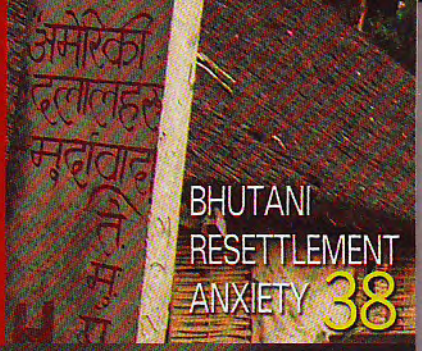
June 2007 Vol 20 No 6

HIMAL SOUTHASIAN



BHUTANI RESETTLEMENT ANXIETY 38

WEARY AND WARY

on the streets of Bangladesh

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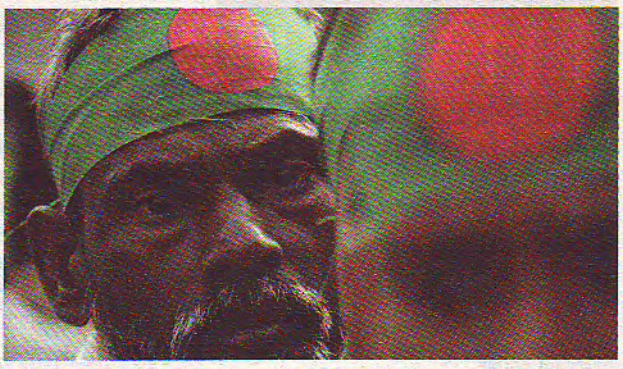
Wariness and weariness

As Bangladesh teeters on the brink of what could be called a 'civic war', the military-backed interim government is trying hard to prove that it is still in charge. For a while, it looked as though the regime might actually do what it claimed it would do – caretake – but none of us is so sure anymore. Citizens will be forgiven for wondering if the changes are really about cleaning up the system, or about the caretaker government preparing the ground for the military. Our cover image, by **Munem Wasif**, symbolises the prevalent mood: the country's 'non-elite' is weary of the malaise that marks the putrid political system, but is also quite wary of technocrats backed by khaki. We bring together a medley of voices about the what, how and why of current happenings in Bangladesh.

We are concerned that readers in Bangladesh may not be able to read these pieces in the hardcopy,



however. That is, if the authorities resort to censorship, as they did with our editorial "Khaki politics in Dhaka" and the article "The Dhaka regime's messy surgery", both from our May issue. In such an eventuality, our website, *www.himalmag.com*, will remain open to all visitors.

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Hard-working caretaker

We are happy to know that *Himal* is observing the present political situation in Bangladesh, but feel you have been unfair in your coverage (*see May 2007, "Khaki politics in Dhaka" and "The Dhaka regime's messy surgery"*). It is crucial to note that the current caretaker government does not belong to any political party, nor does it have an alliance with any foreign entity. During the last 36 years, it is these combined elements that have proved disastrous for our country – creating intolerance, failing to listen to the people's demands, and creating a corrupt society, full of nepotism and favouritism. The common people have never had anyone in political power to speak for their sufferings, nor has basic progress been made in the country's socio-economic, industrial or educational sectors. The present government is now trying hard to bring developments in these sectors.

We urge you not to support any political party until all reformation of Bangladesh's political anomalies are properly executed by the current government. The authorities clearly cannot allow any election at this time, as this would cause the country to fall into turmoil. For the past three months, it has seemed as though Bangladeshis have finally been enjoying the fruits of their independence, and we urge you to refrain from any irritation or disrespectful comments towards the current government. This administration is trying hard to clean up every aspect of the country – to give Bangladeshis a real sense of democracy, whereby they can control their own country.

Mohammad Zubayer, Mohammad Alamgir, Majeedul Chowdhury, Abdul Awal Siddique, Vajan Sarker, Golam Kibria, Monaj Kumar Barua
Dhaka

An American colony

It was with a sense of immense pleasure that I read your articles on the suspension of democracy in Bangladesh in the May issue of *Himal*. Nothing could have been more timely or persuasive.

I do have one query, however: given that Bangladesh is ruled from Washington, DC and other Western capitals, does it really matter whether we have a democracy or an autocracy? What can freedom mean for a colony, which is really what we are? A colonial democracy is a political centaur, and may not be a very desirable animal outside a zoo.

The paradox of being a colony and a democracy must seem incongruous. Yet the origin of this oxymoron goes back to the time of Darius, the ancient Persian king who sought submission from Athens. The Greek democracies of Asia Minor were content to be ruled by the 'great king', so long as he allowed them their little fiction of self-government. How thoroughly modern these arrangements seem, looking at Bangladesh.

Iftekhar Sayeed
Dhaka

Tibetans within Tibet

Thanks for your recent coverage on Tibet (*see April 2007*), which gave much-needed insight into the issue. It is time that the Tibetan government-in-exile starts to think of alternative methods in its dealings with China, as well as with the international community. Dharamsala needs to ask itself how much more it is willing to compromise, as Tibetan overeignty, to some extent, has already been sacrificed.

It should also be noted that most of the articles and viewpoints in *Himal*'s coverage came from outside Tibet. It would have been significantly more interesting to have gotten views from the inside. Do Tibetans in Tibet view issues the same way as the exiles and non-Tibetans do? Probably not. There are, after all, very diverse viewpoints on many of these issues within the Tibetan community in Tibet itself. Freedom and unity within and towards the Tibet struggle will depend upon the integration of these diverse views.

T Jigme
Toronto, Canada

Dangerous bargains

The concerns of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), as well as the headline of our 8 April press release ("Bargaining with Taliban Increases Risk to Foreign Media"), have been misread (*see May, "Mediafile"*). The point of the press release was to criticise the process of bargaining and reaching deals with Taliban or other terrorist groups. It is inevitable that (as in the case of abducted Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, who was later released) if you make a bargain with kidnappers, you put a price on the next media correspondent in town. This increases the risk to foreign correspondents pecifically, because it is Western governments that are most prepared to bargain.

However, it is obvious that the people working with foreign correspondents, and local correspondents, are equally at risk, and the IFJ has been trenchant in its criticism of the killers and the lack of regard of the Afghan authorities. The IFJ is well aware of the risks facing Afghan journalists, and we have been the first international organisation to take steps to try to improve their levels of safety. In this case, we were drawing attention to the hypocrisy of treatment, and seeking an end to the bargaining process that puts all our people at risk.

Aidan White
General Secretary, IFJ
Brussels

PAKISTAN

Karachi's and Pakistan's tragedy

On 12 May, Karachi relapsed into chaos, recalling the dark days of the early 1990s, when armed gangs affiliated with ethnic political parties could openly threaten, beat, kidnap, torture and kill dissenters. Law and order remained problematic but Pakistan's largest city and commercial hub had regained some normalcy over the past decade. It was once more a brash, lively megalopolis with shops and eateries open till the wee hours, despite a few 'no-go areas' that cabbies would refuse to enter at night and a high crime rate marked by muggings, phone snatchings, car-jackings and armed robberies.

Then, on 'Black Saturday', armed members of opposing political parties converted the streets of Karachi into a battle zone. Almost 50 were dead by the end of the carnage and hundreds wounded. The Karachi killings

VIKRAM NANDWANI, POINT BLANK

became a sideshow in the running battle of nerves between General Pervez Musharraf and Iftikhar Chaudhry, the chief justice he is attempting to oust. A lawyer-led mass movement has emerged against the president, with the chief justice as an icon and rallying point. Despite heavy-handed police action against lawyers' demonstrations and fundamentalist-engineered diversions, the tide of support for Chaudhry has not slowed.

As the secular political movement around the chief-justice issue gained momentum, the government seemed to have decided that enough was enough. The administration warned Chaudhry against going to Karachi, where he had been invited by the Sindh High Court bar, on the grounds that doing so would create security problems: the Islamabad government's coalition partner in Sindh, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), had a pro-Musharraf rally planned for the same day. Following the Karachi killings, the government and the MQM have assigned responsibility for the violence to Chaudhry and his supporters.

Out on the streets, Karachi witnessed what many term as orchestrated mayhem. Live television cameras captured the situation for all to see: government tankers blocking routes from the airport to prevent Chaudhry from reaching the lawyers' meeting and the police and Rangers, mostly stripped of their arms the day before, standing by idly if not participating in the onslaught perpetuated by hordes of armed men. The security plans chalked out for the day were abandoned overnight. Rangers abandoned key positions on the flyovers on the main airport road; instead, armed men in civilian clothes took up these positions, firing into the crowds headed out to welcome the chief justice.

Those who had missed the television reports could view them soon afterwards on the Internet. A segment that quickly made the rounds was Aaj TV's coverage of a normally bustling, now deserted chowk: men brandishing weapons and exchanging gunfire with unseen opponents, the tri-colour MQM flag clearly visible on motorcycles parked around them. Gunmen objecting to the live coverage then fired at the Aaj office for several hours and destroyed journalists' vehicles parked outside. Reporters crouched behind desks along with anchor Talat Hussain, who provided a live account of the situation by phone between volleys of gunfire.

No contrition

Aaj TV's refusal to stop its coverage emboldened the new breed of 'citizen journalists' that has emerged with the spread of new technologies. "My faith in independent media was restored, and I was confident that I am not alone," wrote one blogger, posting a doctor's testimony of a murder in his hospital when armed MQM activists came to finish off an injured rival. Blogs buzzed with eye-witness accounts, links and photos. Such visuals and accounts have subsequently kept the outrage alive.

The events in Karachi not only overshadowed Gen Musharraf's simultaneous rally in Islamabad (*see accompanying story, "12 May, the bloodshed and watershed"*), but also the 14 May murder of Hamad Raza, Additional Registrar of the Supreme Court and a key witness in the case surrounding Iftikhar Chaudhry. Raza's

family and Choudhry's supporters allege that Pakistan's intelligence agencies are behind this murder.

The Karachi administration belatedly banned public gatherings, and issued shoot-on-sight orders to the Rangers. When the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) opposed these orders and also called for the MQM to be disarmed, the MQM responded by threatening to "expose" the "wrongdoings" of HRCP chairperson, Asma Jahangir.

For his part, Gen Musharraf's response to Karachi's tragedy has been nothing less than flippant. At a meeting with some 150 ruling-party parliamentarians on 14 May, the general brushed away criticism over the Karachi situation. In an interview with Aaj TV four days later, he dismissed the happenings in Karachi as "the political activity" of a political party.

Journalists in Islamabad expressed their protest in an unprecedented manner – sitting on the floor during an MQM press conference and refusing to accept refreshments. They could do that in the relative safety of Islamabad. Back in Karachi, their colleagues are unlikely to get away with such defiance.

Karachi's tragedy has highlighted General Musharraf's increasing distance from ground reality. The general has otherwise been a deft handler of the opposition. But even the smartest dictator cannot keep together a society in ferment; sooner or later the grip will slip. The obvious misjudgement on the chief justice issue and the killings of Karachi, point to the need for General Musharraf to rapidly begin the process of handing back power to political parties. How best and quickly to do this should be foremost in the minds of all politicians and all other Southasians who wish Pakistanis well. ▲

SRI LANKA

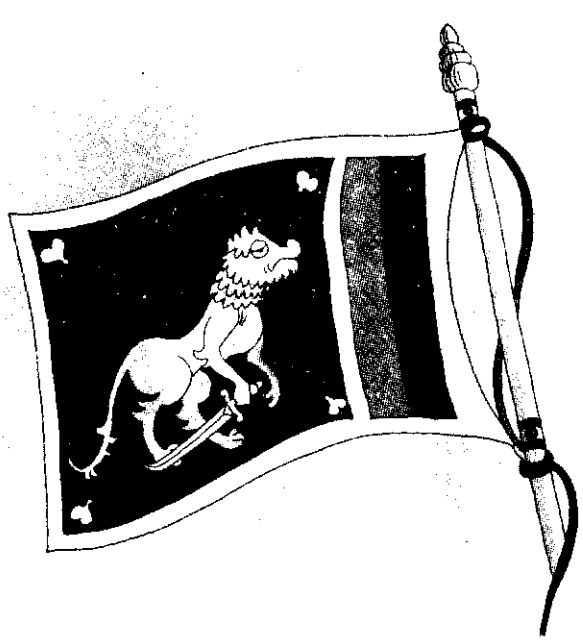
Good for party, bad for country

During the election campaign of November 2005 that saw him scrape through to a narrow victory, Mahinda Rajapakse promised an "honourable peace" with the LTTE. This was in contrast to what he and his nationalist allies described as the "bended-knees peace" of his rival, former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Rajapakse also promised to present a viable political solution to the ethnic conflict within three months. On 1 May, more than 18 months later, the president's party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, finally unveiled this proposal. Unfortunately, it falls woefully short of meeting even halfway the demands of the Tamil minority in general, let alone the LTTE.

There are three key requirements to finding a negotiated settlement to Sri Lanka's three decade-long ethnic conflict. The first, and most difficult, is to persuade the LTTE to enter the mainstream of democratic politics and to renounce its use of violence. The other two involve the extent of Sri Lankan territory that could be regarded as under Tamil habitation, and the quantum of power that a regional government set up for that territory should possess. In Sri Lankan parlance, these two issues are known as those of the 'unit of devolution' and whether the constitution should be unitary or federal.

While the proposals do not even touch upon the thorny issue of persuading the LTTE to renounce violence, the approach to power-sharing is also less than satisfactory. Proponents of a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict have argued that the missing ingredient in reviving the peace process is a consensual political proposal that could lead to power-sharing. President Rajapakse appeared to have been of this view as well, which was why, shortly after his election, he set up the All Party Conference to develop a solution to the conflict. And this is why many were hoping for a more imaginative and courageous package than the SLFP's proposals presented.

With regard to the unit of devolution, the aspirations of the Tamil polity are that the Northern and Eastern provinces, which amount to nearly 30 percent of the country, should be considered the Tamil homeland. The Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987, and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution that followed the signing of the accord, gave a degree of legal recognition to this Tamil demand by merging the two provinces, albeit on a temporary basis. This merger was accompanied by the requirement of a referendum in the Eastern province within a year, but that never took place. This year, the



Supreme Court stepped in to de-merge the two provinces, much to the chagrin of Tamils.

Now, the SLFP proposal has sought to further undermine the legitimacy of the Tamil claim to the Northern and Eastern provinces by asserting that the unit of devolution should be at the district-level. Indeed, this is something which had already been implemented in 1981, but was given up in the legal changes effected by the Provincial Council system of 1987. The SLFP's proposal would mean that, instead of one political unit for the Northern and Eastern provinces, there would be eight district units. In so suggesting, the SLFP seeks to reverse two decades of experience of governance with the provincial units. The ruling party appears to fear the aggregation of Tamil power that the devolution of real power to provincial units would have delivered.

Broken consensus

The second bone of contention with regard to the SLFP proposal is the issue of central control over the regional units that are set up as part of a power-sharing arrangement. The SLFP proposal asserts that all devolution and sharing of power must take place within a unitary constitutional framework. This 'unitary state' would mean that Colombo authorities would wield overriding powers over the regional units, and would retain unilateral power to alter any arrangement. This is naturally unacceptable to the Tamil polity, which has long demanded a federal framework, in which unilateral central rule would be impossible.

President Rajapakse appears to have had the concerns of the Sinhalese community chiefly in mind when he finalised the SLFP's stance. In a heterogeneous society like Sri Lanka, however, it is necessary that rulers take into account the concerns of minority communities. So far, not a single ethnic- or religious-minority party or group of any standing has voiced agreement with the SLFP's new proposals. On the contrary, even parties within the coalition government have expressed reservations.

While President Rajapakse seems to have taken this course to preserve his alliance with the Sinhalese nationalist parties that assure him of a parliamentary majority, his short-term pragmatism is continuously eroding the confidence of many others, in his moral commitment and longer-term problem-solving capacities. Winning elections and holding on to power is one thing; winning the trust of others and solving intractable problems, is another.

INDIA/BANGLADESH

Mixed signals on a stable neighbourhood

Following the military coup in Bangladesh in January, India was relieved. The putsch seemed to mark a decisive moment in Bangladesh's fortunes, which was a welcome shift from the instability that had characterised Dhaka politics over the previous year. There is a fair degree of suspicion about India's role and intentions in the eastern neighbour, and an anti-India platform strikes a popular chord in Bangladesh. While the perception that the Awami League was close to the Indian establishment made the party reluctant to engage too closely with New Delhi while it was in power, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has been traditionally more vocal against what it sees as India's 'interference'.

With the democratic system in place, New Delhi subsequently felt that it was losing out both ways, and not gaining substantive concessions. It wanted a stable regime, which would curb 'Islamic fundamentalism', allow Indian investment, crack down on outfits using Bangladeshi territory as a base to fuel militancy in the Northeast, and address the contentious issue of economic migration across the border into India. The Bangladesh Army, India calculated, was best placed to deliver on these key concerns.

Five months later, that policy appears to remain largely unchanged. The caretaker government's swift execution of a few Islamic militants convicted of killing two judges, and its openness to Indian corporates (especially the Tatas, after the latter's failed attempts at investment the last few years), are seen in some quarters in Delhi as vindications of India's position.

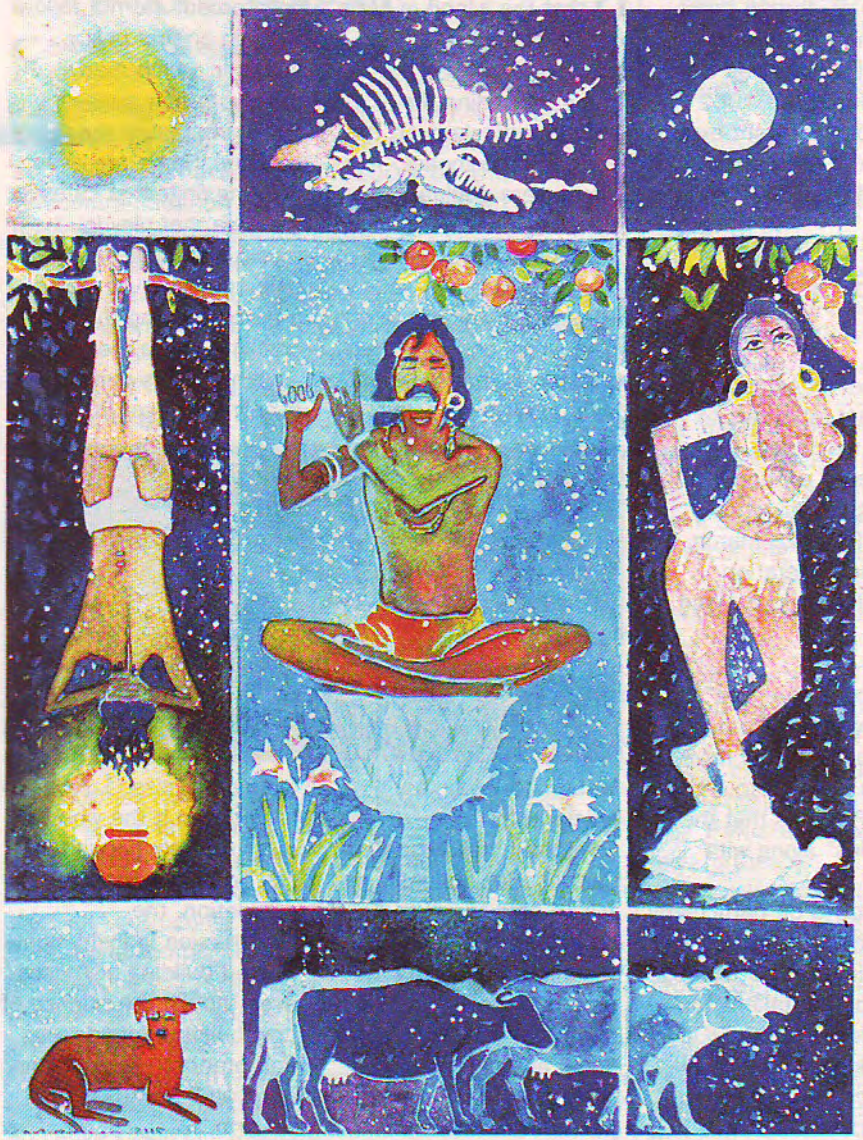
But India should know that army rule is not a sustainable arrangement in Bangladesh, where the thirst for freedom runs deep, and the military invariably seeks entrenchment. This was evident after the original plan to exile Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina fell flat. The widespread unrest within the country makes clear that Bangladeshis are not willing to meekly let go of their hopes for representative democracy. India claims it has privately conveyed to the Bangladesh Army that it should hold the elections sooner than later. But that is as far as New Delhi seems willing to go – though one could have hoped for a public position on democracy, as it had in the case of Nepal a year ago.

The circumspection in New Delhi may also stem from the fact that India, in fact, has limited capacity and leverage in influencing domestic politics in Bangladesh.

This is in direct contrast to Nepal, where New Delhi has at times micro-managed the peace process; or to Sri Lanka, where it has the ability to intervene in the conflict's dynamics. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs does not have as many levers of influence that work on Dhaka; political parties and civil society in Delhi have neither organic linkages with their counterparts in the Bangladesh capital, nor sustained interest in developments on that side. But as the regional power, its position on political issues in the neighbourhood remains important, with many other international actors willing to follow the Indian lead.

New Delhi's stand may be understandable, given that its interests of commerce, security and transit were not served in Bangladesh's democratic interlude. But the militarist tilt evident in the support of the caretaker regime is to be criticised, not only from the moral standpoint but also because it will not be pragmatic in the long run. Army rule cannot last forever, and political parties will come back to power before too long. If India is remembered as the major actor that sided with, when all is said and done, an autocracy, it will stand to lose all the more when a democratic dispensation does come to power. Additionally, if India wants to be taken seriously as a rising world power, it needs to be seen as being supportive of basic democratic values in its own neighbourhood.

New Delhi would be well advised to rethink its hands-off approach on Bangladesh. Outright condemnation may seem overdone, and a proactive approach to oust the regime would be quite out of the question – indeed, a dangerous adventure. But moral support to the political parties and a strong message to the Bangladesh Army to relinquish control of the political process could go a long way in salvaging India's reputation among Bangladeshis, as well as in creating the environment for restoration of democracy in Dhaka.



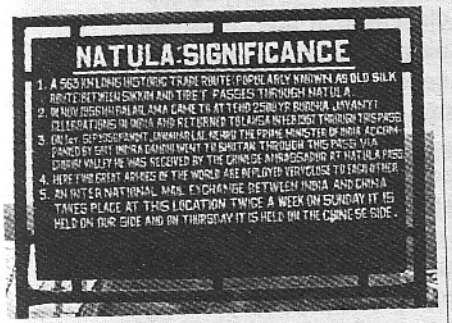
'Ranjha II'

There is reason for Ranjha, the famous fakir of Punjabi folk tradition, to want to sit in the dark. The petals of the lotus on which he rests are soft, as is the night breeze. When he closes his eyes, Ranjha can allow his imagination to wander as far as he wants. In this interpretation by artist **Sabir Nazar**, Ranjha can imagine his cows coming home on a starry night. He can imagine the goddess of fertility atop a tortoise, picking fruit from his tree. He can imagine birth, and he can imagine death. But Ranjha must now rise from his comfortable slumber, open his eyes, and turn from the moon to the sun. Ranjha is an artist, a creative inventor, one invested with society's potential for beauty, brilliance, imagination and change. The world cannot remain in darkness forever. Ranjha's flute must now herald the morning light.

This is part of a regular series of *Himal*'s editorial commentary on artwork by Sabir Nazar. Watercolour, 18"x24"

INDIA/TIBET

'Trade **through** the border'



The Nathula pass between Sikkim and Tibet reopened at the beginning of May, a month earlier than last year. It is now set to stay open through November, two months later than last year. At the opening ceremony, Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh described the trading-time extension as a "small beginning" in the effort to start full trading between China and India through Nathula. "But we still have a long way to go," he cautioned.

Ramesh went on to say that priorities now include upgrading the trade-related infrastructure on the Indian side of the pass, and coming to a new agreement with China that moves "from border trade to trade through the border". In addition, Ramesh noted, the list of tradable goods needs to be expanded. With the current list being based on traditionally traded items from a half-century ago (before Nathula was closed off, following the 1962 war), India's current exports are almost exclusively confined to rice. Δ

INDIA

Minding Meghalaya's migrants

The day after the 1 May deadline set by Adivasi leaders in Meghalaya for all migrant labourers to leave the state, the 'quit notice' was rescinded. Meghalaya is home to a large number of economic migrants, many from Nepal and Bangladesh, who work in the state's many coalmines. From 28 March, when the warnings were issued by the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Peoples (FKJGP), panic had spread quickly through the state's migrant communities.

FKJGP leaders, threatening "dire consequences", warned that if the state government were not to deal seriously with "illegal immigration", locals would have to take matters into their own hands. In addition to economic and cultural worries, FKJGP claims that the migrants have brought "illegal activities" along with them, such as gambling.

Nonetheless, officials professed not to be particularly worried by the activists' demands. Citing a long history of anti-immigrant sentiment, Chief Minister D D Lapang said that the FKJGP warning should not be taken "too seriously". The government did acquiesce to the FKJGP demands enough to promise to crack down on illegal 'infiltration', and to implement a policy requiring all migrant workers to register with the police. Δ

SRI LANKA

Out, **OCHA**

In late April, the Colombo government indicated that it wanted the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to leave the island's most troubled areas. OCHA originally set up its Sri Lanka office in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami to oversee rehabilitation work, but has since remained to assist with communities that have been adversely affected by the ethnic conflict. Now the government is accusing OCHA of "overstaying" its mandate, and has ordered it to vacate the country's north and east. OCHA officials had reportedly floated the possibility of acting as a human-rights monitor, even though some UN officials say that the agency is unequipped to do so. Δ

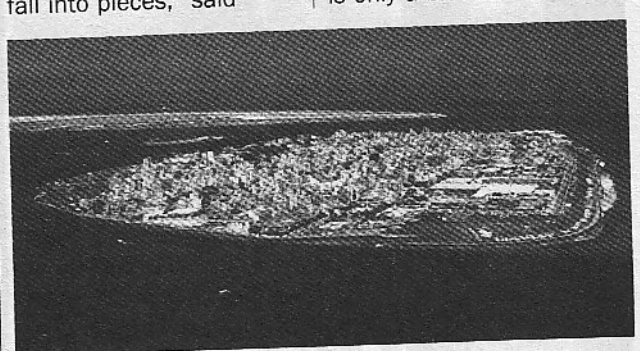
THE MALDIVES

Male 'collapsing'

Reports again indicate that the island of Male is dangerously near capacity. Cracks in the reef surrounding the island, particularly off the north and northeast sides, were originally discovered five years ago. Now those have been observed to have worsened significantly. "The worst possible scenario is that Male will fall into pieces," said Mahmood Riyaz, an official with the Environmental Research Centre. "But hopefully we will be able to do something."

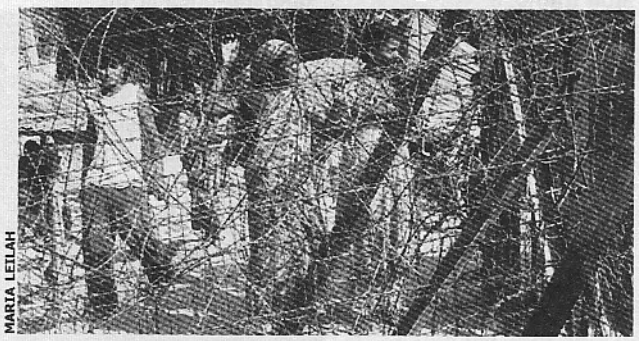
Following a 2002 report, some reinforcement work was done, and certain large-scale construction was halted in the northern areas of the island. The government did not follow through on that policy, however, which many observers now suggest has exacerbated the problem. Some are even pointing fingers at cafes in the area that play loud music, the suggestion being that the vibrations are accelerating the cracking of the reef.

Although its population is only a bit over 80,000, Male's tiny size (1.7 x 1.0 km) makes it the world's most densely populated city. To take in more population, the construction industry has started building high-rises, even though the science of how building foundations and other stresses impact upon atoll islands is not yet firm. Δ



INDIA/BANGLADESH

When in doubt, **buy it**



MARIA LETLAH

With New Delhi's attempt to fence its 4000-km border with Bangladesh well underway, a parliamentary committee has urged the Centre to consider purchasing a vast swath of the frontier. Doing so may also allow the government to move towards circumventing a three-decade-old bilateral treaty with Bangladesh.

At the moment, India is constructing the fence around 150 yards from the frontier, as per a 1975 treaty with Bangladesh that precludes building any defence structure within that distance. However, the government can legally buy real estate that falls within those 150 yards. While the fence may yet be moved closer to the border, the committee has suggested that if doing so is not possible, "the government may buy [this] land ... so that people who have property within the 150 yards may not face problems any more."

Given the heavy population density of much of the borderland, cultivation has traditionally gone all of the way up to the frontier. Indeed, in addition to farms and other cultivated areas, homes have also fallen within this 150-yard stretch. The question arises whether the Indian government should thus continue further with the ineffective programme of border fencing, and invest in thousands of acres of real estate.

PAKISTAN/INDIA

Fibre-optic **Wagah**

Following final approval from Islamabad, the first direct fibre-optic link between India and Pakistan, running through Wagah, began functioning in early May. The cable, which will be used for both voice and data transfer, was actually laid back in April 2006 by the Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL), but has been awaiting final approval.

While a coaxial cable was already in operation through Wagah, the new fibre-optic connection will significantly speed up and lessen the cost of data transfer between Pakistan and India, as well as Pakistan and the rest of Southasia. Previously, Pakistani data transfer has all been routed through West and Southeast Asia, and Europe.

SRI LANKA/INDIA

Taxing **Pooja**

Everyone may love Kollywood, the Madras-based Tamil film industry, but not when their actors are taking away your jobs. Starting in June, Sri Lanka's National Film Corporation (NFC) will be taking steps to curb the increasing influx of Indian film stars into the country's film and television sectors. Colombo has slapped a new SLR 250,000 tax on producers employing Indian actors in starring roles. A SLR 150,000 tax will also have to be paid for employing Indian actors in supporting roles.

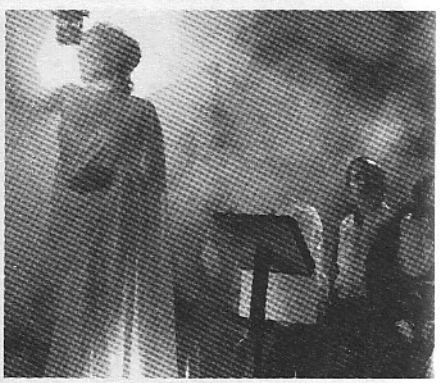
"We have many talented artistes and technicians here, but local producers are bringing Indians and depriving our people of work," NFC chairman Asoka Serasinghe complained, pointing in particular to the Indian Tamil star Pooja Umashankar, who appears in a popular television show. The announcement follows last year's imposition of a USD 750 tax per showing of films and television shows from India and the US, proceeds from which are being put back into bolstering Sri Lanka's own film industry.

PAKISTAN/INDIA

Soundtrack archive

Researchers in the musicology department at Punjab University (PU) in Lahore have announced the formation of a programme to archive the soundtracks of historic films from India and Pakistan. Much of the original soundtracks originated in present-day Pakistan; Lahore was the predecessor to Bombay's filmdom. Students from the department will be tasked with visiting Pakistani production houses and select people associated with the Hindostani film and music industries, in an attempt to track down original classic soundtracks.

According to Keith Timney, a musicology professor at PU, because many of the original recordings of these works – such as those by Mehdi Hassan and Noor Jahan (*see photo*) – were lost, remixes of these songs became popular instead. This, Timney asserts, has led to the crumbling of popular appreciation of the original tracks. While India has had a significantly better track record of saving its original recordings, those in modern-day Pakistan have been less fortunate.



Islamist organisations denounced the new programme, accusing PU of promoting the appreciation of music that is "against Islamic belief". It is our own belief that the good profs will not cater to the clergy on this one.

INDIA/PAKISTAN

Hardly open


Haji Pir, 1965

One and a half years after five new crossing points were created on the Line of Control in Kashmir, several posts remain largely unable to admit travelers due to bureaucratic inertia. Indeed, one of these crossings, Haji Pir Pass, has yet to see its first official border crosser. According to official statistics that became public in April, all five of the crossing points had cumulatively seen just 1700 travelers since October 2005, when Islamabad and New Delhi agreed to open new border checkpoints following the Kashmir earthquake.

Two crossings have remained relatively busy, officials say – the Poonch-Rawalkot and the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad roads. The other three, however, have seen very little traffic, a phenomenon that locals say is traceable to cumbersome procedures for getting the necessary permits. According to People's Democratic Party President Mehbooba Mufti, there are currently "10,000 applications ... pending for permit". Attempting the crossing is also seen as a way of opening oneself up for harassment by security officials.

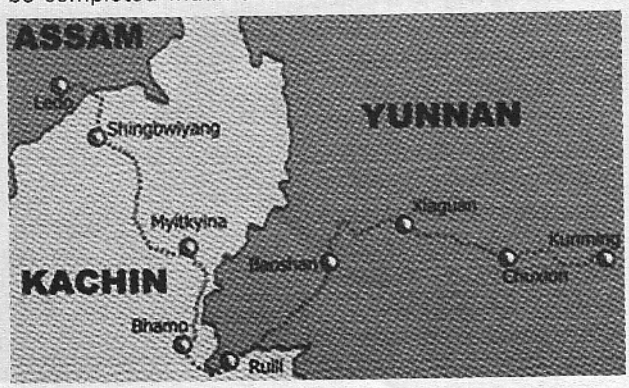
All in all, how does it help for India-Pakistan détente if the all-important agreement to allow LoC border crossings by Kashmiris is only existent on paper, and not at the border?

BURMA

Further **down** the road

Late April saw the opening of the majority of the segments of the Stilwell Road, which runs from Assam to Yunnan in China, through Burma. An opening ceremony held in Myitkyina in Burma marked the end of three years of Chinese-funded construction on the Burma section of the road, which cost Beijing around RMB 1.2 billion (USD 159.6 million). Traveling time from Tengchong in Yunnan to Myitkyina has now been cut from eight hours to around three hours. The Stilwell Road was originally built as a military supply line during World War II.

While the Chinese section of the road has long been operational, travel beyond Myitkyina towards the Indian border remains difficult, with only around two-thirds of that 360 km section currently open to vehicle traffic. In early May, however, Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said that multilateral talks were currently ongoing to "speed up" the road's full reopening. The state's industries minister, Pradyut Bordoloi, noted that development on the road within Assam would be completed within around six months.



REGION

Looking for revenue

Potentially ending a year's worth of intransigence, Dhaka's interim government has agreed to hold talks over a gas pipeline that would run from Burma to India through Bangladeshi territory. Foreign Affairs Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury made the announcement after returning from a trip to Burma in late April.

Although Dhaka had previously held the issue of transit rights for any such pipeline hostage to a host of bilateral grievances with India, Chowdhury put down the new stance reversal to economics: "We'll get revenue," he said simply. Previous estimates have surmised that Bangladesh could make up to USD 120 million per year for allowing the 950-km pipeline to cross its territory.

With reports arsing in recent months of Rangoon's decision to sell most of its natural gas reserves to China, however, it remains to be seen whether the pipeline's USD 1 billion pricetag will still be considered worthwhile.

NEPAL/BANGLADESH

Long, lost years in **Bangladesh**

The story of four Nepalis released in early May from prison in Bangladesh is heart-rending. Three out of the four had been arrested and charged with not having valid travel documents; at the time, they were sentenced to a mere week in prison. Until their release, one had languished behind bars for 12 years, while the other two had been detained for three and six years. The fourth prisoner had been arrested in 1996 on charges of theft and possession of illegal weapons, and was sentenced to serve five years.

Besides the inherent ability of Southasian prison systems to inhumanely forget the rights of unprotected detainees, some of the blame for these severe oversights are said to be applicable to the neglect of the Nepali embassy in Dhaka. Nepali diplomats there now say they are working with Bangladeshi authorities to see whether there are other Nepalis being unfairly detained elsewhere in Bangladesh.

INDIA

The rising **waters**

Path of 2002 cyclone

NASA

A climate-change expert has warned that stronger cyclones, coupled with rising seawater, will wreak havoc on India's eastern coasts in years to come. Although the country's coasts are set to bear the brunt of the ramifications of global climate change, India as a whole will suffer as well, said Pranabes Sanyal, with the National Coastal Zone Management Authority, based in Calcutta.

Sanyal reported that since 2000, recorded cyclone speeds in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh have almost doubled, from 150 kph to 250 kph. Additionally, while sea levels around the world have been rising around two millimetres per year, the change in the Bay of Bengal has been around 3.14 mm per year – and up to 10 mm per year off Khulna in Bangladesh. New Delhi is planning to conduct a broad analysis of India's 7500-km coast next year, to discern how to ameliorate the country's coastal vulnerabilities.

Either way, floods and storms in general look set to increase in the Subcontinent, as do the subsequent hunger and disease they spawn. Although it was not necessarily caused by climate change and global warming, during and following the 2004 tsunami, about 16,000 of the total 230,000 deaths took place in India.

NEPAL/INDIA

Nepali goods to lose edge

Items manufactured in Nepal are set to lose their edge over other Southasian goods in India, after New Delhi recently announced that it would impose zero tariff on goods from all of the region's 'least-developed' countries – including Bangladesh, the Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal. Earlier, Nepali products had experienced a crucial tariff advantage in India over the region's other countries. Nepal's leading exports to its southern neighbour – vegetable ghee, jute goods, polyester yarn and readymade garments – amounted to over NPR 11 billion in 2005-06, over 25 percent of the country's total exports to India.

After Manmohan Singh's announcement during the 14th SAARC Summit in early April, however, these and other goods will have to rely increasingly on their own commercial appeal. When taking into account Nepal's landlocked location and low productivity, many analysts now predict that Nepali goods will not fare well against the new competition, particularly given the suddenness of the announcement.

NEPAL/TIBET

Maoists quash **Dalai Lama** request

Nepal's Maoist leader, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka 'Prachanda'), has declared that his party will not allow the country's interim government to permit the Dalai Lama to reopen an office in Kathmandu. Although admitting that it was a "delicate issue", Dahal said that the newly seated government, with five cabinet posts occupied by his party, would not want to jeopardise "good relations with China". While Nepal would not forcibly repatriate refugees currently living in Nepal, the Maoist leader continued, the new government in Kathmandu would still not allow political Tibetan organisations to operate openly, "since we consider Tibet an integral part of China".

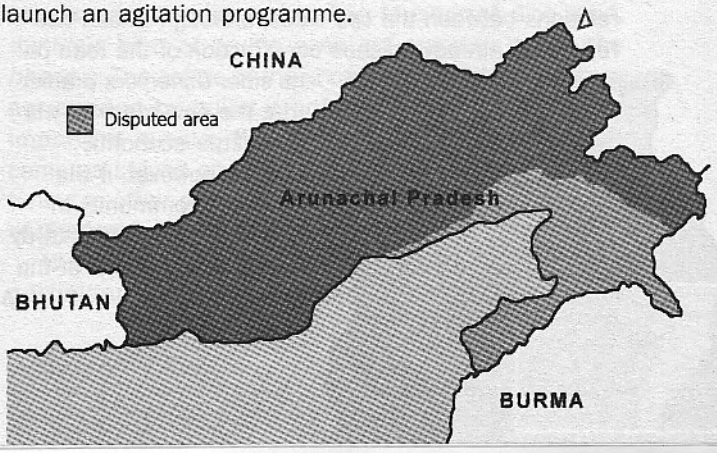
The Dalai Lama's long-time office in Kathmandu, known as the Tibetan Refugee Welfare Centre, was shut down in January 2005, as part of the autocratic Gyanendra's attempt to appease Beijing. An application for the registration of a new Tibetan political organisation has been put on hold by Nepal's governments amidst greater worries, and it now appears certain that the request will be denied.

INDIA

China v **Arunachal**

Optimistic reports of progress over the past year on the resolution of Sino-Indian border issues may have come a bit too early. After the defence ministry in New Delhi had, in mid-May, stated categorically that reports of Chinese 'incursion' into Arunachal Pradesh had been a "misrepresentation", members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) angrily called for a fact-finding mission to the state. Such a body was subsequently put together the following week.

"China is in illegal possession of over 2000 square kilometres of Indian territory in the state," BJP MP Khiren Rijiju announced. "It is not a matter of only the 20-km-long encroachment in Sumdorong Chu in Tawang District, and China has been doing this steadily for years." Rijiju went on to say that resentment was building in the state against the Chinese, and that the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union was planning to launch an agitation programme.



BHUTAN

Dawa Tshering, 1935-2007

Dawa Tshering, former foreign minister of Bhutan, passed away on 8 May 2007 in Thimphu, due to a liver condition.

Dawa Tshering, born in Kalimpong in 1935, had been scouted out by a Royal Government of Bhutan in search of young modernisers. Tshering was inducted into the government's services soon after his graduation from Calcutta University and managed to quickly climb its ranks early in his career. He first became a minister in 1969 and when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was created in 1970, was assigned to head it. As a pillar of the Bhutani government, Tshering was instrumental in envisioning and implementing many of the policies for which former King Jigme Singye Wangchuk – who reigned from 1974 until his abdication this year in favour of his son – has been credited.

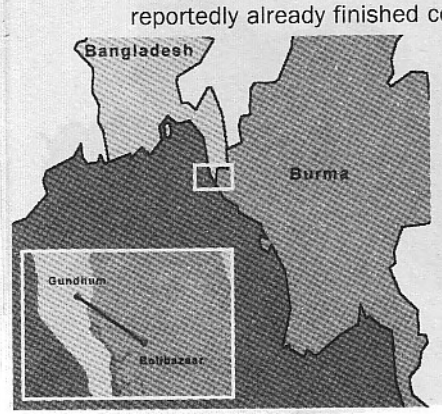
Tshering was foreign minister from 1972 until the dismissal of the old Bhutani cabinet in 1998. He was the face of Bhutan to the world during the mass evictions exercise of the early 1990s, which created the Lhotshampa refugees currently languishing in Nepal camps. (*See interview with Dawa Tshering in Himal July/August 1994*)

BANGLADESH/BURMA

From Gundhum to **Bolibazaar**

Dhaka and Rangoon have finally agreed to build the first crossborder road between the two neighbours, linking Gundhum in southeastern Bangladesh with Bolibazaar in Burma. Although there is no official roadway between Bangladesh and Burma, there are two official crossing points along the 320-km frontier.

Dhaka will now be paying for the construction of the new 23-km road, which both sides hope will eventually run between Dhaka and Rangoon. Discussions over the potential road have gone on for years, amidst off-and-on relations between the two sides, although Dhaka has reportedly already finished construction of the road on its side. Observers predict that the new roadway will have little economic impact, however, if the business community in Dhaka in particular is tardy in taking advantage of the road link.



PAKISTAN/INDIA

Kishanganga, again

Construction has quietly begun on a hydroelectric project in Kashmir that had been stalled for two decades. In addition to being beset by militancy, the 330-megawatt Kishanganga plant has been opposed by Islamabad due to fears that the Indian project would impact on its own hydro scheme, a 969-MW plant located downriver, directly across the Line of Control in the Neelam Valley. Islamabad has in the past alleged that India's plan to divert water from the Kishanganga (Neelam) River, the largest tributary of the Jhelum River, would be in violation of the bilateral Indus Water Treaty.

In addition, there have been longstanding worries that the Kishanganga dam would flood the town of Gurez, in Jammu & Kashmir. Now, India's National Hydroelectric Power Corporation has decided to lower the dam's height by three metres. Doing so, company officials say, will not only eliminate the threat to Gurez, but will ultimately only impact on the village of Wadwun, the inhabitants of which will be resettled in Gurez. The INR 24 billion (now down from INR 32 billion) project's capacity will still be 330 MW. None of this looks set to settle Islamabad's worries, however.

PAKISTAN/AFGHANISTAN

Stalled **repatriation**

In early May, the second meeting of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Jirga Commission finally took place – after having been put off for several weeks, and subsequently shortened to just a single day. Even as the participants were discussing ways to strengthen relations and security between the two neighbours, however, quiet sentiments of a very different nature were being made public: of the remaining two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the vast majority said that they were not planning on returning to their homeland.

This despite Islamabad's specific orders in February that all Afghan refugees should be repatriated by 2009. To that end, at least four refugee camps are scheduled to close down this summer. While a large number of refugees have indeed returned home in recent years (including 200,000 more already in 2007), with the continued upswing in violence in Afghanistan in recent months a survey indicates that 84 percent of those still in Pakistan say they are afraid to return for security reasons. The United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, released those findings in the midst of its largest-ever repatriation programme.

There are official worries that even those refugees that do return to Afghanistan at this time may be confronted with a dire lack of land and related services. Nonetheless, Pakistani officials responded a week later by ordering the "immediate" repatriation of all Afghan refugees, accusing them of being involved in anti-state activities.

12 May: the bloodshed and watershed

AFP

With his miscalculation over the sacking of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, General Musharraf may have hastened the end of his reign.

BY **Q ISA DAUDPOTA**

On 12 May, Pakistan had its Black Sabbath. It turned out to be more bizarre than the surreal happenings that had preceded it, which included the takeover of the sole children's public library by hordes of black-hooded women, a mosque imam referring to the female students in Pakistan's premiere public university as prostitutes, and law-enforcement personnel dragging the country's chief justice by his hair. And all this in the capital, regarded as quite removed from the hurly burly of Pakistan's agitational politics!

Saturday, 12 May will go down in history as a shameful day for Pakistan. On that day, Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, who had been abruptly deposed by General Pervez Musharraf on 9 March on spurious charges, was to address the legal practitioners of the Sindh High Court, in Karachi. On arriving at the Karachi airport, Chief Justice Chaudhry was detained for nine hours, before finally being put back on a plane bound for Islamabad. The entry points to roads from the airport to the High Court had been blocked by hundreds of trucks, buses and containers, orchestrated by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), one of Musharraf's key support bases. Armed MQM thugs, with the tacit support of the MQM-dominated Sindh government, had also coerced lawyers and opposition party activists not to show their support for the suspended chief justice. One observer commented that even the Pakistan Army could not have so successfully halted life in Karachi.

The intimidation was not completely successful, however. All of the major opposition parties had already endorsed the call to greet the chief justice, and thousands defied the MQM threats to take to the streets. Earlier, Sindh Governor Ishrat ul-Ibad, also of the MQM, had warned Chaudhry to postpone his trip (although his talk had been planned long before); the chief justice in turn asked that the MQM not hold its rally on the same day.

As it happened, Chaudhry arrived in Karachi on schedule, and the MQM *goondas* proceeded to wield their street power on the gathered crowds, eventually opening fire. By the end of the day, 40 people were dead, 150 injured and countless vehicles destroyed. Although the state authorities had ordered the deployment of 15,000 security personnel, they did nothing to stop the MQM thugs. It has been reported that not only were the troops specifically directed not to intervene, but even their weapons were taken away. As such, security personnel were widely observed simply standing about, watching the violence unfold. This was in stark contrast to the previous 10 weeks, when the security forces had acted with alacrity against pro-Chaudhry protests and journalists covering the demonstrations. On 12 May, it was MQM supporters who assumed this role – firing repeatedly at the Karachi headquarters of Aaj TV, which was airing live coverage of the day's events.

As demonstrators dropped dead and the injured lay unattended, smoke rose from burning tires and vehicles on the streets of Karachi. In the midst of these warlike conditions, preparations were underway for another kind of gathering, in Islamabad. On 12 May, Jinnah Avenue, Islamabad's central road, wore a sudden festive look, with men in *dhotis* hoisting banners and placards festooned with pictures of Gen Musharraf. The loud, rhythmic beat of drums even led many to dance the *bhangra*. The centre of the show, a 20-foot-high platform surrounded by bullet-proof glass, stood waiting for important guests. But even as the state-television cameras stayed on this sedate scene, the public was tuning to other channels, all of them airing grim footage of the death and destruction in Karachi.

All the while, huge bus convoys, largely filled with paid participants, were flooding Islamabad's main

thoroughfares. The riders, from outlying areas of Punjab and NWFP, were evidently glad to tour the capital – and keen to receive payments of PKR 100-300 and a free meal. Annoyed by the success of Chief Justice Chaudhry's journey from Islamabad to Lahore on 5 May – a four-hour drive that stretched to 24 hours and generated humongous crowds along the Grand Truck Road – Gen Musharraf had his office and his confidante, Punjab Chief Minister Parvez Elahi, arrange his own extravaganza in Islamabad. The district *nazims* (heads of municipalities) were utilised for crowd-gathering and transport.

Following speeches by Pakistan Muslim League leaders and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, Gen Musharraf finally arrived at the glass enclosure. He claimed to be shocked and grieved by the carnage in Karachi, but blamed Chief Justice Chaudhry for the tragedy. He also went on to hint at further violence, should the opposition continue to defy the government's will. "If they think they are powerful," the general intoned, "then they should know that the people's power is with us." No one needed to tell Gen Musharraf that the crowds he saw on the other side of the glass were mostly trucked in; the truth no longer seems to matter for those in the general's camp.

A thorn in the side

Gen Musharraf's relationship with the MQM, his key support base and coalition supporters in Sindh, is a fraught one. With key members of the MQM – including its exiled leader, Altaf Hussain, as well as Sindh Governor Ishrat ul-Ibad – under grave legal charges, it is somewhat ironic that the general keeps direct telephone contact with Hussain (now a British citizen and living in exile in London). On 12 May, to underline his and his party's support for Gen Musharraf, Hussain, the Mohajir Messiah, addressed a huge crowd by telephone, to try and douse the flames in Karachi. He, too, blamed the chief justice for the violence.

Unlike the safely exiled MQM leader, on home ground Gen Musharraf needs to go through legal acrobatics to justify his maintenance of power as both president and army chief. In his 12 May speech, the general reconfirmed his intention to have the country's legislators re-elect him for another five-year term *before* the coming elections. Gen Musharraf's worry that Chief Justice Chaudhry would not allow such a move may have been the most significant reason for making Chaudhry 'non-functional'; even today, the matter remains topmost on everyone's mind.

Several other cases scheduled for hearing in the Supreme Court during 2007 were also potentially embarrassing for the government. Among these is one enquiring into the alleged dual citizenship of Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (Pakistani and American), and his eligibility to hold his current office. Chaudhry had also issued judgments and taken *suo moto* action on issues that had exposed the underlying shady nature of existing or proposed government deals. These have included the privatisation of the country's steel mills, which were to be sold to a person closely connected with Shaukat Aziz; as well as Chaudhry's orders relating to the 'disappearances' and human-rights violations by the country's security forces.

Chaudhry also raised the government's ire over a plan to transform the pristine forest of Patriata – which serves as the watershed and filter for drinking water for Rawalpindi and Islamabad – into a pleasure garden for the country's wealthy. A few weeks before the historic *suo moto* hearing in the Supreme Court, the chief justice received a dossier opposing the proposed destruction of the Patriata forest, which brought to his attention a plan by the Punjab government to construct on the site luxury hotels and foreigner-only enclaves. Due to the court's subsequent intervention, work on the Patriata ridge was stopped pending environment-protection assurances.

The full bench of the Supreme Court is now set to hear the allegations against the former chief justice. This is the first time in Pakistan's history that a sitting chief justice has been dismissed due to such charges. Given the atmosphere in Pakistan and the widespread disgust at the way Chaudhry has been treated, it is unlikely that the court will find him guilty of the current charges of 'misconduct'. More crucially, the general-president may have inadvertently brought about the beginning of the end of his own political career.

With Chief Justice Chaudhry returned to his old seat, the chances would be significantly greater that Gen Musharraf's re-election plan would be halted by the court. There is already a petition before the court, recently filed by the head of the Jamaat-e-Islami, questioning Gen Musharraf's ability to hold his army position past the retirement age of 60. (The general will turn 64 on 11 August.) Gen Musharraf has retorted, however, by warning that he will use "extra-constitutional means" to ensure his election and that of his partners. If the corporate interests of the military, coupled with the desire of the US government for a pliant military leader in Pakistan coincides, Gen Musharraf's next step could be to declare a state of emergency.

After the events of 12 May, the chances of a brewing agreement with the Pakistan People's Party, led by Benazir Bhutto, suddenly became remote. Bhutto would be committing political suicide if she were now to side with Gen Musharraf. In the current political tussle, Imran Khan, the cricketer-turned-parliamentarian, has gathered considerable support through his sharp criticism of the MQM and the general.

These are interesting times in Pakistan, made more so by a chief justice who has had the courage to contest the allegations against him. Pakistanis who support Iftikhar Chaudhry hope that the new opening will prove to be a watershed – perhaps even ushering in a new era of honest politicians, one that returns the military to its barracks, and gradually undermines the military's corporate interests, diminishing their desire to interfere in politics. If this were to happen, we could perhaps even see a peaceful and speedy solution to the Kashmir problem. Who knows – such dreams could lead Pakistanis to act, and make these hopes come true.

King Mayawati

BILASH RAI

Mayawati has turned India's electoral politics on its head, and not many saw it coming. She now has her sights focused on the larger prize – prime minister of India.

BY **PRATAP SOMVANSHI**

The results of the recent Uttar Pradesh assembly polls herald the arrival of a unique political formula, one which will have a forceful impact on electoral politics throughout India for years to come. As the most populated and politically most significant state in India, Uttar Pradesh has long paved the way for new political ideologies – be it the saffron wave or the *bahujan* politics that banked on the votes of the majority, the former untouchable castes, the Dalits. With the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) gaining a thumping majority in mid-May, a newfound alliance of Dalits and upper castes (mostly Brahmin and Bania) has proved to be a formidable combination. In its aftermath, political pundits are lauding the victory of this unlikely coalition as an innovative experiment in social engineering, as overseen by BSP supremo Mayawati.

Mayawati, India's first Dalit woman chief minister, has now been sworn in to the post in Uttar Pradesh for a fourth time. With the BSP's clear majority of 206 out of 403 assembly seats, UP is experiencing its first single-party majority in 17 years, since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in power at the height of the 'Ram Janmabhoomi' movement. The most significant change to come about in recent elections has been the decisive entry of deprived castes into mainstream politics, and today there appears to be a realistic opportunity for the Dalit-majority BSP to play a critical role in national politics. Most immediately, this refers to the election of the next president of India, coming up in June. For their part, Mayawati's supporters have already begun to chant: "Now New Delhi!"

A significant part of the BSP's success can, of course, be put down to anti-incumbency sentiment. Poor governance has not helped the Samajwadi Party's image – in particular, the breakdown in law enforcement as made evident in the Nithari child-murders case, the recent murders of several politicians, and the sheer hooliganism of Chief Minister Mulayam Singh's administration. Even film star Amitabh Bachchan's much-advertised slogan *'UP mein hai dum, kyonki jurm yahan hai kum'* (UP is powerful, because there is less crime here) did little to change the discontent directed at Mulayam.

Another factor in the BSP's favour was the proactive role of the Election Commission, in ensuring that Dalits could vote in large numbers in the seven rounds of phased polling. The elections also saw a large paramilitary presence – almost 500,000 personnel – which some say was the largest deployment of security forces to have taken place in an Indian election. Such a security cover undoubtedly

contributed to another record: for perhaps the first time since Independence, no violence occurred during the UP polls. In certain pockets of eastern UP, Dalits were able to cast their votes for the first time ever.

Rise of regional parties

The political transition in Uttar Pradesh between 1999 and 2007 is fairly easy to trace. During that period, people in the marginalised sections of society became politically aware and united. This was also a period of the progressive weakening of the Congress party. From Independence until 1980, the Congress was the undisputed strongman among Indian political parties, and was largely propped up by a vote bank of Dalits, Muslims and Brahmins. This was a period of upper-caste supremacy, when the Brahmins and Kshatriyas had the upper hand and played a decisive role in the larger Indian political system, as well as in the powerhouse of Uttar Pradesh. For years, the lower castes languished, but their search for political identity, self-empowerment and political power steadily strengthened. It was when the Congress began to lose the longstanding support of these groups in the late 1980s that its power rapidly declined.

V P Singh's decision to implement the report of the Mandal Commission in 1990, recommending reservation for Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in educational institutions and government jobs, acted as a significant catalyst, particularly within the lower and 'backward' castes. Their attempts to gain power subsequently became significantly more vocal. A new era of politics was thus emerging. At the national level, the Third Front of non-Congress and non-BJP parties came into being, and a new face, H D Deve Gowda, became prime minister – the first time a state-level politician had reached such a high office. Regional parties started to flex their muscles, and began to look for ways to shake up the political system in Uttar Pradesh. Thereafter, every regional party felt free to dream – and scheme – of having its own prime minister.

This was also the beginning of hung assemblies in UP, with no political party able to win a clear majority. But political analysts who predicted that such a situation would continue for decades have now been proved wrong. The BSP's win in May has turned longstanding political formulas on their heads: the 'royal sceptre' has been decisively placed in the hand of a *Dalit ki beti*, a daughter of the lower caste, this time unfettered by coalition partners and sharing arrangements that constrained her previous stints as chief minister.

Bahujan to sarvajan

Caste has long been the basis of Indian election formulas. The BSP had also subscribed to the arithmetic of caste, with its perspective that a small number of upper castes were exploiting and reigning over 85 percent of UP's population – the backward and Dalit castes. The strength of the regional parties that began to sprout during the late 1990s was based on low castes and minorities. While the Congress and the BJP proclaimed that they did not believe in the caste formula, behind the scenes they played the same game, and prepared to respond to the strategy of the regional parties.

In the lead-up to the recent election, however, the BSP had changed its stance. It abandoned its policy of cursing *Manuwad*, the ascription of all upper-caste evil to the sage Manu, and the party's members instead began to talk of *sarvajan* (all the people), not only *bahujan* (the majority). Satish Chandra Mishra, an upper-caste lawyer, is credited with the successful implementation of this strategy. As Mishra gained her confidence, Mayawati made him Advocate General of Uttar Pradesh in 2002. Since this was the period when the BSP was trying to woo the upper castes, Mayawati found in Mishra the most acceptable Brahmin face, and she eventually made him a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house in the national parliament, and then general secretary of the BSP. Mishra was instrumental in bringing in more Brahmins to the BSP, and 48 out of 86 Brahmin BSP candidates won the 2007 election.

The BSP's campaign slogans from the past election also reflected this shift in caste alignment and the use of the party's symbol of the elephant over time. From *'Chad gundo ki chaati par – mohar lagegi hathi par'* (Knocking down ruffians – the seal will be put on the elephant), the attempt to woo the upper caste was apparent in the religious symbolism of *'Hathi nahi Ganesh hai – Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hai'* (It is not an elephant, but lord Ganesh – the creator, the preserver and the destroyer.) and *'Brahmin Shankh bajayega – hathi badta jayega'* (The Brahmin will blow the conch – the elephant will surge forward).

The BSP is now 23 years old. When Mayawati's mentor Kanshi Ram founded the party, he coined the slogan, "Share at par with involvement", and the goal of the BSP was political representation in proportion

Foggy prognostication

Exit and opinion polls were a flop once again in the recent UP election. No major political pundit or psephologist predicted the BSP winning a full majority, including those at Star News, the *Indian Express*, CNN, IBN7, NDTV, India TV or Sahara TV. Instead, each of these foresaw a hung assembly, suggesting that the BSP would get between 103 and 168 seats. Quite a few surveys gave the BJP more than 100 seats, although it eventually won just half that. While many put the BSP and the SP in the same range, the SP eventually wound up with less than half of the BSP's seats. Besides the fact that psephology is an inexact science, one might suggest that class and caste bias leads to such skewed predictions, perhaps?

to population size. Initially, the party had to rely on tenuous alliances to make any headway in state politics. In 1993, the BSP came to power and formed a government with the Samajwadi Party, which had a hold on the OBCs, particularly the Yadavs. In the evolving formulation of UP politics, the upper-caste-leaning BJP actually supported the BSP in the 1997 elections, and Mayawati subsequently became chief minister for the first time. Now, a decade later, the BSP has reached a position of being able to form a government by itself. It has been a slow, steady and strategic build up of strength in India's politically most-significant state.

In UP, the ability of the Dalits and the upper castes, particularly Brahmins, to coalesce, marks a great change in the social and political equation, and holds the promise of a stable formula, according to some. Furthermore, this success has set the regional parties' sights even higher. If in coming parliamentary elections, after a year and a half, the BSP were to win 60 more seats in UP, Mayawati's chances of becoming prime minister of India would be very strong. Although seven past prime ministers have hailed from UP, during times of hung assemblies and parliaments the state's politics became weak, and left the field open for regional parties of South India to play a more prominent role in New Delhi. Led by Mayawati, the resurgence of one-party domination in UP now signals the return of the state as the kingmaker.

Muslim vote bank

In the BJP-led coalition government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, politicians from Andhra Pradesh were very powerful in the Centre. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government of Manmohan Singh owes its gratitude to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the left parties, which are currently extremely influential.

Many now say that if Mayawati's government is able to strengthen Uttar Pradesh in central politics, the perceptions of minorities could simultaneously change. Up to this point, the minority vote bank has been scattered, largely attached to various state-level regional parties, and with the Congress at the national level. In the mid-1990s in UP, with a weak Congress party and the opportunistic alliance of the BJP and the BSP, minority votes went increasingly to the Samajwadi Party and whosoever else was perceived to be secular. The so-called Muslim parties were unsuccessful in wooing the UP vote bank, and failed to win the sympathy even of the Muslims. Now, the Muslim vote bank in UP again seems to be turning towards the BSP – and the party leadership is keeping a careful watch over these voters. Said to be very close to Mayawati, Nasimuddin Siddiqui, the popular youth leader from Banda District, has become the minority face of the BSP.

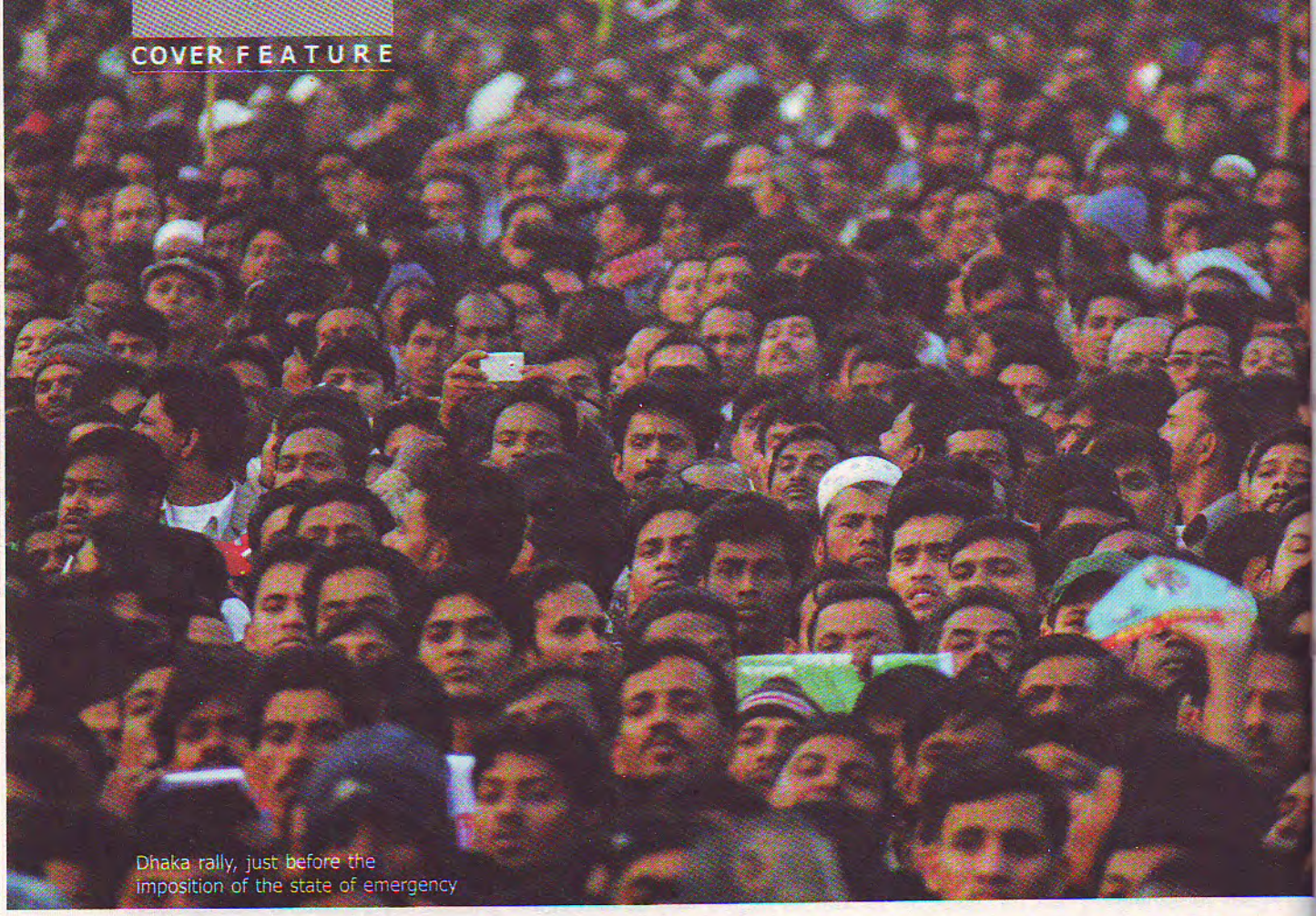
In the aftermath of the recent elections, attention must be paid to the failures of the Samajwadi Party, the BJP and Congress in UP. Their trump cards have proved ineffective. The high-profile road show of Rahul Gandhi, as well as the campaigning by his mother and sister, did not make a dent in the triumphant march of the elephant. In May 2007, the Congress won a mere 21 seats – two fewer, even, than in 2002.

The 'royal sceptre' has been decisively placed in the hand of a *Dalit ki beti*, a daughter of the lower caste, this time unfettered by coalition partners and sharing arrangements that constrained her previous stints as chief minister.

While the Congress saw the worst results in the UP polls, the BJP's dreams also came crashing to the ground. After gaining power in Punjab and Uttarakhand, the BJP was expecting significantly better results in UP. Party leaders were hoping that the saffron wave would sweep India. Indeed, a UP win could have paved the way for clinching Goa, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat – and the road to Delhi would have been clear. Instead, the BJP has to take a hard look at its poll strategy, and perhaps remodel its party structure in UP. In 2002, the BJP won 88 seats in Uttar Pradesh; this time, it could gain no more than 50. The fall-guy for the BJP would be the party's national president, Rajnath Singh, who could not even save the party in his own state.

The same may happen with the Samajwadi Party, which only won 97 out of 403 seats in the state assembly. SP leaders are now seriously thinking about how to restructure the party. During the run-up to the May elections, chief ministers from various South Indian states streamed up to UP to campaign for Mulayam Singh Yadav, who had been dreaming of forming a Third Front with these states for the next Lok Sabha parliamentary elections in 2009. This dream, too, now lies in tatters.

While the UP elections of 2007 have clearly marked a significant shift in how Indian political parties will fashion their political formulas in the days to come, there is, however, little hope for an overall change in the system. Parties in power in the past, after all, have made hundreds of promises during election campaigns, many of which remain flagrantly unfulfilled to this day. While one hopes that Mayawati's new government atop the elephant will not tread the same path, the Indian masses have developed a wary view of the politicians of any political party – and to break that mindset will require a long, long ride. What the public of UP hopes is that four-time Chief Minister Mayawati will be as good in governance this time as she is in forging winning alliances. ▲



Dhaka rally, just before the imposition of the state of emergency

The anger of Bangladesh's non-elite

Very little can shock Bangladeshis today and so they watch with bemusement the games among those who would rule. With Parliament never having been functional, the true meaning of 'political democracy' needs better explanation before the country's poor will appreciate its inherent promises.

BY **AFSAN CHOWDHURY**

What kind of a government does Bangladesh have? Who is in charge and why? When did this begin, and of whom should we be afraid this time around?

The phase that led to Bangladesh's current crisis began last January, when the electoral term of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government, under Khaleda Zia, came to an end, and preparations for the general elections began. This is one of the world's few countries in which a special non-political interim government, the so-called neutral caretaker government, is put in place to supervise national elections. Since no one trusts anyone (especially incumbents) in such matters, this is considered the most practical solution.

The caretaker government is supposed to be headed by the last retired chief justice of the Supreme Court, and is assisted by a cabinet of non-politicians recommended by the two main parties, the BNP and the Awami League. Technically, this government is entrusted with the limited task of holding a credible election. The practice of the installation of such an entity began in 1990 when, after the victorious mass movement against the rule of General Hossain Mohammed Ershad, activists suddenly found themselves without a government to hold an election.

While three earlier elections have been successfully held under the caretaker system – in 1990, 1996 and 2001 – this time, things went sour. The opposition, led by the Awami League, which had previously agitated

MUNEM WASIF

for reforms to the caretaker formula, refused to accept Khaleda Zia's nomination of Justice K M Hasan as 'Chief Adviser' for the caretaker government (the chief adviser functions as the interim prime minister), on the grounds that he had once been a member of the BNP.

The tense standoff exploded in late October 2006, shortly after the BNP government handed over power to then-President Iajuddin Ahmed, insisting that he hold polls as soon as possible. But the Awami League and its allies refused to accept the Election Commission's chief, Justice M A Aziz, another BNP nominee whose neutrality was disputed. Protests subsequently began in earnest, with street violence of an unprecedented scale leaving many dead and injuring several hundreds throughout the country. Dhaka became a constant scene of riot. The sight of two large columns of activists, armed with sticks, rods and boat oars, squaring off against each other on the main streets of the capital presented a terrifying metaphor for Bangladesh's pre-modern political culture.

Despite the mounting violence, the BNP appeared to have the situation sewed up in its favour. Most, including the opposition, concluded that the party was executing a plan to return to power by bending but not breaking the law of the land. President Ahmed, a BNP nominee, was playing a key role in this. He was instrumental in nominating several pro-BNP Election Commission members, even as the agitations continued; he also steadfastly refused to put pressure on the head of the commission, Justice Aziz. Meanwhile, the public clamour for Aziz's resignation grew. Even as President Ahmed was losing all credibility in the eyes of the opposition, the BNP continued to back him. He then went on to announce that since no one was acceptable to either of the contending parties, he himself would take over as Chief Adviser to the President – or, in this case, chief adviser to himself. On 29 October 2006, Ahmed did himself the courtesy of becoming the head of both the state and the government.

Amidst this surreal scene, the Election Commission continued to refuse to dismiss controversial members, extend election dates or make fresh voter lists. But several members of the new Chief Adviser's own Advisory Council began to resist the Ahmed establishment, which people were saying was being run on the sly by the BNP. Among the critics within the Advisory Council were three key representatives of the establishment: former army chief Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury, former cabinet secretary Akbar Ali Khan, and civil-society lawyer Sultana Kamal. The three refused to go along with Ahmed's plan to hold elections immediately under the discredited Election Commission. In a now-famous televised interview, Gen Chowdhury discussed a meeting that he had had with CEC Aziz, which Gen Chowdhury said had been about finding an acceptable way for Aziz to step down. Aziz denied that the meeting had even taken place. "Well, both of us can't be telling the truth, and I'm not lying," the general said, perfectly summing up the situation within the government at the time.

When these three crucial cabinet members resigned in protest on 11 December, anarchy (even by Bangladeshi standards) loomed. The opposition declared that it would boycott the polls, while essential supplies disappeared from Dhaka markets. Amidst the chaos there were reports that grocers were even refusing to sell food to Aziz, prompting supporters from his village to bus down to Dhaka with supplies for his larder. Western diplomats held secret meetings, urging all kinds of crisis management. This period of complete uncertainty lasted for more than a month, during which time the prospect of a military takeover was openly discussed. And then, on 11 January, the other shoe dropped. Suddenly, Bangladesh had a new caretaker government, a new Chief Adviser, a new set of backers (the military), and Iajuddin Ahmed back in his old job. A state of emergency was declared, much to the relief of all at the time.

Caretaker regime

The BNP had banked on military support to carry it through the crisis. But the military old guard – including many loyal to Ziaur Rahman, BNP founder and Begum Zia's late husband – did not oblige. The army, as a whole, was keener to keep its lucrative UN peacekeeping contracts, and there was widespread speculation that these could have been threatened by a full-scale takeover. The early-January statement by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, declaring that the Bangladesh situation was causing him much concern, was added to the worry of the men in khaki.

The new government enjoyed immediate public popularity, as it went after the famous and the corrupt, including Tarique Rahman, Khaleda Zia's eldest son, and his cronies. Government security forces went on a detention spree of taking in leaders and businessmen with links to both the Awami League and the BNP. The initial public hurrah was very loud indeed. The two begums, meanwhile, after a period of catching their breath, indicated that they would not be taking this thrashing lying down. Predictably, Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina welcomed the ouster of the BNP-constructed government and publicly promised to sanction the acts of the caretaker regime which took over. But her later reactions were less friendly, as the

Rumours continue to abound that the military will take over direct power any day. But how would such a situation really change things, barring more arrests?

ramifications for her own party became clearer.

Despite the caretaker government's attempts to force both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia out of the country – it had tried to keep the former from returning home from a US jaunt, while moving to exile the latter to Saudi Arabia – both are now very much in Bangladesh. A far cry from the years of animosity, Khaleda Zia even congratulated her arch-rival for her resolve to return despite having been charged with extortion and murder, and despite a global security alert issued to prevent her entry.

Corruption remains the hottest subject in Bangladesh, and every day sees new arrests, new charges and new investigations, thereby providing the media with plenty to chew on. But other issues have also started to become increasingly prominent, such as inflation, which economists at the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the National Economists Association have all flagged as having reached alarming levels. Research shows that price-control measures have not worked (*see accompanying article, "Inflation up, government down"*).


Fakhruddin Ahmed

The current members of the caretaker government, led by Fakhruddin Ahmed, a World Bank veteran and former chief of the Bangladesh Bank, are very much a part of Bangladesh's high elite, a group that enjoys the confidence of international donors and the diplomatic community. Ahmed has told the international media that he was backed by the military, while insisting in the same breath that he is his own man. For many in the intelligentsia, the question remains: Who put him there? On the other hand, do the people at large care? Rumours continue to abound that the military will take over direct power any day. But how would such a situation really change things, barring more arrests? Bangladesh's ailment runs deeper than corruption lists – though they are an excellent indicator.

Connection capitalism

The problem is not about what is happening now, but rather lies in what happened in the past and could happen in the future. Even as the newest nation-state in Southasia, Bangladesh does not have a democratic tradition, and autocracy has been the favoured form of governance for both civil and military rulers. This tendency began at the very birth of the nation, with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, head of the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina's father. Sheikh Mujib first introduced laws that allowed arrest without trial, then created the unaccountable paramilitary Jatiyo Rakshi Bahini, and finally promulgated emergency rule in 1974. He followed all this up with one-party rule, and banned all but four newspapers in 1975. Before his assassination in August of that year, Sheikh Mujib allowed his followers, family members and other 'connection capitalists' free run over the economy.

Next came General Ziaur Rahman, Begum Zia's husband. Although he rose to power on the back of a series of putsches, and instituted martial law from 1975 to 1978, Zia did also allow multi-party rule and a free media. To build an anti-Awami League alliance, however, he corralled all of the country's political parties into the Bangladesh National Party, which he founded in 1978. Gen Zia is also credited with allowing Islam its first political space in the post-independence era. During the general's period, systematic abuse of financial institutions flourished, and corruption began to gain the kind of institutional acceptance that has now become ingrained. Like Sheikh Mujib, Gen Zia was also a rigger of elections.

In 1981, Gen Zia was assassinated by his fellow fighters of the 1971 War of Liberation. After two years of semi-martial law and political confusion (which included an election and a referendum, both pre-decided), the Bangladesh Army, under General Hossain Mohammed Ershad, moved to oust the BNP. Gen Ershad may have declared a jihad against corruption, but later became the ultimate symbol of corruption in high office.

Popular autocracy

The period from 1982 to 1990 is considered the grand era of political resistance in the young country that is Bangladesh. During this period, the culture of street agitation, fuelled by young rebels, was polished to a shine. When Gen Ershad and his party were toppled in December 1990 (the army having refused the general's request to intervene), Bangladeshis thought that democracy had finally arrived. Although this was an undeniable victory of the streets, it later became evident that no true democratic foundation had been laid. What had been attained was, at best, 'popular autocracy'.

From 1991 to 1996, the BNP ruled under Khaleda Zia. From 1996 to 2001, the Awami League ruled under Sheikh Hasina. The BNP made a comeback in 2001, again under Begum Zia, a move that is remembered

Bangladesh may well have morphed into a new form of state: a post-modern, underdeveloped construction, where each segment has its own political culture.

for the large-scale violence against minorities that became part of the subsequent celebrations. Before long, *laissez-faire* corruption peaked at levels never before imagined.

Although the year 1990 achieved an iconic aura as the time of the birth of democracy in Bangladesh, each Parliament since then has been less effective than its predecessor. Despite court orders passed during the 1990s, the lower judiciary was not separated from the executive branch. Going by the words of K M Hasan, the present chief justice, the higher courts have been so damaged through bad appointments that it will take 20 years to heal them. The country's economy, meanwhile, has huge potential but remains chaotic, with the power sector in particular in shambles. Economic management is showing significant strain, as a result of many years of malgovernance, and inflation of course stands ready to bring down all who would presume to rule.

Against such a backdrop, how much difference can a regime change make? And would orders passed by a civil-military alliance be able to have any impact on what has taken 35 years of disastrous governance to accumulate? Can Bangladesh truly be improved by executive orders, as it would seem the caretakers believe?

Bangladesh's critical success has been in alleviating poverty, but this was delivered by the private sector, the non-governmental sector and the country's citizens rather than by its governments. But winning a Nobel Prize for running micro-credit schemes, as happened this past year thanks to the work of Muhammad Yunus, does not mean that Bangladesh has the political will to achieve macro-economic success. Poverty has indeed declined for the country's 'middle' poor, but the absolute number of poor is actually on the rise. Moreover, the number of people in extreme poverty – those who consume less than the minimum caloric requirement – has now risen to encompass at least 20 percent of the population – and there is no national scheme to address this.

The readymade-garments sector was successful for years, but low wages are a matter of great concern, as is low productivity. The government has had to go as far as to threaten to shut down nearly 100 factories for failing to pay their workers. Violent agitations are now commonplace in the industrial zones. While remittances have increased for many years, the foreign-labour sector is corrupt, unregulated and does not protect those who send their hard-earned money home and help keep the economy afloat. Even the safety valve of overseas labour has become increasingly vulnerable.

Elite to elite

Perhaps the current crisis is not about civil or military rule, nor about the varied hues of rulers, all of whom

130 days of emergency

During the first 130 days of emergency in Bangladesh, from 12 January to 21 May 2007, a total of 96 persons were reportedly killed during operations by law-enforcement personnel. In addition, 193,329 were reported arrested, inclusive of general arrests for violations of law. Of the 96 reported killed, 54 were killed by the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), 25 by the police, seven by the joint forces, six by the army, and three by the navy. One person was reported killed by officers of the Department of Narcotics Control.

Of those killed by the RAB, 51 died in 'crossfire', one was tortured to death, and two others were arrested by the RAB and later died in the hospital. Of those reportedly killed by the police, 12 died in 'crossfire', six were tortured to death, four shot dead, one died in police custody, and two more died in the hospital after their arrest. Of those reportedly killed by the Bangladesh Army, four died due to torture, one while attempting to escape, and one more died in the hospital after being arrested. Of the seven deaths attributed to the joint forces, three were tortured to death, one was killed in 'crossfire', one died in the hospital after arrest, and two died in custody, including one who committed suicide.

Of these 96 deaths, it has been reported that eight were from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, four from the Awami League, six from the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (Jonojuddho), four from the Purbo Banglar Communist Party, four from the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (Red Flag), two from the Biplobi Communist Party, one from the New Biplobi Communist Party, two from the Gono Mukti Fouz, one from the Jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dol, three from the Sromojibi Mukti Andolon and four from the Shorbohara Party.

In addition, one of those killed was reported to be a freedom fighter, one an indigenous leader, and one an 'extremist'. Three were also suspected arms smugglers, two were alleged arms dealers, two alleged muggers, one an alleged gambler, two alleged drug peddlers, 10 alleged dacoits and 18 alleged criminals. Other victims included three farmers, one businessman, one police informant, one bus driver, one female garments worker and one housewife.

The Dhaka-based human-rights organisation Odhikar prepared this report on the basis of 11 national dailies and its own fact-finding reports. In the course of doing so, on 3 May 2007, Odhikar's acting director, A S M Nasiruddin Elan, was taken to the naval headquarters, where Captain Zubayer, the director of naval intelligence, along with three associates, allegedly harassed him for preparing those reports, ultimately threatening him with death.

have been tried and found wanting. Rather, the crucial facet of Bangladesh's immediate circumstances may well be the nature of political governance that the Dhaka elite has practiced, and which it sees no reason to change at this time. Concern over the past several months over arbitrary arrests and lack of press freedom has been expressed mostly perfunctorily, perhaps because previous civilian governments have picked up and disappeared many more, not to mention muzzled the press. The military may be more active now, but so is the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), now a euphemism for swift justice without accountability. The RAB, of course, is a product of civilian rule, as was the Rakshi Bahini.

Bangladesh has no tradition of rule of law or democratic practice, even within non-governmental organisations seeking democratic or political change. Street resistance is about venting rage rather than channelling it and advancing parliamentary rule. Political memories are built around agitations, not constitutional success. Given that nearly every possible variation of autocratic rule has taken place in Bangladesh in the past, very little can shock the country's people today. In fact, several surveys have shown that a large proportion of Bangladeshis actually *favour* extrajudicial 'encounter' killings, arguing that this is the only way to keep citizens safe.

Under the shroud of the current chaos, Bangladesh may well have morphed into a new form of state: a post-modern, underdeveloped construction, where each segment has its own political culture. With Parliament never having been functional, the true meaning of 'political democracy' needs better explanation before Bangladeshis will appreciate its inherent promises. The current confusion is not about introducing reforms, nor about whether the civil or military elite runs the country. Rather, it is about the non-elite, who will need concrete proof that Bangladesh is run, by whosoever it may be, in its interests too.

For that to happen, those in power need to practice the simplest rules of good governance, such as adhering to the rule of law; ensuring accountability; creating a functional Parliament; eliminating extrajudicial arrests, torture and killings; and, of course, instituting a pro-poor national policy. Doing so will be of direct benefit to the non-elite, because in the current context, not only does it wield no power whatsoever, but there is essentially no system in place to ensure the application of governance that is in any way friendly to it. In most countries, such systems are taken for granted; but in Bangladesh, they remain the exception.

The Bangladeshi elite has absolutely no need for the non-elite: the poor are so poor that they have no surplus to be appropriated.

The non-elite cannot govern unless it is in power. In Bangladesh, however, the circumstances do not exist for the non-elite to access power through mechanisms of representation and accountability such as Parliament. A system of genuine electoral democracy forces rulers to share power, because the electorate may otherwise boot them out. The Bangladeshi elite does not suffer from such anxiety, however, as the Parliament is not its only route to political power: the elite is perpetually in power, through non-party-based means of decision-making. Thus it is that no government has had any stake in the Parliament, and there is therefore little connection between the rulers and the ruled. The Bangladeshi elite has absolutely no need for the non-elite: the poor are so poor that they have no surplus to be appropriated.

Organising the non-elite

Since the non-elite does not matter to the elite either economically or politically, it has remained timid in the current context, even though its size is increasing by the day. Although the 'middle' poor is probably in the best position to make its voice heard, here it has taken recourse to violence. While it is true that notable political-transformation successes anywhere tend to come from ordinary people who have set out to conduct their own repairs, in Bangladesh, it is long-time diehard Maoists who are taking up the fight against the state with their signature violence. The repercussions are strong and more Maoists are killed as state enemies than any other group.

There is also now a new face on this front – that of the Islamists, who occupy roughly the same economic strata but are better organised and funded than the Maoists. These new entrants have also shown themselves to be willing to directly attack state institutions, and to kill their perceived enemies. They are not a large force as yet, but their numbers are significant enough to worry the elite as a whole. While they are still a local phenomenon, the future of Islamic militancy remains unpredictable.

Apart from the state, the most important counter to extremism remain the NGOs, membership of which now numbers in the millions. If the Islamists could, they would have done away with such groups, especially their credit schemes, which are considered 'un-Islamic'. NGO penetration nonetheless remains deep and organised, providing services not offered by anyone else in the country. While these organisations powerfully present the multitudinous faces of the non-elite, how exactly the collective voice of that sector of the population might be heard remains unclear. One must wait, and observe the as-yet unseen. ▲

Inflation up, government down

The survival of Bangladesh's unelected interim government will be based largely on its stewardship of the country's economy.

BY **AMER AHMED**

BILASH RAI

When Bangladesh's current caretaker government was sworn in on 11 January, the country was on the brink of economic disaster. The economy was still licking its wounds from last year's crippling labour riots, when the all-important garment industry had suddenly exploded over wage concerns. The political violence that followed, pitting Awami League forces against Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) forces, brought life to a halt in the capital and other major cities in January and February. Industry – with the garments sector being among the most visible and hard hit – took on losses that amounted up to millions of dollars a day. Small businesses relying on daily commerce felt the pinch in the absence of customers and consumers.

In a country where about half the population lives on less than a dollar (BDT 69) a day, it is safe to assume that the common Bangladeshi cares more about being able to earn enough to survive than about who is sitting in the prime minister's office, or how she got there. As such, even though the new caretaker government was sworn in with the blessings of the army, its real mandate effectively came from an economy deprived of much-needed stability. The interim administration appears to recognise this, and has been extremely active on the economic-policymaking front – taking a wide variety of proactive and reactive measures. The most high-profile of these has been its dealing with trade facilitation and achieving price stability. The government has achieved substantial success in the former, but is yet to succeed in controlling inflation.

Reforms targeted at the country's deep-sea port at Chittagong – which handles about half of international trade – have been at the centre of the administration's proactive initiatives. Prior to 11 January, the port was notoriously rife with corruption, mismanagement and political vested-interest groups. Racketeering and extortion were widespread and went largely unopposed, with local businesses reportedly paying premiums in excess of 20 percent for freight handling.

One of the first acts of the caretaker government was to set up a taskforce to assist in port-management reforms, and its success has been extraordinary. The turnaround time of ships has dropped by more than half, even as the number of ships handled has increased. More tellingly, there are now no ships sitting at anchor, whereas previously the average wait to dock was about two weeks. The measures taken by the military-assisted taskforce included aggressive and simultaneous anti-corruption and anti-crime drives, an improved management structure, and privatisation of various port functions. An integrated approach to handling freight has more than doubled the number of containers that Chittagong can handle in a day. The healthy export sectors, including the garments industry, are undoubtedly the principal beneficiaries of these reforms.

Hoarders' mark-up

Despite the obvious benefits of these port reforms, it is still too early to evaluate their impact on the Bangladeshi economy as a whole. In contrast, the government is being judged on a daily basis over its handling of the rising inflation rate – a long-time problem that has dogged successive governments. With the consumer price index (CPI) very closely tied to the country's food stores, rising inflation is felt most painfully through the soaring prices of essential food commodities. Any inflation-mitigation policy would thus have to focus on reducing food-price increases. The question is: What policy measures could the government actually take to curb these increases?

The conventional wisdom is that the rising commodity prices are due to strategic behaviour by certain distributors – aptly referred to as 'hoarders' by the media. The essential-foods market in Dhaka is something of an oligopoly, with a relatively small number of companies buying wholesale and reselling to the retailers in the capital. These companies have been able to limit the supply to retailers, and consequently charge increasingly high mark-ups on these goods. On significant food items, price increases typically do not notably reduce demand. The Centre for Policy Dialogue, a Dhaka-based economic think tank, has found that there is a cartel of importers of essential commodities that is in complete control of food imports, and is able to mark up prices at will.

Identifying the 'hoarders' as the primary inflationary agents, the government has taken three measures to weaken their mark-up power. The first was to reduce tariffs, to make imported foodstuffs more competitive against domestic products. The second was to task various law-enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend the hoarding companies. Finally, the government intervened in the market directly, by deploying the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles to set up fair-price food-sale centres throughout the capital, to sell commodities at prices lower than could be found in the bazaars.

The economy's response to these measures has been sluggish, however. From 6.8 percent last July, the inflation rate rose to 7.4 percent in March. Both the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank have expressed concern at the ineffectiveness of the government's approach. The government may have been mistaken in focusing exclusively on hoarders. Various pundits in and out of Bangladesh have argued that the current inflation-rate increases can be ascribed to other factors, most importantly the increases in fuel prices that jack up transportation costs and reduce domestic production. In addition, the ADB has pointed its finger at an economy that has been overheated due to increased remittances, foreign revenue from increased exports, and rapid private-sector credit growth, all of which have exerted strong inflationary pressures on the economy.

Pay and feed

Despite such available insights, the government has yet to formulate a strong policy response to the galloping inflation – although the Bangladesh Bank, the country's central bank, has recently recognised the importance of a coordinated monetary-fiscal policy strategy. Less-than-expected revenue collection and lower foreign-aid receipts have also left the government with much less to spend this fiscal year. If it is to hold any hope of tightening the money supply, the current administration will need a disciplined fiscal policy, keeping its borrowing at a minimum. With the budget for the next fiscal year yet to be determined, the government's fiscal policy is going to be watched much more closely this year, both in Dhaka and internationally.

Aside from monetary policies (such as increasing exchange-rate flexibility), the only policy that the government could implement at this stage with any immediately visible effect would be to activate social safety-net programmes, to mitigate the suffering of the poorest Bangladeshis – those who will undoubtedly bear the brunt of higher food and fuel prices. In the medium term, the government can improve delivery mechanisms and facilitate commodity supply. The trade-facilitation policies that the government has in the works might have the secondary effect of addressing this latter objective. However, increasing food prices in neighbouring countries – and hence, the prices of food imports – may blunt the efficacy of any trade liberalisation.

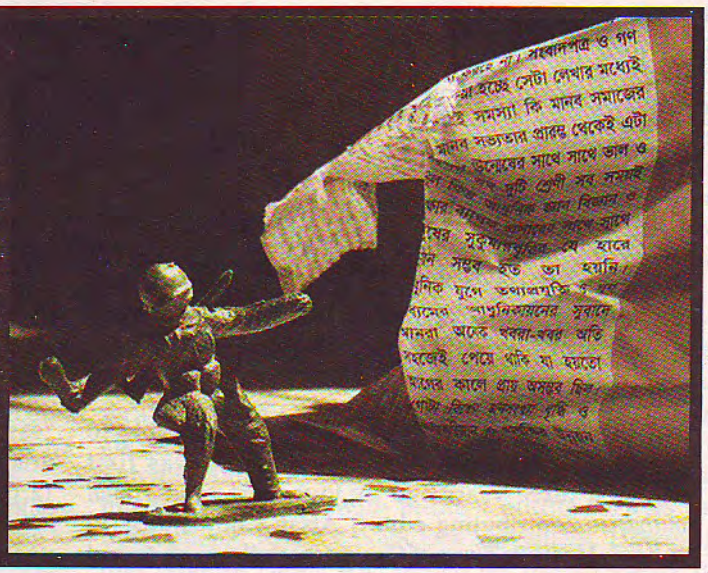
While Bangladesh's civil society – under the political and media restrictions placed on it by the government – is increasingly impatient for a return to democracy, at this point this discontent does not seem to present an immediate threat to the interim administration's viability. As such, the survival of this unelected government is largely contingent on successful economic management; and the support of a paid and fed labour force, coupled with that of a thriving business community, will be critical to the government's continued survival. The caretaker government appears to be cognisant of this reality, and has made attempts at keeping these two support bases happy. This has not been easy for the authorities, given that their anti-corruption drive has made many in the business community nervous, even while their early actions against slum-dwellers in Dhaka were perceived by many as being anti-poor.

While the positive fallout of the trade-facilitation programme will only be able to be judged in the long run – perhaps long after the present regime is gone – it is inflation that will affect the government's scorecard as far as the common Bangladeshi citizen is concerned. And as of now, the authorities have gotten barely passing grades. ▲

Testing time for Dhaka's media

Bangladeshis have been looking to the press for leadership in a time of military rule, but the journalists have allowed themselves to be bullied by populism and cowed by fear of authority.

BY **ASIF SALEH**



ISHTIAQUE ZICO

On 11 January, Bangladesh's interim government announced a state of emergency, and a censorship regime was imposed on the country's media. The following day, the editor of the English-language *The Daily Star*, Mahfuz Anam, declared: "We believe this move to be against the interest of democracy and of Bangladesh. Just as mistakes after mistakes have brought us to this stage of political crisis, the decision of gagging the press is nothing but a continuation of those mistaken decisions." A few days later, Anam wrote an angry editorial about receiving a phone call from an unknown caller giving him "press advice". He promised that his paper would never abdicate its responsibility under such pressure.

Four months later, even after Bangladeshi journalists had been detained by the authorities for their writings, the *Daily Star* editorial of 8 May was much more conciliatory. On the subject of Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, it read:

> Actually, there has been no dearth of commitment on his part to press freedom since he took over, but there are certain parts of the government which didn't seem to act in sync with his ideas. Some organs of the government have proved intrusive, making telephone calls, inviting journalists to talk and giving them advice and directives including issuing media advisory and press notes curbing press freedom.

The contrast in the language used by these two editorials speaks volumes about the Bangladeshi media's precarious position over the last four months. On the one hand, the papers had to deal with the restrictions imposed upon them; on the other hand, they tried to play an activist role for potential political change. This, coupled with the lack of standards and consistency, as well as owners' economic interests, has meant that the media's position has come to be both difficult and confusing. But what has become obvious as the months have passed is an overzealousness to protect and support the current military-backed caretaker government. Given this, Bangladesh's vanguard Bangla and English-language press has lost its credibility – something that may prove costly in the long term.

To understand the current media situation in Bangladesh, one needs to look back to a bit of its recent history. The national press saw tremendous change during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a number of new dailies stormed the marketplace, bringing with them a new emphasis on investigative reporting. As the middle class expanded and international 24-hour news channels invaded the country, the taste for 'quality' in the news also grew. With Bangla dailies having saturated the market, each of the papers sought to capture specific niches, by developing individualised brands of partisan journalism. While this got dailies such as *Janakantha*, *Inquilab*, *Ittefaq* and *Jugantor* their huge readerships, they lost influence and the ability to shape public opinion due to their partisan positions.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's rich and powerful began to invest heavily in the print media, with an eye towards increasing their influence in business negotiations. There were also a few promoters with larger visions for the industry, such as S M Ali and Mahfuz Anam of the *Daily Star*, and Naimul Islam Khan and Matiur Rahman of *Bhorer Kagoj*. Together, these individuals were responsible for the evolution of a 'modern' journalism in Bangladesh. Over the years, the *Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* (the latter created when Matiur Rahman broke away from *Bhorer Kagoj* in 1998) gained stature for objective and non-partisan positioning on issues, and steadily grew to become collectively the highest-circulating papers in the country.

As more young Bangladeshis took up journalism

as a profession, the quality of reporting continued to rise. With the demand for personnel in the electronic media, the competition for able journalists became intense. But while the size of the media sector increased exponentially over the past decade, it is safe to say that there was stagnation when it came to improving standards. What did and did not get published increasingly became something of a mystery, and such decisions lacked consistency. The freedom of the media came to be commonly regarded as an indulgence of the powerful, rather than as a right.

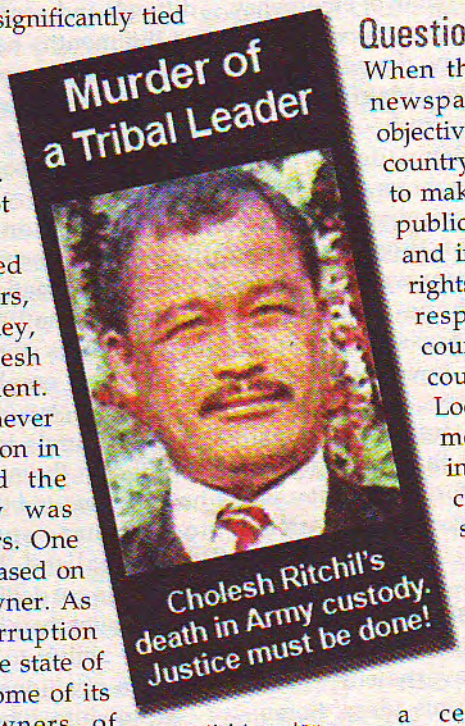
Self-censorship

That the Bangladeshi media would not be able to sustain pressure during times of crises was first predicted three years ago by journalist (and *Himal Southasian* contributing editor) Afsan Chowdhury. In his book *Media in Times of Crisis*, Chowdhury observed that powerful business houses had captured much of the print-media space, and highlighted the fact that journalism in Bangladesh had been significantly tied in with various other economic and business interests. The growth of the industry seemed not to have been matched by an increase in quality, as was the initial promise. Various systemic problems were not being addressed.

The trend Chowdhury described accelerated over the last three years, with Dhaka awash with black money, thanks to cronies of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government. Partisan journalism flourished as never before and, reflecting the polarisation in politics, the motivation behind the publishing of any news story was questioned by suspicious observers. One was having to interpret the news based on the identity of the newspaper's owner. As the interim government's anti-corruption drive followed the imposition of the state of emergency in January this year, some of its frontline targets were the owners of these media houses. One after another, the owners of *Janakantha*, *Jugantor*, *Jai Jai Din*, *Shomokal*, *Ittefaq* and NTV came under the anti-corruption dragnet.

Although editors at these organisations were left largely unharmed, the government's message had gone out loud and clear. In turn, editors imposed strict self-censorship. As such, there was very little media discussion of the government's disregard of due process, or its abuse of the judiciary to fit its needs. Instead, sensational headlines, often leaked by the government itself, took centre stage – for instance, stories of outlandish bank accounts belonging to Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina made the rounds, only to disappear after the chief of the National Board of Revenue issued a denial.

The vanguard sister publications *Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* proved a disappointment, perhaps made cautious by their by now considerable financial stakes. As the regime of Khaleda Zia and the Awami League opposition of Sheikh Hasina continued their vainglorious stand off, *Prothom Alo* decidedly echoed the public sentiment that politics-as-usual had failed, but it went one step further to look towards the cantonments for a solution to the padlocked politics. *Prothom Alo*'s usually reticent editor Matiur Rahman came live on television to implore the armed services to "save the nation" from chaos and anarchy. When a draconian emergency ordinance was promulgated on 12 January, curbing all fundamental rights, there was little protest from most of the papers. *Prothom Alo* proclaimed that because the political parties had failed, it was indeed time for the armed forces to play a much greater role.



An activist poster

Questionable inconsistencies

When the lines get blurred between a newspaper's job of disseminating objective news and its desire to act as a country's saviour, alternative views fail to make it from the editor's desk to the public. In the absence of a parliament and in the suspension of fundamental rights, the Bangladeshi media had the responsibility of emerging as the country's voices of reason and as a counter-balance to the government. Looking back over the past about five months since the take over by the interim government, it is clear that a certain level of consistency was significantly lacking, particularly in demanding due process.

Barring a few exceptions, such as the *New Age* and the *Shomokal*, the editorials in most newspapers have generally not dared to cross a certain line when discussing government appointments, key policy decisions, arbitrary rule by ordinance, and the actions of the military.

The media coverage till date has been marked by cheerleading for any step taken by the military-backed caretaker government, without critical analysis. The regime's botched plan for the undemocratic exile of Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina was not met by criticism from the media; indeed, the dailies generally cheered the move. When Begum Zia's son, Arafat Rahman, was taken into detention and released only after his mother reportedly agreed to leave the country, the sheer barbarity of abusing a mother's anguish for political purpose was not challenged by the leading papers,

which greeted the matter with deafening silence.

By the end of February, Dhaka-based journalists began receiving regular phone calls with threatening 'press advice' for articles that were even remotely critical of the regime. The situation was far worse outside of Dhaka, where local journalists were being called "for tea" to military precincts. When a correspondent of the *Daily Star*, E A M Asaduzzaman Tipu, was arrested for offending the district commissioner in Nilphamari, editor Mahfuz Anam reacted with a surprisingly mild editorial. Although the paper deigned to publish strong opinion pieces from time to time, if only to maintain its position as the most high-profile newspaper in the country, it has come under an increasingly critical spotlight, often for news it was not publishing rather than for what it was.

The headlines of *Daily Star's* sister paper *Prothom Alo* have been even more tendentious, often seeming to be specifically timed to help the government's position. Rather conveniently, when the regime was attempting to exile the two begums, stories of infighting within the two parties, and lower-ranking leaders questioning the BNP and AL leaders, were given wide coverage. *Prothom Alo* and other newspapers took to publishing news from unnamed sources from inside the government, with no corroboration or follow up. Part of this timidity stemmed from the fact the interim government was enjoying huge popularity among the public, and no editor wanted to be the odd man out.

By responsibly critiquing the authorities, these news organisations would have been able to help the government help the people. While valiant young journalists spoke out against the suppression during an event to mark World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, newspaper coverage was devoted instead to the photo-op event set up by the US ambassador for the occasion. Previous charges of corruption against a sitting election commissioner, retired Brigadier Shakhawat Hossain, were published in only two newspapers. Similarly, news about the alleged torture and murder of indigenous leader Cholesh Richil, at an army camp in mid-March, received hardly any coverage in the national media, barring a few op-ed pieces. When Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, arguably the country's most popular columnist, wrote about Richil's demise in *Prothom Alo*, the column was blocked by his editor for nearly a month.

The citizens' journal

Ever since the interim government's popularity started its dive in April, the regime has been becoming increasingly touchy about criticism, and has clamped down harder on dissent. Doing so has been significantly complicated, however, due to relatively widespread urban access to the Internet, which has made available international media sources and, importantly, Bangladeshi websites and blogs. Indeed, the Bangladeshi blog has come of age as a citizens' journal in the current environment. Even after the censorship of *Himal Southasian*'s May issue (which was allowed to be distributed only after two Bangladesh-related stories were physically removed from the magazine), the magazine's website continues to be accessible within Bangladesh. It seems the authorities recognise the power of new media, as *Daily Star* journalist Tasneem Khalil was dramatically arrested shortly after midnight on 11 May for writings he had posted on his blog.

Khalil, a human-rights consultant and an outspoken critic of military rule, had highlighted the case surrounding Cholesh Richil online; and had also written for the *Daily Star*'s monthly magazine, *Forum*, about the link between Khaleda Zia's elder son, Tareque Rahman, and his appointees at the national intelligence service with militant outfits such as the International Khatme Nabuwat Movement. However, that issue of *Forum* was pulled off the stands by its editor, and was only reprinted without the article. Following Khalil's arrest, an appeal from his wife went out to his e-mail contacts, and Bangladeshi bloggers sprang into action – printing the censored article, contacting international human-rights organisations and politicians, and generally spreading the word of the detention. Even after mainstream news websites in Bangladesh had blacked out reports of Khalil's arrest, his status was constantly updated on his blog. Within 24 hours, a worldwide campaign to free Khalil had sprung into action.

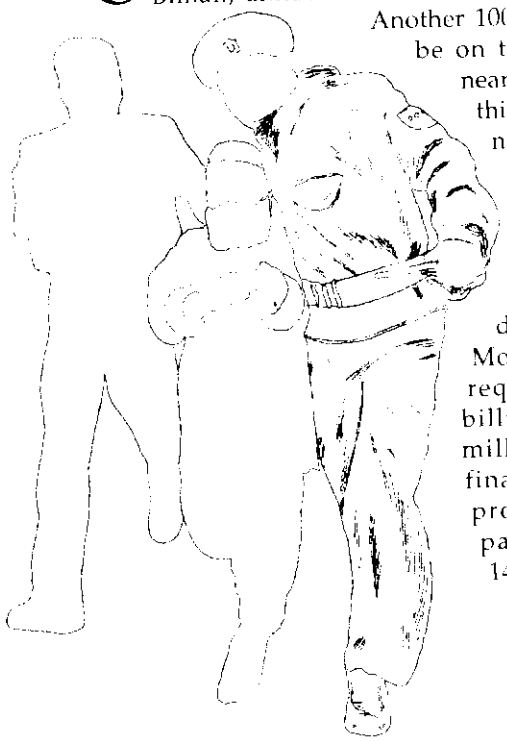
Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam did subsequently go to the army camp where Khalil was being held, and it is partially due to his influence that Khalil was released after 23 hours. Nonetheless, Anam's considerable credibility was damaged by the meek press statement that he put out during the episode, in which he noted that he had been informed that Khalil's arrest had been due not to his work for the *Daily Star*, but to what he had posted on his website. Anam went on to baldly state that it was "because of the caretaker government's policy for the freedom of the media" that a release had been agreed upon.

By April, four months after his courageous commentary on press freedoms at the time of the military takeover, Anam seemed to have come full circle with his tepid statement on Khalil's release. This episode encapsulates the situation of the Bangladeshi media under military rule, in which the partisan press is cowed by strong-arm tactics, while the commercially powerful media seek to deprive the public (the very public that made them powerful) of its right to be informed. This has been coupled with a lack of daring to challenge the populist tide that carried the consuming classes in the initial months of the military regime. It would be prudent for the long-term health of the media, and of Bangladesh itself, if editors were to be steadfastly vocal about their freedom to print and publish as they see fit.

Secretly selling Biman

BY **JOSEPH**

On 9 May, Bangladesh's state-owned airline, Biman, announced the slashing of 1400 jobs. Another 1000 positions may be on the block in the near future. All in all, this means a cut of nearly half of the flag-carrier's current roster. According to the company's managing director M A Momen, Biman has requested BDT 3 billion (USD 43 million) from the finance ministry to provide severance packages for the 1400 employees.



The BBC carried the news item. But only one Bangladeshi newspaper gave it coverage, and then only on its webpage. Herein lies the problem.

Following 11 January, the interim government took bold and unprecedented measures to ensure transparency and accountability in public institutions, reconstituting the Anti-Corruption Commission, appointing non-partisan individuals to the Election Commission, and separating the judiciary from the executive branch. The increase in censorship, however, makes clear that the interim officials have underestimated, if not downright disregarded, the crucial role of the media in the success of these very agendas. The caretaker government has reacted to criticism with too heavy a hand – particularly in April, during its attempts to exile the two former prime ministers. There now exists dangerous self-censorship on many issues, as can be seen in the lack of coverage of the Biman retrenchment. The national airline, after all, had never before been a taboo subject for the Bangladeshi press.

To silencing the press is to stop a third party from verifying official claims. This may result in misallocation of public resources and abuse of state power and, subsequently, misinformation about both. The vicious cycle thus entered inevitably leads to runaway civil unrest.

Do Bangladeshi taxpayers realise that USD 43 million is being spent retrenching 1400 workers? This works out to around USD 31,000 per worker, a massive sum in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, jute-factory workers from state-owned mills in Khulna remain unpaid, and are unlikely to get anything in terms of severance. At Biman, not only are senior workers who have worked with the airline for more than 25 years being let go – so too are the leaders of at least nine workers' organisations.

All this secrecy does not augur well for the government's plans for Biman: following the layoffs, the company is to be floated on the Dhaka and Chittagong stock exchanges. However, it is unclear if these shares will even be made publicly available.

These drawings are part of a series by **Naeem Mohaiemen**, taken from three periods of recent history: the return of Guantanamo detainee Mubarak Husain (circa 2006 BNP government); opposition rallies protesting controversial election plans (circa Iajuddin caretaker government, winter of 2006); and the sweeping anti-corruption drive that arrested many corrupt godfathers, including Khaleda Zia's son (circa Fakhruddin caretaker government, spring 2007). The first two drawings were created as part of a contribution to the anthology *Art & Democracy*, from Goldsmith College/Peer Press, London. The final drawing was part of *Aprior* magazine's "Proposal for Documenta 12 in 2007".

Caretakers, trust the public

BY **RUBANA**

Yesterday: Gone

One fine morning in Dhaka, I discovered that I could reach Gulshan D I T circle II from my home in less than 10 minutes, because an illegally constructed building had been suddenly demolished, and a new road had been surfaced overnight. We witnessed changes in the elite's shortcut menus, which included: preparing wealth statements, attempting to negotiate with the current establishment for an escape route for tax evasion, and tampering with financial statements.

We concluded that the cleansing drive to which the caretaker government remained committed was ruthless yet essential. The begums have royally raped the country with their long dynastic trail, and we were all promising *sadka* (special prayers and offerings) for their exile. We wanted them to disappear like the Shah of Iran or Imelda, and then to be made irrelevant in complete disgrace. Cartoons were being sketched, aggressive reports were being written, and we were truly happy. We realised that the era of the conspiring step-sisterhood was over. (Where were the men though, for all these years?)

Today: Going

The royalty syndrome suffered a blow with the lock-up of the crown prince.

We rejoice.

Reports suggest that the authorities have managed

to recover a substantial sum of money that he had siphoned out of this land.

We applaud.

Every news bulletin displays more arrests without proper papers.

We pause.

A young man, the son of an ex-bureaucrat, writes from the University of Mass, USA, about his father being picked up without warrant.

We grow a little cautious.

The BBC airs footage from a young entrepreneur pleading for his business to be saved from the striking lot who were threatening to close the port.

We ache.

There are plans to privatise on a massive scale.

We think.

Many transit routes are being opened in the name of connectivity.

We think again.

We spot an absentee landlord behind the face of the chief advisor.

We question.

We look outside our windows and spot a man in semi-khaki attire. We think he is here to exercise his khaki rights, to steer us away from our homes, because we have indulged in free speech. Curbs on media are announced.

We shudder.

Tomorrow: Gone?

The port functions with maximum efficiency.

The cleansing operation continues.

The Election Commission charts out a roadmap that seems painstakingly detailed and credible. It promises no less than TRANSPARENCY, in all caps.

The cabinet is blessed with good communication skills, backed by the superb English of the advisers.

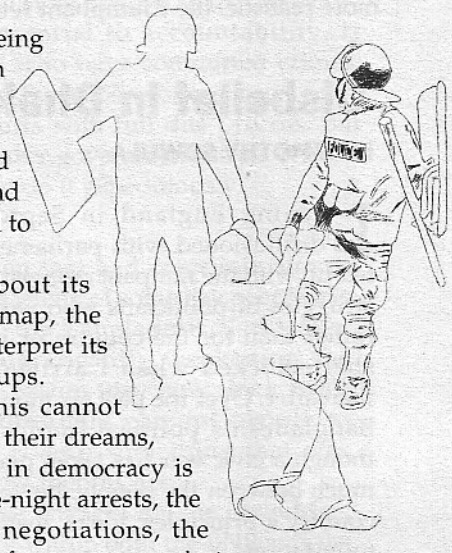
Yet, many of us remain disheartened by the administration's oscillations on its execution of the 'minus-two-begums' formula.

Many question the administration's indifference to human rights and democracy, clearly reflected in the reports of torture and 'accidental' deaths.

The day after: Rescue ...

A Machiavellian emergency is indeed a pathetic cure for a delta doomed to decay through political rivalry and corruption.

What we need is a clean dialogue with our caretaker.



If its hands are being aided by the men in khaki, we need to know.

If it is being blessed by forces from beyond our borders, we need to hear that.

If it is unclear about its agenda and its roadmap, the civil society must interpret its handicaps and hiccups.

What Bangladeshis cannot afford is a wilting of their dreams, for the only treason in democracy is faking hope. The late-night arrests, the behind-the-curtain negotiations, the major decisions on infrastructure projects without the nod of an informed public – all this must cease now, please.

An aspiring democracy can accommodate failure, inefficiency and slow learning. But it is, by definition, intolerant of lies and corruption.

If the caretaker handles its inadequacies with complete transparency, we will all learn to reconcile with our own weaknesses, and crawl to the finish line with patience.

Trust us, caretakers. We do not mind pebbles on our rough ride to freedom. But we certainly cannot afford a newly laid coal-tar pitch road that covers our dreams, and allows others to ruthlessly tread on our landscape.

The exile misadventure

BY **SHAMERAN ABED**

The plans of the military-backed interim government to send Bangladesh's two top political leaders into exile abroad have stunningly backfired. Where the intention of the government was to isolate Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, the now-aborted plans have instead firmly re-established the two leaders at the helms of the parties they lead.

Even so, there appear to be two very different points of view regarding the government's attempts to expel the two begums in the first place. One group, which possibly constitutes the majority, agrees that internal reforms and a democratisation of the parties will only be possible in the absence of the two ladies. This group views the dictatorial leadership styles of both begums as the major stumbling block to constructive dialogue within the parties, which is necessary for their overall democratisation. These people are thus disappointed that the exile attempts have failed, and blame the interim government for botching an opportunity to change the nature of Bangladeshi politics.

The other group, which seems to be gaining adherents, believes that the government has been devious and disingenuous in trying to exile the leaders. This lot feels that the government appreciates that the leadership of Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina is what keeps together their parties' many factions.

The government's attempts to remove the two have pushed the parties to fracture, perhaps even to disintegrate, and this is seen as something that will pave the way for the interim administration (and its military backers) to float a political party of its own in time for the next general elections, promised for late 2008.

If the second group's view is accepted as being the more realistic, the triumphant return of Sheikh Hasina in late April was a political event of enormous significance – not because it relegated to the back-burner the interim administration's plans to force through necessary reforms within the existing political parties, but because it has thrown the current government's own political ambitions into disarray. This means that the powers that be will now have to be even more devious and innovative in their attempts to reorder both politics and polity.

Disbelief in Dhaka

BY **TIMOTHY SOWULA**

Leaving England in September 2006, I was disillusioned with parliamentary politics. I was fed up with the rampant cronyism and pathetic power struggles of politicians who worked for themselves, rather than for the country or its people. But I was shell-shocked when I arrived in Dhaka shortly thereafter. Over the past six months, I have witnessed Bangladesh's political implosion. It has been as though a civic war has taken place – a conflict not so much between the people, however, but between the country's principles, ideas, institutions and political foundations.

I could not believe that the two begums had consolidated so much power over their parties, the state and its many agencies. I could not believe that a debate was actually continuing over Justice Mainur Reza Chowdhury's eligibility for a constitutional post, even though he had recently died. And I could not believe that, with just 14 days to go before the elections scheduled for late January, the Electoral Commission still did not know the total number of eligible voters, or that it did not have a final list of polling stations, or competing candidates and parties.

The military may have intervened to halt this chaos, but as the constitutionally acceptable limit of 120 days of state of emergency passed on 11 May, Bangladesh remained on shaky ground. Having survived the army's attempts to exile them, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina – who had earlier been reviled for the endemic corruption that had taken hold during their long leaderships – have now bounced back to popularity. And Muhammad Yunus, who briefly offered a light of wisdom and integrity in the political darkness, has now faded away.

Bangladesh is plagued by contradictions that the nonchalant British do not have, and the justifiable pride Bangladeshis have in their history seems, in fact, to be their Achilles heel. It is the exploitation of historical events that has led to the begums' firm hold on the direction of Bangladeshi society. An intensely patriotic country has for too long been run by a group of people that has rarely failed to put the people's needs second. It is this conflict of past-versus-future that now mires Bangladesh, and that must be resolved through reforms if 150 million people are ever to have real hope of seizing their destiny.

C = M + D – A

BY **MASHUQUR RAHMAN**

When Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency on 11 January after two months of political turmoil, he assured Bangladeshis that a newly constituted caretaker government would "hold a free, fair, neutral and acceptable election to Parliament within the shortest possible time, in consultation with all parties concerned". In spite of the state of emergency, Bangladesh breathed a collective sigh of relief.

That relief has now dissipated, and in its place is mounting concern. The caretaker government's mandate to hold 'free and fair' elections has now mutated into an all-encompassing anti-corruption drive. The business of holding elections has taken a back seat to the business of rounding up politicians on corruption charges. A ban on political activities, the suppression of fundamental rights, and intimidation of the press have contributed to creating a state of dire uncertainty.

While the reduction of corruption, rampant in Bangladesh, is a laudable and important goal, it is far from clear that an anti-corruption drive by an unaccountable government can indeed be successful. On the contrary, all the conditions exist today for the

further corruption of the political system in Bangladesh. The World Bank often uses the following formula for parsing corruption: C = M + D – A, where corruption (C) equals monopoly power (M) combined with discretion by public officials (D) minus accountability (A). According to this formula, the current caretaker government's monopoly over all instruments of state power; its powers of arbitrary arrest without warrant, and its detention of citizens without due-process rights; and the limitations it has placed on the press as the citizens' watchdog, all conspire to undermine the government's stated goal of reducing corruption.

The crucial element of fighting corruption – accountability – is conspicuously missing from the current framework. Though the leaders of the caretaker government may have good intentions, the government itself, operating under a state of emergency, is institutionally stacked against them.

It is time for Iajuddin Ahmed's caretaker government to return to its original and constitutionally supportable mandate of holding free and fair elections. To do that, a dialogue must start with the country's political parties, to begin work on electoral reform; shackles on the press must be undone so that free flow of information, so essential to accountability, is guaranteed; and those who have committed crimes, including stealing from the public coffers, need to be brought before the courts with full due process. But time is not on the caretaker government's side. It has a job to do – and needs to do it expeditiously.

Doing away with dynasties

BY **MRIDUL CHOWDHURY**

Ever since the current caretaker government took over in January, Bangladeshi politics has been going through a rare and unique period of political dynamism. The determined act of the caretaker government and the military to send to jail some of the most powerful and corrupt political elites has ruptured the seemingly unbreakable web of corruption and extortion that had crept into almost every sphere of life. The jailing of some key people has virtually destabilised the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), while significantly weakening the Awami League. These parties may now think twice about appointing thoroughly corrupt people to important leadership roles – something that was unimaginable even a few months ago.

There have been other changes too. By early May, there was a growing cry within both the BNP and the Awami League for a change in the dynastic leadership that has gone unquestioned in the parties over the

past decades. And the government's recent drive to prohibit party politics on university campuses could prove to be a monumental step towards the eradication of the practice of student wings providing militant and sometimes armed support to party leaderships.

There is no doubt that these changes, if sustained, hold the potential to take Bangladeshi politics in a new direction. But the question of the sustainability of the reforms remains, especially given some of the more controversial and less daring decisions recently taken by the caretaker government. The cumulative effect of these has been a questioning of whether the seemingly positive changes facilitated by the caretaker government are really about re-establishing democracy, or whether the priority to ensure an uncontested transfer of power to illegitimate authorities.

Politics as hard work

BY **LUBNA MARIUM**

Here in Bangladesh we are hoping against hope that history is wrong, and that all those quotes about 'force and guns' being the 'end of morality' will be proven false in our beautiful little delta of a land. That, like a phoenix, our armed forces will rise above their history of supporting dictatorship and become our saviours. But, as Demosthenes said: "There is one safeguard known generally to the wise, which is an advantage and security to all, but especially to democracies as against despots. What is it? Distrust."

I am just a dancer, and dance is what I judge best. On 29 April, International Dance Day, I was invited to a little town around 200 km from Dhaka. I was pleasantly surprised at the high standard of performances I saw there. But there were two young solo performers who did not seem to fit in. After the show, upon inquiry, I was informed that their fathers were in the armed forces, and that the school had been asked to 'accommodate' them.

I do not want to be judgmental. I do not want to distrust. I also do not believe in miracles.

But what are my other options? I do not want to vote for the two ladies. I was of course wary of Muhammad Yunus's desire to float a party on the condition that the people sweep him to power. However, I was disappointed when he chickened out, and withdrew his political ambitions. We need people like him in politics, but only if they are willing to do years of legwork, going door to door, going to the people.

Our problem in Bangladesh is that we do not have a people's politics. We have a spanking new 'civil society', with all the right morals and values; but it is mostly driven by donor funds, and unwilling to sully its feet in the muddy waters of the delta. Where are our radical and progressive politicians? I sometimes wonder if the murder of 30,000 grassroots left-party workers in the early 1970s left us bereft of anyone who seeks to speak for the people. It had taken nearly a hundred years to build this solid base of grassroots intellectuals, and they were all eliminated – we suffer the results even today. Politics is hard work.

I have decided that, as soon as the ban on 'indoor' politics is removed, I will personally go to Dr Yunus, and beg him to form a party. Not with the objective of coming to power, but with the objective to build, slowly and steadily, a platform from which people can be heard.

The Vaan Puligal takes off

By demonstrating their air capability, the Tamil Tigers have succeeded in changing the dynamics in Sri Lanka's conflict – momentarily, it seems.

BY **D B S JEYARAJ**

In recent months, Sri Lanka's 'undeclared' conflict has undergone a dimensional transformation, literally and metaphorically. Starting with the 25 March attack on the Katunayake Air Force base, in the next 35 days the LTTE deployed its fledgling air wing, the Tamil Eelam Air Force (TAF), on three 'successful' missions. Although the amount of damage inflicted by the TAF is debateable, the awesome shock of this turn of events has clearly rocked the island.

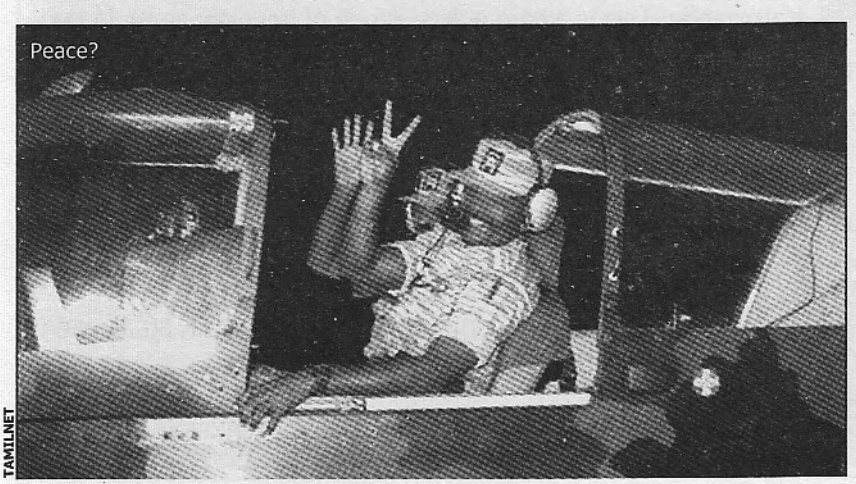
The first LTTE air attack was actually on 11 August 2006, when two planes dropped bombs over the Palaly air base in the Jaffna peninsula. That mission was considered a flop, however, as all of the bombs were off-target. The mission was part of an ambitious bid by the LTTE to simultaneously paralyse Trincomalee and invade the peninsula. As with the air attack, that plan backfired and was aborted.

The second air attack came on 25 March this year, when two planes flew over Katunayake, which also hosts Sri Lanka's only international airport. Three bombs were dropped on the base, specifically targeting the engineering and maintenance hangars. Five of these bombs exploded, killing three Air Force personnel and injuring 17 others.

On the evening of 24 April, the TAF again flew into action. This time, two planes headed north, dropping four bombs on Palaly, Vasavilan and Kadduvan, and two more on Myliddy. The LTTE later claimed that these planes had bombed ammunition dumps, fuel depots, food-storage complexes and aircraft-maintenance facilities. This was strongly denied by the Colombo government, which alleged that the rebel planes had fled when an air-defence system was activated. While the government admitted that six soldiers were killed and around 30 more injured in the attacks, officials claimed this was due to a fleeing plane dropping a bomb on a bunker.

Even as the country sat glued to its television sets on the night of 28-29 April to watch its national team in the World Cup Cricket finals, military planes flew over Vanni in central Sri Lanka, and dropped eight bombs in Viswamadhu. The bombardment ended at one in the morning. Fifty minutes later, two TAF planes dropped bombs on the Kolonnawa oil-storage complex, and thereafter bombed the liquid-petroleum-gas facility in Kerawalapitiya, both in the west.

While the destruction caused by this attack was minimal, its effect on Sri Lankans in general was widespread. As cricket fans sat engrossed in the game, the power was suddenly switched off, in order to activate Colombo's air-defence system. Power was restored at 3:00 am, but a false alarm about Tamil Tiger planes coming over the sea led to another blackout 15 minutes later. As such, the whole country was jolted awake, fully aware of the danger from above. Parachute-lights were sent up, and panic-stricken troops fired indiscriminately into the air. Several security personnel and civilians were injured in the fallout.


Peace?

TAMILNET

Hawks down

The Tiger air attacks have had a significant impact on the Sri Lankan economy. Starting the second week of May, the government suspended night-time air traffic at Sri Lanka's sole international airport, affecting the government's ambition to make Colombo a hub of Southasian air traffic. Tourism, already in the doldrums, was further affected, and a gas shortage also resulted. With the prospect of increased defence spending in the near future, inflation and general costs of living are both bound to further increase.

As crucially, the TAF bombings also caused a change of attitude throughout the country. Until very recently, the overwhelming Tamil mood has been one of despondency, as government aircraft bombed and shelled the northeastern areas. Meanwhile, the voices of the Sinhala doves have gone silent, while the hawks in Colombo have been upbeat, with the expectation that the LTTE was about to be vanquished. With the TAF air attacks, these moods were reversed.

Even as Colombo attempts to paint the TAF attacks as 'failures' because of the purported minimal damage they caused, the government continues to miss the fact that the

impact of the air assaults goes well beyond the physical damage done. Indeed, the attacks have been potent with political symbolisms. They have shown that, regardless of recent successes by the Sri Lankan military, the LTTE as a military entity cannot be written off. More importantly, the LTTE leadership has sent a message to Colombo, to Sri Lankan Tamils and to the world at large that it will continue fighting.

According to military analysts, the Sri Lankan Air Force's fleet is indeed significant, comprising a host of modern aircraft, fighter jets and attack helicopters. Reports in pro-LTTE Tamil media, on the other hand, have placed the LTTE air strength at somewhere between 18 and 26 aircraft, most of them small and light. While these partisan reports may not be reliable, intelligence and defence analysts have also drawn attention to some of the aircraft allegedly possessed by the LTTE, all of which are reported to be relatively lightweight models. The plane used in the recent air strikes is widely believed to be a Cessna Skymaster, which flies at an average speed of 150 mph, and can carry a payload of around 1040 kg. There is much speculation about the type of aircraft being used in the recent air strikes, however, and concrete information is unavailable.

Shankar's force

While the idea of the *Vaan Puligal* ('Air Tigers' in Tamil) has been a long-cherished dream of Tiger chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, the man who actually laid the groundwork for the air wing was Vaithilingam Sornalingam (aka Colonel Shankar), a close confidante of the supremo. Some media reports wrongly state that Shankar studied aeronautical engineering in Montreal and worked for Air Canada. In fact, the man had never been to Canada, and studied aeronautical engineering at Guindy, in Madras, but did not complete his studies. He later trained as a pilot in London.

Shankar's initial efforts resulted in the LTTE obtaining two ultra-light planes from an Australian company in 1998. On 27 November of that year, these aircraft were put on display at the annual Heroes Day (also called Martyrs Day) observances, at Puthukudiyiruppu in Mullaithivu District, during which the airplanes were also used to shower flower petals on cemeteries. Little was heard of the air wing for years thereafter, though occasional news reports referred to unidentified aircraft being sighted over northeastern skies. In September 2001, Shankar was killed in a landmine explosion. Five months later, in February 2002, the Ceasefire Agreement came into force. According to knowledgeable Tamil sources, Prabhakaran galvanised the air wing into action after Shankar's death as a form of tribute to his comrade.

The ceasefire has provided a significant opportunity for the LTTE to tap the Tamil diaspora in developing the air wing, which received contributions in the form of funds, equipment and even planes. Several trained pilots and aircraft engineers made their services available, and some foreign experts were also hired. After keeping the programme under wraps for several years, following the

Katunayake assault the Tigers released pictures of airplanes and masked cadres, said to be TAF personnel. The decision to finally do so appears to have been taken because the Tigers had been suffering significant defeats at the hands of the Sri Lankan armed forces, and they needed a diversionary tactic. Furthermore, the rebels had to boost morale among their cadres and supporters, particularly in the diaspora.

The aerial attacks, particularly the ones of 29 April, have succeeded in making people in the south, especially those in Colombo and the suburbs, aware of the reality of the undeclared war. Although the TAF has so far not targeted Sinhala civilians, and no civilian has suffered directly, there is a palpable sense of confusion and fear that is contributing to a loss of morale among the people and the security forces. In addition, the ham-handed response by Colombo's ill-prepared security forces to the attacks has magnified the threat to massive proportions. Government-inspired media reports talk of grandiose plans to install radar and anti-aircraft guns, but in practical terms these measures are of little utility. It is a moot point as to how many places could be 'protected' in this way. What Colombo fails to comprehend is that the LTTE now has the capability of zeroing in on any target – military or otherwise – on land or at sea.

Against such a backdrop, the government's strategy cannot be defensive alone. The logical option is to go on the offensive, focusing on destroying the TAF aircraft after first locating the aerodrome. As such, Colombo needs to conduct a ground-based drive into LTTE territory in search for the planes. In practical terms, however, this is a near-impossible task, chiefly because the Colombo government lacks reliable intelligence about the Vaan Puligal. For the same reason, it cannot use the other option of bombing the planes on the ground from the air. If the planes are, for instance, in underground hangars, as is being surmised, powerful 'bunker-buster' bombs would need to be dropped with exact precision.

There is an ironic complexity in the current situation. Colombo downplays the LTTE air threat to the Sinhala people, claiming to be on top of the situation. At the same time, the government exaggerates the threat internationally, particularly in presentations aimed at India. Despite their success in turning the tables by going aerial, however, the dice are loaded against the LTTE. How long the Tigers can sustain the air wing successfully is a moot point. The international community has not reacted positively to the Tigers possessing such effective air capability. With the events of 11 September 2001 having changed the international perception towards airplanes in general, a rebel group with its own air force will likely not be tolerated.

Repatriation or resettlement
Resolving the Lhotshampa dilemma

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIMALI DIXIT

The stagnating Lhotshampa refugee issue has suddenly seen movement in the form of the American government's promise to resettle more than half of the refugees. But what does this mean for the goal of repatriation to Bhutan? And is Thimphu being given an easy exit after the cruelty it has shown to the Lhotshampa? After initial bewilderment, most refugees seem to be opting for resettlement, hoping to keep the fight for repatriation alive in the diaspora.

BY **HIMALI DIXIT**

It is eight o'clock on a tepid mid-April morning in Khundunabari, one of the seven refugee camps in the southeastern Nepal districts of Jhapa and Morang that are home to an estimated 106,000 Bhutani refugees. A few hundred people are gathered in the open grounds near the camp's settlement of thatched-roof huts (*see photo*). The atmosphere is festive. A handful of large tents have been set up in the commons. Soon, the people here will begin to form long lines, waiting to enter these tents to identify themselves and be counted as refugees. Despite their presence in the camps for a full decade and a half, these people have never been granted that crucial identity marker.

This is the second day of the refugee census exercise in Khundunabari camp. The undertaking is being jointly overseen by Nepal's Home Ministry and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Khundunabari was the last camp to be surveyed. Among other things, the completion of the census will allow UNHCR, at long last, to issue each refugee an identity card declaring his or her status.

The census is not all that has not taken place in these camps over the past 17 years. During that time, refugee families living here have seen no progress in their efforts to return to their homeland. They have suffered from the instability of the Nepali state, and have seen the Bhutani government run circles around team after negotiating team from Kathmandu. For 17 years, these refugees have lived on aid-agency rations in crowded camps in the hot Nepali plains; one,

sometimes two families per hut; their children educated for free until high school but unable to work legally thereafter. For 17 years, frustration has been mounting.

October 2006 saw the first real movement in response to the refugee crisis – along humanitarian if not political lines. At a UNHCR conference in Geneva, US Assistant Secretary of State for Refugee Affairs Ellen Sauerbrey announced that her government was willing to resettle up to 60,000 Bhutani refugees. Since then, the other member countries of the Core Group on Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal – Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Norway – have expressed willingness to take in some refugees, and Nepal's new foreign minister announced in late May that she had commitments for a total of 85,000. In April, a US State Department team visiting Nepal announced that 60,000 – a number that the US hopes to resettle over the coming five to six years – should not be considered a ceiling on the number of Bhutani refugees the country would be willing to accept.

17 long years

Between 1990 and 1992, 75,000 Bhutani citizens, most of them Lhotshampa (Nepali-speakers from south Bhutan), were forced out of the country. Bhutan's minorities had suffered state-led persecution in the form of Bhutan's 'One Nation, One People' policy of Ngalung cultural hegemony and exclusion under the country's 1985 Citizenship Act. This policy, implemented under the command of King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, prompted Lhotshampa resistance before culminating in 1991 in wide-scale evictions, confiscation of citizenship cards, closure of schools in southern Bhutan, dismissal of Lhotshampa government employees, and the razing of homes.

As close to a thousand refugees a month began to enter Assam and West Bengal, seeking to set up camps in border towns, Indian authorities, seemingly unwilling to permit anything that would cause King Jigme discomfort, herded them into trucks and drove them to the Nepali border town of Kakarbhitta. In Nepal, in February 1992, the influx of refugees to the original camp on the floodplains of the Mai River reached 10,000 per month. Reprieve came in the form of UNHCR, which began assistance to the refugees at the request of the Kathmandu government. The refugee population was eventually moved to camps built in Beldangi, Khundunabari, Timai, Goldhap and Sanischare in Jhapa and Morang districts. According to Human Rights Watch, in addition to the 106,000 or so refugees currently in the camps, there are up to 15,000 more in Nepal who are not registered with the Nepal government, as well as up to 30,000 unregistered refugees in India.

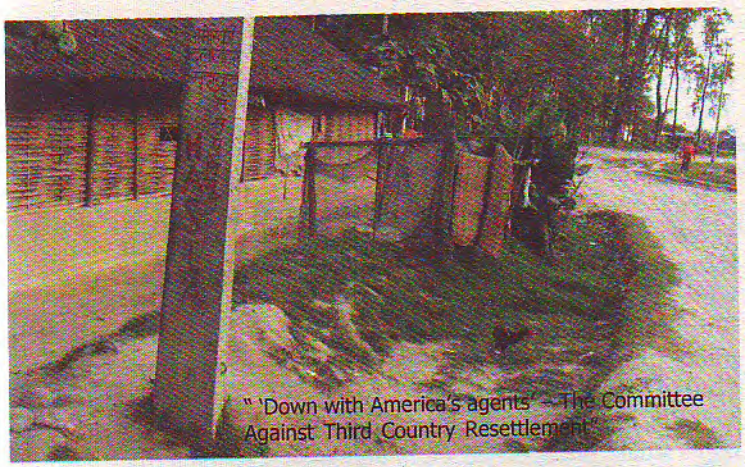
Since 1993, Kathmandu and Thimphu have engaged in 15 rounds of ministerial-level talks (a 16th round, slated for late last year, never took place). While negotiations have been unsuccessful in addressing the concerns of the refugee population, even these have been halted since 2003, when a team from Thimphu confronted an angry crowd in Khundunabari camp. This incident seems to have provided an excuse for not returning. The Bhutani side has been continuously successful in stonewalling and duping Nepali delegations. One Nepali team was even convinced to agree to a nonsensical categorisation scheme, in which refugees would be classified according to whether they were 'genuine' Bhutani citizens forcefully evicted; Bhutanis who had left Bhutan voluntarily (which, under Bhutani law, results in loss of citizenship); non-Bhutani; or Bhutani criminals.

India, the only obvious lever of diplomatic pressure on its small, introverted neighbour, has been doggedly unwilling to interfere. While some cite New Delhi's need for quid pro quo from Thimphu with regards to insurgent groups in Assam that seek to use Bhutan's borderlands as safe havens, others point to its economic interests in Bhutani hydropower, or to an unwillingness to rock the boat in what is regarded as a sensitive Himalayan frontier. Whatever the reason, the Indian position has been unequivocal, and New Delhi continues to insist that the refugee issue is a bilateral one of concern only to Nepal and Bhutan. Indian authorities also continue to arrest Bhutani refugees trying to return to their country. What has been lacking in this position is a level of humanitarian sympathy for the second-largest group of refugees in the Subcontinent, barring the Afghans in Pakistan.

Until recently, the refugee leadership had not expressed a desire for any 'durable solution' except repatriation to Bhutan. Beginning in the early 2000s, however, some began to speak of the need to "open all options" to the refugees – ie, to give the population in the camps a choice between the three 'durable solutions' of repatriation to Bhutan, local integration in Nepal, or resettlement to a third country.

Since the Core Group's creation in 2006, talks sought with Thimphu by representatives of those countries convinced many diplomats that Bhutan was not inclined to accept back any section of the refugee population in the near future. In Kathmandu, senior Community Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) leader K P Oli had come to a similar conclusion. After a new government made him foreign minister in the spring of 2006, Oli sought to bring 16 years of fruitless negotiations with Bhutan to a definitive conclusion.

It was with the backing of the Core Group countries that the Kathmandu government finally opened up to the idea of third-country resettlement, abandoning its 'repatriation only' stand. There is now a general agreement among all working on Lhotshampa refugee affairs that the refugees cannot be held hostage to the uncertain outcome of bilateral talks. Bhutan, meanwhile, has welcomed the offers of resettlement to a population it continues to deny is its own. Following the visit to Thimphu of the US ambassador to India



"'Down with America's agents' – The Committee Against Third Country Resettlement"

this April, Bhutani Prime Minister Khandu Wangchuk told the press, "I expressed [to Ambassador David Mulford] our deep appreciation of their decision to resettle the people."

Who wants to go?

Despite being energised by the fact that some movement is finally taking place with regards to the refugee issue – indeed, the month of May saw a sudden flurry of activity in Kathmandu, including the arrival of UNHCR chief António Guterres – the refugees are divided on how to approach the resettlement offers. While a majority would want to accept the promised evacuation to a Western country, some maintain that all they want is to return home. Some of the ambivalence among refugees with regards to resettlement is due to an apprehension with regard to the unknown among the elderly. But there also seems to be a fair degree of political intimidation going on, which keeps many refugees from being open about their choice of resettlement. Indeed, a small segment opposes resettlement not only for itself, but also for others. A lack of information on the modalities and extent of resettlement has caused a fair amount of confusion, and this has been stoked by those vehemently opposed to the option. UNHCR was only just beginning its first official information campaign on resettlement as *Himal* went to press.

Karna Bahadur Saukar, an elderly man of Beldangi I, says that he is not prepared to resettle in the West. "We don't know the soil of that place. We don't know the water, the air. We want to go back to Bhutan. If we can't do that, we would rather stay here in Nepal." Phurba Tamang, in his early 20s, says, "We are not Nepali. We are Bhutanese." According to this view, it is either Bhutan or nothing: resettlement is out of the question.

Others worry how they will be treated in the countries offering resettlement. Teenager Buddhiman Rang Rai says he has heard that many Vietnamese refugees resettled to the United States have not received the all-important 'green card'. Some suspect that Western countries want them only as cheap labour, while others feel that only the most capable should resettle, and then send money back to their families in the camps. D B Khawaas, a Beldangi resident in his late 20s, worries that he would not be able to care for his old parents and young children if everyone were to move. Clearly, information is lacking on the human-security aspects that would have to be guaranteed in any resettlement exercise. Arjun Pradhan, a journalist with the camp-published *Bhutan Jagaran* newspaper, says that some refugees are worried that Western countries may house them in conditions worse than they know here – perhaps even in other refugee camps.

Back in Bhutan

As one group of southern Bhutanis contemplate whether or not to move out of the refugee camps in Nepal, by all accounts those who remain in Bhutan continue to suffer constant discrimination and threats to their status as citizens. The plight of Bhutan's minorities indicates that much needs to change in the country before a safe and dignified return is possible for the exiled Lhotshampa. But perhaps more importantly, ongoing discrimination within Bhutan demands that whatever leverage possible be used in order to ensure the safety of an increasingly insecure population within the country. The international community must be on high alert: it must work to make Bhutan recognise its obligations towards its minorities, and it must be quick to recognise a second eviction if and as it begins to occur.

Following the mass evictions of the early 1990s, the Thimphu government required Bhutani citizens to obtain No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from the police, to confirm that they are not involved in any 'anti-national activity'. NOCs are required for admission in schools, employment in the civil service, the right to sell cash crops, the right to buy and sell land, to obtain business licenses, and for the issuance of passports. According to a report released by Human Rights Watch in mid-May, "Being denied an NOC deprives a person of almost all means of earning a living." Accusations of being 'anti-nationals' fall easily on the Lhotshampa, in particular those with even distant relatives in the refugee camps in Nepal. NOCs are accordingly difficult to obtain.

Bhutan's Nepali-speakers continue to be discriminated against under the 1985 Citizenship Act. That discrimination has recently become more acute, as many Lhotshampa who had previously held citizenship cards have been denied new ones following the 2005 census, which classified 13 percent of those who reside in Bhutan as non-nationals – a total of 80,000 people. It is

All of the major donors to the camps are also members of the Core Group on Bhutanese Refugees, with the exception of Japan. These are also the countries that are currently offering to resettle the refugees, indicating a strong correlation between resettlement and 'donor fatigue'.

Muna Giri, a young woman from Beldangi II who organises a women's discussion group in a children's library in the camp, laughs as she recounts some of the rumours that are circulating among the camp population: "They say that in America, if you get very sick they give you an injection and put you to sleep for good." Krishna Maya Basnet, a feisty 79-year-old, chimes in: "They say that we'll be made into fish feed. Well, let us be fish feed rather than stay here, where we don't have firewood to feed ourselves!" In late May, it was heard that fake emails were circulating in the camps in which some of the refugees already resettled in the US and Canada (an initial 'test group' of 18 refugees were resettled last autumn) were said to be complaining of conditions in the resettlement countries and opposing resettlement.

Manoj Kumar Rai, the young and energetic camp secretary of Khundunabari camp, says that those currently opting not to resettle generally fall into three categories: the elderly; those who have already taken Nepali citizenship and so are out of the running; and young "school dropouts", whom anti-resettlement die-hards have convinced that they do not have the skills required to survive abroad.

Humanitarian v political

Some of the most prominent refugee leaders say they do not consider third-country resettlement to be a solution to what they see as the most pressing issue facing the refugee community. Thinley Penjore, head of the Druk National Congress, a party functioning in exile, says that the refugee situation is "first and foremost a political problem. Our expulsion is not and must not be painted as merely an ethnic, cultural or racial problem. And our troubles today cannot be seen as a humanitarian problem alone." As such, the solution to the refugee problem is political change in Bhutan – and that is a fight that must be fought within Bhutan itself. Penjore is positive about the current democratisation process in Bhutan and feels that, though it is taking place on the terms of the Druk monarchy, it is bound to open up space for greater political activity.

While Penjore says he believes that refugees who want to resettle to third countries should do so, he worries that resettlement, as a humanitarian solution, does not address the political problem. He and others fear that resettlement could sap energy from activism for repatriation, and also reduce the numbers fighting for democratisation should the door back to Bhutan be opened.

Frustrated with the prioritisation of the humanitarian cause, Tek Nath Rizal, chairman of the Bhutanese Movement Steering Committee and long the public face of the Bhutani movement for repatriation, retorts: "Don't tell me about human rights. Is not the commonly believed that this figure includes many Lhotshampa. In mid-May, it was reported on a refugee-run news portal that 70,000 Lhotshampa were denied their adult franchise in the 'mock elections' that took place in Bhutan this past April as a part of the new King Jigme Khesar's inherited democratisation project.

"All the root causes of the mass eviction of the early 1990s remain," says a former Nepal foreign-ministry official. Bill Frelick, director of the Refugee Policy Program at Human Rights Watch, concurs: "Things have not changed. Furthermore, there are disturbing parallels between the census of 1988 and the census of 2005." At the same time, refugee leader Ratan Gazmere cautions that any future eviction will undoubtedly be so cleverly conducted that the world may not even notice. Indeed, Human Rights Watch's recent report quotes one Lhotshampa living in Bhutan as saying, "They don't ask me to leave, but they make me so miserable, I will be forced to leave. I have no identification, so I cannot do anything, go anywhere, get any job."

UNHCR-Nepal head Abraham Abraham says he believes a second eviction to be unlikely, given that "Bhutan is receiving messages from all directions that this must not take place." His boss, UNHCR High Commissioner António Guterres, said in Kathmandu in late May, "I have deep conviction, and am sincerely hopeful, that such a tragedy will not occur."

Discrimination and denationalisation should not need to amount to expulsion, however, for the international community to be on the alert. Pressure must be maintained on Bhutan – by recalcitrant India in particular – to amend its citizenship laws, abolish the NOCs, and discontinue all discrimination against Nepali-speakers. In order to make sure that the suffering of the refugees has not been entirely in vain, it is imperative that Thimphu be made to realise that it must respect the political, social, economic and cultural rights of all of its people.

protection of your property a human right? Is not return to the land of your birth, the country of which you are a citizen, a human right?" Though Rizal, like others, had rejected resettlement in the wake of the offers last autumn, he too no longer publicly opposes it.

For many of those living in the camps, however, the most critical issue is indeed the humanitarian rather than the political. Rupa Monger, a mother of three from Khundunabari, says that life in the camps has been getting more and more difficult. Referring to the so-called bio-briquettes provided by UNHCR since last year, she says: "They cut our kerosene rations and have given us coal instead. To start a fire you need more firewood than coal, but we are not allowed to collect firewood. The funds for higher education have been cut. We were being told to stand on our own feet, but we are not allowed to work. We were worried sick. Now, with the resettlement offers, we have hope."

That hope has not come cheaply, however. While Rupa had long hoped to return to her country, she now says, "Bhutan won; I have lost to Bhutan." Similarly, Pingala Dhital says she feels as though her life has been "put on hold", and that she can no longer live in hope of a political settlement. "I must think about my child, who doesn't know Bhutan, and who mustn't remain stateless," she says.

UNHCR representative in Nepal Abraham Abraham feels strongly that the refugees should be given the option of ending their camp stay as soon as possible. "Repatriation will happen when the time and the situation are conducive to it," he says. "Until that time, refugees need not be subjected to the harsh conditions in the camps. This is a freedom they have – a choice, an option." Abraham also warns that resettlement must be taken up while it is still being held out. "Resettlement is not something that is on offer for everyone forever. It is not an easy thing to get countries to agree to. And if the resettlement option does not remain, what other viable option do we have?"

The seeming impossibility of repatriation to Bhutan is what is getting many refugees to fall on the side of resettlement. Ever since the conclusion of the first survey of the infamous Nepal-Bhutan Joint Verification Team – which divided the refugee population into the four categories of Thimphu's creation – in Khundunabari camp in 2003, the Thimphu regime's attitude has consistently been one of evasion or prevarication on matters of repatriation. Only 2.6 percent of the total 12,000 surveyed in Khundunabari were identified as "genuine Bhutanese", and even these were offered return to Bhutan under denigrating and exploitative conditions. Even so, no repatriation has taken place to date.

Long-time refugee leader Ratan Gazmere says that though most refugees would like to return to Bhutan, next to nobody would opt to do so under current circumstances. "The situation does not exist in Bhutan for a safe and dignified return," he says. "We must work towards the creation of such a situation, and this is where the international community must help us."

Donor fatigue

If many Bhutani refugees seem to be in favour of third-country resettlement today, that change in mindset only came about recently. Father Varkey Perekkatt, head of both the Jesuit Refugee Services in Nepal and the INGO Caritas's Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme, says: "Until two years ago, I'd say 80 percent of the population would have opted to wait for repatriation." Now, he says, many of those people will opt to leave. A major reason for the shift, explains Perekkatt, is the fact that there has been no progress on the repatriation front since 22 December 2003, when the Khundunabari findings of the Nepal-Bhutan Joint Verification Team were announced and the Bhutani delegates departed, never to return.

In the intervening three years, a number of significant developments have taken place. Most important has been a shift in UNHCR policy, brought about by the organisation's increasing lack of resources. "Given this," Perekkatt says, "there has been much depression, disappointment and hopelessness over the past few years." Against this backdrop, suddenly and unexpectedly came the resettlement offer from the US.

Graeme Lade, the Australian ambassador to Nepal and current chair of the Core Group in Kathmandu, cites two reasons why the resettlement offers were made at this time. "First, the offers have been made on humanitarian grounds," he explains. "These refugees have spent a long period of time living in a camp situation, and this gives rise to various concerns. The second reason is basic donor fatigue." UNHCR representative Abraham corroborates this: "Between 15 and 18 million dollars is spent on the camps annually. It's just not sustainable."

Indeed, over the past few years the refugees have seen cuts in the provision of, among other things, cooking fuel, food and medical services. In December 2006, the World Food Programme (WFP), which provides most of the food rations for the camps, warned that it had not yet received any contributions towards the next two years of its Bhutani-refugee operations. Though aid activities in the camps have been under increasing financial stress over the past decade and a half, the lack of funding has been increasingly palpable over the last few years. All of the major donors to the

What has been lacking in this position is a level of humanitarian sympathy for the second-largest group of refugees in the Subcontinent.

camps are also members of the Core Group on Bhutanese Refugees, with the exception of Japan. These are also the countries that are currently offering to resettle the refugees, indicating a strong correlation between resettlement and 'donor fatigue'.

Camp breakdown

If the refugee population has been made desperate by cuts and uncertainty in support, an increase in threats and intimidation has made life in the camps that much worse. This makes camp residents all the more willing to relocate, at which point they are once again targeted by radicalised youth who claim to oppose resettlement. Laxmi Adhikari, mother of Hari Om Adhikari, was surrounded and attacked near her home in Khundunabari on 10 November last year by a gang of young camp residents accusing her of wanting to "go to America". Similarly, Hari Adhikari 'Bangaley', camp secretary at Beldangi II and head of the new NGO Bhutanese Refugee Durable Solutions Coordination Committee, no longer lives in the camps after an attack made on him in August 2006. He now commutes to work from the town of Damak. "We have no technical support here to maintain security," he says. "Sometimes, the police don't arrive to help us. What should be small incidents quickly become big incidents."

Adhikari says that intimidation has been on the rise since 2005. "These young people have seen the trajectory of Nepal's Maoists, and how nothing seemed to stop them after they took up the gun." Indeed, at various times during the ten-year conflict between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the Nepali state, Maoist cadre treated the refugee camps in Jhapa and Morang as safe havens, forcing camp residents to feed and house them, and making use of camp medical facilities. Before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the CPN (Maoist) and the Seven Party Alliance in Kathmandu last autumn, groups of camp youth had also been taken by the Maoists for indoctrination and arms training. The Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist), founded in early 2003, is believed to have grown out of this socialisation.

Sexual and gender-based violence has been a particular problem in these crowded and mostly unguarded settlements. UNHCR itself woke up to the issue when, in 2002, 18 cases of sexual abuse were discovered to have been perpetrated by people paid by the aid agency and its partner organisations.

Tension has also been increasing between the camp populations and the surrounding communities. The most commonly cited example of this souring is the fight that broke out between refugees and locals in Morang District on 22 February this year. The refugees, reportedly frustrated by using the UNHCR-supplied bio-briquettes, had gone to the community forest near Sanischare camp in search of firewood. The ensuing fight resulted in the death of Gopal Khadka, a refugee from Sanischare.

Outside JVT House in Damak, Jhapa: A sign from another age

"The conditions in the camps are worsening, and militancy is so much on the rise that it would be a crime to ask anyone to remain there even a year longer," says Hari Adhikari 'Bangaley'. Meanwhile, Ratan Gazmere, who is chief coordinator of the Association of Human Rights Activists (AHURA), Bhutan, worries that an increase in violence in the camps may affect chances of resettlement, as the refugees gain an image as a violent bunch, something they have thus far avoided. The increase in "violence and militancy" has been gradual, says Abraham Abraham, and is not showing any signs of abating. "The longer the refugees stay in the camps," he notes, "the more frustration will build – the greater the social ills, the greater the animosity. As numbers start leaving, hopefully the social problems will decline."

Many also hope that, with the start of mass information campaigns, intimidation that has found fuel in the confusion surrounding resettlement will decrease. At the end of May, UNHCR began distributing a pamphlet in the camps that seeks to answer questions refugees may have about the choice they face. It explains, among other things, that UNHCR will chose countries to which to refer individual refugees interested in resettlement on the basis of its assessment of their needs; that families will be resettled together; that resettlement avails refugees of permanent residency of the host country and eventually, if the refugees choose, its citizenship; and that refugees will be given assistance until assimilated in the country of resettlement. The US will also soon step up its own information campaign (a fact sheet on resettlement has already been distributed in the camps). Washington, DC will soon set up an Overseas Processing Entity, which will begin processing cases referred to it by UNHCR in September. On a recent visit to Kathmandu, Janice Belz, a high-level official

'Our expulsion is not and must not be painted as merely an ethnic, cultural or racial problem. And our troubles today cannot be seen as a humanitarian problem alone.'

with the US State Department's refugee office, said that the first group of refugees opting for resettlement should be able to leave for the US by the beginning of 2008.

A global movement

At this point, 'opening all options' for the Bhutani refugees – the rhetoric used by refugee leaders and foreign diplomats alike – ultimately boils down to little more than the opening of the option of resettlement. After 17 years, any pressure that has been applied to Thimphu has come to nought. Even as the international community prepares the groundwork to wipe its hands clean of the Bhutani refugee issue, there is the lingering sense that 'justice' has not been delivered to this group of people.

With Bhutan less than a hundred miles from the camps, across Indian territory, some refugee leaders are saddened by the prospect of refugees leaving a place from which Bhutan is physically so close. "From where we are now, we can sneak into Bhutan if need be, and speak to people there," says Thinley Penjore. "From afar, we will only be able to contact those people with access to online media. Not many people have this access, and many have been kept uneducated."

Others point out that, in a few year's time, there will no longer be a 100,000-strong population in the camps, functioning as a prod to the international conscience. At that time, whatever conviction there has been among the international community to resolve the refugee issue will disappear. As such, an injustice carried out by the Thimphu regime on a massive scale will have been excused.

But there are others who say that resettlement will in fact energise a refugee movement that has long stagnated. "We can do nothing sitting here in the camps," complains camp secretary Manoj Rai. "We must give our movement a global scale." A younger generation of refugees, he says, understands the power of information technology and the ways in which it is possible for an educated population across the globe to coordinate and mobilise effectively. Concurs one former Nepal foreign-ministry official: "Why do they not want to leave the camps? Because Jhapa is close to Bhutan? But they have been unable to reach Bhutan in 16 years. Maybe they will find Thimphu closer from elsewhere."

Whether or not the Bhutani refugees can hope to galvanise as much support, the Tibetan movement stands as an example of the kind of solidarity that can be found in the West for the cause of an unjustly displaced people. "The world doesn't know about the Bhutanese refugees. Outreach to the populace of a powerful democratic country could be very useful," says Kimberly Robertson, who looks after durable solutions for UNHCR's Nepal operation. Hari Adhikari 'Bangaley' says that experience has shown that a return to Bhutan cannot be achieved through reliance on the Nepal government alone. "If we have our people in Geneva, New York, London, we can lobby there," he says. "Mechanisms unused until now can be utilised."

If the refugees have been disadvantaged due to their geographical placement, they have been even more so for lack of funds. "Let them go. Let them be educated, earn and live well, and let them spend on their movement," says the former Nepal foreign-ministry official, "Right now, refugees who seek to be heard often can't scrape together enough money for a trip to Kathmandu." Manoj Rai echoes these sentiments. "Our main problem in our efforts to pressure Thimphu is financial," he says. "If our people resettle, they will be able to work. For ten years, they may struggle themselves. But after that, they will fund a movement in Bhutan."

Will the Bhutani identity remain strong enough among the refugees to maintain a movement after a second displacement? D N S Dhakal, general-secretary of the Bhutan National Democratic Party, insists that the refugees will not disappear into a wider Nepali-speaking diaspora. Not only is the Bhutani identity distinct, he says, but, as has been seen with other groups, "Feelings for nationality become stronger when people become economically strong."

The Bhutani refugees have held out hope for long enough that the international community – and, most importantly, India – would pressure Bhutan to allow their peaceful repatriation. With resettlement, perhaps they will be able to finally take the fate of their movement into their own hands. Perhaps it will end not only their dependency on international aid, but also their reliance on others for a movement for change back home.

There are refugees who will remain in the camps, choosing not to leave until they can do so for their own country. The success of a Bhutani movement overseas notwithstanding, the desires of this group of refugees must not be forgotten. It seems, however, that a large number will indeed opt to leave the camps in Jhapa and Morang for overseas resettlement. They will leave looking forward to opportunities and freedoms they have lived without for a decade and a half – seeking employment, and hoping for better futures for their children. The actions of this new diaspora, created out of a humanitarian response in the face of a grave injustice, will be worth watching in the decades to come.

Monsoon memories

K R RANJITH

BY **SOMNATH MUKHERJI**

Is it just this year, or have all the transitions from spring into summer been like this? In recent weeks, the gathering dark clouds on the horizon, the whiffs of cool air and distant rumblings have provided me sudden seclusion from my immediate surroundings. They have also transported me to a world that is both familiar and distant. It is odd what a little moisture in the air can do for one's grip on the present.

Indeed, monsoon is a state of mind. Even casually thinking of monsoon brings back a flood of memories, sights, sounds, smells and feelings – as though a Himalayan river has burst its banks. Till 10th grade I lived in Arunachal Pradesh, one of India's most sparsely populated states. I do not have a seasonally sequential memory of the monsoons there, mostly due to the fact that seasons in Arunachal did not matter. Memories of life there are like a painted story: bright smears of games, friends, a pet dog named Marshall, fishing, school, belonging to a community, lush forests, mountains with patches of *jhum* agriculture, affection and security.

The monsoon would turn the river behind our house turbid, overflowing its banks. We would bet on which direction the fickle course would change after the water subsided. Cloudbursts during the monsoon would bring down red slush from the mountainside, making roads impassable. Migrant labourers would clear these slides, two people to a shovel – one digging into the debris and casting it away with the help of the other, who would synchronously pull at a rope tied to the shovel's neck. The puller was usually a woman, who would be paid less than the digger. They cleaned mud and rocks in the rain, wearing torn plastic shoes held together by pieces of ropes. You could tell from their unsure footholds that they did not belong on the mountain slopes of Arunachal. Being far from their homes in the plains of Bihar and Orissa, they made way for us. I felt their distance from home.

Finishing 10th grade made me an educational migrant to Calcutta. I came to that dense populace with my father shortly before the onset of the monsoon in Bengal. The city's uniform, limitless sky was a shock to my eyes, so used to a view broken up by peaks and valleys. As my father and I walked around looking for possible high schools, the monsoon descended on Calcutta.

This was a very different sort of monsoon – one indelibly mixed with humanity. This monsoon was up in the skies as much as it was overflowing the streets. Again and again, my father and I were forced to take shelter under the low-hanging canopy of teashops, where we would stand squeezed in close to the city's humanity, all of us carefully avoiding the trickle from the swollen tarpaulin. I would watch the droplets generate on the tarpaulin's crest, then be released like clockwork to the flooded ground. I felt relaxed and invigorated standing there. But the impatience of the urban folks was palpable, as was the listlessness of the lungi-clad rickshaw-wallahs, ready to wait out the storm for as long as it took. The odour of people was everywhere – in the trains, buses, teashops, in the lines to get the high-school admission forms. Monsoon brings back the smell of humanity.

Kalbaishakhis

White cranes flying in huge V's against black monsoon clouds over swaying parrot-green paddy, the whole view sliced by the four bars on the window of a local train – that was the closest I came to mixing monsoon with rural Bengal. Of course, there were also the groups of boys playing football on slushy fields, with balls indistinguishable in colour from the field's mush, darting towards goalposts made of leaning bamboo poles.

Monsoon reminds me of the first showers of 1984 in Calcutta, mixed with my first phase of personal urbanisation. It reminds me of my father's refutation of the common

wisdom of taking a rickshaw during a shower: one should not pay for getting wet, he'd say, as he headed out resolutely on foot. Monsoon reminds me of reading my mother's neat handwriting on blue inland letters – with the exception of a few disintegrated words, where the monsoon drops had landed. For years afterwards, I would sit on the veranda with Amma, my grandmother, and deliberate over the possibility of a faraway rain. *Didn't the wind feel moist? Wasn't it carrying the unmistakable smell of the first drops on parched soil? Well then, it shouldn't be long before we get our share!* More often than not, we were wrong – it was wishful thinking rather than meteorological certitude, but it made us happy. Monsoon reminds me of Amma.

I also remember the *kalbaishakhis*, the storms that announce the arrival of the monsoon. Kalbaishakhis meant running to latch the wooden window panes, which were too swollen to fit their frames. The fettered windows would stutter violently, like a decapitated hen being held to the ground. Monsoon also meant my cousin and I keeping a vigilant eye over our *himsagars*, a very sweet variety of mango, lest anyone felt emboldened enough to steal one. Monsoon reminds me of thinking about my sister and mother back in Arunachal, while staring through the iron bars on the window of my hostel room in Narendrapur. Monsoon reminds me of my boyhood's uneasy transition into adolescence.

It was monsoon time when I finally joined the Bengal Engineering College. With my parents, I arrived with a new mattress, a pillow, a bright-blue mosquito net and two bed-sheets inside a bedroll – and a load of trepidation. Monsoon reminds me of that trepidation, of the overgrown grass and creepers on the Victorian buildings of B E College, and of the Ganga that flowed directly behind the campus. I need not have worried. Soon enough, my classmates and I would come back to our hostels for lunch, loudly vocalising our longing for the rain to come down hard, wishing for the second half of classes to be washed away. Our unified incantations of *"Aaye, aaye!"* ("Please come!" in Bengali) from the hostels' verandas would have little effect, however, and the rain would predictably taper off even before the lunch break ended. This led to our strong faith in the existence of the 'Varun-Seal pact' – A K Seal being our principal, and Varun, the rain god. Monsoon reminds me of how the strings of so many lives were braided together amidst the greenery of the B E College campus.

Distant clouds

After studying electrical engineering for four years, I started my first job in Calcutta, overseeing an air-conditioning project. Feeling the void of friends after leaving college, wearing starched clothes to work, the newfound necessity of aftershave lotion, staring at the almost vanished *No Standing Allowed* signs in a sardine-packed S7 bus – all of these memories are moistened by monsoon humidity.

The other day, as I was walking on the bike path near my present home, I saw that dark clouds had begun to gather in the sky – pregnant with moisture and ready to break. I saw children playing soccer (here in the United States, 'football' refers to a whole different sport entirely) on the synthetic green of the local high-school field. Black-and-white hexagonal sections of the numerous balls stood out vividly, along with the small orange cones illumined by the high-powered lights that had been switched on due to the premature darkness caused by the clouds. Teams could be distinguished by their distinct uniforms, coordinated down to their socks. The humid air was a prelude to the impending rain, and the wind exposed the whitish underbellies of the leaves. It was raining in America, but hardly a monsoon.

My heart suddenly wished for a palm tree – bent like a bow, with its wind-blown leaves looking like a woman's hair caught in an updraft. I thought of a slushy football field with a single worn-out, earth-coloured ball, and teams distinguished by either bare or shirted backs. I thought of the four bars of a train window; of the five segments into which they would cut the paddy, the sky, the clouds; of the light from a distant hut shifting between those segments, in rhythm with the swaying of the train. It was monsoon season again, in my mind. ▲

Southasian mea culpa

Self-criticism came more readily to our forebears.

BY **JAWED NAQVI**

Introspection and self-absorbed bigotry have traditionally walked hand-in-hand in Southasia. Megalomaniac rulers, the leech-like priestly classes and their bete noire, the serenely divine dervishes representing the hoi polloi, have coexisted for centuries. Jawaharlal Nehru himself quoted Alberuni, the 10th-century Afghan chronicler, to support this lacerating critique of the Subcontinent.

For India's sciences, languages and its architectural splendour, Alberuni had unalloyed praise. About its people, though, he said: "They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-contained and stolid. They believe there is no country like theirs, no nation like theirs, no science like theirs, no religion like theirs." How did Nehru respond to such criticism, centuries later? In the *Discovery of India*, he describes Alberuni's views as "probably a correct enough description of the temper of the people".

Alberuni was relentless in his scrutiny of India's cultural demeanour, which he thought was not too dissimilar at times to any frog in the well. "According to their belief", Alberuni wrote,

there is no race on earth like theirs, and no created being besides them have any knowledge or science like theirs whatsoever. Their haughtiness is such that if you tell them of any science or scholar in Khorasan or Persia, they will think you to be either an ignoramus or a liar. If, however, they had travelled and mixed with other nations, they would soon change their mind, for their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation is.

It took a large-hearted intellectual of Nehru's stature to understand and accept this devastating commentary on historical India and its ruling elites.

A 'foreigner' such as Alberuni should not, of course, be readily accepted as a stand-alone source of such a harsh evaluation of a people. Let us therefore turn to the home-grown Bhakti movement, in medieval India. Straddling the entire diversity of the Subcontinent, where it spread to the remotest of corners, the movement threw up an amazingly critical worldview. And among its foremost objectives was a square challenge of what the dervish-like Bhakti preachers considered to be an incorrigible moral decay.

If we were to call a Hindu a 'rogue' in India today, we would risk starting a communal flare-up. Similarly, neither would it be politically wise to call a Muslim a 'pervert'. But 500 years ago, the saint-poet Kabir was delivering these rebukes to both communities in equal measure, through popular poetry. "The Hindu doesn't let you touch his pots and pans over claims of possible contamination, but you would often find him prostate at the prostitute's feet," he declared. "Muslims marry their cousins, eat dead animals and scream atop their fragile mosques as though God were deaf."

Far from being harassed or hounded by his powerful pre-Mughal quarries, Kabir set off a bizarre competition between Hindus and Muslims – both of whom he berated roundly – as each clamoured to claim his legacy. The seer would be lucky today not to be lynched by those he dared to address so acidly five centuries ago. Kabir lived not far from the sacred ghats of the Ganga in Benaras, where religious zealots recently hounded out the film crew of a movie about Hindu widows. That movie, *Water*, had later to be shot in Sri Lanka, and was subsequently widely lauded.

India allergy

Religious and nationalist fervour share a common characteristic: their

followers believe that theirs is the best. There is great irony in this regard contained in a moving poem by Allama Iqbal, one which India later chose to accord the status of a national song. In the 1930s, Iqbal wrote: "*Saare jahaan se achha Hindustan hamara*" (Our Hindustan is better than any other nation in the world). Now, if you were to take a fleeting poetic thought such as this to heart, hitch it to a newfound nuclear prowess, and you happen to be surrounded by countries who fear your overbearing narcissism, you would spell trouble for both yourself and those neighbours you seek to befriend.

This is more or less how SAARC – the brainchild of Gen Ziaur Rahman – was born in 1985. "To tell you frankly, we were all a little allergic to India, so we decided to engage it collectively," explained General Hossain Mohammed Ershad, who hosted the first summit in Dhaka. (Ershad made these remarks in a televised discussion with this writer in 1997.) India's army had helped to liberate Bangladesh from a sectarian, Punjabi-dominated West Pakistan. And yet, Dhaka chose to turn against its former 'benefactors' in New Delhi. Was there something wrong with India's body language towards Bangladesh following the brief honeymoon period in 1971-72, that such tension should arise between India and Bangladesh that today you can cut with a knife? It seems so, but the problem has never been publicly or truthfully discussed. Is Bangladesh an ungrateful neighbour? Perhaps both sides could use a little self-criticism?

But let us not pick on any one country. Instead, let us discuss all the SAARC member states, and their chemistry with each other. There are admittedly ethnic tensions between Bhutan and Nepal related to the refugee matter. There may also be some small issues pertaining to a trade corridor between Nepal and Bangladesh. But that is about it. There is no foul chemistry between these countries, much less any suspicion of an imminent military assault. So why is it that India has been viewed with such disfavour by its neighbours?

Take India's helping hand to Sri Lanka. In the 1970s, it had militarily bailed out Sirimavo Bandaranaike's Sinhalese-dominated government in the face of a Marxist revolt. It also gave moral and political support – including alleged military training – to Sri Lanka's Tamil minorities. And yet, Rajiv Gandhi was butted by a miffed Sinhalese soldier at an official guard of honour in Colombo, before being killed by a Sri Lankan Tamil woman near Madras some years later. It was all extremely tragic, but how do we explain this bristling rage from the very people one had tried to help?

Or, take India's ties with landlocked Nepal. The one lasting memory among the people there – despite India being the artery, a veritable lifeline to Kathmandu – is the image of the crippling economic blockade that New Delhi imposed on its northern neighbour in 1989. Some Nepali analysts acknowledge the culpability of the royal palace in forcing India's hand, but the lasting rancour in Kathmandu is palpably anti-Indian. Why? Was there introspection, much less any self-criticism, by either India or Nepal over this easily avoidable standoff? If there was, we have not heard of it.

A country such as Bhutan, supposed to be umbilically linked with India's political and diplomatic postures, finds itself occasionally strained by the bear hug. The tiny Maldives, whose government the Indian Navy saved from a certain coup in 1988, does not exactly seem to reciprocate the enthusiasm with which India seeks its welfare. About India-Pakistan ties, the less said the better. Each side bears such enormous and deep-rooted grudges against the other that we should count ourselves truly lucky that the nuclear-armed neighbours are currently at least talking.

Far from making an objective and critical self-evaluation of their poor bilateral relations, the rhetoric from India and Pakistan has been marked by double standards. For example, Pakistan has often slammed Indian-sponsored elections in Jammu & Kashmir as 'fake', but has not considered making room for a credible civilian democracy in its own wider patch. Another example is worth recalling. India held up the last Kathmandu SAARC Summit because it disapproved of a military coup against Nawaz Sharif by General Pervez Musharraf. But India seemed to have forgotten that the first host of the SAARC summit, Gen Ershad, was himself a military dictator with blood on his hands. And who was the Pakistani leader at that summit shaking hands with Rajiv Gandhi? General Zia ul-Haq, of course, the guru of all coup leaders!

Meaningless jingoisms

It was Imtiaz Alam, the Pakistani founder and secretary-general of the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA, a promising platform for Southasian media until it began carting dubious politicians around for powwows at fancy holiday resorts), who once hit the nail directly on the head. A few days after India and Pakistan exploded their bombs in May 1998, Alam visited Delhi for a discussion with the Indian media on the road ahead. His observations at the end of the conference were withering: "We are here ready to concede that Pakistan has done horrible things in Jammu & Kashmir. We have fomented terrorism there. But we want the Indians also to say 'mea culpa'. But all we hear from them is, 'Yes, you are right, Pakistan has done a lot of harm to us!'"

Clearly, the media in Southasia has, for the most part, followed rather than challenged the accusatory stance of its jingoistic political leaderships. We refer derisively to American and British journalists in Iraq as the 'embedded media', but do we ever look at our own culpability in this regard? Continually and truthfully doing so could, little by little, work to bring about a revolutionary change – perhaps with regards to what Alberuni and Kabir found missing in our spirits.

Marking time in Kashmir's beautiful prison

The 'Pakistani line' is finding favour in Kashmir, with the demand for demilitarisation and self governance blurring the divide in the Kashmiri polity between pro-India and anti-India camps

BY **RIYAZ MASROOR**

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY RIYAZ MASROOR

A glossy hoarding board that advertises for Airtel, India's fastest-growing telecom company, currently sits atop Srinagar's Central Telegraph Office, in the busy commercial hub of Lal Chowk. To a great extent, it symbolises the paradox of change in Jammu & Kashmir. On 31 July 1988, Kashmiri militants bombed the Central Telegraph Office (CTO), heralding the start of armed resistance against the Indian military presence in J & K. Nearly everyone still traces the insurgency's start to what is popularly known as the *targhar*, or telegraph, office blast. Today, despite a nearly four-year-old bonhomie between India and Pakistan, the CTO complex remains heavily guarded, its security precautions engulfing most of the road area.

The central *targhar* today houses the government telecommunications company, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL). In 2003, state police officers resorted to force to quell a frenzied crowd of mobile-phone-seekers near the CTO, after New Delhi belatedly allowed cellular service to start up in the state. Then-Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed termed the launch the "beginning of peaceful days". Today, BSNL subscribers can be seen queuing up at the CTO building to pay their phone bills, and the combined revenue of BSNL and Airtel in J & K has grown from INR 600 million in 2003 to around INR 2 billion. Nonetheless, a vast spread of sandbags and barbed-wire coils remains around the CTO, and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) officers continue to point their automatic rifles at passers-by.

Such security measures can be seen dotting the length and breadth of the Kashmir Valley, as well as parts of Jammu, including Doda, Rajouri and Poonch. The latest attempt by the Indian Home Ministry to set up review panels to figure out how to trim the security presence in the area has not yielded results. Indeed, little has changed since a European Union delegation in 2004 memorably noted that "Kashmir is a beautiful prison." Around 600,000 troops currently guard this prison. In addition there is the state's own 65,000-strong police force and 25,000 of what are known as 'special police officers', who are generally taken from the ranks of former militants. There are also an estimated 3000-5000 pro-government, army-protected gunmen, officially known as 'friendly militants', as well as around 5000 gunmen engaged in various government-sponsored village defence committees.

Lieutenant General A S Sekhon commands the Indian Army's 15 Corps, the largest counter-insurgency force in Kashmir. On 29 March of this year, Lt Gen Sekhon, although publicly pessimistic about Islamabad's commitment to dismantle the militant infrastructure it supports, stated in Srinagar that infiltration from across the 740-km by 35-km Line of Control had effectively reached zero. But such statements have been made time and again over the years, and today checkposts as massively guarded as the Lal Chowk CTO are found throughout and deeply impact daily life throughout India-administered Kashmir (heretofore referred to as 'Kashmir', unless otherwise required). For instance, local legislators recently estimated that close to 80,000 students in the Kashmir Valley have to pass through heavy security barricades every day on their ways to and from school.

Exhumation catalyst

A few paces down from the Central Telegraph Office, a swanky, multi-storey mall is being built, exuding a perfect 'metro' look. Besides a business hotel, it will house branches of two international banks and will generally cater to fruit merchants and the Kashmiri executives of Indian pharmaceutical companies. Following the step-up of armed resistance in Kashmir back in the early 1990s, all the nationalised banks closed shop here, leaving the market wide open for the local J & K Bank, which has gone on to become one of India's leading banks. While the arrival of the new

international entries is being billed as a sign of returning normalcy, government statistics report that investment proposals worth INR 20 billion are currently gathering dust. In the meantime, despite being offered fat sops – incentives and a decade-long tax holiday – to set up shop in the Valley, major manufacturing companies have moved to the neighbouring yet relatively peaceful Jammu, Kashmir's summer capital.

Along Srinagar's fashionable Residency Road, one can find several other recently constructed high-rise structures, housing business centres and plush restaurants. The owners of these complexes have decided not to put up garish, backlit signboards, a practice that is otherwise widespread in more-peaceful areas. One leading businessman in Kashmir, Mansoor Ahmad, explains why he believes that erecting a backlit board is a waste of money in Srinagar: "What is the fun of having illumination when there is no movement during the nights?" Indeed, life here remains squeezed solely into the daylight hours. Even the bustling markets around Lal Chowk close down immediately at sunset.

Despite the lack of nightlife, tourists have continued to flock to Kashmir, providing a crucial injection of cash into the economy, with more than 700,000 tourists visiting Kashmir in 2005. Although a series of bomb attacks on tourists in 2006 affected this influx, police suspect the assaults were actually due to a rivalry between tour operators from Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. With recorded daily killings in Kashmir now down to three, from 10 in the early 1990s, such prospects have looked set to brighten further.

Although Kashmir's tourism department had been gearing up for a massive campaign to woo tourists in 2007, this plan was affected like so many others by the disclosure of police involvement in a series of 'fake encounters'. In January and February, the bodies of five men, alleged by the police to have been foreign militants, were exhumed around the Ganderbal area in Srinagar district. Forensic testing subsequently found the men to have been civilians, allegedly murdered in staged gunfights by policemen for rewards and promotions. These dramatic findings triggered a mass movement, challenging the entire counter-insurgency process. The case went to the heart of an extremely sensitive issue for Kashmiris: according to Parveena Ahangar, the chairperson of the Srinagar-based Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), more than 8000 youths have disappeared in military custody since 1990.

The exhumations and subsequent uproar have also spawned a larger political movement that has brought together people of traditionally opposed points of view. While the 'anti-India' forces – including the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), a conglomerate of secessionist outfits – championed the cause of ending bloodshed by withdrawing troops from populated areas, elected 'pro-India' leaders espoused the same cause on the floor of the State Assembly. A loose consensus between these ideologically differing forces (including the pro-India National Conference, Congress party and People's Democratic Party, as well as the APHC, the J & K Liberation Front and others) is continuing to evolve around the demilitarisation issue. These forces differ on the interpretation of demilitarisation, however, an idea that was originally floated by Pakistani Prime Minister Pervez Musharraf in October 2004 (and then suggested by him again in

Seeking a win-win-win solution: An interview with Mirwaiz Umar Farooq

When Mirwaiz Muhammad Farooq, chief cleric of Kashmir, was assassinated in 1990 by unidentified gunmen, his 14-year-old son Umar was anointed his successor. Later, as a college student in Srinagar, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq became the chairman of the largest coalition of secessionist parties, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC). Following hardliner Syed Ali Shah Geelani's split from the APHC in 2003, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq has been heading the moderate faction of the Hurriyat. ***Riyaz Masroor*** *interviewed the Mirwaiz, who is also currently working on a PhD thesis on Sufism.*

Islamabad and your faction of the Hurriyat Conference seem quite optimistic about a Kashmir solution.

We have enough reasons to be optimistic. The Line of Control is locally known as *Khooni Lakeer* [Bleeding Line]. India and Pakistan have fought battles over it, and many thousand Kashmiris have died in crossfire and while fighting for freedom. Now, the Indian and Pakistani armies have been honouring a ceasefire on this line for nearly four years. Not only this, but a bus service has also been launched. There are meeting points

November 2005 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly) and that more recently became a part of his four-point 'Kashmir formula'. Yet the majority of Kashmiris still feel drawn towards autonomy, mainly due to the continuing high level of militarisation. Despite official statements that only 1500 militants are active in the state, a substantive part of the inhabited areas remains inaccessible due to massive army presence.

Following the political clamour over reduction of troops, in March 2007 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set up three committees under Defence Minister A K Antony, tasked with looking into the troop-cut demands. In Kashmir, the move has been received with scepticism, with many arguing that New Delhi has a history of burying issues by constituting committees. APHC leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and the main opposition National Conference have maintained that the move is nothing more than an eyewash.

Catch and kill

Ever since Partition left the fate of J & K unresolved, Kashmir's political landscape has remained stuck between two radically differing positions: one aligned with Pakistan, the other aligned with India. A third opinion, favouring complete independence, was a late entry, coming into being around 1990. Pro-Pakistan forces, such as the underground guerrilla movement al-Fatah, the political outfit Plebiscite Front, the People's League and other groups, remained active throughout the 1950s and 1960s, espousing the cause of separation from India. Ghulam Rasool Zahgeer, Ghulam Muhammad Naikoo, Fazal Haque Qureshi and Shabir Ahmad Shah were prominent figures of al-Fatah, and Shah and Qureshi continue to run separatist outfits.

Following his landmark accord in 1975 with New Delhi, Sheikh Abdullah, the state's then-chief minister who had been newly freed after a prolonged detention, suddenly became a despised figure among the separatist forces, although he continued to think of himself as part of the section opposed to New Delhi. The secessionist demands, which had been largely political in nature, eventually assumed a militant bent following Sheikh Abdullah's death in 1982. The anti-India forces, in a bid to legitimise themselves, contested the polls in 1987, which witnessed mass rigging in favour of the ruling party, led by Sheikh's flamboyant son, Farooq Abdullah. Contesting candidates, including India's most-wanted militant commander, Mohammad Yusuf Shah (aka Syed Salahuddin) were arrested and ruthlessly abused in detention.

The way this movement for political rights was diverted by the Indian state was what triggered the insurgency in 1988. At that time, the Soviet army was withdrawing from Afghanistan, and Zia ul-Haq had turned his sights on Kashmir. Many observers continue to believe that General Zia's death in a mysterious plane crash – barely a fortnight after the CTO blast in Srinagar – squandered Pakitan's military scheme of a covert war against India. He had wanted, it is said, a low-key insurgency to force New Delhi to agree to talks on Kashmir. Suddenly, there was a free-for-all in Kashmir. Government administration collapsed, and Farooq Abdullah flew to London as his party, the National Conference, became an object of hatred. Jagmohan, Kashmir's hardliner governor, was appointed by New Delhi as an emergency

on the LoC. We don't say we have achieved everything, but these confidence-building measures [CBMs] have reinforced the perception that a purely political problem cannot have military solutions. We do have apprehensions about the slow pace of the peace process and the lack of impact on the ground of these CBMs, yet we do hope that India and Pakistan would respond to the aspirations of the people of J & K in such a manner as would appear a victory for everyone. There is much talk of a win-win solution. I daresay it's not only win-win, but win-win-win: for all the three players, India, Pakistan and Kashmir.

Recently, you told a public meeting outside Srinagar that a solution would appear within three months. Are India and Pakistan ready to move ahead?

President General Pervez Musharraf has personally confided to me that his government has shared papers about the solution with India. As far as my information goes, New Delhi has moved a bit, yet it wants to move slowly and is providing the pretext of democracy. But the Indian prime minister has taken the opposition into confidence. Right now, you may not be able to gauge how much India has moved forward, for it is facing elections in key states, including Uttar Pradesh. The Congress party has already lost Punjab. This is politics, and whatever bitterness seems to emanate from New Delhi, is nothing but posturing.

Has General Musharraf formally presented his latest four-point proposal to India?

There is a lot of progress in the peace process as far as the two countries are concerned. The only thing is how to make this solution useful and acceptable to the people in J & K. Papers have been exchanged. Musharraf might not have personally handed them over to Manmohan Singh, yet it has happened at top government levels.

Does your present mass-contact programme aim at canvassing for General Musharraf's four-point proposal?

Of course we are reaching out to the people with the new concept. There

Woman pleading for the release of her kin in Harwan, near Srinagar

administrator. Under his regime, a mass exodus took place of about 100,000 Pandits, members of Kashmir's minority Hindu population. Today many believe that Jagmohan encouraged this dislocation so that, with the Hindus out of the way, security forces could be freely unleashed on the Muslim population of the state.

In response to the increasing insecurity, in 1990 Kashmir came under presidential rule. From the early to the mid-1990s, Kashmiris saw some of the worst repression and an estimated 25,000 deaths. Also in 1990, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which had been in force in parts of India since 1958, was extended to J & K. Paramilitary troops subsequently carried out repeated massacres, resorting even to direct firing on unarmed anti-India demonstrations.

While armed resistance enjoyed massive popular support in Kashmir during those years, the insurgency was unable to score a significant military victory against the Indian state. On the one hand, resistance fighters were being countered militarily by the Indian Army. On the other, by the mid-1990s, internecine battles had led to the emergence of a government-sponsored civil militia, the Ikhwan, built on the strength of the ranks of dissident militants. The Ikhwan was under the leadership of one of Kashmir's best-established militant commanders, Muhammad Yusuf Parray (alias Kuka Parray). The outfit included an estimated 3000 gun-wielding youths, who carried out large-scale killings of perceived sympathisers of militants.

The pressure on militants thus increased, eventually forcing the pioneer Kashmiri militant group, the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), to announce a unilateral ceasefire in 1994. The JKLF subsequently came aboveground and became a major constituent of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, which had come into being following the assassination of Kashmir's chief cleric and pro-Pakistan leader, Moulvi Muhammad Farooq. Farooq's 14-year-old son, Umar Farooq, who had just graduated from a Christian missionary school, was anointed as his successor, thus becoming the first chairman of the APHC amalgam (*see accompanying interview*).

In league with the Ikhwan, the Indian armed forces wreaked havoc during counter-insurgency operations, perpetrating massive human-rights violations – a crucial issue for the APHC. New Delhi chose to suppress popular anger in the state with ever-more-stringent laws – in addition to the AFSPA, these included the Public Safety Act, the Enemy's Agent Act, the Arms Act and the Anti-National Activities Act. These measures induced a sense of impunity among the military forces, and the events of the latter years

is a tremendous response. The struggle of Kashmir has been transformed. Yesterday, people were drawn towards emotional and rhetorical slogans. Now, they want free space to live, to speak and to move around. That's why we are demanding demilitarisation. People in Kashmir, Rajouri, Poonch, Doda, and other places have been trapped; I believe 70 percent of the land is under the army's occupation. When the earthquake razed hundreds of houses in the Northern Uri area, I personally visited there, and had a tiff with an army officer. He tried to stop us from offering prayers in an open ground. This is unwarranted intervention. We want the army out of our social and political lives.

Does your concept of demilitarisation include the disarming of militants?

Absolutely. When the army is out, militants will lose the logical argument. Militants will automatically leave after the lands are returned to the rightful owners, and the fenced and trapped villages begin to breathe free air. We have already offered to broker the ceasefire once Indian troops leave the populated areas.

Did you try to persuade militants to call a ceasefire during your visit to Pakistan?

This chicken-and-egg story should be discouraged: this is not a question of who should withdraw first. We are facing an enormous army presence in J & K, and it's a hurdle in the peace process. There are more than 800,000 troops in the state. Buildings, orchards, sports grounds, schools and colleges are under army occupation. The Indian Army higher-ups have said many times that the number of active militants in the state is less than 1200. The army's sustained presence among the population has ruined our socio-economic set up.

What about New Delhi's decision to set up review panels for recommending troop cuts in J & K?

The Indian prime minister and his defence minister have several times dismissed the possibility of troop withdrawal. If they want to relocate them as a matter of

Indeed, life here remains squeezed solely into the daylight hours. Even the bustling markets around Lal Chowk close down immediately at sunset.

would come to resemble a direct war between the Indian state and the people of Jammu & Kashmir. Herding of residents during crackdowns, random arrests, torture and other repressive measures became the norm – so much so that even if militants did commit rights violations and executions, these became overshadowed by what in Kashmir came to be known as "state terrorism".

Seeing no tangible results from its military approach, New Delhi then veered towards political solutions. That is what led it to hold elections in 1996 when, with the active help of the Ikhwan, Farooq Abdullah was brought to power. This was a direct challenge to the APHC, which was working to keep its mass movement alive. And in this, Farooq Abdullah contributed to the cause of separatism by raising a special task force from out of J & K's local police cadres in 1996. This force not only provided further impetus to the Ikhwan, but also launched a 'catch and kill' campaign against anyone with suspected involvement in the insurgency.

Four major events had, in quick succession, greatly impacted the Kashmir situation. First was the nearly all-out war between India and Pakistan over Kargil Heights during 1998. Second, the bloodless military coup took place in Pakistan on 12 October 1999, orchestrated by an apparently moderate General Musharraf. Third, in November 2000, Atal Bihari Vajpayee offered the Non-Initiation of Combat Operations (NICO) agreement, a cautiously termed ceasefire with Kashmir's militants. Finally, in September 2001 came the attacks in the US, the reverberations of which are still being felt in Kashmir today.

9/11 and Kashmir

Farooq's regime collapsed in 2002, soon after the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the commencement of the US military campaign in Afghanistan. Since 9/11, both the complexion of Pakistani support to the Kashmir movement and politics within Kashmir have undergone a significant change. Gen Musharraf's newfound flexibility post-9/11 came in handy to local political actors – especially those who were pro-India – seeking to connect back to the Kashmiri masses, the armed uprising having made them widely despised figures. What had been conceived as a political arrangement in 1996 took a beating in what was widely seen as a fair election in 2002. Although managing little over a dozen seats in J & K's 87-member legislative assembly, former Indian Home Minister Mufti Muhammad Sayeed came to power on a semi-secessionist agenda, largely exploiting people's anger against Farooq and his repressive methods.

Barely two months after 9/11, five armed men stormed into the Indian Parliament. Although quickly subdued, the ensuing gunfight claimed the lives of nine armed guards, a gardener, and five of the attackers. The assault triggered a hysteria of patriotism throughout India, stoked by the then-ruling National

operational requirement, the people are not foolish enough to take it as some kind of concession. Some politicians who are closer to Delhi want to take credit for what is mere hype. They try to mislead people, and we are making people aware of such machinations.

Why didn't you participate in the prime minister's roundtable conference in April?

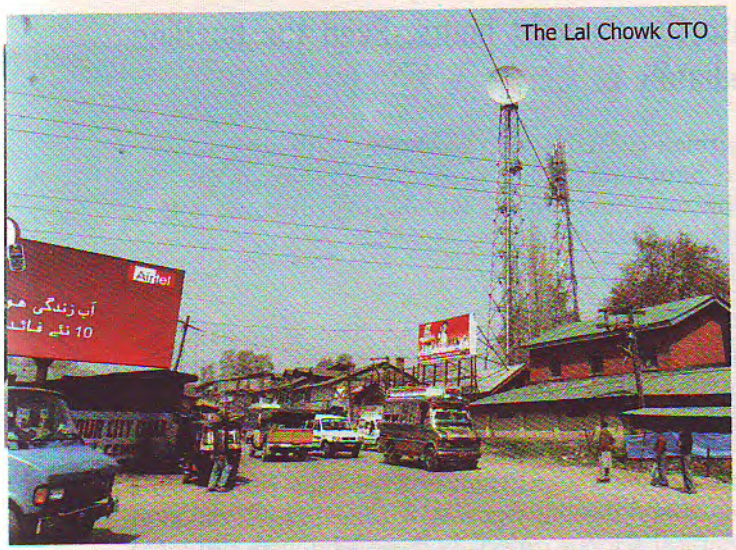
We were not invited.

But the media reported that you were invited.

The local deputy commissioner had delivered a written invitation on behalf of the Indian Home Ministry. The way we were invited did not reflect seriousness. It was as if everything was normal in Kashmir, and the Home Ministry wanted to discuss some administrative matters with politicians of a state, just as routinely as it would do in the case of a Maharashtra or Gujarat. The prime minister should have personally invited us for an exclusive meeting. In such a meeting, what is the role of a politician who has no problem with the accession pact, which Maharaja had signed under duress with the government of India in 1947?

Do you want Prime Minister Singh to invite you for an exclusive roundtable conference?

Yes. We have conceived the idea of three-way talks. Indo-Pakistani dialogue forms one track, while the talks between New Delhi-Hurriyat and Islamabad-Hurriyat are the other two tracks. We have been talking to Islamabad quite clearly, yet India, in its eagerness to rehabilitate its proxies in Kashmir, has of late confused the process by involving pro-India parties in the sensitive dialogue process. We have made it clear that we will not shy away from talks because we have a strong case. We had announced that the Hurriyat Conference would discuss the invite in its executive body but there was no official invitation. We could take a decision on the merit of this Conference. We do have certain reservations about the form of this process. New Delhi wants to shift



The Lal Chowk CTO

Democratic Alliance led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. After a media frenzy, the government chose to mobilise troops against Pakistan, and both countries quickly had their armies staring each other in the face over the Line of Control. Even by that time, however, the Musharraf regime had become so crucial in the US-led 'war on terror' that, after nearly a year of tense standoff, Washington, DC was able to quietly persuade both countries to withdraw their armies to peacetime positions. But militancy and excesses by security forces continued largely unabated in Kashmir.

Against the backdrop of these incidents, the steady emergence of India as an economic giant, coupled with the US's increasing interest in Southasia, contributed to the peace agenda becoming more dominant in political discourse on Kashmir. On 23 November 2003, Gen Musharraf announced a unilateral ceasefire along the Line of Control, to which India reciprocated. Hundreds of thousands of families living along this battle line have since received a modicum of respite, with farmers able to resume cultivation, children able to go back to school, and long-split families able to reunite.

Musharraf's promise

Leaving behind the well-beaten tracks of bellicose posturing, Gen Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee co-signed a historic declaration in January 2004, on the sidelines of the SAARC Summit in Islamabad. The present peace process is rooted in that declaration, and has since led to several confidence-building measures, including new bus services between Azad Kashmir and Jammu & Kashmir, as well as a series of talks between New Delhi and secessionist leaders.

During his talks with Prime Minister Vajpayee, Gen Musharraf put in writing his 12 January 2002 promise that he would not allow his territory to be 'misused' against Pakistan's neighbours. Observers found this declaration vastly significant, as it indicated Islamabad's climb down from its traditional policy on Kashmir, which had always hinged on the UN Security Council resolution of 1948-49 regarding the holding of a plebiscite.

The declaration has significantly solidified a long-shaky peace process. This can be seen particularly in the fact that even the July 2006 Bombay train bombings, which killed around 180 Indian citizens, and this year's explosion on the crossborder Samjhauta Express, which killed dozens and wounded hundreds,

focus from the main issue of resolution to peripheral matters. We are not opposed to the administrative reforms or steps taken to strengthen the governance, but it becomes objectionable when New Delhi propagates the idea that these conferences and working groups will solve the Kashmir problem.

Do the National Conference and the Peoples Democratic Party have a role to play in the resolution process?

We are happy to see them championing the same cause as we have long been espousing. But their integrity is doubtful, and people think that they are doing image-building exercises in favour of Delhi – and in the process, garnering support for the forthcoming elections. I challenge them to seek votes on what they believe in politically. Let them tell people in rallies that they want J & K to be an integral part of India and you will see them lose their deposit.

General Musharraf has termed the UN resolutions on Kashmir irrelevant. Nonetheless, you still speak of people's right of self-determination.

Flexibility should not be misunderstood. We are saying that there could never be a military solution. Pakistan and Kashmiris have shown their willingness for a non-military solution. It is India that is still keeping her forces in Kashmir. UN resolutions provide a legal input to the dispute, though they are not relevant in their entirety. We are for a negotiated settlement, but all three players should actively participate in that negotiation. That is why we had introduced the idea of three-way talks between the APHC, India and Pakistan. We have met the Indian leadership a couple of times and they have gone on the record recognising the need for such a process. We have assured New Delhi that, once they create the impact of the peace process on the ground, we would persuade armed groups for a ceasefire.

Many believe that the APHC would contest the next elections.

I don't mind saying yes, because that is a genuine democratic

were not able to derail the process. Gen Musharraf's follow-up on the declaration culminated in his four-point formula for Kashmir, announced in December 2006. These points included demilitarisation, allowing free movement between Azad Kashmir and Jammu & Kashmir, providing all Kashmiris maximum self-governance, and jointly managing the defence and foreign affairs of these two entities. In short, Gen Musharraf proposed a concept of shared sovereignty that would help placate the alienation felt in Jammu & Kashmir, where he believes the people need a solution that infuses a sense that they are no longer ruled by New Delhi. To implement this plan, Gen Musharraf is willing to negotiate for Azad Kashmir, which has no record of insurgency or revolt against the state of Pakistan.

Some see international pressure behind both Gen Musharraf's insistence on demilitarisation and India's cautiously milder response to his pleas. There is a general impression that George W Bush's administration has been asking Gen Musharraf to increase troop levels in Waziristan and other loosely governed tribal areas and that the general might have told Washington that he could not move his forces away from the Line of Control unless New Delhi cut down on military installations there. Additionally, observers also surmise that Gen Musharraf's push for a solution on Kashmir might also be timed keeping in mind the presidential elections. A 'resolution' on this intractable problem might help bolster his popularity, currently at low ebb.

Whatever be his compulsions, Gen Musharraf's approach has nevertheless come as a political breather for the Kashmir Valley's pro-India politicians. Nearly all of those figures are now openly supporting the 'Pakistani line', in an attempt to renovate their support bases. This new dynamic has almost blurred the lines that used to divide the Kashmiri polity between pro-India and anti-India camps in J & K; with a few exceptions, all are now for demilitarisation and self-governance. At the same time, it is not easy to gauge the popular sentiment. Although pushes for self-governance and demilitarisation have gained momentum, and while many have started to expect relief from these proposals if they are ever implemented, the majority of Kashmiris in J & K (except for the elite intellectual and business sections) remains alienated from India. However, most observers currently believe that the proposals of demilitarisation and self-governance could help to subdue much of the remaining popular anger.

No groundswell in the Valley

Optimistic observers insist that the emerging geopolitical dynamic in Southasia will lead to a resolution of the Kashmir situation in the foreseeable future. Proposals for an alternative settlement of the dispute abound, and media reports suggest that a "status quo plus", if not more than that, is in the offing. Of late talk of soft borders, crossborder trade, peoples' exchanges and joint management of disputed territories on either side of the LoC has become a staple of almost all the political players. While Mufti Sayeed and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq are actively pitching for a substantive cut in the number of Indian troops in Kashmir, others are also more or less following the same tack. Pro-India

exercise to ascertain popular acceptance of a particular viewpoint. But J&K is a disputed territory hence it is not possible for the elections to deliver the true verdict within either the Indian or Pakistani constitution. Still, we believe that people need governance and if for the sake of governance - and I stress this, for governance alone - some politicians are fighting, we won't be a hurdle. However we have the right to make people aware of certain political machinations.

What is your model for resolving the Kashmir issue?

The process has to be understood. We are not proposing a tailor-made solution to be pushed on the Kashmiri population. Finding an alternative solution to what people had believed as an ultimate destination for six long decades is an uphill task and I should tell you that we are halfway through. The process is evolutionary. Various confidence-building measures have helped us to at least identify the contours of that solution. And India and Pakistan during recent meetings have sketched out a rough drawing. People in India, Pakistan and Kashmir have to be rallied behind that sketch.

Can you share some of the outlines of that 'rough drawing'?

This sketch would be clearer if the government of India were to take a realistic, pragmatic and fair view of our demand for demilitarisation in J & K. Once the region is demilitarised, people in different parts would be given the opportunity to elect their regional assemblies in Pakistani and Indian parts of Kashmir.

Would that lead to your 'United States of Kashmir' model?

Well, that is how we put it.

Would you aspire to become the president of that United States of Kashmir?

(*Laughs*) Once things are settled and the society is cleared of military intervention, people would get a chance to elect their leaders. At that time we would go to the people with the achievement and seek their mandate. ▲

leaders, including Farooq Abdullah, have called for an unconditional dialogue with the Azad Kashmir-based militant leadership.

To all of this, New Delhi has responded cautiously. Manmohan Singh has initiated a series of roundtable meetings, which is meant to bring together all political camps. Three of these meetings have now been held. But the roundtable process has not been able to impress the secessionists, who want a cut-and-dried agenda for the resolution of the Kashmir issue, and are averse to the omnipresent discussion of economic and social concerns. For these reasons, all secessionist leaders but one stayed away from the 25 April 2007 roundtable meeting in New Delhi. Hashim Qureshi, primarily known for his role in the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane in 1971, was the only secessionist who participated (*see accompanying interview*).

Last year, Prime Minister Singh constituted five working groups, with the aim of drawing up a plan to rehabilitate the victims of violence in Kashmir, and to suggest measures for good governance. At the late-April roundtable, those groups finally presented their proposals. But although these included some additional confidence-building measures, such as creating 'dignified' living conditions for those Kashmiri youth who are "ready to eschew violence", a groundswell for peace remains conspicuously absent in Kashmir. The daily life of the people remains unchanged, with no trimming of the Indian troop presence on the roads and in orchards, office buildings, markets and residential areas.

If anything, public protests – against land acquisition by the Indian Army, fake encounters and the government's failure to provide jobs – are becoming increasingly routine. While the Indian leadership was preparing to host the 14th SAARC Summit in New Delhi in early April, downtown Srinagar remained restive for almost a week. Residents took to the streets, alleging that troops deployed in area bunkers had been harassing local women. One legislator attempted to calm the crowd, assuring it that the matter would be taken up at the highest levels. "What peace process?" demanded one resident, "What 'Musharraf's four-points'? Nothing gives us relief from all this."

In the absence of a mechanism to compensate for the losses wrought by a decade and a half of violence, proposals from Pakistan and packages from India sound hollow to the people of Jammu & Kashmir, who remain victims of an unresolved conflict. While broaching proposals of joint management of all of Kashmir, and various other options, leaders in New Delhi and Islamabad will have to understand that *what* they offer to Kashmiris will not matter as much as *how* they offer it. One young separatist leader, Sajad Lone, whose father Abdul Ghani Lone was assassinated in 2001, believes that as long as New Delhi continues to negate the sacrifices of the people in Kashmir, any offer, howsoever attractive, will be regarded as a hoax. "When New Delhi and Islamabad start projecting the peace process as being a result of their respective leaders' sagacity and statesmanship, people get excluded," he said. "What is in it for the people? I believe that as long as people are not made stakeholders in the peace process, it will continue to be vulnerable."

The popular mood in the Valley has been sceptical ever since the peace process started. If the summits and declarations do not affect the present scenario on the ground, and if the barbed wire and bunkers surrounding the CTOs of Kashmir continue to inspire a sense of living in a 'beautiful prison', the optimism that is flying high right now is likely to come crashing to the ground.

An 'agent' of Kashmir

An interview with Hashim Qureshi

ADITI BHADURI

In January 1971, Hashim Qureshi, then 18, suddenly rose to fame when he hijacked an Indian Airlines flight from Srinagar and diverted it to Lahore. The hijacking led India to ban Pakistani flights over its airspace, and crippled Pakistan's military efforts to tackle the emerging crisis in East Pakistan. Branded an 'Indian agent', Qureshi was incarcerated for nine years in a Pakistani jail. Thereafter, he went into self-imposed exile in the Netherlands. He returned to Srinagar in 2000, where he now lives. In conversation with **Aditi Bhaduri**, Hashim Qureshi, presently chairman of the Jammu & Kashmir Democratic Liberation Front (JKDLF), talks about initiatives for peace in Kashmir, as well the emergence of a "United States of Southasia".

Was it difficult to return to Kashmir?

Yes, in many ways. I had a very comfortable life overseas. Moreover, immediately on my return I was arrested.

So what made you come back?

My land, my people, my nation. I left Kashmir when I was 18 years old. I was in exile for 30 years. I was living a comfortable life in the Netherlands, but I wanted to do something for this land. I could not watch it bleed.

You are a proponent of non-violence today, yet you were one of the first to resort to violence against the Indian state.

Yes, yes. I was very young, angry and disillusioned with India and its treatment of Kashmir, and I wanted to draw the attention of the world. But I did not have anything against the passengers, and I still remember their frightened faces. When we landed in Lahore, the first thing I did was to fold my hands and tell them, 'Brothers and sisters, we mean no harm to you, our struggle is against the Government of India'. We let all the passengers go.

In prison, I read books by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. I realised that the gun would not solve the problem of Kashmir. Especially now, there is no international support for violent movements. Taking the path of violence was a big mistake. Kashmiris were being used as pawns by Pakistan, and Pakistan itself has come to the brink of insolvency.

When did you form the Jammu & Kashmir Democratic Liberation Party? What is your programme and goals?

I had problems with the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front [which Qureshi helped to found], as I believed that the armed struggle in Indian Kashmir was not a freedom struggle and was being fought by Pakistan's ISI. So I resigned from the JKLF in 1993. The JKDLP was formed in 1994, in Kathmandu. I came from Holland, and people from Kashmir came.

Our main agenda is a single Jammu & Kashmir: to unite Pakistani Kashmir, the Northern Areas – Gilgit and Baltistan – with Jammu & Kashmir here. We want to build up the economy. Today we run the Maqbool National Welfare Association, to look after orphans and widows who are the victims of militancy, empower women and run self-help groups.

In the long term, we advocate the forming of a 'United States of Southasia' which will include India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan and Kashmir. Like the European Union, it will have open borders, a visa-free regime and free trade. It will help end the enmity in this region, and help resolve the Kashmir problem.

Some critics say your only agenda is anti-Pakistan, and that you work for the Government of India.

From my freedom in 1980 till my exile in 1986, I was active in Pakistani Kashmir and Pakistani politics. But eight times I was banned from entering the district, and four times I was arrested. Today, even Syed Ali Shah Geelani, who is for Indian Kashmir's accession to Pakistan, is saying that the Pakistani rulers are betraying us.

If I am an Indian agent, why is there a case against me as a Pakistani agent? I was in prison for one year; I'm out on bail. There are cases against me under the Enemy Ordinance, the Official Secrets Act and for robbery and airplane-burning – the same charges for which I was tortured and incarcerated in Pakistan. But it is not the people who call me an Indian agent; it's only some stooges

of Pakistan who do so, because they are following the maxim that anyone against them is an agent of someone else.

Sixteen years ago, I spoke out against militancy, and said that Pakistan was helping to turn Kashmir into a graveyard. Now Mirwaiz Umar Farooq has said the same thing. This is proof enough that I'm only an 'agent' of Kashmir and the Kashmiri people.

What was the state of affairs that you witnessed in Pakistan-administered Kashmir?

In Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, anyone who publicly supports or peacefully works for an independent Kashmir faces persecution. There is no High Court in Gilgit, and yet you have 30 lakh people living there! The region does not get royalty from the Mangla Dam, or its share of foreign exchange. Many have migrated to West Asia, Europe and other countries to find work, and they remit enormous amounts of foreign exchange to Pakistan. Yet, there are no industries, no medical colleges, no engineering colleges. 'Azad Kashmir' is *azad* in name only.

Are you planning to contest elections in the future?

I want to serve the people, and am doing that in a variety of ways. However, if the people want us to participate in the elections, we will try to fulfil their wishes.

You criticised the Hurriyat and the JKLF for boycotting the recent roundtable conference. Yet, you yourself boycotted the second roundtable conference.

At the first roundtable conference, I had suggested that the second roundtable conference should take place in Srinagar, and also that political prisoners should be released. The Centre agreed, but did not fulfil its promise. I heard that the Hurriyat had asked the prisoners to be released *after* the roundtable conference so that the Hurriyat could claim success. In protest, I boycotted the second roundtable conference. But you have to keep the dialogue going, so I participated in the third round table conference held recently.

Are you for demilitarisation of the state?

Demilitarisation should also include Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, Gilgit and Baltistan. I will be extremely happy to see the streets of Kashmir free of the army.

You are one of the few who has spoken of the tragedy of the Kashmiri Pandit community. What suggestions do you have for their return to the Valley?

Yes, at the very outset of the armed struggle to attain freedom, Kashmiri Pandits were pushed out. The community had contributed greatly to the education of Kashmir; they were true secularists. It is sad that we could not protect them and their property. Even if we assume that the Pandits left at the behest of Governor Jagmohan – which is not true at all – what has been the fate of those Pandits who stayed back?

It is the moral, national and religious duty of every Kashmiri to go to the Pandits and bring them back to the Valley. Without them there can be no settlement of Kashmir. The Pandits are part and parcel of the Kashmiri identity. But I don't support 'Panun' Kashmir [the Pandits' demand for a Kashmiri homeland] because they want a separate land – and then Jamat-e-Islami will also want a separate land, and again there will be a 1947-like situation.

So what kind of *azadi* do you envisage for Kashmir? Given its geopolitical situation, do you think independence is viable?

I want independence for both Kashmirs – Indian and Pakistani, including Gilgit and Baltistan. Then we can fight against poverty and illiteracy, instead of fighting against one another. This is the 21st century: we need computers, not communalism; we need to open borders for trade, for people-to-people exchange, for peace, for progress. Azadi is possible if India, China and Pakistan can guarantee it. Jammu & Kashmir can be the road to Central Asia. We can have a visa-free entry system, it can be a tourist state, and it can even be semi-independent, without an army. But we will need guarantees from the surrounding countries.

You have advocated freezing the Kashmir issue for 20 years.

Yes, in the 'freeze period' the borders should be opened and trade relations should be increased. Armed and unarmed foreign nationals should leave Kashmir, and both India and Pakistan should evolve a joint mechanism. Only defence, currency, foreign affairs and communication should remain with the two states, and all the remaining powers should be delegated to the people of Kashmir, including Gilgit, Baltistan and Azad Kashmir.

That may take some time. What initiatives would you suggest that can be implemented immediately?

Human-rights violations must stop immediately. The army must stop custodial killings, fake encounters, humiliation and torture of the common people. Roads must be built, infrastructure must be developed, the environment must be cleaned up, the education system should be developed and jobs must be found for the youth. There must be investment in the state, to generate employment. Families of the disappeared and the victims of militancy must be taken care of. The Indian prime minister's promise of 'zero tolerance' of atrocities towards the people of Kashmir must be felt by the people. The government of India should show magnanimity, and declare a unilateral ceasefire.

'Sighting' is a new space, in which the editors of Himal *will offer readers an update on personalities or subjects long out of the headlines.*

Never again:
a people against war

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **KUNDA DIXIT**

Covering conflicts in various parts of Asia during the 1990s, many of us were 'parachutists'. We flew in, filed and flew out. We rushed to the site of the latest bomb, or walked into the bush to interview insurgent leaders, staying only long enough to get a couple of good quotes.

The last thing I had expected to see was a conflict in my own country. But in 1996, when I returned to Nepal after covering conflicts in Sri Lanka, the Philippines and elsewhere, the Maoists had just launched their "people's war". Suddenly, this was not someone else's war anymore – it was happening among my own people. I was forced to re-learn journalism, and to find a way to move beyond being a mere spectator. Such attachment is anathema to journalism professors, who teach us never to get too involved in a story. But our problem was that the Nepali media was not involved *enough*. For ten years, we were satisfied with counting bodies, with being the chroniclers of carnage.

Some journalists turned to making documentaries; others wrote novels. In fact, fiction turned out to be a better way to portray reality than merely listing facts. Some of us decided to choose the medium of still photographs to recall, lest we forget the horrific times. The organisation Nepa-laya, which had been involved in organising a series of successful peace-concert tours through Nepal, was also interested in publishing a photo book, looking back at the past decade of war.

In February 2006, when we began work on *A People War*, Nepal's future looked bleak. The war was killing an average of 40 Nepalis a week, an uncompromising autocrat-king was in power in Kathmandu, and it looked as though the country would sink into full-scale civil war. As the pictures came in and we started selection, all of a sudden a non-violent people's-power uprising in April 2006 unseated Gyanendra. A ceasefire was declared, and the Maoists were brought into the interim government. By the time *A People War* was released in December 2006, the war had stopped, though the country was not yet at peace.

Since most Nepalis could not afford the book, necessarily costly because of the colour printing and art paper, Nepa-laya decided to take a selection of the pictures on an exhibition tour across the country, and also to distribute copies to libraries along the way. We were on the road throughout April 2007, putting up the exhibition in ten venues, in parts of the country that had seen the worst of the turmoil in the decade-long conflict. The response cannot be described as anything less than overwhelming: more than 100,000 people saw the pictures, more than double our original estimate. But the reaction was stronger than just the numbers – everywhere we could see that most people were deeply touched by what they saw. It was as if Nepalis had been made one in their grieving memory.

In Chautara, east of Kathmandu, the pictures were displayed amidst the ruins of the district hospital, which had been destroyed in a battle in April 2006. In Ilam, the exhibition was held inside the auditorium of an orphanage in which ten blind students had cowered while a night-long battled raged around them. In Tansen, the exhibition itself resembled installation art, as designer Navin Joshi arranged the pictures around the ruins of a stately ancient palace that used to serve as the district administration office and had been completely destroyed.

The message everywhere was the same, and by the thousands they entered their innermost feelings in the guestbooks we kept at the exits. People said they would not want to see such sights of pain, suffering, loss and destruction ever again, and that they were convinced that the use of violence in politics solved nothing. "Never again" should we have to undergo a "people's war" and the state's reaction to it, was the refrain everywhere. And there were many who asked why we were showing the pictures to them, and not to those who waged the war: King Gyanendra, Maoist leader 'Prachanda' and the politicians.

Army man at exhibition in Palpa takes picture of Maoist cadre murdered at Doramba by the army.
Photo by Ishwori Neupane

Ram Krishni Chaudhary's son Bhaban was taken away by the army four years ago from a bus. She has never heard from his since. When the exhibition arrived in Nepalganj, Chaudhary was asked to unveil her own portrait that was taken by Rameswor Bohara (in yellow shirt, right).

A youth in Budadau photographed in 2001 when he joined the Maoists as a "whole timer", and again in 2005, by when he was a guerilla in the PLA.

Photos by
Kashish Das Shrestha/Tim Farrell

The book's cover picture of two boys looking out of a shell hole of a police station in western Nepal was placed amidst the rubble of the hospital corridor where two patients were killed by a bomb.

At a Maoist gathering in Ramechhap district in 2002, a man meets his nephew for the first time after he ran away from home three years before, to join the Maoists. The uncle walked four days to to be with his newphew and persuade him to return home. The boy refused.

Photo by
Mukunda Bogati

When the exhibition came to Kathmandu, one of the visitors was Puskal Rai, who immediately recognized his niece, Anupa Rai seen in a picture with her baby. Puskal recalled that Anupa and her brother were convinced by their class teacher to join the Maoists. Both took part in many battles, Anupa was injured several times and still has shrapnel lodged in her lung. Her brother, who was more seriously injured, was rushed to the Indian town of Sitamarhi for treatment where he was arrested by the Indian police and is still in custody.

For four years after he took a picture of his friend and fellow-journalist Gyanendra Khadka after he was publicly executed by the Maoists, Yubaraj Puri didn't tell anyone it was his photograph. At the exhibition, Puri finally went public and explained how he was weeping and his hands were shaking as he took this photograph.

The exhibition began in the town of Jiri and was opened by Nanimaiya Kafle (in blue dress) by unveiling the photograph of herself. Nanimaiya's daughter Shona was only 20 days old when the bus she was traveling in was caught in the middle of a firefight. Nanimaiya saved her baby and herself by hiding under the seat, but her husband was killed.

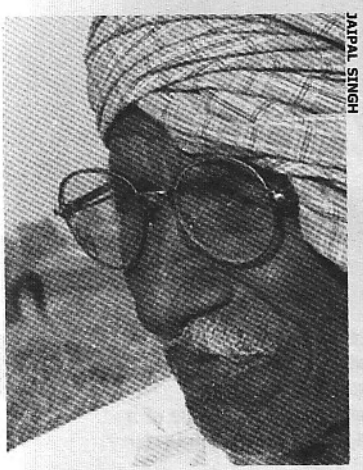
Remember the farmer

Pen is the sister of farmers.
Remember what I had told you?
When I made you hold the pen?
Mother was bellowing.
I got up startled, dripping with sweat
The dream was of Singur.
– Devbrat Joshi, *Sapne me Singur*

First, the good news. According to all projections, the southwest monsoon this year is expected to be almost normal. More importantly, the Southasian monsoon has been estimated to arrive a week early. While the volatility of Typhoon Yutu in the West Pacific has made the exact arrival date a bit uncertain, risk analysts remain upbeat about the rains that directly affect nearly one-fifth of the world's population.

Monsoon-gazing is important in Southasia for several reasons. Agriculture continues to be the mainstay of the population and economies of the region. While the direct contribution of the farming sector to the regional GDP is only about 20 percent, nearly half the population of Pakistan and two-thirds of Indians depend upon agriculture for their livelihoods. An even higher proportion of Bangladeshis and Nepalis survive on the cultivation of farmland that has little or no irrigation facility. A good monsoon for most of them is synonymous with good times, despite the increased risk of landslides, flash floods and inundation.

When the harvest is good, farmers buy better toothpaste, more soap, expensive razorblades and, increasingly, colour television sets, refrigerators and motorcycles. Manufacturing and services get a boost, as purchasing power increases and expenditure patterns veer towards higher consumption of finished goods. An important cause behind the consistent performance of the Indian economy has been the benevolence of the rain gods: the monsoon has not failed Southasia for several years in a row (touch wood).


JAIPAL SINGH

Everybody benefits from the munificence of the monsoon. Abundant rains, however, do not necessarily imply all gain and no pain for the farmers of Southasia. Due to the unreliability of government policies – no less volatile than the vagaries of nature – agriculture has become an unrewarding vocation. The romance of farm life disappeared a long time ago. With sustenance itself becoming undependable, the future of agriculture and food security will become issues of vital concern in our region in the years ahead.

Forgotten farmers

The current buzz in India is all about IT, though this is a source of livelihood for no more than a miniscule section of the national populace. In a country where fishing supports more people than sewing, the citizens of Bangladesh nonetheless love to talk about garments exports. Tourism this and tourism that is the national obsession of Nepal, but the sector's contribution to GDP is less than five percent. While it is true that the fuel of remittances drives the economy of Pakistan, agriculture continues to be the mainstay of Sindh and Punjab. However, the absence of agriculture from the headlines is not a case of 'no news is good news'. The plight of Southasian farmers is out of sight – and hence, out of mind.

Once upon a time, agriculturists dominated parliaments and legislative assemblies, but today their central place has been taken by others. Manmohan Singh is an economist who crept into the Rajya Sabha for the fourth time from Assam. General Pervez Musharraf is, well, an army general from a bourgeois background. The shadowy current rulers of Dhaka are also mostly soldiers. Girija Prasad Koirala was once a factory hand. Other than notable 'sons of the soil' like H D Deve Gowda, and Tau Devi Lal, next to none of the chief ministers of India's major states have ever set hands on a tractor, let alone a plough. Mulayam Singh Yadav may have known how to climb onto a buffalo's back, but Mayawati is a popularly elected queen astride a bedecked elephant, her Dalit background notwithstanding.

Immediately after de-colonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, first-generation college-goers from rural backgrounds brought their farming experiences to the professions. They helped in the success of green and white revolutions. These days, the professors' progenies become district collectors, who encourage their sons and daughters to become ICE professionals. They then marry

doctors, engineers, lawyers and entrepreneurs, who in turn inspire their own offspring to become non-resident Southasian entrepreneurs – NSEs. Empathy for farmers and farming is now almost completely absent among the region's rapidly expanding urban middle class.

The less said about the media, the better. There are now over 100 channels beaming satellite signals down on us 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, but none deem it fit to chronicle the struggle for survival of Southasian farmers. Suicides do make news – there has been a surfeit of them to report, with more than 25,000 recorded cases in less than ten years in India alone. Even so, little investigation of circumstances that force a farmer into self-annihilation has made its way into the mainstream media. Major newspapers offer the same fare to villagers that they serve to their urban readers: cricket, cinema and sensationalism.

Credit crunch

Land, the fundamental factor of farming, is under attack from several quarters. Rising sea levels and the salinity of backwaters are forcing Bangladeshi farmers to grow shrimp in their former paddies. Unlike rice, which requires constant attention and provided yearlong employment for many, shrimp grow by themselves, and get exported making hardly a contribution to the rural, local economy. Farm owners are growing rich, but farm labourers face destitution. In West Bengal, the automobile industry seems set to gobble up land left over by smokestack industries, which had previously displaced the jute-growers that had forced rice farmers of yet an earlier era into the slums of Calcutta.

Skewed landholding is another problem. Nearly three-fourths of all farmers in Southasia cultivate less than five acres, and many have no land at all. In Sindh, *zamindars* that make up six percent of the farming population control 44 percent of all farmland, and 80 percent of the farming population are *haris* who own no land at all; they cultivate their landlords' holdings on the condition of sharing the harvest, usually on a 50/50 basis. Meanwhile, with the public commons quickly disappearing, the landless have less pasture to graze their goats. The fencing of forests under various pretexts curtails the freedom of indigenous communities to forage.

The mismatch between the cost of production and income has also begun to pauperise the peasantry. In Sri Lanka, the cost of producing rice – the staple diet of Sinhalese and Tamils alike – has recently exceeded the market price. While Punjabi farmers estimate that wheat must fetch INR 11.4 per kg to make a modest profit, the price fixed by the government is only INR 8.4. There is a vast difference between what a farmer gets for wheat and what a consumer pays for flour, even after taking into account the cost of collection, transportation, processing, distribution and taxes – although that is a different story altogether. It has been estimated that the cost of input in growing grains has gone up by more than 300 percent in the last few years, while market prices have remained more or less the same.

Mismanagement of land, infrastructure and input supplies has made things bad enough, but the direct cause of the desperation of farmers is the credit crunch that nearly everyone faces. Some time ago, journalist P Sainath reported that 70 percent of farmers in the state of Andhra Pradesh were in debt. The figure for Indian Punjab was around 65 percent; Karnataka, 61 percent; and Maharashtra, 60 percent. Most of these loans are made out by private entrepreneurs who supply inputs at inflated prices and charge usurious interest rates to hard-pressed and marginalised farmers.

City slickers sneer at such figures. *Of course, it can't be all that bad. Look at all those rural slobs riding Bullets in the countryside,* exclaims one New Delhi socialite. While the prosperity of some farmers on the peripheries of metropolitan cities cannot be denied, the fact is many of them have bought their cars and Bullets by selling farmland to real-estate developers. A few sell their property to migrate, paying upwards of a million rupees to sneak illegally into Canada, Australia or Europe.

Landless sharecroppers have to adopt more desperate means of survival when the crop fails, interest accumulates, and debt exceeds repayment capacities. Some sell their children as domestic workers to fill the demand of the urban middle class. Slightly more enterprising ones borrow, beg or steal to go to West Asia in search of work, any work. When all else fails, there is always the recourse of suicide of the breadwinner or of the whole family. It is only then that the media wakes up to notice – momentarily – the forgotten farmers of Southasia. ▲

When the harvest is good, farmers buy better toothpaste, more soap, expensive razorblades and, increasingly, colour television sets, refrigerators and motorcycles.

COURTESY: R K LAXMAN

The March 2007 issue of *Critique*, a review of Indian journalism, is dedicated to **Sham Lal**, the veteran editor and literary critic who died on 23 February. Writes the Nagpur-based editor Alok Tiwari: "When the editor Sham Lal died many journalist also saw their own death in that process ... There was no editor like him, and there would never be another one in the same league. Sham Lal's demise leaves the heavily de-intellectualised journalistic world [in India] much poorer." Writes *Outlook* editor Vinod Mehta in the same issue: "What is the difference between the [Indian] editor of the 1970s and 2007? Simple yet profound. The 1970s editor clocked in at 10 and clocked out at 6.30. He read voraciously, talked to like-minded friends and scholars, furiously debated issues, checked and re-checked information for veracity and poured out the distilled wisdom onto the Edit Page. He did not make speeches at seminars, anchor TV shows, visit cocktail parties, take part in book discussions, judge fashion shows, wear sharp clothes. The editor was not yet a celebrity. He was neither seen nor heard. He was just read." All *Chhetria Patrakar* can say is, *ya khuda*.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM
ISLAMABAD-PAKISTAN

Here's a course in **Urdu journalism** that can be accessed by anyone throughout Southasia, because it is a correspondence course. Run by the National Institute of Journalism in Islamabad, the course runs for 16 weeks, at a cost of PKR 3000. It is directed at "newcomers to media", journalists, as well as public-relations officers and marketing managers. But can non-Pakistanis apply? Don't see why not. If you would like to do Urdu journalism, simply apply, sahib or sahiba!

Speaking of public relations, Thukten Yeshi, the managing director of Aesthetic Bhutan Tours, sure knows how to milk the bejeezus out of **one's country's exotification**. He offers research-based tours in order to "build a new image of Bhutan as a progressive nation guided by profound wisdom ... [its] root philosophies and concepts, which make Bhutan a unique nation in the world." Mr Yeshi gets more profuse as he goes along: "Bhutan is an oasis of pristine environment, rich culture and tradition, and peace and harmony in the twenty first century world characterized by environment-degradation, culture-erosion, militancy, and people's alienation, anxiety, fear, and restlessness." All of which, predictably, leads to that old chestnut of age-old wisdom translated into a modern development concept, Gross National Happiness – thereby making "Bhutan one of the most spiritually progressive nations in the world".

Ref the **Urdu nuke notice** astride. Some radioactive material seems to have been lost in Pakistan, otherwise why would the authorities put out an advert in the major Urdu papers appealing for those who locate said material to report it? Even while the ad was out there in print, staring you in your face, government officials sought to reassure the media that no radioactive material had actually "been stolen, lost or gone missing", reports the BBC. So, then, why those notices? Officials claim, lamely, that there is a need to heighten public awareness of nuclear issues. Zaheer Ayub Baig, spokesman of the Nuclear Regulatory Authority, in a letter to the BBC, wrote that there could be decades-old nuclear material lying about. "This could have been before the creation of Pakistan, and may relate to nuclear material that could not be taken under our charge." He also said that there may be material out there that has been used in hospitals and industrial plants. "There is nothing to worry about," Mr Baig said. Uh-huh. CP is not convinced, and believes that, as they say, *daal may kuch kala hei*. Because at this very moment, we are A Q Khan sahib.

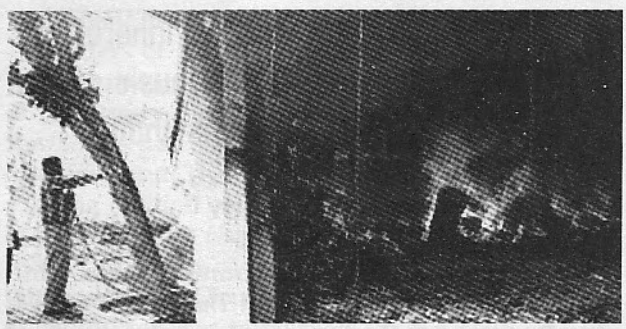
Bravo, **Dr Agnes Callamard**, executive director of ARTICLE 19! You have lambasted the UN Human Rights Council for its resolution of 30 March, for having violated international standards on freedom of expression. The resolution was sponsored by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and passed by 24 council members (14 voted

against the measure, and nine more abstained). Dr Callamard subsequently decried this undermining of the freedom of expression – the most effective protection against human-rights abuse – on the excuse of "human rights destruction waged by President Bush's version of America".

It is important to read her diatribe in full. She continues: "Religious believers have a right not to be discriminated against on the basis of their beliefs, but they cannot expect their religion to be set free from criticism, even in its harshest or most sarcastic form. The equality of all ideas and convictions before the law and the right to debate them freely is the keystone of democracy. As international human rights courts have stressed, freedom of expression is applicable not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received but also to those that may offend, shock or disturb any or all of us. In many ways, the Human Rights Council resolution is in keeping with a trend that has resurfaced with great strength in our post 9/11 world: protecting the belief at the expense of the believers, of all believers ... [Proponents of the resolution] chose to focus their efforts on protecting religion itself: NOT the believers and NOT freedom of religion."

Twenty years after the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) shot dead 40 Muslim men from Hashimpura, in Meerut District, and threw their bodies into the Upper Ganga canal, the families of the victims are still pursuing justice. Following a transfer order by the Supreme Court, it was only in 2006 that a Delhi Court finally framed murder charges against all the 19 PAC members accused. On 22 May 2007, to mark the anniversary of one of the worst communal killings in police custody in independent India, as many as 615 applications under the **Right to Information Act** were filed by the victims' families, challenging the impunity of the PAC and seeking accountability. For the first time in India's history, victims are asking the state to tell them why the accused have not been suspended from service even while they are facing prosecution; what disciplinary action has been initiated against them; and why the chargesheeting took almost a decade. Maybe the victims also want to know why there is such silence in the mainstream media on Hashimpura and other forgotten mass crimes.

Hats off to Mizzima News! The Burmese news agency, started in 1998 by a small group of Burmese journalists in exile, is this year's winner of the International Press Institute's **Free Media Pioneer Award**. That Mizzima exists at all has been no small feat, considering the wrath it has faced from the Burmese junta – which also recently got the Indian authorities to raid this intrepid watchdog's head office in Delhi.



The family feud in one of Tamil Nadu's leading political families has proved costly, not only for the dashing Dayanidhi Maran, who lost his job as Union Minister for Information and Technology as a result, but more so for employees of the **Tamil daily *Dinakaran***. On 9 May, two computer-service engineers and a watchman were killed after a petrol-bomb attack on the newspaper's Madurai office (*see photo*), owned by Kalanidhi Maran. The attack, allegedly by supporters of DMK leader M K Azhagiri, elder son of Chief Minister M Karunanidhi, was in response to the publication of a recent survey by *Dinakaran* and A C Nielsen. The report put the electoral chances for M K Stalin, the second son of Karunanidhi, at 70 percent, but gave just two percent to Azhagiri, who controls party cadres in the southern districts.

Dinakaran was bought two years ago by Karunanidhi's grand-nephew, Kalanidhi Maran. Since its acquisition by Maran, the paper has launched an aggressive price war, which reportedly boosted it from third to first place in state-wide readership in Tamil Nadu. Maran also owns the Sun TV network, the dominant private television network in South India. Readers may note that his brother, in his previous job, had oversight jurisdiction over the allocation of the broadcast spectrum. Not surprisingly, an opinion poll in *Dinakaran* rated Dayanidhi Maran as the "best" Union Minister from Tamil Nadu. But Karunanidhi was not amused, and saw to it that his grand-nephew was removed from his ministerial post – disregarding Dayanidhi's avowals that he was born a "party man", and would be one until his last breath. ▲

– Chhetria Patrakar

Dreaming without subtitles

'Fusion music' is a much-abused, little-understood term. But at least Amit Chaudhuri understands its inherent promise, as he presents the music of the early-21st-century urban Indian.

BY **SUMANA ROY**

A listener's first encounter with Amit Chaudhuri's new album *This Is not Fusion* is mediated through its cover. An imagined hybrid animal is sculpted in *dokra*, a metallic alloy; a saffron-clothed figure's gender is left undefined; 'Berlin' and 'Calcutta' appear side by side; a tanpura is on the front, a guitar on the back. This music is "not part of two different worlds," Chaudhuri declares in the liner notes, "but a common inheritance ... inlaid into different parts of a single self, a single memory." Perhaps aware of having already declared, in the album's title, what his music is not, Chaudhuri later sings: "This music has no land/ This music has no name/ Don't know where it began/ Don't know from where it came."

Chaudhuri is no sentimentalist, and *This Is not Fusion* contains no nostalgia for that romantic notion of a time before 'East' and 'West' hardened into specific lineages. The 45-year-old writer, who was born in Calcutta and grew up in Bombay, has instead created an anthem for people (maybe even generations) who, when they sleep, dream without subtitles in any language. The saffron-clothed figure on the cover holds a special meaning: Chaudhuri, in an earlier essay, "Thoughts in a Temple", had said that saffron "is the colour not of belonging, or fitting in, but of exile, of the marginal man". By extension, *Not Fusion* becomes the music of the exile. But this is a self-imposed exile, an exile from the oppressiveness of the 'East versus West' traditions.

What is 'fusion' music? And why is Chaudhuri so reluctant to take up its surname? "In East-West fusion as we know it here," Chaudhuri explained in a recent article in the *Times of India*, "the Indian representative is commonly a classical performer, and the bearer of an ancient tradition; the Western representative, often a jazz musician, a well-known type of modern, the exhausted romantic who's had enough of modernity, and must renovate himself through contact with immemorial cultures." He continued: "One of the more problematic features of fusion is its wide-eyed transcendence, not only of nationality but of locality, with the old ideal of the 'universal human being' reworked into the cunning, grasping innocence of our globalised world."

Within compositions that are branded as 'fusion', there is a piece of proto-fusion music, one that demands a particular conformity from its practitioners. Such proto pieces are not the classic pieces that one might expect. Rather, in the rarefied world of subcontinental fusion music, we generally find a deliberate synthesis of two heterogeneous forms of music – jazz and Carnatic, for instance, or Western classical and Hindostani classical. Such a situation creates a platform where there is no dialogue. Two people, two systems, speak in their native tongues, as though speaking in sign language, comprehensible only to their practitioners. This exclusionist practice succeeds because of the listener's lack of education and exposure, which partakes in and helps to accentuate the closed nature of such fusion work. This is obvious: there is no school, no *gharana*, of fusion music.

Fusion music, by laying claim to individuality, supposes to challenge the notion of the 'pure' or the 'authentic'. In so doing, it sanctions as its inheritance a kind of unexplained rootlessness. This is precisely where the problem with 'Indian' fusion music lies. A deliberate positioning of disparateness discounts history and its complex network of veins, which function as a framework to any piece of music, giving it body and weight. Indian fusion music, an oxymoronic nomenclature, has proliferated on this

scavenged ground of selective amnesia. Musicians from different traditions come together and create assemblages, rather than organic entities that have the capacity for self-sustenance.

While musicians and listeners alike have revelled in the aesthetic of the patchwork, this kind of 'fusion' has resulted in the assembly-line production of pieces of music where 'and' has become synonymous with fusion. But mere addition is not gain, as any musician will attest. The music may gain girth, but lose its sense of a centre of gravity, lose sight of its origin. The average piece of Indian fusion music has, therefore, neither beginning nor end. There is no imperfection in Indian fusion music. This is not because there are no faults, but simply because such a piece of music can never be perfect. The genre has become something like the parrot's song – mimicked without context and, therefore, sounding similar after a few listens.

In "so-called world music", the cultural-studies scholar Paul Gilroy has argued, "authenticity enhances the appeal of selected cultural commodities, and has become an important element in the mechanism of the mode of racialisation necessary to making non-European and non-American musics acceptable items in an expanded pop market." The effort to be 'authentic' in an age of digital remixing can often be hilarious. In Karan Johar's 1998 film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, for instance, the *bhajan* "Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram" is sung to the beat of military marching music, with the Indian and British flags hung at half mast, as if in symbolic compromise. Often, an Orientalist construct is attested by a contemporary globalising mission (as evident in the famous works of Philip Glass), where the world lays claim to Indian music like a tourist carrying a favourite tune back after a holiday.

Provincial geneology

Unlike so-called fusion or world music, however, the compositions in *This Is not Fusion* are all bound by a spirit of 'historical provincialism'. The need to contextualise subcontinental fusion music comes from the need to create a genealogy for it. As Chaudhuri has argued, fusion music cannot be an ahistorical monster. Is *This Is not Fusion*, then, a piece of history? Yes and no. Yes, it is a tract of personal history, the history of one displaced and still moving – the history of the global citizen interpreting his reflection in the window with the provincial vocabulary of his self. It is an indirect critique of globalisation, a process that has killed provinciality and rendered the local paralysed. *Not Fusion* is perhaps one of the last sighs of the century, escaping from the global citizen's lips – a regret for what could have been rather than what once was. Chaudhuri's work celebrates history with a footnote. Its creators do not fight over legitimacy. Their music, unlike most contemporary music that calls itself fusion, does not ask the irrelevant questions of 'When?' and 'Then?' It is simply an exploration of the possible.

Readers of Chaudhuri's fiction and poetry were perhaps prepared for his new musical work. The titles of his literary works – *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, *E-Minor* – had made evident the leaning of their creator's mind. The 2002 short story "White Lies" was a strong political commentary on the sudden revival of the *ghazal* and *bhajan* traditions in India during the 1980s. Dictated by commerce (and its ally, mediocrity), this revivalism, Chaudhuri showed, had been urban in nature, and was responsible for the death of many non-metropolitan traditions. In many ways, "White Lies" was also a contemporary fable about music in the age of mechanical reproduction, about the triumph of the technology-enhanced recording over the simple human voice.

The impulses at work in Chaudhuri's fiction are evident in his music as well. By placing a stanza or two from the songs of Tagore or Nazrul in the narrative, he deconstructs one with the other. Here is an example, from his 1998 *Freedom Song*:

> She began a familiar song:
> Lost heart
> On a verdant road
> I gather strewn flowers
> By myself.
> Park Circus; Shamsul Huda Haq Road. A pharmacy and a sweet shop at its entrance. Only a twenty minutes' walk from Khuku's house.

Fusion influence

The collaboration between Indian and Western musicians dates back to the 1960s, to Ravi Shankar's work with Bud Shank and with The Beatles. Soon after that, Miles Davis, the jazz musician, started to create 'fusion' sounds with such musicians as Khalil Balakrishna, Bihari Sharma and Badal Roy. In the mid-1970s, the British guitarist John McLaughlin began to collaborate with Southasian musicians Zakir Hussain, L Shankar and others in the influential fusion group Shakti. For a while, the incorporation of Indian influences and instruments was relatively widespread, including such popular Western bands as the Rolling Stones, the Grateful Dead, Traffic, the Incredible String Band and many others. London during the late 1980s saw a resurgence of this form, in the coming-together of Indian and Western traditions to create forms like the Asian Underground (*see accompanying article*).

The late 1980s was also a time of formation of many Indian bands that tried fusion, particularly Indus Creed, Parikrama, Pentagram, Zero and Nexus. Contemporary artists working in this category include Bikram Ghosh, the tabla player who heads the fusion band Rhythmscape, Maqsoodul Haque and his band Bauliana, and Naquib Khan and his band Renaissance.

The aesthetic remains the same in *This Is not Fusion*. The nameless mythical animal juxtaposed against the names of streets and places on the album's cover is emblematic of the familiar and unfamiliar, one interpreting the other to create the template of a provincial discourse, even before we hear the music. This is an enriching provinciality, a temper that is gradually drying out amidst the fierce forces of globalisation. We later find this to be the voice of the *flaneur* (a "gentleman stroller of city streets", in the French poet Baudelaire's words) – moving, roaming, discovering, commenting on and interpreting, for himself and the not-yet enlightened world. This *flaneur* is a 21st-century modernist, picking up things for later use: texts from the backs of Indian trucks, sounds from the Berlin underground, the twanging of a *dhunuri* (a tool used for cotton fluffing) from the street, shouts from refugee newspaper-sellers in Europe in the morning and the All India Radio theme tune in the evening.

Just as Chaudhuri's four novels begin and end with various comings and goings, his music is full of metaphors of travel, the rhythms of movement, of trucks, of the *dhunuri* man walking the streets of old Bengal, of the gradual movement of the day's brightness dying into evening (a sound that can only be sensed through music) – and finally, of the movement of music itself, from one tradition to another, the sounds of musical osmosis.

The musicians of *Not Fusion* clarify their politics at the outset: that of the secular, modern Indian, who finds "a little bit of this, a little bit of that" in his self. It is therefore no coincidence that Ramakrishna Paramahansa is Chaudhuri's emblem: "The liberal humanism of the Bengal Renaissance formed the basis of the secular Indian state," Chaudhuri wrote in "Thoughts in a Temple". "The experiments of Ramakrishna, in which different ways of seeing existed in a sort of tension within oneself, formed the basis of the creativity of the modern Indian. It is no accident that every significant Indian writer or artist has negotiated seemingly antithetical world-views or languages in his or her work."

If there is any tradition in which we can categorise the musicians – the vocalist, Chaudhuri himself, and the accompanists of *Not Fusion* – it is in this: that of not belonging to any single tradition. "It's only natural that we belong to several places," Chaudhuri has written elsewhere, "all of us, not only because of fashionable air travel and possibilities made open to the diaspora, but because of history ... All these people, those who possess and those who don't possess, belong to a number of places."

Musafir hoon yaaron

There is no pure; all cultures are hybrid. *This Is not Fusion* is the music of the early-21st-century urban Indian. "What else but the subconscious can make Milton, Imre Nagy, *The Seventh Seal*, Mozart, the *Ramayana*, Nischindipur, Basavanna, Kerala, Chicago, Calcutta and France seem part of a single literary history?" Chaudhuri has asked in an essay. "It is the dimension of the subconscious that distinguishes this tale of modernity from the postcolonial narrative. In the latter, a confrontation takes place between empire and local culture."

But in Chaudhuri's story of 'fusion', "the battle, the struggle takes place *within* the self, not just between the self and an enemy outside it." The narrative of modernity, he argues, is as much a story of self-division as the postcolonial narrative is one of empire, domination and resistance. In the postcolonial narrative, the mother tongue, the ideas of 'Indianness' and 'Bengaliness' are natural properties of the colonised, threatened by the processes of empire. In the story of modernity, the mother tongue and the English language are part of a transaction that, "through disowning and recovery", define the 'modern' self.

This Is not Fusion is about cultural diffusion, in which the old artefacts of identity are passé. In the process, it tries to find a grammar in which these fluid identities can be cast, at least temporarily. Beyond anything else, this is what *Not Fusion* celebrates: impermanence, evolution, freedom, the opposite of inertia. In other words, process. In so doing, it also leaves a listener without a sense of an ending – as indeed all things in 'process' must. The moral is perhaps this: in our postmodern fables of pastlessness, the only journeys possible are, ironically, through memory. So, remember.

It is no coincidence that most of the compositions in *Not Fusion* are about moving, about 'history ... passing', about the sound of the wheels on roads, or the wanderings of the Bauls in Bengal. *Not Fusion* is not just a Whitmanesque song of the roadside; it also belongs to the tradition of songs of the journey of the Subcontinent – "*Musafir hoon yaaron*," I am a traveler, says one well-known Hindi film song.

Not Fusion does not follow the easy routine of borrow-replace-create; rather, it creates a new vocabulary of exchange, which proves that dialogue is possible between cultures. It works between certain moods of traditions, not as mere elective affinities of musicians, whose inspiration results in material representations of two cultures yoked together by violence. If the album fails, it will not be because of its musicians; we the listeners will be responsible. We are so used to 'system' writers and musicians that any work we cannot fit into our store of codes scares us. "It is doubtful if the discriminating minority will go for a hybrid if they can find the meat in a conventional movie," said Satyajit Ray, about the new wave of Indian cinema. If we fail to grow an attachment with the hybrid called *This Is not Fusion*, it is simply because we are still uncomfortable with a part of ourselves.

A soundtrack for a foreign existence

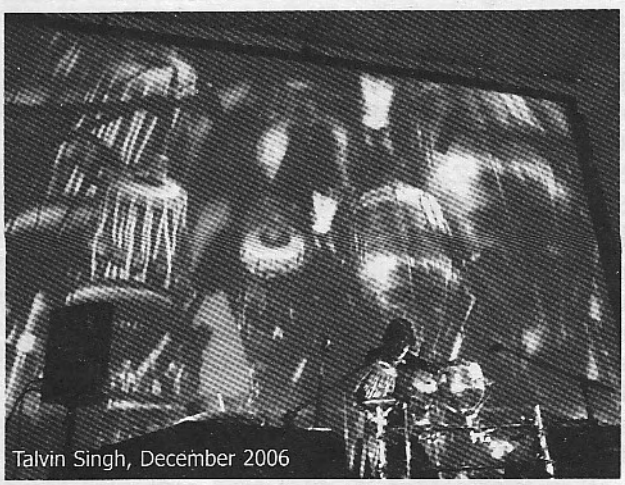
For a new generation of Southasians, particularly those growing up in the diaspora, music plays an important role in adapting old traditions to new realities.

BY **RAHUL GIRI**

A light scent of sandalwood lingered in the lounge. The soft, colourful lights filtered through hovering smoke as music resonated throughout the room – a mix of booming club beats and tabla, topped with melting sitar riffs. Then the voice of Ustad Sultan Khan joined the ensemble, reminding this writer of the old Indian classical songs that his mother used to listen to every morning. The sound of the sitar seemed to grow by the second, blossoming into something magnanimous, the sinuous bass lines reverberating along with the tabla's *da da dhin na* and the club beats, as the Ustad's haunting vocals diffused over it all.

This grand unification was thanks to a band called Midival Punditz, one of the first Indian 'electronica' bands to make it big on the international scene. The group's founders, Tapan Raj and Gaurav Raina, are known for their cross-cultural vision, which they describe as marrying "the soulful elegance of Southasia's extraordinarily rich traditional and classical music heritage with the exuberance and limitless potential of modern Western electronic music". The group is also an integral part of the musical collective known as the Asian Massive, an offshoot of the Asian Underground movement, the UK-based collective that mixes contemporary metropolitan culture with traditional Southasian music. According to Raj, "It is about trying to stretch Western audiences towards Indian sounds, and to stretch Indian audiences towards modern, electronic, Western music."

As more and more Southasian artists cropped up in the British music scene, a record label (and club) called Outcaste was founded in 1995. Featuring only Southasian artists, its music later became known as the Asian Underground. The term 'Asian Underground' was initially used to describe Southasian artists based in the UK, who, during the mid- to late 1990s, were merging elements of Western underground dance music with the traditional music of their homelands. These artists were generally second-generation, British-born youth, many of whose parents had experienced life as immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s, when racism in the UK was at a peak. The music of the Asian Underground became a response to the race-based atrocities faced by these youths and their families. It was the music of the displaced – a manifestation of alienation, and a trans-national discourse that found its roots in the processes of migration in the post-war British cultural milieu. The Asian Underground movement also made the statement that 'brown' people were as cool as anybody else.



STEVE T

Talvin Singh, December 2006

Throughout the 20th century, local cultural forms around the world, including those of music, came under pressure from the introduction and encroachment of Western forms. According to Bruno Nettl, a music and anthropology scholar, the reactions by non-Western societies to this dynamic can be classified into three types. First, there is the desire to leave the traditional culture intact, essentially allowing the form to live on with no change whatsoever. Second, there is a call for complete Westernisation, the "simple incorporation of a society into the Western cultural system". Nettl describes the third reaction as "moderate" compared to these first two – it is the search for modernisation, which he defines as "the adoption and adaptation of Western technology and other products of Western culture ... with an insistence that the core of cultural values will not change greatly". This vision of 'modernisation' is what gave birth to the unison of traditional Indian music and electronic music through Western technology.

The stepping-stone

Ravi Shankar was one of the key figures to first couple classical Hindostani music with Western sounds. During the 1960s, he collaborated with The Beatles' bass player George Harrison, who had been studying the sitar. Their friendship made an international star

of Ravi Shankar, and did much to feed the burgeoning fascination with India in the West. (Albeit that all was not well in the subsequent 'fusion' of these cultures. Recalling one trip to San Francisco, Ravi Shankar later wrote in his autobiography: "I felt offended and shocked to see India being regarded so superficially and its great culture being exploited. Yoga, Tantra, mantra, *kundalini*, ganja, hashish, Kama Sutra? They all became part of a cocktail everyone seemed to be lapping up!")

Following the Shankar/Harrison work, many artists, especially from the American jazz community, followed in the footsteps of this musical collaboration. Guitarist John McLaughlin incorporated various Hindostani classical sounds in his electric-jazz-rock fusion group the Mahavishnu Orchestra, and later worked with L Shankar and Zakir Hussain in the acoustic ensemble Shakti. In the UK, India-born and -trained Ashwin Batish combined popular rock rhythms with sitar melodies for a 1986 album, *Sitar Power*. For his follow-up to this album, *Sitar Power #2*, Batish blended tabla and sitar with synthesiser and guitars. Then, in the early 1990s, bands such as Cornershop and Asian Dub Foundation began churning out politically charged songs that confronted the racism prevalent in the UK at the time.

Post-World War II, European countries faced shortages of unskilled labour. While the UK initially drew upon Irish workers, it later moved its focus almost entirely onto former colonies in Southasia, the Caribbean, East Africa and the Mediterranean. As the new migrants took up these low-wage jobs, however, many British found themselves displaced or with significantly limited job options. The ramifications of this in the context of a dilapidated British economy manifested themselves in racism and rising tensions between migrants and the native population.

Migrants from the Caribbean found solace in musical forms they had brought with them – reggae, ska and dub. During the 1970s, groups such as Jah Shaka made roots reggae popular among the Caribbean working class through songs that addressed the injustice, poverty and racism faced by Jamaican youth. Artists such as Bob Marley made this music and message even more popular, and brought it to a world stage. In the mid-1970s, highly political punk acts such as The Clash incorporated and featured reggae music on their own albums, cementing reggae's counter-cultural image and importance. Soon, music from the Caribbean, along with punk and, during the 1980s, hip-hop, had become part of the mainstream British music scene.

Musical activism

The success of Caribbean music in the UK eventually led to new possibilities for second-generation Southasian youth to express their dissatisfaction and disapproval of their country through music. Asian Dub Foundation, which combined elements of electronic, reggae and hip-hop, for instance, claims to have used its music "to raise consciousness about racism and police brutality, as well as to campaign against the unjust imprisonment of Satpal Ram, who was finally freed after fifteen years of imprisonment largely due to Asian Dub Foundation's efforts." Ram was a British Southasian who was arrested for murder following a racially charged fight in England in 1986. Later, allegations arose (which eventually led to his 2002 acquittal) that the all-white jury had not been able to process crucial evidence due to the fact that no Bengali-speaking interpreter had been provided at the trial. Many say that Asian Dub Foundation's work on the issue kept Ram's case alive. The group's current work, though less political, has been just as community-based, including spreading awareness about HIV and AIDS.

Some of these artists used their music as a form of criticism – of racism, of political and economic oppression. But for many of the early Asian Underground musicians, the most important issue was displacement, and their music became a way to explore and discuss their fractured existence in a foreign land. One of the Asian Underground's pioneers, Nitin Sawhney, delved so regularly into aspects of the immigrant experience that he came to be seen as an activist. Karsh Kale, a pioneer of the movement in the US, explains what was being attempted this way: "We're displaced from where we come from, so we make up stories, and that's what the music is about. It's about making a soundtrack for our existence here."

The apex of the Asian Underground movement came in the form of a British-born musician of Southasian descent named Talvin Singh. Singh's unique brand of drum-and-bass and classical Indian music came to prove such a draw that, in 1995, he was able to found a club in London, named Anokha, devoted solely to this new form of music. While Singh had started playing the tabla at the age of five, his musical interests, like that of many of his friends, also lay in those genres that formed the core of mainstream British music at the time – punk, electronic and hip-hop.

At 16, Singh went to India to pursue his education in classical music. After his return to the UK in the mid-1980s, he began collaborating with such avant-garde musicians as Bjork and The Future Sound of London. It was at this time that he began making drum-and-bass music – the mainstay of British dance halls – but using tabla and other Indian percussion instruments to do so. Regardless of past collaborative 'fusion' attempts between Western and Indian musical forms, this had never been done before.

Talvin Singh's album *OK*, released in 1998, became such a hit in Britain that the sound in it could no longer be considered 'underground'. As with the reggae, ska and other forms of the 1970s, this music, with its feet planted firmly in two widely disparate traditions, was no longer confined to a single culture. And the world of music is the richer for it.

India is flat

BY **VIJAY PRASHAD**

In 2004, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance went before the electorate with the motto, 'India Shining'. The BJP probably lost the election for a host of other reasons, but the sheer absurdity of the slogan highlighted the party's callousness. 'India Shining' rang false to hundreds of millions of Indians in the throes of a prolonged agrarian crisis, and to untold others 'retrenched' from their industrial and bureaucratic jobs. Pratap Suthan, the advertising expert who designed the phrase, later reflected that it "is all about pride. It gives us brown-skinned Indians a huge sense of achievement. Look at the middle class, and they tell the story of a resurgent India." The truth is encapsulated in the last sentence: the middle class is the subject that shines, and its self-image drives the hype about India, Inc.

New York-based Mira Kamdar's new book both mirrors that middle-class bravado, and gently questions it. There is the familiar litany: India is the planet's fourth-largest economy; its growth rate is very high; its cities spawn supermalls as fast as they can be built. Bangalore's information technology sector makes an early appearance, and its entrepreneurs act as the philosophers of our time (Infosys's Nandan Nilekani, after all, gave *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman the title for his 2005 bestseller, *The World Is Flat*). Kamdar rightly points to the role of the Indian diaspora, to those Internet and finance kingpins from California's Silicon Valley whose children have now emerged as culture-makers in their own right – producing documentaries, films and comics, most of which are now created in Bangalore and Bombay for a global market. "Buoyed by strong economic growth and a new smorgasbord of consumer goods and entertainment options," Kamdar writes, "India's youth is filled with fresh confidence, fueled by high expectations. They believe the future belongs to them." But who qualifies as 'youth'? Almost 550 million Indians are below the age of 25. Many of them see their confidence shattered before they attain maturity.

Kamdar is aware of this. As soon as the reader of her book gets complacent about the opportunities, she steps in with a few statistics to dampen their enthusiasm. Farmer suicides, malnutrition, illiteracy and the shabbiness of infrastructure litter the text as signposts of other Indias – 'Bharat', or what have you. The ills are familiar, but they are often airbrushed from the India, Inc story. The push is on to brand India – the job of the public-private India Brand Equity Foundation established in 2003. This branding "is done by taking part of the story," Kamdar tells us,

> the story of a richer, smarter, and more powerful India becoming more like the West – and turning it into the whole story. The result is a cosmetically enhanced image of India where the less attractive realities of endemic poverty, a raging HIV/AIDS epidemic, environmental catastrophe, and collapsing urban infrastructure are conveniently glossed over, if not completely ignored.

The gurus of the New Economy (another branding device of the plutocracy) are generous enough to recognise that their enclaves do not represent the country. Infosys's other guru, N R Narayan Murthy, yearns for a "compassionate capitalism", a system that reaches out to the millions who have been left out of India, Inc's framework. At least these new gurus are better than the bulk of the elite, whose members, as Kamdar points out, "are impatient with the poor".

But liberal concern is insufficient. Nilekani proposes that, "Globalization is in our favor. Innovation is not a problem," and so suggests that the way to create "ten to twelve million new jobs" is by "scaling it up", or increasing the scale of the successes that he attributes to globalisation. India's IT sector has so far produced about 1.3 million jobs, and no one really has the answer to how the technology revolution will draw in more millions. The expectation that the IT sector will produce more jobs, it seems, is more virtual than real, more marketing than sociology.

Brand experts tell us that India's 'middle class' numbers about 240 million, just about the total population of the United States. This hype serves their clients. Provisional but more-scientific studies, such as those done by the geographer Jan Nijman, show us that those who are now 'middle class' might have always been so. Upward mobility is not the mark of this epoch. What we have here are people who no longer defer gratification, but who are able to buy

Planet India:
How the fastest growing democracy is transforming America and the world
by **Mira Kamdar**
Scribner, 2007

homes and cars at a younger age than their parents were. Cheap money encourages people not to 'wait for the promotion'. So far, job creation is not on the agenda. Rather, as China's ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi, said in 2005, "China has a large manufacturing base. I believe it is the world's factory. And India, with its development in software and other areas, I feel is the world's office." More jobs are created in the factory than in the office. Neither *Planet India* nor the IT gurus say much about this, although they are aware of IT's inability to create jobs in bulk. The Bangalore companies continue to expand in India, but they too have outsourced production to China.

Kamdar's book raises many problems, but offers few solutions. Rohini Nilekani, Nandan Nilekani's wife, tells Kamdar: "Many of us try to dissect this animal called poverty. It has many avatars. In India, three hundred million people are living with less than they need to eat. Anything can happen ... We are working in the trenches to deepen democracy." This is pabulum in a context in which corporate power (Infosys included), however compassionate, overwhelms the state and the citizenry. What is nevertheless prescient in Rohini Nilekani's comment is that "anything can happen". As growth rates rise and produce an increasing gap between India's rich and poor, the tinder is dry. What the Nilekani couple proposes is to continue with policies that produce high growth rates and high inequality – to create the very conditions that they bemoan.

Left out

Planet India introduces readers to a range of interesting people from the worlds of business, media, advocacy, academia, entertainment and government. But Kamdar neglects to talk to the political left, both organised and informal. While some 'grassroots' people make an appearance, by and large they are executive directors of NGOs with substantial funding bases. There are few barefoot activists or communists, trade unionists or Kisan Sabha organisers. Indeed, Kamdar's knowledge of the left is revealingly limited: for her, the Maoists came out of the Communist Party of India, when in fact most of those who became Naxalites came out of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Kamdar points out that when George W Bush visited India in 2006, Delhi "was paralyzed by demonstrations". But the politics of the demonstrators remain out of her consideration; they seemingly do not belong on Planet India. Were we to hear from them, however, we would find a different story – one that might see Washington, DC less as a partner (Kamdar repeats the tired reference to India and the US as "two of the world's great democracies") than as the engine of planetary suffering. Neither does the author offer any analysis of the baleful role played by finance capital, whose unfettered power since the 1960s has smothered the ability of sovereign states to enact their own destiny. Global finance has long been empowered by the Group of Seven (G-7) countries, the de facto leader of which is the US president. Kamdar's evocation of democracy is formal and nostalgic: she looks back to the revolutionary era of the 18th century and the US Constitution, but not to their failures, nor to the undemocratic international polity husbanded by the G-7, together with corporations housed in the global North.

The future, Kamdar notes at the close of *Planet India*, rests in how India answers its challenges. But the future is also being lived out in Latin America, where left-leaning social movements and their political parties have seized capital by the throat. Now the rest of the world watches to see what those Latin American fingers are capable of.

Parsing the Indian 'identity'

BY **ADITYA ADHIKARI**

In current academic and intellectual circles, this is a time of widespread suspicion of what has been called the 'grand narrative' – those accounts of countries and cultures that claim to be comprehensive. Such narratives, warn critics, not only ignore heterogeneity, but also uphold dominant power structures. This is also a time when the dominant intellectual mood celebrates the mixing of cultures, and perceives identity to be multiple – like masks that can be worn and taken off as the situation demands. To claim that a people have a particular identity is to invite charges that one views culture as fixed and inalterable, and does not allow for the possibility of social change.

In such an intellectual climate, Sudhir and Katharina Kakar have written an unapologetically unfashionable book, attempting to reveal the common cultural characteristics that make up Indian culture and society. Their focus is squarely on middle-class, *savarna* Hindus, who, they claim, occupy the dominant place in Indian culture. Those "at the margins of Hindu society (such as the Dalits and tribals, or the Christians and Muslims)," they write,

"will spot only fleeting resemblances to themselves" in the pages of *The Indians*. The scope of the Kakars' work is highly ambitious, covering everything from the sexual life of Indians to the nature of conflict between Hindus and Muslims. The Goa-based husband-and-wife team contend that there are more similarities than differences among the various people of the Subcontinent, and verge perilously close to the view (appropriately qualified, of course) that there is an underlying core at the heart of Indian civilisation, one which remained intact through the Mughal invasions, British colonialism and other vicissitudes of Indian history.

"Identity is not a role, or a succession of roles, with which it is often confused," write the authors, in a passage that is sure to annoy postmodernists and other likeminded readers. "It is not a garment that can be put on or taken off according to the weather outside; it is not 'fluid', but marked by a sense of continuity and sameness irrespective of where the person finds himself during the course of his life."

The Kakars have a talent for explicating, in a thoroughly contemporary idiom, the 'laws' that govern the Indian social universe. Oftentimes the average Indian reader will be only vaguely aware of social mores that the authors claim to be widely and deeply held. Prior to reading the Kakars (including Sudhir Kakar's past works), the reader would likely have considered his actions to have been governed by an ethical system rooted in the various injunctions of older family members, and in well-worn statements from India's classical and folk literature. *The Indians*, however, opens up a new door, enabling the reader to perceive how the system has shaped and defined his culture and personality.

The Kakars convincingly connect Indian business culture to the Indian child's experience of family. From an early age, they write, the Indian child is made aware of the importance of the integrity of the family, and of the hierarchy within it. Indian children receive much nurturing from their elders, but are also expected to follow their elders' injunctions - to the extent that they are made to believe that what their elders dictate is what is best for them. This has ramifications far into the child's future, particularly when he has to join the workforce. Drawing from a report on various global corporate cultures, the Kakars show how the Indian organisation is characterised by four elements: a high degree of idealisation by subordinates of their superiors; a significant separation between members of the organisation by power, authority and prestige; a widespread culture of caring, altruism and kindness; and a fierce loyalty by workers towards the organisation.

At first glance, some of what the Kakars reveal is startlingly counter-intuitive. Take, for instance, the relationship between the daughter-in-law and her cruel mother-in-law, which is an inexhaustible theme of Indian folktales and TV soap operas. When such a plot is used, every Indian (indeed, nearly every Southasian) knows to sympathise with the victimised daughter-in-law, and to revile the villainous mother-in-law. But the Kakars demonstrate that such animosity towards the mother-in-law is in fact unwarranted, as she is merely "an agent of the Indian family", whose role is simply to preserve the traditional form of the family from outside intrusion. "Given the organizing principle of the traditional Indian family," the Kakars continue, in which the parent-son and filial bonds are more central than the husband-wife tie (that is considered the fulcrum of the modern Western family), the new bride constitutes a very real threat to the unity of the larger family. Abundantly aware of the power of sex to overthrow religiously sanctioned family values and long-established social norms, the family is concerned that the young wife may cause her husband to neglect his duties as a son, as a brother, a nephew, an uncle; that he will transfer his loyalty and affection to her rather than remaining truly a son of the house.

The Indians: Portrait of a people
by **Sudhir and Katharina Kakar**
Penguin Books, 2007

Refined enjoyment

Perhaps because *The Indians* is largely a synthesis of Sudhir Kakar's previous books, the quality of the chapters here is somewhat uneven. Two of the most problematic deal with the various shapes of modern Hinduism, and with communal antagonism and violence. These read like mere amalgamations of the works of many other social scientists, and include little unique insight.

But outstanding chapters, such as the one on Indian sexuality, make up for those weaker parts. The study of sexuality has been a major facet of Sudhir Kakar's career. In addition to his studies on sexual mores in contemporary India, he has co-authored a translation of the Kama Sutra, and written a novel based on the life of Vatsyayana. In *The Indians*, the Kakars draw from these works, to create a celebratory and lyrical account of sexuality during the era in which the Kama Sutra was written.

While admiring sexuality as practiced in ancient India, the Kakars are pained by the conservative and puritanical sexual mores of contemporary India. Indian society today, they say, is in "the dark ages of sexuality", characterised by a lack of "erotic grace which frees sexual

activity from the imperatives of biology, uniting the partners in sensual delight and metaphysical openness." The Kama Sutra, then, remains particularly relevant in contemporary India. Juxtaposed against the discussion of contemporary sexual mores, the celebration of the Kama Sutra appears as an effort to critique modern Indian sexuality through the presentation of an example of a superior alternative from the Subcontinent's own history:

> The erotic love of the Kama Sutra is a precarious balancing act between the possessiveness of sexual desire and the tenderness of romantic longing, between the disorder of instinctuality and the moral forces of order, between the imperatives of nature and the civilizing attempts of culture. It is a search for harmony in all the opposing forces that constitute human sexuality.

Similar implicit critiques run throughout *The Indians*. The Kakars approve of societal characteristics that promote harmony, health and the refined enjoyment of the daily pleasures that life offers. They disapprove of those characteristics that cause discord, and inhibit expression and enjoyment. Indeed, Sudhir Kakar was a practicing psychoanalyst for many years, seeking to liberate his patients from psychological barriers that prevented them from living full and healthy lives. In *The Indians*, the authors come through as pragmatic, wise and gentle guides. They criticise, but their criticism is understated, appearing on the surface as simple description of Indian society. Even when they describe ugly traits, they do so with warmth and fondness towards the people they are describing. Ultimately, it is the gentle, implicit critique and the warmth of the Kakars' personalities that hold the disparate strands of this book together.

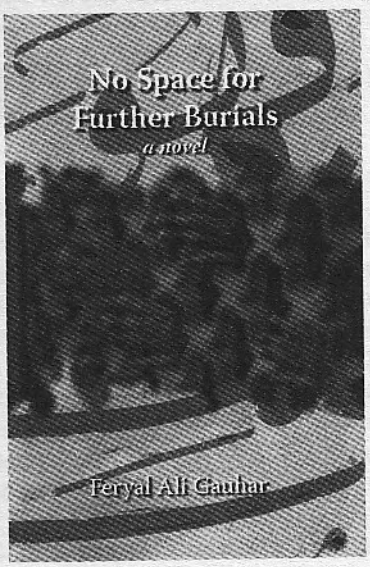
Afghanistan anodyne

BY **AUNOHITA MOJUMDAR**

Feryal Ali Gauhar's new novel is an unmitigated tale of horror – bestial fact stacked upon bestial fact, evoking revulsion and nausea. The book's jacket claims that the work powerfully reveals the tragedy of Afghanistan, the terrible madness of war. But *No Space for Further Burials* never reaches that broader bank, staying caught instead in the narrow sewer it describes.

Although the book's publisher gives only sketchy details about the author, Gauhar is well-known enough in her multiple roles as a UN goodwill ambassador, a TV actress, and as the author of the 2002 *The Scent of Wet Earth in August*, which explored Tibbi Galli (Lahore's red-light area) and the abuse of women. In *No Space for Further Burials*, she moves away from both Pakistan and gender issues, instead basing her novel in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Gauhar's central figure is a US Army soldier who, having strayed from his base, is captured, and suddenly finds himself shoved into in a mental asylum along with mentally deranged, physically crippled and diseased inmates. Inside the walls of the asylum he is known as 'Firangi'. The asylum, once funded by the government and serviced by foreign doctors, has now been abandoned to itself, with only the inmates/captives remaining behind, kept forcibly by the asylum's caretaker and his wife. There are several mysteries here: why the caretaker continues to hold these people here; why he and his wife do not turn the inmates free, and escape themselves; where the group's food comes from, and why they choose to slowly starve rather than leave the asylum's horrific confines. Perhaps Gauhar feels no need to explain these issues, preferring instead to allow them to build into her endless vortex of sordidness.



No Space for Further Burials
by **Feryal Ali Gauhar**
Women Unlimited, 2007

In the midst of all this, there are some references to the outside world. Soldiers, who are interchangeable with looters and rebels (the distinction is not explained at any length), come regularly to plunder the asylum for whatever it might yield. There are some brief snapshots of Firangi's earlier life in his military base, as well as occasional references to the possible futility of the American military attempt to bring democracy and liberation to a country such as Afghanistan. Gauhar tries to

weave in bits of Afghan history, as well as that of the Great Depression of 1930s America. Where the book fails is in linking these issues together; in broadening the peephole show to take in the larger world; in balancing the horror with the human element that would let the reader relate to the characters or their squalid situation.

No single character in this asylum is afflicted by just one ailment. Instead, each has a string of horrors plaguing him or her. Even the one friend that Firangi makes in the asylum, Bulbul, ends up making lewd gestures at him before stealing his clothes. All the while, Firangi's homophobic fear of contact with Bulbul hangs over the relationship like a pallid, overcast sky. At other times, limbs are broken and deformed, flesh is torn, and family tortures family; pus, mucus and blood are liberally smeared over this tale. All forms of madness also make appearances here – rape, injury, the killing of families, and people driven insane by the terrible things that have happened to them.

Anaesthetised

Sitting in Afghanistan reading this book, this reviewer notices interest in Afghanistan flagging in the international media. Only the big, sexy stories continue to capture interest: the drug wars, the Taliban and the deaths. There is the fear that reporting on Afghanistan will go the way of Iraq, reduced to stories of the dead and not the living. The incessant roll call of death in Iraq has blunted media viewers the world round – immunised us from feeling anything but the mildest shock. Death tolls of more than a hundred are relegated to sidebars in newspapers, taken off the headlines after cursory mentions in brief bulletins.

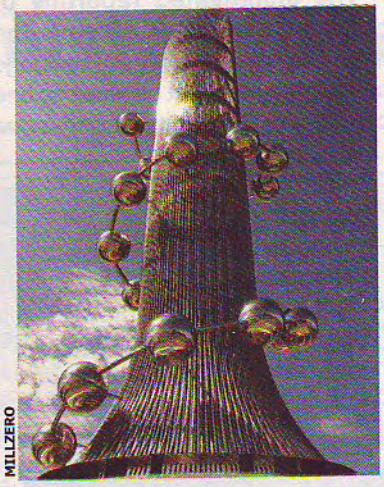
The unmitigated reporting of horror functions as an anodyne. The lack of shock evoked by the coverage of Iraq is skewed; not because no one cares about the living, but rather due to the fact that the media does not talk of them. When understanding of a country is reduced to its death count, there is no human face to the tragedy there, and it slowly ceases to matter. Similarly, the sheer horrors in Feryal Ali Gauhar's book also act as an anodyne, to anaesthetise any sensation.

There is an element of Mantoesque madness recreated in *No Space for Further Burials*: the blurring of lines between the sane and the insane, between memories and reality, between dreams and facts; the loss of concepts of time and space; the nowhere land of Toba Tek Singh, from where Firangi will not be rescued. At best, however, this remains a mere attempt. The attempt to make everything absolutely horrifying, surpassed by even more unimaginable horrors that lie in wait, destroys what the book sets out to do. *No Space for Further Burials* may bring up plenty of bile, but it does little to stir real emotions.

Atoll before the storm

2 May. The government of the Maldives had decided to hold a celebration in honour of World Press Freedom Day, and had chosen a state-of-the-art slogan: 'Press Forward Maldives'. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was on the dais, under a banner that proclaimed World Press Freedom, and Minister for Information Mohamad Nasheed was at the podium, emphasising the need for "free and *responsible* media to promote the presidential agenda for reform and democracy".

Press freedom, declared Minister Nasheed, clearly a bright-eyed boy of the ageing president, "cannot be used to whip up divisions and disaster, cannot dehumanise and destroy the delicate fabric of our small community". He stressed the need for professionalism and "decorum".


MILLZERO

There is obviously some discontent with regard to the 'presidential agenda' in the atolls; and in the hall, there were some journalists present who did not want to feel all that 'responsible'. In the back, placards were unsheathed and quietly held aloft, calling for press freedom and an end to government harassment of journalists and media organisations. It all seemed a highly civilised affair, for those of us from more-cynical northern climes, where authority is challenged with rants and raves, *zindabads* and *murdabads*.

This was said to be the first time that President Gayoom had been challenged face-to-face by dissidents in the country. It was history being made, and certainly a lot of decorum was being displayed.

President Gayoom – who has been president since back when Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Ziaur Rahman, Zia ul-Haq and Birendra were still our respective prime ministers, dictators, presidents and king – eventually got up to speak. The agitators stood up and walked out single-file, about ten of them. The president pretended not to notice, and reminisced affably about his student days in Cairo. He confessed that, as a one-time pen-pusher himself back in the 1950s, he had a soft spot for journalism, and acknowledged the rising assertiveness of the Maldivian media – "even though it is overly politicised". Quite different, evidently, from when he used to serve as editor, staff reporter and typist of the *Maldivian News Bulletin* and a cricket magazine.

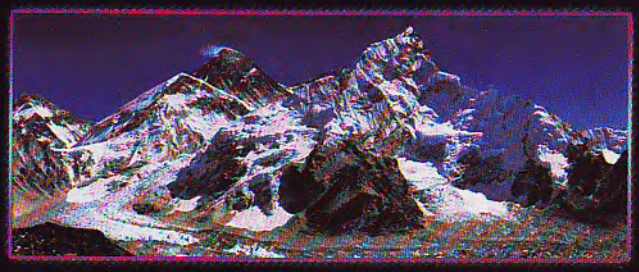
Today, Gayoom is challenged by, among others, the fiery Aminath Najeeb, founder-editor of *Minivan* ('independent') *News*. Is Gayoom's hold unravelling? He has been to the brink before this, Najeeb explains, and has managed to hold on. Previously, however, he has not had to contend with Internet activism, for one. In addition, discontent is clearly catalysing, and is bound to break through the barrier reefs that protect the Maldivian establishment. While the distance between the islands has punctured previous attempts at political activism, it is likely that the future will see dissidence based on the growing distance between comfortable Male, which sponges off the resort hotels owned by the capital's rich, and the rest of the atolls.

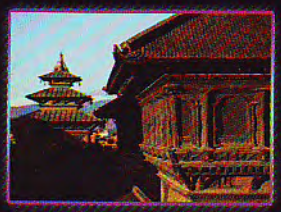
Any outsider can see that beneath the serene arcs of sandbanks that define the Maldives from the air (there are around 1196 coral islands in 27 atolls), the sources of instability will come from an inability on the government's part to deal with inequity and class differentiation, which seems to be defined not by ethnicity but by geography and distance from Male. President Gayoom is already feeling enough heat that he has hired a public-relations firm in London, to help him present a benevolent visage to the world.

Another indication that the president-since-1978 is losing his touch is the tsunami memorial that he has had put up on the seawall on the eastern side of Male island (*see photo*). Said to have cost a million rufiyaa (a bit more than USD 78,000), the memorial is meant to memorialise the 108 citizens who died under the big wave of December 2004. Rather than a national coming-together, however, this has turned out to be a phallic-shaped embarrassment. Although, as with most monuments, it may yet burrow its way into the national consciousness, for now people generally avert their eyes when confronted by the conglomeration of pipes, rods and balls.

"It has very little meaning to the public," said a local architect, Mohamed Ishan Saeed, to the *Haveeru* daily. "To me, it is an edifice to be looked at and held in awe – as if it came down from above, and is telling you something you should know but you are ashamed to admit you haven't a clue." President Gayoom, too, may not have a clue about how to respond to changing times, mores and demands. There always comes a time when autocrats, whether malevolent or benevolent, begin to lose their sure touch. At this time, President Gayoom should be exchanging notes with General Musharraf.

Unleash Yourself





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