India in the contemporary world.

To her credit, Sonia Gandhi seems to realise the enormity of burden that comes with the possibility of becoming a leader. Addressing the annual *Hindustan Times* jamboree in mid-November, provocatively titled "India: The Next Global Superpower?", the de facto premier said pensively, "The question is certainly appropriate. But while noting the question mark, I am somewhat uneasy with the very word *superpower*. For too many of us, it evokes images of hegemony, of aggression, of power politics, of military might, of division and conflict." Perhaps for this reason, India needs to be a 'subtle-power', relying on the force of ideas rather than on money or guns. But such a dynamic would require a reorientation in South Block, which will have to lower its gaze to its own regional neighbourhood. A country that is occasionally tempted to bully Bangladesh, bamboozle Sri Lanka or bludgeon Nepal will never be taken seriously elsewhere.

The second compulsion of India's strategic ambition is the importance of engagement with China. In the wake of the finalisation of Indo-US nuclear cooperation, Chinese President Hu Jintao traveled to New Delhi to make a matching proposal. If his offer of cooperation is spurned, Hu's sponsors in the People's Liberation Army of China may well turn towards their traditional favourites in Islamabad, fuelling yet another nuclear race in the Subcontinent. Having to choose between the US and China is a no-win situation. However, engagement with both can turn it into a win-win proposition.

The third choice that Indian decision-makers face is even more perplexing. Although Indo-Chinese trade has increased a hundred-fold over the past decade, it is still less than USD 20 billion annually. Despite all efforts by the commercial mandarins of Marine Drive, corporate India attracts international investment worth USD 7 billion, which places it on par with Vietnam. Clearly, a trade-based, foreign-investment-fuelled, export-oriented growth model of economic development is unsuitable for a country that will have the world's largest population within a decade. New Delhi needs to rethink and reorient its economic policies to create jobs for all in the region, a task that requires a larger role for government in the economy.

In order to establish its autonomous identity, even as it comes up for chairmanship of SAARC next year, New Delhi would do well to revisit its own Nehruvian past, and give it a regional thrust to pave the way for a truly Asian Century. The American Century was energy-based – one of fire, tobacco, guns and missiles. The Asian Century will have to be an epoch of water – of songs, grains and masalas. Even some Japanese thinkers do not want India to go the Japanese way. But temptations of the rising sun are too strong to resist, especially when the gentle moon has already been conquered.

HIROSHIGE

Clearly, a trade-based, foreign-investment-fuelled, export-oriented growth model of economic development is unsuitable for a country that will have the world's largest population within a decade.

Soldiers under stress

With suicides and 'fraternal killings' among soldiers in Jammu & Kashmir suddenly escalating this year, India's military brass is forced to admit that there's a problem.

BY **PEERZADA ARSHAD HAMID**

J J Singh admits

The Indian Army and associated paramilitary forces fighting in Kashmir are losing more men to stress than to militant attacks. The capacity of the 1.3 million-strong army – an estimated 600,000 soldiers of which are stationed in J & K – to cope with stress came dramatically into focus during October this year, when the incidents of 'fraternal killings' suddenly spiked. During that month alone, ten Indian soldiers were killed by colleagues, while only three died in combat operations. Similarly, during the first ten months of this year, the Indian Army lost 55 soldiers in anti-insurgency operations in Kashmir, but 86 more took their own lives. These figures are all the more striking against a recent report that violence levels in Kashmir are actually down by around 20 percent this year. Although the military has long denied that its ranks suffer from systemic stress problems, army chief General J J Singh recently admitted to the pressure faced by soldiers, and ordered an investigation into the deaths.

As for suicides, official statistics show that 66 Indian Army soldiers took their own lives in 2002, 96 in 2003, 100 in 2004 and 71 through November in 2005. The number of recorded 'assault and affray' cases – including battery of officers and violence among troops – is also said to be significant. Murders within the army also rose during the same timeframe, with six in 2002 and between 16 and 18 each year for 2003-05. Experts generally describe suicides and fraternal killings among soldiers as being 'panic reactions'. These are attributed to a plethora of reasons – work under hostile conditions, experience of a continuing threat to one's life, lack of recreational options, and homesickness due to long separation from families.

Theories abound as to why the trend in suicides and inter-personal violence has suddenly gone up at this particular time. But as stress among army and paramilitary troops is now an official truth, it becomes obvious that the Indian Army does not have adequate systems in place to combat the growing problem. The army brass has recently decided to train 50 counsellors to cope with this 'emergency', 40 of whom will be sent to J & K. In addition, military officials are hiring psychologists to be sent into the field, as well as experimenting with meditation, exercise and yoga programmes.

"Yoga has worked wonders for troops," says Prabaker Tripathi, a public-relations officer with the Central Reserve Police Force (CPRF) in Srinagar. "It keeps their minds under control during hostile circumstances, and helps them to remain controlled persons and behave properly with civilians." There are generally two reasons that soldiers commit suicide or turn their weapons on their fellow soldiers, Tripathi suggests. "One, pressure related to family affairs, and two, round-the-clock duty. Investigations into cases have revealed that in the wake of domestic pressures, soldiers take such steps mainly over denial of leave or altercations with officers or fellows."

The army is also placing emphasis on strengthening officer-soldier relationships. "We focus on officer-man relationships, and try to develop personal contact among the soldiers in order to make them feel them relaxed," says Colonel Hemant Joneja, defence spokesman in Srinagar. "We have also employed entertainment techniques. During extreme conditions, when we feel that a soldier is not showing signs of improvement, we seek the help of psychiatrists."

Dr S Khrushid-ul-Islam, who teaches behavioural science at the Institute of Management and Public Administration in Srinagar, says that fatigue may be one crucial reason for the recent rise in suicides and fraternal killings. Top military officials have admitted that the ongoing war in Kashmir is taking its toll on troops, who are reportedly increasingly questioning their role in the conflict. In addition, Dr Khrushid believes that regular exposure to media transmissions from the outside world could enhance mental disturbance

rather than act as a palliative. "With the introduction of the Internet and cable TV, these people get exposed to the other side of world, where life looks rosy," he says. "Away from their homes and amidst constant tension, they begin feeling that people outside are enjoying life at their expense. Desperation sets in and they search for an escape."

Uncaring bureaucracy

Almost all incidents of suicide and fraternal killing have taken place within barracks or camps. Invariably, soldiers who shoot colleagues and superiors also turn their weapons on themselves. On the few occasions in which soldiers have been overpowered or shot in self-defence, it has been found that they have been aware of the consequences of their actions.

A health worker working on psychiatric disorders in J & K, who wishes to remain anonymous, attributes the recent increase in stress levels not just to the environment of chronic conflict, but also to the cold weather, long working hours and frustrating bureaucracy. An enormous amount of paperwork is involved even for a small clearance, she says. She adds that the crucial first step was for military officials to admit that troop stress had become a problem. Now that this has been done, she suggests a restructuring of duty hours and vacations, incorporating counselling as a part of mandatory training, educating soldiers on what stress signals to watch for in peers, and administering personality tests before placement in high-risk stations. She also refutes the army's claim to have employed stress-coping techniques among its soldiers. Yoga classes may look good on paper, she says, but are difficult to find on the ground.

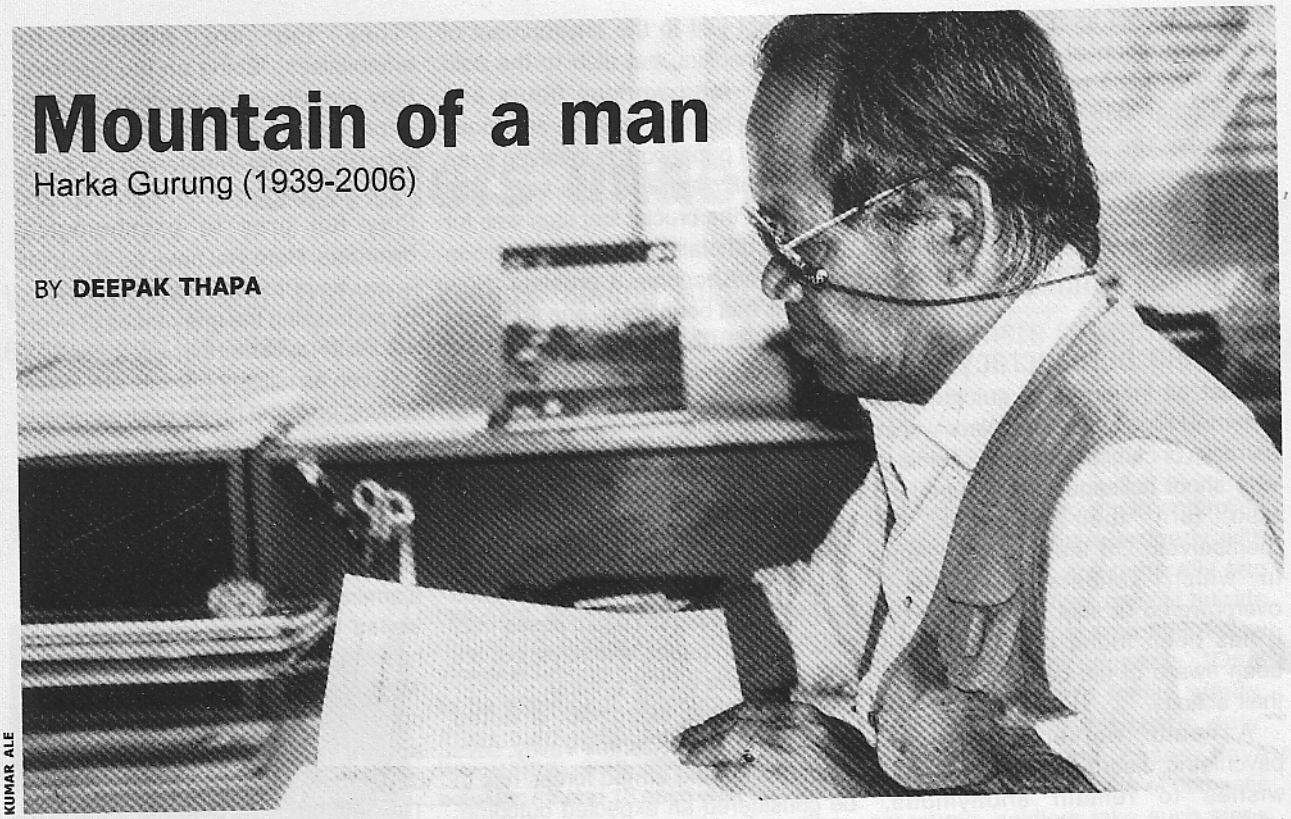
Dr Mushtaq Margoob, a noted psychiatrist in the Kashmir Valley, says that stress in the armed forces has to be considered an expected outcome, and should be planned for as such. "They too are human," he emphasises. "Being on the forefront, they are witness to severity, and are exposed to traumatic experiences. When facing life-threatening incidents, their coping mechanisms give up, and they fall prey to psychological disorders. Here you have no shortcuts – you have to address the problems by addressing the grievances of every soldier to avoid further episodes."

Even as military officials are slowly waking up to the reality of stress levels among their troops, this is a problem that Kashmiris have faced for a long time. Among the population of Jammu & Kashmir, it has been a while since stress-related disorders reached alarming heights. In 1987, 775 patients visited the government's psychiatric hospital in Srinagar for treatment. After 1989, that number increased dramatically. More than 65,000 have sought treatment through last December – more than 4060 per year. The soldiers are experiencing now what civilians have for long.

Mountain of a man

Harka Gurung (1939-2006)

BY **DEEPAK THAPA**



KUMAR ALE

On 23 September 2006, headlines suddenly flashed around the globe of a World Wildlife Fund-chartered helicopter missing somewhere in eastern Nepal. Among the 24 people on board were a government minister and several foreign dignitaries, which perhaps explains why, over the next few days, before a crash could be confirmed, the incident received extensive international coverage. The Nepali victims included several prominent personalities, who had contributed significantly to turning Nepal into an exemplar of community-based natural-resource management. The accident was termed a tragedy of countrywide importance, and the government declared a national day of mourning.

Tucked into the roster of passengers was the name of Dr Harka Gurung, whom the papers variously described as a geographer, conservationist, regional planner, former minister, mountaineer, author and – due to the capacity in which he was on ill-fated flight – simply as "adviser to WWF". It is a measure of the man's accomplishments that all of these descriptors applied to him equally. But Dr Gurung was much more than such descriptions could express. With due respect to all the others who lost their lives in the accident, it was his death alone that amounted to a national tragedy. As the tributes began to fill the newspapers, the import of what he meant for Nepal slowly became clear to the many who knew of him only by name.

Dr Gurung (over the decades the title had become indelibly affixed to his name) was one of those rare individuals who could pursue diverse interests and be equally at ease with each of them. It all began when an inquisitive but unschooled boy of nine ran away from home to explore the world of knowledge. Born in 1939 into a family of well-to-do Gorkha soldiers in the Himalayan foothills of central Nepal, Harka Gurung could easily have slid into a comfortable rural living, or followed in his father's and brothers' footsteps into the Indian Army, as did many others in his situation. But destiny had other designs for this boy.

After some preliminary education in Kathmandu, Harka Gurung completed his schooling in India. He then returned to finish his Intermediate in Arts in Kathmandu, and went on to get a Bachelors from Patna University, and a PhD in geography from the University of Edinburgh. After returning to Nepal in the mid-1960s, Dr Gurung joined Tribhuvan University as a lecturer in geography. But the newly modernising country needed his services at the level of policy, and at the age of 29 he was inducted into the National Planning Commission. Within a year, the young Dr Gurung introduced the idea of dividing the country into smaller units, in order to allow different regions to devise their own development strategies. This was a dramatic departure from Nepal's history of central control over all government activities. The political will necessary to implement his vision in its entirety may have been lacking, but his model is still extant, if only in form.

By 1972 Dr Gurung had risen to

head the planning commission, as its vice-chairman. His government service soon led to political office, and he was appointed first as a minister of state and later the country's first tourism minister. His political career ended abruptly in 1978, however, when he was implicated (by all accounts falsely) in what is known in Nepal as the 'carpet scandal'. Forced to quit, Dr Gurung went a step further and resigned from the national legislature as well, despite the fact that this could easily have been construed as an affront to the all-powerful king who had appointed him.

Controversy and commitment

A decade in government service did not impinge on Dr Gurung's extraordinarily productive life. Out of office, he continued with his research and writing. His depth of knowledge on various subjects made him the logical first choice for a multitude of appointments, and he shouldered burdens from which lesser minds would have shrunk. His heading of the government taskforce to devise a national policy on migration, for instance, led to recommendations that attracted heated criticism for their supposed bias against the people of the tarai plains. The controversy had been caused by, among other things, the suggestion that the open border between Nepal and India be regulated, which was perceived by some as an attempt to close the frontier altogether.

In his writings, Dr Gurung reflected sadly on this incident, and imputed much of the resulting criticism to a phrase that many had erroneously believed to have appeared in the report – 'people of Indian origin', an idea that would surely have raised the hackles of Nepalis of tarai origin, since it emphasises their 'Indian' roots in contrast to the presumed origin of all Nepalis in the country's hills and mountains. In fact, what Dr Gurung had done was to challenge the notion of a 'person of Nepali origin', a concept that still forms the cornerstone of Nepal's citizenship laws. As he later wrote: "There is a Nepali language and a Nepalese state but no Nepalese race. A modern state should be above race, religion and culture and subscribe to the territorial foundation."

One of Dr Gurung's more well-known accomplishments was heading the government committee that named many of the peaks of the Nepal Himalaya. As someone who had grown up in the lap of the Himalaya and who had a strong love for the mountains (he even named three of his four children for Himalayan peaks), this was a task he relished. It was also a job that he was well suited for because, with the notable exception perhaps of Toni Hagen, the Swiss geologist who surveyed Nepal during the 1950s, there was no one who knew Nepal quite as well. One gets a taste of this vast knowledge in *Vignettes of Nepal*, published in 1980. Although he calls the book an account of his journeys from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, it is history, ethnography, geography and geology, all at the same time.

This fascination with the mountains extended to mountaineering as well. As a university teacher, he had authored *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri*, chronicling the history of climbing in the Nepal Himalaya between 1950 and 1960. Dr Gurung's interest in climbing was more that of a chronicler than of a climber, but he did join the international expedition to Mount Everest in 1971, and made it up to Camp I. Later, in 1988, he also served as the deputy leader of the Nepal-China-Japan expedition that made the first successful north-south traverse of Everest.

Cartography was another passion, and it is likely that no atlas has been published in Nepal without Dr Gurung's involvement. When it came to his knowledge of the country's topography, he had no peer. Thus it was that before they became redundant, anthologies of introductory essays on Nepal invariably began with Dr Gurung's meticulous description of its physical geography. Human geography had an equally animating effect on him. His later periodic analyses of the country's demography and the transformations wrought on it over time are essential reading for scholars engaged in research on Nepal.

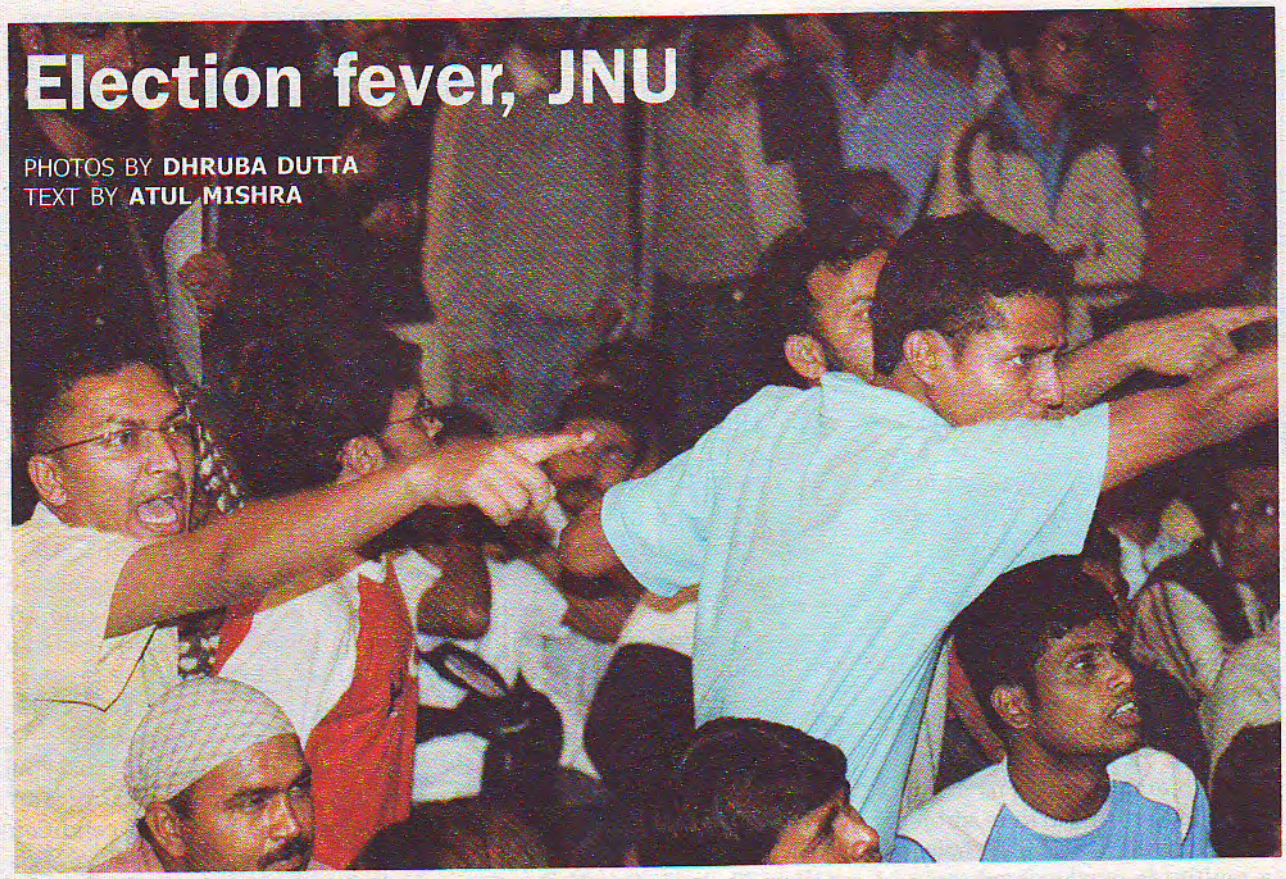
A few more asides to Dr Gurung's life have to be mentioned here. In 1967, while a teacher at Tribhuvan University, he led a Kathmandu football team to victory in the national league championships. And, while still a teenager, he participated in a countrywide art competition, and had two of his paintings of birds chosen to be issued as postage stamps in 1956.

In his later years, Dr Gurung began to devote a large part of his time to understanding and explaining the backward condition of those of Nepal's ethnic groups called *janjati*, and the state's role in creating that situation. As a member of one such group and as someone who had occupied high government positions, he had a vantage point few could claim. But while much discourse – especially in these times of flux – has been driven by emotion, Dr Gurung always provided a calming voice of reason.

That voice was in high demand in various Kathmandu forums. Dr Gurung certainly knew how to enthral a crowd, whether by his blunt way of speaking or his breadth of knowledge and experience. But for all the heavy demands on his time, and despite being quite computer-illiterate, he never delivered anything extempore, instead always arriving with a well-prepared text painstakingly written in longhand. Long before his untimely end, Harka Gurung had gained an iconic stature. As a former student of his put it, "Dr Gurung was sometimes criticised for not building any institutions. But the man was an institution himself."

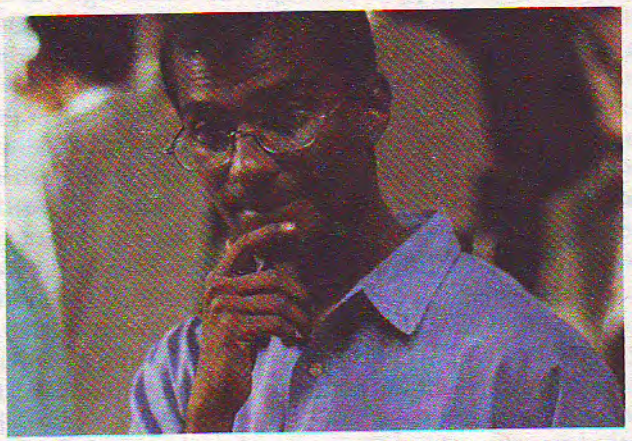
Election fever, JNU

PHOTOS BY **DHRUBA DUTTA**
TEXT BY **ATUL MISHRA**



May 1968: A particularly potent graffiti during the students' revolt in France mocked the Charles de Gaulle administration's encouragement of docility with these words: "Be young and shut up." Of course, the French youth spoke and de Gaulle had to listen. November 2005: A few young voices at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) spoke up, and almost did not let their prime minister finish his address.

If that incident was a glimpse into this university's student politics, the annual student's-union elections spread it out into a much larger, more vibrant picture. A fortnight-long affair, the elections are unique in the Southasian university circuit for several reasons.

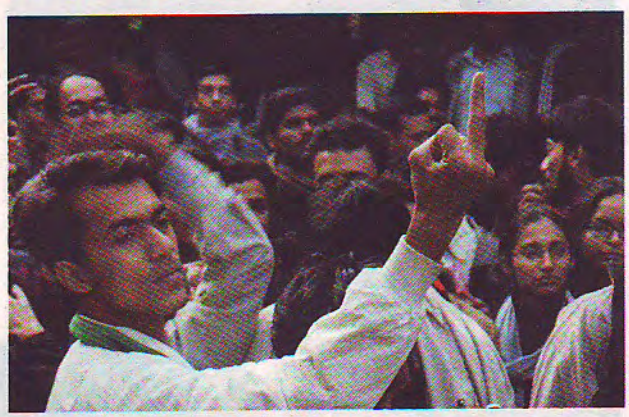


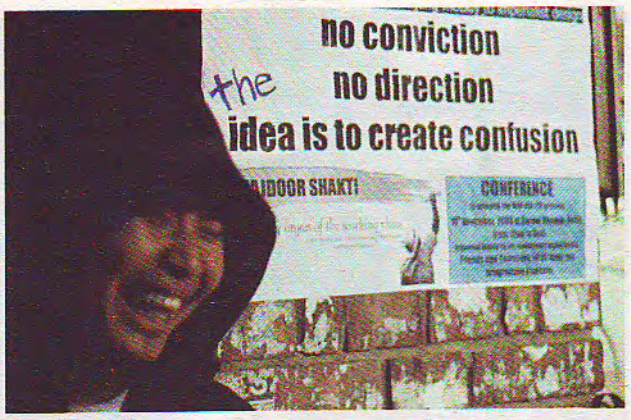
Contrary to the money-muscle nexus, glittering posters and coercive strategies (including violence, threats and kidnapping of rival candidates) that mark many regional university elections, polls at JNU are treated as a secular festival – one that is non-violent, issues-based and removed from flashy campaigns. The whole process is conducted by a non-partisan Election Committee, comprised of students.

General student-body meetings act as platforms for voters to review performances of outgoing office-bearers, to ask questions and grill the new candidates. In the run-up to the elections, student outfits organise post-dinner public meetings, addressed by some of the country's top academics, political leaders and activists. These are followed by torchlight processions against – depending on the outfits – US imperialism, neo-liberal globalisation, state-sponsored repression, communalism, patriarchy, leftwing extremism, terrorism, communism, fascism, anarchic-nihilism, pseudo-secularism and jingoistic nationalism. Whoever said you cannot defeat an *ism*?

Intense personal and group campaigns, political pamphlets, heated dhaba discussions over chai and Navy Cut cigarettes set the stage for the presidential debate – the most eagerly awaited night of the season. As the contenders for the top post lock horns, students eagerly cheer their favourite, jeer the tasteless, suffer public disappointments and experience personal triumphs. Many debates carry into the wee hours of the no-campaign day, just before the polls.

Once counting begins, groups and their sympathisers burst into a final leg of sloganeering – revolutionary and patriotic music swelling – to brave the leads announced





regularly over loudspeakers. A wave of announcements silences hundreds. The leaders cheer, as do the trailing candidates; leaders begin trailing, and new leaders emerge. But all the while, slogans continue. *Laal Salaam* versus *Vande Maataram*. *Asli Laal* versus *Nakli Laal*. Shades of communism vie against each other. Drowsy eyes, tired bodies retain enough to sloganeer for 40 hours or more, and keep a bit in reserve for that one last victory march.

Traditionally a Left-dominated campus, this year's JNU elections saw a proliferation of participating organisations. The extreme leftwing outfit Democratic Students Union (DSU), the Dalit organisation Bahujan Students Front (BSF), and the new reservation opponent Youth for Equality (Y4E) gave impressive competition to long-time popular organisations such as the Students Federation of India (SFI) and the All India Students Association (AISA). Much to the dismay of many, the Y4E gave a real scare to the SFI and the AISA for central panel posts, eventually emerging as the third-largest outfit. Eventually the SFI and AISA clinched two posts each in the central panel, leaving JNU's leftwing domination intact. What's more, the students elected an American national their vice-president. The young have never shut up on this campus. And when they speak, they set examples.

It has been a month of Indian media houses organising big jamborees. The *Hindustan Times* Summit saw Delhi's power elite, a galaxy of political leaders from across the region and film celebrities rubbing shoulders with each other. But the star treatment seemed to be reserved for the region's own revolutionary-turned-politician from Nepal, Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'). Newspapers gave his speech the front-page spread and welcomed his "debut on the Subcontinent's political stage". Political reporters couldn't stop raving about his straightforward and frank style. Dahal played his part by turning nostalgic about his underground life, spent in large parts in Noida and R K Puram in Delhi. He shed all anti-India rhetoric and, to please the security hawks, added for good measure that he had refused help from ISI in the past. Oh yes – there was that small matter of the killings and misery for thousands unleashed by his revolution. When Dahal said violence was relative, scribes asked no tough questions, and the land of Gandhi remained mum. The welcome accorded the leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) seemed to be generally aimed at letting the Indian Naxalites know the bouquets that awaited them if they came aboveground. All very opportunistic, and the reality that till a year ago the Maoists were diehard anti-Indians, who were digging trenches to counter an Indian invasion, be damned!

While the HT Summit took pride in having the high and mighty, *Tehelka*, the investigative website-turned-newsweekly, organised a 'Summit of the Powerless'. Forget for a while the pejorative inherent in the very title of the conference; the objective was to get political power, money power, and people's power all onto one platform and discuss grassroots issues. Laudable indeed. But hold on. Isn't political power in a democracy really people's power? No, the paper decided that this honour went to representatives of 'people's movements' rather than to elected political leaders. And if the focus was on the 'powerless', what explains the emphasis on the inaugural speech by bomb-maker President Abdul Kalam, where only special invitees had access? The 'powerless' meanwhile looked on as images pasted on banners and posters outside the venue. *Postscript* – the latest edition of *Tehelka*, with reports on the plight of the 'powerless' – is now being sold by ill-clad and hungry kids at Delhi traffic crossings.

Speaking of problematic events, the First South Asia Film Festival, organised by the South Asia Foundation in Delhi, was an unmitigated disaster. Sri Lankan and Pakistani filmmakers boycotted the event due to 'mismanagement'. The opening, in the capital's premier Siri Fort auditorium, with seating capacity of more than 2000, had no more than 50 in the audience. *The Hindu* reported Satyajit Maitipe, a leading Sri Lankan director, as saying, "Sri Lanka was the focus country of this event, but only two Sri Lankan movies have been screened so far. It is an insult; we have been exploited by the organisation." At the opening, the organisers had to look for another venue because they did not have a permit to continue screening at Siri Fort. As a result, no one had a clue as to which movie was being shown and where, and the filmmakers were shifted from one seedy hotel to another. The organisers refused to comment on the fiasco.

Pervez Musharraf's smooth talk about his liberalism is gradually coming apart. He has consistently claimed that press freedom in Pakistan is healthier than in most democracies. The International Federation of Journalists reports otherwise. During the last six months, four journalists have been killed after filing stories that the government did not want reported. The latest victim of 'enforced disappearances' is Dilawar Khan Wazir, a BBC Urdu service reporter in South Waziristan. Hussain Haqqani, an analyst in Islamabad, writes that key issues have been kept out of bounds for journalists, including the role of Pakistan's intelligence services, and corruption of senior military regime figures. Human rights and sovereignty violations in the 'war against terrorism' are strict no-no areas. Opinions critical of the military regime are allowed, but not facts that back up these opinions. General Sahib, who is in the line of fire here?

Chhetria Patrakar cannot vouch for the accuracy of this snippet. But there is a high possibility that *presstalk.blogspot.com*, run by a credible business journalist, has got it right. The blog reports that the *Hindustan Times* came out with a survey finding that 59 percent of Delhi citizens were against sealings – the drive by local authorities, on the orders of the judiciary, to shut all illegal constructions. From a paper that has been fairly positive about the sealing

drive till now, this was a surprise. It so happens that the illegal residence of a top executive of the media group was sealed a day before the survey was published. Hmm. The blog does not spare HT's rival either. The *Times of India* has been consistently reporting on the traffic mess in Delhi over the past few days. It now appears these reports came in the wake of a case filed by the group's number two honcho against the Delhi Traffic Police because he couldn't leave his house due to Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit. The things you can do if you own a newspaper.

The Indian Cabinet has finally approved a long-standing demand of civil-society organisations to allow NGOs to initiate community-radio broadcasting. The new policy says that the license will be given only to a "non-profit" organisation with at least three years social service to local communities, and the community radio station should serve specific local communities. As one broadcaster put it, the policy has been cleared 80 years after broadcasting began in India, and 11 years after the Supreme Court declared airwaves public property. But certainly better late than never. Nonetheless, there are voices of dissent. Some point to the fact that hard news is still not allowed to be broadcasted, while others claim that besides political and electoral news, people can decide what to air. Many are now keenly awaiting detailed guidelines being prepared by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to understand the fine print.

It has long been a fact that the Delhi media is capital-centric. At best, it is willing to peep into developments in neighbouring North Indian states. That is why CNN-IBN's "Golden South" series is refreshing. Pegging the stories on the golden jubilee of the creation of the southern states of India, the channel has been carrying daily reports on various facets of life from the south of Vindhyas. These range from human-interest pieces to stories on social trends and economic changes. The North India obsession of the English-language channels is surprising, actually, because the bulk of the English-watching audience is in the south. *Chhetria Patrakar* hopes that the coverage of South India continues on a sustained basis, and other channels pick up the thread as well. After that, the North India channels can focus on the Northeast, Kashmir, and finally the neighbourhood of Southasia.

– *Chhetria Patrakar*

The inheritance of stereotype

Awarding the 2006 Man Booker Prize to *The Inheritance of Loss* amounts to trivialising marginal communities, in this case the Nepalis of the Darjeeling hills.

BY **NAMRATA CHATURVEDI**

One of Edward Said's contributions to the humanities has been to push scholars to analyse the politics of 'representation', as his own writings did in the case of the creation of the Orient as the 'other', in contrast to Europe. In his book *Orientalism*, Said exposed the veneer of romance that overlays this way of thinking, generating complacency and almost justifying prejudice. It was in large part Said's writings that led to the creation of postcolonial studies, but analysis of the politics of representation is something far too important to remain confined to academia.

The story of Oriental romance continues in numerous forms, both overt and discreet. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, which recently won this year's Man Booker Prize, is a case in point. While representing an individual or group, fiction always contains the possibility of making them overly exotic or romantic. Because of its distance from the majority of the Indian public, this tendency is particularly strong in Indian fiction in English. It is easy for a writer like Desai, for instance, to view the entire community of Nepalis of Kalimpong and Darjeeling through tinted glasses, given that she is writing in English. Had the text been written in Nepali, it would in all likelihood have been rejected by the people it claims to represent.

The picture one gains of the Nepalis of the Darjeeling hills from Desai's book is of a community that is poor and illiterate – perhaps even insignificant – in its entirety. Out of all the Nepalis we meet here, it is only the tuition teacher, Gyan, who is educated; but lest the reader sees him as a learned, ambitious young man, the author makes it a point to show the 'reality' of his existence – the poor, sordid environment of the Bong Busti to which he belongs. In the detailed description of the surroundings of Gyan's shack-like home, the incongruity of his aspirations is meticulously drawn out. Even his involvement in the Gorkhaland movement is left unexplained, evidently not requiring as careful a treatment as the breakfast served to the character of the retired judge when he was a young student in London.

In an interview following the announcement of the Man Booker award, Desai claimed to have drawn a parallel in the book between the Nepali diaspora in India, and Asians, particularly Indians, living and scrounging for work in the US. The parallel can be justified in that a poor Indian's desperation to go to America in order to escape the clutches of poverty of his homeland may be similar to the issues of instability and lack of opportunities that have through the centuries brought many immigrants to India from the Nepal hills and plains. But from this point onwards, critical differences emerge between the two situations. While the Indian immigrants vie for green cards and must constantly be on their toes with regards to paperwork to stay in America, circumstances are not the same for Nepali immigrants in India. The community that Desai has chosen to represent are not immigrants, let alone illegal ones, but Indian citizens with franchise and other rights. The Nepali language itself is recognised in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The status of Nepalis in India, hence, cannot be relegated entirely to that of cheap labour.

Black-and-white exotic

The truth is that, for the people of Kalimpong, life is as real, as tough, as beautiful, as happy as for people elsewhere. It is neither a mysterious place, nor are the shoulders of every Nepali here sagging under the weight of poverty and hardship. Besides the Metalbox watchman and his family (who are paralysed by the intricacies of telecommunications technology), Gyan's family (where his mother locks her son inside to keep him 'safe'), and the boys clad with bandanas à la Rambo, forcing appalled people to buy cassettes and calendars to support the movement, other Nepalis live in Kalimpong too.

One can only hope for a sensitivity on the part of readers that is missing in the writer, to consider with due interest and respect the community the novel claims to represent.

There are students, teachers, professors, photographers, poets, critics, novelists, artists. For an outsider who reads the novel, it is not difficult to construe an image of the Nepalis of India as unsophisticated and hopelessly vulnerable.

The choice of Kalimpong as a setting for the novel is convenient for two reasons. First, because it is a 'sleepy, obscure place in the hills', so detailing comes easy and unquestioned. Second, it provides a historical backdrop that seems to make the novel impressive – a well-researched, careful, perfect combination of history and fiction, treating diaspora, multiculturalism and what have you. Perhaps most importantly, it has that *something* that makes contemporary Indian novels so intriguing to the West. Indians can speak about these issues with honesty, apparently, because of their firsthand experience. The West likes to read these works because it satisfies their scruples about genuine concern for spaces beyond their maps.

Desai is fortunate in two ways. First, because she is an Indian woman, and this enables a claim to authenticity for which every writer of fiction clamours. Second, she has chosen to write about a marginalised community that has not spoken much for itself through Indian English-language fiction. But combining these two things, however, she has managed to marginalise that community within its own area. The marginalised 'subaltern' in this case neither speaks for itself, nor does the writer choose to speak for it.

The historical backdrop Desai has chosen is that of the Gorkhaland movement of 1980s West Bengal. Throughout the novel, the movement's only contribution is in making the hills a site of violence and torture. Desai attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the uprising, and gives a smattering mention of various leaders and treaties, but fails to move beyond the mere 'concept' of the movement. The 28-month-long uprising appears merely as an extension of the inner landscape of the judge's mind, and therefore as a series of unfortunate, unavoidable, disturbing events.

Pankaj Mishra, in his review of the novel, wrote: "Sai is romantically involved with her math tutor, Gyan, the descendant of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary, but he eventually recoils from her obvious privilege and falls in with a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents." The revolutionaries here are indeed mere "insurgents", forming a thrilling backdrop to a love affair. History does not emerge from the text as a reality, but is reduced to a function in the plot. Mishra goes on: "Not surprisingly, half-educated, uprooted men like Gyan gravitate to the first available political cause in their search for a better way. He joins *what sounds like an ethnic nationalist movement* largely as an opportunity to vent his rage and frustration" (emphasis added).

For youngsters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, participating in the movement seems to be an opportunity to make themselves useful, an opportunity they evidently rarely find. The fact of demagoguery is brought out well, but at the cost of trivialising the uprising itself. It is easy for the reader to feel sorry for Father Booty, the Swiss dairy man who is forced to leave Kalimpong, or for Sai, whose first romance is shattered, or for the two Anglophile sisters whose beautiful house is ransacked. But the poor father and daughter-in-law, who come to the judge on their knees, are seen through the eyes of Sai, who is returning after a bitter quarrel with her lover. The poor pair, squatting in a corner, appears as an object of pity and irritating persistence, a result of their helplessness and vulnerability. People presented as the majority are thus constantly marginalised.

There is a distortion of details in the novel that would not have been overlooked if the 'object' being represented had been mainstream to more of its readers. The real Apollo tailors have been renamed Apollo Deaf Tailors, not missing a jibe at the inefficiency of their work. Such distortion is not to be confused with the misplacement of details and facts due to nostalgia, a process that Salman Rushdie hails as a creative power at the hands of the expatriate writer. Desai repeatedly emphasises the seven years she spent researching her book, the guarantor of her precision.

This kind of smugness in an Indian diasporic writer is threatening. In the nature of her representation of her object, Desai justifies Orientalist notions of cultural superiority, notions that postcolonial criticism has been trying to question for decades. If the recognition accorded by the Man Booker Prize serves to justify positions of apathy adopted by a novel, then this recognition is not only damaging to the culture and people represented, but also renders attempts at generating cultural sensitivity meaningless, as it paves the way for further stereotyping of this and other cultures. With the increased readership that the Man Booker is sure to bring to *The Inheritance of Loss*, one can only hope for a sensitivity on the part of readers that is missing in the writer, to consider with due interest and respect the community the novel claims to represent.

New tales of old

BY **JAI ARJUN SINGH**

It is difficult to tear oneself away from the covers of Ramesh Menon's two-volume English translation of the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata. The colours are bright, and the design is strikingly informal and minimalist. The first volume has featureless figures representing the Pandava princes at the game of dice, their humiliated queen Draupadi gambled into slavery, and the lord Krishna standing in the foreground, identifiable mainly by his blue skin. The figures all have short, cropped hair. "I wanted a contemporary look," explains artist Moonis Ijlal, "because this is a great contemporary story." The Mahabharata is a universal epic, he says, not one that belongs only to Hindus. To this end, he convinced the publishers to allow him to write *Mahabharata* in both Hindi and Urdu scripts on the back cover – the words are entwined, and the effect is of one language reaching out to and almost embracing the other.

Ijlal's belief in the fact that the Mahabharata is a human story with a strong contemporary resonance on the one hand, and that it is an epic that belongs to everyone on the other, fit well with former journalist Ramesh Menon's novelistic rendering of the work by Vyasa. In prose that is dramatic (as befits a grand epic) and at the same time accessible to the casual reader, the author brings the story alive. He continues the tradition of writers like the late Kamala Subramaniam, who wrote a beautiful, intimate single-volume rendering of the epic, which Menon acknowledges as a major inspiration.

Both Menon and Subramaniam's works are significantly different in tone from the only full-length English translation currently in the public domain – the one by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, published in the late 19th century. Ganguli's 12-volume translation* is an invaluable reference work, but it is hard to imagine the non-academic reader bearing with its sheer length, archaic language, detailed listings and descriptions of places, and exhaustive elucidation of character names.

Besides, as Subramaniam suggests in the introduction to her book, it is not possible to do full justice to ancient texts in a literal translation. "English is not suited to the elaborate similes that are common in Sanskrit," she writes. "Also, there is a vast difference between the Eastern and the Western ways of description. For instance, [the Pandava prince] Arjuna is called 'Bharatarshabha', which is very pleasing to the ear in Sanskrit. But in English, it translates into 'O Bull of the Bharata Race!' One can see how awkward it sounds." Such awkwardness can be found on nearly

every page of Ganguli's otherwise commendable effort.

At the other extreme, however, many of the simpler translations give us only the stories of the epics – their bare bones. These often take the sprawling canvases of the original works and reduce them to easily digestible morality tales, without handling the complex characters with the sensitivity and depth they deserve. Works by C Rajagopalachari and R K Narayan (both of whom have translated the Ramayan, the Mahabharata and other autonomous stories from Hindu mythology) are among those that fall short in this respect.

What Subramaniam has done is to strike a balance between the two extremes. Her treatment of the Mahabharata as a human tragedy is reflected in the way she fleshes out the conversations between the characters, emphasising their inner conflicts, holding their struggles up to the light; and in the empathy and understanding she brings to nearly all the people in the story. Inevitably, some creative licence is exercised, but none of her extrapolations are inconsistent with the tone of the epic.

Mythological relevance

Recently, publishing house Canongate began a series of revisionist writings on ancient myths. Leading novelists such as Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson and A S Byatt were asked to retell myths from works including Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Labours of Hercules*. In the anchoring book of this series, titled *A Short History of Myth*, Karen

The Mahabharata: A modern rendering (two volumes)
Ramesh Menon
Rupa & Co, 2004

Armstrong reminds readers that myths were not meant to be taken literally, or to be seen as providing factual information. Their function was to help people cope with spiritual emptiness and make sense of their lives:

> Human beings fall easily into despair, and from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting.

*Available at www.sacred-texts.com/hin/maha/index.htm

We all want to know where we came from, but because our earliest beginnings are lost in the mists of pre-history, we have created myths about our forefathers that are not historical but help to explain current attitudes about ourselves, neighbours and customs.

In the Indian context, the work done by Subramaniam and Menon reflects this attitude. They draw out the human

Siva: The Siva Purana retold
Ramesh Menon
Rupa & Co, 2006

aspects of the epics, and make them more relevant for readers who are not as interested in mythology for either its literal truth or religious significance, as they are for what it tells about the human condition, about the everyday bustle of life. Subramaniam's likening of Prince Duryodhana to Shakespeare's tragic heroes – marked by a single fatal flaw but otherwise a noble prince with many fine qualities – may not sit well with purists who choose to see the Mahabharata as a simple tale of good versus evil, and Duryodhana as a straightforward villain, a demon incarnate. But surely one of the world's most sprawling, complex works of literature deserves a more searching treatment.

To illustrate the difference between Ganguli's literal rendition of the Mahabharata and the newer translations, here is a simple example from one of the most vivid of the epic's passages. The fierce fighting, often interrupted and resumed, rages between Bheema, the mighty Pandava, and the great warrior Karna, on the 14th day of the Kurukshetra War. The two men are brothers, though only Karna, the elder, knows this, and his affection for his younger sibling has impaired his ability to fight with full vigour. Besides, before the

The Mahabharata: A modern rendering (two volumes)
Ramesh Menon
Rupa & Co, 2004

war began, Karna had promised his mother Kunti that he would not kill any of his brothers, with the exception of Arjuna.

These are the psychological subtexts to this great passage, but they are all but concealed in the Ganguli text, which devotes passage after lengthy passage to the actual fighting – the details of weaponry and chariot manoeuvres, descriptions of the resplendent warriors as they cast arrows and spears at each other. Ramesh Menon, on the other hand, finds time for the profound human poignancy of this scene: for the unseen tears in Karna's eyes, for the subtlety with which he keeps Bheema at bay while taking care not to strike him a fatal blow, and the way he masks his feelings by addressing Bheema with cruel words when he has him at his mercy.

Menon is among the most rigorous

modern re-tellers of these stories. Apart from his voluminous Mahabharata, he has also translated works such as the Skanda Purana and the Shiva Purana. These are full of enthralling mythological stories – the churning of the ocean by the *devas* and the *asuras*, Sati's self-immolation in her father Daksha's *yagna*, Shiva's subsequent revenge, the reunion of Shiva and Sati/Parvati, the genesis of Karttikeya and Ganesh, and the creation and destruction of the magnificent celestial cities jointly known as Tripura. This is captivating stuff in itself, but Menon's prose brings a strong, individual voice to these oft-told tales while retaining their basic flavour. He knows how to be florid when the stories demand it, but his descriptions never become ridiculous or over the top. They remain precise and vivid. A sample:

An earthquake shook sacred Gangadvara. As in a dream, Daksha saw a mysterious and malignant cluster of stars at noon. The sun was blotched with black patches; a dark ring glowed balefully around the star. The quarters were squalid and gloomy, strange comets fell out of the dim heavens. Vultures circled low over the yagna, darkening the sacrificial platform; jackals howled at the perimeters of the conclave of rishis and devas.

Mounted on Garuda, the Sudarshana humming at his finger, Vishnu faced Virabhadra. Heartened, the devas turned and came back to fight. Bhanukampa sounded Virabhadra's conch, which glowed like moonlight. The devas quailed at the blast; they prepared to flee again. At once, in reply, Vishnu blew a deafening note on the Panchajanya, rallying them. He froze the gana army for a moment on its murderous, rapacious spree: Virabhadra's forces stopped their ears with bloody palms.

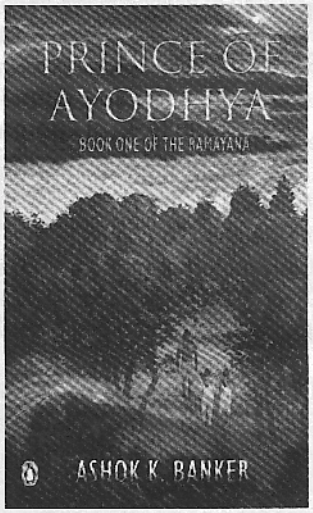
Even Menon's seemingly throwaway use of words like "humming" (to describe the Sudarshan Chakra) brings the scene an immediacy and intensity that few modern translators have achieved. The reader can almost hear Vishnu's

disc spinning fiercely at his finger.

Phallus and all

Something else that the better retellings do is to present the more controversial aspects of the originals, without making them gratuitous. This is an important function, for generations of Indians have grown up with sanitised versions of these stories – in the Amar Chitra Katha comics, for instance. Such renditions have performed an important role in acquainting young children with the myths, but they offer little to open-minded adult readers who might want something of the tone and complexity of the original tales.

Consequently, many people have no idea of the scatological elements in the texts they have been taught to revere. More conservative households find it easy to play ostrich when faced with the sexual explicitness of the Puranas, for instance. This reviewer once had a piquant conversation with a shocked colleague who, having read some of the unexpurgated texts, wondered aloud what the point was in worshipping gods who seemed to have the same frailties as human beings – sexual appetite being one of these 'frailties'. Likewise, millions of devout Indians are probably unaware even that the Shiva linga represents the male phallus. One of the achievements of the modern translations is to present these aspects



matter-of-factly, thus paving the way for them to enter the public domain rather than to be treated as something better left unaddressed.

The works mentioned thus far have been examples of translations that stick close to the original plots. But revisionist retellings of myths have also been gaining currency of late. A good example is Ashok Banker's bestselling Ramayana series, written and marketed as fantasy novels, complete with the bright covers that evoke the Western fantasy/science-fiction genre. Banker's works have drawn accusations of being 'assembly-line' creations, perhaps because of the speed at which he churns his books out. But to his credit, he has taken an epic that was never considered very exciting (the Ramayana does pale when compared to the richness of the Mahabharata), and effectively repackaged it for a new generation of readers.

Authenticity will, of course, continue to be a burning subject when it comes to the retelling of myths. But as Banker rightly asks in his author's note: "Does a grandmother consult Valmiki's original Ramayana before she retells the tale to her grandchildren at night?" He has a point. In a sense, we are continually redefining and reinventing these legends; each generation brings its own wisdom and life-experiences to them, and that is how it should be.

The Ramayana series
(six volumes)
by Ashok Banker
Penguin Books India, 2005-2006

At their best, these modern translations revive the sense of wonder that we felt when we first heard these ancient stories from our grandparents, even while showing us how the tales are relevant to our own lives and times. In this sense, it is appropriate to call them novelistic. After all, to quote Karen Armstrong again: "A novel, like a myth, teaches us to see the world differently; it shows us how to look into our own hearts and to see the world from a perspective that goes beyond our own self-interest."

A sick system

BY **MADHUMITA BOSE**

The existing public healthcare systems in Southasian countries are largely the legacy of colonial administration. Despite the fact that these systems are now worn dangerously thin, they remain little changed. With the limited resources at their disposal, regional public health focuses almost exclusively on the urban sector, neglecting the rural majority. The system in place in Pakistan is no exception. The average family here is large, its members lack education, and are undernourished and unhealthy. At the moment, the Islamabad government is doing almost nothing to change this situation.

In a region plagued by poverty, pollution and rampant disease, with enormous rural populations largely neglected by their respective states, Southasian governments have begun to realise that a healthy economy is impossible without a healthy people. A lack of attention to public health amounts to condemning a large section of the population to difficult, short and unproductive lives. This does not help in the creation of an educated, skilled and competent middle-class workforce, which is essential for the development of a market. Records of Pakistan's recent economic performance show marginal improvements in the manufacturing sector, but economic progress will remain low as long as its social indicators remain dismal. With the

Pakistan's nearly 108,100 doctors far outstrip a countrywide nursing staff of just over 46,300.

exception of war-torn Afghanistan and Nepal, Pakistan's vital health statistics are currently lower than that of every other Southasian country.

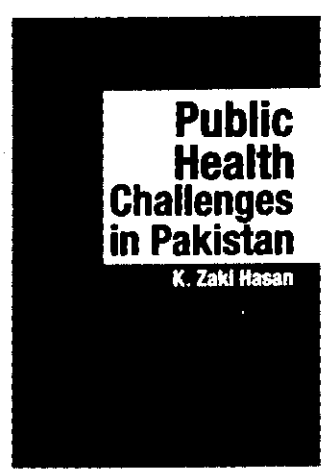
Despite the grim scenario, Pakistan's health sector remains a low priority for its government today, conspicuously so when compared to the country's notoriously well-funded military sector. In recent years, health and education have seen only token increases in allocations. In order to more fully explore the effects of this neglect, professor K Zaki Hasan, the founding dean of two Pakistani medical institutions, has compiled in *Public Health Challenges in Pakistan* a body of statistics that speaks for itself.

Total public and private health expenditure in Pakistan accounts for just 2-3 percent of the country's gross domestic product. In 2001, less than one percent of the GDP was allocated for public healthcare, whereas expenditure on debt servicing and defence exceeded the country's total revenue. Pakistan's total health expenditure per capita was only USD 13 for 2005, having declined from USD 16 in 1998. In comparison, in Sri Lanka that amount is USD 32, and in the Maldives it is USD 120.

Indeed, Pakistan's vital statistics for health are low even within a region where such statistics are generally poor. Although 2004 figures show that the country's life expectancy has increased to 61 years from 43 years in 1960, this is still an excruciatingly low national average – regionally, Pakistan fares better than only Nepal and Afghanistan in this regard. Infant mortality rates are very high, at 81 per 1000 live births as of 2003, as per UNICEF figures from 2004; in Nepal that figure stands at 61, and in Sri Lanka at 13. Mortality rates for children under the age of five are 103 per 1000 live births, as per UNICEF's 2005 figures, again high for the region. Malnutrition is the reason for half of these deaths. To complete this sorry picture, maternal mortality rates are 500 per 100,000 live births, with only 20 percent of children being delivered by trained medical personnel.

Dr Hasan, who has been working closely with the Islamabad government since 1970 in shaping the country's public-health policies, offers the reader a perspective on the health sector from within the administration. He also brings to the text a social-scientific approach that tries to get at the deeper causes of Pakistan's health-sector ills. Problems in the country's healthcare are not simply a matter of inadequate funds. Instead, Hasan places a significant amount of the blame on a culture of patriarchy and the low status of women, which in turn manifests itself in low female literacy rates and female disempowerment.

The combination of inadequate primary healthcare and high population growth leads to a significant prevalence of communicable disease, especially among children. Government figures for 2004 also show that manpower imbalances persist, as Pakistan's nearly 108,100 doctors – highly concentrated in urban areas, and showing marked preference for work in private hospitals – far outstrip a countrywide nursing staff of just over 46,300. Recruitment in the medical and public health sectors is also dangerously skewed in favour of men.



Public Health Challenges in Pakistan
by K Zaki Hasan
SAMA, 2006

The lack of decentralisation in Pakistan means that government hospitals are found almost exclusively in urban areas, even though most of the population lives in the countryside. The majority of Pakistanis thus have little access to hospital beds or doctors, and must either travel long distances for medical treatment, or rely on practitioners of traditional medicine. Pakistan's urban rich, able to afford private treatment, are oblivious to the country's healthcare pinch. The rural poor, on the other hand, comprise 90 percent of the population. It is imperative that medical manpower be developed for the rural public-health sector.

Hasan also points out that close attention needs to be paid to the country's environment, with an eye to the growing population. The bulk of health problems in Pakistan are comprised of respiratory infections and diseases such as cholera, typhoid, dysentery and hepatitis, most of which affect children. These are brought on largely by systemic problems such as biological contamination in water, industrial waste and air pollution. Inadequate attention is not exclusive to children's health, and Hasan also stresses that both women's health and mental health are in need of increased consideration.

Grassroots knowledge

Islamabad came up with two innovative social-action plans in recent years, in 1991 and 1996, spanning five years each. Both offered broad goals of upgrading primary health, primary education, public welfare and rural water supply and sanitation, and were expected to significantly accelerate improvement in the health sector. Supported by the World Bank and involving both government and NGOs, the participatory development model encouraged people to initiate projects to improve social services in their own communities.

Unfortunately, the scheme failed to

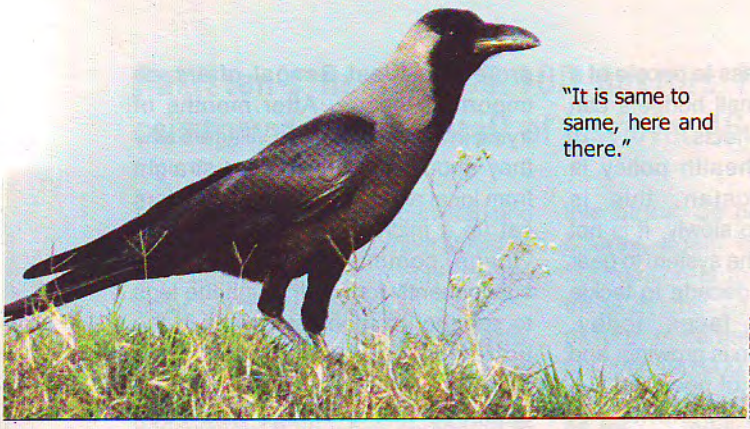
meet its goals and was finally disbanded. Insufficient funds were cited as one reason for the failure, as were politicised and lopsided disbursement policies. Provincial governments with high budget deficits could not afford the long-term expenditure required by the projects, and neither could they generate revenue to finance them on their own. To make matters worse, by the end of the second phase in 2001, the plan had in fact decreased expenditure on basic services from the allotted 1.7 percent of GDP in the base year of 1991-92 to 1.4 percent during 1999-2000.

Islamabad's experiments with such social-action plans present a classic example of unrealistic approaches to problems concerning large populations. Particularly in situations where funding is a problem, it would make more sense to implement policy changes at a grassroots level, and subsequently let them work their way up to the top. When government officials work with local organisations that have direct access to people at a local level, even small budgets can prompt significant effects.

Though public-health policy is changing in Pakistan, this is happening much too slowly. It is not acceptable to allow the system to gear itself over the next decade to tackle the problems it faces today. Pakistan's population is growing, and so are the numbers of poor and ill – the much-touted benefits of globalisation notwithstanding. Increased numbers will continue to strain a system that has not reformed itself quickly enough or with adequate foresight.

Pakistan's primary healthcare system urgently needs to be overhauled. A strong network must be created in place of the existing system, under which a basic but well-equipped medical unit is created in every village. Literacy programmes are needed, as are awareness programmes to educate people about the sources and dangers of various diseases. In this regard, a UNICEF project in West Bengal offers an important lesson. After months of trying in vain to explain to villagers why they should not drink water straight from local ponds, government doctors set up a microscope one day in the village commons. Each villager subsequently looked through the lens to see the microbes squirming in the untreated pond water. Within six months, cases of waterborne diseases in the village had been nearly halved. What works in rural West Bengal, surely may work in rural Pakistan.

In the preface to *Public Health Challenges in Pakistan*, Dr Mubashir Hasan states that, "a modern nation state is contractually bound to do the very best it can to look after the health of its citizens." The Islamabad government would now do well to remember this. It is imperative that it muster the political will to understand the vast and complex spectrum of causes that affect collective well being, and to act on that knowledge with speed and intelligence.



"It is same to same, here and there."

RAJIV LATHER

Cairo's crows

If you want to get a feel for a Southasian metropolis, you could not do better than land up in Cairo – al-Kahira, capital of al-Misr, or Misradesh. The latitude and temperatures are comparable; the garbage collected along the Nile has the same mix of polythene bags amidst the muck. Like here, the stale haze smells of a combination of sewage, dust, diesel fumes and burning coal. This could be Karachi, Dhaka, Madras, Bombay.

Cairo's crows (jackdaws) are near-identical cousins of Southasia's urban crows. They croak and holler just as much. Perhaps the only difference is that while the Southasians have a loose grey band across the nape of the neck, the grey bands of those in the Lower Nile are more of a jagged sort.

Cairo's citizens shun overhead pedestrian walkways just as do their counterparts in Calcutta or Kathmandu. Like here, they exhibit enormous daring to cross thoroughfares amidst whizzing cars and buses. The Cairo-wallahs, too, walk confidently across busy two-way boulevards, while their hard disks simultaneously calculate the speed of several oncoming vehicles as against their own diagonal traverse. It is same to same, here and there.

Ah, then there are the enclaves. After miles and miles of tenements, you leave the city suburbs to enter the desert. Suddenly, there is a vast green oasis covering hundreds of acres, with individualised housing semi-standardised to some rough Greek design – but all posh, very posh. There are lakes, fountains and a manmade forest in the middle of the desert. Every tree and bush is individually watered with miles of underground piping. In this tiny corner of over-populated lower Egypt, no one walks – everyone drives to do their groceries, to get to the malls and the multiplex cinemas.

This, too, is the way of Southasia Shining. A distancing between the upper- and the under-classes, one that is just beginning to kick in along the Indus-Ganga-Jamuna basin. (That's Jamuna, by the way, as in the Brahmaputra, and not the eviscerated western watercourse.) When the middle class gets too rarefied to join with the rest of the populace, they will eject themselves out of the teeming cities. They will create bubbles for themselves – enclaves that will become neutered, a-cultural havens, where they can partake in idealised forms of suburban American bungalow living.

Someone needs to tell our middle classes that this is not necessarily the way of the West – that the upper classes of old Europe are doing just fine living amidst real places, not make-believe bazaars and marketplaces. What we are doing in the cities of Southasia instead is creating a stifling, faux atmosphere, complete with artificial and invented cafes, promenades and lakefronts. The socio-political phenomena of such a distancing can only be imagined, and it will doubtless be horrific in a region where the upper crust will want to flee the muck and stench of the marketplace. On the whole, the creation of the Southasian Class Bubble will guarantee the placement of autocratic regimes in the capitals of our countries, states and provinces. And that eventually must give way to ... what?

The process has begun in India in particular, but also in the rest of Southasia. As yet, the enclaves of the regional elites are still connected to the rest of society. They still call out to the vegetable vendor, who continues to wander the neighbourhoods; they still rely on the service providers of the poor, such as the bicycle-repair family at the curb or the paan-masala guy across the street. For now, the enclaves are not completely cut off. But it will happen, and the process is already well underway, with the malls, the exclusive multiplexes, the toll highways and air-conditioned cars, trains, buses, lobbies, offices and toilets.

The definitive distancing of the rich from the masses began in India during the 1970s, when Air-Conditioned II-Class seaters and sleepers invaded the Indian Railways. The windows became sealed with tinted glass, and you could no longer hear the chai-wallah quickly enough to holler at him to rush over. The best you could do now was to cup your hands against your own reflection on the glass, and gesticulate to him. And then, your chai came not in an earthen cup, but a brittle plastic one.

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