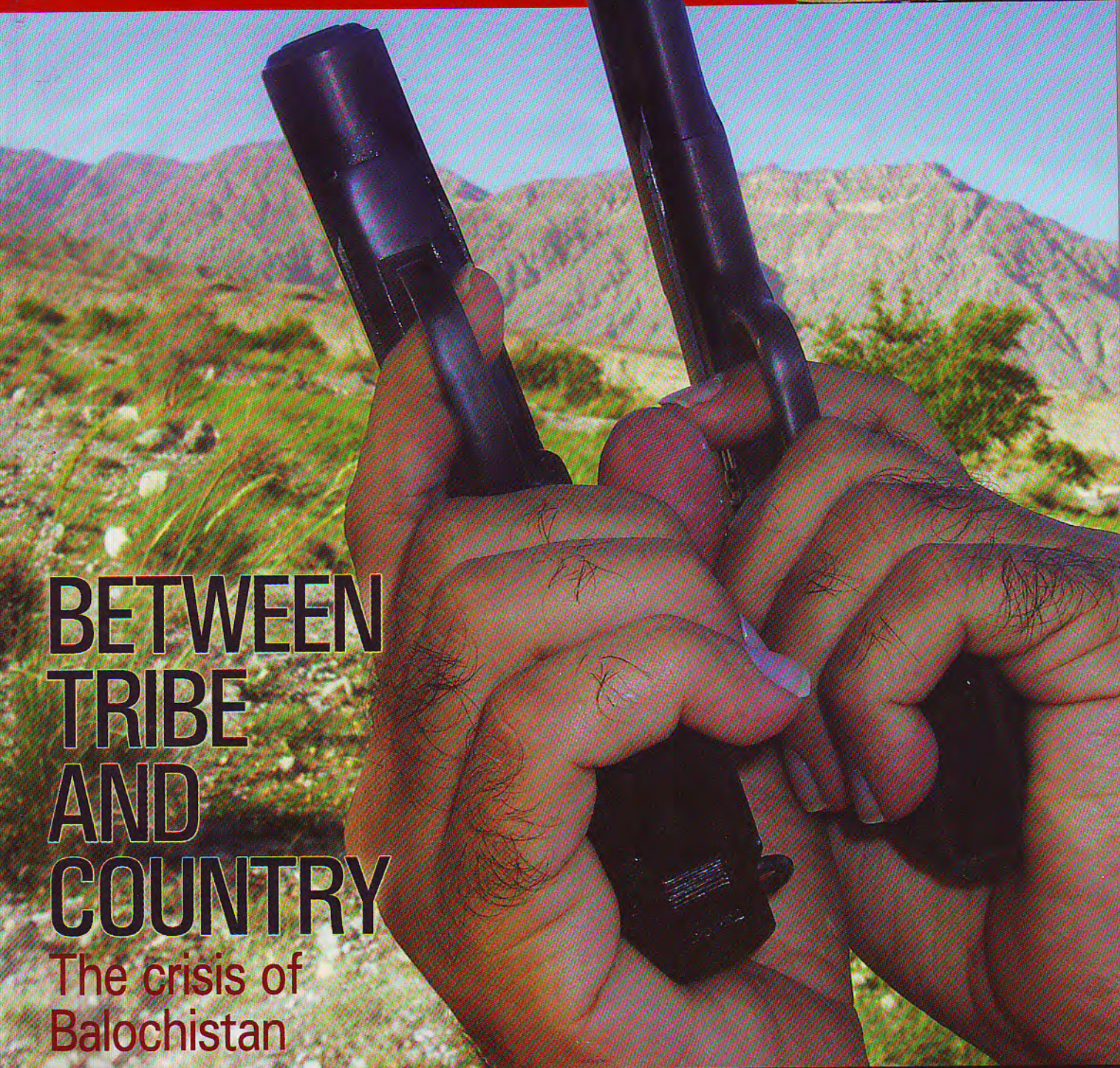


HIMAL

S O U T H A S I A N

GO
~~INDIA~~
BANGLADESH
CRICKET & LOYALTY 63



BETWEEN TRIBE AND COUNTRY

The crisis of
Balochistan

**Obsessing over the
female back**
Sumana Roy

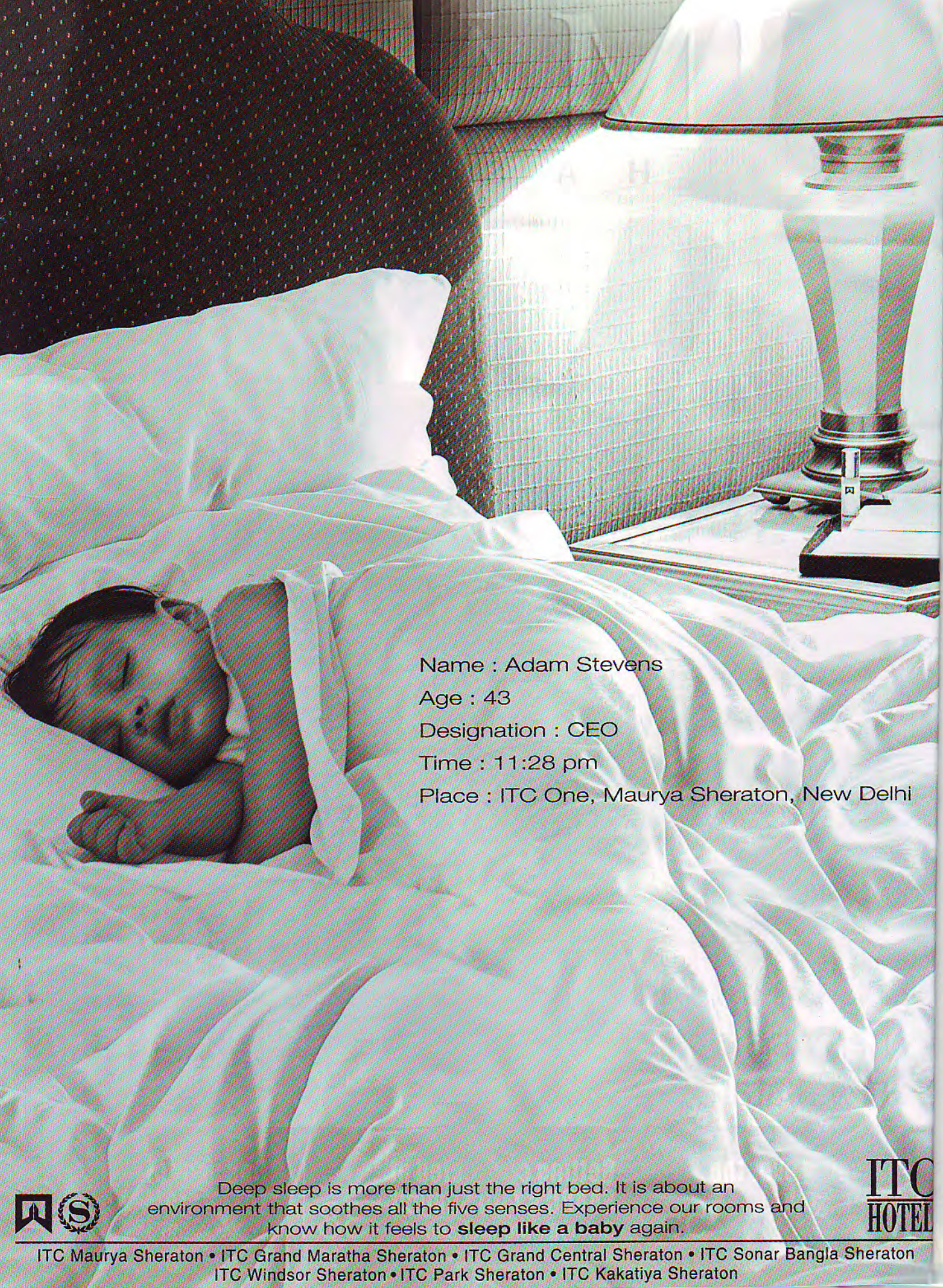
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**Getting connected at
SAARC's 14th Summit**
Sukumar Muralidharan

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**One year of
Loktantra**
Liz Philipson

44



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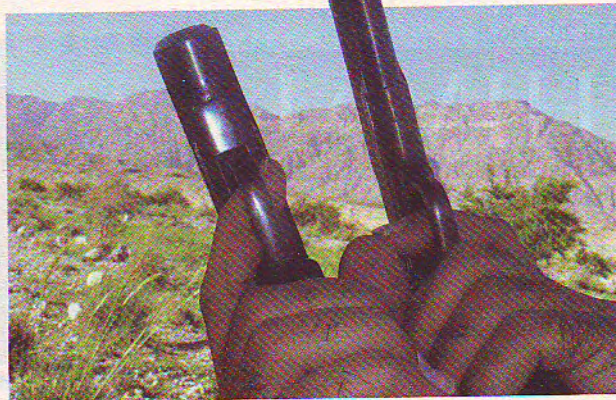


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Tribe, province and country

The neglect of Balochistan has gone on for too long in the modern era. The area was singled out from the very beginning, when Kalat (or Balochistan) was made part of Pakistan in what many Baloch believe to be an act of coercion. Over the past six decades, Baloch nationalists have mounted three violent insurrections to drive home their point – now a fourth is fully underway. Relations with Islamabad have reached a breaking point since 2005, when the Pakistan Army moved in to crush the renewed resistance. And yet, the answer does not seem to lie in a separation from Pakistan, both because of the competing sub-identities among the Baloch themselves, as well as the geopolitical reality that impacts on this corner of Southasia. Rather, the Baloch future lies in more and better self-government, and access to a far greater share of the profits from the province's natural resources. The rest of Pakistan had better listen, before the violence spirals out of control.



Our cover image is a starkly minimalist photograph by Massoud Ansari, a Karachi-based journalist who also wrote this issue's cover feature. The camera records weapons held by a militant of the Baloch Liberation Army. The revolvers point towards the Bolan mountains, the ancient gateway from Kandahar to the rest of Southasia, via Quetta.

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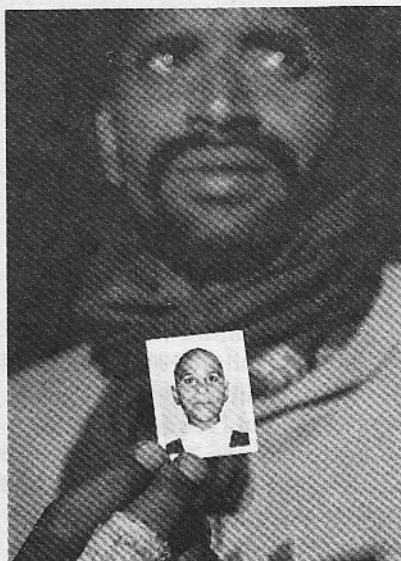
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Stale pieties

I used to particularly admire C K Lal's writing – sharp and lucid, often full of unexpected insights. I was in Kathmandu immediately following the royal takeover in 2005, and in that period of widespread uncertainty and anxiety I eagerly awaited his columns. Not only were they insightful, but they also reflected my own mood at that time of cynicism and melancholy. But lately, it has seemed to me that cynicism and bitterness informs and infects Lal's entire worldview.

In a recent column (*See February 2007, "Sezophilia' and the coming mutiny"*), Lal tackled one of his favourite themes: the injustices of globalisation and the adverse effects they have upon the poor. That globalisation in India has brought with it an increased disregard and callous contempt for the poor is a fact that nobody can deny. What's problematic with Lal's essay is the manner in which he makes his argument, and his subsequent conclusions. By a breathtaking leap of logic, he finds the serial rapes and killings of children in Nithari to be a symptom of middle-class India's obsession with growth.

From this Lal derives two



far-fetched conclusions. First, globalisation in India is only "Westoxification", so superficial as to be the equivalent of choosing a burger with stale meat over the more wholesome *puri-bhaji*. Second, he compares those poor people who are attracted to the glitter of the new globalising India to moths attracted to flames. According to Lal, the children who were attracted by the comforts of that house in Nithari, where they were raped and killed, were an example of this.

Nowhere in Lal's writing has there been an appreciation of the complexities of the globalisation process. Dismissing the rapid and

deep changes that are currently occurring in India's economy and culture as mere "Westoxification" reveals a superficiality of thought. To compare the poor to moths that die when they approach the flames to which they are attracted reveals a lack of understanding of the poor. In making this analogy, Lal commits the old Marxist mistake of assuming that the poor have no agency, and are passive recipients of whatever the rich dole out to them.

Lal has no sense of the complex mixture of feelings – of fear, of hope, of a sense of possibility – with which the poor view the rapidly changing world around them. He is stuck endlessly repeating the stale pieties of the old left. Only this time, the enemy is globalisation instead of colonialism.

Aditya Adhikari
Bombay

No pre-election agreement

Regarding your recent commentary (*See April 2007, "Yes, an autonomous Tibetan Autonomous Region"*), the difficulties the Dalai Lama faces in trying to return to his homeland are monumental. He regularly interacts with world governments and leaders, nearly all of whom officially recognise Tibet as an 'integral' part of China. They also all contradict themselves; we in New Zealand have a big problem with the government in this country, which blatantly lies about its dealings with visiting Chinese officials, who arrive secretly so no one can protest their presence. It is not just the Chinese with whom the Dalai Lama has to deal, but also all of the two-faced world leaders who maintain an eye on China's economic largesse. The truth will prevail, but only when the Chinese population realises that which has been hidden from them for a generation.

Geraldine Watson
New Zealand

Returning to Tibet

While Arjuna Ranawana (*See April 2007, "President under fire"*) presents extensive analysis from an anti-Rajapakse perspective, the article fails to bring up any reference to the much murkier reasons for the current accusations against President Mahinda Rajapakse by disgruntled parliamentarians. Among these, the most striking evidence that the LTTE and Rajapakse in fact had no pre-election agreement is that it was just two weeks after Rajapakse was elected that the LTTE re-commenced its attacks in the east,

in violation of the Ceasefire Agreement. This immediately put the new Rajapakse government into difficulties vis-à-vis its southern supporters. Soon thereafter, the LTTE went so far as to target the army commander in Colombo, who narrowly escaped with his life. Surely there would have been greater cooperation from the LTTE if there had indeed been an agreement, as Rajapakse's enemies are now declaring. Some of these, it should be noted, only came out with this story after being thrown out of office by the president.

M Ladduwahetty
USA

Send mail to editorial@himalmag.com

Campus needed

I agree with Kanak Mani Dixit's observation that, "The very evolution of Southasia can be given direction by a Southasian University with practicable achievable goals and staying power" (*See March 2007, "A Southasian umbrella university"*). Nonetheless, his advocacy of a "decentralised model" for said university remains deficient. A Southasian University as an umbrella organisation that would be involved in making grants from the funds of a Southasian University Grants Commission (SUGC) to selected postgraduate departments of already existing premier Southasian universities? If there is a SUGC, why not a proper university? Eschewing the idea of building a "spanking new one" for reviving the "hallowed universities" seems a waste of an opportunity. A remotely

controlled and dispersed institution could hardly constitute its own identity, or aspire for composite excellence. For that, a university campus is required.

A more rooted approach could base itself on Mahatma Gandhi's principles of 'cultural flows': "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed," Gandhi wrote in 1921. "I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." The objective of a Southasian University could be to provide a world-class education by mustering its resources from Southasia, thereby projecting Southasia to the world.

To facilitate the process, the Southasian University should be located in a historical Southasian city, but preferably not a capital. Its students, faculty and administrative

personnel should be gathered from all over the Subcontinent, in order to foster a composite Southasian identity. Along with teaching, comparative and crossborder research in Southasia should be accorded the highest priority, so that students can be enriched by innovative and cutting-edge research. Curriculum framing should keep regional and global realities in mind without diluting international standards. Attempts to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding through festivals and meets could also be instituted.

The success of the idea of a Southasian University will lie in the practice of its academic and social goals – not through the underwriting of disparate departments and programmes in already existing universities.

Anjan Ghosh
Calcutta

Life with dignity

I agree with A C Sinha's reaction (*see April 2007 Mail*) to my February article, "Hawks descend on Assam", that the Biharis have a constitutional right to inhabit any part of the Indian territory. I dare not simplify the issue by dividing the parties to the conflict into criminals and defenders of the nation. As a member of civil society, I condemn human-rights violations by both the militants and the security forces. For this reason, the killing of innocents by either side should not be brought under the rubric of 'national defence'.

I am also aware of the Indian Constitution's Article 21, which the Supreme Court has interpreted as every citizen's right to a life with dignity. My issue of contention is only with the type of immigration that violates this right. The 'push' factor of immigration – be it from Bihar, Nepal or Bangladesh – is the feudal system, lack of land reforms and poverty. The 'pull' factor is a legal system that does not recognise community ownership of land, and facilitates encroachment with

impunity. The Assam government has acknowledged that it has used nearly 392,000 acres of private land, and has displaced more than 343,200 people. The reality is nearer to 1.9 million people deprived of more than 1.4 million acres. Most of those who are not counted are 'tribals' or riverbank dwellers, who had sustained themselves on that land for centuries before colonial law declared them encroachers. The immigrants, mostly Bangladeshi in lower Assam and Biharis in upper Assam, occupy such common land, which causes resentment.

Sinha adds that he has not experienced resentment against Hindi-speakers. I, too, have said that the resentment is only against the leaders who impose another culture on them. During recent field visits, my colleagues and I were surprised to see that many were aware of statements such as the one in the Constituent Assembly, which stated that if the people of the Northeast were not assimilated with the Indian mainstream, they would join Burma. Similar was the stance of a senior NDA minister, who said that some 'Indianness'

should be 'put' into the people of the Northeast. Many have also asked why the Northeast is not mentioned in the national anthem, and why the Ganga alone, rather than the much bigger Brahmaputra, should be considered India's sacred river.

Biharis did not come to Assam more than 100 years ago, as Sinha claims, but during the 1930s, and most of them after 1960. A comparison of the 1971 and 2001 census shows an unexplained excess of 4 million people in Assam – 1.7 million of them Muslims, presumably of Bangladeshi origin, and the rest Hindus of Bihari or Nepali origin. As for sovereignty, very few today speak of it as 'independence'. The people support the cause of an auto-nomous economy, identity and culture, but not the violence that both sides perpetrate.

Killing or expelling the immigrants is not the solution. For peace with justice, the economic, land and cultural issues that result in injustice have to be resolved.

Walter Fernandes
Guwahati

SRI LANKA

If the war moves north

The vicious cycle of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict continues to spiral. In 2001, the LTTE launched a suicide ground attack on the Sri Lankan Air Force base cum international airport in Katunayake, on the outskirts of Colombo. The attack destroyed more than half of the national airline's fleet, as well as several Air Force planes. With insurance rates at that time soaring and tourism falling sharply, the Sri Lankan economy took a nose dive. Six years later, in the early morning hours of 1 April, the LTTE returned to those same airfields, this time by air. Many say that the ramifications of this attack will be even more dire.

The assault involved two light aircraft, and President Mahinda Rajapakse characterised it as the first time a guerrilla group had attained air power. Even though the strategic value to the LTTE of the 1 April attack seemed limited, it provided a major psychological boost to the rebels, who have suffered a string of recent military defeats in the east of the country. During the weeks following the air assault, the LTTE has stepped up attacks on Sinhalese civilians in the east. By doing so, the Tigers have once again demonstrated their enduring ability to be destructive even as they are being militarily marginalised. But it is not only the brutality of the civilian killings that evokes memories of earlier phases of the conflict; the response of the government forces towards the civilian population is also reminiscent of past practices.

So-called cordon-and-search operations are now routine, in which large numbers of people are taken into custody, questioned, and those deemed to have the remotest connection with the Tamil Tigers are detained. This process can take days or weeks, and generates anger and bitterness, particularly among Tamils. While the evidence on the ground shows that the confrontation between the government and the LTTE is getting uglier in terms of human-rights abuses, government claims of having taken control of LTTE-held territory have not translated into greater security for the people.

The next phase of any military 'solution' would necessarily be to take the war to the north. But such a battle would likely be significantly more costly than the one in the east. First off, the rebels have consolidated positions in the north, where they have not fractured as in the east. Second, the LTTE could be expected to target the civilian population outside the north and east, both in an attempt to divert the government's attention and to take vengeance. If the civilian toll were to be heavy, and if there were to be a large-scale influx of refugees into India, the international consensus on giving Colombo a free hand in the war could cease. This could bring about an even



more dangerous and uncertain phase.

The Colombo government appears to be undeterred by these prospects. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse (the president's brother) recently told the international press that there is no longer any meaning in the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement, and has speculated that it has not been officially abrogated merely to keep the international community happy. He has also said that the government proposes to push towards the rebels' northern strongholds, which would mean a certain escalation in violence. Such statements run contrary to the public stance of nearly the entire international community – namely, that the solution to the Sri Lankan conflict should be negotiated within the context of a peace process.

De-escalation

The willingness of Mahinda Rajapakse's administration to stand up to the LTTE has won it the support of the majority of the Sinhalese population. What needs to be questioned, however, is the government's primary reliance on military confrontation, rather than on political reform that addresses the roots of Tamil grievance. By summoning an All Party Conference several months ago to come up with a political solution, President Rajapakse did lay the foundation for a positive political resolution. Now that commitment needs to be followed through.

Both the international community and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) agree that the best way for the country to avoid being taken to the edge of disaster would be for the current administration to escalate its political efforts to generate an acceptable political framework that would meet Tamil aspirations. Simultaneously, it must seek ways to de-escalate its military campaign against the LTTE, and stop the northward gravitation.

President Rajapakse needs to capitalise on his current

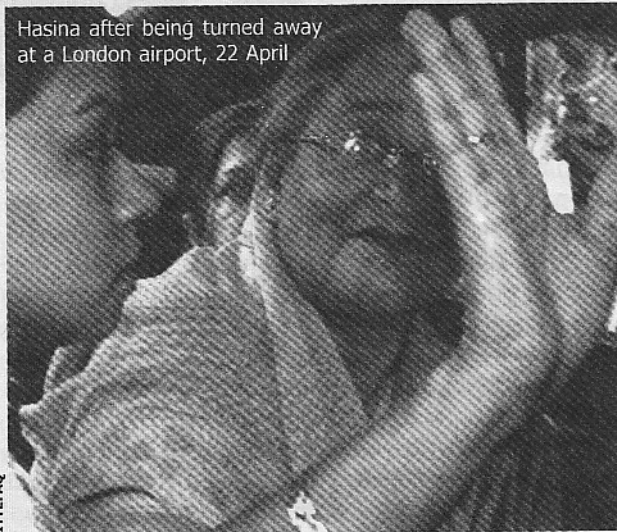
popularity with the Sinhalese masses, to devise a political solution that provides justice for Tamils and other ethnic minorities. Those who seek a peaceful resolution to the current conflict will be hoping that the proposals for a political framework that his ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) has promised to come up with in the coming days will be able to win the support of the Tamil people, and eliminate the rationale of continued LTTE violence to achieve that objective.

The LTTE's positive response to any move towards

political negotiations that go beyond military matters will also be crucial. There is no denying the technical acumen that permitted the Air Tiger attack on Katunayake, and the safe return to base. Skills such as these should be used for Sri Lanka's national development, including in the north and east, rather than for perpetuating an impossible struggle. But the goodwill and trust that is required for Sri Lankan society to function continues to be missing from the rhetoric and behaviour of the principal protagonists. ▲

BANGLADESH

Khaki politics in Dhaka



Hasina after being turned away at a London airport, 22 April

TITFPAQ

The subterfuge is over. It has now become clear that Bangladesh is under the control of an autocratic military regime. After three months of pretending that it had little to do with the new interim government, set up in early January, the Bangladesh Army's role in derailing an already shaky democratic process is now obvious. In early April, the Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant-General Moeen U Ahmed, gave a speech on the need to design a new political system, his assertions eerily similar to the arguments for 'Guided Democracy' that Southasians have heard repeatedly from past dictators. There has been a clampdown on political activity and protests, with many leaders of both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party arrested on grounds of corruption. Meanwhile, promises to hold elections 'as soon as possible' seem on their way to being conveniently forgotten.

The most recent move was the concerted attempt to push Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed into exile. These mutually antagonistic leaders, alternately presiding over the Dhaka durbar for the past 15 years,

have certainly not been models of democratic governance. Both engaged in intense political bickering, looted from state coffers, encouraged a culture of street-lumpenism, and constricted the institutional development of Bangladesh's democracy. But the one lesson that we have learned from the royal takeovers in Nepal, the military coups in Pakistan, and even the state of emergency in India, is that neat technocratic solutions, backed by the military baton, are almost always unstable – besides being inherently illiberal.

What is happening in Bangladesh follows a familiar script – in countries where democracy has not taken deep roots, the record of corrupt and irresponsible parties leads to public disillusionment with the system itself, and provides the opportunity for conservative rightwing elements to step in. There is initial euphoria among Bangladesh's urban middle class, which is pleased to see the fear-induced efficiency in some government offices, as well as the protest-free streets. There is a rhetorical commitment to democracy, accompanied with pledges that the current situation is merely a temporary arrangement. But once they take over, military regimes do not withdraw voluntarily; often, a significantly messier campaign is needed to oust them.

Bangladeshis should know this better than most. They have lived under military rule, both before and after the War of Liberation in 1971. They have also watched the consequences of such regimes in Pakistan for six decades. Against this backdrop, it was surprising to see even liberal dailies and civil society in Dhaka welcome the army's move in January. Only now are they waking up to the fact that this is not a temporary interlude that will teach the two parties to behave better; rather, it is the long haul of dictatorial rule that seems to be in the cards. The government's decisions to send Khaleda Zia to Saudi Arabia, and prevent Sheikh Hasina from returning to Bangladesh from overseas, will have a disastrous long-term impact on democratic evolution in Bangladesh. The space for legitimate political protest and mechanisms

to communicate grievances will shrink, further strengthening extremists.

The Bangladesh Army seems to have been inspired by General Pervez Musharraf in its use of the political tactic of exiling popular leaders. The brass has also learned to make the right noises in front of the international community. We have thus seen the swift execution of six 'Islamic fundamentalists' – as a sop to the Americans – as well as promises to create a more liberal investment atmosphere, which is music to Indian ears. While the agitation to send the generals back to the barracks will have to come from Bangladeshis themselves, international actors must not repeat the mistake they

have made in innumerable past situations to prop up an autocracy. They must correct their pre-conceived disdain for political parties, which led the Western embassies to get behind the January putsch. The king's disastrous rule in Nepal and Gen Musharraf's current troubles in Pakistan should be enough proof that these arrangements are not sustainable. The focus, however, will be on domestic political players, who have an opportunity to shake the state structure and push the military back – as well as to create a more responsible and institutionalised form of democracy. The next people's movement of Southasia we would wager will be in Bangladesh. ▲

NEPAL

Constituent Assembly, postponed

The past month has seen a charade played by the political parties in Kathmandu, including the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), newly inducted into the government and interim parliament. Everyone knows that the promised elections to the Constituent Assembly cannot be held in June as planned. And yet everyone is comfortable living the lie that they will be held as scheduled. In fact, all sides vociferously hold forth on the necessity of this, all the while hoping desperately that someone else will make the inevitable announcement. A political calamity is predicted upon the failure to hold the polls in June, and no one wants to be seen to have contributed to this through the act of questioning the dates.

An election to a Constituent Assembly (CA), which would restructure state-society relations, was exactly what the Maoists needed to extract from the parliamentary political parties before they could justify giving up their decade-long 'people's war'. For their part, the parties could not agree to a Constituent Assembly until the Maoists convinced them of their intention to lay down the gun. Agreement was reached on these matters in the so-called 'Twelve-Point Agreement', signed between the two sides after half-secret talks in New Delhi in November 2005. That agreement paved the way for the People's Movement of April 2006, and since then the torturous series of negotiations that saw the adoption of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the arrival of United Nations monitors, and the induction of the Maoists into the interim parliament and government. All of these are seen as way-stations on the road to the Constituent Assembly.

Today, the demand for a Constituent Assembly is much more than a means to bring the Maoists in from the jungle. In a country of minorities, all oppressed communities – by ethnicity, language, faith, region and even altitude – have internalised the fact that the state needs to be restructured through the Constituent Assembly. The CA is



Maoist cadres protesting the postponement of Constituent Assembly elections, 14 April

seen as a means to correct historical neglect and injustice, to overturn the control exercised by Kathmandu Valley by pushing through a federal structure, and – something the political class seems to greatly favour – getting rid of monarchy in all forms and configurations.

In the second week of April, it was left to the Election Commission to ask for 110 days to organise the polls after election laws were enacted, and the commissioners did everything but say out loud that elections were impossible in June. Crucial pieces of electoral legislation were still pending with the government and parliament, the logistics were not in place, and a state of fear and intimidation still prevailed in large parts of a country coming out of a decade-long internal conflict. The United Nations representative in Kathmandu let it be known that June elections were neither politically nor technically feasible.

At long last, by the start of the Nepali New Year in mid-April, the political class seemed to have matured enough

to look reality in the eye, and to stop depicting election sceptics as 'royalists' and 'reactionaries'. But even so, as *Himal* goes to press, there seems to be no hurry to declare a postponement. The government continues to move at a leisurely pace, seemingly in the belief that there is no need to make an announcement about what is already known.

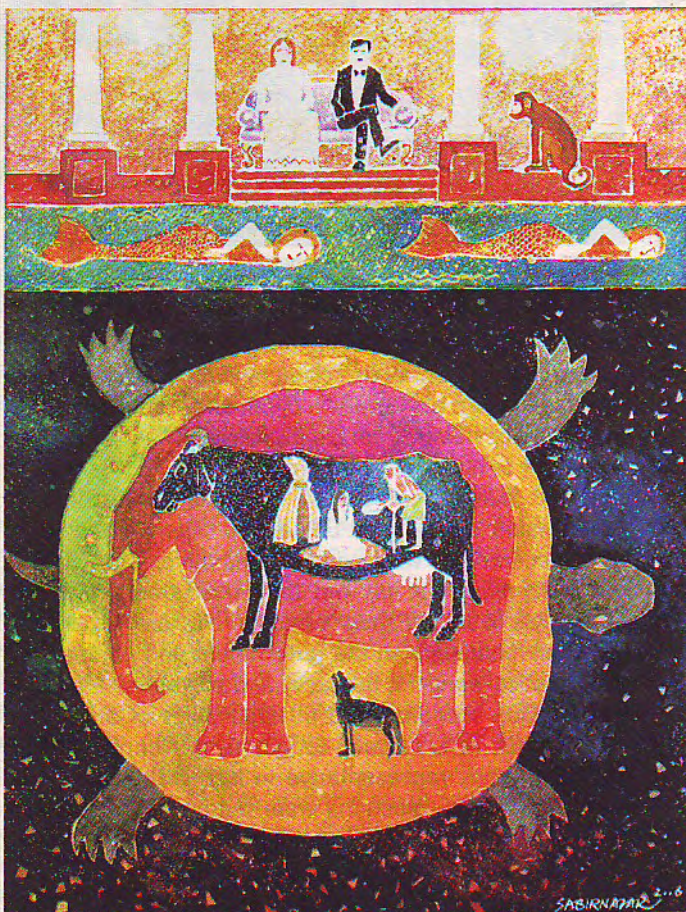
Prepare for fall elections

The scaremongers who claim that Nepali society will crumble if the elections do not take place in June are wrong. To begin with, the law-and-order situation is in shambles due to an incapable Home Ministry and the constant irresponsible acts of Maoist cadres; indeed, things could not get much worse. But the task at hand for responsible social and political leaders is to ensure that the long interregnum that would come as a result of the postponement of polls does not invite lawlessness and anarchy. To prevent the few remaining ultra-conservatives from fishing in troubled waters, some observers in Kathmandu believe that it is important to weaken the monarchy further by taking the title of 'king' away from Gyanendra, cutting the umbilical cord that still links him to the erstwhile royalist army, and taking action against those royal functionaries who have been pronounced culpable for the suppression of the People's

Movement last year.

At the same time, as part of a comprehensive package to ensure stability, and so as to make up for a decade of destruction and lost time, the government must jumpstart the development process, get a few high-profile, employment-generating infrastructure projects underway, and begin the rehabilitation process in earnest. While Nepal's internally displaced have to be reinstated to their homesteads, what is known as 'security-sector reform' must include the induction of a sizeable section of the Maoist fighters into an appropriate unit of the Nepal Army.

It is important for the eight-party alliance, headed by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, to collectively concede the impossibility of elections in June, and simultaneously to announce a new date for polls in the autumn of 2007, after the monsoon and the harvest season are passed. It would not be sensible to delay the elections to next year, because too much depends on the early and credible holding of elections for the CA, free of fear and intimidation. The postponement of five months would allow a countrywide campaign of debate and discussion, even as the CPN (Maoist) gets the reprieve it needs to put together a party organisation that does not really exist at present. It is better that the Maoists have a relatively good showing in a delayed election than that they be routed in a hastily organised one. ▲



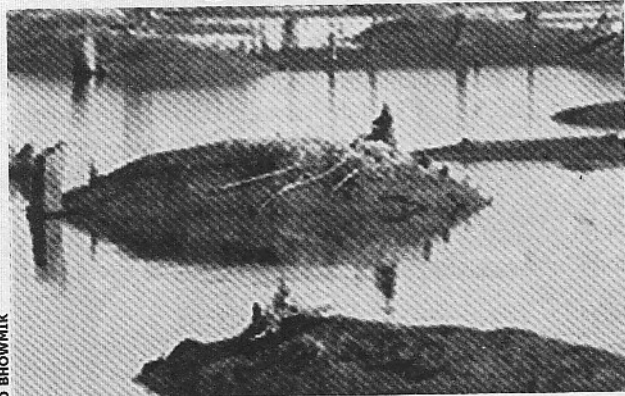
'Rawan'

Inside the turtle, symbolic of the universe, is the short-eared subcontinental elephant. Inside the elephant is the cow, symbolic, in the interpretation of artist Sabir Nazar, of the motherland. Inside the motherland, and within the further circumscription of a Laxman rekha, sits Sita, on the verge of abduction by the devious Rawan. The turtle swims in a dark sea, and Sita is separated from the brightly-lit head of an imperial hall by a moat and a universe. Those who rule this court are far from her daily concerns, her happiness, her troubles. The political disconnect, the distance in understanding, manifests itself in stretches of water, in the stark difference between the dark sea and the bright air. The metropole is far away. Its powerful appear comfortable and happy, lording over a world they do not know. ▲

This is part of a regular series of *Himal*'s editorial commentary on artwork by Sabir Nazar. Watercolour, 18" x 24"

INDIA

Ousted again



D BHOWMIK

A decades-old injustice was reopened recently when hundreds of people in Tripura began returning to their former lands, which had been flooded during the 1970s by a hydroelectric project. The 10-megawatt Gumti

project was originally commissioned in 1974, over the fierce protest of the 40,000 local residents whose lands were to be flooded by the dam's reservoir. Human-rights workers say that less than 20 percent of those

affected were ultimately compensated by the government, due to the fact that the displaced families, mostly Reangs, held no official lease on their traditional lands.

Due to drastically reduced water levels, by mid-March state Power Minister Manik Dey admitted that Gumti was no longer producing any electricity. The problem has reportedly arisen due to agricultural and illegal logging activities in the catchment area – traceable largely to the Reang oustees – which have raised the reservoir's silt bed. Now community members have begun attempting to reclaim

some of the emerging land (see photo). Tripura has around 25,000 landless farmers, and advocates say that they could all be comfortably resettled in the reservoir's 65 sq km, if the government were to agree to dismantle the dam.

At the moment, though, Tripura's government is resisting doing so. Despite promises to undo exactly these types of historical injustices, the state's Left government has responded to the situation by pledging that no land will be reclaimed. Police are now chasing off anyone who attempts to strike root in the dry reservoir bed. ▲

REGION

Cross-sharing stocks

Getting into the spirit of regional synergy just prior to the 14th SAARC Summit, a meeting of the South Asia Federation of Exchanges (SAFE) discussed the possibility of 'cross-listing' local stocks in a Southasia-wide exchange. Officials from the exchanges of the then-seven SAARC countries proposed a regional system through which investors could invest in any company anywhere in Southasia. This would entail the launch of a new SAFE index and exchange-traded fund, which would initially operate within each country and later be traded throughout Southasia.

If it ever comes to fruition, such a system would certainly herald a new era in economic cooperation, through which Indian investors, for instance, could invest in Pakistani companies for the very first time. Such prospects paint a rosy scenario for Nepal and Bangladesh's finance sectors, with observers suggesting that they would be likely to initially receive the most requests for cross-listing. The benefits would not be unlimited, however, since the markets in those two countries are yet to reach the standards of India's. Indeed, critics suggest that such a system would be more appropriate for countries possessing similar markets, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

While true integration of the various exchanges may seem remote for now, a few years ago the very possibility that these various groups could meet would have seemed unimaginable. We can now truly say that Southasia is beginning to look bullish! ▲

PAKISTAN

The big deal

Long-simmering reports of a secret deal in the offing between Pervez Musharraf's government and Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have suddenly picked up significant steam. First, the government fuelled speculation during the first week of April when it halted an investigation of Bhutto by a long-time anti-corruption investigator, Hassan Wassim Afzal.

Just days later, Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad said that talks between the PPP and General Musharraf's administration had "entered into a semi-final stage". Despite the government's subsequent vociferous denials of Ahmed's characterisation, observers suggest that the situation shows either the current chaos in Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz's cabinet, or that the whole charade was a deliberate ploy to confuse the opposition.

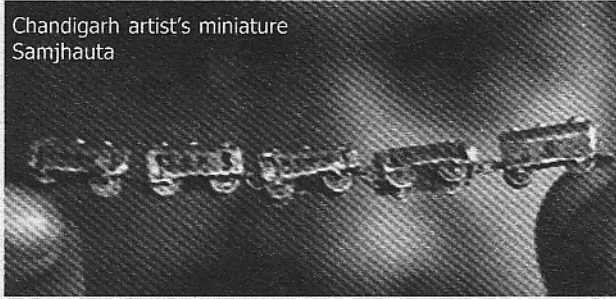
With Islamabad under increasing international pressure to put in place real democratic reforms by the next election, many are now concluding that Gen Musharraf may be ready to accept a government led by Bhutto – if it backs his continued presidency. ▲



A real treat

Samjhauta tickets on the rise

Chandigarh artist's miniature Samjhauta



S SINGH

Following the 19 February bombing that killed at least 68 people on the Samjhauta Express, there has been a surprising surge in passengers clamouring for tickets on the twice-weekly train between Delhi and Lahore. The increase has been so marked that railway authorities have now decided to increase the crossborder train's

maximum number of passengers from 576 to 750.

Wannabe riders have evidently been teeming at railway stations in Lahore and New Delhi, demanding tickets and harassing railway authorities. "Pakistan Railways has requested the Indian authorities to induct two additional passenger coaches with the Samjhauta Express to

accommodate the increasing number of passengers traveling between the two countries," Lahore Divisional Superintendent Muhammad Khalid said in late March.

Kalid also confirmed that, following the February bombing, both India and Pakistan were

cooperating on sharing passenger information as a security measure. With New Delhi and Islamabad in mid-April renewing their agreement on the train for another three years, why not take the opportunity to bump up the Samjhauta's sojourns to thrice weekly? Actually, a daily service would be more like it. ▲

INDIA

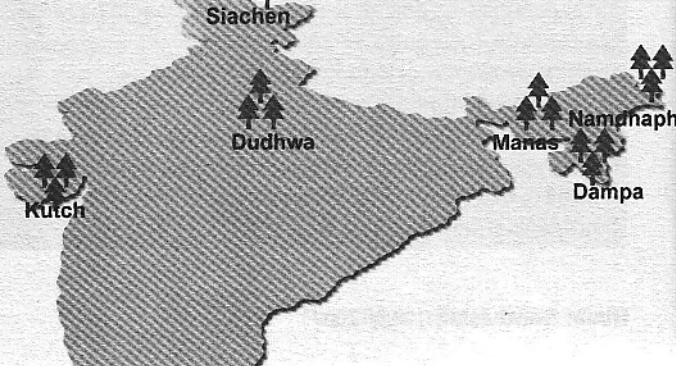
Peace parks

In late March, a meeting was convened in New Delhi by the Indian environment ministry (along with other ministries, including defence) to attempt to identify a likely location for a future crossborder national park. The aim of the meeting was to look at existing parks on India's frontiers, and identify one that could be a candidate for crossborder cooperation with the relevant neighbouring country. In addition to increasing people-to-people cooperation, one environment official said that such a trans-national project would also help with long-term conservation and anti-poaching efforts.

The meeting came on the back of two previous meets held between the ministry and head park officials, who reportedly have offered widespread backing for the plan should the central government approve it. Of particular interest has been the Dampa reserve in Mizoram, Rann of Kutch in Gujarat, Manas in Assam, Dudhwa in Uttar Pradesh and Namdhapha in Arunachal Pradesh.

While the Siachen glacier has frequently been mentioned as one such possibility as well, the prospect seems notable though far-off. Nonetheless, in what observers have dubbed a step towards Manmohan Singh's desire to see Siachen turned into a 'mountain of peace', New Delhi recently began installing seismic sensors on the glacier.

Although there is not much seismic activity near Siachen - rarely registering over one or two on the Richter scale - India's seismic-monitoring network has been sparse to date, and Siachen's military presence made it an easy extension of that network. Indeed, with the project being jointly overseen by the army - and with bilateral talks over Siachen again breaking down in early April - the glacier could now become something of a 'mountain of paranoid listening'. ▲



NEPAL/INDIA

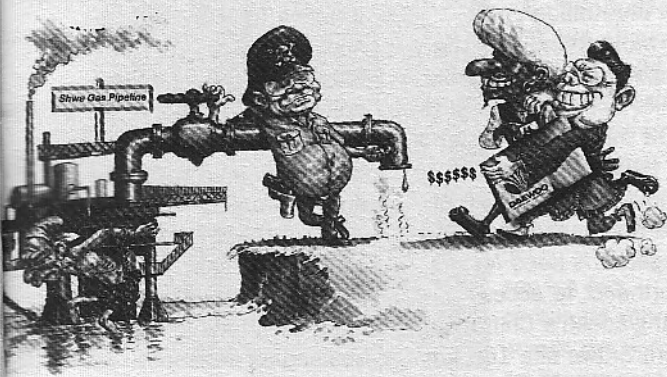
What's the rush?

One of India's largest steel manufacturers, the Bhushan group, in late March said that it would be closing down its Nepal operation. The owners put the decision down to the ongoing flux in Nepal, saying that they could "do better business in India". Bhushan, which is worth roughly USD 650 million, set up shop in Nepal in 2001, employing around 300 workers in Biratnagar town under the name Aarti Strips.

As Nepal's prospects have looked up over the past year, outwardly it would appear that so too have Bhushan's. Company officials say that last year their Nepal operation brought in around INR 5 billion, and that they currently have contracts for INR 1 billion more this year. While general manager Roshit Unnithan says that the Nepal office "didn't suffer a loss" last year, he notes that "the tension became unbearable".

Those headaches have included regular power outages and a stiff export tax, but also the increased instability of the Tarai plains, which has included a step-up in trade-union activities. The move follows a similar decision made last year by Hindustan Steel. Bhushan will now be relocating eastwards, to the pro-industry entrepôts of either Assam or West Bengal. Nepali officials meanwhile believe that Bhushan is making a mistake, leaving just as the country is about to turn the corner. ▲

No Burmese gas?



COURTESY: HARRI LAY

By late March, India's hopes to secure rights to Burma's offshore Shwe gas field appeared to have come to naught. The Myanmar Oil & Gas Enterprise (MOGE) called a meeting between consortium members of the two most lucrative gas blocks in the Shwe field – the so-called A-1 and A-3 blocks, which together hold an estimated 200

billion cubic metres of natural gas. On the table: the possibility of selling most or all of that gas to state-run PetroChina. One Indian consortium member expressed his fear that MOGE had "made up its mind to give the gas to China".

New Delhi dispatched top officials to attempt to salvage the deal, but Rangoon seems to have

decided to quash energy-crunched India's increasingly frantic hopes to pipe in Burma's gas. One obstacle to this plan had been Dhaka's longstanding refusal to allow New Delhi to use Bangladeshi territory for any such pipeline. But two solutions had recently appeared to be in the offing to this problem: India's decision to develop the Kaladan River, from Burma's Sittwe port into Mizoram; and Dhaka's recent decision to go back to the negotiating table regarding transport

through its territory.

As for Rangoon's preference for China, despite India's siding with Burma over a recent United Nations attempt to censure the junta, according to a leaked memo China's steadfast veto of the move in the Security Council seems to have finally swayed Rangoon's decision. When it comes to the crunch, Rangoon evidently trusts Beijing more than New Delhi, even if the latter bends over backwards to pamper the dictatorship. There's a message here for Dr Manmohan. ▲

INDIA/BURMA

India drops Bahadur Shah

After deliberating for nearly six decades, India has finally given up its request for Burma to 'return' the remains of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. Born in 1775 in Delhi, Bahadur Shah was the son of Akbar Shah from his Hindu wife, Lalbai. He attained power in 1837, and was the last in the 300-year line of India's Mughal emperors. A painter, cartographer and poet ('Zafar' was his penname), Bahadur Shah became a figurehead of unity during the rebellion of 1857, and it was expected that he would rule the region after the British were thwarted. Instead, after the failure of the uprising, the British exiled him to Rangoon in 1858. He died four years later, at the age of 87.

The request to have his remains shipped back to his birthplace originated in 1949, when the Bahadur Shah Zafar Memorial Society expressed the need to bring the "mortal remains of the last Mughal king from Yangon to New Delhi". But 58 years later, Indian Culture Minister Ambika Soni recently told Parliament that, "It was decided that the proposal need not be pursued." Soni did not elaborate further on what may have prompted the decision to let Zafar's remains remain, ensconced near the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. ▲



AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

The Pakistani 'roadblock'

Even as Afghanistan was readying itself to officially join the SAARC organisation at the Summit in New Delhi, the Afghan Foreign Minister, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, was warning that Pakistan was standing in the way of the country's integration with the rest of the Southasian region. Spanta was referring to Islamabad's ongoing intransigence towards allowing transit rights for Indian goods bound for Afghanistan.

While Kabul is looking forward to potentially tapping into the soaring economies of the Subcontinent – particularly India's – Islamabad has been holding the transit issue hostage to Indo-Pakistani negotiations, including over Kashmir. Indian businessmen say that flying or shipping goods into Afghanistan (the latter of which is currently allowed through the Karachi port) is prohibitively expensive. At a time when some are wondering about the prospects of a proxy war being played out in Afghanistan between India and Pakistan, the standoff has allowed the latter to hold onto a significant influence advantage in the former – despite the continuing, though lessened, acrimony between Kabul and Islamabad. ▲

Kaladan development



SISTER EDEN

After long discussing the possibility, Indian Union Minister for Development in the Northeast, Mani Shankar Aiyar, has officially announced that New Delhi will be helping to develop the Kaladan River, which

runs between Burma and Mizoram. The announcement followed three days of deliberations in mid-March by the North Eastern Council (NEC), which Aiyar chairs, which were aimed at speeding up the river's development as much as possible.

Prospects for New Delhi's hopes to use the route to transport Burmese gas into India (bypassing Bangladesh) dimmed dramatically in the weeks following Aiyar's announcement, when Rangoon all but

decided to sell most of its gas to China. It is yet to be seen how this development will impact on the Kaladan plan.

More than likely, the impact will be negligible. In its favour, India's USD 103 million refurbishment of the Sittwe port in Burma, at the mouth of the Kaladan, is slated to negate the need for the Northeast to access Bangladesh's Chittagong port. Sittwe sits 160 km from the Mizoram border, and the three-part scheme

in the offing would include the development of a 70-km road from the upstream Burmese port city of Kaletwa to Mizoram. According to Aiyar, "The Sittwe port will be an exit point to mainland India. It is only 12 hours from Haldia, 36 from Vishakapatnam and 48 from Tuticorin."

All of these convoluted plans, one might add, will self-destruct the moment Bangladesh allows itself to be used as a corridor between the mainland and the Northeast. ▲

NEPAL/INDIA

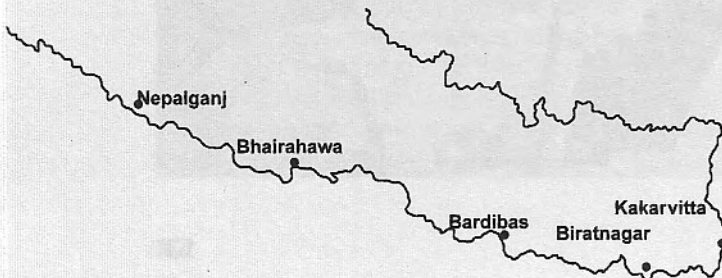
Five small extensions

Although the discussion has long lingered on the block, by the second week of April extending India's rail network to Nepal had reportedly become a "top priority". The Nepal-India border region, long a backwater where the metre-gauge 'choti line' has lingered till now, is thus ready for a broad-gauge makeover.

The reason for the Indian step-up might be linked to China's keenness to extend its own spanking-new train line to Nepal's northern border. Beijing is also planning on extending its rail line (which currently runs only into Lhasa) to the Tibetan town of Chomo, near the Nathula pass into Sikkim. Nathula and the Qinghai-Lhasa passenger-train service both opened during the first week of July last year.

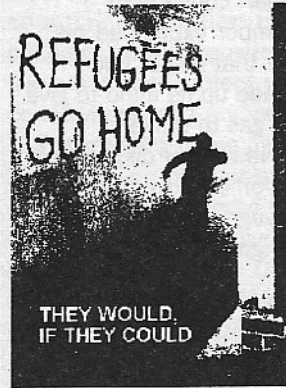
Experts have found that a railroad into Nepal from Tibet across the Himalayan ramparts would be economically unfeasible, but this has not quelled New Delhi's emphasis on tit-for-tat strategic footholds. As such, India's Railway Ministry now wants to extend its rail network to five Nepali cities - Nepalgunj, Bhairahawa, Bardibas, Biratnagar and Kakarvitta - a cumulative track extension of around 160 km.

It might soon also be time to discuss whether the Indian line should not be joined with the Tibetan line, an action that would change the face of this part of Asia. ▲



SRI LANKA

Repatriation quandary



Faced with dramatically escalating levels of human-rights violations in Sri Lanka, European officials have begun reassessing their policies on repatriation of asylum seekers from the island. By the first week of April, the estimated number of internally displaced people throughout the country had risen to

290,000, while international rights groups were stepping up criticism against the Colombo government's increasingly draconian clampdown on dissent.

Against such a backdrop, European countries have continued to repatriate Sri Lankans who have fled the ethnic conflict but fail to meet individual governments' qualifications for asylum. Switzerland, for instance, which recently scheduled a meeting to discuss a possible change in repatriation policy, has received nearly 330 Sri Lankan requests for asylum during the first three months of this year alone. The majority of such requests have come from Tamils. Of those, 23 were officially sent back to Sri Lanka, while another 22 went back of their own accord; another 76 reportedly left Switzerland with no known destination.

Other countries have not yet even begun to have the discussion. In England, for instance, where the arrival of Tamil refugees during the mid-1980s prompted a significant tightening of immigration procedures, officials say that the government currently has no plans to revisit its repatriation policy towards Sri Lanka. ▲

Four decades at the station

After a 40-year lag, Dhaka and New Delhi are nearly set to restart passenger-train service across the Indo-Bangladeshi border. Although irregular cargo service has continued running across the border, no passenger trains

have been allowed to do so since 1965, when the India-Pakistan war sealed the border. It was not until the early 1990s that even a passenger-bus service was allowed to restart between the two neighbours.

The new passenger train, which New Delhi has reportedly been eager to get on the rails, will run from Joydevpur, near Dhaka, to the Sealdah station in Calcutta. The current agreement is not new, but rather an extension of one signed in 2001, which was scheduled to run out in July. A bilateral meeting is scheduled to take place soon, to evaluate the decrepit state of infrastructure, which rumour has it will push off the train's opening until late 2007. Hopefully that will be the project's biggest obstacle. ▲

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

Crossborder jirga

The first major meeting of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Jirga Commission took place over three days in mid-March. Despite the ongoing vituperation between Kabul and Islamabad, reactions following the jirga's first meeting were almost uniformly positive.

In the course of the jirga, members agreed not to trade allegations about the other side, and to adopt a common strategy towards extremist activities. In the near future, a national-level jirga would also be created in Pakistan, which has no tradition of such a body.

The crossborder jirga evidently has its work cut out for it – as particularly noted by its failure to convene as scheduled during the second week of April, due to unassigned “technical” reasons. Problems had already cropped up the week the jirga began its meetings, however, when the Afghan Defence Ministry accused Islamabad of having begun to fence the border between the two countries.

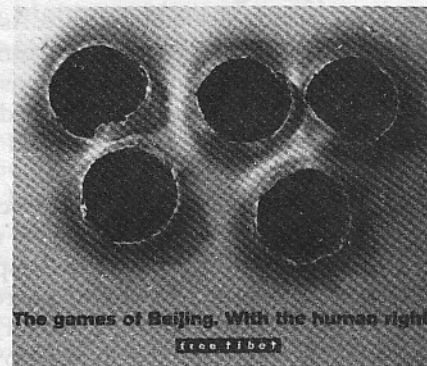
Indeed, by mid-April, Pakistani officials were said to be just waiting for the necessary fencing equipment to arrive. It would seem that the jirga would do well to suggest that Islamabad consult with New Delhi about whether border fences work, given the latter's experience along the Pakistan border. ▲

From Beijing, with love

Perhaps safe in the knowledge that investment dollars (or yuan) cannot buy freedom (or autonomy), the Chinese government has announced that it will be investing nearly USD 13 billion in Tibet. The new construction is to be completed before 2010.

One Tibet official, Hao Peng, has said that the new projects will be particularly aimed at remote herding villages. The money will be spent on 180 separate projects, including the improvement of electricity, telephone and drinking-water infrastructure in rural Tibet; the extension of the new Qinghai-Lhasa train line, as well as the construction of a whole new track linking Lhasa with Tibet's second largest city, Xigaze (Shigatse); and the upgrading of airport facilities.

But the same week that Beijing announced its latest largesse, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) warned that, 500 days away from the start of the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government was still failing to comply with commitments that it had made in 2001 in its bid to land the coveted prize of hosting the 2008 games. In particular, ICT activists emphasised Beijing's failure regarding promises to: protect minority nationality rights; become a more open society; allow foreign journalists to “travel anywhere in China”; and to institute transparent governance throughout the Olympics process. ▲



REGION

Far from home

The Taliban claimed responsibility for a bomb blast in Kandahar on 17 April that took the lives of four Nepali contractors and an Afghan driver who were traveling in a United Nations vehicle. It was one of the deadliest attacks on UN personnel since 2001, and served as a reminder of the large number of Southasians working as peacekeepers in Afghanistan and around the world.

Globally, around 40

percent of UN personnel are made up of workers from the Subcontinent, and the USD 85-a-day salary is a lucrative pull for many. But with so many Southasian boots on the ground, the region's related death toll is striking as well. As of this past March, 354 Southasians had been killed in active duty for the UN – 123 Indians, 95 Pakistanis, 80 Bangladeshis and 56 Nepalis. Four more need now be added to that last figure. ▲

The Dhaka regime's messy surgery

With the two major political parties forcibly sidelined, who is left to fix a broken polity? The fact that the writer of this article is compelled to remain anonymous is perhaps indicative of the sudden democracy deficit in Dhaka.

BY INCOGNITO

Bangladesh's political orchestra is reaching a crescendo, at least for this passage. What comes next may be a long, deafening silence. As the two political dynasties were made to exit the country, the remonstrations of the two heads were heard far and wide. The military-backed interim government's tackling of its envisioned 'minus two' rescue plan for the polity has been neither smooth nor discreet. Despite the noises made out of entrenched political camps, however, it has become clear that there is no turning back for Bangladesh. The tables have been turned.

In January, when the military-backed regime took power with an initial 'emergency' mandate of 120 days (which will end on 10 May), there was no timeframe in place for elections. Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed and his military backers provided such a timeline – elections by the end of 2008 – almost as a gift on the eve of the Bengali New Year. But even as the chief adviser was delivering his address to the nation on 13 April, rumours were already rife of plans to exile Begum Khaleda Zia, chair of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Talk of Sheikh Hasina Wajed, president of the Awami

League, being barred from entering the country was also being heard. For most of April, Dhaka was a city of rumours.

With all forms of political activity banned, there was very little opposition to the action against the heads of the two main parties when it finally took place. With the anti-corruption dragnet picking up politicians from across the political divide, no one dared to speak out. There had been pressure on Khaleda Zia to leave the country since her son Tarique Rahman's 7 March arrest. But it was not until her second son, Arafat Rahman, was picked up in a midnight raid at her residence that, on 17 April, she agreed to depart for Saudi Arabia with her immediate family. One down, another to go, it seemed.

The wait was not long. With no foreseeable obstacle to the plan, on 18 April a government press notice stated that Sheikh Hasina had become a "national-security risk", and was therefore barred from returning to the country from a trip to the US. A day after Hasina had declared the interim government "unconstitutional" in an interview, the government publicised the corruption charges against her. Suddenly, the accusation of political murder was added – a charge that carried with it an arrest warrant. With the travel ban in place, Hasina made an attempt to return to Bangladesh, but was denied entry to an airplane in London on 22 April, the morning the warrant was issued.

Dangerous vacuum

While the attempt to cleanse the political culture overnight is a grand adventure worth applauding, trying to fill the



BILASH RAI

Senior army officials would be reluctant to return power to civilian hands without ensuring safeguards, for a backlash from political quarters that have come under the anti-corruption sweep is a certainty.

vacuum left by such a sudden removal will not only be difficult, but dangerous. Politically, the first signs of cracks were seen immediately prior to Khaleda's planned departure. Many mid- and senior-level BNP leaders had been lying low for fear of prosecution on corruption charges. On the evening of 20 April, they found an armyman-turned-BNP politician, retired Brigadier Hannan Shah, holding consultations with the party chairperson. (Khaleda had already been under house arrest for weeks.) With no one to vouch for or denounce his contention, Shah declared that Khaleda wished to reorganise the party and dissolve the existing committees. Some senior BNP leaders feared a split, while others pointed towards arm-twisting by the army to force-feed the party its agenda.

The Awami League is said to be going through similar gyrations. Both of the parties are showing the inherent weakness of an unyieldingly hierarchical political culture. Does this mean that the interim government should be cheered for dismantling them? Perhaps not. While the international community seemed to have given the military-backed government an initial nod, it appears that the announcement that national polls will be held by late 2008 (along with the Election Commission's elaborate promises of national identity cards, a new voter roll and revamped election rules) might become a means to another end.

On 2 April, the army chief and de facto head of the country, General Moeen U Ahmed, announced: "The aspiring democratic process of Bangladesh and the current transition period allows us an opportunity to develop a new concept, and find a new sense of

direction to the future politics of Bangladesh." This 'new concept', of course, may not necessarily refer to the traditional participatory electoral process known to Bangladesh's electorate. Ahmed went on: "Bangladesh will have to construct its own brand of democracy, recognising its social, historical and cultural conditions, with religion being one of several components of its national identity." This talk of a 'new brand of democracy' was widely and fervently discussed in Bangladesh for the better part of early April, and many political observers characterised it as the first public indication that the armed forces were to implement their own plans for the future of Bangladeshi politics.

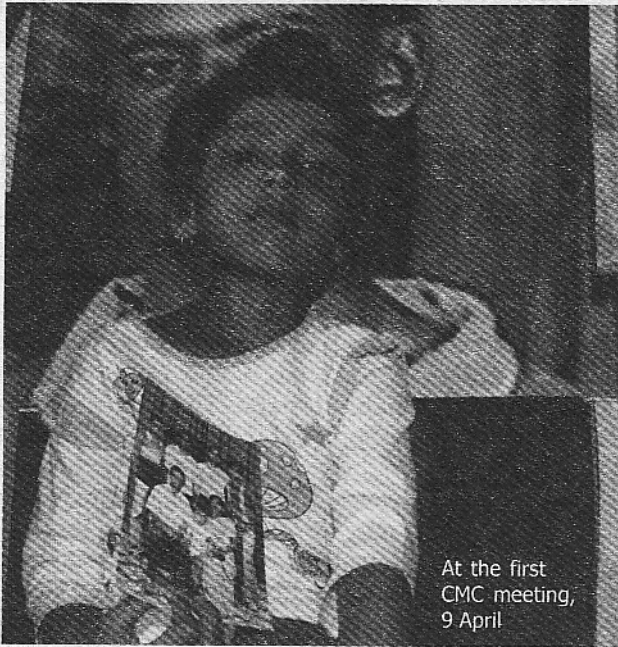
However, like some of the other peoples of Southasia, Bangladeshis have seen previous military-backed governments with 'unique plans', and scepticism was in the air. By late April, there was already word of tension within the armed forces themselves. Ahmed's term as army chief ends in June 2008, which is just prior to the currently stipulated timeframe to hold the national polls. General Masud Uddin Chowdhury, the key proponent in formulating the current emergency rule, is slated to be the next chief. While the actions taken by the interim government might have wide-scale popular support – as is believed in the absence of credible public opinion polls – senior army officials would be reluctant to return power to civilian hands without ensuring safeguards, for a backlash from political quarters that have come under the anti-corruption sweep is a certainty.

In the heady atmosphere of early 2007, many had initially thought of Nobel Prize winner Mohammad Yunus and his brand new political

party Nagorik Shakti, born under the blanket of emergency rule, as a possible successor in the making. But with bitter reactions from various quarters, and given the current subdued state of politics, Yunus has kept relatively quiet. Many observers have also pointed out that, while the BNP has suffered severely in the recent anti-corruption drive, its chief ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami, remains unscathed, with no more than a few minor leaders behind bars. The place of the Islamist forces in the army's radarscope will be something to watch. The execution in March of six activists of the militant Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, convicted for the highly publicised serial bombings of 2005, might have brought to an end one chapter of Bangladeshi militancy. Nonetheless, the patronage received from the Jamaat and the complex web of Islamist sympathy towards such fundamentalists – including from within the army – remains to be probed.

Meanwhile, talk of the political ambitions of military leaders backing a transitional government will undoubtedly continue and progressively escalate until the brass returns to the barracks. But all the talk of establishing a new political party with army support, and of bringing together various splintered political entities, seems to be driven by uncertainty rather than intelligence. In a country that is in desperate need of a clear plan that leads back to the people's mandate, uncertainty coupled with raw power can be a deadly mixture. Social, cultural, political and economic systems cannot be purged overnight by diktat, as the generals seem to think possible. In the meantime, the Dhaka intelligentsia is having second thoughts about this cleansing. ▲

A thriving industry of Tamil extortion



At the first CMC meeting, 9 April

Amidst kidnappings and ransom demands, Tamil businesses in Colombo are downing the shutters. It seems the government couldn't care less.

BY DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI

Sixty-year-old Egamabaram Palaniraja, the owner of Mythili Jewellers in the heart of Colombo, went missing on 12 September last year, along with his 23-year-old son Balasaravanan and employee, Ganesan Muhundan. All three were abducted while returning home at around nine in the evening, just metres away from the Sri Lankan prime minister's office. Two days later, Palaniraja was released 250 km from Colombo, in Polonnaruwa in the North Central Province, and ordered to arrange an "undisclosed" amount of ransom money to secure the release of his son and employee. After extracting millions of rupees, the abductors released both of the youths but retained the vehicle.

For a citizenry that slid into a virtual war last July despite the existence of a truce to which both the government and the LTTE rebels continue to pay lip service, the past few months have been a nightmare. Beyond the stepped-up military engagements, there have been dramatically increased levels of forced disappearances, extortions, extrajudicial killings,

general harassment and intimidation. Amidst widespread human-rights violations in Sri Lanka today, one of the most significant, and most under-reported is the ongoing intimidation, extortion and abduction of affluent Colombo-area Tamil businessmen. This phenomenon was recently referred to as a "thriving industry".

Palaniraja is among the lucky few. Many abducted Tamils never return home, even after paying multi-million-rupee ransoms. S Srikandarajah, a leading sugar merchant, and his driver were abducted in July 2006. But they failed to secure their freedom even after SLR 30 million was paid for their release. While Thirunavakurusu Puvaneshwaran, a successful Tamil businessperson, was released after SLR 1.5 million was extracted as ransom money, trader Maxie Bolton has still not been let go although the requested money was deposited.

More white vans

With the phenomenon of disappearances prevailing in Colombo, its sizeable and economically powerful Tamil population is seized by fear. Not only is it susceptible to forced disappearances by the Sri Lankan Army, the LTTE breakaway Karuna group and occasionally the Eelam Peoples' Democratic Party (EPDP) for alleged connections with the LTTE, its commercial success also puts it at risk. Some of the abducted have been released after severe warnings, while the mutilated bodies of other victims have been recovered near culverts, waterways, paddy fields and roadsides, transmitting a potent message to the living.

Since the resumption of virtual wartime conditions in July 2006, the Civil Monitoring Committee (CMC), a multi-party human-rights group that works in Colombo and its suburbs, has recorded over 80 disappearances. Although there has recently been something of a lull in the numbers of abductions reported, the trend in extortion is on the up and up. A likely indicator of the excessive intimidation has been the increase in the number of Sri Lankan Tamil business families fleeing the island. According to CMC records, over 30 Tamil businessmen have left the island during the past two months, to shift their base of operations to India, Singapore, Malaysia, Europe or West Asia.

These victims tended to lay the blame on the Karuna group and, to a lesser degree, army deserters as well as activists with the EPDP. It was the LTTE that used to kill or demand ransom from the supporters of alternative Tamil political parties such as the EPDP and Karuna faction. But in Colombo today, Karuna activists far overshadow any other outfit in carrying out extortions, with occasional collaboration from government security forces.

While analysts point out that the disappearances do not necessarily have a political element to them – with victims being not just Tamils with origins in northeastern Sri Lanka, but also those of Indian

origin and the occasional wealthy Moor – others note that government complicity is aiding the culture of impunity. Either way, says CMC chairman Sirithunga Jayasooriya, the evidence is incontrovertible as to who is being targeted: “Many victims are from two predominantly Tamil areas, Colombo 6 and Colombo 13. They are also business hubs.”

Many of the victims have only returned to the island following the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), with an eye to investing in their homeland. One Sri Lankan Tamil who keeps houses in Britain and Sri Lanka, who did not want to be named, says that a white van has recently been seen repeatedly near his Colombo residence. The passengers of the vehicle had questioned the man’s neighbours about his return from the UK, and also about his Sri Lankan businesses. “I took a couple of years to formulate a business plan,” he explained. “The business climate created by the truce is what inspired me to return after decades in the UK. Now I have returned here only to be hounded by white vans wanting to find out details about my investments.” He is now contemplating returning to the UK, and abandoning his Sri Lankan venture.

Many others have, of course, already thrown in the towel. A reputed Colombo jeweller, who has received several threatening telephone calls demanding millions of rupees, says that it is not possible to continue his business in Sri Lanka anymore. “I have already selected a location in Chennai to relocate my business,” he said. “It is sad because I ran two jewellery shops for 30 years in Colombo without any problem, and even survived the 1983 communal riots.”

Collusion?

Not only do Tamil businesspeople in Colombo feel physically and commercially threatened, says CMC convenor and Colombo District legislator Mano Ganesan, but matters have been compounded by significant police inaction. “There is a complete breakdown in the law-and-order situation,” he says. “We have provided telephone numbers, some bank-account numbers of extortionists, and eyewitness accounts in certain instances to assist the authorities. They have done absolutely nothing to bring the culprits to book.”

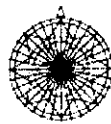
As the pressure mounts, Ministry of Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella admits to “some problems”. But while he adds that a presidential inquiry into the matter “could be appointed”, he refuses to discuss when this will happen. He also denies widespread charges that the government has failed to take action. “It is easy to blame the government,” he said. “Civil society can help the authorities by providing vital information.”

Even while the CMC has been attempting to provide just those details, the allegations of government complicity have received added momentum from within the government itself, particularly from Deputy

Vocational and Technical Training Minister P Radhakrishnan, himself a Tamil. Upon receiving complaints from other Tamils who had recorded their own interactions with extortionists, Radhakrishnan took the matter up with President Mahinda Rajapakse, providing the telephone numbers of several extortionists, along with an appeal for immediate intervention. The only outcome: Radhakrishnan was summoned by the police to explain how he got the telephone numbers.

With the Sri Lankan government failing to control the situation, the opposition is getting vocal, as is the demand for international intervention. Opposition leader Ranil Wickramasinghe says that the government has failed to contain the extortion situation. “The incidents are on the increase. In such circumstances, we are compelled to support the call for an international human-rights monitoring mission,” he said in late April. “People have lost faith in the law-enforcement mechanism. The United National Party is obliged to assist these victims, and do everything possible to prevent an escalation in abductions and extortions.”

The possibility of international involvement in highlighting the disappearances has brought some hope to even victims’ families, says Ganesan. “Given the gravity of the issue, what we ask is so little,” he says. “But for a government that is hell-bent on abetting the crimes by sheer non-action, this may prove impossible.”



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The phantom disappearances of Manipur

Were 400 Manipuri villagers kidnapped and forced across the Burmese border or not?

BY YUMNAM RUPACHANDRA

Last December, more than 1500 people living along the Burmese border in Manipur suddenly began leaving their villages, in flight from a counter-insurgency operation by the Indian Army against cadres of the Manipur People's Army (MPA), the armed wing of the nearly 43-year-old insurgent group United National Liberation Front (UNLF). The Indian Army had just begun a major operation to purge MPA cadres from an area the insurgent group had been calling a "liberated zone". Heavy artillery bombing and mortar shelling followed, and intermittent encounters between the two forces were also reported.

The Indo-Burmese frontier in the southeastern part of Manipur is almost devoid of the presence of state authority and government infrastructure. When this writer trekked into the area a few weeks before the military operation began, the army controlled the area up to Hengshi in Chandel District, beyond which the insurgents held sway. Caught in the crossfire, the predominantly Kuki-Chin villagers on both sides of this line were living a life of daily uncertainty.

As the fighting intensified during the following

days, villagers from Chandel District, southeast of Imphal, began converging at a village called Molcham, seeking safety in numbers. They were soon moved out of this area, however, allegedly by the army, to a village called T S Lajiang, near a new army post. The UNLF has charged the military with having used the villagers as human shields, and of herding them away – under the guise of humanitarian intentions – so that they would not be able to speak to the press about their experiences of the counter-insurgency operation. The army has denied all such accusations.

Another 300 villagers from Molcham managed to make it to the border trading town of Moreh, where another controversy erupted. The refugees were initially provided relief by a local NGO, but were whisked away the day after their arrival to T S Lajiang under controversial circumstances, allegedly by members of two Kuki organisations – the Kuki Students' Organisation and the Hill Tribal Council – in an act said to further the interests of the Indian Army. A group of journalists and state-assembly legislators were due to arrive at Moreh to meet the group just as it was being taken away. As with the previous incident in T S Lajiang, the UNLF characterised the move as an attempt to forestall the villagers from telling the true story of what had taken place in Molcham.

Local media reports told of atrocities by security forces, while military officials reiterated that their forces were engaged in providing a secure environment for the villagers. Such statements were eventually called into question shortly thereafter, during a High Court inquiry into alleged atrocities at Tuyang village. Tuyang was one of the villages that took the brunt of the counter-insurgency operation from December through February this year. The severity of atrocities reportedly committed by the army forced the Tuyang village chief, Limkhojam Haokip, to seek judicial intervention in February. Haokip and a village secretary filed separate writ petitions, charging that



Villagers turn up in Molcham to debunk the kidnap story.

the villagers were being utilised as forced labour by the paramilitary Assam Rifles, and that troops were beating up villagers and preventing the injured from being taken to hospital.

Subsequently, the High Court on 22 February issued a rule of notice to the Assam Rifles, after taking into consideration a report filed by the director of the Manipur Police Training School. Based on the report, the judges observed that the petitioners' allegations appeared to be correct.

Kuki kidnapping

Even as these dramas were playing out, in mid-March nearly 400 villagers who had remained holed up in T S Lajiang along with a group of Indian Army troops suddenly disappeared. Several Kuki organisations charged the UNLF with having kidnapped the villagers and handing them over to the Myanmar Army. These organisations issued a statement alleging that, in the early morning of 13 March, militants rounded up the villagers, beat them up and took them away. The villagers were said to be detained at Lalim Namunta village in Burma, about an hour's walk from T S Lajiang.

Over in New Delhi, soon after the disappearances a rally was organised that was led in part by the Kuki Students' Organisation (KSO). Memorandums were submitted to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh demanding the clearing of Chandel District of UNLF activists. The KSO memorandum charged the UNLF of laying landmines in the area. It also alleged that the Rangoon junta had a "tacit understanding" with the UNLF. The rally turned violent after the Delhi police detained a number of protestors.

Several Kuki groups proceeded to call a *bandh* on the stretch of highway between Moreh and Imphal, continuing to demand the rescue of the missing villagers. But even as the strike was in progress, a media team from Imphal gained access to Molcham, where the villagers who had been reported kidnapped had suddenly appeared to tell their stories. The villagers proceeded to debunk the kidnapping story, saying that they had returned to the area as the fighting had subsided, in order to attend to their *jhum* (shifting cultivation) fields.

After hearing of the media visit, the Kuki Student's Organisation and the Hill Tribe Council attempted to detain the reporters on their way out of the area. Activists took away the journalists' notebooks and cameras, and the reporters were made to sign a declaration promising not to write articles related to the three-day affair. The media team was eventually freed after intervention by a team from the All Manipur Working Journalists' Union. Following intervention by the state police, the journalists' cameras and notebooks were returned, and their stories were widely published.

The Kuki groups cried foul, accusing the media of

bias. They set up their own fact-finding team, which eventually came out with a report suggesting that more than 400 villagers had in fact been kidnapped from T S Lajiang, which the report claimed had been abandoned by the Indian military in mid-February. The Kuki groups said their fact-finding team had also visited the Moreh relief camp, where it found that nearly 500 villagers who had been able to sneak back from Burma were taking shelter. The report charged that about 40 UNLF cadres had "escorted" the 400 villagers, including women and children, to Lallim Namunta, in Burma. Along the way, the group was said to have been accosted by the Myanmar Army, but to have been released following an agreement.

The UNLF categorically denied the allegations. In a public refutation, it accused the ethnic NGOs – namely the Kuki Students' Organisation, the Hill Tribal Council and others – of being used by Indian intelligence agencies as anti-UNLF propaganda tools. At the time of going to press, the controversy continues, with all sides sticking to their stories. The Manipur police's stance is currently unequivocal: no Kuki villagers were abducted.

Despite the outcry from the Kuki NGOs, the governments of both India and Burma are maintaining a silence. Meanwhile, whatever the truth about what happened to the villagers, one thing is clear: peace continues to elude these Manipur borderlands. The people here remain victims to countless 'misunderstandings' amidst the ongoing battle. ▲

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BETWEEN TRIBE AND COUNTRY

The crisis of Balochistan

Islamabad's wilful inability to formulate a just and equitable relationship with Balochistan has led rising numbers of disaffected Baloch citizens to attempt a separation from Pakistan.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MASSOUD ANSARI

A photograph showing a collection of military equipment and ammunition. In the foreground, a brown leather bandolier is laid out, filled with rows of brass-cased bullets. To its left, a dark, cylindrical object, possibly a magazine or part of a rifle, lies on the ground. The background consists of dry, rocky terrain with sparse vegetation under a clear sky.

Baloch bandolier
and jutis

For the past two years, the eerie silences in the rugged expanses of Balochistan have been shattered by the screams and thuds of mortars. When the first rocket attack struck Quetta back in 1998, it was considered an aberration. According to official estimates, militants have fired over 30,000 mortars in the province since the insurgency picked up steam in 2005. During that year alone, nearly 1570 attacks were carried out, and they were not confined to tribal areas. Instead, insurgents belonging to the outlawed Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and fighters of the Marri and Bugti tribes have targeted the Pakistani armed forces and foreign workers. There have been pitched battles between the paramilitary Frontier Corps and the insurgents.

Recently, tensions have risen to near breaking point. "I won't say it is the beginning of the end, but it certainly is not an easy task by any means to completely quell these insurgents, who are thriving on the very genuine grievances of the people," says Nawab Haji Lashkari, a chieftain of Raisani tribe.

The Raisanis form one of Balochistan's main tribes, mostly found in the province's Dadhar and Sibi districts, where vast archaeological ruins have been recently discovered that indicate continuous habitation from around 7000 BC to 2000 BC. This place of antiquity is today mired in the tensions of a modern-day tussle for power between a national capital and a province. "No one can reverse the course of history," says Lashkari. "But they have to make a tenfold greater effort now to make people feel a part of the system, instead of trying to silence them with the barrel of a gun." By 'they' Lashkari means the Islamabad administration.

Lashkari himself lives in a fortified house in Quetta, where heavily armed tribesmen keep constant vigil over the movement on the roads and trails. Such precaution is understandable, given the host of tribal enmities in which his kinsmen are involved. Lashkari's father, Sardar Ghous Bakhsh Raisani, a former governor of Balochistan, is thought to have been killed by Rind tribesmen during the 1980s over a local dispute. Since then, several dozen men from the Rind and Raisani tribes have been killed in a rivalry that is yet to be settled. The heads of both tribes now live in fortified compounds similar to Lashkari's, and move only under heavy guard.

Balochistan today is a hornet's nest marked by feuds amongst its tribes leavened with disgruntlement and anger targeted at the federal government. The province's total population is around seven million, and is divided into several tribes – the Raisani, Zehri, Bugti, Marri, Rind and Mengal, to name the most prominent. Even though they mainly speak either Balochi (a tongue with origins in present-day northwestern Iran) or Brahui (a Dravidian language), each tribe has its own chieftain and insists on asserting a separate identity. These groups have long fought

each other, and the feuds tend to be longstanding.

In recent months, Baloch leaders have tried to buck the trend of historical rivalry in order to target Islamabad as the common enemy. Angry youths from different tribes have come together to take up the gauntlet against the capital. Although not every Baloch is a part of the armed struggle, everyone is seething with anger against what is widely referred to as the "Punjab-dominated" federal government.

The current armed struggle in Balochistan is hardly a new phenomenon. As a result of the colonial 'Great Game' during the 19th century, the people of what could be loosely termed Balochistan – a region inhabited by tribes that accepted affinity to each other – were forcibly divided between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even after Independence and the creation of Pakistan in August 1947, for more than a year present-day Balochistan remained only loosely federated to Pakistan. In 1948, however, it was formally annexed – against the will of the people of Balochistan, many say. This discontentment at being forced to join the federation has led to three movements of independence.

The first of Balochistan's armed movements was led by Karim Khan during 1948, beginning very soon after the area's annexation. The second erupted in 1968, and was led by Nawab Nowroz Khan. Both of these ended quickly. But following 1971, Baloch tribesmen took a cue from Bangladeshi nationalists, who on the other side of the Subcontinent had successfully wrested their independence from the Pakistani state after years of disaffection. The year 1973 saw the emergence of a major insurgency in Balochistan. Many Baloch tribes, mainly led by Marri and Mengal chiefs, took part in this struggle, which lasted for nearly five years. As with the earlier two, this armed movement too was ruthlessly crushed by the Pakistan Army. As the relationship between the province and the rest of the country – and particularly the capital – has evolved over the past three decades, sentiments that motivated the three insurrections of the past have, if anything, been sharpened.

Watan ya kafan

Following the step-up in violence in 2005, the old agenda of Balochistan's militants – that of 'snatching more rights' from the central government in order to exercise greater control over the province's abundant natural resources – has for the first time received a serious hearing in the rest of Pakistan. This attention of opinion-makers in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad

'We have been Baloch for more than 7000 years. We became Muslim some 1400 years ago, and have been Pakistanis for just 60 years.'

From the province's 1948 accession by Pakistan to the present, Baloch nationalists have ruled Balochistan for a total of just 37 months.

can largely be attributed to the dramatic killing, on 26 August of last year, of the renegade tribal leader Nawab Akbar Bugti, at age 79. Not only was Bugti's killing by the armed forces startlingly brutal, the order for his assassination is believed to have come directly from General Pervez Musharraf.

Nawab Bugti was not necessarily one of the province's most popular leaders, but his assassination has generated a grievous sense of injury among the Baloch. On the streets of Quetta, many readily proclaim that Bugti's assassination will have far-reaching consequences, for both the province and Pakistan.

Warns Haider Bhurgri, a Baloch development worker, "General Musharraf may think that he has gotten away with the murder of Nawab Akbar Bugti, but his killing will always remain one of the major charge sheets against the federation of Pakistan." Bhurgri says that the fallout of Bugti's killing may not become evident as some activists may wish, but he notes that "the course of future action is certainly set". Bhurgri's frustration is shared by many Baloch, as also his words regarding a 'future action', which is a clear reference to the eventual dismemberment of present-day Pakistan and the emergence of an independent Balochistan.

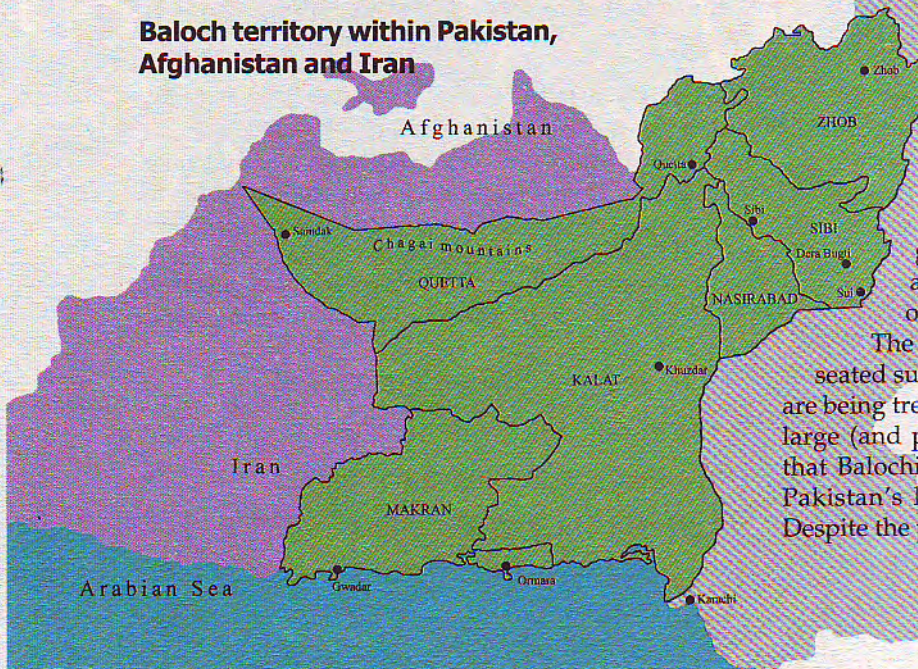
People may look for signs of what is to come in different ways, but the Baloch opinion with regards to the future remains largely united. Using a traditional method of predicting the future, one local sardar studies the bones of a butchered goat, and predicts Balochistan's independence. "Balochs, who are born in these vast lands, are very independent people by nature," he says. "I can tell you it should not take more

than ten years before we attain independence." His clansmen gather around and listen attentively to their chief's 'forecast'. They too claim to see in the fleshless bones of the goat a future very much as their sardar has described. The chieftain continues, with evident bravado: "We have been Baloch for more than 7000 years. We became Muslim some 1400 years ago, and have been Pakistanis for just 60 years."

The sardar who would divine the future did not want to be identified. Despite obvious disgruntlement with the Pakistani state, except for a noteworthy few, most sardars prefer not to be vocal about the separatist desire, fearing a backlash from Islamabad. Privately, however, many openly discuss independence. But while the elders remain circumspect, Baloch youths are becoming increasingly aggressive, and many today work to make their desire for independence as public as possible. Such a tendency was evident in the aftermath of Nawab Bugti's assassination, when a major tribal jirga was called by the Khan of Kalat to decide on the course of action to be taken. The meeting was attended by all the local tribal heads, and an overwhelming number of young people also showed up. They attempted to pressure the elders to call for an independent Balochistan, with some threatening to otherwise set themselves afire. Eventually the elders prevailed, telling the gathered youth that it was too early for such sloganeering, which they said could end up causing more loss for the province. Instead, the jirga demanded that Islamabad provide Balochistan with more autonomy and more rights for its people, as was promised to them when they joined Pakistan nearly six decades ago.

Notwithstanding the success of moderates during the 2006 jirga, walls across Balochistan today reverberate with graffiti for a 'Greater Balochistan'. 'Watan ya Kafan' is the rallying cry: either to attain independence, or a willingness to end up in a coffin. A proposed national anthem for an independent Balochistan is currently in circulation, and parallels are regularly drawn with the rumblings in East Pakistan pre-1971.

Baloch territory within Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran



The provincial colony

Although each of the three Baloch uprisings (not counting the current agitation) has eventually been subdued by the military, none of Pakistan's governments has ever undertaken a serious attempt to deal with the roots of the anger on which Baloch nationalism is founded.

The source of disenchantment lies in the deep-seated suspicion among the Baloch people that they are being treated by both Islamabad and the country at large (and particularly Punjab) as a colony. The fact that Balochistan constitutes more than 42 percent of Pakistan's landmass is presented with vehemence. Despite the province's massive mineral and petroleum

reserves, development and living standards in the province remain extremely low, even by Pakistani standards, and this goes to the heart of the matter: The Baloch are being made to bleed for the sake of Pakistan.

The first deposits of natural gas in Balochistan were discovered in Sui in 1953. Since then, the national economy has benefited enormously from this cheap source of energy, although no royalty was offered to Quetta until 1980. That meagre amount has now remained static for more than two and a half decades. Although household and commercial gas was supplied to Punjab as far back as 1964, Quetta had to wait until 1986 to be connected – the same year that Islamabad established a military garrison there. Similarly, Dera Bugti District, home to the Sui gas fields, go connected to gas only because a paramilitary camp was opened there in the mid-1990s, and needed the service. Even today, only four of Balochistan's 26 districts are supplied with gas – as compared to nearly every village in Punjab and Sindh.

A copper project in Saindak, in Chagai District near the Iranian border, was originally supposed to train and employ local youth. The project remained in limbo between 1996 and 2005 due to Islamabad's unwillingness to provide PKR 1.5 billion of working capital. In 2005, the project came under Chinese management. The Metallurgical Construction Corporation (MCC) of China, which has been given the project on a ten-year lease, is now to invest roughly USD 1.4 billion, in return for 50 percent of the plant's profits. Out of the remainder, 48 percent will go to the federal government, while just two percent will stay in Balochistan.

For their part, companies working in Balochistan say that their operating costs in the province are extremely high, since enormous royalties have always been paid to the Sardar of Sui, Nawab Bugti, and some of the other chieftains. S Munsif Raza, the chief executive of Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL), one of the country's oldest and largest oil and gas companies, admits that although his company has not paid cash, it provides diesel, medicine and other materials to the tribal chiefs. "All the companies working in Sui have to oblige them or else they won't be allowed to work," says Raza. Likewise, contractors who work in Sui are paid more than those who do the same jobs in other areas. "We pay up to 75 percent less to contractors doing work in the gas fields in Sindh than to those who work in Sui. Their costs increase because they have to put in more money to ensure security," says Raza.

Whenever Balochistan's economic backwardness is discussed, officials in Islamabad also tend to repeat that refrain – that it is due to the avarice of the tribal chieftains, particularly Sardar Khair Bakhsh Marri, Sardar Attaullah Mengal and the late Nawab Akbar Bugti. Gen Musharraf has called these three "corruptible and corrupt", and dubbed them



Following the air assault, local officials used Nawab Bugti's trademark glasses to confirm his death.

impediments to the construction of "mega-projects in particular and to development in the province in general". They act as impediments, he says, "for fear that their traditional hold on their areas may be weakened by modernisation".

But many observers are convinced that this deflection of blame is but a smokescreen. "This is absolutely incorrect and a lame excuse," says 'Hafiz', a Quetta teacher who does not want his identity revealed. "They have used this to justify the stepmotherly treatment meted out to us since the very outset. There are only two or three sardars who had been declared 'renegades' by various governments. These sardars may have sway over three districts, but what would the government say to the underdevelopment of the rest of the province?" When it comes to these tribal heads, Hafiz continues, the amount of power the state has in Balochistan can be gauged by the fact that Islamabad has now killed one of these sardars, another is in hiding, and the third has been imprisoned. "And still they are holding these chieftains responsible for underdevelopment!"

Hafiz adds that Nawab Bugti was part of the government several times over a period of 40 years. In 1958, he was elected to the National Assembly, following which he briefly served as minister of state (handling home affairs) in the government of Malik Sir Feroz Khan. In 1973 he served as governor of Balochistan, and in 1989 was elected the province's chief minister. In 1993 and again in 1997, Bugti was elected to the National Assembly, representing the Jamhoori Watan Party, Balochistan's largest political unit. However, his stints in the government did not seem to significantly change the equation between the province and the Centre. In fact, Nawab Bugti resigned from government posts on several occasions, due to disagreements with the federal government's Balochistan policies.

The present chief minister, Jam Muhammad Yousif, is also a chief of his tribe, as was Zulfikar Magsi, the previous chief minister. "So why has there been no

Every time a new chief minister has been installed by Islamabad, the perception is that the province continues to be run by federal diktat – almost as if by remote control.

development work carried out in these areas?” Hafiz asks. “Why are there still no schools, no colleges, no roads and no hospitals in these areas?” It may be worth noting here that, from the province’s 1948 accession by Pakistan to the present, Baloch nationalists have ruled Balochistan for a total of just 37 months. These include the eight-month chief ministership of Sardar Attaullah Mengal (*see accompanying interview*), which ended in February 1973 with the dismissal of his government; and the 17-month term of Nawab Akbar Bugti, who resigned as governor after a disagreement over the deployment of the Pakistan Army in Balochistan as part of the crackdown on the National Awami Party. Nawab Bugti’s term as chief minister also lasted for just 17 months; he resigned in August 1990 because he could not agree with Benazir Bhutto’s government on the rights of the province. Sardar Akhtar Mengal’s one-year term as chief minister ended in July 1998 following the decision of the Pakistani Muslim League to withdraw support to the ruling alliance in the province.

While the reasons may be various, the lack of infrastructure and services is readily apparent on the ground. Throughout Balochistan, there is neither a modern cardiology nor a dialysis centre, and patients able to do so travel the thousand miles to Karachi for such treatment. Similarly, schools and colleges, if they exist at all, are under-staffed and unable to provide any kind of quality education. Again, those who can afford it send their children to study in the cities of Punjab or Sindh.

Even as Gen Musharraf has often conceded that the graduates from Balochistan are the worst prepared in the country, he has never publicly delved into the reasons behind this anomaly. The fact is, successive Islamabad governments have simply never made an effort to staff Balochistan’s educational institutions with qualified teachers. Asks Jamil Mengal, a Quetta local: “When they can set up excellent schools in the remote areas of Punjab, such as Bahawalpur or

Marri, why has no effort ever been made to set up a proper school to impart quality education to the people of Balochistan?”

The federal government is today engaged in muzzling independent voices from Balochistan. Over the past two years, after Islamabad loosened its media policy and allowed private players to get into broadcasting, almost every province has set up one or two television channels in the regional language. However, when a Quetta-based journalist named Munir Mengal tried to set up a Balochi channel, he was arrested by intelligence agents. Mengal has now been missing for two years. The government has officially denied that Mengal is in its custody; but privately, officials concede that he was picked up after the intelligence agencies received reports that he was planning to set up a satellite TV channel to uplink from Singapore. The Balochistan Liberation Army had allegedly provided him with financial assistance, with an eye towards promoting the nationalist cause.

“Forget about roads or fancy buildings. Just look at the basic facilities of the modern world – the education, health and other social indicators in the province,” says Saleem Baloch, based in Quetta. “They are in shambles when you compare them with Pakistan’s other underdeveloped areas, outside Balochistan.” He says that such a situation has increasingly compelled the Baloch people to pay more and more attention to the rhetoric of the secessionists. “We are providing the most precious source of energy, especially natural gas, to the entire country. And yet we continue to live in the pastoral age, where man and animal share water from the same ponds!”

The lack of basic infrastructure for the majority of Baloch is all the more stark when contrasted with the province’s wealth of natural resources. Besides copper, oil and natural gas, Balochistan is host to large deposits of coal, silver, gold, platinum and aluminium. In addition, significant deposits of uranium have also been found in the province, which feed Pakistan’s need for weapons-grade fissile materials.

Along the Makran coast

Since the inception of the Pakistani state, Baloch politics have been factionalised by federal interference. With few exceptions, every time a new chief minister has been installed by Islamabad, the perception is that the province continues to be run by federal diktat – almost as if by remote control. One particularly egregious example of this disconnect was the detonation of a nuclear bomb in the Chagai mountains in May 1998: neither the Provincial Assembly members nor the chief minister were taken into confidence before that test. Besides a nuclear testing ground, Balochistan continues also to serve as the main base for Pakistan’s space programme and rocket experimentation.

None of Islamabad’s administrations have promulgated a serious policy of development in the



The armed resistance

Anti-Islamabad sentiment has seen the rise of an extensive armed resistance in Balochistan, although not much is known about the armed groups themselves. It is believed that young men are trained in tactics of guerrilla warfare in several camps, with estimates of the number of camps ranging from 15 (official figures) to 40 (according to journalists quoting local residents). The camps, each of which is said to house 300-500 recruits, are believed to be located in militarily strategic areas, using abandoned facilities built by the Pakistan Army during its 1973 operation against Baloch nationalists.

There are currently two known armed groups. The **Baloch Liberation Army** is an amorphous, underground organisation that is believed to have emerged in the University of Balochistan, in Quetta, during the 1970s. Left-leaning members of the Baloch Student's Organisation are thought to be the BLA's most important component. To establish the BLA as a countervailing force in a country perceived to be the weakest link in the international-coalition chain, the former USSR is believed to have supplied the BLA with money, arms and logistical support. The fall of the USSR was succeeded by a period of silence surrounding the BLA.

Following its ouster from Kabul, the presence of the Taliban in Pakistani-Afghan border areas prompted the US to establish its own spy network, to crosscheck the information made available to them by the ISI. Anti-Taliban nationalist elements, whether Pashtun or Baloch, were employed as the best available resource for the purpose of tracking Taliban activities.

According to some sources, Khair Baksh Marri's sons – Ballach Khan Marri, a member of the Balochistan provincial assembly, and Meheryar Khan Marri, a former provincial

minister – are part of the BLA's leadership. Ballach Khan Marri has, however, publicly refuted this charge, even as he has expressed his support to the BLA's cause. BLA members are held to be from both the Bugti and Marri tribes, while members of the Mengal tribe are also believed to be joining its ranks of late. The BLA is said to have upwards of 5000 fighters, most of them having been trained in Afghanistan.

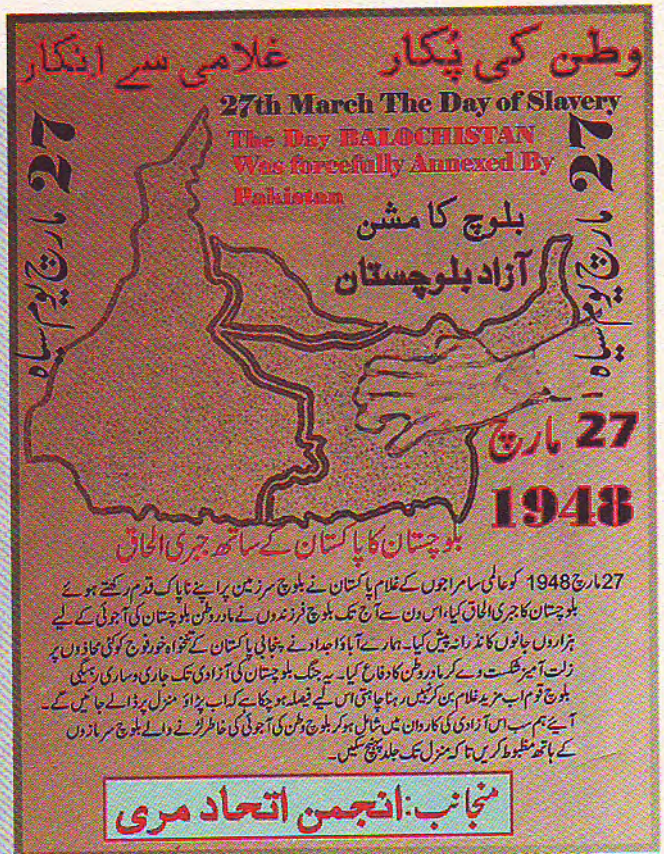
Websites such as *balochvoice.com* and *balochwarna.org* carry details of the armed actions carried out in Balochistan by the BLA. Journalists who have visited BLA training camps say that the group possesses Kalashnikov automatic rifles as well as machine-guns, rocket-launchers, anti-aircraft guns, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades. They are said to be well supplied with walkie-talkies and satellites phones. The group's targets tend to be government buildings, rail lines, telephone and gas installations, power-transmission lines, passenger trains carrying military personnel, and paramilitary road convoys.

Although the BLA was outlawed in 2006, it claims to retain significant public support. Out of more than 2000 respondents to an opinion poll on *balochvoice.com*, 85 percent expressed support for the BLA.

While officials deny the existence of any militant group other than the Baloch Liberation Army, some sources give credence to the existence of a second armed group

of Baloch youth called the **Baloch Liberation Front (BLF)**. While newspaper offices report receiving telephone calls from the BLF claiming responsibility for various bomb blasts and rocket attacks, these claims have never been verified. The BLF is also sometimes referred to as the Baloch People's Liberation Front (BPLF).

As for funding, in addition to kidnappings of and 'collections' from non-Baloch industrialists and workers in the province, the ISI alleges that the BLA and other Baloch nationalist forces receive funds from neighbouring countries, including India and Iran. Others suggest that these armed groups have close links with drug traffickers who operate in the border areas, and who are provided shelter in Iran. Allegations have also been made that members of the ruling family of the United Arab Emirates provide financial assistance to Baloch armed groups, with an eye towards disrupting the new Gwadar port, which would compete in the future with the lucrative port at Dubai.



Baloch nationalist poster

Missing in action



Human-rights violations in Balochistan, rampant for almost six decades, have peaked since 2001, when the Pakistan Army began operations there. Both local Baloch organisations and international human-rights groups have noted large-scale disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, and generally the

use of excessive force by security and intelligence agencies.

The increase in militarisation – including reports of F-16 aircrafts and helicopter gunships being used against settlements, in contravention of international humanitarian law – has led to civilian deaths and widespread displacement. Taking note of the deteriorating human-rights situation, the US State Department's 2006 country report on Pakistan said that Islamabad's human-rights record "remained poor."

Disappearances in Balochistan are a key area of concern. The military intelligence agencies, including the ISI, reportedly arrest civilians, detaining them in what can only be called torture camps. After remaining in detention for up to 12 months in facilities that are off-limits to the public, the inmates have emerged to

province, even while the rest of the country has benefited greatly from Balochistan's plentiful natural resources. For instance, the multi-billion dollar deep-sea port in Gwadar, which was inaugurated in March this year, was approved by neither the Provincial Assembly nor the Balochistan government. Rather, the massive project was handed down by fiat from Islamabad in the name of development. Against such a backdrop, Baloch nationalists are feeling so disillusioned with the system that today they perceive these mega-projects as attempts not only to plunder their resources, but also to marginalise and colonise the local people.

Since Independence, 95 percent of Balochistan has been dubbed a 'B-area' by the Islamabad authorities. While 'A-areas' encompass urban centres such as Quetta, Sibi and Loralai, all tribal and other areas outside of municipal limits are known as B-areas, which means that they are ruled by the 'Levies forces', or the semi-private armies of pro-government sardars. Ironically, when Islamabad recently began initiating large development projects in Balochistan, it found the Levies forces incapable of handling local insurgents. As such, government officials decided to dispense with

Baloch nationalists are feeling so disillusioned with the system that today they perceive the mega-projects as attempts not only to plunder their resources, but also to marginalise and colonise the local people.

their services, and to bring some areas under the regular administration. Other areas where the government has major interests, however, are likely to come under the vigil of the Pakistan Army.

The government is now planning to construct military garrisons in the three most sensitive districts of Balochistan – Sui, with its gas-producing installations; Gwadar, with its grandiose port project; and Kohlu, the 'capital' of the Marri tribe, to which most of the nationalist hardliners belong. The government insists that the construction of garrisons goes hand in hand with road construction and the setting up of schools and hospitals. Nationalist leaders, however, view these cantonments as outposts of control and repression, not development. Since these installations are not located near sensitive frontier areas, the apprehension seems well founded that the army will not be used to exert control over an external enemy, but rather over disgruntled local elements.

Beyond outright oppression, the apprehension remains that along with the funding of massive national projects will come a flood of outsiders. When the government first announced plans to construct the Gwadar port in 2003, many nationalists opposed it, fearing the marginalisation of the local population by an influx of migrant labour. Parallels are drawn with Karachi, where the indigenous Sindhis have now become a minority. The new coastal highway between Gwadar and Karachi, which has reduced travel time considerably, has also become an object of provincial paranoia. Before the government announced the development of Gwadar, an acre of land was going for as little as PKR 15,000. Nowadays, a plot of just 1000

recount harrowing tales of physical abuse, confinement in narrow cells, and blind-folded solitary confinement for days on end.

The independent Lahore-based Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reports: "In some cases it is not known where they are being detained, and furthermore the government has also not disclosed the identities of persons arrested during these operations." The HRCP also notes that the government gives contradictory accounts of the number of persons arrested in Balochistan.

While no official statistics are available, rights groups have attempted to document cases of missing persons. But reliable data is difficult to compile, and the range of estimates is very wide. According to Baloch sources, about 6000 Baloch persons have disappeared over the

past six decades. The HRCP, in its report for 2006, says that of the total 99 abductions that took place in the country, 73 were from Balochistan. The number would be higher, but families are often hesitant to come forward due to warnings by intelligence agencies.

The Pakistani interior minister, Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao, stated in December 2005 in the National Assembly that over 4000 persons had been detained in Balochistan since 2002. Of this number, Sherpao continued, less than 200 people have been presented before the courts, therefore implying that the remainder are being detained incommunicado and/or have disappeared. Despite the high number of cases of various abuses, no law-enforcement or military personnel has been punished for such actions. Impunity is a key

factor in enabling the ongoing human-rights violations.

Families of some missing Baloch nationalists have petitioned the courts for redress, claiming that government agencies are detaining their relatives without due process. Last November, the Supreme Court ordered the interior ministry to disclose the whereabouts of 41 illegally held detainees. Since then, Islamabad officials say that 25 have been released, although human-rights groups have only accounted for 18. It is widely believed that the Supreme Court's proactive stance on disappearances and impunity might have played a part in Pervez Musharraf's ouster of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry in March, which has since generated significant country-wide protest. 🕌

- Laxmi Murthy

square yards fetches up to PKR 5 million. This is a sum far beyond the reach of ordinary Balochs.

Another port recently developed is Port Qasim on the Makran coast, built in cooperation with Kuwait. The Jiwani peninsula, near the Iranian border, is being developed as a strategic airport together with a berthing facility for naval ships. Jiwani and nearby areas are also being explored for petroleum, while some Chinese firms aim to explore offshore for oil reserves. The Makran coast also reportedly has a covert port facility near Ormara, used by Pakistan's Hangor Class submarines. There have also been recent indications that Adi and Damb, on the Sonmiani Bay, are being developed as strategic ports, reportedly with US assistance.

Chinese interest in Balochistan – described by some as the 'Gateway to the Central Asian heartland' – is significant. Aside from its collaboration with Pakistan in nuclear and missile technology, and its development of mining facilities and the Gwadar port, China is interested in a joint operation with Iran and Pakistan for laying oil and gas pipelines to run from the Makran coast through inland Balochistan, Sindh, Punjab and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, to destinations in China's Xinjiang province. Amidst the modern 'great game' being played out on the Baloch landscape, the locals feel un-consulted and marginalised, and have decided one more time to try and flex their considerable muscle.

CIA, KGB, RAW

The current crisis in Balochistan erupted following the January 2005 rape, allegedly by an army captain, of

Shazia Khalid, a medical doctor working for Pakistan Petroleum Limited in Sui. Before any official inquiry was conducted, Gen Musharraf publicly stated that no army captain had been involved. Although an inquiry was eventually made, the government has not publicised details of its findings, nor disclosed the name(s) of the guilty. Over the past two years, this issue has infuriated Baloch leaders, for whom Baloch honour has long been a cause around which they have rallied their followers. In an attempt to stem the fallout from the incident, government officials lashed out at Nawab Bugti and his tribesmen, accusing them of blackmailing the government.

Bugti began to be described as being a mastermind behind the Baloch Liberation Army, and accused of securing its support from neighbouring India. Other than the fact of its emergence in the 1970s, the BLA's origins remain unclear (*see box*). It is known to be fighting for Balochistan's independence, and has been held responsible for most of the militant attacks carried out in Balochistan over the past eight years. The BLA was officially outlawed last year, after a crisis began brewing around the case of Shazia Khalid.

Since the army operation began in Balochistan two years ago, a significant (though unknown) number of Baloch people have disappeared after being detained on charges of "spying for an enemy country", or for alleged connections with the BLA. The independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan maintains that 400-500 people are currently missing, while nationalist leaders place that number at more than 4000. Many of those who have been picked up have either been Bugti tribesmen or otherwise had connections with Nawab

Bugti. The government has continuously refuted charges of mass arrests, but Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao has publicly admitted that around 4000 people have been arrested in connection with the Baloch conflict. Meanwhile, for two years Pakistan's armed forces have indiscriminately bombed civilian settlements in Balochistan. It is a campaign of fear marked by disappearances, torture and custodial killings.

For their part, many Islamabad policymakers profess to be convinced that the reasons behind the Baloch unrest are to be found in foreign intervention, and their finger points to India, Afghanistan and Iran. "All this violence is a part of a greater conspiracy," Gen Musharraf said in a countrywide address a few days after Nawab Bugti was killed. "These militants would not be challenging the government so openly without the back-up of a foreign hand." Without naming any other country, he claimed that surrendered militants had disclosed to authorities how massive loads of weapons and tonnes of rupees were being supplied to them from the governments of neighbouring countries. (And indeed, both before and after Nawab Bugti's murder, dozens of his commanders publicly admitted that money and weapons had been supplied to them by sources in India.)

Some government officials in Balochistan even suggest that the BLA's two main leaders – Berhmada Bugti, the grandson of Nawab Bugti, and Hairbiyar Marri, the son of Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri – are currently residing in Afghanistan at the invitation of Hamid Karzai, allegedly on the insistence of India. Although available information does indicate that these two are in Afghanistan at present, the rest appears to be conjecture. Intelligence officials in Islamabad maintain that there are various places in Zhob and Naushki districts, on the Balochistan-Afghanistan frontier, through which money and weapons are supplied to Baloch rebel leaders. These sources maintain that over the past two years, Baloch insurgents have procured weapons worth PKR 500 million (USD 8.2 million) from the Kabul government.

Baloch locals reject such claims, pointing out that every time they have raised their collective voice they have been dubbed 'foreign agents' – a convenient diversion, they say. "When the operation against the nationalists was launched in the 1960s, they were described as belonging to the CIA. In the 1970s, these nationalists were dubbed as KGB agents.

Now they are branding them as RAW," said a Quetta college teacher. "It is always easy to tarnish the image of genuine movements. And, just for argument's sake, let us say that this is true, then the government should think about why these locals are compelled to seek support from foreign hands."

United Balochistan

Until Islamabad – which is viewed from the Baloch periphery as the capital not of Pakistan but of 'Punjabistan' – does more to address the grievances and accommodate the ethnic, cultural, economic and other interests of the majority of the people in Balochistan, no solution to the current situation is possible. Because introspection in Islamabad seems unlikely in the near future, the decade-old stalemate in Balochistan looks set to continue, possibly to worsen.

In the run-up to the general elections scheduled for later this year, Gen Musharraf, who at one point appeared to have a relatively solid hold on his administration and governance, has been increasingly losing control. Following the assassination of Nawab Bugti, the people of Balochistan have lost any faith in Gen Musharraf they may have once had, and the problems the province currently faces will almost certainly continue until he is out of office. At a time when Pakistanis throughout the country have also rapidly lost faith in Gen Musharraf's administration, in preparing for the general elections his administration's priorities will be on Punjab and Sindh, rather than on addressing Baloch grievances.

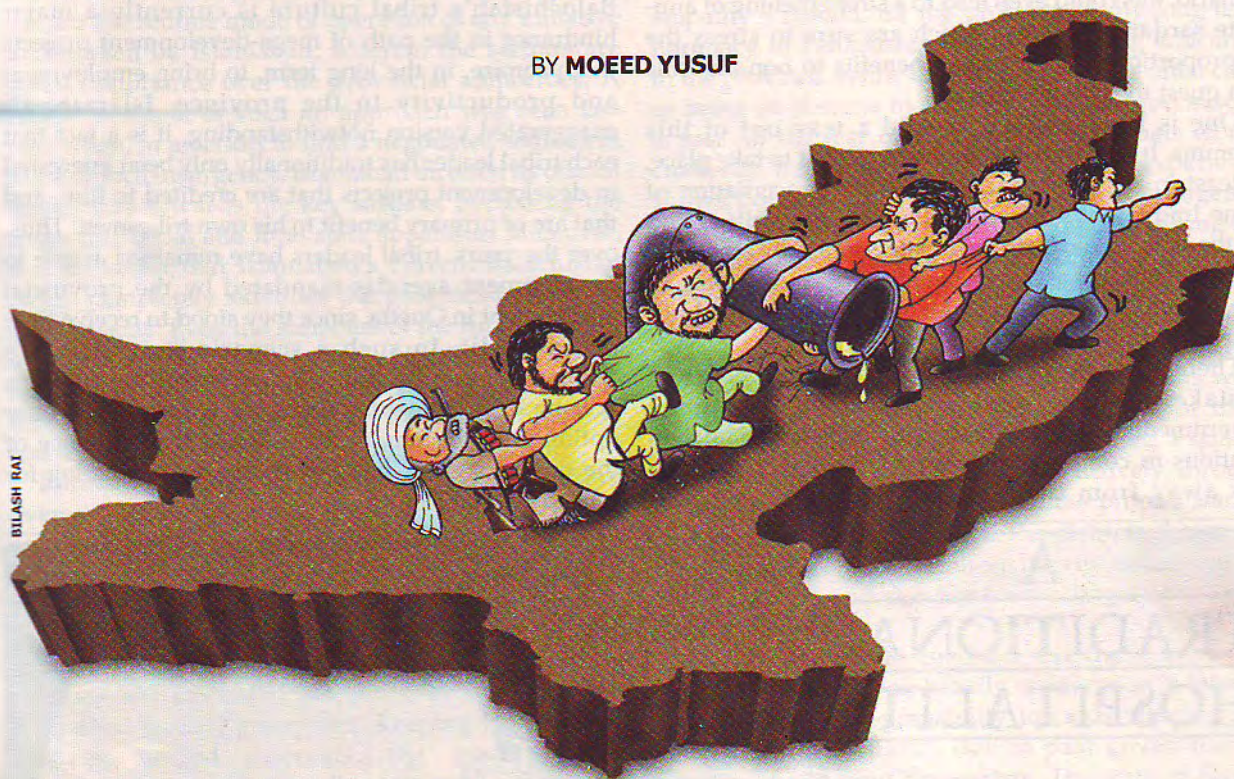
The importance of Balochistan to Pakistan lies not only in its natural resources but also in its strategic location. Quetta, Pakistan's all-important road-head to Kandahar in Afghanistan, witnessed the considerable mobilisation by Pakistan, the US, Saudi Arabia and others to fight the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. In addition to being used by the Afghan mujahideen and mercenaries under Osama bin Laden's command, Quetta also houses the operational forward base of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). It is also rumoured that, to date, Islamabad is supporting the resurgent Taliban forces in Quetta, and that under no circumstances would it allow Afghan, Indian or other forces to gain a toehold in the strategically important capital of Balochistan.

But if the now two-year-old military operation has driven home the fact that there is little hope of 'containing' the Baloch issue on the current administration's watch, there is also little prospect for the success of the Baloch insurgents' desire for self-determination. This will remain the case until the militants are able to gather together their divided clan-based loyalties, overcome intra-tribal feuds and articulate a unified Baloch nationalism. If the goal remains independence, Baloch nationalist and militant organisations remain too scattered and un-unified to achieve their aims. What they can do, however, is continue to attract frustrated young people to their fiery cause, inevitably feeding a cycle of militancy and military response with which Islamabad seems only too willing to play along. Those who would lose in this are the Baloch people, caught between rivalries at home and the domination of 'Punjabistan', as they would see it. ▲

Islamabad v Balochistan

Mainstreaming Balochistan within Pakistan will require Islamabad to begin to focus on the emerging Baloch middle class, for only then will the backward-looking and competitive sardari system be challenged.

BY MOEED YUSUF



The relationship between Balochistan and the 'federation' has always been troubled. Pockets of resentment have existed vis-à-vis the Islamabad state throughout the country's short history, and no government has been able to address Baloch grievances permanently. In fact, most governments have focused on stopgap arrangements, addressing only temporary political compulsions.

Nonetheless, there is no dearth of understanding of the root causes of Baloch grievances. The province is by far the most underdeveloped in the country, with dismal literacy rates and virtually no productive infrastructure. Moreover, Balochistan continues to be entrenched in a tribal set-up, with a number of powerful sardars catering to their own interests and readily challenging the state whenever it seems prudent. For its part, the state has exacerbated the alienation of the

people by attempting political subjugation in order to check nationalist tendencies – the latest manifestation of which is the ongoing military operation against 'dissidents'. The majority of observers believes that the eventual solution lies in granting political autonomy to the province. Yet, despite emphases on historical grievances and calls for either independence or provincial autonomy, there is a virtual consensus among experts within Pakistan that Balochistan's real problems are socio-economic in nature.

Let us first consider the issue of development, wherein the primary concern is over who would gain from the Islamabad-proposed mega-development projects in Balochistan. A genuine apprehension of the sardars and locals alike is that development in the province will end up excluding the indigenous population from the bulk of the benefits. While the

government continues to maintain otherwise, such an outcome is inevitable given that the majority of Baloch labour is unskilled, and will therefore not be able to fill positions available only to a skilled workforce. As such, outsiders (from Punjab, Sindh and NWFP) are likely to gain most from these opportunities. Already, it is common to find non-Baloch workers employed across the hierarchy of jobs in both the public and private sectors in Quetta and elsewhere. Given the feelings of anti-Punjabi resentment in the province, a development agenda that is perceived to be no more than another avenue to enhance Punjabi domination in Balochistan could trigger a counterproductive reaction and alienate the Baloch populace even further. In an extreme scenario, this could even lead to a strengthening of anti-state sardari elements, which are sure to stress the disproportional development benefits to non-Balochis in a quest to rally the masses.

One is hard-pressed to find a way out of this dilemma. It is impossible for development to take place, at least in the short run, without the exacerbation of some traditional grievances. Perhaps the only option for the state would be to formulate a mutually agreeable arrangement, by assuring benefits for locals, with an eye towards co-opting those Baloch anxious about losing out in the grand development scheme.

There is no denying the fact that it is persistent mistakes on the part of successive national governments that have landed Balochistan-Islamabad relations in complete disarray. However, one cannot shy away from the fact that those who support

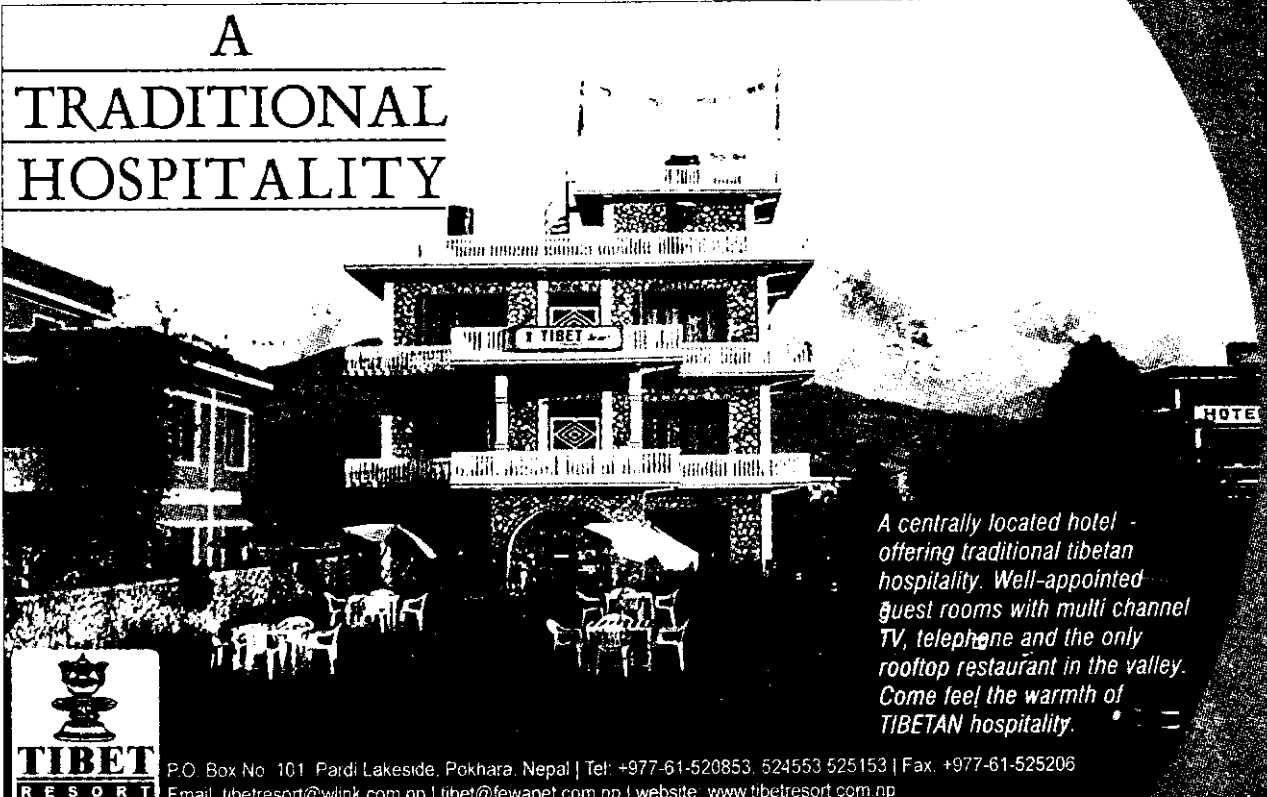
autonomy, development and increased literacy as solutions remain oblivious to what is involved in attaining these feats. Given the current power structures within the province, it is virtually impossible to imagine a quick-fix implementation mechanism that could bring Balochistan into the political and economic mainstream.

Sardari stagnation


While giving due weight to the argument for autonomy, and to the fact of the marginalisation of Balochistan in development, it is important also to look at the other side of the coin. While ensuring social and economic progress is clearly an imperative, Balochistan's tribal culture is currently a major hindrance in the path of mega-development projects that promise, in the long term, to bring employment and productivity to the province. Islamabad's exaggerated version notwithstanding, it is a fact that each tribal leader has traditionally only been interested in development projects that are credited to him, and that are of primary benefit to his own tribesmen. Thus, over the years, tribal leaders have remained averse to development agendas mandated by the provincial government in Quetta, since they stood to receive little or no credit. In such a scenario, to expect the government to be able to successfully employ a holistic development framework is naïve. The only option is to diplomatically sideline the influence of the sardari system, without necessarily preparing for a head-on collision.

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Here is where the Islamabad government has gone wrong. Rather than targeting the tribal culture for change in the province, government policy over the decades has maintained the system, simultaneously engaging tribal leaders and alienating the common Baloch. Successive governments have found it prudent to continue flip-flopping and maintain a foothold by setting one sardar against another, only to subsequently reverse whenever the allied sardars became irritants. This has meant tacit support to the tribal system at the expense of according importance to and developing the capacity of the government's own functionaries in the province.

An understanding of this dynamic helps to put in context the routine mode of operation of any initiative undertaken by Islamabad, wherein the sardars are given importance over the provincial authorities. A classic example of such an approach was seen last year when, in an effort to find a negotiated settlement to the Baloch insurgency, Islamabad directed its official negotiators towards the key sardars, bypassing the entire provincial and local state apparatus. Moreover, it is no secret that Islamabad's current Balochistan policy completely sidelines the provincial and local governments. Even the members of the ruling alliance in Balochistan have been critical of the Centre's heavy-handedness. As such, it is hardly surprising that state functionaries do not command respect in the province, and are helpless in the face of tribal opposition.

Intrinsically linked to this situation is the concern over granting autonomy to political actors in the province. This is extremely difficult to achieve. Perhaps the toughest question to answer is exactly to whom that autonomy would apply. Today, fair elections in Balochistan are certain to produce a tenuous coalition government, which would be likely to include a number of nationalist elements, as well as anti-Islamabad sardari groupings. Keeping in mind the sardars' vested interests, the government's apprehension about providing autonomy to such a set-up is not completely unwarranted.

Moreover, given state functionaries' lack of influence, an autonomous set-up could quickly provide prominence to the victorious sardari elements, with the pro-Islamabad moderates being sidelined. This possibility accentuates Islamabad's inherent paranoia about loosening its tight-fisted control over the province. On the other hand, if Islamabad decides to initiate autonomy under a relatively unpopular government – as would be true if a government were to be installed with Islamabad's blessings – there would be tremendous domestic resistance against allowing such a set-up to establish its writ.

Educational development

There is one window of opportunity that Islamabad has not focused upon thus far, and to which it must urgently turn its attention. This is the growing yet

underestimated influence of the Baloch middle class, based in Quetta and Makran District – the only two major areas that have historically been outside the hold of the tribal system. Quetta and Makran now possess a substantial number of indigenous Baloch who are eager to join the mainstream of development, and are also supportive of a unified Pakistan (though they still resent Islamabad's heavy-handedness). This middle class presents the most likely Baloch ally for the Centre. Over the long run, this category could both drive the province's development agenda, and provide cadres who could responsibly handle a relatively autonomous province.

One crucial key to fostering this type of ability and empathy – indeed, for the prospect of any long-term normalcy in Balochistan – is in improving education in the province. While the sardari system is often cited as being an obstacle to achieving this end (because, it is said, of the fear that educated individuals would challenge the system's legitimacy), past experience shows potential for pushing the education agenda regardless of tribal influence. For example, during the 1990s, the World Bank funded an elaborate project for female primary education in Balochistan. This undertaking managed to achieve most of its objectives, and came to be considered highly successful. One of the more interesting findings was that parents were willing to spend more on the schooling of their daughters, so long as they were guaranteed a quality education. Parents even participated actively, through village committees, to ensure that the process started by the programme continued. The districts chosen for the programme included those heavily influenced by tribal culture, and reactions were largely the same across the board.

Islamabad needs to draw on these types of experiences, and invest heavily in education in interior Balochistan – a responsibility towards which it has been delinquent partly due to past governments' priority of engaging the sardars. The state of higher education in Balochistan, for one, is dismal, with institutions confined to Quetta for the most part and even these exhibiting poor standards. Of course, education will not provide any short-term dividends. What it will do, however, is ensure a continuous stream of pro-development citizens in future generations, who could ultimately benefit from the opportunities afforded by what will hopefully be a mainstreamed and relatively autonomous province.

Under the present scenario in Balochistan, implementing any such recipe is more difficult than most analysts have suggested. Nonetheless, Islamabad needs to begin contemplating these issues immediately, with a priority of reaching a win-win implementation mechanism. On the positive side, the government already agrees with the broad parameters of success in Balochistan as listed above. The unanswered question is how to achieve them. ▲

“Ending the rule of Punjab, by Punjab and for Punjab” An interview with Sardar Ataullah Khan Mengal

One of the most prominent leaders of the Baloch struggle, Sardar Ataullah Khan Mengal, head of the Balochistan National Party, served as the first chief minister of Balochistan from May 1972 to February 1973, at which point he was ousted by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Although he visited his homeland on and off during self-imposed exile in the UK, Ataullah Mengal, now 78, finally returned to Balochistan about six years ago. *Himal Southasian* talked with Mengal by phone while he was at his home in Wadh, in Khuzdar District of Balochistan. (The call was rudely cut off several times, notably at points when Mengal was particularly critical of the federal government.)

Please pinpoint for us why the Baloch people feel discriminated against by the federal government.

How many tragedies do I have to count? The seeds of discontent lie in the fact that Balochistan, also called Kalat, was hesitant to accede to Pakistan right from the beginning. Unlike the other provinces, which had two choices before them – to join either India or Pakistan – we had a third: to remain independent. Balochistan, which had never been ‘conquered’ but had entered into a treaty with the British, opted for independence. Even though Mohammed Ali Jinnah had been an advocate for the Khan of Kalat, he chose to invade the territory, and coerced Balochistan to accede to Pakistan. Since then, every Baloch born is regarded as a ‘traitor’ in Pakistan. All of us are suspect. Conversely, the Pakistan Army in Balochistan is viewed as an occupying army, butchering the local people. This mutual distrust has given rise to eruptions every now and again, since 1972.

Meanwhile, our resources are being exploited, with no benefit to us. Employment-wise, all positions in Balochistan – from officers to sepoy – in the Secretariat, the police and the Frontier Corps, are filled up by outsiders. The local Baloch people are nowhere to be seen.

What are the practical ways in which the vast resources of Balochistan can best be utilised for the benefit of the Baloch people? What model of development do you envisage, and what inter-relationship with Islamabad?

We don’t want favours. We demand that the resources of a province belong to that province. Islamabad has no right to stampede the people. As things stand, all revenue flows from the provinces to the federal government; and in the process, Balochistan is being robbed of its assets. This is



because once the federal government has collected revenue, it re-distributes it in accordance with the population size. So, since we have a small population, we get just 3.7 percent of budget outlay. This, when we contribute billions of rupees in gas alone! We cannot visualise any workable relationship with a regime that views Balochistan as a receptacle of resources to be exploited.

Do you see rivalries between the various Baloch tribes as posing a serious obstacle to a unified Baloch resistance?

Tribal rivalries are not coming in the way of a united struggle. This is nothing but false propaganda to downplay the resistance. Even in other provinces – be it Sindh or Punjab – there are different tribes and clans, each with their own competing loyalties. Tribalism exists, of course, but the differences between tribes in Balochistan are blown out of proportion. The lack of unity is more due to not being organised at the national level. The struggle is widespread, however, and is gathering momentum.

Do you still stand by your earlier demand for an independent Balochistan consisting of the Baloch-inhabited areas of Pakistan and Iran?

Yes, absolutely. I stand by the demand for complete independence of the Baloch people. However, we have enough to handle in the resistance to the Pakistan Army – we don’t want to ask for unification with Baloch-inhabited territories in Iran, and risk the wrath of the Iranian security forces!

Do you see armed resistance as a realistic route to the goal of autonomy or independence?

As the weaker party, we have no option other than armed

struggle. It is a matter of survival. And capability is honed when it is a matter of sheer survival. It becomes a question of do or die. The leadership is now in the hands of youngsters, and they are evolving a collective leadership.

Do you feel that your long exile in the UK has affected your leadership of the Baloch struggle? What made you come back to Balochistan?

It was never smooth sailing under Bhutto's regime, and then the military rule of Zia didn't make things better. Myself and [Khair Buksh] Marri feared for our lives, and thought we would be more useful alive than dead, so we left the country. But I was never permanently away – I kept coming and going. We have a saying, "You better put up the fight for your land with your feet on that land." So I thought it was time to come home, and carry on the struggle from here.

How do you respond to the allegation by Islamabad that the Baloch resistance is being supported by "outsiders", notably India, Afghanistan and Iran?

This is utter nonsense! There is no truth at all in the allegation. In fact, were it true, the picture would be quite different. There is no geographical contiguity with India, so how is it possible for India to support our struggle? And while India might have her own grudges against Pakistan, especially over Kashmir, what will India gain from the liberation of Balochistan? As for Afghanistan, it is not interested in the liberation of the Baloch

people. Iran, for its part, has never been friendly to our cause, and has even occupied a part of Balochistan. Right from the time of Alexander, Iran has been hostile, and history doesn't support the possibility of Iranian backing to our struggle. The Gulf states are too worried about their own security to intervene in any movement for self-determination. Moreover, they will never do anything without the consent of the US and UK, which are friendly to Musharraf's regime.

Does the current lack of democracy in Pakistan act as a roadblock to the Baloch people achieving their aspirations within Pakistan?

It is true that democracy in Pakistan has not been allowed to function. Democracy here is defined as 'Rule of Punjab, by Punjab and for Punjab'. We stand nowhere. Under the military regime, we are ruled with an iron heel. And during democracy, it is more of the same, but sugar-coated. There is no substantive difference.

Is your goal independence or provincial autonomy?

Provincial autonomy is a closed chapter. Provincial status will always mean being subject to domination by Punjab, which I see as synonymous with 'Pakistan'. We define independence as the right to do whatever we see fit in the interests of our people. Our goal is a full, sovereign country that Punjab/Pakistan will have no power to interfere with. *(Call gets cut off.)* ▲



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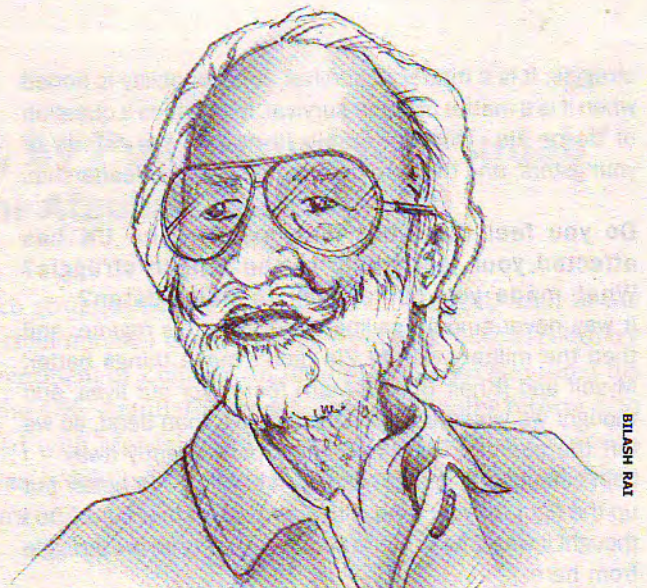
A death foretold

For many Baloch, the turning point in the latest insurgency came on 26 August 2006, the day Nawab Akbar Bugti was assassinated.

BY MUNIZAE JAHANGIR

On a hot day last August, I landed in Lahore on a flight from London. Blaring headlines were announcing that Nawab Akbar Bugti, known as the 'Tiger of Balochistan', had been killed in a military operation. I switched on the television to see confused newscasters giving contradictory versions of how he had been killed. Over the next few days, the government changed its own version of how this had happened several times. To this day, how exactly Nawab Bugti died remains a mystery. I was one of the last TV journalists to interview the sardar. Months before his actual demise, he had already predicted it. "They want to eliminate us, especially me and [fellow Baloch tribal leader] Balach Marri, and also those Balochs who are not with the government and want their rights," he had told me in his hideout in the mountains, from where he had waged a guerrilla war against the Islamabad regime.

All road and air links to Balochistan were cut off on the day that Bugti was killed. While this was done in an attempt by the authorities to quash any subsequent agitation, those attempts proved futile. Across Balochistan, youths took to the streets to protest the killing of a leader whom they felt had attained martyrdom. The next day, I managed to take the first available flight from Lahore to Quetta. By now, the protests against the government had turned violent.



BILASH RAI

There was chaos on the streets. Rowdy young boys hurled stones at buildings, and grabbed money from burnt-out ATM machines. When one of them discovered that I was Punjabi, he snarled at me. Since the creation of Pakistan, the Baloch have accused the ruling Punjabi elite of usurping their social and economic rights. The young man asked me why their chieftain, who was perceived by the Baloch as being pro-Pakistan, had been killed. "If you can kill your own man, then what will you do to us?" he asked, his eyes defiant, and his young body quivering with anger. When he had been a young man, Nawab Bugti had been the first Baloch leader to vote for the creation of Pakistan. Thereafter, he was appointed governor and then chief minister. For many hardline Baloch nationalists, Nawab Akbar Bugti became a traitor when he took his oath under the federation of Pakistan.

In Quetta, more than 10,000 mourners attended Nawab Bugti's funeral service. Those pro-government officials who dared to show up at the stadium where it was taking place were manhandled and thrown out of the glass doors by the angry crowd. Their blood covered the floor of the entrance to the stadium. After the funeral, enraged mobs took to the streets of Quetta, attacking public property. All government buildings that carried revenue records were torched by mobs shouting anti-military slogans. In their attempt to catch the world's attention, part of a UN building was also set ablaze by Baloch students.

In the aftermath of the funeral, thousands of Baloch youth were arrested across the province, with the Baloch Students' Organisation (BSO) at the forefront of these protests. Years before Nawab Bugti was killed, the BSO had splintered off into several groups, and each of these groups had unofficially associated itself with various Baloch nationalist parties. Bugti's killing was a turning point for the BSO: it brought these groups under a single umbrella once more. The various group leaders also cut off their links to all nationalist parties, in an attempt to create a separate movement for independence.



Mourning Bugti

MASSOUD ANSARI

One of the student leaders came to see me at my hotel, dodging several military check-posts on the way. The young man, who preferred not to be identified, said that the killing of Bugti had been the last straw in a long line of atrocities inflicted by the Pakistani state on the Baloch people. The Baloch now would not be content with provincial autonomy, he said. They wanted a separate homeland. "At first, we used to participate in political forums and debates," he told me. "We had affiliations with Baloch nationalist parties who preferred autonomy over independence. By killing the Nawab, who was seen by us as pro-Pakistan, the Pakistani government has demonstrated that it will only resort to violence when dealing with the Baloch. Thus, now we have no choice but to abandon political means and pick up the gun."

What negotiations?

Eight months after Nawab Bugti was killed, the Baloch insurgency has still not died down. Gas pipelines are blown up almost every day. Several Baloch leaders have been jailed, and the BSO has started a campaign for independence. It has become clear that General Pervez Musharraf and his military grossly miscalculated their response to the sudden escalation in the Baloch insurgency. The killing of Nawab Bugti, who had become a rebel leader only in his later years, could not have provided the solution. Instead, the brutal and mysterious way in which he was killed and buried has ignited wide-scale resentment amongst the Baloch against the state. In a manner of speaking, Nawab Bugti is now more alive than ever before. The battle for Baloch rights that was being fought by the Bugti and Marri tribesmen has now spread

throughout the province. While 'more autonomy' still remains the demand of all nationalist parties, young Baloch want more.

Nawab Bugti's last words now echo throughout Balochistan, and have become a slogan for young Baloch. Below are excerpts of his last TV interview, given to this writer.

MJ: What do you want from the government; what will be the solution to this armed conflict?

NB: We do not want anything from the government, just let us be in peace.

MJ: If the government wants to hold talks with you, will you welcome their move?

NB: What negotiations, talks? They are talking to us through the gun, how else will they negotiate? They have imposed this war on us ... the general himself went to visit Kohlu, and they dropped some grenades there ... he considered this a personal affront, and stated that he will take revenge for this. So now he is taking revenge, and this is a result of that revenge. There was an attack on the general in Islamabad twice, but he did not attack or drop grenades on Islamabad. Another commander was attacked in Karachi, on the Clifton Bridge, but that bridge is still there and so is Karachi - they did not attack there. But here they are giving collective punishment to the whole Baloch people.

MJ: What is your connection to the Baloch Liberation Army?

NB: Just that they are Balochs, and so we respect their cause.

MJ: Do you want independence from Pakistan?

NB: Everyone wants independence, even animals.▲



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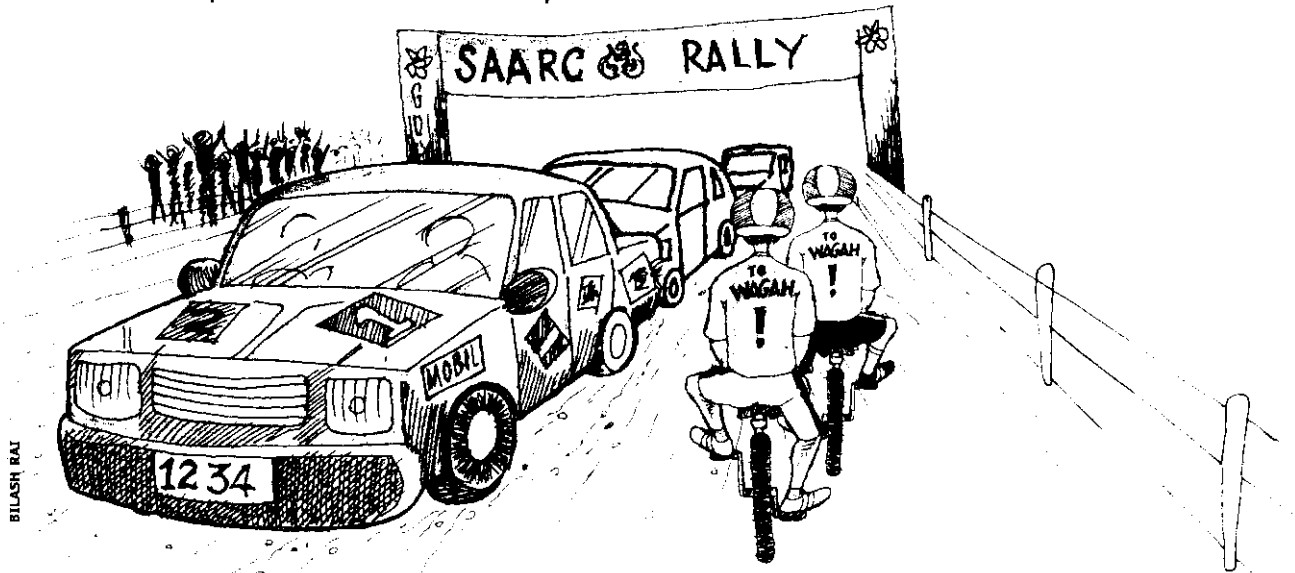
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BRAC has recently started its operations in Sri Lanka.

Public Affairs & Communication, BRAC
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Getting connected at the SAARC Summit

Between leveraging India and respecting the spirit of regionalism, the 14th SAARC Summit took place in Delhi on 3-4 April.



BY SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

Among the ceremonial events that marked the opening of the 14th SAARC Summit in Delhi in early April, was the flagging-off of a car rally. Beginning two weeks earlier in Dhaka, the rally had briefly halted in Delhi en route to covering all of the member countries (then seven) of the regional grouping, in the space of a month. It was a rather literal-minded effort to underline the Summit's ostensible theme of 'connectivity'. But even as the cars went their way, proudly emblazoned with the emblems of generous Indian corporate sponsors, nine forlorn youths from Maharashtra were making their way back from the Wagah border. They had cycled 2000 kilometres over a few weeks, in the expectation of visiting Lahore on a peace-and-goodwill mission – only to have their visa applications rejected at the last moment.

Is 'connectivity' about a coming together of the people of Southasia? Or is it merely a means of creating greater opportunities for Indian business? Certainly, as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressed his summit partners shortly after assuming the SAARC chair from Bangladesh, he seemed to be advocating connectivity in its widest possible sense – a confluence not merely of "physical, economic" attributes, but also "of the mind". Southasia as a region, he said, has traditionally only

flourished when it has been connected within itself and to the rest of the world.

Prime Minister Singh was reprising a much-favoured theme: that of the endeavour to make borders irrelevant, and to give the people of the region the wherewithal to move freely across the vast, populated expanses of Southasia, searching out and utilising every opportunity available for both their own betterment and the larger social good. This is undoubtedly a noble vision, yet it overlooks a significant point. As the cyclists from Maharashtra found, they probably do not enjoy the same privileges of cross-border mobility as the owner of a car. While connectivity within Southasia could become a right theoretically enjoyed by all, it may in practice remain the preserve of a mere handful.

To give him due credit, what the Indian prime minister envisages is a situation in which the freedom to travel becomes a reality for a broad cross-section of the people of Southasia. And thus, he promised that India would soon announce a unilateral liberalisation of visa rules and procedures for students, academics, journalists, and individuals traveling for medical treatment. India would also provide duty-free and quota-free access for imports from SAARC member countries that happen to be classified among the "least developed" – excluding

Is 'connectivity' about a coming together of the people of Southasia? Or is it merely a means of creating greater opportunities for Indian business?

Pakistan from the party. The sensitive list of commodities to which the new rules would not apply would, the prime minister assured, be pared down and soon made public. No time frame was specified within which these decisions would be made and operationalised, though the history of SAARC is strewn with promises made in the effulgence of a summit, only to be forgotten just as rapidly.

It was little surprise that the assembled dignitaries were underwhelmed by Prime Minister Singh's announcement. His former Indian Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey has commented, trade liberalisation in Southasia has been "flawed" from the start – and this has been a conscious "political choice" on all sides. A key aspect of all such agreements is the 'negative list', which specifies the product lines where free trade does not apply. As yet, no Southasian country, least of all the region's largest, has shown the generosity or courage to prune this list to a meaningful level. In the inchoately formed and contentiously interpreted South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), India's negative list is four times larger than that on the most recent offer it has made to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Regional tokenism

When it is not of purely symbolic value, the fact is that 'duty free' access could also be a means of increasing opportunities for Indian business. India's free trade agreement (FTA) with Sri Lanka, which came into effect in 2000, has been an umbrella under which shrewd businessmen have managed to arbitrage customs-duty differentials on third-country imports. Sri Lanka, for instance, allows duty-free imports of copper scrap and Indian businessmen have been sharp enough to spot the opportunities this affords for investing in copper smelters in Sri Lanka, for re-export to India. A similar process has been underway in the vegetable-oils market. Value addition in Sri Lanka from these exports, which account for the bulk of its trade with India, is minimal. The principal upshot has been that a few Indian businessmen have managed to enrich themselves. How Sri Lankan business groups have fared in the same sectors remains to be documented.

On the other hand, India could be using the promise of duty-free access for the region's least-developed member countries as a means of leveraging greater trade openings within Southasia, with an eye towards emerging as a major investor in regional light industry, transport and telecom. This is likely to encounter competition from China, which perhaps could underline its own investment ambitions with a greater infusion of funds. Moreover, as long as the smaller countries in Southasia remain locked in a low-level equilibrium of poverty and slow growth, the opportunities for such investments are not likely to be

particularly large in the near future.

As home to the largest concentration of the world's poor, Southasia needs to reconsider how well the process of trade liberalisation truly aids in increasing social welfare. There is at least an equal risk that liberalisation within the region could become a zero-sum game, with each country trying to out-compete the other in lowering wage levels – in other words, in using poverty as a source of competitive advantage. Trade liberalisation has all too often been seen exclusively as a charter of rights for business. What Southasia needs in order to escape from its grinding poverty is a social charter, one that will secure at least the barest entitlements to subsistence for its people.

Of all the pronouncements made in the Summit's Delhi Declaration of 4 April, two may have a direct bearing on mass welfare. The first concerns the SAARC Development Fund, which has now been ordered operationalised in full conformity with the charter of the association. Second is the creation of the SAARC Food Bank, which is intended to "supplement national efforts to provide food security to the people of the region". Scepticism would not be out of place with regard to either of these endeavours, especially since India's management of its own food economy over the past decade and a half of globalisation has been little short of chaotic. In short order, the depleted warehouses of the early 1990s were swamped with an over-abundance of food, which was subsequently disposed of by exporting it at prices lower than those reserved for India's poor. Since the severe drought of 2002, the pace of stock depletion has accelerated, and the last two years have seen grain imports of unprecedented magnitude.

When the efforts of national governments have been so disastrously askew, there seems little reason to believe that trans-national efforts at cooperation will fare much better. Anybody viewing the financial allocations that have been made would be justified in concluding that these programmes are but the barest tokenism. They would serve little purpose other than of sustaining the somnolent SAARC bureaucracy through another year. The much-needed fillip they would impart to the various track-two efforts that have rather ineffectively sought to energise 'regionalism' thus far would be an outcome to celebrate, even if it is unintended.

A regional institution

This does not mean that the Delhi Summit was a complete fiasco. As Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee said, it was the smoothest and least contentious such gathering in many years. This despite SAARC's new member, Afghanistan, having provided a rather colourful prelude, in President Hamid Karzai's trenchant attack on Pakistan just before his arrival in Delhi. In remarks to *The New York*

Times, published to much consternation in Delhi just as the committee of SAARC foreign ministers was in session, President Karzai accused Pakistan of harbouring a "colonial" mentality, and being intent on transforming Afghanistan into a satellite state.

Landing in Delhi, President Karzai would have undoubtedly been comforted by the thought that most of the member countries of SAARC were undergoing transitions, though with varying degrees of tension and trauma. Indeed, aside perhaps from Bhutan and the Maldives (the two smallest members) and India (which is too big to feel the pain of its million mutinies too acutely), every other SAARC member state might witness a change in the character of its ruling arrangement before the next summit. This raises some interesting questions about just how far the decisions made in Delhi will stand the test of changing times.

Yet for all the cynicism that customarily shrouds the SAARC organisation, there was at least one decision made during the Summit that was welcomed across a broad spectrum. If all goes according to plan, a Southasian University could soon be a part of the academic landscape of the region. Its central campus would be in India, with satellites and perhaps entire faculties being located in other countries. An intergovernmental steering committee has now been tasked with drawing up the charter of the university.

Considering the record of earlier initiatives in the realm of education (for instance, the little-known SAARC fellowships programme), there is reason to believe that things may not indeed pan out quite as well as the more optimistic observers believe. Presumably, with the

Southasian University's location having been broadly settled, any residual uncertainties on this count would be an internal matter of India's. There are believed to be two contending opinions within the Indian government, the first of which seeks to convert an existing campus – such as the Viswabharati at Shantiniketan, West Bengal – into a Southasian institution; while the second favours an entirely new establishment, based in all probability in Delhi. Quite apart from these decisions, there is immense potential for discord between the member nations when the charter of the new centre of learning is drawn up.

With the extravagance of hope continually bumping up against the recognition of reality, some scholars believe that the best course for the new university to follow would be to go to the heart of the most contentious subjects that divide the Subcontinent: history, comparative religion, contemporary politics, international affairs and the like. Southasia is a region divided as much by conflicting readings of history as by competing ambitions of national elites. And for reasons of history and sheer geopolitical clout, India has assumed for itself the mantle of representing the civilisational ethos of the region, in a manner that neighbouring states find insensitive, if not hegemonic.

The groves of academia may well afford a congenial environment in which an alternative vision could be constructed – one that provides room for all Southasians to participate, and respects their particularities. Though optimism is at a premium after the indifferent performance of SAARC over the first 22 years of its existence, there is still room, presumably, for the occasional extravagance of the imagination. ▲



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The ritual of the ballot

All over Southasia, the beleaguered institution of the election commission may finally be getting the priority – if not the respect – that it deserves.

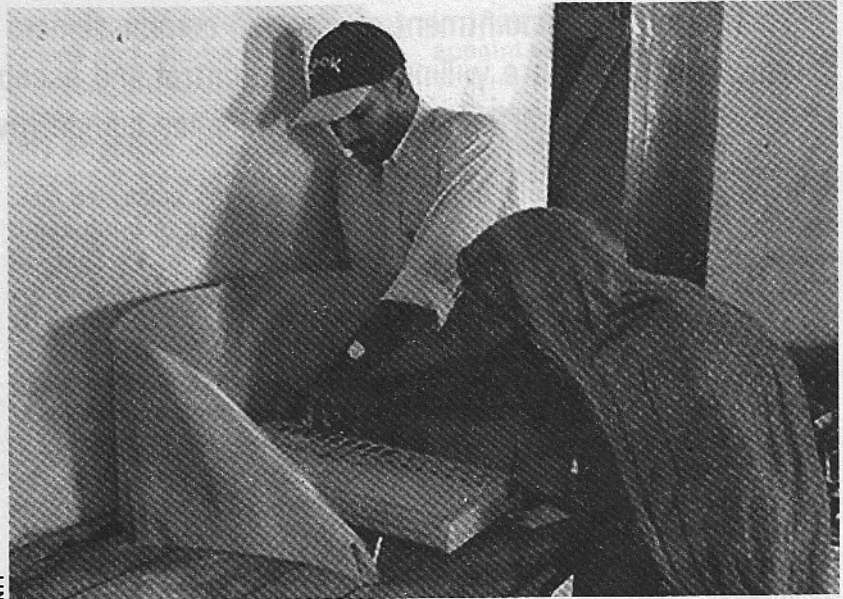
BY SAMRAT SINHA

An election is a moral horror, as bad as a battle except for the blood; a mud bath for every soul concerned in it.

– George Bernard Shaw

The story of democratic transition in Southasia is incomplete. Although all members of SAARC possess autonomous electoral-management institutions or election commissions, there have been notably few investigations into strategies used to enhance their independence. Such a lack of priority placed on the institution of the election commission has been detrimental for democracy in all the countries of Southasia. Historically, election commissions (ECs) have been viewed as representing the interests of the ruling political faction, and have been known to rubberstamp flawed elections. This has been a view confirmed by the 2002 general elections in Pakistan (where an executive order reconstituted the EC just prior to the election) and in the 2003 presidential elections in the Maldives (where President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was re-elected to a sixth five-year term with 90 percent of the vote).

The neglect of electoral institutions may now be changing, and not a moment too soon. Recent



NYT

developments in the region's north, east and west have drawn new attention to the crucial functions performed by election commissions as guarantors of representational democracy. The reconciliation process in Nepal, for instance, has shown that the establishment of a meaningful form of representation is the foundation for a viable peace. The Election Commission of Nepal has been entrusted with the responsibility of conducting the upcoming Constituent Assembly polls (originally slated for June, but now all but officially postponed), an exercise that will involve the complete overhaul of current procedures and regulations. Similarly, the governments of both Pakistan and Bhutan have pledged to hold free and fair elections in 2007 and 2008 respectively – Thimphu's election commission was established as late as 2006, while Islamabad's commission has to shake off the perception that it has been a political pawn, an accusation that once again surfaced during the recent Sindh by-elections.

The terms *free* and *fair*, when applied to elections, belie their market origins. There is a general tendency in the literature on electoral systems to regard elections as an 'open market', where politicians compete with each other to maximise their votes. Elections are 'free' when

there is a perception that the elections did not take place under coercion; and they are 'fair' when the competitors adhere to the rules of competition. However, no election can be either free or fair without effective control on the behaviour of political parties and candidates, in the same way that regulations are needed to ensure that commercial firms behave ethically.

Electoral malpractice in Southasia takes many forms. These include the buying of votes, the capturing of voting booths, the use of intimidation and violence, the misuse of state resources, and the mobilisation – or disenfranchisement – of voters on the basis of caste or community. Election commissions are thus confronted with a plethora of social practices, both formal and informal, that distort the meaning of the ballot. As a consequence, elections are often reduced to little more than a ritualistic act, largely lacking political significance.

A cursory overview of the elements of electoral management runs the risk of mistakenly conveying the impression that the tasks performed are essentially bureaucratic and routine. Yet each of these individual responsibilities is as important as the act of casting a vote. A comparative analysis of Southasian election commissions shows a high degree of

The manner of appointment of election commissioners does signify the extent to which politicians are willing to forgo control and accept the high level of political uncertainty that accompanies competitive elections.

uniformity in the responsibilities assigned to the institutions, despite variations in the level of autonomy. Important tasks common to all the commissions include the registration of voters, political parties and candidates; the counting of votes and certification of results; the appointment of observers; the delimitation of constituency boundaries; and the regulation of campaign finances. In addition to this complex array, the election commission is also important for its research on electoral systems, as well as its promotion of the education of voters and the norms of gender representation.

Not one of these tasks has been un-politicised. In Bangladesh, for instance, the Constitution envisaged the national election commission as an impartial body with extensive powers of electoral management. But the resignation of five election commissioners in late January and the outright postponement of the general elections brought the question of impartiality into sharp relief. The resignations were the result of a prolonged agitation led by the Awami League-led opposition over the perceived partiality of the EC towards the then-ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). One of the AL's central concerns had been the illicit addition of more than 12 million names to the electoral rolls, an accusation that was confirmed by a pre-election assessment report by the US-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. That report outlined other discrepancies as well, including a lack of regulation in the financing of political campaigns, and the inadequacy of measures to ensure the security of ballot boxes.

Carving out autonomy

How do election commissions ensure autonomy in managing elections? ECs in Southasia are

performing a highly politicised task, and are attempting to bring about electoral reform in the face of increased partisan pressure. In the current context, it may be helpful for the region's governments and political watchers to explore the processes by which the Election Commission of India (ECI) has, for the past half-century, worked to reform the electoral process in that country, as well as the obstacles that it has faced.

Indeed, the contestation over transparent elections in India has been closely linked to the institutional evolution of India's election commission. Records from the Indian Constituent Assembly debates concerning the creation of electoral law indicate that policymakers were initially sceptical about the need to establish an independent election commission. At the outset, legislators ensured that Parliament would have supremacy in all matters of electoral law, and attempted to control the most critical aspects of the electoral system – ie, the power to legislate over term limits, the number of seats, the eligibility of electors and the delimitation of the boundaries of constituencies. As former Chief Election Commissioner James Michael Lyngdoh indicated in his book on the landmark Jammu & Kashmir assembly polls of 2002, electoral law in India with respect to corrupt practices was intentionally designed to apply only to individual offenders and political candidates – not to political parties, despite the fact that the parties were always considered the biggest violators during election time.

There have been four particularly important measures instituted by the ECI, which have allowed for a degree of official leverage over political parties and candidates. These include the stricter enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct for Political Parties since 1991; the

linking of the official recognition of a party (and its political symbols) to that party's compliance with ECI regulations, after the 1994 modification of the 1968 Symbols Order; the implementation of the Electors Photo Identity Cards programme in 1993; and the extensive use of electronic voting machines since the 2004 general elections.

The Model Code of Conduct is a set of norms that governs the behaviour of political parties during elections. Many of the guidelines are not present in the body of electoral law legislated by Parliament, and include norms that prevent malpractices such as the distribution of gifts during campaigns, the disruption of social peace, the mobilisation of voters along communal lines, and the misuse of publicly funded media and other resources.

Ever since its inception in 1950, the Election Commission of India has been involved in a continuous process of litigation, and has been able to use critical judicial decisions to expand the purview of its constitutional mandate. At the centre of many of these decisions has been the contradiction between the Indian Constitution's Article 324 – which empowers the election commission to supervise all aspects of the election process – and Article 327, which ensures parliamentary supremacy in all matters of election law. It is significant that the judiciary has repeatedly asserted in its decisions that, in situations wherein electoral law has remained silent, it is well within the constitutional mandate of the ECI to formulate rules and regulations to ensure the smooth conduct of the election process.

The application of this principle can be seen in a Supreme Court order of 2000, with reference to *Election Commission of India v Union of India*

and others. The order now enables the election commission to assume disciplinary powers over officials deputed for election duty from the states, as well as over central security forces. The principle was similarly applied two years later in *Union of India v Association for Democratic Reforms*, a case that was instructive as to how legislators try to obstruct electoral reform.

The problem of 'criminalisation' is inherently difficult to solve. The term itself refers to the increasing trend of candidates and legislators contesting elections in spite of having criminal casts. Currently, for instance, there are more than 700 legislators in India's assemblies and 30 members of the federal Parliament that have criminal cases pending against them. The lack of incentives for political candidates to reveal criminal records or disclose their financial assets finally led to an important litigation process initiated by civil-society groups. This issue was further complicated because the making of false declarations about financial assets and criminal records was not a justiciable offence.

In 2002, the Supreme Court in New Delhi issued an order based on a petition by the Association for Democratic Reforms, making it mandatory for candidates to disclose criminal proceedings, assets, liabilities and educational qualifications in a pre-election affidavit. In response, President A P J Abdul Kalam was compelled by the cabinet to approve an ordinance that modified the Representation of the People Act of 1951, thereby making such disclosure non-mandatory. This

was eventually challenged by several groups and, after a long litigation process, the court declared the ordinance unconstitutional. Out of this litigation emerged another important development - civil-society 'election watches', which, in most states, compile and circulate data on candidates during elections based on the affidavits filed with the election commission.

Compliance and empowerment

There are several lessons that can be drawn from the politics surrounding election commissions, particularly from the Indian context. First, the degree of autonomy attributed to an election commission is dependent on the concentration of power in the legislative or executive branches. We are most likely to find greater constraints on an election commission when power is concentrated in a single dominant faction (such as in the Maldives), a primarily two-party system (Bangladesh), or in a semi-presidential system (Pakistan). Conversely, the ability of legislators to pass laws limiting the powers of election commissions is decreased when there are several competing parties in the legislature, and thus a higher probability of an eventual veto. The manner of appointment of election commissioners is telling of the extent to which politicians are willing to forgo control and accept the high level of political uncertainty that accompanies competitive elections. Thus, the fact that the election commissioners

in Pakistan are presidential appointees will be problematic in future elections.

Second, connected to the problem of autonomy is the issue of compliance. Election commissions are similar to courts in that they do not possess independent policing powers to enforce compliance with their regulations. As with courts, they are also envisaged as being accountable to the electorate and not to the legislative or executive branches. On the other hand, there are very few incentives for political candidates to disengage from behaviour that allows them to maximise votes.

This disjuncture - between the capacity of election commissions to enforce their regulations and the willingness of candidates to comply - is a very real one. The tension between these opposing forces determines the type of politics that surrounds electoral management. Overlooking the processes by which legislators strategise about institutions that safeguard the election process will be detrimental to the quality of democracy. As such, it is imperative for civil society to recognise the importance of ECs in shaping the normative basis for electoral democracy in the region. While George Bernard Shaw's adage quoted at the beginning of this article holds true much of the time, the empowerment of election commissions is one of the most critical routes through which the ordinary voter is assured that the act of casting a vote is indeed a meaningful one. ▲

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A year of loktantra

लोकतन्त्र

Nepal is currently undergoing three transformations – of peace, of democracy, and of identity. With the country's highly anticipated elections to the Constituent Assembly now being put off until later this year, the political parties in Kathmandu need to use this time to ensure a truly inclusive process of transformation. Nepali citizens also need to internalise the fact that any such process will inherently be a drawn-out one.

BY LIZ PHILIPSON

While the optimism and euphoria of the arrival of *loktantra* (the new Nepali coinage for 'people's democracy') has dissipated somewhat since King Gyanendra stepped down on 24 April 2006, the Nepali peace process is unquestionably progressing. Economic inclusion will take longer, and full social inclusion may have to wait for a generational change, but the upcoming Constituent Assembly process will nonetheless offer an opportunity to lay the groundwork for these seismic changes to begin.

Nepal was never going to be able to move the peace process forward at the breakneck speed with which it started; nor was it feasible for the overly optimistic political timetables that were promised to be met. Nevertheless, having had a temporary government made up of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA), the country has now moved to an 8-party interim government. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has handed over most of its weapons to the United Nations, and has officially entered the government. Power no longer resides with the king. The country's political leaders can be proud of this record, achieved within a year in power.

Democratic transitions are always turbulent, and conflict transformation is a daunting and complex task; Nepal is engaged in both. The country has many overwhelming

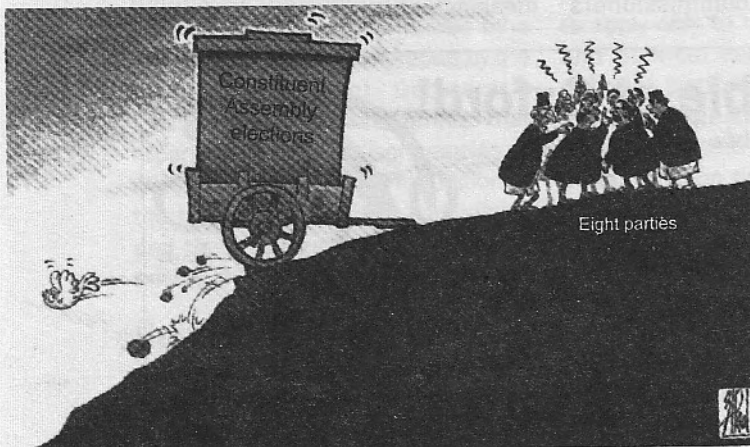
challenges to face, not least that of ensuring that what emerges is a Nepal-specific democracy – not an Indian, or an American, or a European one. Only a Nepali democracy that takes strength from the Nepali population, after all, will survive.

Transition and transformation

Transitions to democracy are fluid, unstable and volatile, and moving people from resistance to participation is not easy. A state and society moving from authoritarianism to democracy must transform existing power relations throughout the society, a process that is inevitably accompanied by sporadic violence at various levels. This is not to suggest that Nepal can afford to be complacent about the absence of justice and law and order; nor can parallel structures, such as those set up by the Maoists, run indefinitely. But it is important to understand that the transition will not be smooth, and will take time. The objective is to reach an agreed, inclusive democracy that is based upon stable and predictable political relationships, and volatility should slowly decrease as the transition progresses.

Conflict transformation is not about returning to the past, but about building a new future. This requires several simultaneous transformations – of the conflict parties; of political, social and economic relations; of institutions and cultural attitudes. Such fundamental changes do not take place in unison, and the varying speeds with which different organisations and relationships evolve have a knock-on effect throughout the system. In Nepal, as elsewhere, it is the rebel group that is under the most pressure to change. However, it is extremely difficult for any conflict party to transform if little else around it changes; a much larger canvas for transformation is necessary. It is, of course, essential for the CPN (Maoist) to reign in its cadres and accept the norms and boundaries of democracy, but this will not happen in isolation.

There are groups in Nepal that are likely to offer strong resistance to fundamental change in political relationships. These include the army and the bureaucracy,



both founded on a culture of patronage and nepotism. The Nepal Army, having grown in size exponentially to meet the challenge of the insurgency, will need to adjust to Nepal's new security requirements, and transform into a modern, integrated, professional army. The bureaucracy will also have to be revamped in order to be able to respond to the changing times, and meet the needs of the population. In past experience in Sri Lanka, for example, an entrenched bureaucracy proved an obstacle to governments seeking to implement negotiated agreements.

The process in Nepal is slowing down, which is necessary for consolidation. Indeed, this is a process not of months but of years, though observers may have been taken aback by the initial momentum it gathered with the People's Movement of April 2006 and its immediate aftermath. In South Africa, the citizenry still considers itself to be in a transitional period, 13 years after the first post-Apartheid election. However, the volatility of the transition will not even begin to subside until substantive agreements have been made on the future of the country. In Nepal, the political parties are reluctant to enter into negotiations on the future compact of the state and society until after the Constituent Assembly elections. Eight years, an insurrection, a period of autocratic monarchy and a popular people's movement have all passed by since the last democratic election, and no one has any real idea of the electoral strength of any political party, least of all the electorally untested CPN (Maoist). The parties themselves live between hope of what an election might deliver, and fear that they will suffer rejection. Thus, the parties, unsure of themselves, are unwilling to risk engaging with issues until they become critical.

Other democratic transitions suggest that it is during this period that practices and norms become embedded in the nascent democracy. Therefore, it is important that there is early progress on the structural aspects of democracy to ensure that, for example, the values of inclusion and democratic practice are embedded, rather than those of corruption and nepotism. This is at least Nepal's fourth attempt at a democratic transition (after 1950, 1960 and 1990), which suggests that early progress on such issues is crucial.

Despite the use of the term 'peace process', it is precisely process that is often lacking in building peace. Including in Nepal, process is generally understood as procedure – for example, the sequencing of events, rather than the complex web of relationships and analysis that underpins how the process functions. Agreements focused only on outcomes do little to change either the underlying conflict structure or the causes of the conflict. The inherent authoritarianism of Nepali society and its political system militates against an approach that focuses on how the parties relate to each other to achieve

a shared vision of what is now widely referred to as a 'New Nepal'. The milestones that have been reached in Nepal through elite negotiation are impressive, but there remains a question as to whether this style can deliver the transformative forces necessary for a sustainable and secure Nepali democracy. Power-brokering and crisis-management approaches have both, in fact, contributed to the problem with the setting of the date of the Constituent Assembly elections, and the subsequent blame game when it came time to come up with a more realistic timing.

Promise of constituency

The citizens of Nepal were first promised a Constituent Assembly in 1950, when the Ranas were overthrown. Nearly a decade of political turmoil thereafter led to a compromise between the then king and the political forces, which instead led to a general election, in 1959. The short-lived experiment in democracy was brought to a close the following year, and the autocratic king-led Panchayat system was introduced. The demise of the Panchayat system in the spring of 1990 as a result of the People's Movement did not lead to a Constituent Assembly – instead, an understanding with King Birendra led directly to a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, which is what was quashed by Gyanendra, until he was defeated by the second People's Movement of April 2006. The unfulfilled demand for a Constituent Assembly was central to the People's Movement, and there is a historic fear that it may be snatched away yet again.

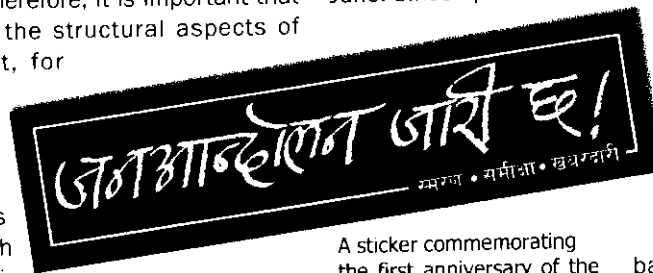
And so, the Nepali people are still waiting for the Constituent Assembly promised back in 1950. In mid-April, they learned that they will have to wait a little longer, after the Chief Election Commissioner declared that it was not possible to meet the promised date of 20 June. Since April 2006, various election dates have been

pulled out of the political air, but June had appeared just about possible when it was first announced. However, the work of the Election Commission – compiling voting registers, producing

ballot papers – takes time, and could only commence once the political decision-making about the method of

elections and constituencies took place and was cemented in law. Delays in that process have made it impossible for the Election Commission to do its job on time.

This situation has been known and understood for some months. However, instead of addressing the problem, the political parties have engaged in talk of abnormal elections for abnormal times. No one was willing to take the political responsibility of announcing the delay, which was finally left to the Election Commission. The



A sticker commemorating the first anniversary of the 2006 People's Movement reads: "The People's Movement continues!"

assumption is that the election can now not be held until after the monsoon, which probably means not until the end of October or early November, to make time for the post-harvest Dasain and Tihar festivals. There will be several ramifications of this delay, each of which will need to be managed. There have already been complaints about the conditions in the Maoist cantonment camps, for instance, including the fact that these shelters were not made to withstand a monsoon season.

Since the Constituent Assembly is the necessary negotiation site for the big questions regarding Nepal's future, uncertainty on these questions will most likely continue for another six months. This may adversely affect the law-and-order situation, though it does give more time for the state to organise the justice sector, and to dismantle the parallel Maoist structures (although there does appear to be some political reluctance to tackle these contentious issues). Currently, the Maoists are increasing pressure on the interim government and the Parliament to take a decision on abolishing the monarchy – and the subsequent question of republicanism – prior to the Constituent Assembly. It would not be ideal for an unelected interim parliament and government to take such fundamental decisions, which would be monumentally stronger if made by the Constituent Assembly. But fear that postponement may mean cancellation could lend support for earlier action on the question of monarchy.

Identity conflict

Democratic inclusion and exclusion have become central to political discourse in Nepal, and successive demonstrations demanding rights for various groups have become the norm in the cities, especially Kathmandu. But it is in the Tarai plains that exclusion has exploded in a dangerous identity conflict.

Since April 2006, there has been a strong pattern of mobilisation in the Tarai, where the simple bipolar conflict between the Maoists and the government has been replaced by a complex and dynamic ethnically-based conflict. The Madhesi people of the Tarai, who are of 'plains origin', have long been treated as outsiders, which is qualitatively different to the 'insider discrimination' experienced by the Janajatis and Dalits of the hills.

The Madhesi people were treated as second-class citizens more than were other groups, due to the hill identity taken on historically by the Nepali nation state. In the modern era, there has also been a denial of citizenship to many, as the Pahadis (hill people) fear Indian infiltration through the open border to the south. Having for the past decade promoted the rights of excluded peoples, the CPN (Maoist) saw the populous Tarai as a lucrative vote bank. Both Madhav Kumar Nepal, the head of the mainstream Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's home constituencies are in the eastern Tarai, and there is a strong history of involvement in the democratic struggle in the plains.

But, high expectations after Jana Andolan II (the 2006

People's Movement) led to a series of protests, some violent, across the Tarai. The violence increased through 2006, provoked by groups including the Maoist-breakaway Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha (the JTMM, which has since broken into two additional groups) and other groups espousing violence. The Madhesi Peoples' Rights Forum (MPRF), led by an ex-Maoist, was initially a peaceful organisation but has also become implicated in violence.

Fear of not being proportionally elected in the course of the Constituent Assembly elections led to great disaffection, particularly among the Madhesi people of the eastern Tarai. On 25 December, violence in the plains came to a head after a Tarai strike was called by the Nepal Sadbhavana Party-Anandi Devi (NSP-A), a member of the SPA government, to protest the signing of the interim constitution. The response by both the police and CPN (Maoist) cadres was coordinated and violent. Violence continued across the Tarai – further inflamed by incidents at Lahan in mid-January – even with the occasional offers of talks being made by the government.

The official response to the unrest in the Tarai has been clumsy and confused. The first instinct of the government and the CPN (Maoist) – which was already in the interim parliament and preparing to join the interim government – was to use force to try to quell the protests. This merely fuelled the indignation and determination of the Madhesi groups, however, and aided their mobilisation. The strong role played by the Maoists in using force also lent a hollowness to the offers to negotiate by the CPN (Maoist) Madhesi leader, Matrika Yadav. More than two dozen died in what many called the 'Madhesi Jana Andolan', but the government seemed to be insensitive to so many deaths – more than the total of the April 2006 People's Movement.

In March there was a clash of a different nature in Gaur, between MPRF members and Maoist cadres and sympathisers. At least 27 were beaten to death with bamboo poles and more than 40 others were injured, most of whom were affiliated with the Maoists. The deaths shocked Nepalis, and ended any claim to pacifism on the part of the MPRF. The violence also showed the level of disappointment and resentment many Madhesis feel towards the CPN (Maoist).

A hurried amendment

As the violence mounted, the government appeared to panic, and unilaterally amended the interim constitution to change the government structure to a federal system, with guarantees of representation for disadvantaged groups in all state bodies. It did not, however, specify as to how these constitutional objectives were to be achieved. This was a classic case of doing the right thing the wrong way, and only succeeded in buying a 10-day respite in the Tarai violence.

In times of conflict, the tendency is to concentrate on what will end the conflict. The government's handling of the constitutional amendment illustrates the problems inherent if the eventual solution is not the culmination of

a truly inclusive process. The timing of the promulgation of such solutions is also important, as windows of opportunity open and close quickly in conflict situations. The constitutional amendment failed to stem the Madhesi conflict both because of its unilateral nature and because it was too little, too late. The Madhesi saw it as a concession that had been squeezed out of the government, rather than a right freely granted. It was therefore heavily scrutinised and found wanting in its lack of elaboration on how federalism and inclusion would be granted. Madhesi leaders subsequently drew the conclusion that they would have to continue to agitate in order for these constitutional clauses to become a reality. So far, there have been no official negotiations with the Madhesi groups.

Even the concession that was granted by the government, to increase Tarai constituencies, was given as a gift from on-high, rather than through a process of negotiation. As such, the Madhesi groups who might in fact have celebrated did not do so because they were shown not to have been involved. The position that the government took was bolstered by Maoist hardliners, who were fuelled by internecine tendencies. This, in addition to the rebels' inexperience in the arena of co-operation and pluralism, seems to have led the government to bungle in addressing the Madhesi situation.

The government response to the violence in the Tarai has made other affected groups unhappy, particularly

because an impression has been created that you have to be violent to be heard. The restive hill ethnic communities – as well as the Tharu of the Tarai, who largely see themselves as different from the Madhesi – are at this time extremely disgruntled. Of course, it is important that the government does not respond only to those bearing arms, or those causing law-and-order problems. The issues of inclusivity should be negotiated with all affected groups, particularly non-violent ones. Otherwise, Nepal's transitional process will become an exercise in encouraging the use of arms. Care should also be taken to not incorporate constitutional clauses of apparent inclusion that are themselves exclusionary. Inclusion needs to be on the basis of individual and collective fundamental rights, rather than lists of those entitled to rights, which would automatically exclude those not on the list.

Despite these formidable obstacles, there is currently a strong will for peace in Nepal at the highest political levels. Political will is the single most important element in any peace process, and if more attention can be paid to the process and to the wider transformation agenda, peace can prevail in Nepal. With the Constituent Assembly all but officially postponed as of this writing, Nepal's citizens can hope that the fragile peace and the turbulent return to *loktastra* will both be consolidated on the road to the Constituent Assembly elections in late autumn of 2007.



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On 7 February this year, Bhutan's new king, Oxford-educated Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, began a six-day visit to India, marking his debut on the world stage two months after his earlier-than-expected ascension to the country's throne. The following day, the 27-year-old king signed a revised bilateral treaty with India that gave Bhutan significantly greater freedoms in pursuing its foreign and defence policies, areas tightly controlled by New Delhi for nearly six decades in accordance with the 1949 India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty. Not only has the signing signalled the arrival of Bhutan's upcoming democracy, with the stage now set for a realignment of relations with its 'closest friend', India; it has also opened possibilities of significant, if not drastic, changes in Thimphu's multilateral diplomacy in the neighbourhood.

Tentative redefining of the bilateral relationship began almost immediately. Following the signing of the new treaty with Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, King Namgyel Wangchuck stated: "From a guiding role upon Bhutan's first step to modernisation, we now stand as close friends and equal partners in the global arena." From such a sentiment, it seems clear that Thimphu is hoping now to deal with India on a level footing, rather than to continue to look up to it as a 'guide'. But even as the two countries talk about a further consolidation of their friendship, given Thimphu's newfound autonomy in foreign policy and military purchases, observers will have to wait to see the full impact of the agreement.

The India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty was signed in Darjeeling on 8 August 1949. One of its most central tenants, Article 2, defined the following circuitous relationship: "The Government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations." While over the decades the hold of this clause was progressively weakened as Bhutan stepped up its international

India and the upcoming Druk democracy

After revising its longstanding 'friendship' treaty with India, Bhutan is now ready to wield its own agency. How will it use it, and what will New Delhi think?

BY WASBIR HUSSAIN

diplomacy, it has nevertheless been a canker and a source of discomfort for Thimphu's nationalists.

This year's revised agreement has already come into force, with New Delhi and Thimphu exchanging the treaty's so-called Instruments of Ratification in the Bhutani capital on 3 March. Apart from the change in its relationship with India, the new treaty will also mean significantly different – and potentially, more vibrant – relationships between Bhutan and its other neighbours, particularly China, Bangladesh and Nepal. All of these will also have a natural bearing on India's security and diplomacy concerns – which is all the more reason why New Delhi will no longer be able to take its small northern neighbour for granted.

India's hesitant loosening

All of this is taking place against Bhutan's transformation from a monarchy to a parliamentary democracy – the country's first national elections, for instance, are slated for 2008. The impact of the combined dynamic of these fast-paced changes – on both the foreign-policy and electoral fronts – will be widespread, for both Bhutan and India. When Bhutan finally becomes a parliamentary democracy, the country is bound to witness a power play, in which even external forces could try to influence political parties or electoral behaviour. Furthermore, when Thimphu eventually attempts to pursue its own fully autonomous foreign policy, its actions could quickly raise challenges for New Delhi. In agreeing on the transformation of their relationship, New Delhi clearly seems confident that its geostrategic interests will not be tampered with by Bhutani authorities, including those of a democratic dispensation.

After the new treaty was signed, an Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman said that it removed provisions that had become "obsolete". "The treaty commits both countries to cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests, and not allow the use of territories for activities harmful to the national-security interest of the other," he said. New

Delhi clearly hopes that Thimphu would not ignore any future foray by Indian militants into Bhutan. Separatist groups from the Indian Northeast had operated from well-entrenched bases in southern Bhutan for more than 12 years before they were expelled in December 2003 by Thimphu's military, with active support from Indian forces across the border.

Irrespective of the changes taking place – or perhaps because of them – Indian aid to Bhutan appears set to continue as before. On 29 March this year, New Delhi announced assistance to Bhutan worth INR 26.1 billion. An official statement following the cabinet's passage of the aid made clear the quid-pro-quo India expected from the deal in letting Bhutan off earlier restrictions:

This decision will result in continued strengthening of India-Bhutan relations based on our strategic and economic interests in an area of high geo-political sensitivity. We will support the new King of Bhutan, and Bhutan's transition to a constitutional democracy. It will also generate the opportunities of Indian companies to participate in major projects, and strengthen goodwill for India in Bhutan by fulfilling our existing commitments.

With New Delhi having agreed to help Bhutan hold its upcoming elections, there has been a formal tie-up

between the Indian Election Commission and the nascent Election Commission of Bhutan. An estimated 400,000 electors are to choose their representatives from 47 parliamentary constituencies, which have been defined after the recent completion of a delimitation process. While India is in the process of exporting its ideology – that of democracy – to Bhutan, it remains to be seen whether the darker add-ons to electoral politics, such as money and muscle power, also take hold in Druk Yul. With Bhutan's first two (marginally) private newspapers having come up following the July 2006 passage of the Information, Communications and Media Act, a heady cocktail of media, politics and governance seems to be in the offing in heretofore-staid Thimphu.

Some sections in Bhutan seem wary of the perils of the country's fast-paced transition. An editorial in the government-run *Kuensel* recently noted:

It would be unrealistic to believe that we will maintain a harmony of views throughout the process [of democratisation] and avoid conflict. We already know that there will be differences in political views among the potential leadership and among voters. The challenge is to accept those differences as a necessary and useful element of democracy ... We understand today that democracy is not just elections but an entire system of values that places the responsibility of governance on the people. Our goal is not

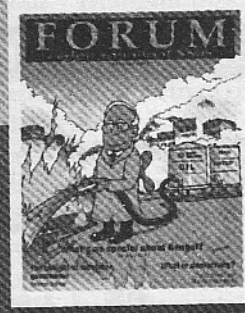
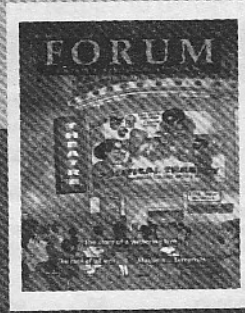
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to introduce the structure of democracy but to establish a democratic government that will function well. Introducing democracy is the first step. The real goal is to make it work.

If democracy fails to 'work' in Bhutan, the greatest ramification would of course be for Bhutan's expectant citizenry, long deprived of any say in their governance. At the same time, India would have to confront an unpredictable democracy, whereas earlier it only had to talk to the king.

Bhutani Maoists

As the 2008 elections in Bhutan draw near, the most important thing to watch from New Delhi's point of view will be the political forces that come into play. For obvious reasons, New Delhi policymakers would like a politically stable Bhutan. The Indian and Bhutani security establishments were stung when they learned about the launch of the Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) (BCP) in April 2003. At that time, the BCP circulated pamphlets in Bhutan as well as in the Lhotshampa refugee camps in southeast Nepal that spelled out the new party's objective as hoping to "smash the [Bhutani] monarchy" and establish a "true and new democracy" in the country.

The creation of the BCP also brought focused interest from both New Delhi and Thimphu onto the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), one of three Indian militant outfits that were said to be operating from within Bhutan for a while. Formed in December 1995 by some radical members of the

Koch-Rajbongshi tribe (from which is derived the name for Cooch-Behar District), the KLO has been fighting to carve out a separate Kamatapur state from parts of Assam and West Bengal. Authorities quickly concluded that the pro-Maoist KLO was active and had pockets of influence in the strategic northern part of West Bengal; they also worried that the KLO could eventually act as a bridge between Maoist guerrillas in Nepal and the newly emerging Maoist force in Bhutan.

The emerging militant threat to Bhutan may ultimately have been the key factor that drove then-King Jigme Singye Wangchuck into action during the winter of 2003, to engage in the coordinated military mission with India. Against this backdrop, it will be interesting to watch whether a Maoist-backed or Maoist-linked political party emerges in Bhutan, and whether any such group eventually takes part in the country's 2008 electoral exercise. As such, observers have again started placing particular focus on the Bhutan Communist Party. Whether the BCP has any level of actual strength is not known; Bhutani authorities, however, have stated that the party has formed an armed wing, called the Bhutan Tiger Force. This outfit has been accused of planting a bomb near the Bhutani trade hub of Phuentsholing this past March. As of now, it is unlikely that the BCP will contest in the 2008 elections, but it could back a new, yet-to-emerge force. If former king Jigme had been worried about the extended influence of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) on Bhutani affairs, he might be

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sleeping a little easier now that the Nepali rebels are well on their way to becoming part of the 'establishment' in Kathmandu and are seemingly quite 'sensitive' to New Delhi's views on geopolitical matters.

Sino-Bhutani tranquillity

Given Bhutan's ostensible new foreign-policy freedom, it will be particularly interesting to watch the course of Sino-Bhutani relations in the days to come. Though the two countries share a 470 km border, Thimphu currently does not have diplomatic ties with Beijing. Although Bhutan never had a policy of 'equi-closeness' or 'equi-distance' vis-à-vis China, in recent years there have been high-level visits in both directions. This is due largely to direct border talks, which from 1984 onwards tried to resolve various boundary disputes.

It was in 1954, after the communist revolution and subsequent integration of Tibet, that China first laid claim over Bhutan. Four years later, Chinese troops moved to occupy about 300 square miles of Bhutani territory in the country's north and northeast. In 1960, Chinese claims on Bhutan resurfaced after Beijing openly declared that, "Bhutanese, Sikkimese and Ladakhis form a united family in Tibet. They have always been subject to Tibet and to the great motherland of China. They must once again be united and taught the communist doctrine."

Until the 1970s, Bhutan's border issues with China were incorporated under the rubric of the Sino-Indian border dialogue. With the coming of the Janata Party government in New Delhi in 1977, relations between India and China showed some signs of improvement. In 1981, a process was started to initiate direct dialogue with China, and the Boundary Commission of Bhutan was established. Preliminary border talks began in 1981, facilitated by the United Nations and Indian diplomats. It was not until 1984, however, that the first formal meeting between Chinese and Bhutani officials took place.

Signs of Thimphu and Beijing embarking on a road to friendship started appearing in 1990. In addition to Bhutani delegations traveling to various international events in China, since 1995 Bhutan has also shown a degree of international support for China. For instance, Thimphu representatives have helped to defeat various drafts perceived to be anti-China sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); they also voted against the draft for Taiwan's participation at the UN, and rejected Taiwan's bid to host the 2002 Asian Games. Since 1994, the Chinese ambassador in India has regularly visited Bhutan, while Bhutan's ambassador to India visited Beijing in 2000. Both China and Bhutan have now been talking of a territory exchange for some time, and the chances of this happening have risen significantly with the signing of the new Indo-Bhutani treaty.

In December 1998, the so-called Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity in

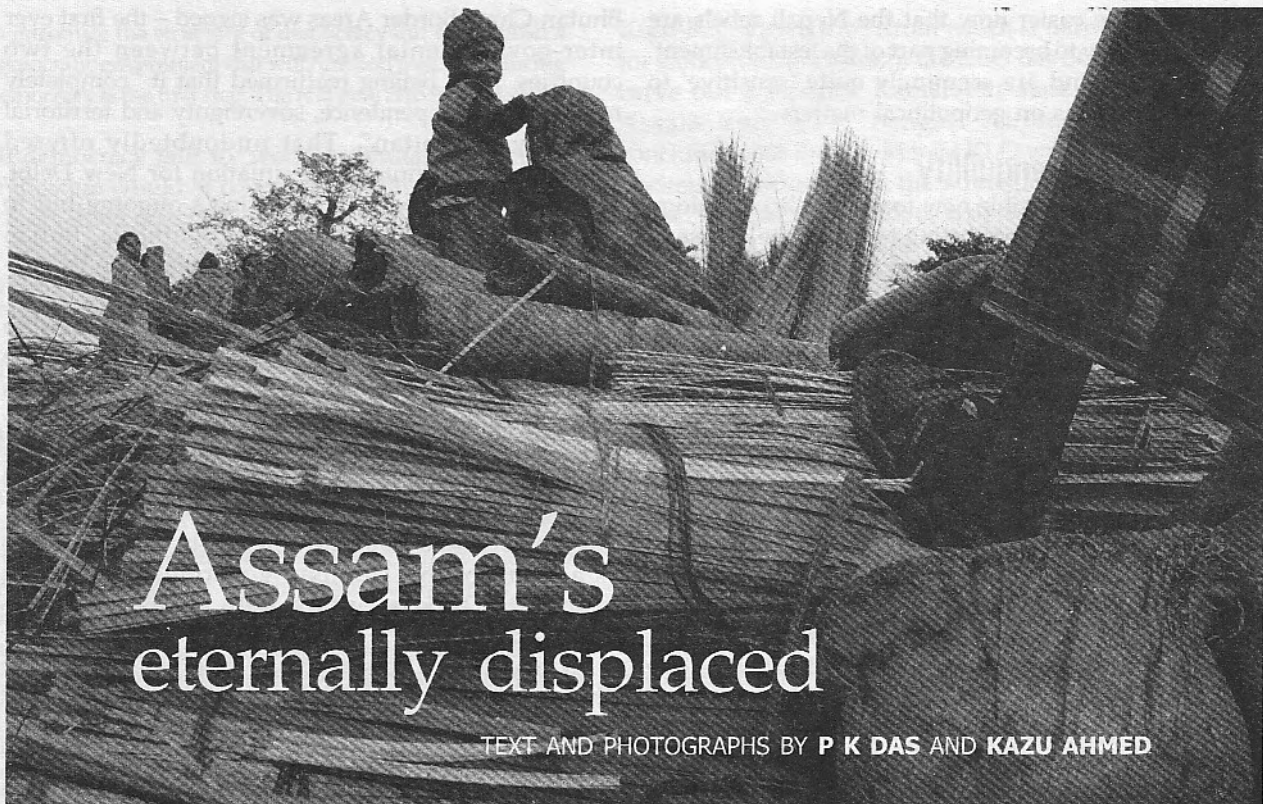
Bhutan-China Border Areas was signed – the first ever inter-governmental agreement between the two countries. In it, Beijing reaffirmed that it "completely respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bhutan". That undoubtedly offered some solace to Bhutan; the situation for New Delhi, however, is less rosy. With China's ongoing bid to establish handholds throughout Southasia, Indian policymakers will surely keep a close watch on Beijing-Thimphu relations in the days ahead.

Just as interesting will be the evolving relationship between Bhutan and Nepal, particularly because bilateral relations between the two neighbours, whom many consider 'natural allies', have been affected by the issue of the Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa refugees, who have been living in UNHCR-aided camps in southeastern Nepal for the past 16 years. The Lhotshampa departure began in the late 1980s as a result of the Thimphu government's attempt to impose Drukpa culture onto all the country's ethnic groups.

By mid-1990, Lhotshampa in exile had formed the Bhutan People's Party (BPP), which demanded civil rights and drastic changes to the political system. Thimphu dubbed the Lhotshampa as 'anti-nationals' and cracked down harshly, subsequently setting off a mass exodus from Bhutan into Nepal. Today, there are roughly 106,000 Bhutani refugees living in seven camps in Nepal's Jhapa and Morang districts. Ironically, the democratic transition demanded by the Lhotshampa activists is in the process of being put in place in their absence.

Although the refugee issue has shown possibility of resolution recently – with the Kathmandu government for the first time allowing for the possibility of third-country resettlement in response to the United States' offer to 'take in' 60,000 refugees – Kathmandu-Thimphu relations remain extremely chilly. Last December, bilateral discussions between the two capitals on the refugee issue – in their 16th round – again broke down. Whether Nepal-based Lhotshampa political forces with linkages into Bhutan can become a factor in the country's elections next year remains to be seen. It will be important to watch, however, how Thimphu proceeds in dealing with the problem with its newfound foreign-policy freedom.

While India-Bhutan relations remain firm for the time being, they will no longer have the concrete assuredness on which Indian diplomats and policymakers have for so long been able to count. New Delhi will now need to keep in view external factors and influences that could strain future ties. India's security concerns aside, however, on paper Bhutan has now been cut loose from India's influence if not munificence – largesse that always came with strings attached. How both sides react to the new situation in the coming years will go far in defining a whole new dynamic in this land-locked corner of Southasia. ▲



Assam's eternally displaced

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY P K DAS AND KAZU AHMED

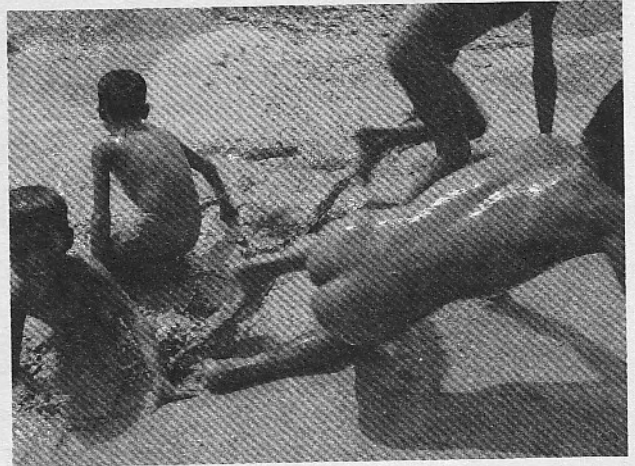
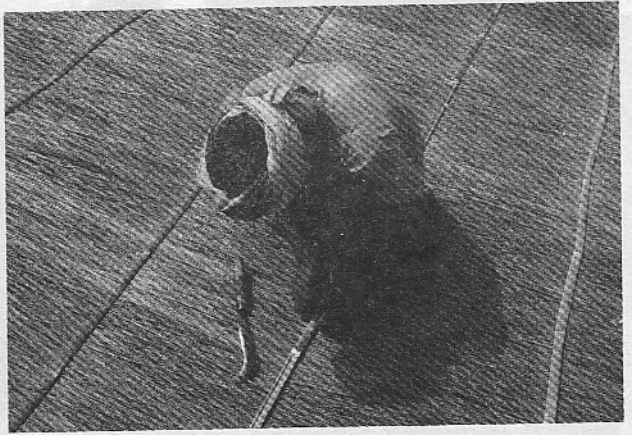
For around 1500 families that have spent the past decade at the Goroimari relief camp in Assam, life continues to be a series of unforgiving tests. Originally rendered homeless by the ethnic violence that rocked parts of western Assam during the early 1990s, these Bengali-speaking Muslim Assamese (initially numbering just a couple of hundred families) first moved into a relief camp set up by the state government during 1993. Since then,

they have been forced to shift camps again and again.

In the first camp, they suffered due to flooding. In an attempt to move them to higher ground, in 1996 the Assam government settled the families in Goroimari, in long rows of shanties on both sides of the National Highway 31. While drunken truckers mowed down the refugees' new 'homes', Goroimari locals accused the camp residents of theft. District officials even allege that the

people in the camps had taken substantial grants from the government with the assurance that they would return to the places they had come from, but that once the sums were received, they had refused to budge. Camp residents deny having received any such compensation. Whatever be the truth of these claims, what is apparent is that the government seemed happy to forget these people. Ten years passed.

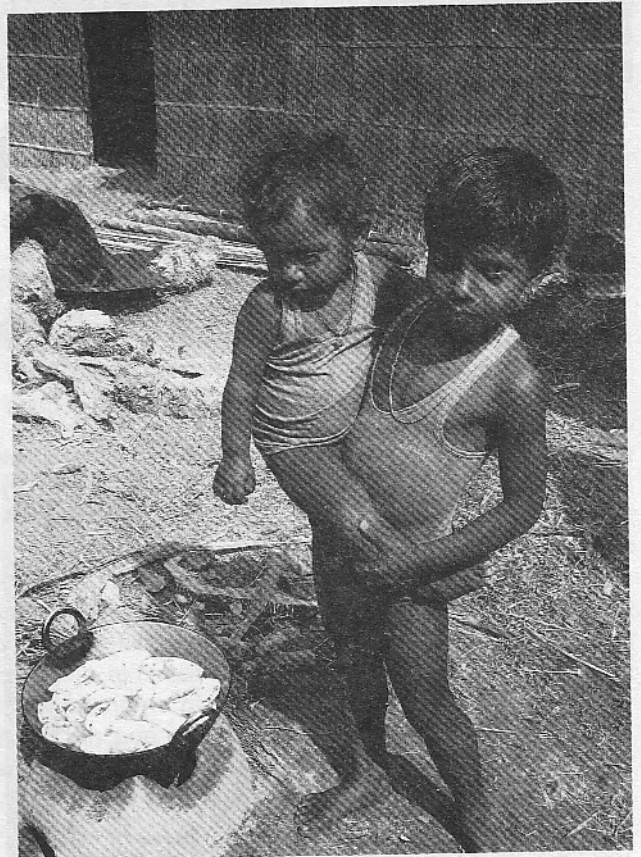




In 2006, the Goroimari camp population suddenly came to be seen as an obstacle in the way of a massive highway project. So, this past January, these people were again displaced, literally overnight. According to the camp's residents, district authorities simply showed up and told them to pack their belongings and be ready to leave by the following day. The next day, 17 trucks and a few buses arrived to take the families to an area called Barkhapara. There, they were to be given small pieces of land, some cash, and some building materials. Thereafter, they would be expected to fend for themselves. The relocation process was to take place quickly, due to expectations of trouble from those who would protest the arrival of the oustees – student organisations, political parties and local residents. Sure enough, instead of finding their new lands in Barkhapara, the refugees instead were greeted by a group of 2000 protesters.

The fourth camp

The Goroimari residents never did make it to Barkhapara. Unable to relocate them at the intended site, for a while the district administration herded them around. Finally, they were taken to a place called Chalabila. This area had at one time been considered for inhabitation by the refugees, but the plan had run into legal problems fostered by local vote-bank politics. Although the High Court of Assam had previously stopped the relocation to Chalabila,

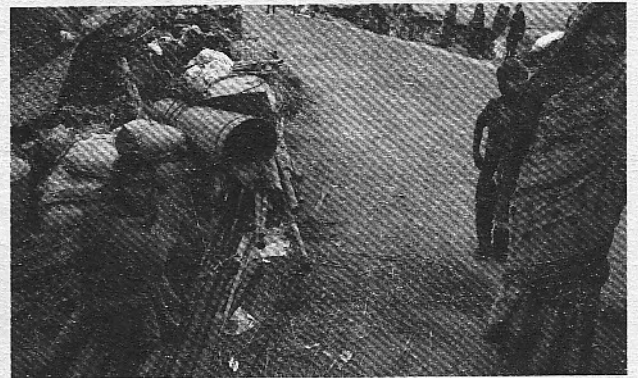




this order was apparently reversed overnight. A platoon of police personnel was posted, barbed-wire fences were erected around the site, and many of the Goroimari residents eventually moved in. Chalabila locals, especially non-Muslims, now fear that with the arrival of the refugees, the social and economic situation will change to their disadvantage – an anxiety that has its roots in the fear of Bangladeshi ‘infiltration’, which has long been the bread and butter of Assamese political parties and student groups.

For the new residents of Chalabila however, there are more immediate problems. Although not far from the subdivisional headquarters at Bijni, Chalabila does not have the healthcare facilities required for such a large number of people. This population knows nothing about various government programmes, including those that have been set up specifically for people living below the poverty line. While livelihood issues are currently the most pressing concerns, economic and educational opportunities are also limited. With no infrastructure in the offing, the new settlement is likely to endure serious lack of services in the days ahead.

This instance of displacement is not an isolated one for Assam. The uprooting of people from their lands and their encounters with social and economic distress are facts of life that have been repeated over the decades. Despite this long experience, humane approaches to address the situation of refugees remain elusive. Though displacement continues, an effective policy of rehabilitation simply does not exist. Those who suffer are no longer internally, but *eternally*, displaced peoples. ▲



A full-bodied treatment of a story of physical passion – and such stories, great ones even, are not lacking in our literature – is unthinkable on the Indian screen ... The scenes of lovemaking in Indian films have therefore been reduced to a formula of clasping hands, longing looks, and vapid, supposedly amorous verbal exchanges – not to speak of love duets sung against artificial romantic backdrops. It is the dead weight of ultra-Victorian moral conventions which reduces the best of directors to taking refuge in these devices.

– Satyajit Ray, "The Odds against Us", *Our Films, Their Films*

To Ray's catalogue of those techniques used by Indian film directors to portray "physical passion", one may add a recent inclusion: the fetish for lingering on the woman's uncovered back. Women have long had an indirect relation to culture, as the Muse has traditionally been female. "Men are erotically stimulated by the opposite sex; painting was male; the nude became a female nude," noted feminist scholar Shulamith Firestone, while talking about the representation of heterosexual desire in art. Such sentiment is echoed by the British art critic John Berger: "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at ... The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female."

The obsession with images of women's bodies, in Southasia in general and in India in particular, can be construed as a form of voyeurism in which women are distanced, even kept powerless. But why this tendency of the camera in Indian films and television commercials to focus on the woman's back? Quite simply, the back is the front's other. While the woman's front, with all its various devices of mothering, is exactly what males lack, the back is everything that the front is not. With its apparent unisexuality, the back would appear to be a most unlikely place for 'provocation'. Nonetheless, as plenty of evidence on the ground can



Priyanka Chopra

Affair with the back

A scholar's view of the obsession with the woman's back in Bollywood cinema. For the voyeuristic camera, the woman's back is safe terrain.

BY SUMANA ROY

attest to, this is exactly what has taken place in India.

"The presence of woman," says the feminist theorist Laura Mulvey, "is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation." In popular Indian culture, particularly in Hindi films, this attitude is particularly apparent. In the film *Beta*, for instance, a passionate Madhuri Dixit

coos "*Dhak dhak karne laga*" (*Dhak dhak goes my heart*), *dhak* being the aural mimicry of a heart in passionate turmoil. While doing so, Dixit shows the audience her back. With its outward thrusts, an apparent mimicry of the beating heart, the back stands in for what cannot be seen – and particularly for what cannot be shown. The back becomes the uncovered front, and in the ensuing politics of representation, becomes the camera's voyeuristic ally. Significantly, this fetishism exists outside the linear



Kareena Kapoor

time of the narrative, during the songs and so-called item numbers.

The triangle

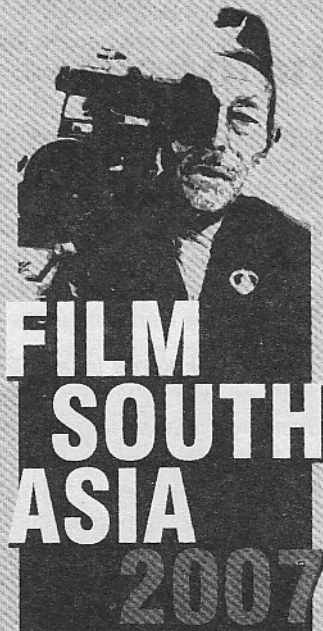
Imagery of the female body has become so uni-dimensional that it can barely be shown without the temptations of desire and the implications of abuse. This is nowhere more evident than in the "Choli ke peeche kya hai" number from the film *Khalnayak*. With the implicit fear that the woman has been abused hovering about, one woman asks

another the titular question, which translates to "What is there behind your blouse?" The camera, meanwhile, has to remain content with watching the thrusts of the woman's back muscles.

In Indian cinema, the woman's back has become an equivalent of the "half-open lips ... an affirmative expression" that, according to the French cultural theorist Luce Irigaray, was a marker of the "women-goddesses" of "prehistory". As with the women in Hindi films, these goddesses were considered divine not because they could be mothers, but because of their female identity. Similarly, the women showing their backs to the camera make no claim to motherhood – the biology of the back does not allow that. As such, while the desire remains the same, its actual location changes. The sex of the goddesses to which Irigaray refers was marked by a triangle, hiding but simultaneously drawing attention to the female genitalia. A woman's back in modern representation works in a manner similar to this ancient figure of the triangle.

The trajectory of the use of this triangle, moving between cultures and times, shows how the signposts of erotica have evolved, how they have essentially moved from the reproductive organs to a 'sexless' fragment of the body. This cannot be seen as a sign of the attitude of the 21st-century middle-class Indian towards sex, where the easy accessibility of sex is said to have killed interest in the 'real' thing. Nor, as some social historians have suggested, can it be seen as a turn towards an increasingly androgynous world. If the rise of the obsession with the female back says anything about the people of the Subcontinent – both producers and consumers – it is to their continuing discomfort with the female sexuality. This manifests itself in the tendency to decentre a woman's body by portraying her in fragments (breasts, lips, hips, back), and in the process 'desexualises' her.

For women, the back dissolves all boundaries. Unlike the front, with its obvious breasts, stomach, navel, pelvis and genitalia, the back is unique in that one cannot specify where it



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Physically, the back is a space that is beyond one's own touch. As such, the identity of the back has, of necessity, been based on sight.

begins or ends. (Interestingly, a man's back in mass media is generally described not through eroticism, but through machismo and masculinity. In stark contrast, the site of acceptable male eroticism is not the back, but the chest.) Focus on the back also makes fewer demands on women, as there is no particular template of size or colour to which one needs to conform. This can perhaps explain the apparent absence of unease among female performers regarding exposing their backs.

The open peeth

Most of the other parts of the body (the hair, face, eyes, lips, legs) have long been glorified in 'filmi' songs and ghazals. But there is hardly any musical ode to the back; perhaps the back's Hindostani equivalent, *peeth*, sounds too unpoetic. Unlike the much-mythologised hair, eyes, feet or navel, the back has never been significantly portrayed or written about with any element of signification. The back, therefore, was only to be spoken about by the unspoken; the aural had to give way to the visual. That has all changed with the modern mass media. Exploring a few examples of this proliferation can give a sense of the camera's newfound affair with the female back, as well as the situations in which it generally makes its appearance.

Take, for instance, the immensely popular routine surrounding the song "Didi tera dewar deewana" (Sister, your brother-in-law is crazy) in the film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. The song begins with the entire screen filled with a woman's back. As the camera moves away, that back is hit by a stone from the unshown hands of the crazy brother-in-law himself. Having been denied entry to an all-woman pregnancy-celebration party, he has found his stone-throwing to be the only means of 'touching' the central female character.

The importance of a woman – and her back – as a visual element is somewhat definitively revealed in the

music video for a 2003 song by Babul Supriyo called "Sochta hoon" (I imagine). This song is entirely based on this dynamic of the 'unsaid' finding representation in the imagery of a woman's back. The video includes a lingering shot of the captivated lover as the lone spectator in a theatre hall, watching with smiling eyes a woman sitting onstage with her back turned towards him.

The sense that a viewer gets from the "Sochta hoon" video is that of the female back as a kind of *tabula rasa*, on which the language of desire can be scripted. Such a conclusion is echoed in a painting by the contemporary Bengali artist Subroto Gangopadhyay. His "Winged Goddess" deals specifically with the female back (see *image*). Apart from the obvious bare-backed woman in both the video and the painting, there is another similarity between these two works – a bird motif. In the painting, the wings are perched on the woman's back, while in the "Sochta hoon" video, the tattoo on the woman's back is that of a winged woman. The camera lingers on the surface of the back, before descending onto the tattoo in an action reminiscent of digging a path through the woman's back to her heart. Throughout the course of the shot, the woman's face is never shown – she is simply a faceless woman in a backless dress.

The inexplicable relationship of the imagination to the bare female back is also seen in the song "Kaise Piya Se", from the Hindi film *Bewafaa*. Here, the actress Kareena Kapoor is thinking about her lover, her thoughts coloured by her imagination as she gets up from the bubble bath, drapes herself in a towel and shows her back to the camera. She was subsequently quoted in an Indian tabloid as saying that her bare back in the song "is very aesthetically shot", and that there was no "obscenity" in it.

Unexplicated secret

Feminist scholars have long argued that a female performer cannot wear a 'neutral costume', that every garment she wears is inherently imbued with feminine and class specificity. In India specifically, however, the contours, the colour of the back, and therefore the cut of the draping fabric has a value that often defies analysis. Since the culture of fashion has been such that emphasis has been placed on covering the organs associated with reproduction (from the fig leaf to the bikini), the back has been able to elude culture's censorious scissors.

The semantics of 'looking' at the back rather than 'peeking' at the front is indicative of how the bra – not a new concept in India's tradition of dressing – has become a symbol of the 'back holding the front'. The bra is subsequently threaded with masculine fantasy, for it is a garment that is completely missing in the male wardrobe. Similarly, the different cuts of the *choli*, and the use of henna to paint the back, both point to the space of the back as being one of negotiation and power struggle between the masculine and feminine.



Madhuri Dixit

Since the culture of fashion has been such that emphasis has been placed on covering the organs associated with reproduction, the back has been able to elude culture's censorious scissors.



Physically, the back is a space that is beyond one's own touch - by the hands or anything else. As such, the identity of the back has, of necessity, been based on sight. The emphasis on the back is also patriarchy's means of avoiding the woman's image of her own body - that based on a woman's biology, of menstruation and

reproduction. By avoiding the 'female mystery', the camera creates a woman's image from the outside, from the other side. The back, without the problematic elements of fissures and broken surfaces, the orifices and the tears with which the female body has traditionally posed challenges to patriarchy's notion of the 'classical

form', becomes a safe zone for the camera.

This sub-cultural discourse regarding the back, so prevalent in the Subcontinent, makes explicit a social contract in which the complex interrelatedness between gender and the politics of representation become evident. Interestingly, the words 'explicit' and 'explicate' both stem from the Latin *explicare*, meaning 'to unfold'. The explicit back thus becomes a site of social markings that delineate the hierarchies inherent in the way society constructs gender relations of privilege and sexuality. The camera's affair with women's bare backs explicates the many ways in which our individual bodies and the body politic overlap. Just as Matisse (in his works "Back I" to "Back IV") explored the contours of the woman's back in his sculptures, Indian filmmakers continue to repeat images of the female performer's back in the tone of an insistence - as if to constantly remind us that something precious remains hidden, a 'secret' that needs to be 'exposed', a secret that is, at once, filled with pleasure and distrust. ▲

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The new USSR

Half-hearted journey

Nearly suspended

Expected destination

Almost abandoned

— Rameshjung Sijapati in *Asanchit Bhav*

The mainstream Indian media is obsessed with the five C's – cricket, consumerism, controversy, cinema and crime, though not necessarily in that order. So much was happening on each of these fronts during March and April that the New Delhi newshounds hardly took notice of a small meeting of unassuming Southasians at the India International Centre, called Imagine a New Southasia (with the last as one word).

Mediapersons need to be forgiven their preoccupation. Even though almost everybody in Southasia knows by now that cricket matches can be fixed in advance, it was as if editors and TV producers had just discovered this uncomfortable reality. While audiences in Pakistan and India were clamouring for the heads of their fallen heroes, the TV channels were perhaps correct in prioritising the agony of the commercial celebrities of the colonial game.

Taking advantage of a balmy springtime in New Delhi, the *Hindustan Times* had also hosted a summit of its own, during which the owner of a French super-brand took it upon himself to declare that the opposite of luxury was not, in fact, poverty, but rather vulgarity. As if there can be anything more vulgar than a conclave on extravagance in a country that is home to the majority of the planet's poor.

Controversy galore from all over Southasia was vying for newspaper inches. In a revised edition of her autobiography, *Daughter of the East*, Benazir Bhutto made some startling revelations about the Pakistani military. The source of Vijaya Mallya's limitless funding, which sustains the opulence of Kingfisher Airlines, was another matter of intense speculation. And the Bangladeshi experiment of running a country like an NGO was also keenly watched, to consider the possibility of its replication elsewhere.

Cinema had its own stories. Ash's

wedding gown, the journey of Shahrukh Khan to Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London, and the release of a slew of new movies based on the lavish lifestyles of NRIs were enough to keep glamour-hunters excited. In comparison, all that the Imagine a New Southasia conference could offer the TV cameras was an ailing I K Gujral, venting his frustration with the slow pace of development of the Southasian identity.

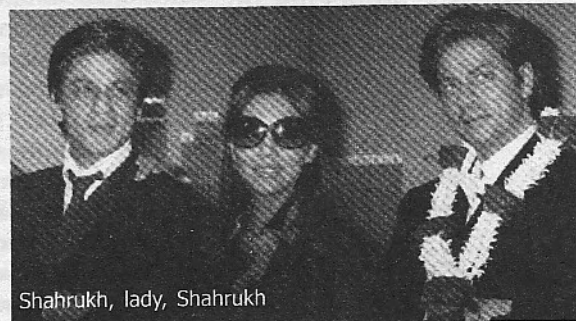
But despite the mainstream media's wandering attention, there is indeed another Southasia out here, which even the World Bank has now begun to recognise. "There are currently two South Asias in our region. One has high growth and great dynamism. In the other, there is tremendous poverty and conflict. The two South Asias need to be integrated into one, and this makes regional cooperation an important priority for us," the World Bank said in a press statement ahead of the 14th SAARC Summit, held in New Delhi during the first week of April.

The World Bank is supposed to specialise in policy prescriptions. In this case, however, it took refuge in pious pronouncements. But effective regional cooperation cannot be achieved without creating processes that extend beyond borders. After 22 years in existence, perhaps SAARC has finally outlived its utility. The next phase of regional solidarity needs to aim for nothing less than the integration and creation of a Confederation of Southasian Countries, and let us immediately give it an acronym: CSC. The Imagine a New Southasia conclave helped create the groundwork towards creating such a confederation, which may even lead to the eventual formation of a new USSR – the United States of the Southasian Region.

The IIC crowd

Created towards the end of the Cold War years, SAARC continues to suffer from the acrimonious legacy of the Southasia of the 1980s. Those were the days when Pakistan was busy creating a Central Asian identity for itself, Bangladesh was discovering Islamism, Sri Lanka was being towed towards ASEAN, and

With an India-born president in Islamabad and Pakistan-born premier in New Delhi, it seems that the time has indeed come to think of regional unity in concrete terms.



Shahrukh, lady, Shahrukh

Nepal was asserting its trans-Himalayan links. Amidst all of this confusion and insecurity with regards to the neighbours, India stood alone in imperious isolation – it was its territory that connected all Southasian countries to each other. Through the early 1990s, there were still many scholars in New Delhi who interpreted SAARC as a malicious attempt to encircle India. In an endeavour to phrase a non-controversial charter, the SAARC declarations became exercises in futility.

It was the unintended consequences of annual summits, however, that gave impetus to Southasian solidarity. A range of professionals began to discover, and then to value, pan-Southasian fraternity. The Track II crowd of former bureaucrats, retired diplomats and conscientious intellectuals suddenly found that there was a low-risk cause célèbre waiting to be championed. By the end of the 1990s, a Southasian identity had become acceptable in alternative circles of Colombo, Dhaka, Islamabad and Kathmandu. New Delhi socialites needed a bit of convincing; but thanks to the penetration and persuasive powers of Gujralsaheb, the 'IIC crowd' at Lodi Estate too began to extend its reach beyond the candlelight vigils at the Wagah border, and to consider the entire Subcontinent as its domain.

But the mainstreaming of the Southasian agenda was still limited. It had not yet gone to the region's 'others'; the marginalised, the excluded and the disempowered were still left out. The challenge was to address this constituency in such a way that pressure from below would build up to accelerate the process of regional cooperation. This is what a series of events preceding the 14th SAARC Summit, including *Imagine a New Southasia*, intended to achieve: to create awareness about the importance of Southasian unity. But the mainstream media refused to cooperate, instead deciding to wait for the pomp and show of the ceremonial summit.

The *Imagine a New Southasia* (INSA) initiative was audacious in the sense that it *began* by talking of a common currency, a common market, and a common passport for all of Southasia, to be governed by a Southasian Parliament formed according to the provisions of a Southasian Constitution. With an India-born president in Islamabad and Pakistan-born premier in New Delhi, it seems that the time has indeed come to think

of regional unity in concrete terms.

Manmohan Singh dreams of breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul. While that kind of dream is important, it does nothing to inspire those for whom the daily meal is breakfast, lunch and dinner, all rolled into one. Nonetheless, in order for it to become a reality, they too need to share the dream of Southasian unity. INSA attempted to address these concerns by advocating for the creation of pan-Southasian institutions.

A Southasian Commission on Poverty Alleviation need not ruffle too many feathers in the region's various capitals. Similarly, the Kabul-born grammarian Panini deserves a pan-subcontinental Academy of Southasian Languages dedicated to his memory – the region, home to nearly half of the world's 25 major languages, deserves the same. Meanwhile, a Southasian Minority Commission, a Southasian Commission for Human Rights and a string of Southasian Centres of Higher Studies would create the necessary conditions for the ultimate creation of a Southasian confederation.

The European Union emerged from the debris of World War II by improving 'connectivity', increasing interactions and deepening understanding. The process then progressed with the formation of an economic union, which is likely to result in the creation of a shared but not common political identity. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was created by the US to contain China and repel the Soviet Union from a region considered to be a bastion of capitalism. But it has failed to outgrow its role and acquire political relevance. While there are lessons from both of these experiences for Southasia, the world's most populous culturally affiliated but unintegrated region, Southasia will nonetheless have to chart its own course towards creating a shared identity.

It might even be that we will succeed better than all the other groupings, our late start notwithstanding. The Subcontinent does have what few regions elsewhere in the world share: a legacy of intertwined history, and the possibility of easy connectivity. In addition to (or instead of) an overarching institution such as SAARC, Southasia needs multiple bridges between cultures of the same Indic civilisation – so that each person can eventually discover that she is no different from any other in the region. ▲

**As if there can
be anything
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conclave on
extravagance
in a country
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planet's poor.**



Italian journalists are more equal than **Afghan journalists**, it seems, for the Kabul government, for Taliban extremists, and even for the International Federation of Journalists. In early March, a kidnapped journalist working for *La Repubblica* was released after ransom was paid by the Italian and Afghan authorities. But when Kabul refused to meet new demands to free the Italian journalist's working companion, journalist Ajmal Naqshbandi, the Taliban murdered him with "cynical and sickening brutality", in the words of the IFJ. But then, the international watchdog's own worries seemed more concerned with foreign correspondents than with the local journalists who face daily trials and tribulations. IFJ's 8 April press release was titled "Bargaining with Taliban Increases Risk to Foreign Media". Why this extreme concern for foreign media when a local journalist has just been killed? Is this lack of perspective breathtaking, or what?



Hameed Haroon, the publisher of **Karachi's Dawn**, has issued a public appeal for support against the Pakistani government's actions against his newspaper, specifically the drastic reduction in government advertising. He writes online, "Of late, the government headed by President Musharraf has become increasingly intolerant towards criticism in the press and towards the publishing of news that reflects poorly on the performance of his government on security matters." Haroon maintains that the directives emanate mainly from President Pervez Musharraf's office, and are activated by the newspaper's independent reporting on two broad areas: the escalating developments in Balochistan and in North and South Waziristan, and the Pakistani government's war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. "Also irksome have been the DAWN Group's related attempts to monitor a recurring tendency toward covert militancy among responsible decision-makers in government," Haroon notes. The publisher presents a complete dossier listing the continuing conflict between the DAWN Group and the Musharraf government since 2004. In the first phase, he writes, the government attempted to exert pressure through the proxy of the Sindh provincial government, which imposed a complete ban on advertising in the publications of the Group. This was followed by a comprehensive ban on government advertising imposed by Islamabad itself, "with an intent to provoke the financial collapse of the DAWN Group."



All *Chhetria Patrakar* has to say about Hameed Haroon's detailed *j'accuse* against Prez Mush's administration is - wow! Only a media group that is in extremely dire straits, or one whose hands are extremely clean, would dare go public the way the DAWN has. CP believes, and knows it to be true, that the case is the latter. So, hats off to the DAWN Group, and may other media companies, from Kathmandu to Colombo to Delhi to Dhaka, have similar courage of their convictions. And why should only Pakistanis express their protest to the various bigwigs listed (with phone numbers) in Haroon's note? Let all Southasians vent their ire by calling (albeit by long distance) the following numbers. The country and area codes are +9251 for all.

- Gen Pervez Musharraf, 9221388
- Shaukat Aziz, Prime Minister, 9212866
- Rana Bhagwandas, Acting Chief Justice, 9213452
- Mohammed Ali Durrani, Minister for Information Development, 9203740



The selfsame Pakistani Information Minister, **Mohammed Ali Durrani**, seemed to have over-reached in late March to claim that Pakistan's media had become a model of press freedom in Southasia. Durrani put this questionable trend down to his government's efforts to make the sector more 'dynamic' and 'professional'. So let us check out the media rankings on press freedom, as given out by Reporters without Borders: out of 168 countries, Pakistan is placed at 157th. True, the country is ranked higher than two other Southasian countries - Nepal (159) and Burma (164). However, it is no model for the Maldives (144), Sri Lanka (141), Bangladesh (137), India (105) or even neighbour Afghanistan, with its neophyte media (130). Indeed, if there is a press-freedom model for Southasia, according to RSF that would be Bhutan (98), which rose an astounding 44 places in a single year due to the opening of the kingdom's first (marginally) privately owned newspaper. Now, if *Chhetria Patrakar* might turn away from Islamabad-bashing to question the RSF - which planet are they on to rank Nepal so poorly? Do they not know that there has been a People's Movement a year ago, and the press is now freer than earlier? Is there another country called Nepal?

Even though the Male government did finally legalise **private broadcasting in the Maldives**, the honeymoon has been short-lived. When the head of the national Telecommunications Authority, Mohamed Amir made the long-awaited announcement recently, he said that

the government of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom would only be making available five national and eight Male-based frequencies to private broadcasters. Amir put the decision down to "limited resources", as well as to previously existing broadcasts. In fact, other than the expatriate opposition Minivan Radio, the only organisations at this point taking up the spectrum are the state-owned Voice of Maldives radio and TV Maldives. According to Amir, a "semi-independent" board, made up of members appointed by President Gayoom without any parliamentary oversight, would now be vested with making the decision as to which broadcasters are allowed licenses to use the new frequencies.



The willing cooption of the **Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)** seems to have picked up steam after it joined the interim government of Girija Prasad Koirala in early April. The rebel supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda') had been forcefully arguing against foreign

investment in Nepali media, rhetoric that had been clearly directed at a particular publishing house known to be owned by Indian interests. So what would the CPN (Maoist) do when its third-ranking leader, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, suddenly got the position of Minister of Information? The minister's seat had not even warmed when he went public to concede that, while he disliked foreign investment, it was "impossible" to stop the inflow. The minister then announced that the Miss Nepal beauty contest, being organised by the Indian multinational Dabur, would not be allowed to air on the state-owned Nepal Television – a threat that Mahara was not able to follow through on, given that the contract between NTV and Dabur was already a done deal. The good news is that the Maoists are well on the way to obeying the rule of law. The bad news is that they are losing some 'face' in the process.

Over on **Male island**, the attacks on press freedoms during the past month have seemed rather modest. The informational dissident website *Minivan News* was briefly hacked on 13 April, with the front page



altered to display a picture of President Gayoom, a banner reading "Our Nation, Our Culture" and the quote "Our strength is our unity, don't let anyone break it. Protect this country from those people who are trying to corrupt it." The problem was corrected overnight, while the editors put out a notice to say that they saw the episode "as another attack on the freedom of the media in the Maldives."



Authoritarian stupidities abound, in India as in Pakistan. On 16 April, the offices of the Burmese dissident *Mizzima News* organisation were sealed by New Delhi police and municipal officers. Soe Myint, the chief editor, reported that the ostensible reason given was that *Mizzima* was operating on a commercial basis in a residential area. However, in all likelihood the raid was related to *Mizzima's* coverage of Burma, which goes increasingly against the grain of Indian foreign policy of engagement with the Rangoon junta. Now the good news: on 18 April, the Indian authorities decided to allow *Mizzima* to resume operations, reportedly after recognising that its activities were "exclusively journalistic". And now the warning: Dear Indian authorities, please do not meddle with the one organisation that has continuously covered human-rights and other abuses within Burma, just because you are cosyng up to the generals. The Burmese right to freedom of the press has to be protected within India, too.



In a study supported by the organisation Panos South Asia and published on the media monitoring site *The Hoot*, journalist

Shubha Singh contrasts the "sporadic attention" the Indian press gives to Bangladesh in contrast to the detailed coverage of events in Pakistan. The study covered the five English-language dailies – the *Hindustan Times*, the *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *The Hindu* and *The Asian Age* (the last two of which have their own correspondents in Pakistan). Singh contrasted these with the news coming out of Pakistan during March (essentially the stand-off between the Chief Justice and Prez Musharraf), and Bangladesh, where the interim administration was engaged in high-profile raids on the residences of Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed, and in the arrest of the Begum's son, Tarique Rehman. Writes Singh, "The events in Bangladesh were almost as significant as the agitation in Pakistan ... But it merited just a day's detailed coverage with only one newspaper choosing to comment on the happenings. Indian commentators have continued to stress on President Musharraf choosing to remain army chief while ignoring the army's involvement in installing the interim government in Bangladesh." Oh well, the quicker the Indian national media gets over its Pakistan fetish, the better off we all will be in this neighbourhood in the southern part of Asia!

– Chhetria Patrakar



AFP

17 March

and the multiverse of loyalty

Ethnicity, state and the Cricket World Cup.

BY GARGA CHATTERJEE

For the West Bengali *bhadralok*, East Bengal continues to represent vastly different things to different people: a Muslim-majority country, an audacious dream of ethnic pride and secularism, a land vaguely culturally similar but distant in imagination, their forefathers' homeland, the place where cyclones aimed at West Bengal finally end up, a hub of ISI activity, the place of origin of the wondrous Ilish fish ... the list, of course, goes on. While every West Bengali's attitude towards East Bengal/Bangladesh is formed from one or more such memories and connotations, many of these have a limited acceptability in standard discourse, particularly in public expression. That does not make them any less potent, however, and forces their manifestation only under very particular instances.

One of those instances was 17 March, the day Bangladesh scored its historic win over India in the World Cup cricket match in the West Indies. I watched

the Bangladesh-India game in an undergraduate house at Harvard University. With India being the odds-on favourite, the Bangladeshi team was widely expected to take a beating. Since live telecasts of cricket matches are not available on cable TV, the Harvard Cricket Club folks, comprised primarily of Indians (including this writer), had bought a special subscription. Watching along with me were two East Bengali friends. If truth be told, I only watched the Bangladeshi innings because I could not wake up in time for the Indian innings after a late night's work. Regardless, while I was happy that West Bengal's own Sourav Ganguly, the Indian team's former captain, was in the process of scoring the highest number of runs for the Indian side, I was not very happy with the Indian total. But slowly, perhaps as I became more and more caught up in the action on the field, that reaction changed.

With the Bangladesh Tigers prowling all over, I felt the first of many alarm bells going off in my head. I was surrounded by non-Bengali supporters of India, who were cursing the Indian team for its poor performance. But as the direction of the game became increasingly obvious, I did not really see the coming defeat as my own. In fact, I was busy asking – somewhat quietly and ashamedly – questions about the Bangladeshi team: “*Oi batsman tar nam ki?*” (What is that batsman's name?) By the time the match was nearing its end, I had become an unabashed Bangladeshi cheerleader. This led to a few strange stares, but I did not care. Nonetheless, it did all feel a bit odd. My cheers, after all, were not really for good cricket. There was nothing remarkable about a single run taken by Bangladesh, except perhaps that it was bringing the underdog a little closer to a win against the titan. And I was happy – long-forbidden loyalties were having a free ride, and the Bengali (not the West-Bengali Hindu) in me loved that we had won.

After the game ended, the general ambience in the room was distinctly dark. But I found that my own mood was not part of the gloom. My East Bengali friends treated me to a pint of beer, and we had a hearty, congratulatory talk. As I walked home that evening, I felt a nagging confusion – not about the anger of the Indians, nor about their reaction to my cheers for Bangladesh. Rather, of my own change of heart. A side of me had opened that only had so much space and time for loyalties. It is an easy call, perhaps, when Ganguly is on the team – he is an Indian Bengali. But even here I was found wanting. And more generally? In the games to come, would I continue to root for the Bangladeshi team? And what did this opening mean for India-Pakistan matches to come?

Primordial organic identity

The way that my reaction had publicly changed during the course of the game would have been inconceivable had I been watching the match anywhere within India



Pakistan protest,
18 March

or Bangladesh. The split self that I harbour – and which, I believe, many others do as well – does not have a legitimate space for expression in any but the most liberal of establishments in the Subcontinent. But such dual identities remain within us, deep down in our hearts, where politically correct stances and obeisance to national symbols cannot cast a shadow.

Ethnicity is a category, as is identification with a nation state. However, these two differ in one important aspect. A nation state demands explicit loyalty, and de-legitimises everything else; those who balk at this explicit parade of fidelity are at best parasites – at worst, loyal to another nation state. The kind of fealty that ethnicity proposes, I like to believe, is at once more organic and primordial than that demanded by the nation state. In most cases, the loyalties to ethnicity and to nation state do not come into specific conflict with one another. But the varying degrees of distance between the two can be mapped as a continuum. On the one hand is the Naga, for instance, who has no

nation state but is held within an all-consuming one, which goes to repressive lengths to extract explicit loyalty. At the same time there is the Hindi belt, an area that can explicitly declare its unflinching loyalty, as the points of declaration in its case do not interfere with claims of ethnicity. The Hindi belt is to the localities the natural claimant of the spot where the Indian pulse is to be felt, something that the rest of India only grudgingly acknowledges.

West Bengal is an interesting case in this regard, falling somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Together with the explicit declaration of loyalty to the Indian nation state, we find here a vague understanding and acknowledgement of ethnic kinship with Bangladeshis. But of course, almost all Hindu (and Muslim) West Bengalis would balk at a declaration of loyalty to the state of Bangladesh. And so the split self remains masked. Even among West Bengalis there would be a continuum of the exact extent to which this kinship is felt, irrespective of loyalty to the state of India. It is an interesting and open question: How does the barrier between Muslim and Hindu West Bengalis differ from that between West Bengali Hindus and East Bengali Muslims? For that matter, can any such difference be attributed to allegiance to India? Would the dynamics of West Bengali loyalty to India change if Bangladesh were not a state that bore the primacy of Islam in its Constitution? Further, did Hindu West Bengalis feel clear affinity with the Bangladesh that was still officially 'secular' before the 1988 constitutional amendment that made it 'Islamic'?

The day after Bangladesh's 17 March win, I was reading *Sangbad Pratidin*, a Bangla daily published in Calcutta. It reported that, following India's loss, local cricket fans were not as grief-stricken as was the rest of the country. This same story was echoed in the national media. I could not help wondering whether I would have felt as positive as I did if my local Calcutta boy, Sourav Ganguly, had not scored well – indeed, had he not been the highest run-getter among all of the two

Bangladeshi-Pakistani bhai-bhai?

Of course, the Southasian story in 2007 World Cup cricket did not end with the defeats of Pakistan and India. Perhaps just as significant as the losses of those titans were the surprising wins by Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. But while the series organisers must have prayed that the turn of events from these two teams would successfully retain the interest of the great mass of Indo-Pakistani audiences, they were to be disappointed.

There were widespread stories of Indians and other Southasians, once

the smarting had subsided, changing their loyalties to cheer for either Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. This regional camaraderie – and the denial thereof – was unbeknownst to me, until I chanced upon it on the Internet. On a widely used social-networking website, a group of Pakistanis had formed a virtual community to cheer on what they called the 'East Pakistanis'. This attempt at comradeship, of course, would not sit well with any Bangladeshi. The site called East Pakistan for World Champions included the line, *After*

kicking India's ass, they take on the world.

The forum quickly became a space for nationalist abuse and counter-abuse, all under the guise of sporting solidarity. After anger arose due to Bangladesh being referred to as 'East Pakistan', a Pakistani member retorted, "Ah, personal insults. I would expect nothing less from you, my less evolved, but still Pakistani brother." The thread of this type of baiting continued, with increasingly personal put-downs from both sides.

teams' batsmen. How would I have taken to East Bengali bowlers cutting short Sourav's innings?

Days later, the Bangladeshi team defeated South Africa, the world's top-ranked squad, doing much to demonstrate that their win against India was not a fluke. West Bengal's largest-circulating Bangla daily, *Anandabazar Patrika*, carried huge headlines trumpeting, "Bengalis stun the world's best!" Bangladesh had the sudden chance of a glory run, and I found that I wanted to cheer it all the way – my conscience perhaps cleared by India's elimination.

United in grief

An inward-looking state experiences great problems with transnational loyalties and animosities associated with those loyalties. Nowhere were the disadvantages of this seen more clearly than in this year's Cricket World Cup. It is widely acknowledged that Southasia, specifically India and Pakistan, are the lifeblood of commercial cricket (See *Himal November 2006*, "Cricket cooperation"). Southasian interests are the major stakeholders in wooing sponsors, popularising the game, worshipping the players, studying the telecasts, watching the ads, performing related ceremonies, baying for the blood of fallen stars, critiquing the teams, purchasing the tickets, buying the players. The majority of this exuberance has not spilled over into other global cricket audiences, except possibly the West Indies in an earlier era.

In the 2007 Cricket World Cup, all of this was fantastically played up. India lost unceremoniously to an unrated but spirited Bangladesh. Pakistan lost to Ireland, one of the weakest teams in the series. The drama reached its bizarre crescendo after the Pakistani loss, when the South African coach of the Pakistani team, Bob Woolmer, was found murdered in his hotel room. Rumour had it that Woolmer had learned that the match had been fixed, and that he might have had specific names. The reaction in India and Pakistan was one of shellshock. Normally larger-than-life cricketers came back home as social outlaws under cover of darkness, to avoid the wrath of fans. Allegations flew wildly, as did dispensations on what had gone wrong. India's coach Greg Chappell resigned days later, checking himself into a hospital, reportedly fearing for his life. Only one player received a hero's welcome upon his return to India, and that was Sourav Ganguly. Some Bengalis might have taken satisfaction in the thought that they had not been the ones who had lost. In the West Bengal imagination, India had.

With an estimated 70 percent of global cricket viewership residing in India and Pakistan, the economic fallout of the losses of these two teams was enormous. International and national corporations had invested tens of millions of dollars in television commercials touting the countries' cricket stars, while broadcasters were charging up to three times more for advertising during Indian games. Following the losses,

many advertisers pulled out, with some of the largest attempting to default on contracts. The poor showing from these two teams also hit the host West Indies hard. An overwhelming number of travel and accommodation bookings had been made from India and Pakistan, and their near-simultaneous losses brought in a wave of cancellations and demands for refunds.

In the midst of all this, one heard oft-repeated laments of how invincible a combined India-Pakistan team would have been. In sleek television studios, ex-cricketer stars frankly criticised their respective cricketing establishments, and even took the liberty of the moment to give advice to the other side. It was one of those rare moments when segments of the Indian and Pakistani populace were united in grief – and even sympathetic to the grief of the other.

These losses, however, did not have much direct emotional impact on me. I (along with many others, evidently) was still looking out for Bangladesh, and was finding doing so surprisingly easy. Given the relatively low expectation from Bangladesh, a loss did not bring sadness, but wins were unmistakably joyful. Segments of the Indian and Pakistani audiences may have broadly turned off emotionally from the game, but that only went to show how the ethnic continuums that spread across Southasian borders make it so tricky for the inward-looking nation states of Southasia to promote tendencies of crossborder solidarity. Cricket in Southasia is not a game; it is serious business, and a regular metaphor for passion, imagination and expression. Cricket has been used as an acid test for loyalty to one's country. In general, it does not leave much space to reach across and support the neighbours.

But primitive loyalties know no political frontiers, however strong the efforts of Southasian states to seek out exclusive loyalties. Rather, this more guttural type of devotion inevitably finds its own space in private imagination; crossborder organic connections, after all, predate the Southasian political landscape – not to mention cricket itself. But what can be used as a tool to solidify loyalty to a nation state can also act as an avenue of private, almost unconscious, subversion. Because the relationship between a country and its citizens has been moulded into one of either loyalty or defiance, this process inevitably comes with guilt.

Can we not imagine beyond this? If political identities in Southasia are largely imagined, then forceful transnational identities are potent triggers for an organic re-imagining of the region. Guilt makes the private dissident crave legitimacy, for intimate alternative identities do not like suppression. The dissident can only hope that organic continuities will eventually make states negotiate with transnational loyalties, with the audacious hope that such negotiations will be obligatory to the long-term survival of nation states in Southasia. ▲

Amnesty's sticky wicket

The international watchdog's attempt to use the Cricket World Cup to draw attention to Sri Lanka's human-rights situation has backfired.

BY MICHAEL ROBERTS

The recent campaign by Amnesty International against human-rights abuses in Sri Lanka has created quite a hullabaloo. Using as a springboard the English idiom 'It's not cricket' (meaning not on the level), Amnesty used the occasion of the Cricket World Cup to mount an international campaign called 'Play by the Rules'. The programme involved sending cricket balls to Australia, the Bahamas, Bermuda, India, Nepal and the UK, inviting concerned individuals to sign them in support of sending independent monitors to Sri Lanka to oversee human-rights issues. The signed balls are to be delivered to representatives of the Colombo government and the LTTE.

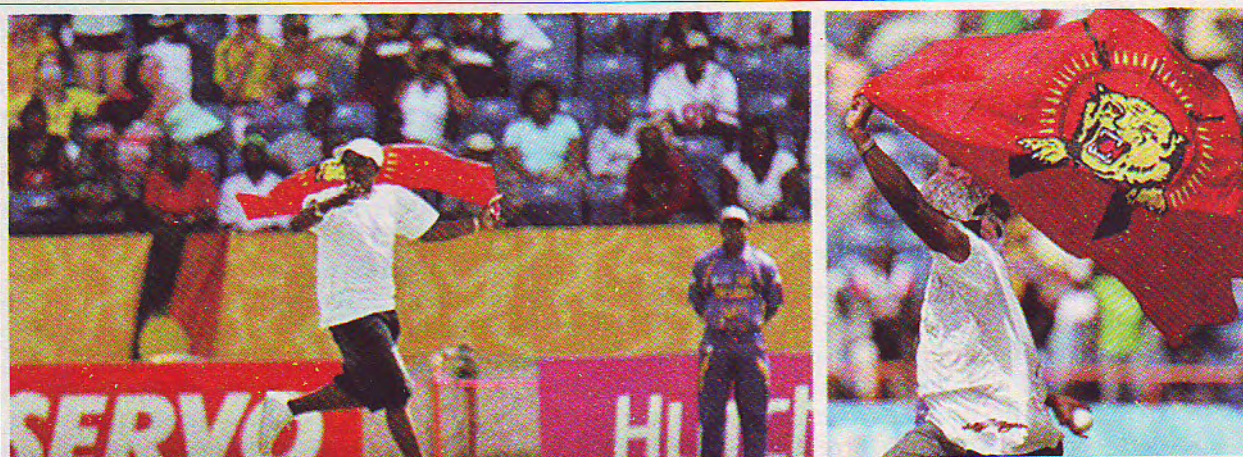
Amnesty International (AI) personnel are modern missionaries: secular, rational, well-intentioned and firmly attached to the problematic notion of the autonomous individual as a principle of universal applicability. In a world bedevilled by atrocities committed by powerful and weak states and militants alike, such an organisation is much needed. But this does not preclude questions about AI's missionary excesses - for instance, the organisation's vague use of the word *child* in

its campaign against child soldiers to refer to those as old as 16.

In its missionary zeal, Amnesty chose to use cricket as an engine of pressure on both the government and the LTTE. AI may have been inspired by the example of FIFA, the international football agency, which innovatively campaigned against racism in sport during the 2006 World Cup football matches. But there are important differences between FIFA's actions and those of Amnesty International, in terms of both context and response. FIFA followed a policy of uniformity and universality. It did not name names, nor single out culprit governments. It was also acting within its own realm and field of jurisdiction.

In the current situation, however, Amnesty simply used the conventional image associated with cricket - the idea of fair play - to mobilise support for its highly specific cause, which was directed squarely at the two protagonists in Sri Lanka. Amnesty was not commenting on either the Sri Lankan cricket team or its cricket playing, but merely utilising an opportune moment to draw attention to its principles. Moreover, the International Cricket Council (ICC) was not a partner in the campaign, so AI could be seen to have had no right to spread related propaganda at the West Indies cricket grounds.

This is not to say that the two protagonists covered themselves in glory - the Sri Lankan government in particular did not. As soon as the Colombo authorities got wind of the campaign, they mounted strident protests - writing to the ICC as well as various governments. This seems to have been a kneejerk reaction in keeping with the increasing paranoia prevailing among some segments of the Sinhalese population, especially within governing circles. First off, the fact that Colombo approached the ICC at all in its efforts at redressal indicates just how ill-informed the Sri Lankan authorities were. Second, the fact that Amnesty was already disallowed from entering the cricket grounds also means that it would not have been able to directly affect the performance of the Sri Lankan team, as had been one of the central complaints against the organisation. Moreover, the very stridency of Colombo's reaction ended



LTTE flag being unfurled by a supporter in Grenada when Sri Lanka took on Australia during the recent World Cup

APP

up enhancing AI's media campaign in ways that marked the government more than the LTTE. For its part, the LTTE went the other way, accusing the government of trying to hide its "brutality" by attacking Amnesty's action. Since AI is critical of both parties, the Tigers' rhetoric is somewhat laughable.

Sports nationalism

In kneejerk protests Sri Lankan cricket fans were also aroused to make the hackneyed argument that politics should not be imported onto the sports field. Such a contention cannot be sustained and bespeaks a narrow view of politics. The fact is that the sports field has become one of today's prime political arenas. A well-established branch of academia now deals specifically with the topic of 'sports nationalism'. The Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London recently assembled a number of analysts to discuss politics and race issues in cricket, while the journal *Sport and Society* recently brought out a special issue entitled "Cricket, Race and the 2007 World Cup". Race and related issues still intrude every now and then both on and around the cricket field.

But what is ironic about the Amnesty International campaign is its seeming lack of awareness that the Sri Lankan cricket team happens to have the greatest ethnic and religious mix of all the teams competing in the World Cup. The Sri Lankan teams of the last few years have represented a fair cross-section of the island's ethnic and religious groups, including Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers and Colombo Chettys. Team members have been Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian. No other country can claim such diversity in its national team.

Perhaps knowingly, Amnesty stepped into an arena that is considered nearly sacred among Sri Lankans, whether Tamil, Sinhalese or any other ethnicity. Cricket has been one of the few areas outside of the ethnic conflict where Sri Lanka has made its mark on the world, and generates one of the few regular news broadcasts that bring regular joy to Sri Lankans, both at home and abroad. As such, cricket has been a cathartic realm for many, and Amnesty's campaign seemed to have invaded an arena that Sri Lankans had nurtured as their link to the inter-community harmony of the past.

This discontent was evident even among likeminded

organisations. The well-known Colombo-based watchdog Free Media Movement (FMM), for instance, called upon AI to retract its campaign. "Cricket, essentially based on a foundation of meritocracy, exemplifies the democratic ideal, and is a powerful bond that unifies all communities in Sri Lanka," FMM said in a statement. "Cricket offers a war-weary nation an important psycho-social release. Cricket is, as the adage goes, almost a religion to many peoples in Sri Lanka. To revel in our victory on the field is to take our minds away, even for a moment, from the bloody reality of conflict."

The widespread criticism only caused Amnesty to righteously dig in its heels. In one press release, it stated: "The distortion in Sri Lanka of Amnesty International's campaign 'Play by the Rules' is a ploy to distract attention

from the increasingly desperate plight of hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan people." Among the strident voices directed against AI are indeed those that can be called 'Sinhala chauvinist' or 'communalist'. But in fact, a significant number of moderates and non-Sinhalese have also been angered by the campaign. Within such a context, therefore, it has encouraged the chauvinists to target NGOs deemed to be in league with Amnesty.

A recent comment from P Saravanamuttu, director of the respected Centre for Policy Alternatives, indicates the manner in which the AI campaign has planted a few more landmines, so to speak, on an already difficult field of operations. "The point about the Amnesty campaign is that it is in danger of being self-defeating and of ricocheting on the efforts, both local and

international, for human rights protection in Sri Lanka," Saravanamuttu wrote. He added that "The Amnesty campaign ... is additional fodder to the local, self-proclaimed patriots who will no doubt garnish their rhetoric about traitors with reference to the Amnesty campaign."

Ultimately any human-rights or social-justice action needs to be judged not on its innovativeness but on its effect on the ground - here, on the Sri Lankan soil. Given the frustration evident in the sentiments expressed by Saravanamuttu and others, Amnesty International would do well to mark down its Play by the Rules campaign as an educational experience. ▲





KIT MUSEUM

Bhojpuri emigrants

A common heritage of pain

Memories of separation and loss live on in the 'Bidesia' genre of Bhojpuri cultural forms that have spread – and grown – across the globe.

BY NIVEDITA SINGH

Nearly 150 years ago began an agonising saga of migration from the Bhojpur region of India. With Britain actively engaged in agriculture in colonies across the world, there was a great need for skilled labourers – a need that was largely filled by the impoverished people of what is today western Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, who were particularly skilled at growing sugarcane. In their efforts at controlling Indian life, the British had systematically destroyed many rural enterprises, in particular the colony's small-scale sugar and molasses industries. This dynamic had led to the creation of a large group of surplus labour in the region, which in turn was shipped off to work on plantations in Suriname, Mauritius and the Caribbean islands. Between 1873 and 1916, 64 shiploads of workers – more than 34,300 men and women – were 'recruited' to work as indentured labourers on sugar plantations in the far-off islands.

This was not an exodus that went unrecorded at the time. Indeed, newspapers and magazines such as *Saraswati*, *Vishal*

Bharat and *Pravasi* were launched with the specific aim of educating the people about what was taking place, and many novels and short stories were written during the period around the theme of departure. Some of these dealt with the deep anxiety felt by wives and other relatives who had remained at home. The exodus also led to the emergence of a number of unique rituals and superstitions, and ancient goddesses, capable of fulfilling the wishes of deserted women, were rediscovered or invented. One of these was Sankata Devi, who had the power to protect faraway husbands and to ensure their safe return; her temple in Benaras became an important pilgrimage site during the peak period of colonial migration.

The separation caused by this migration also gave birth to a new and distinct folk culture, one that gave expression to the disquiet felt by those left behind. Attendant forms of this culture include: the *kaharwa*, a folksong sung in the Kahar community that narrates the pain of separation from a wife or beloved as a result of migration; the *chamraudha* dance of the Chamar

caste, the songs of which cover the same theme; the *barahmasa* narrations, which detail the different emotions that each month of the year brings; and the *nautanki* popular theatre, performed during festivals and weddings. These folk traditions remain alive today in several Bhojpuri villages, as do many other rituals, customs and superstitions that date to the period of the great migration.

Because it grew out of the trauma of separation, this folk culture came to be known as Bidesia. In some other Southasian languages, the word *videshi* refers to the natives of foreign countries, but the Bhojpuri word *bidesia* refers to those Bhojpuris who left their homeland for overseas. In one sense, *bidesia* is an affectionate term for non-resident Bhojpuris; in another, it refers to the works of folk tradition composed in memory of those non-resident Bhojpuris. As such, Bidesia is not a word with a single, clear meaning, but a term steeped in multiple and overlapping cultural significances.

Due to its expression of the collective anxiety that characterised the area's communities at that time, Bidesia came to be extremely popular in villages and cities throughout the Bhojpur region. Today, the laments of folk artists who sing of the dislocation caused by present-day migrations to Delhi, Noida, Ghaziabad or Bombay echo the Bidesia of old, and keep alive the memory of those early pangs of separation. These laments are also

What crime have I committed
that you left the country and
did not tell me your feelings
before leaving?

As I sit on my terrace I keep
remembering your face in my
heart.

But you did not even send me a
letter.

I don't know in what country and
on which road my beloved is
now living.

The barber says that there is
no hope my beloved will
ever return.

joined and built upon by artists in such faraway places as Suriname, Mauritius and the Netherlands.

Bidesia effect

The multitudes of the Subcontinent, of course, have experienced migration for tens of thousands of years. But the migration of the colonial period took place on a massive and sudden scale, and the places where the emigrants found themselves were often very far away, where contact with the homeland was exceedingly difficult. This inevitably caused significant pain to huge numbers of people, both those who had left and those who were left behind.

Bhojpuri society did respond quickly in an attempt to stop the migration – for instance, with a ‘ban’ on overseas travel. To go abroad to earn money came to be considered sinful, and to avoid becoming social outcasts, men who did so had to appease the gods by feeding large numbers of Brahmins. Few could afford to do so, and rather than change their plans, many chose to keep them secret. The migration did not stop, and increasingly became a central facet of Bhojpuri life, and one that was reflected in the region’s performance traditions. *Poorvi lok sangeet*, for instance, is a genre of folk music that reverts back

to memories of the homeland. Another genre of Bhojpuri song is *ganga geet*, songs about the Ganga, a river strongly invested with emotion as most migration took place from the Calcutta port.

It was in 1917 that Bhikhari Thakur, the singer often credited as the originator of Bidesia folk culture, pioneered the tradition of what he called ‘Bidesia theatre’. Soon, the songs that were sung in these theatres were known as Bidesia songs. The style employed by Thakur became so popular that other *nautankis* making use of this style also came to be called Bidesia. Other urban theatre companies began to put on Bidesia productions, and before long Bidesia became the popular folk-theatre style of the Bhojpur region as a whole.

Bidesia plays generally follow the sad story of a young bride whose husband has been forced to leave her behind in order to seek employment in *pardes*, foreign lands. The plot develops as Sundari (a common name given to this bride) arranges to send a message to her husband. She begs the messenger to release her husband from the clutches of the city woman for whom she assumes he has fallen, and to bring him back to the village. The plays also narrate the emotions of the young man, particularly how he feels upon returning to his village after having been away for many years. It was the common chord that these narratives struck in the hearts of Bhojpuri audiences that made them so popular. The interspersions of comic relief, satire on the existing system, and statements on contemporary social dichotomies added to both the appeal and longevity of Bidesia theatre, which is why it remains a phenomenon today.

The Bidesia effect – the sense of

In one style of Bidesia song, a woman asks her loved one why he emigrated.

Be careful; your bad fortune will come to an end.

From Calcutta, we were sent to a depot in Suriname where we were fed rice.

After a difficult, three-month journey by ship, we reached Suriname, which we had earlier taken to be Shri Ram’s land.

As soon as it was morning, the *bakara* [white owner] called us and promised to send us back to India after we had completed the five-year contract.

34,000 Indians came here and 12,000 have already gone back. Between 1837 and 1926, 64 ships came here.

We came here as *jahaji*, people on ships, and remained as *jahaji* brothers.

Kishore [the poet] does not know whether to call this his good luck or his bad luck.

loss caused by long-term migration – is found in both the homeland and the land of emigration. There is a common heritage of dislocation evident in works composed both by resident Bhojpuris and in the diaspora, from the Caribbean islands to the Netherlands. (Bhojpuris arrived in Amsterdam from the Dutch colonies to which they had originally been taken.) In Mauritius and Suriname, the descendants of migrants sing songs that describe the impact of their severing from their Bhojpur roots.

In one style of Bidesia song, a woman asks her loved one why he emigrated. In Suriname, poetry is composed in the local Sarnami (a language that is a mixture of Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Magadhi and other languages) that takes the form of responses and explanations to such questions. These songs are now also composed in the Netherlands, where over half the Bidesia population of Suriname moved after 1970 – and to where they once again took this still-evolving, multi-generational tradition. ▲



NIVEDITA SINGH

Guilty until proven innocent

BY C K LAL

Despite the hype over the US-led 'war on terror', overwhelming global concern continues to be centred on poverty. The persistence of poverty in large parts of the world has created the conditions for the rise of various forms of extremism, while attempts by development agencies to fight poverty have proven sluggish, and the gains uneven. At least for many non-American donors, the realisation has finally begun to dawn that a form of governance that ensures dignity and security for all is necessary for the alleviation of poverty. Consequently, 'participatory governance' is the new mantra of the diplomatic community.

Democracy gives a government popular legitimacy, in that it symbolises the consent of the governed. Democratic governments claim to represent the people, and rule in their name. Weak democracies can foster fissiparous tendencies, as populist and chauvinistic politicians fan the fear of the inimical 'other' to consolidate their own hold over the masses. It has been argued that the historical Greek democracies

disintegrated largely due to lack of discipline.

Scientific explorations of causes, effects and possible remedies of democratic process are now needed, as are comprehensive studies of political parties, commensurate with their role and relevance in governance. After all, strengthening of political parties cannot be accomplished without first understanding their dynamics, and such a comparative analysis has been particularly lacking in the Southasian context. The Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has

now attempted to fill that need by sponsoring the study and publication of a book dedicated to the functioning of political parties in the region. Irrespective of the quality of its contents, such a publication is an achievement in itself.

Based on research on and dialogue with political parties in the region, *Political Parties in South Asia: The challenge of change* follows the standard format favoured by international consultants. Had the book come ring-bound, it would probably have failed to stand out among the deluge of reports that flow from organisations similar to IDEA. That would have been a pity. Even though this publication is data-heavy and insight-deficient, it succeeds in laying important groundwork for more substantive debates regarding the capacity-building of Southasian political parties.

In studying the political parties of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the authors discover three ways in which these entities came into being. The first and foremost is as the legatees of independence movements, such as the Awami League in Bangladesh, Congress (I) in India and the Nepali Congress in Nepal, though the latter fought for 'independence' from the



Political Parties in South Asia: The challenge of change
by K C Suri, et al
International IDEA, 2007

Ranas. These parties continue to fight electoral battles in the names of their founders.

Second, ideology-based parties create or exploit fissures between different population groups. Based on class, community, caste or religion, a group identity is created to be pitted against an external group that supposedly threatens 'us'. Class solidarity helped in the entrenchment of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal. Religious sentiment created the necessary conditions for the Muslim League to create Pakistan from British India. Caste calculations produced populist leaders such as Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar, Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh and the anti-Brahmin platform in Tamil Nadu.

The evolution of a third type of political outfit is the most interesting phenomenon. When ambitious political entrepreneurs find that existing organisations are too crowded for them to reach the forefront, they divide the parent party and create their own vehicle. Such manoeuvring begins with moralistic rhetoric, and ends in hard-headed bargaining for power and pelf. Indira Gandhi dumped her party's candidate for a personal favourite in the presidential elections of 1969, and portrayed herself as above the institution. Charan Singh wrecked the Janata Party experiment for what turned out to be a very temporary premiership. Sher Bahadur Deuba facilitated the creeping authoritarianism of King Gyanendra for the same reason by splitting from Girija Prasad Koirala's party. Nepal's Maoist supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka 'Prachanda') embarked on his armed adventure by erecting a political outfit from the debris of the party known as Unity Centre. It is easy to discern parties built by political entrepreneurs: they prefer the royal 'we' over the humble 'I' of simpler activists.

Saviour syndrome

The pathology of democracy in general and political parties in particular arises from the peculiar

'saviour syndrome' common to most developing societies. Often, an ambitious man on horseback will decide that he can be a better saviour than a civilian claimant, and proceeds to capture state power. Since politicians are assumed guilty till proven innocent, it is relatively easy for military usurpers to sell the ethical cleansing of public life.

There is a certain pattern in the pathologies of political parties. Decadence is common to parties that grow out of independence movements. Dynastic succession can evolve anywhere, but legatees of imperial traditions are more at risk. Demagoguery comes naturally to the 'us versus them' parties, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Despotism is endemic to parties founded by political entrepreneurs such as Prabhakaran and Pushpa Kamal Dahal. These are also the outfits that degenerate into politics of desperation and annihilation.

Despite its critical tone, *Political Parties in South Asia* gives a strange sense of satisfaction to the reader. Southasians seem to be one in censuring their political parties, but flock to the same institutions when kings and dictators make their periodic appearances as saviours. Political parties have to be strengthened to reduce conflict, improve governance and create conditions for sustainable peace. The book also provides opportunity for a discussion of participatory governance, that concept most dear to the international community.

Participatory governance has at least three dimensions. Its base consists of democracy, wherein instruments of free, fair and periodic elections, a multiplicity of political parties, voters' education, electoral campaigns and coalition-building are some of the indispensable elements. Second, effective governance requires that certain broadly-shared values be made inviolable. The consent of the governed is conditional upon the government adhering to universal principles of governance, incorporating the republican

dimension of democracy (rule of law, separation of powers, etcetera). However, when rule of law ossifies in the absence of periodic democratic renewal, republics turn into empires and begin their collapse.

The third dimension that gives depth to democracy consists of identity and dignity. Human rights, individual liberty, multiplicity of identities and diversity of cultures are some important concerns of democratic governance. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, though violated too often to remain sanguine about its own sanctity, has nonetheless become universally accepted. The inviolability of human rights is now more important than national sovereignty.

If one were to compare academic studies on the dimensions of participatory governance, republicanism would likely emerge on top, with tomes devoted to it from the time of Plato and Kautilya onwards. Even though identity politics is a relatively new area of intellectual exploration, the collapse of the Soviet Union inspired hectic academic exercises in this field. In comparison, the functioning of democracy remains the obsession only of the media. That may be because republicanism is a political science, identity an art, and democracy a politics that falls somewhere in between. Nonetheless, democracy remains the very base of society, and deserves more attention than it has thus far received.

Change management

In line with the obsession of donor agencies with gender politics, a whole chapter in *Political Parties in South Asia* is devoted to the study of women's participation in the Southasian political sphere. But it is comparatively weak in the exploration of exclusion (of Dalits, for example) and marginalisation – two issues that will test the mettle of all of the region's political parties in the days to come.

In suggesting remedial measures for political parties, IDEA's researchers rely on conventional wisdom: leadership, electoral reforms

and party finances. Even though elsewhere in the book the authors lament the “discourse of liberalization in between elections and the discourse of welfare during elections”, the reinvention of an ideological glue to keep a party relevant is left untouched. Perhaps it is not easy to train leaders, reform electoral practices or ensure transparent party financing in isolation. These probably have to be a part of the empowerment package that seeks to involve political parties – not just in a democratic exercise, but also on the axes of republicanism and identity. Political parties of

the future will have to be ‘change managers’ in every sphere, rather than limiting themselves to being electoral machines.

Political Parties in South Asia is a technocratic work, and suffers from expert bias. There is a strong advocacy of party-neutral election-time governments, patterned after Bangladesh. It is debatable whether this experiment has been successful in that country, however, or whether it is replicable elsewhere in Southasia. The authors’ collaborators from Nepal, meanwhile, are not well known for their democratic or

party-building credentials.

With a lot of history but no memories; tonnes of data but no stories; and a series of tables but no images, it seems that a conscious effort has been made to keep this book dry enough to look acceptably academic. For this reason, even though politicians need to read *Political Parties in South Asia*, they may not have the patience to plough through it. The volume is, however, attractive enough for display on the bookshelves of those politicians who love to cultivate an intellectual image. ▲

The imagined Bihar

BY HARTOSH SINGH BAL

The first epigraph to Amitava Kumar’s *Home Products* is as good an introduction to the book as any: “An intelligent man cannot turn himself into anything, only a fool can make anything he wants of himself.” The two men who lie at the heart of Kumar’s narrative are Binod, a journalist who has immense trouble turning himself into any kind of success, and his cousin Rabinder, who thinks far less and does far more.

The protagonists of two recent books, Siddhartha Deb’s *Surface* and Siddharth Chowdhary’s *Patna Roughcut*, were also journalists. These three books share a few other details, as well – they all belong to the Picador stable, for instance, and their settings are far removed from the metropolitan world of most of their readers. In some ways, both the Indian Northeast, where *Surface* is set, and Bihar, where the other two take place, are counterpoints to the very idea of ‘India’. The Northeast is where the idea dissipates into cynicism, while Bihar is where it is magnified into a mockery of itself,

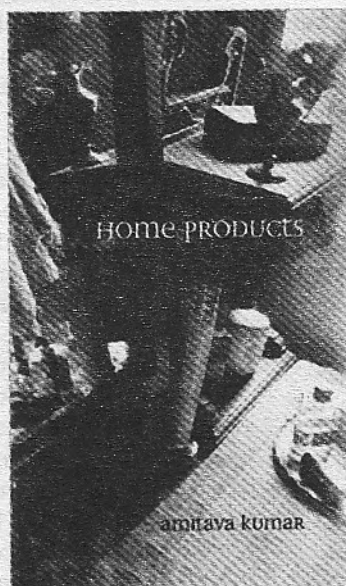
with every flaw seen larger than life. In such settings, a journalist brings a critical gaze.

Home Products’ title comes from its second epigraph: “...one relative or neighbour mixed up in a scandal is more interesting than a whole Sodom and Gomorrah of outlanders gone rotten. Give me the home product every time.” More than one of Binod’s relatives is mixed up in various scandals. Rabinder is in jail after having set out on the trajectory of a

Bihar mafia don; his widowed mother, Binod’s ‘Bua’, is a politician in the midst of a very public affair with a minister in Lalu Prasad Yadav’s government.

Binod belongs to this world, but it is his years as a journalist that allow him the perspective of an outsider. But this is also where the trouble starts, for Kumar’s idea of what constitutes an Indian journalist reduces to an assemblage of whatever is convenient for his purpose. Binod, we learn, works for India’s largest-selling English-language newspaper; he has ostensibly been sent to Bombay to cover the film world, but is also often called upon to write editorials, or to be sent on outstation assignments to places such as Goa. We learn that one time, when he had been sent to Bihar for a story on the Mandal Commission, he managed to appease his editor by instead sending a piece on the first anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. For anyone with the slightest knowledge of the world of Indian journalism, all this is rather implausible.

Such difficult groundings for the story may explain why the character of Binod leaves a void at the very heart



Home Products
by Amitava Kumar
Picador, 2007

of *Home Products*. Binod may suffer from the intelligent man's failure to make something of himself, but he also rarely puts his intelligence to good use. He writes an editorial on the death of a young woman in Patna, clearly modelled on the Madhumita Shukla murder – a poet involved with a senior state minister. When a well-known film director feels that there may be a script in the story, the suggestion sets Binod off on a journey to his hometown of Patna. But for someone who has often traveled as a reporter, he inexplicably lets a single brush-off by the murdered woman's family halt his investigations. Instead, he heads to meet his cousin Rabinder in jail, who suggests that perhaps the story he should be writing is that of Bua. As suddenly as he took the trip to Patna to write one story, Binod is now ready to write another. The story of these 'home products' – Bua, Binod and Rabinder – is now the narrative that begins to unfold. In the end, when the film director actually wants to bring the story to life, it comes as no surprise to find which of the cousins ends up working with him.

Unconvincing pastiche

Home Products is Amitava Kumar's first attempt at a work of fiction, and in the early pages, it seems he may pull it off. There is a well-written sequence describing how the characters go on with their lives while the events of 11 September 2001 play out on a television in the background. But this balance does not hold throughout the book. Rabinder himself is a pastiche of news events that construct the Bihar of the larger Indian imagination. As a child, he manages to shoot and kill a little girl in a *baraat* while firing a gun in the air. As an adult, he takes to crime. On the way to becoming a mafia don, he lands up in jail, living and working out of prison much as news stories from Bihar would have you expect. But perhaps because too much of Amitava Kumar's Bihar is as the newspapers play it, against this backdrop the characters fail to come to life.

Even the nonfiction-writer's eye for detail seems to have escaped the author at a critical point. In an otherwise absorbing episode, Bua's marriage is vividly described through

the eyes of an eight-year-old Binod. A few pages later, we learn that Bua arrives in Patna with eight-year-old Rabinder, to live with Binod and his parents after her husband is sent away to an asylum. This should make Binod at least 17 at the time, yet the years do not add up; instead, we find him a 12 year old sharing a bed with Bua. The stirrings of illicit love are key to the narrative, forcing Bua to live alone in a hostel, and eventually leading to her involvement in politics.

Kumar has spoken of how he had started off wanting to write a nonfiction book about actor Manoj Bajpai, who indeed serves as a model for one of the characters in *Home Products*. Speaking of the transition to fiction, Kumar observed: "The fiction writer doesn't have to explain everything. For a long time, I thought fiction meant that one needed to add dramatic details to what had already been collected through travel and research. But writing this, I learnt that it's more about taking things away and letting the silences stand." The character of Binod, however, could have done with a little less silence, and a little more attention to detail. ▲

GENDER JUSTICE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN CONSULTANTS (Senior-Level) - Pakistan

The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation, a non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, and open Asia-Pacific region, is seeking qualified consultants for the **Chief of Party (COP)** level and for short-term assignments in Pakistan in the area of Gender Justice and Violence against Women.

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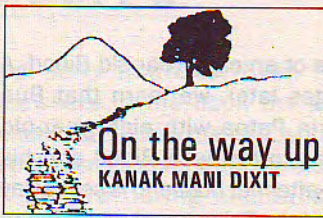
Requirements

- A relevant graduate degree is required. PhD is strongly preferred.
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- Applicants must have a minimum of 10 years experience in the development sector, working with non-government organizations, government, and donor communities.
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Kabul as was and is

Autumn of 1977. A 22-year-old studying law in Delhi University took the Wagah-Attari route – then a series of super-fast dilapidated buses – through Lahore, Peshawar, Khyber and Jalalabad, to arrive in breathtaking Kabul. Coming from license-radj India, Kabul was as close to the ‘West’ as was possible in those days. The markets were stocked with Western goods, Russian and German cars ran on Chicken Street, and socialist architecture was just hitting its stride.

Back then, Kabul shocked the young man from Kathmandu, with all its schoolgirls in skirts showing a lot of leg. Out in Hazara country, the Big Buddha in Bamiyan was still standing, and it was possible to climb up the tunnels to look down on his humongous,



1500-year-old torso. All of that, of course, was subsequently blasted out of existence in an unparalleled act of desecration.

In 1977, the king had been deposed, and Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan was in power. This was Kabul before the Russian invasion, the rise of the Taliban, the hanging of Najibullah, and the devastation wrought by the warlords after the Talibs were routed post-11 September 2001. Bullets and howitzer shells would soon find their mark in every single downtown building; even Babar’s modest resting place would take a hit.

Back in 1977, on a pine-covered ridge above Kabul, the summer residence of Afghan royalty had been converted into a haute restaurant. Like everything else, 30 years later it is a shell of a building (*see photo*), with peeling plaster, furniture all gone, and an empty swimming pool in which local lads play football. Some day, when Kabul has made headway on its long journey back to normalcy, and the Talibs and Mujahideen are both gentrified, this place will regain its old character.

There is evidently a lot of money being made in Kabul today. The elite have certainly been enjoying the war economy, while the warlords in their ‘narco mansions’ make their millions now that Afghanistan is a monopoly producer of heroin and cocaine. But neither the war nor the narcotics economy are evident on the streets, where the commoner hopes that one more year without the Taliban’s threatened incursion will allow the economy to find itself. Kabulwallahs generally seem to be rooting for the success of NATO’s ‘ISAF’ force, thought to be more effective than the American Marines.

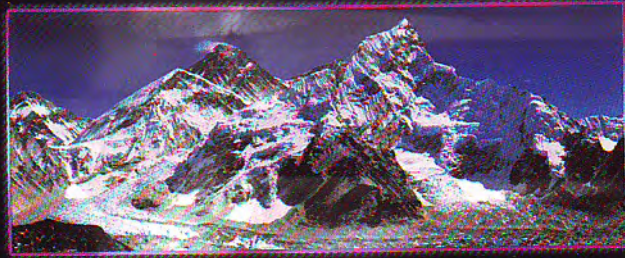
The stamp of international donors is everywhere, on even the most modest of projects. Public buses are to be found plastered with Japanese or Pakistani flags. Over by TV Hill, one even spotted a ‘UNDP Public Toilet’. Only the Indians, who are providing massive amounts of aid – including 500 buses and the spanking-new Parliament building coming up on Darulaman Boulevard (which lost all its trees to shelling after 1993) – seem to be confident enough in their relationships with President Karzai and the Dari-speaking elite to be discreet in their munificence. But the taxi drivers of Kabul all speak Bollywood Hindostani, and sport the most current Bombay patois.

Kabul today has electricity for four hours a day, so all the well-to-do have generators. Down on street level, Nepali guards are well paid to suffer at the front lines of all expatriate offices, military and donor alike. They seem to be the ones doing the dying, as and when required. The new phenomenon here are the suicide bombers, euphemistically called ‘anti-government elements’. In late March, three people were killed in a suicide blast near the zoo; the following day, life was back to normal on the spot which still sported a patch on the ground.

Another to have lost his life in Afghanistan’s turmoil – this time in an al-Qaeda assassination, two days before the attacks of 11 September 2001 – was Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Lion of Panjshir. Today, Massoud’s portraits are ubiquitous in Kabul, in order to keep the Panjshiris happy with having no berth in the current cabinet. Massoud’s brother in law, the dapper former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, today lives in New Delhi, perhaps on the green boulevard named for Massoud in early April.

A couple of days after the suicide blast at the zoo, Hamid Karzai went to Delhi to attend the SAARC Summit. Welcome to Southasia, Afghanistan. ▲

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