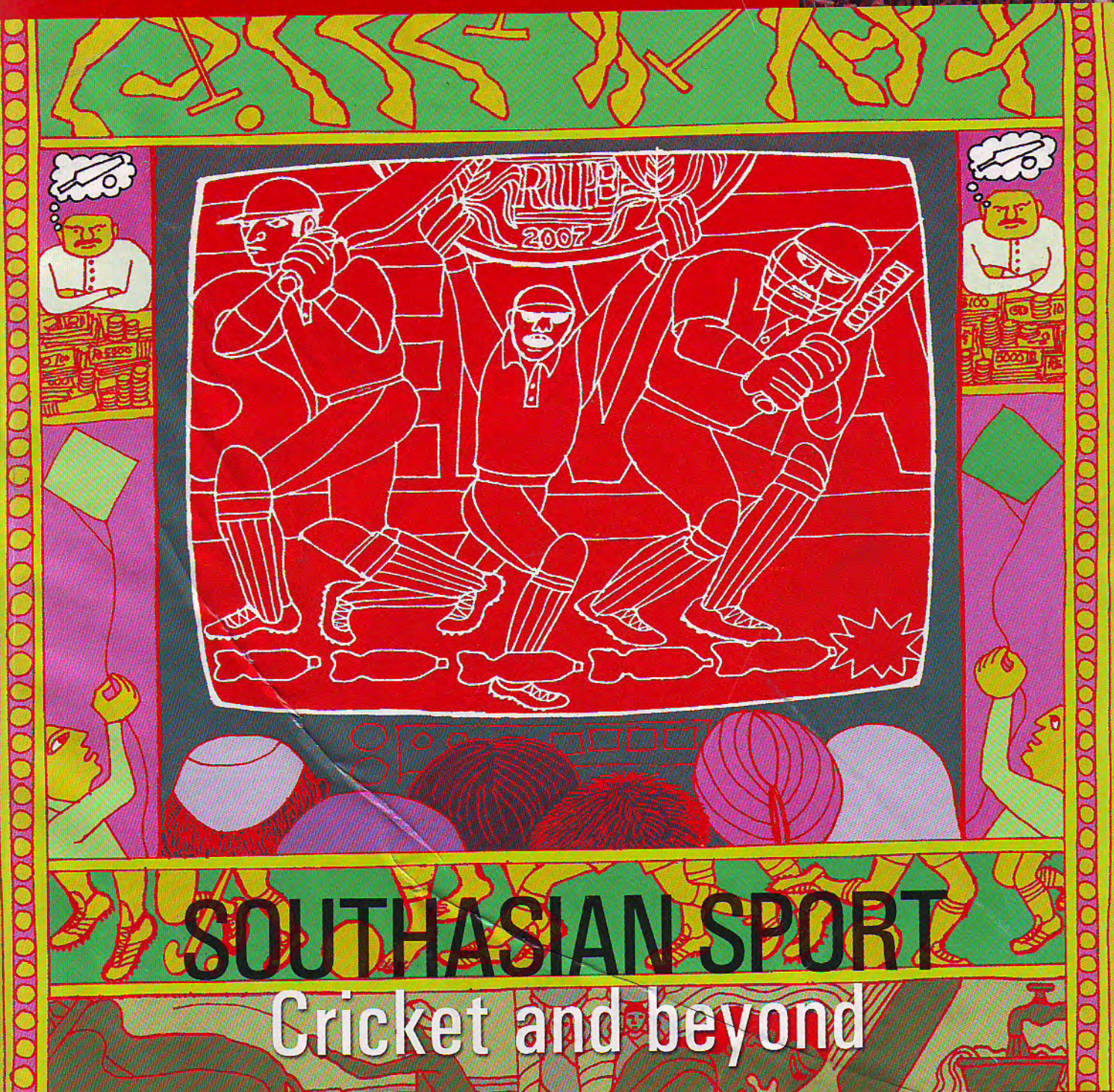
July 2007 Vol 20 No 7

HIMAL SOUTHASIAN

AFGHAN REFUGEES, KICKED OUT 60



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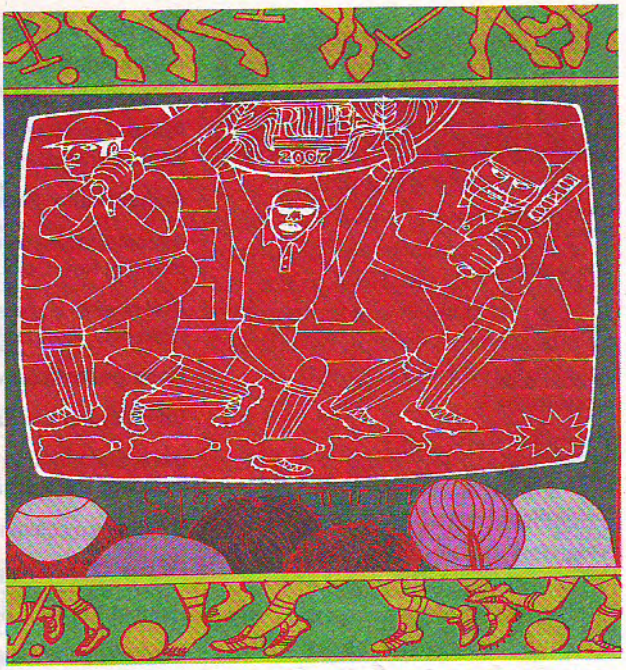
Game, sport, game

Confronted with headlines these days, one might well ask: Is there more to sport in Southasia than cricket? We were sure there must be. After all, hockey is the national game in both India and Pakistan, as volleyball is in Sri Lanka. But, as our cover illustration by Chandigarh artist **Karen Haydock** suggests, there is no denying the fact that cricket has become the overwhelming, dominant passion in the region. That said, all it takes is a little digging to find that there is indeed life beyond cricket. The rough and tumble of various contact sports, the exhilaration of climbing, the thrill (and, yes, dangers) of kite flying, the ancient form of jousting that is polo – all of these not only continue to exist, but continue to attract new adherents from across the spectrum. Tradition, skill and adventure, as well as the politics of caste and discrimination, mix to form a heady medley in this sport-filled July issue of *Himal*. From the games children play to the core of the advertising industry, the essence of sport is alive and punting in Southasia today.



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Editor and Publisher
Kanak Mani Dixit

Associate Editor
Laxmi Murthy

Desk Editor
Carey L Biron

Assistant Editor
Himali Dixit

Editorial Assistance
Prakriti Mishra
Kabita Parajuli

Contributing Editors
Calcutta — Rajashri Dasgupta
Colombo — Jehan Perera
Delhi — Mitu Varma
Dhaka — Afsan Chowdhury
Karachi — Beena Sarwar
Kathmandu — Deepak Thapa, Manisha Aryal

Business Advisor
Monica Bhatia

Marketing Manager
Komal More

Creative Director
Bilash Rai

Design & Web
Roshan Tamang

Administration
Sunita Silwal
Manee Rajbhandari

Subscription
Santosh Aryal
Navin Shekhar
subscription@himalmag.com

Sales
Samir Maharjan

Valley Distributor
Bazaar International
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www.subscriptionkiosk.com

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Contributors to this issue

Aditya Adhikari is a political analyst with the Carter Center International Election Observation Mission, Kathmandu. His writings are at *mesocosm.blogspot.com*.

Adnan Farooqui is a research scholar at the Centre for Political Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi

Amber Rahim Shamsi is senior copy editor at Dawn News.

Aseem Shrivastava has taught Economics at universities in India and the US. He is based in New Delhi.

Atul Mishra is a research scholar in International Relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Aurangzaib Khan writes from Peshawar.

Billi Bierling is a Kathmandu-based freelance journalist.

Boria Majumdar, a Rhodes Scholar, is the author of two books on Indian cricket, including The Illustrated History of Indian Cricket (Roli and Tempus, 2006).

C K Lal is a columnist for this magazine and for the Nepali Times.

Fatima Chowdhury is a freelance journalist based in Calcutta.

Hekmat Karzai is director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul.

Karen Haydock is an artist based in Chandigarh.

Michael Roberts is an adjunct associate professor of Anthropology at the University of Adelaide.

Nadeem Omar Tarar is a post-doctoral researcher at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

Peerzada Arshad Hamid is a Srinagar-based journalist.

S Anand is publisher of Navayana. He lives in New Delhi.

Safiya Aftab is affiliated with Strategic and Economic Policy Research, in Islamabad.

Shafqat Ali is a journalist based in Islamabad.

S K Sinha works with a Patna-based conservation organisation.

Siddharth Saxena is football editor at the Times of India, New Delhi

V K Shashikumar is editor, 'special investigations', CNN-IBN.

Wasbir Hussain is director of the Centre for Development and Peace Studies in Guwahati.

Zaffar Junejo heads the Sindh-based Transformation Reflection for Rural Development.

India oversight

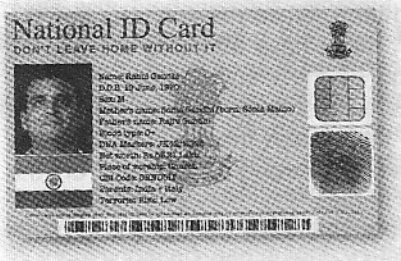
Thanks so much for your recent coverage of the Lhotshampa refugee issue (*June, "Repatriation or resettlement"*). We found it unfortunate, however, that the writer did not stress India's role in ending this near two-decade-long tragedy. India has been instrumental in creating this problem, and its involvement is necessary in finding a solution.

With regard to third-country settlement, this should be a choice made by individual refugees. That said, it is also important to note that the UNHCR and the members of the core group have been emphasising only resettlement, rather than putting pressure on the Bhutanese authorities to take back the country's citizens. In addition, the US and other resettlement countries have not yet demonstrated that refugees' right to return to Bhutan will be guaranteed after resettlement. Furthermore, they have not made clear the conditions under which refugees will be kept in these new countries. This oversight has created unnecessary tensions in the camps.

UNHCR and the 'core-group' countries have also not spoken about the Lhotshampas who remain in Bhutan, who were not registered as Bhutanese citizens during the last census. Thousands of Lhotshampas are now in line to be booted out of the country, and the US, India and most human-rights groups are acting as mere spectators as the events unfold. To claim itself as the largest democracy in world, how ethical is it for India to remain aloof from these activities, taking place in a country to which it has offered guidance for decades?

Bhutan News Service team
Kathmandu

Poor taste (simulated)



I was recently browsing through your back issues, and came across the article on India's national ID card initiative (*November-December 2005, "Peeking out of your pocket"*). While the article was competently written, it included a very offensive illustration, showing a simulation of a national ID card belonging to Rahul Gandhi. The illustration mentions the "Place of Worship: Church", "Parents: Italy + India", as well as a fake CBI Code – all of which show poor cultural values, as well as the radical leanings of the illustrator and publisher. The poor taste and lack of respect exhibited should be apologised for, and the illustration withdrawn.

Savio Pereira
Bangalore

Beware the US

In your coverage on Bangladesh, you have not given due weight to the role of the US at this critical time. It is worrying to note, for instance, that the current prime ministers in both India and Bangladesh are former World Bank employees. The US – in collaboration with European capitals, as well as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank – is bent on the 'Pakistanisation' of Bangladesh. Washington, DC knowingly allowed radical Islam and rampant corruption to flourish in Bangladesh during the 2001-06 rule of the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami government. Even while US officials now talk publicly about establishing democracy in Bangladesh, they continue to quietly back the army.

India's kowtowing to the US could seriously hurt the Southasian cause. New Delhi must not give in to US imperialist ambitions for petty short-term gains. An unstable, undemocratic Bangladesh will be a significant threat to the region, particularly for India and China. As such, New Delhi and Beijing must ensure that human rights are quickly restored in Bangladesh, and that it returns to democracy soon. Prolonged dictatorship and Islamic fascism will plunge Bangladesh into an abyss. The current unconstitutional government has neither legitimacy nor mandate to push the hidden agenda of its foreign mentors.

Wasim Rajin
By e-mail

Glad *Himal*'s banned

Regarding the June cover on Bangladesh, I would suggest that you and your reporters refrain from creating confusion among people by writing what you think will get publicity. The Bangladeshi military has always backed the government, irrespective of whether it was run by the BNP, AL or JP. Why didn't you write such critiques during those times? I for one am happy that your publication has been banned in my country. I believe in freedom of speech, but most reporters forget that the definition of 'freedom' includes an element of responsibility.

Please understand that I am also against military government. But the present situation has only occurred because the two major parties could not reach a consensus on the holding of elections. I hope that the situation stays like this, so that the people can be rid of strikes, street demonstrations and violence created by the political parties. Politicians in Bangladesh like to talk about freedom of the people. All the while, in the name of 'agitation', they torch buses and create an environment of chaos that destroys our country's economy.

Saidul Alam
Edmonton, Canada

Send mail to *editorial@himalmag.com*

INDIA

President sahiba for India?

Who is Pratibha Patil, and how is it that she is likely to become India's first woman president? Sonia Gandhi's 14 June announcement of Pratibha Patil's nomination had journalists scurrying to unearth some background on the worthy candidate; but no laudatory past arose, nor any skeleton in the closet. Evidently, she is just a potential 'common minimum candidate' to support the common minimum programme of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Here is a candidate who cannot be accused of being "soft on saffron", as was the criticism by the left parties against the candidature of Shivraj Patil, current home minister and Sonia Gandhi's first choice as presidential nominee. The left also rejected the nomination of Karan Singh for his 'royal' background. Gandhi claimed that External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, one of the early names thrown up and an acceptable candidate for the left, could not be "spared" from his current position.

INDIAN EXPRESS

Who is that mystery woman?

It is telling that the Congress party appears not to wield sufficient clout with its current alliance partners, and subsequently had to bear the ignominy of two of its high-profile potential nominees – Singh and Home Minister Patil – being rejected by the left. This has also been a contest signifying an era of coalition politics, and the considerable role played by regional parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam, in tilting the votes. This has also been occasion for unprecedented public wrangling played out in front of television cameras, and the subject of SMS polls – rather unseemly for an office that has been occupied in the past by such dignified statesmen and philosophers as Rajendra Prasad, S Radhakrishnan and K R Narayanan.

Following the tenure of the aeronautical-engineer A P J Abdul Kalam, there has been a shift towards selecting a 'political' nominee to occupy New Delhi's Rashtrapati Bhawan on Raisina Hill – the residential estate purported to be the largest of any head of state in the world.

Why this intense lobbying for a position that is largely ceremonial? Although India's president is the head of state and the supreme commander of the country's armed forces, in reality the presidency has had little power. Particularly since the time Indira Gandhi installed Giani Zail Singh in 1982, the post of president has been diminished to a rubber stamp for the ruling party. Powers to declare national emergency, or 'president's rule' in a state facing extreme turbulence, or to withhold assent to controversial bills passed by Parliament – all these remain largely theoretical, and few presidents have managed to assert their veto powers on actions of the prime minister. In mid-2006, for instance, President Kalam, after initially sending back for reconsideration a controversial bill on broadening the scope of the 'offices of profit', which would disqualify a person from being a member of Parliament, had to give his assent after the UPA ensured that the Parliament passed the bill without any change.

The UPA had by that time made it clear that it was not in favour of a second term for Kalam. Meanwhile, the 'third front' of eight regional parties – including the Jayalalitha-led AIADMK and Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party – in its new avatar of the United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA), are throwing their weight behind President Kalam, persuading him to contest a second term. While President Kalam, the 'people's president', might have attracted votes in an open election, voting by the electoral college, which consists of the elected members of both houses of the Parliament and the elected members of the state legislative assemblies, is largely dependent on the diktat of the political parties.

Although it was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that installed President Kalam in 2002, it has agreed to back current Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat as an independent candidate. As such, the party was put in a bind by President Kalam's late-June indication that he would be willing to consider contesting a second term due to the "overwhelming love and affection from various sections of people" – although the president hedged that bet by making his candidature contingent on his election being a "certainty". That contingency seems unlikely, given that the UPA, the left and even some constituents of the National Democratic Alliance (including the Shiv Sena of Maharashtra) are opposed to Kalam's candidature. The Shiv Sena, incidentally, is also in a spot, as it needs to oppose the Congress even while championing the interests of Pratibha Patil, a Maharashtrian.

Lifelong loyalist

With the numbers stacked in her favour, the 12th president of India is likely to be Pratibha Patil, a 72-year-old, uncontroversial, low-profile Congress loyalist. Pratibhatai (as she is known in Maharashtra) has been in politics since 1962, when she was elected

to the Maharashtra Assembly, where she remained until 1985. She has also been a member of the Rajya Sabha. Patil's CV also tells us that she was a college table-tennis champ, and even once organised women home-guards.

The candidate's main qualification appears to be her steadfast allegiance to the Congress, and to the Gandhi family in particular. Even after her mentor, Yashwant Rao Chavan, parted ways with Indira Gandhi after the Emergency, Pratibha Patil stood by the clan. Her loyalty paid off, and she was appointed to the Maharashtra PCC (Pradesh Congress Committee) by Rajiv Gandhi from 1988 through 1990. Her appointment as governor of Rajasthan in 2004 was also interpreted as a reward for her loyalty.

It is unfortunate that an office that should be occupied by a person of outstanding qualities, one who can remain non-partisan despite political pressures, is now part of the hurly-burly of coalition politics, and that the primary criterion should be loyalty – not even to a party, but to a family. The Congress's sudden backing of a woman candidate is not convincing as a show of progressiveness, given that no other woman's name came up before all the other nominees were rejected by the various UPA coalition members. In a post-facto justification, Pratibha Patil's nomination is being touted as a step towards women's empowerment. All we can say is, try another one.

INDIA

Post-Mandal, post-Mandir

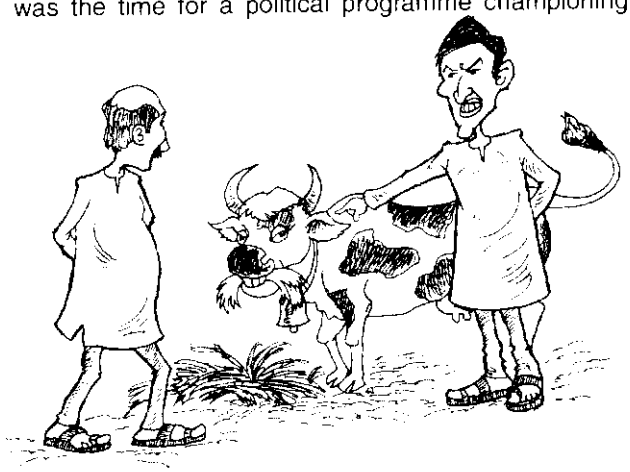
There is a major political churning underway in North India. The region affected most by the Mandal and Mandir politics of the 1980s and 1990s finally appears to be crossing over to a new phase. From the confrontational caste- and religion-based politics, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are moving towards the formation of social alliances between erstwhile rivals with fundamentally different interests. With the two states contributing the most MPs to the central Parliament, this change is bound to have an impact on national politics. Those political forces that stick to old exclusivist slogans will miss the bus.

For two decades now, UP and Bihar politics have revolved around mobilisation along one's own caste and religious lines, and have not gone beyond catering to identity-based aspirations. This was important in itself – marginalised groups attained political power and a sense of dignity, which allowed them to stand up to exploitative structures. Laloo Prasad Yadav's decade-and-a-half rule in Bihar was based on a shrewd Muslim-Yadav alliance, and he delivered to his constituency; there was no communal riot in Bihar throughout his rule, and the Yadavs managed to assert themselves as never before. In Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav relied on the same coalition, while Mayawati stuck to her Dalit constituency – with both giving a sense of empowerment to their supporters, as well as access to administration, and economic and political opportunities.

But the forces that led this change tried to ensconce themselves in the establishment by assuming that exclusivist identities would remain the sole determinant for political choices, and that there was little need to do much else. In fact, Laloo Yadav was often quoted as saying that he did not believe in development, since it would not win him votes. Ground-level realities, however, were constantly shifting. People were happy to be finally enjoying citizenship rights in the true sense, but now demanded more. Aspirations were changing and expectations rising. The citizenry could see that some cities had managed to corner most economic opportunities, and they wanted a share of the pie. Meanwhile, identity remained central to their self-definition and social structure, but this was no longer rigid; erstwhile social barriers were being broken down, and upward mobility and new social alliances were emerging.

In Bihar, Laloo Yadav was forced to give way to Nitish Kumar, who allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to carve out a coalition of upper castes and the extremely 'backward' castes. Laloo's Muslim-Yadav formula no longer worked because, to his surprise, even his supporters said they wanted more-substantial improvements in their lives, from education to health. Recognising this, Kumar is now making an effort to concentrate on law and order, bringing investment to the state and encouraging the creation of first-class universities. (Laloo himself, as railway minister, has also belatedly woken up to this, bringing about a remarkable turnaround in the functioning of Indian Railways, suddenly converting it into a profit-making enterprise.)

In Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati has successfully forged a Brahmin-Dalit alliance, an almost unthinkable proposition till very recently. She realised that the real rival of the Dalit was the intermediate-caste landowner at the ground level. She also knew that the time for harping on confrontational politics was past – that now was the time for a political programme championing



BIJASH RAI

social harmony based on equal rights. The only party that has yet to wake up to these realisations is the BJP, which still believes there to be a large constituency for Hindu fanaticism. Just prior to the UP polls, BJP apparatchiks brought out a virulently anti-Muslim DVD, and made a serious attempt to elevate cow protection to an election issue. As a result, even its Brahmin base swung towards Mayawati.

The message emerging from UP and Bihar is clear: marginalised communities want respect, but also real economic dividends: identity is critical, but identity fundamentalism has little support; and finally, people want political stability and social harmony. To the credit of the Indian democracy, this message has come from the ground, and will have an impact even in Delhi politics.

NEPAL

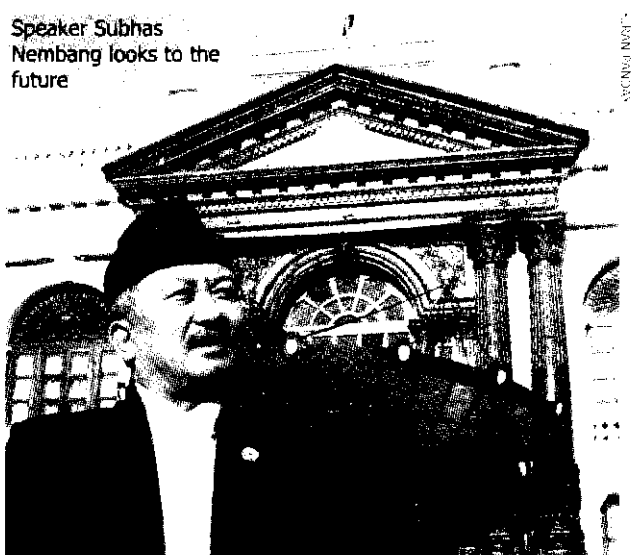
A thousand Nepali mutinies

To the outsider, Nepal is getting to look like a chaotic failed state. The government administration is non-existent; development work is at a standstill; identity-led agitations are erupting all over; the Maoists are finding it hard to fit into a government of political parties while their battle-hardened fighters have difficulty in respecting the populace; criminality rages in the Tarai.

On the flipside, a social scientist would say that only the chaotic moment, as chaperoned by Nepal's resilient political parties, can allow for a transformation of Nepali society, a process to be defined neither by neighbour India nor by the larger international community, including the United Nations. To those who express exasperation with the Nepali players, according to this argument, only peace, democracy and a state-structure defined by Nepalis themselves will have staying power. Also, Nepal is doing much better than so many countries emerging from years of violent internal conflict.

Over the course of the last few years, it has become clear that there is a fuzzy logic to the Nepali political process, where the reality on the ground can be diametrically different from what seems evident in the English-language discourse. When all seems lost amidst the cynicism of the unconnected Kathmandu intelligentsia and the various interlocutors who feed alarmist information to the donors and diplomats among others, one is liable to be surprised in the days ahead when everybody agrees on a formula or scheme that they had been vehemently opposed to the day before.

That, at least, is the hope today, when a thousand mutinies rage while Girija Prasad Koirala tries to hold together a contradiction-filled government. But wishes cannot deliver a constituent assembly election, and that is the event on which every hope for political stability and an equitable and inclusive society now rests. The critical importance of holding elections in November 2007 could be the one factor that ties everyone together – after each is exhausted in defending his/her certitudes, and when every community's (and political party's) demands hit a countervailing demand from another quarter.



Speaker Subhas Nembang looks to the future

Restarting democracy

The unique situation of Nepal is that everything seems to be happening at the same time: the demand for inclusion in a restructuring state, sparking a multifaceted debate that is still in its initial stages; the challenges of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) trying to maintain its heroic rebel posture even while serving within a government-and-parliament format; and the difficulty in restarting a democracy after it was mismanaged by the political parties and hijacked by Gyanendra – all of this in a relatively mature polity that has not seen a general election since 1999.

Against this backdrop, the vital importance of the Constituent Assembly becomes clear whichever way you look at it. And indeed, Nepali citizens are privileged today to be in a position to be drafting their primary document of state – learning from others in the Southasian neighbourhood (and elsewhere), yet devising a text that is unique to Nepal's history, its demographic diversity and its wildly differentiated geography. Let it not be forgotten that the lead-up to the Constituent Assembly is being conducted according to the mandate of the People's Movement of April 2006, which requires the political parties and especially the CPN (Maoist) to be morally obligated to seek the people's mandate through the ballot.

The pitfalls of not being able to conduct elections in November are there for all to see. The current eight-party government, which includes the Maoists, will lose all legitimacy; the royal rightists will think they can once again make a stab at power; and the political turbulence will have the international community aflutter about 'saving Nepal'. At that time, when the country experiences a loss of agency and sovereignty is compromised, Nepali power-brokers and opinion-makers will have no one to blame but themselves.

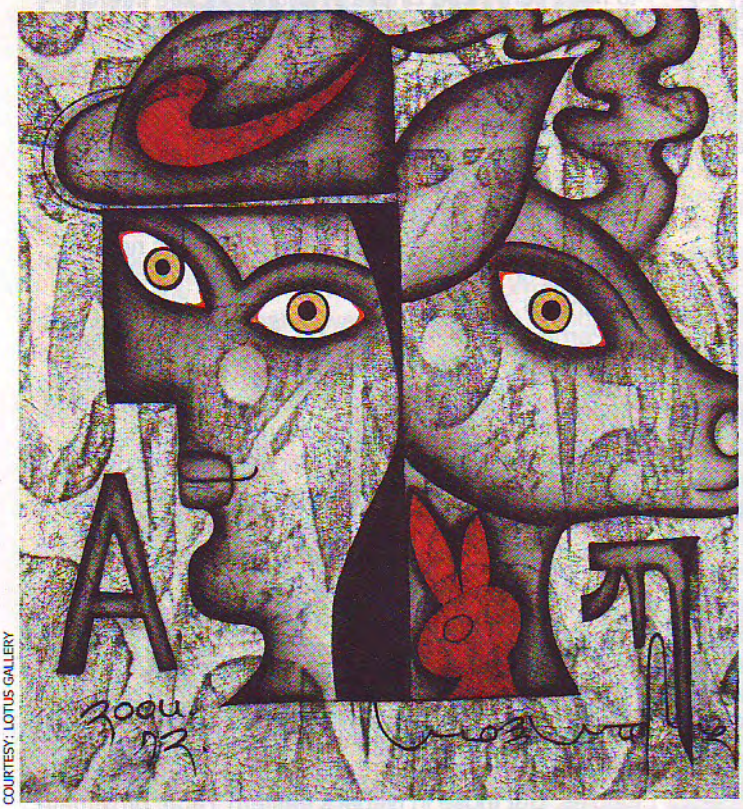
And so, preparing the conditions for a November election, as has now been decided through an amendment to the Interim Constitution, should be the priority during the month of July. The challenges come first and foremost from the need for a buy-in to the 'mixed' election format agreed upon by the political parties – most importantly, by the indigenous ethnic-community organisations, the Dalit groups and the agitated Madhesi factions of the central and eastern Tarai. While a 'fully proportional' election system might also have worked, the mixed system (with half of the seats in the Constituent Assembly to be decided through the familiar first-past-the-post system of electing candidates, and the other half in which the political parties are asked to select their members in the house in accordance with the proportion of communities in the population) does seem to have within it the kernel of a 'new Nepal'.

Indeed, the mixed system has the ability to throw up a completely new cast of players in the political arena, and it is important now for the political parties to indicate their bonafide intentions in order that the community groups to express their whole-hearted support for the election process. It has also to be kept in mind that a certain amount of campaign rhetoric and acrimony is a given, for the upcoming legislature will not only write a new constitution but also provide the government for the following couple of years.

If the communities are on board, that leaves the issue of law and order, which has three aspects: the Koirala government's abject failure to guarantee internal security and solidify state administration; the Young Communist League of the CPN (Maoist), with its proclivity to speak the language of violence; and the chaotic situation in the Tarai, where private and communitarian armies are being born by the day.

Can things settle down enough by the autumn, for an acceptably free and fair election to the Constituent Assembly to be held? We sincerely believe so. The spring has traditionally been the season of discontent in Nepal, and the upcoming monsoon will bring with it the balm of camaraderie and goodwill. But Nepal cannot rely on nature and culture to make the elections successful. The first task is to get the buy-in to the mixed system by the indigenous/ethnic and Madhesi groups. The second is to provide muscle and motivation to the police force and state administration. The third is to ensure that Gyanendra, the vainglrious person who is as yet king, is completely neutralised and unable to wreck the people's agenda for a November election.

When all this is done, we may find – surprisingly in the eyes of some – the situation looking very different in the next couple of months. Nepal has the ability to astound the world, when the state and citizens put their minds together.



COURTESY: LOTUS GALLERY

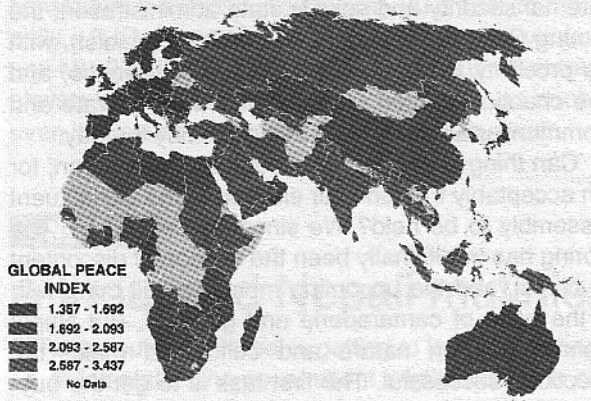
'Sacred face'
(part of a series)

The face of a woman and the profile of a chiru, the endangered Tibetan antelope, gaze out in wrapt curiosity from this painting by artist Ang Sang. Against an overwhelmingly grey background, their wide eyes are strikingly bright and open. What are they watching that so holds their attention? The woman wears a Nike swoosh on her hat; and the chiru, that mascot of indigenous culture, sports a Playboy bunny. These logos, the bright red symbolism of which screams from the page like a noisy new entrant, seem to partake in their wearers' viewership. What is the relationship here? Woman and antelope fix their gaze on a common object. What they are watching must be truly beautiful, or truly repugnant, to so fascinate both human and beast. But the searing colour of the corporate logos has started to invade the whites of their eyes.

This is part of a regular series of Himal's commentary on artwork by artists with the Lhasa-based Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild. Woodblock with brushwork, mineral pigments. 50 cm x 50 cm.

REGION

Rating **peacefulness**



The first-ever Global Peace Index (GPI) was unveiled recently, revealing some unpleasant surprises for Southasia in general, and all-but-shining India in particular. The GPI, which for the first time has attempted to rank 121 countries according to their "absence of violence", placed India at 109 – shockingly, one spot lower than Burma. Iraq was at the bottom, while Norway was considered the most 'peaceful' country. The GPI was developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit in conjunction with an international panel of academics and experts. Researchers utilised a definition of violence that included unrest both within and between countries.

Other Southasian countries did even worse, with Sri Lanka at 111 and Pakistan at 115. Indeed, on the GPI's global map, the Southasian region is coloured almost completely red, meaning the "state of peace" is "very low". Bhutan, however, at 19, was placed better than much of the rest of the world, something that will surely make it onto glossy travel brochures in the very near future. China as a whole was placed 60th, and Bangladesh 86th, while Afghanistan, Nepal and the Maldives were mysteriously absent from the rankings altogether – not that their inclusion would have dramatically changed the region's colour scheme.

On India, one hypothesis for its low ranking could be that, while looking at the country through the prism of a centralised state, it may look 'stable'. But whether there is 'peace' in the units of the Indian Union is another matter – consider the Northeast, Kashmir, Jharkhand, Telangana, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat!

PAKISTAN/INDIA

Pakistan panchayat

A group of Indian Panchayati Raj officials, intellectuals and activists are scheduled to visit Pakistan on a mission in July, to discuss India's experiences of local self-governance – known as Panchayati Raj. India's Minister for Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyar, will head the 50-person mission, which is to last all of three days.

The crossborder exchange will be the result of an agreement made nearly two years ago (as well as a follow-up agreement made last December) between Aiyar and the head of Pakistan's National Reconstruction Bureau to create an India-Pakistan Joint Forum for Local Governance. Under Pervez Musharraf's rule, Pakistan took on a new system of local governance in 2001, and interest in India's Panchayati Raj system has been periodically expressed by Islamabad ever since.

NEPAL/INDIA

ULFA to Nepal?

With Bhutan, Burma and, soon, Bangladesh rendered non-options, the claim is that the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is moving bases to Nepal. This is what two arrested ULFA leaders have told their Indian handlers.

After having successfully strong-armed the governments in Thimphu and Rangoon to carry out missions in their frontier areas to flush out Indian insurgent groups in the past, New Delhi now seems to have convinced Dhaka's military-backed interim government to send a no-welcome message to any Northeast insurgent group in Bangladeshi territory.

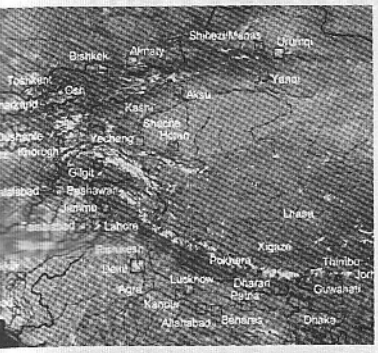
The only remaining crossborder area to go to, evidently, is Nepal. Following their arrest in early June in Assam, senior ULFA leaders Ghanakanta Bora and Tulsi Borgohain (incidentally, a married couple) claimed that the group had already set up a handful of bases in Nepal, and that it was now planning on moving a significant number of militants into them.

Perhaps more inflammatory, Bora and Borgohain also alleged that the Nepal camps were set up with the help of Nepali Maoist cadres, who had also aided ULFA militants in the procurement of weapons. The two ULFA leaders and their son were evidently based in Nepal prior to their arrest. Days after the allegations surfaced, Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) leader Baburam Bhattarai vehemently denied any connection between his party cadre and ULFA militants. "We have no direct or indirect link with them," Bhattarai asserted. "We have never been in contact with this organisation called ULFA."

There is one question that still needs to be asked, though. In order to have insurgent bases of the kind that were in southern Bhutan or Burma, one needs jungles. But those in Nepal's eastern Tarai, proximate to ULFA stomping grounds, have all been decimated. Where would these bases be situated?

REGION

On the **global** precipice



Southasian glaciers, fast receding

On 5 June the world celebrated another World Environment Day, further cementing the global understanding of the earth's environment as well on the road to doom. The World Bank released a report the same week, warning that crop yields in Southasia could decrease by up to 30 percent over the coming four decades, due to global warming. The report noted that climate change in the region would inevitably significantly hamper attempts to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals, including in poverty reduction and communicable disease.

The net impact of many of these ramifications, the Bank's researchers cautioned, will be a series of "severe" economic shocks, which will radically increase the rate of population movements and create new migration patterns. Populations will particularly move into urban areas and across international boundaries, exacerbating looming resource crunches, stressing poorly planned and inadequate infrastructure, and putting increased pressure on states' senses of national and resource security.

Separately, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), in Kathmandu, took the opportunity to raise the alarm about another 50-year scenario. Within the coming half-century, an ICIMOD report stated, all Himalayan glaciers could disappear. These glaciers function as sources for nine of the largest rivers in Southasia, from Pakistan to Burma, and the direct impact on the region's population of 1.4 billion people would be monumental.

As the glaciers melt, they will affect agriculture, biodiversity and hydroelectricity production, and will lead to massive swings in both flooding and drought. What seems clear is that while we fight each other based on petty nationalisms here in Southasia, all our attitudes and mental foundations will be made irrelevant by the tectonic shifts resulting from global warming. But our sense of alarm seems only to be linked to the period around World Environment Day. So, see you next 5 June – we will worry some more then! △

BANGLADESH/BHUTAN

From **Bhutan** to **Burma**

Bangladesh's attempts to purchase hydroelectric power from Bhutan have evidently come to naught. By mid-May, Energy Adviser Tapan Chowdhury said that there had been no answer from either Thimphu or New Delhi to Dhaka's repeated queries on the matter since early March. "We cannot expect to buy hydroelectricity from Bhutan at present," Chowdhury conceded, at a roundtable set up by the Asian Development Bank.

And so the adviser (a minister in the current set-up) announced that Dhaka was planning on sending a delegation to Rangoon in June, to look into the possibility of importing hydroelectricity from Burma. This option was clearly not as enticing as the possibility of importing Bhutani power, which would have been so close by, just across the 'Duars' of Assam. Chowdhury warned that importing Burmese energy would require large capital investments into Burmese hydropower plants – loans which would be difficult to procure, given the current international sanctions in place against the Rangoon junta.

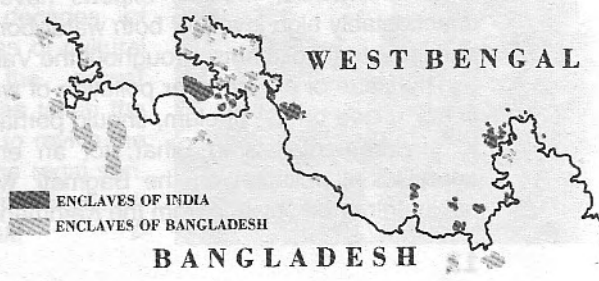
But money would not be the only issue. While New Delhi has a special relationship with Bhutan and imports the vast majority of the energy the small Himalayan country produces, a similar dynamic has been evolving between Burma and Beijing. How will Bangladesh untie that particular geopolitical knot, to assuage its thirst for power? △

INDIA/BANGLADESH

This country or **that**

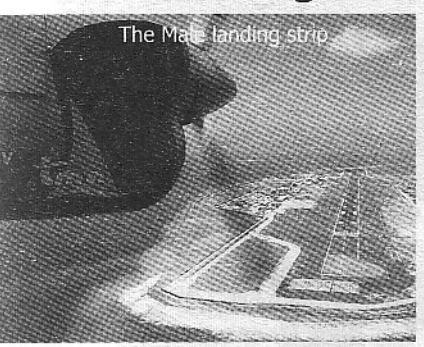
In late May, an official Indian delegation for the first time paid visits to a handful of the 'enclaves' that dot the Indo-Bangladeshi border. It was joined by a counterpart mission from Dhaka. The team visited three Indian enclaves in Bangladeshi territory and four Bangladeshi enclaves in Indian territory, in an effort to speed up the process of trading the so-called *chhitmahals* that was initially agreed upon more than thirty years ago.

Although exact numbers vary dramatically from source to source, there are an estimated 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India and 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh, created due to Partition-era confusion over a 19th-century agreement. Cut off from the protection and munificence of their home countries, the estimated 30,000 residents of the enclaves live without electricity, schools, medical facilities and other infrastructure. The recent visit was to usher in what is forecasted to be a 'final' round of talks on the issue in late June in Dhaka. If the news has reached them at all, those 30,000 will certainly be looking forward to an end to their △



THE MALDIVES

Mid-range **Maldives**


The Male landing strip

The Maldivian government has announced plans to build five new airports in various parts of the atoll nation. The Maldives' aviation minister, Mahamood Shaugee, said that the new programme would take the total number of air hubs in the country to seven. He promised that the addition of the new landing strips, on land reclaimed from lagoons in the north and south atolls, would make the Maldives a less exclusive, less expensive holiday destination for tourists.

"The image that we want to portray is that we have products for the mid-market also," Shougee explained, going on to note that each new airport would be built in conjunction with at least one resort. "We are making an effort to bring mid-range resorts to the Maldives."

Occupancy of the 89 existing resorts in the Maldives is reportedly at nearly 90 percent. Fifty-one additional resorts are currently under construction, and it is said that charter airlines from Europe have already begun booking flights into the yet-to-be-built airports.

The opening up of alternative airports may also be an attempt to address disgruntlement in the less-developed parts – particularly Addu atoll in the south – towards Male-centric tourism and other development. A World War II-era airport in Addu is said to have been left neglected by Maldivian authorities in order to pamper Male.

PAKISTAN/INDIA

Bilateral **pollution**

For the first time, the issue of crossborder pollution has been raised under the auspices of the Indus Water Treaty. On the sidelines of the bi-annual meeting of the Indus Commission in New Delhi in May, Pakistan Indus Water Commissioner Syed Jammat Ali Shah recounted his dismay over the pollution levels he had witnessed in the Jhelum River during a recent visit to Kashmir.

Shah had been in the area to inspect the Uri and Kishanganga hydroelectric projects, and reported finding, for instance, drains from Srinagar emptying directly into the river. (Out of 52 sewage installations in Srinagar alone, 35 are reportedly flowing directly into the Jhelum without treatment.) Shah subsequently decided that the issue of pollution flowing out of Indian territory into Pakistan through rivers is indeed covered under the 1960 treaty.

Although Shah was evidently unimpressed with explanations given to him of attempts to mitigate the pollution flows from Jammu & Kashmir, experts in Srinagar have long complained of a lack of necessary funding to deal with the issue. Indeed, for the past several years, water-quality experts have failed even to set up monitoring stations beyond the Srinagar area. Meanwhile, medical experts have warned of unacceptably high levels of both water-borne diseases and industrial pollutants throughout the Valley.

The issue of crossborder pollution of watercourses, finally raised on the Jhelum, should perhaps be a cue to environmentalists in Bihar, for an environmental appraisal of pollution on the Bagmati, which carries down untreated sewage from the Kathmandu Valley.

THE MALDIVES/BANGLADESH

Low-country **solidarity**

Following the recent mass flooding in the Maldives, the first country to respond to Male's pleas for international aid was none other than cash-strapped, crisis-engulfed Bangladesh. When the interim government in Dhaka announced a contribution of USD 1 million to ameliorate the effects of the country's worst flooding since the 2004 tsunami (a preliminary report suggested that nearly 1650 people had been made homeless), officials in Male were perhaps the most surprised of all.

Thus it was that the Southasian country with the lowest GDP was the first to step forward to help the Maldives, which has one of the highest – indeed, Bangladesh's GDP is around a quarter of the Maldives'. And not only is USD 1 million the largest contribution that Dhaka has ever made to another government, but it far eclipses the Maldives' largest single international aid contribution – USD 50,000, made to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh following past natural disasters. The amount also far outstrips other promises of assistance made to the Maldives to date, including by India and the US.

In explanation of this largesse, Bangladesh's ambassador to the Maldives pointed to the similarities between the two countries, noting that they are both "low-lying states, vulnerable to flooding and the effects of global warming". He also stated that while the aid came with no strings attached, he hoped that the Maldives would in the future help Bangladesh to create an international organisation to help with emergency disaster response.


YASIR

BHUTAN/INDIA

The **Mechi** battleground

After years of stagnation, the circumstances surrounding the Bhutani refugees in southeastern Nepal have suddenly turned dramatically violent. After thousands of Bhutani refugees attempted to cross the Mechi River border bridge into Indian territory on 28 May en route to their homeland, one of them was killed and dozens wounded when Indian security forces opened fire. Indian officials reported that at least six of their own personnel were also injured when refugees started throwing rocks.

The previous week, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, had visited the refugee camps in southeastern Nepal, before going on to Thimphu, where he had urged the royal government of Bhutan to repatriate the estimated 107,000 refugees currently in the UNHCR-overseen camps.

The confrontation on the border also followed directly on the heels of days of dramatically ramped up violence in the refugee camps themselves, with anxiety mounting surrounding refugee activists opposed to recent moves towards third-country resettlement. Preparations are currently underway to begin resettling refugees to the US and other countries, with the process to begin by the end of the year.

Two refugees were killed by Nepali police in the camps during attempts to quell the violence, and one prominent refugee leader was severely injured when attacked by goons. A two-week strike subsequently called by the refugees was suspended, however, on promises of a meeting between refugee leaders and Nepali, Indian and Bhutani officials.

On 10 June, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee electrified the refugees' mood when he conceded in Calcutta, after meeting with the West Bengal chief minister, that the Lhotshampa refugee issue was indeed an "international problem". This was a major departure for a country that has denied not only any international flavour to the refugee issue, but even its own interest in what it has called a purely bilateral issue between Thimphu and Kathmandu.

It now remains to be seen how the refugees and their leadership are able to capitalise on this sudden surge of interest in their condition.

INDIA/BURMA

Fibre optic to **Southeast Asia**

Just weeks after a new fibre-optic connection between India and Pakistan through Wagah was slated to become operational, New Delhi agreed to lay a similar cable to the east, across the Manipur border into Burma. The project will be sponsored on the Indian side by the state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL). The proposed connection will stretch from Imphal to Moreh, and from Tamu to Mandalay, about 500 km into Burma.

While vastly improving India's telecommunications link with its eastern neighbour, the cable will also be the first step towards connecting the Subcontinent directly to Southeast Asia, in a network that will eventually end in Singapore, through Kuala Lumpur. Construction on the first phase of the project has already begun, and is expected to be complete by the end of the year. In addition, BSNL is said to be planning to build an underwater telecommunications connection directly to Singapore, across the Bay of Bengal.

PAKISTAN/INDIA

The **sari** fights back

The power of entertainment has long been proven unmatched in rendering irrelevant intellectualised hang-ups. This has been visible in recent times in Pakistan, where the popularity of Indian television dramas among Pakistani women has led to a spike in sari sales. Pundits have dubbed the reappearance of the sari there as a "new fashion trend".

Not only has the popularity of such shows as "Kahiin To Hoga", "Kumkum" (*see photo*) and "Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii" led to a brisk black market in saris smuggled in from India, it has also resulted in a dramatic upsurge in the small local sari-manufacturing industry in Pakistan. One shopkeeper recently estimated that a sari-wallah may have sold 20 saris a week in past years, but could now have a weekly turnover of up to 100.

As could be imagined, the most in-demand saris are those that resemble the ones worn by actresses on the tele-dramas. As such, local manufacturers have come out with lines named after the television characters themselves – for instance, the Kumkum or Kashish sari. After decades of relentless loss of cultural space to the salwar kameez, it has taken the Hindi serials to revive the fortunes of the regal sari. Television can bring some justice after all!

INDIA/PAKISTAN

Pugwashed

An international conference on Kashmir, to be held in Bombay in early June, was postponed due to New Delhi's decision not to allow visas for Pakistani participants. The conference was to be part of the international organisation Pugwash's series 'Conferences on Science and World Affairs'.

Ironically enough, Pugwash, which is based in Europe and the US, is currently headed by an Indian, eminent scientist and Rajya Sabha member M S Swaminathan (*see pic*). Prominent personalities had been slated to attend the conference, including Jammu & Kashmir leaders Omar Abdullah and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq. Several Pakistani diplomats, scholars, government officials and leaders from Azad Kashmir were also expecting to take part in the conference, including Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan and Chaudhary Latif Akbar. That was when the visa problem came up.

The New Delhi government gave no explanation for the denial, although similar Pugwash conferences on Kashmir have successfully taken place in Kathmandu in 2004, and in Islamabad last year.

REGION

Politicised waters

Beijing recently concluded a wide-ranging study on how the waters from five major Himalayan river systems are currently being used, reigniting fears in India and Bangladesh over China's longstanding plans to build a dam on the Brahmaputra's Tibetan headwaters. Although an official in Lhasa couched the enquiry in terms of China's currently stepped up environmental initiatives, he also noted that the study, conducted over the course of a month from 8 May to 3 June, would be the "longest and most wide-ranging examination of the region's use of water resources".

Researchers ostensibly focused on drinking water, sanitation and small-scale hydropower, but this did little to quell jitters in New Delhi and Dhaka. Despite past diplomatic discussions, Beijing is believed to be moving forward with its old plan to dam the Brahmaputra, eventually diverting nearly 200 billion cubic metres of water per year into the Yellow River, for use in China's increasingly parched northern regions.

It seems appropriate for India's Northeast and all of Bangladesh to collaborate on this issue, with an eye to heading off the Chinese plans. And the going could still be tough, given Beijing's proclivity to run roughshod over naysayers in matters of water sharing and dam building.

INDIA/TIBET

MP **'already'** Chinese

A consular decision by China's embassy in New Delhi in late May has added to irritation over Beijing's continuing claim to around 90,000 square kilometres of land in Arunachal Pradesh. During the course of preparations for a visit by 107 Indian bureaucrats to Beijing and Shanghai, Chinese officials in the Indian capital agreed to issue 106 visas – but said that the 107th, meant for an official from Arunachal, was unnecessary because, as far as Beijing was concerned, the man was already a Chinese citizen.

New Delhi immediately cancelled the entire visit, and the city has been full of rancour over the incident ever since. Although Manmohan Singh and Wen Jiabao signed an agreement two years ago to resolve their countries' border disputes through "friendly consultations", rhetoric over Arunachal has been heating up in recent months. New Delhi recently sent a probe to the state to explore reports that Chinese troops are illegally occupying parts of Indian territory.

Possibly this type of diplomatic incident has not occurred in the past because there have been too few Arunachalis applying for Chinese visas. But what will happen when applications increase?

BANGLADESH

Rapporteur **worries**

The purge being carried out by Dhaka's military-backed interim administration now also targets UN officials. Sigma Huda (*see photo*), the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Trafficking, was supposed to appear in Geneva before the Human Rights Council on 11 June, to give a report on her findings in Bangladesh. The week before, however, the interim administration forbade her from leaving Bangladesh, claiming that she was a "security threat", and charging her under anti-corruption legislation. Huda's husband, Bangladesh Nationalist Party politician Nazmul Huda, has also been charged. Huda was previously refused exit from Bangladesh in mid-May.

The assumption is that Dhaka officials were worried that Huda would be making some damning accusations in her report, including highlighting allegations that the military-backed government has detained and tortured more than 95,000 Bangladeshis in recent months. She responded to the latest contravention of international law by questioning whether she herself was really the security threat, "or whether the government itself is the threat?"

Revisiting reservation

The recent agitations by the Gujjars in Rajasthan can provide an opportunity to clear the cobwebs around India's caste-based reservation policy.

BY **ADNAN FAROOQUI**

Any democratic society faces the challenge of harmonising two essentially contradictory political concepts: first, equality before the law irrespective of religion, caste, race and gender; and second, social justice at the cost of the same commitment to equality before the law. Over the years, reservations have become the Indian government's standard approach towards groups demanding equality, and this has led to increasing political pressures to extend reservations to communities other than Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

For a week during late May and early June, Rajasthan witnessed an unprecedented level of violence over demands by the state's Gujjar population for inclusion in the ST list. The protesters sought, extraordinarily, to demote their caste category from Other Backwards Classes (OBC), in order to gain further benefits from affirmative-action policies reserved for STs and SCs. Their demand was subsequently violently opposed by Rajasthan's Meena community, which is currently listed as a Scheduled Tribe. Gujjar demonstrators blocked the national highway in Rajasthan, dismantled railway lines, and burned bridges, public buses and railway property. All in all, the protests claimed 26 lives. The agitation spread like wildfire to Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi and even Jammu & Kashmir, even while the police, paramilitary forces and army seemed nonplussed.

The roots of the current crisis can be traced to promises made by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Vasundhara Raje. During her 2003 campaign in Rajasthan, Raje had pledged to grant ST status to the Gujjar community. Since becoming chief minister in December of that year, however, she has not moved to fulfil that promise. Even as Gujjar anger escalated, things were made more difficult for Raje by warnings from leaders of the state's powertul Meena community, who were worried that Gujjar inclusion on the ST list would affect their own position, for having to divide their benefits.

It was following the official formation of the state of Rajasthan back in 1949 that the Meenas were declared a Scheduled Tribe. The Gujjars were not, even though the two communities are of comparable socio-economic status. It was in 1993 that the Gujjars were granted OBC status, a category devised to cater to deprived communities that did not make it within the ST and SC categories. The community started jostling for ST status when Atal Bihari Vajpayee granted OBC status to the powerful Jat community in Rajasthan in 1999, and Gujjar leaders realised that they were looking at receiving a smaller share of the OBC reservation pie – hence the proposed shift to ST status, which has generated identical fears among the Meenas.

Though the recent protests were about entitlements in jobs and educational institutions, they were fuelled by the perception that, over the last 50 years, the Meenas had done better for themselves than the Gujjars had, largely due to their ST status. While the former has become well represented in state and service jobs, the latter has largely had to resort to mining and construction or, at best, minor clerical positions.

After six days of agitation, a settlement was arrived at on 4 June, signed by Chief Minister Raje and the Gujjar leader Colonel (Rtd) K S Bainsla. While it has brought temporary peace to Rajasthan, the animosity between the Meena and Gujjar communities continues. Meanwhile, an official committee directed to look into the Gujjar demands will have to work extremely hard if it is to submit its report within the stipulated three-month period. There is no guarantee that its findings will satisfy the Gujjars. And either way, no findings will satisfy both the Gujjars and the Meenas.

The Gujjar-Meena confrontation has prompted a nationwide rethink of India's policy of reservations based solely on caste. Yet, this is not just a story about Gujjars or Meenas wanting to gain more reservation privileges. It is also the story of how politicians are attracted to quotas and reservations as vote banks. Once contemplated as a temporary measure to ensure equality for historically disenfranchised communities, reservations have become a permanent tool for vote-bank politics – and have, in the process, been excessively divisive.

Two-way resentment

The policy of affirmative action in India is based on a rigid reservation system that uses quotas to assure diversity in the educational system and certain sectors of the workforce. While the policy of reservation in favour of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes was implemented very early on in post-Independence India, the same arrangement was not made for the OBCs because the Constituent Assembly could not decide on whether the criteria for defining 'backwardness' in this case should be class or caste.

Though the constitutionality of the use of religion as a criterion in selecting backward classes has not been challenged explicitly, the government has rejected its application in practice in the face of demands made

by Muslims and Dalit Christians. Reservations have, however, been extended to more and more groups over time – by state governments during the 1970s and 1980s, and by the central government following the Mandal Commission report in 1980, which affirmed reservation practices for OBCs and STs and SCs.

This has called into question the legitimacy of India's reservation policy in general. For one thing, it has brought benefits to members of groups with considerably weaker cases for preferential treatment than the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. This disconnect has sharpened social tension and political contestation around issues of ethnic identity, against a background in which the demarcation of groups eligible for reservation benefits is already problematic. Furthermore, reservation policies in higher-education admissions encourage inter-group competition for access to seats in elite institutions. This has led to increasing resentment against beneficiary groups by more-advantaged groups, whose members have traditionally enjoyed exclusive access to such positions.

The group-based reservation policies that are currently being proposed for OBCs in higher education have their rationale in three basic premises. The first is that the groups concerned are socially disadvantaged relative to what is known as the 'general' category. Second, the disadvantage is most effectively addressed by directing benefits towards groups, rather than towards disadvantaged individuals or households. And third, among available group-based affirmative-action policies, reservations in education and government jobs are the best choice.

Addressing backwardness

Is there a case for OBC reservations in higher education? Despite the lack of data, it appears that although OBCs do face some disadvantages vis-à-vis the general category, these differences are small in comparison to the obstacles faced by the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Furthermore, the question of relative disadvantage of the OBCs with respect to the general category has remained controversial because there is no recent census data that correlates caste and social status. The last detailed caste enumeration was undertaken by the colonial administration in 1941. Even then, this data was only partially tabulated due to World War II and the political unrest of the last years of British rule. As such, it is data from the 1931 census that is most heavily relied upon.

Furthermore, the official definition of 'other backward castes' has varied from state to state. The term does not signify a homogeneous social group and, moreover, splits between upper and lower backward castes have historically occurred in many states. The heterogeneity among broad categories such as the OBCs, together with the fact that some communities – such as the Jatavs amongst the SCs, or the Kammas, Reddys, Jats and Vokkaliggas amongst the OBCs – have been able to corner a disproportionate share of state resources through effective political mobilisation, suggests that reservation policies targeting broad social groups may not be effective tools of social justice. Too many of the disadvantaged lot, including the Gujjars of Rajasthan in the current instance, will be excluded in favour of the more privileged.

The idea of group dignity fervently catches the public imagination when it comes to the reservation of public-sector jobs for disenfranchised groups. Frequently in North India, it is political victories of lower castes that get celebrated as symbolic of defiance and social redemption, rather than committed attempts at changing the economic structure of deprivation. While reservation policies ostensibly serve the function of group upliftment and provide symbols for aspirations of future generations, public quotas generally end up helping only tiny elites within disenfranchised groups. The overwhelming majority of people in these groups stand no real chance of landing the high-level jobs that reservations secure, in large part because they drop out of school.

Beyond the direct consequences of distributive politics are its ramifications for democratic governance. The Indian polity has recently become more representative, with the inclusion of groups hitherto excluded from the state apparatus, and elite control over governance has somewhat diminished. This has led to a welcome expansion of democracy into the lower rungs of the social hierarchy.

These social and political changes have come to North India rather late. South India, where comparable socio-political and economic mobilisation took place several decades ago, has seen significantly better performance in matters of public expenditure – on pro-poor projects in health, education, housing and drinking water. This reflects the fact that, in South India, there has been a long history of social movement against exclusion of lower castes from the public sphere, against their educational deprivation and so on.

The historical disparities between caste groups in India are so great that corrective policy interventions are essential. To a large extent, the reservation policy has succeeded in providing opportunities to people who did not have them. But in judging who should be eligible for reservation, the focus has been only on caste, and this has meant that many of the benefits of reservation have gone to economically well-off groups. Furthermore, little effort has been made to supplement reservation policy with an improvement of basic facilities: good primary schools, better health facilities, and training programmes. Neither the Constitution nor public policy has been able to ensure substantive equality. State intervention, whether in the form of reservation or action against adverse discrimination and a host of welfare policies, has reduced neither the vulnerability suffered by the vast majority of Indian citizens nor the massive inequalities in the country.

KAREN HAYDOCK

CRICKET AND BEYOND...

FROM GAME TO SPORT AND BACK AGAIN: FIVE LOOKS AT CRICKET, SIX LOOKS BEYOND.

Caste and the sporting status quo

As long as caste continues as the overwhelming factor in India, all-round sporting glory will be elusive, and Indian teams will continue performing disastrously globally.

BY **S ANAND**

Sport, historically, evolved as a substitute for war. Chariots used in war would be used for racing as sport. In ancient Greece, the Olympics games were closely associated with the development of the state and warfare between states. In the sporting arena, gladiators – either prisoners of war or criminalised slaves – fought to the death in front of spectators. Early sport was controlled war in a public place: permissible violence, staged within a certain demarcated boundary, unfolded under the gaze of the state, king or some form of authority.

The linkages between war and combative sport in the Subcontinent are strong. In India, when ultra-nationalist and revisionist historians celebrate 'ancient' sport such as *kushti, malla-yuddha* or *pehlwani* – forms of combat wrestling in which the mythological Bhima and Duryodhana participate – they are primarily referring to martial arts. Even in the southern part of the Subcontinent, *kalarippayattu* (prevalent in parts of present-day Kerala and Karnataka) and *varma adi* (in present-day Tamil Nadu) are martial-art forms that double up as medical practices, since they emphasise understanding of the 'vital spots', and also pass for sport. *Kabaddi*, a popular sport in the Punjab that also

Sport is projected as a great social leveller, but in India it becomes yet another site of reinforcing social norms.

finds mention in ancient Tamil culture as *sadugudu*, is another combative team game that entails a great deal of group physical contact.

When sport thus is a display of controlled physical aggression, the question of who has a right to perform becomes crucial. In traditional caste society, participation in all martial sports would necessarily have been limited to the martial Kshatriyas; in some cases, arms-bearing Brahmins also participated. The oppressed castes, especially the Dalits, are not expected to participate in sport. In the hierarchical social order, every caste group has a certain predefined role to perform, and the very participation of Dalits in the sporting arena could threaten that order, with the prospect of defeat at the hands of the 'subaltern'.

The mythological story of Ekalvya, the Adivasi archer who is denied by the Brahmin guru Dronacharya a chance to even compete with the less-talented Kshatriya-disciple Arjuna, encapsulates the issues of boundaries and transgressions that animate caste society. Karna, half-brother of the Pandavas in the epic Mahabharat, is deemed low-born, but poses a threat with his very talent at archery. Ekalvya, Karna, Arjuna and Dronacharya may be mythological characters, but they continue to be the reference points when caste codes are written by the modern sport establishments. The Indian state awards for the country's best players are named after Arjuna, and after Dronacharya for the best coaches – a Kshatriya-Brahmin combination notorious for its unsporting attitude, duplicity and deception.

Even today, birth determines eligibility in various forums, and the sporting arena is more contested than other public spheres. The victory of an individual or a team belonging to an oppressed caste can lead to role reversals. A Dalit cannot be an 'acceptable' winner in sport, since it imbues the person/community with heroism. Though globally modern sport today endorses the slum-to-podium successes of the working-class poor, and modern sport is seen as a site of subaltern assertion, caste society does not permit such assertions. James H Mills, editor of *Subaltern Sports: Politics and Sport in South Asia*, argues that "sports invites subalternity" – although such an invitation seems foreclosed in many ways in the caste-ridden Indian context. And even if there are sporting arenas where Dalits and Adivasis can truly excel, such a sport never manages to attract mass appeal, and such heroes are rarely subjects of mass adulation. The forgotten Indian archer, Limba Ram, a one-time world champion, exemplifies such indifference. Only a Tendulkar, Dhoni or Sania Mirza can be icons and brands.

Not a social leveller

Take the case of an 'ancient' Indian sport such as *pehelwani*. According to Joseph S Alter, a scholar who has studied Indian wrestling, untouchables and Muslims are discouraged from entering the *akhara*

More than legend

MIN BAJRACHARYA

Gurung warrior

Whatever history and allure football and cricket possess, neither can claim the mythical roots known to Southasian archery. The Ramayan, Mahabharat and the legend of Ekalvya each use an archery contest as their starting point. The sentiment of these fictional matches – as an arena for men to display their hunting prowess and compete in a show of machismo – if not their function, was echoed in the realities of historical life in the region. In the Himalayan principalities, archery was much more than the game it is today. As a form of defence against raiders, as the main method of hunting, and even as protection against invading colonial forces, archery held a place of prominence.

In today's Himalaya, Bhutan is most widely associated with archery, where it has been the national sport since 1971. According to legend, Bhutan's archery history dates back to the 10th century, when a Buddhist monk, Lhalung Pelgi Dorji, assassinated an anti-Buddhist king using a bow and arrow. Traditionally, a group of archers was led by a *tsip*, an individual believed to have particular archery powers. The *tsips* made full use of the power they were accorded, charging exorbitant fees for their services. Teams would invoke the divine to intervene on their behalf, a practice now forbidden by the government-controlled National Archery Federation of Bhutan.

Siddhartha Gautam, a skilled archer himself, is said to have played a role in archery's spread through the region, as he moved across the Gangetic plains. Indian tourism websites from West Bengal,

A hierarchical, divided society that insistently sustains and nurtures inequality cannot aspire to sporting glory.

(exercise pit). After all, he notes, "Akharas are often located on land that is owned by temple-management committees or donated by a public benefactor or patron of wrestling." Dalit participation, and potential victory, can upset the caste order of things. Moreover, the *pehlwani* diet is strictly vegetarian, and emphasises *brahmacharya*, or celibacy. According to Alter, "A diet of milk, *ghee*, and almonds is said to both build up and stabilize one's supply of semen. *Ghee* in particular is regarded as homologous to semen since it is whitish and creamy, and because it is the distilled essence of milk." The ideology around *pehlwani* seems anomalous, but it strongly endorses caste hierarchy. Crucially, the expensive diet is not something the largely poor Dalits would be able to afford. The Dalits thus tend to be excluded structurally from the strict regimen that goes into the disciplining of a wrestler's body.

In India, where more than 72 percent of the population continues to live in rural areas, where demarcations of boundaries based on caste continue to be rather rigid, sport, both in its premodern and modern avatars, is not a ready option for the oppressed communities. Where Dalits cannot even visit teashops or wells, access to public playgrounds or a gym, if there is one, becomes a serious issue. It is for this reason that one witnesses, in India, news of Dalits being attacked and even killed for winning sporting contests, in particular in games dominated by the upper castes.

In December 2003, in the village of Santagarh in Saharanpur District of Uttar Pradesh, two Dalit boys, Vikas and Munish, were brutally killed after their cricket team had inflicted a string of defeats on the Rajput-dominated Hasanpur team. The all-Dalit Saharanpur team had won INR 200 per victory in their last three cricketing encounters with Hasanpur, and the Rajput sense of pride and honour had taken a beating. Similarly, in January 2007, in Sedapalayam, in Tamil Nadu, a Dalit youth named Siva was murdered following an altercation between the Dalit and the dominant Vanniar youth over a cricket match. These are but a few incidents that have come to light due to the fact that, at the centre of the conflicts, has been cricket – a game that drowns out all other sports in India.

Sport is projected as a great social leveller, but in India it becomes yet another site of reinforcing social norms. The domination and popularity of cricket owes not merely to the fact that it was introduced by a colonial power around their *gymkhanas*, or to the fact that in contemporary India, urban and rural, it appears to require nothing more than an improvised bat, a rubber ball, three hand-drawn lines on a wall or a pile of stones serving as wicket. As such, cricket has come to be projected as a truly democratic sport, one that can be played by more than just the rich.

It is this notional, routine access to cricket that gives the poor and the unprivileged the impression that they are participating in something of a 'national' game, that otherwise only the upper-caste Tendulkars and

Darjeeling and Sikkim, all the way down to Tamil Nadu, boast of indigenous archery traditions.

In more recent years, the sport has undergone something of a revival, including regaining popularity in Nepal. Initially, influences from both the north and the south contributed to Nepali archery. The Thakali, Gurung, Magar and Chyanntal communities of the central and western hills of Nepal were traditionally archers. Head of the Thakali Heritage Committee, Bhumikarna Bhattachan, says, "We can't say exactly when or how archery originated in Nepal, but the Thakali language itself highlights the significance of archery. It is one of the most important aspects of our culture." During the annual Toran La festival in Manang, in the east of the Thakali region, archers shoot at a human-shaped figure, aiming at the heart.

Yogendra Sherchan was a member of the Nepali team at the first South Asian Archery Championship, in Dhaka in February 2006. That year, Nepal beat Bhutan to take third place. "Modern archery is different from its traditional form in terms of equipment and rules," he says, "but the basic skills required are the same." Bhattachan echoes these sentiments: "A skilled archer must have strong eyesight, excellent concentration and, above all, *sadhana* [spiritual practice]."

With India's international achievements in archery (Jayanta Talukdar was ranked the world's number two archer in 2006), the game is spreading beyond tribal communities. To make the sport more accessible than expensive modern equipment allows, the Archery Association of India created the Indian Round in 1995, sponsoring village-level competitions with wooden and bamboo equipment. The Toran La festival of Nepal (among others) serves a similar purpose. While Bhutan's government is also making efforts to support archery, the youth of today are more likely to be found sprinting down than a football pitch than aiming an arrow. But while its dominance in the sport may have ebbed, the Thimphu state's emphasis on Druk tradition means that archery is unlikely to be forgotten in Druk Yul anytime soon.

– Kabita Parajuli

It is a fact that only those who have the paraphernalia of flannels, shoes and the right gear, as well as access to well-formed pitches and 'nets', can even think of playing competitive cricket at the lowest division level.

Dravids play. One-day cricket, with its demands of fitness, has led to a more regionally and, caste-wise, more diverse national team than the 'traditional' five-day Test cricket. Yet the larger system that governs cricket in India, and the manner in which access to most professional sports is structured, limit the possibilities of 'subaltern' forays into the higher echelons of any sport. It is a fact that only those who have the paraphernalia of flannels, shoes and the right gear, as well as access to well-formed pitches and 'nets', can even think of playing competitive cricket at the lowest division level.

Today, global capital and the television boom in India may appear to have bestowed a pre-eminent status on cricket. Yet the game's ready acceptance among the elite, and its natural propensity to be Brahmin- and upper-class-dominated (at least in Test cricket) goes largely unexplained. Ashis Nandy, who has in the past equated cricket with Hinduism, and argued that it is an 'Indian game' accidentally discovered by the British, writes in his *The Tao of Cricket*: "Particularly recognisable to the Indian elites were cricket's touch of timelessness, its emphasis on purity, and its attempt to contain aggressive competition through ritualisation." For Nandy, who can be considered anti-modernist and anti-secular, cricket is a non-modern game that seeks to sustain a 'hierarchy of values' that defies modernity. Cricket, most importantly, being a non-contact sport, appeals to the Brahmin sense of 'purity'.

Non-school activity

The question is often asked as to whether some form of affirmative action in sport, one that ensures subaltern participation, could lead to more Indians climbing the medals podiums in global sport. There is no simple answer to this question. As things stand, the possibility of participating in modern competitive sports depends almost entirely on access to education. But in rural areas in India, 75 percent of schools make do with one teacher for several classes. Among Dalit children, the dropout rate in classes 1 to 5 is nearly 37 percent; in classes 5 to 8, it is nearly 60 percent. By secondary-education levels, that number jumps further to 73 percent. Few schools have playgrounds, and there is precious little space for sports other than plots used for assembly. Certainly sports equipment is absent, and children are left to play 'games' rather than 'sports'.

Compounding the problem is child labour, which forms the lot of the exploited youth and children. Children under 14 constitute around 3.6 percent of the total labour force in India. Of these, nearly 85 percent are engaged in traditional farming. There is hardly the time or income required to engage in sport, even as a child. Sport is invariably seen as an extracurricular, even non-school, activity for which there are no academic incentives. According to the norms, a school must necessarily have a playground, but such norms are easily flouted. Only upper-class schools provide some opportunities for real engagement with sport.

In India, those who take to athletics, hockey, football or other physically intensive but deglamourised sports tend to come from less privileged backgrounds. The aims and objectives of a lower-middle-class sportsperson in India can be rather modest. Having been forced to neglect academic education, he or she aims to become a state-ranked player by age 22; at best to participate in a few national finals; and, on the strength of such achievements and a degree, land a clerical job with the government, availing the 'sports quota'.

For sportspersons with better education, keen on moving up one rung and getting a toehold in the middle class, public-sector units (PSUs), led by the railways, had in earlier times offered employment and financial security. Even they ceased to represent their employers in sports meets by age 30. However, since the 1990s, following the policy of 'liberalisation', the government disinvested from PSUs, and there followed a freeze on most government recruitment; as such, the incentive to explore a career in sport is far less attractive today. The private sector's policies of recruitment do not, of course, make allowance for any form of affirmative action – forget a sports quota.

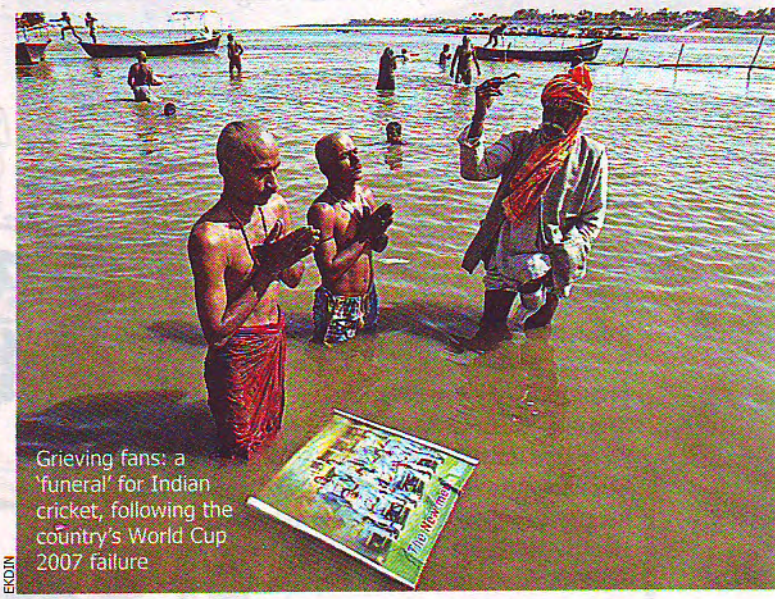
Given such combinations of factors, most Indians, egged on by the mainstream media, are keener on following the failures of the Indian cricket team than in introspecting on why Indians do not fetch medals at global sporting events. A hierarchical, divided society that insistently sustains and nurtures inequality cannot aspire to sporting glory. As long as caste continues to remain an over-determining factor in India, all-round sporting glory will elude Indians. Till then, postmodern scholars can continue to speculate on how this is, in fact, symptomatic of the Indian tradition of resisting the modern, how non-performance with regard to global standards is in fact a native critique of the universalising and standardising impulse of contemporary global sports. Till then, we can partake of the subcontinental obsession with cricket, a sport that apparently defies modernity.

As things stand, the possibility of participating in modern competitive sports depends almost entirely on access to education.

Opiate of a billion

Cricket has transformed India, as much as India has transformed the sport.

BY **BORIA MAJUMDAR**



Grieving fans: a 'funeral' for Indian cricket, following the country's World Cup 2007 failure

EKDIN

Indian cricket changed overnight. All it took was the excitement and energy following one victory: India's World Cup win on 25 June 1983. That evening, what used to be a mere sport was converted into a lucrative career option, and cricketers into default national icons. And from then on Indians – and along with them, the rest of the region – began to look to cricket as both a relaxant and something into which to channel their energies, patriotic and otherwise. Soon enough, the corporate world would take note – and the rest of the world would follow.

Cricket has been played in the Subcontinent since at least the early 18th century, but it was only around the close of the 19th century that the game began to assume particular significance in the region. With the inception of an influential cricket series in Bombay in 1892, the game's popularity increased, and by the 1930s, the Pentangular matches (so-called for their inclusion of Europeans, Parsis, Hindus, Muslims and 'the rest') were being viewed by 25,000 or more spectators. The Indian Cricket Board was formed in 1928, and India played its first Test match at Lords, in London, on 25 June 1932.

But it was only after India's triumph in 1983 that the game came to be perceived as a viable path to fame and income for middle- and lower-middle-class Indians. That victory paved the way for corporate sponsors to invest in cricket, in anticipation of rich dividends. It also gave the media events for it to build hype around, and cricket proved a salve for a troubled nation. Today, no hyperbole can capture the importance of cricket in the everyday life of the country. And the reason for this can be traced to one of modern India's most sensitive disconnects: India is the world's second-most populous country, but its global presence remains relatively less significant. On the political stage and the economic front, although desperately trying to edge herself into the circle of super powers, India has not quite made it.

This marginality is especially prominent in sport. In the past two summer Olympics, the Indian tri-colour was hoisted in victory only once. India has never won a gold medal in a non-team sport in the Olympics. As Indians turn their attention to cricket, however, the narrative of 'catching up' suddenly disappears. Cricket is the only realm where Indians, for the past two decades, have consistently – the World Cup debacle in the West Indies this March notwithstanding – been able to flex their muscle. It is India's only crack at world domination. Clearly, the widely voiced aphorism is true: for Indians, cricket is much more than a game.

In the two decades since 1983, the craze for cricket has become a veritable mania. In the contemporary sporting world, few would argue with the assertion that, economically at least, India is the new cricketing superpower. As a consequence, cricket has become integral to defining the culture of postcolonial India, a country anxious to define its position in a world rapidly changing and characterised by globalisation and growing inter-dependence. As was evident during this year's Cricket World Cup, for the short duration that Indian hopes were alive, cricket mania completely dominated the country. During the week of 17-23 March, all other news seemed to melt into the background as millions of Indians sat glued to their television sets, following their team's every move.

As was to be expected, cricket commerce was also at an all-time high during the series. Given the amount of attention focussed on it, India's early loss led to widespread dejection, vandalism and public wrath across the country. (A similar situation held sway across the country's western border, after Pakistan too suffered an early and ignominious defeat.) This is because the fortunes of the Indian cricket team encapsulate the story of postcolonial India in microcosm: a tapestry being woven around the performance of 11 men, who carry on their shoulders the hopes and demands of a country of a billion.

Feel-good space

The Indian madness for cricket does not transfer to other sport. Indeed, the attention drawn by the

country's two other popular games, football and hockey, does not compare, even though the latter is technically India's national game. Since the mid- to late 1970s, Indian teams have fared poorly in these games at the international level. In hockey, India performed miserably in the Olympics and the Champions Trophy tournaments during the 1980s and 1990s; in the eight-country tournament held in the Netherlands in August 2005, the Indian hockey team finished a dismal seventh. Though it did win India bronze medals in the 1968 and 1972 Olympics, hockey's popularity has notably diminished over the past three decades – during which time cricket's ratings have skyrocketed.

Meanwhile, the last time that Indian football performed decently was at the Bangkok Asian Games in 1970, where the team won a bronze. Since then, the tale of football in the country has been one of continuous decline; in rankings for June 2007 compiled by the International Football Association (FIFA), India placed at 161st. Football infrastructure in the country is such that FIFA's president, Sepp Blatter, argued during a recent visit that India should not hope to enter the sport's big league anytime in the next two decades.

Both football and hockey have longstanding histories in India, and the reasons for the decline of their play in the country are many. The Indian Olympic Association, the All India Football Federation and the Indian Hockey Federation have all recently accused the corporate world and the media of what they perceive as unfair treatment of these two sports. While there is a kernel of truth to these contentions, poor marketing strategies, internal politicking and the myopic views of the officials who run these institutions have also accounted for their sports' stagnation.

Given India's history of failure in other team sports, the Indian public has grown accustomed to leading on the cricket team. Somewhere along the way, appreciation of individual performance came to be drowned out by the clamour for national victory. Players are now lauded not for great innings so much as for those performances, however brief they may be, that have proven decisive. After his penultimate ball four against Pakistan in the final of the Independence Cup in Dhaka in January 1998, Hrishikesh Kanitkar was as much a star as Saurav Ganguly or Robin Singh, both of whom had scored very high in the same match. Stars are made on the basis of last-minute saves. Thus, a young Sachin Tendulkar, a relative newcomer in 1993, whose meagre score of 15 runs had been a disappointment in that year's Hero Cup semi-final against South Africa, was catapulted to stardom when he conceded only three runs while bowling in the last over. The crowd hailed a saviour who had brought victory by two runs; Tendulkar's sad 15 was forgotten.

Cricket today provides India a feel-good space, where nearly all differences can be overcome. The assertion of an Indian 'identity', the expression of cultural nationalism or the feeling of a common emotion – these are no longer confined to the stadium and post-match activities. For instance, a poll conducted a few years back found that more than 50 percent of India's youth would prefer to live in another country. However, as journalist Sandipan Deb has observed: "Even when they do go away to some other country, they have a live cricket scorecard open surreptitiously on their computer monitors throughout their working day, and they turn out in daunting numbers at the stadium whenever India's playing in their adopted country." The global Indian wants simultaneously to escape his country and to embrace it. Clearly, cricket is no longer a mere 'national' obsession.

India's squad to England, 1932

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF INDIAN CRICKET

Anthropologist Robert Foster has offered similar analysis of the role played by the Papua New Guinean rugby star Marcus Bai in stirring the Papuan national consciousness. Similar to Bai's role vis-à-vis his countrymen, cricket in India is no longer a vehicle for merely imagining the nation, but has become one by which to transcend the nation – to escape the troubled country, even, through a form of 'imagined cosmopolitanism'. Foster says that such imagining conjures a utopian vision for the future, one where a Papuan, or an Indian, can engage with the world on a level playing field. In India, however, cricket provides far more than an opportunity for imagination. The sport allows postcolonial India to assert itself on the world stage.

The postcolonial game

For a short while, India's craze for cricket succeeded in hiding the grim realities confronting many of the

region's countries, particularly with regards to poverty. Retired cricketers faced destitution, and it was, and to some extent still is, commonplace to hear of former players being rescued from inhumane conditions by human-rights workers and the most ardent of fans. If this was the fate of once beloved sportsmen, there was little wonder about the circumstances of much of the rest of the population.

Since the turn of the millennium, things have begun to change. In 2004-5, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) formally started a pension scheme, converting cricket into a proto-industry. Any player who has represented the country now qualifies to receive a monthly pension of at least INR 25,000 from the cricket establishment, for as long as he lives. Players' widows are also part of the scheme. Perhaps most significantly, however, a proposal is now under discussion to extend the pension scheme to India's roughly 50,000 national-level, interstate players, known as Ranji Trophy cricketers. Doing so would suddenly allow for a relatively large constituency to see cricket on a national level as a realistic, stable, life-long career.

Even as it finally begins to look to the well-being of its non-international players, Indian cricketing has felt confident enough to turn its attention to its would-be competitors – namely, other sports. Take a look at the following news release, from May 2006:

> The Indian cricket team will play a match every year to raise around Rs 45 crore to promote other games in the country. "It is not only cricket the BCCI is worried about. It will spend Rs 50 crore every year on training the country's top-ranking junior player of any individual game played in the Olympics," BCCI president Sharad Pawar said. He concluded saying, "It is not good for the country that we are not winning golds in the Olympics. Cricket has people's cooperation and the board's finances are improving. It is appropriate for the board to assist other games."


On India's 1932 England tour

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF INDIAN CRICKET

Indeed, through the pension scheme and through these new efforts to give players of other sports a boost, Indian cricket has undertaken an important programme of ensuring that sport is, for the first time, able to directly benefit a significant and growing group of people in the country. During the course of what may be seen as a decade-long transition, cricket has become the first Southasian example of what could be called a 'postcolonial' sport. As recently as the 1990s, despite its vast popularity and increasing financial might, national-level cricket was still essentially just a game – a game that rich people played while poor people worked. Several factors during the

A leisurely pastime

The movement of cricket's global power centre was borne out particularly sharply to this writer when, in March 2006, England won a famous victory in Bombay, beating India in the third Test match. After watching the English victory, I left my friends' house in a quiet London suburb. The loss had left me crestfallen, and I assumed that everyone in the London Underground would be discussing the game. As it turned out, however, cricket in England is hardly the game it once was. Only us Southasians, it seemed, really bothered about what was happening back home, and awoke early in the morning to watch the action. For the English, cricket has become nothing more than a leisurely pastime.

In the crowded train, I listened in on a football-related conversation between six British teenagers. On inquiring what they thought of the English cricket squad's recent victory over India, I was told, "We didn't know that England was playing a friendly against India!" Upon clarifying that I was talking about cricket, not football, the group was quick to point out that after the biannual Ashes series between England and Australia, cricket generally falls out of focus in most London homes.

Though thoroughly confused, I became determined to find out whether cricket had any substantial presence in central London. It did not seem unreasonable, after all, to expect that analysis of the recent match would be shown on the television screens of at least some shops in the area. But a subsequent stroll proved me wrong. In direct opposition to Southasia, nearly all the televisions I saw were beaming football updates. In the working-class neighbourhood in Oxford, the sole place where a pedestrian could catch some cricket news was the local grocery, owned by a Pakistani man whom locals called Lalaji. This dingy corner store stoically continued to air cricket around the clock, despite the expense required to subscribe to the requisite channel.

past decade led to the establishment of cricket as an institution, one in which several groups of participants – cricketers themselves, but also administrators, fans and sponsors – have a stake.

Eastern colonialism

The opening up of the Indian economy during the 1990s, coupled with the role of the new media, stimulated the solidifying of a commercialised, and increasingly jingoistic, cricket culture. Until a 1995 judgement by the Supreme Court, the state-owned television channel Doordarshan had monopoly rebroadcast rights over Indian cricket. Following the decision, however, the BCCI suddenly found itself able to sell telecast rights of cricket matches in India to any private broadcaster. What followed was a phenomenal influx of corporate finance to Indian cricket.

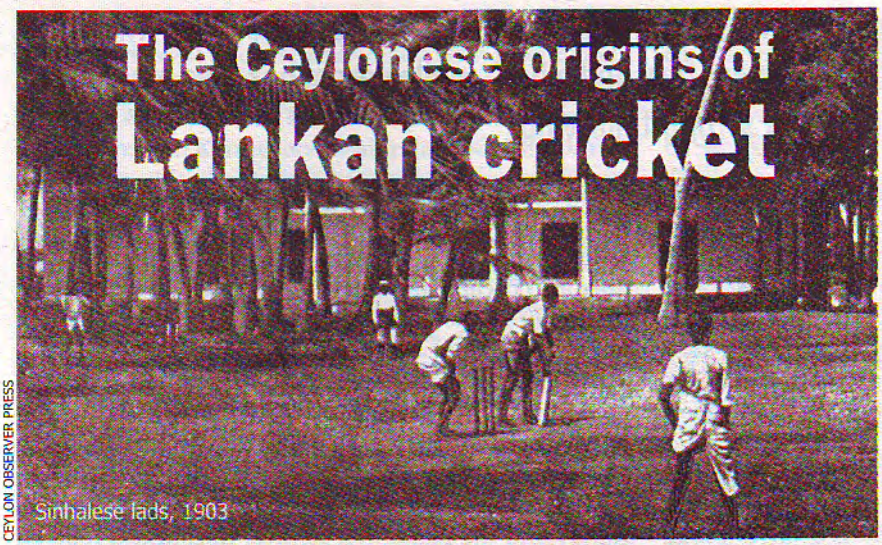
Soon, and just as the Indian public was being drawn into the global economy, names like Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid began promoting various brands of products. Indeed, cricket became inseparable from brand names. Though an indulgence for most Indians, Adidas, Nike, Reebok and other cricketer-endorsed brands found a place in the cricket enthusiast's participation in the game. Off-field, drinking a particular soft drink became importantly symbolic of participation in national triumphs. The 1996 World Cup hosted in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, for example, is remembered as much for being an organisational success as for the advertising war that took place between Pepsi and Coke.

For their part, cricketers went from being mere glamour icons to becoming integral parts of the entertainment/advertisement economy. Soon, in India at least, they were able to directly influence the day-to-day lives of the masses, whether in generating active patriotism, inadvertently inducing destruction following failure in matches, or building and fashioning a consumer culture. Cricket stars began shaping lives.

As India's cricketers rose in stature, the country was increasingly able to disengage itself from its colonial past. This is visible in particular by the ease with which the Subcontinent has been able to overpower Western countries to win rights to host World Cup competitions. Indeed, no other country can match Indian cricket's current financial muscle. As such, over the course of the past decade, the economic nerve centre of world cricket has firmly shifted away from the West, particularly England, and towards Southasia (*see box*).

Cricket's iconic status within the Southasian diaspora underlines the region's transformation into the new centre of global cricket. One simple example from 2004 is enough to prove the point. During the inaugural match of the Champions Trophy in Birmingham, England, not a single hoarding board at the event advertised for a local company – they were all from the Subcontinent. And Southasia (or at least India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh), despite being a tardy entrant into the contest to win the rights to host the 2011 World Cup, was eventually the runaway winner. Are we now seeing an Eastern economic imperialism, with its basis in cricket, colonising the West in the global sporting village of the 21st century?

The Ceylonese origins of Lankan cricket



CEYLON OBSERVER PRESS

Sinhalese lads, 1903

The state has decreed volleyball Sri Lanka's 'national game', but the citizens, of course, know it to be otherwise.

BY **MICHAEL ROBERTS**

Modernity took firm root in Ceylon under the imperial aegis of Britain. British rule ushered a considerable transformation in the political economy of the island, a revolution in the communication system, the administrative unification of the country and the emergence of new (capitalist) class forces. English became the administrative language, leading to the development of an indigenous socio-political elite – referred to locally as the "middle class" – whose mode of domination included a facility in both the English language and lifestyle.

During that process, the ethnic diversity of the island was compounded. Apart from the Tamils, Sinhalese and Tamil-speaking Moors of yesteryear, one witnessed the influx of people identified as Indian Tamils, who worked on the plantations in the interior or as menial labourers in the main urban centres. The island's location also encouraged small groups of Malays (who had served in the Dutch and British regiments), as well as Bohras, Sindhis, Parsees and Colombo Chetties to join the mixed European descendents described as 'Burghers' in the polyglot towns of the southwestern quarter of the island, most notably in Colombo. By the 1880s, Colombo was the island's hegemonic centre, looming over the rest of the country with its political and economic clout, as well as its symbolic primacy. It was this primacy in Colombo's status that was to prove central in the evolution of another overwhelming hegemony in Ceylon: that of cricket over all other sports in the country.

It was through Colombo, too, that the intellectual currents known as 'liberalism' and 'nationalism' first entered public consciousness. A small coterie of young Burgher men, educated in English at the Colombo Academy, comprised the forerunners of Ceylonese nationalism when, in 1850, they launched the periodical *Young Ceylon*. This new way of thinking was sustained by the emerging multi-ethnic, indigenous middle class over the course of the following century. The first momentous challenge to white superiority occurred, prophetically, on the cricket field, when the best Ceylonese XI took on the best local Europeans in June of 1887, in a match they lost. This began an annual Europeans-versus-Ceylonese series that lasted until 1933 – a series in which, by the 1910s, the Ceylonese were usually the victors.

Cricket was also a medium for the encroachment of other Westernised ways of life, particularly that institution known as the club. Thus, cricket's anti-colonial dimensions were qualified by strands of Anglophilia and a distancing of its bearers from the hoi-polloi. Indeed, running parallel with Ceylonese nationalism, one saw indigenous resistances of a more marked anti-Western character. There were two threads intertwining here: the hostile Hindu and Buddhist reactions to Christian proselytising on the one hand, and hostility towards the English language and Westernised lifestyles (and the associated assumptions of superiority) on the other. Among some Sinhalese, this resistance was quite virulent, and one can point to a cohesive Sinhalese nationalism from the 1860s onwards.

Thus, at the time of Independence, one found Ceylonese and Sinhalese nationalisms, along with Tamil and Moor communitarianism, jostling with one another, often in complex overlap. On the cricket field, however, the elite ranks of all the ethnic groups (with the partial exception of the Indian Tamils) were united in supporting Ceylon against all 'outsiders'. Colombo-bred, middle-class Tamils were among the leading players and administrators. When Ceylon played India or took on the Madras Cricket Association for the Gopalan Trophy from 1953 onwards, Tamils were among the keenest of Sri Lanka's fans. This is in direct contrast to today, when a significant proportion of indigenous Tamils tend either to be ambivalent or to

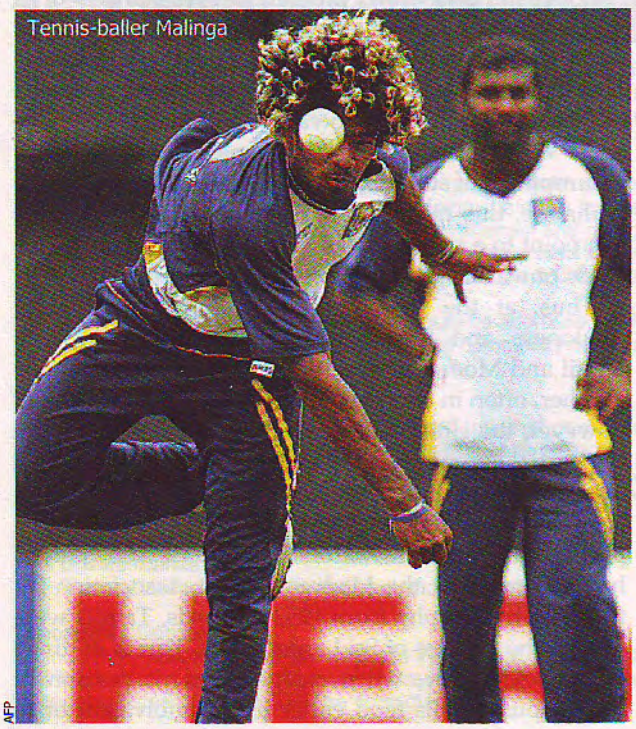
Card games such as bridge, rummy, donkey, snap and canasta have been the most popular games in Sri Lanka for over a century and a half, while carom has also maintained a strong following.

support India – or even 'anyone but Sri Lanka', on the principle of backing the enemy of one's enemy. Today, with cricket having become Sri Lanka's premier sport, reaching across all classes and embracing most parts of the country, this qualification is of some importance. But in order to grasp the significance of such developments, we must retrace our footsteps to the early 19th century, and the advent of those great inventors of games, the British.

Passing time in British Ceylon

The British rulers in Ceylon indulged in a broad spectrum of recreational activities, with the enthusiasm and leisured circumstances of rulership. The full panoply of British games, of both the board and field varieties (including the 'manly' pastime of hunting), were vigorously pursued in Ceylon. By the late 19th century, the field games included football, volleyball, hockey, athletics and cricket. Over time, most of these (except polo) were taken up by the Ceylonese middle classes, while some board games such as draughts were dispersed across all strata. Indeed, card games such as bridge, rummy, donkey, snap and canasta have been the most popular games in Sri Lanka for over a century and a half, while carrom has also maintained a strong following.

As with the British, field games were institutionalised through clubs, which inevitably led to a similar opportunity for segregation. Inevitably, the 'colour bar' stood firm at the gates of the European clubs, but a similar proclivity to set up cricket clubs along ethnic lines also became ingrained among the Ceylonese. The first of these, the Malay Cricket Club, opened its doors in 1872, followed by several multi-ethnic institutions. There was also an important disconnect between the urban and rural areas. Both cricket and rugby were largely restricted to the urban centres until the 1960s, and were for the most part elitist in character; rugby, for instance, was only played in Colombo, Kandy and the plantation centres. In contrast, football was more widespread, and attracted both elite academies and a wider range of educational institutions and regions.


Tennis-baller Malinga

AFP

Despite the elitism shared by Ceylonese rugby with cricket, there was nevertheless an important difference between the two. Many more schools, including the leading ones in the Jaffna Peninsula, played cricket. Moreover, some working-class people in the larger towns were drawn to the big matches between rival schools, encouraged by the opportunity to engage in betting, as well as the carnival atmosphere of these large matches. As such, team-specific loyalties built up over time, something that did not take place with either rugby or football. One must not forget that education in Sri Lanka was not expensive at this time, and that classes at most urban schools included many poor children, whose parents were also drawn into their children's areas of interest.

Cricket, moreover, was not an expensive pastime of the purely 'leather ball and white longs' kind. The game could be played with all manner of balls, including the local *kaduru* ball, and therefore attracted young players from all strata, though they remained exclusively male. Since players could use cheap tennis balls, cricket was a familiar sport in the palm groves, bare patches, beaches and side streets of the urban and semi-urban areas for over a century. It could also be played by children within the restricted space of a garage or veranda. Lasith Malinga, who shot to fame recently as a sling bowler, developed his relatively unique technique as a tennis-ball beach-cricket lad.

Cricket also had a golden aura to it. Famous English and Australian sides would occasionally play whistle-stop one-day matches in Colombo when their ships called in, en route to their respective countries. Beginning with the West Indies in 1949, sides touring India sometimes also played a series in Sri Lanka. The attention devoted to such matches in the prestigious English-media newspapers was high octane for the sport's popularity in the country.

In the meantime, cricket was beginning to catch on in schools where it had not previously been a prominent feature, notably in the former Buddhist denominational schools Ananda and Nalanda (both in Colombo), Dharmaraja (in Kandy) and Mahinda (in Galle). During the 1960s, Neville Jayaweera, the farseeing former head of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, initiated Sinhala-language cricket commentaries for the annual big match between Ananda and Nalanda, which involved the invention of a whole new vocabulary. This was a momentous step, as it both contributed to the popularity of the game and deepened refined knowledge.

17 March 1996

Through the years, the prestige associated with cricket in Ceylon (and, now, Sri Lanka) encouraged high levels of proficiency, particularly in the art of batting. Over time, the lineages of excellent cricketers in some elite schools, notably S Thomas' College, crystallised and enabled Ceylon to field teams that beat Pakistan and India several times during the 1960s. In addition, several Ceylonese players made their mark in Oxbridge and English county cricket during the 1950s and 1960s.

These achievements eventually gained Ceylon 'associate' status within International Cricket Club (ICC) circles in 1965. But circumspection by Western countries kept the highest levels of international cricket closed, even after Sri Lanka won the ICC trophy for second-tier cricketing countries in 1975. These doors were eventually opened in 1981, which meant tours of Sri Lanka with all the associated international gloss. This also happened to be the time that television was introduced in Sri Lanka. Cricket fervour grew apace, despite the context of escalating conflict and a civil war in the south from 1987 to 1990.

When Sri Lanka eventually succeeded in winning the World Cup in one-day cricket in 1996 against Australia, Sri Lankans around the world were glued to their TV sets. That day, 17 March in Lahore, capped a century and a half of evolution of Sri Lankan cricket: all at once consolidating the 'groundwork' provided by tennis-ball cricket, the prestige of school cricket, a long pedigree of good cricketers and television's glamourisation of the game. Sri Lankans proved themselves capable of holding their own at the highest international levels.

While the government decreed volleyball to be the 'national game' of Sri Lanka in 1991, this declaration is not widely known, nor readily accepted by those who do know. Today, with the overwhelming media attention towards cricket, as well as the widespread engagement with the sport, cricket is undoubtedly the country's ruling prince of sport – as well as the popular king.

Still in the nets

Pakistani women's cricket has begun a long journey.

BY **AMBER RAHIM SHAMSI**

It is played on every available strip of grass and patch of asphalt, in every *galli* and *mohallah*. Hockey may be Pakistan's national sport, but cricket is the national passion. Of late, however, that passion has turned sour, with forfeited matches, failed dope tests, fitness problems, the early exit from the World Cup in March and the death of coach Bob Woolmer. It has been a bad year for Pakistani cricket, to say the least – for men's cricket, at any rate.

While the men in white are portrayed alternately as gods or devils, depending on the slant of the fickle public mood, the country's cricketing women have been building a team under the radar. Yes, Pakistan does have a women's cricket team. No, these women in white have not won a major tournament yet. But that must be seen in context.

"The Indian women's team has been playing for more than 35 years," says 21-year-old Urooj Mumtaz Khan, captain of the national women's cricket team. "We can't compare." The current Pakistani team is merely two years old. Also stacked against it is the nature of cricket's social milieu. Those games being played in the *gallis* and *mohallahs*? All by boys. And while Shamsa Hashmi, secretary of the women's wing of the Pakistan Cricket Board, may call the game a "second religion", Pakistan's religious extremists have raised a fuss about mixed-gender sporting events.

In 2005, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) – the conservative multi-party religious alliance that constitutes one-fifth of the current Parliament – intervened in a mixed marathon in Lahore. When violent clashes ensued, the government prohibited women and men from 'sporting' together. The aftershocks of that decision can be felt even today. Men are banned from women's cricket matches unless accompanied by their families. This ban even extends to the Women's World Cup qualifier tournament, an international event where the likes of Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, Bermuda, Ireland, South Africa, Scotland and the Netherlands will compete in Lahore this November. But team captain Khan is happy with the decision. "We do prefer to avoid groups of men watching our games. This keeps out riffraff who come to see us playing for cheap thrills."

Khan herself comes from a fairly liberal family. She


Pakistan captain Shamsa Hashmi, Lahore, October 2005

batted and bowled with the boys from a young age, and was soon playing more competitive cricket with boys older than she was. Her parents have been supportive, and her college (she is in the final year of a dentistry programme) has fully accommodated her sporting pursuits. For Urooj, cricketing has never been a male activity. "I've got a younger brother who doesn't play cricket," she says with a grin.

On to Lahore

More encouraging than the experience of women like Urooj Khan, who hails from metropolitan Karachi, is the sight of female cricketers who come from inland towns such as Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Multan, Sialkot and even far-off Toba Tek Singh. The national team's fast bowler, Qanita Jalil, is from Abbottabad, in the NWFP, where the provincial government is led by the MMA. But in a country where women are pigeonholed as either demure housewives or glitzy sex bombs, the sporty woman is a breath of fresh air for many. And the fact that playing sports is becoming increasingly acceptable at the family level despite the conservative wave that seems to be sweeping the country, is giving girls a healthy outdoor outlet that was previously almost nonexistent. Urooj has many girls between the ages of 14 and 18 coming to participate in matches and camps.

Women's sports have been getting a boost in Pakistan over the past eight years of Pervez Musharraf's regime. Previously, the only women's national team was under the Pakistan Hockey Federation. Now, the Pakistan Football Federation and the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) have separate women's wings. Under Nawaz Sharif's government from 1997 to 1999, women were forbidden from playing any sport in public. It was in the face of death threats that sisters Sharmeen and Shazia Khan brought women's cricket to Pakistan back in 1996. Despite stiff opposition, they went on to form the Pakistan Women's Cricket Control Association (PWCCA), which became affiliated to the International Women's Cricket Council.

The PWCCA team eventually qualified for the 1997 World Cup held in India, and went on in 2000 to beat the Marylebone Cricket Club at Lords in London. However, official backing for the sport has increased since the time that Sharmeen and Shazia Khan had to depend on their businessman father for funding support. In fact, Pakistan's revised National Sports Policy of 2005 states: "All sports federations will organise appropriate sports for women. Women wings (where feasible) will be created." Indeed, it was when the PCB took over the reins of women's cricket in 2005 that the game really picked up.

"The PCB is contributing in terms of facilities and funds," says Shamsa Hashmi. "Cricket has been introduced at the school and college level. Plus, there are 11 regional teams." It has been a busy six months for the women's wing. This year alone, there have been the Inter-District Women's Championship, the National Women's Cricket Championship and the National Schools Under-17 Women's Championship. Meanwhile, a month-long training camp for 33 players in preparation for the November qualifiers is currently underway in Lahore. In their first major win last year, the Pakistan women's team triumphed 3-0 over the visiting team from Hong Kong.

Urooj Khan is now looking forward to the November qualifiers, in which Pakistan's main competition will come from Ireland and South Africa. Eight teams are competing for just two slots in the World Cup, and this will be a make-or-break tournament for the fledgling team. "One of the obstacles we face is that girls do not get to play cricket all year round like boys do, so fitness can be a problem," says Hashmi. "So we give them exercises they can easily do at home."

But how far women's cricket in Pakistan can win over deeply entrenched social mores remains to be seen. When asked whether she sees herself playing cricket five years from now, Khan at first answers in the affirmative, but then her face clouds a bit in doubt. "I would like to get married," she admits shyly. PCB's Hashmi has also observed that the priority of most young Pakistani women is to settle down – with a husband and kids, rather than a red leather ball and a white willow bat. Perhaps if the team qualifies for the World Cup, there will be an incentive to delay the inevitable.

Cricket or bust

For Indian sports journalists, the decision is stark.

BY **SIDDHARTH SAXENA**


It's a job...

TIGERCRICKET

Over the course of more than a decade of writing on sports – a time that has coincided with the explosion of international cricket in India – I have covered only one one-day cricket match with 'visitors'. During this time I have concentrated on football. I have reported on the dismal standards and the doping scandals, taken lonely treks into the Punjab heartland on investigative beats, explored the socio-political role of football in India's Northeast, covered Tibet's defiance towards China in the form of a ragtag national football team, and discovered that Britain's first expatriate footballer could have been an indentured Indian labourer from the Caribbean. As far as cricket is concerned, there have been endless hours at the copy desk, cleaning up messy stories by self-important (and mostly touring) cricket correspondents. In all of this, I can count only one game of cricket in terms of a reporting assignment – admittedly a dismal record.

But this is not a lament. It is, rather, a celebration of a choice. I have nothing against cricket – far from it. Nowadays, I might not haul myself out of bed at first light to see England take guard against Australia in the Ashes Down Under, nor do I sit bleary-eyed (but ever alert) long into the night to watch games in the once-distant West Indies. But all of that is in the past. Since Australia's Shane Warne and the West Indies' Brian Lara retired in quick succession in recent months, much of international cricket's edge seems to have left with them. But my decision not to cover cricket long predates this recent slump.

When Sachin Tendulkar was scoring his record-breaking Test century in Delhi two winters ago, and the world was watching breathlessly, I was in Manipur, trying to make sense of footballing nationalism in the faction-ridden state (*see box*). When Anil Kumble, again in the capital, was taking his '11 for' (whereby he defeated all 11 of the opposing team's batsmen) in a single, decisive inning back in 1999, I was on a mission to uncover child labour in Punjab's lucrative sports-goods industry.

In both cases, my stories were relegated to the inside pages of the newspaper I worked for. That is all right and, of course, expected. It would have been petulant to believe that my articles needed to be staring everyone in the face. Yet, this marginalisation of non-cricket stories follows a pattern.

Number-crunching

While covering my sole international cricket game in November 2002, a younger colleague, who had been sitting a few rows from me with Maninder Singh – the former cricketer who was hospitalised after an attempted suicide in mid-June – came over and excitedly announced that this would make the 50th match. "Whose? Sourav Ganguly's?" Missing my sarcasm and suggesting that Ganguly had already played over 300 one-dayers, he said this was the number of games he had now covered as a journalist.

I got to thinking, who keeps count in such matters? Likely not a sporting romantic – but a lover of numbers, or a careerist. Journalists must not be grudged their moments of glory, but there is something more than an enthusiast's pride to this eagerness to keep one's personal score.

Cricket reporting – what could otherwise be a beautiful task – now comes accompanied by journalistic ambition so great it seems to gnaw at the game's soul. The trade's promise of growth and acceptance

International cricket has supplanted not only reportage of all other sports, but also coverage of other cricket. Today, domestic Indian cricket games do not receive mention in any but the most provincial of papers.

distracts from the sport itself, and fosters a destructive competitiveness. Those who choose to report on cricket must thus either discard all sense of propriety and plunge headlong into the game of self-promotion, or opt to keep a distance and merely watch it all. If you choose the former, you may discover a new talent, perhaps even find yourself at the head of the reportorial pack. If you choose the latter, you will invariably be forced to wrestle with your emotions – kicking yourself for being such a shrinking violet, since all the tours are going to other people while the column-inches are filled with poorly filed reports from attention-hungry megastars, mostly made-up controversies and convenient leaks. Indeed, one of the many effects of excessive cricket reporting has been that, in their rush to file something exclusive every day, journalists allow 'news' to be planted by the players. During long international tours in particular, when regular stories seem to dry up, petty controversies among cricketers, with their agents, and the high-handedness of Cricket Board officials, are played up to seem significant. It is the journalist pack's survival tactic.

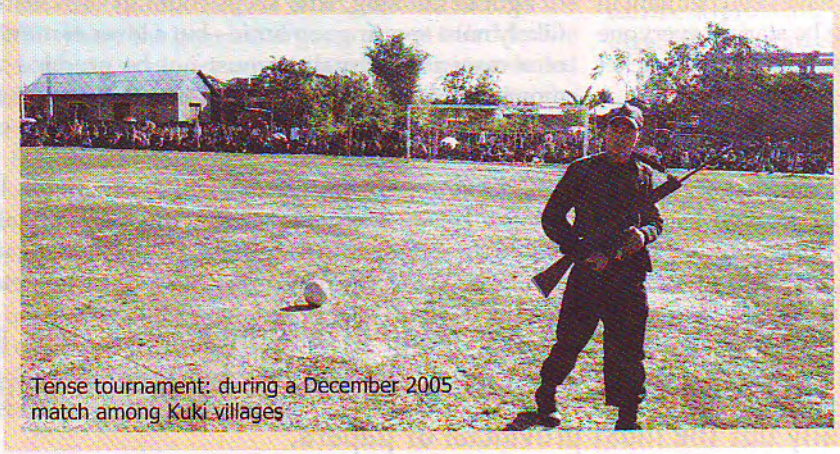
In India, an aspiring sports journalist must either be content to cover cricket, or seek another profession. After all, barring the occasional blip on the radar screen from the tennis court, no other sport provides the material gratification and ego boost that cricket writing does. To imagine being able to write about anything else is self-delusion – and the situation has only gotten worse with time. You may discuss the exploits of tennis star Roger Federer or the trends in European football with your sports-loving editor during a cigarette break, but you will be called to task if you make the golfer Jeev Milkha Singh your story's lead, instead of the latest war of words between Greg Chappell and Sourav Ganguly.

When I became a sports journalist, in the mid-1990s, the cricketing boom in Southasia was in its nascent stage. The Internet was yet to be found in Indian newspaper offices at that time, and the ubiquitous television camera and crew were yet to arrive on the Indian pitch. In the mid-1990s, Sachin Tendulkar was just about to sign his first multi-million-dollar deal with WorldTel. In the ensuing upward spiral, prices for telecast rights and TV deals would go through the roof, multiplying manifold with each new series – and soon, these were cropping up by the dozen. As the game

Manipur's football nationalism

It is December 2005, and Sachin Tendulkar is scoring his 35th century, beating a record that Sunil Gavaskar had held for 22 years. But Imphal, the capital of Manipur, is oblivious to the tremor rocking the Indian mainland. A flickering TV set in a dank hotel lobby is probably cricket's only connection to the city. And even there, apart from the hotel cab driver awaiting his call, the Sikh businessman and front-desk manager who rarely looks up from his bills, nobody is watching.

But later in the evening, when the electricity returns after a power cut, there is a remarkable awakening. After a soulful rendition of a local number, the waiter of Sri Krishna Chicken Centre joins his mates to watch the delayed showing of an FC Barcelona-Cadiz Spanish League football meet on cable television. The telecast is greeted with silence and rapt attention. At this very moment another channel is replaying Tendulkar's century, but no one here is tuned in.



TOI

Tense tournament: during a December 2005 match among Kuki villages

In November 2005, a refereeing decision at the Santosh Trophy tournament in Kochi had hurt Manipur's chances of advancing to the semifinals; the subsequent protests in Manipur led to a two-day closure state-wide. Public demonstrations were arranged immediately, and effigies of the referee and All India Football Federation (AIFF) officials were burnt. The local cable channel halted telecasts of the rest of the tournament, and Zee Sports' ratings took a nosedive. Scathing editorials of the referee's call appeared in the local papers, and a Manipuri referee turned in his badge.

The All Manipur Football Association (AMFA) was quick to withdraw its teams from all AIFF-run competitions through the end of the year; this was followed by the Manipur Olympic Association's withdrawal from all national-level sporting events. In the uber-organised world of Manipuri sport, the national participation of its teams nationwide is serious business. Manipur is a state deeply divided between hill groups and the dominant, non-

became increasingly commercialised, the time-tested tradition of an off-season would quickly be done away with. And with players on the pitch the year-round, sponsors would feel they were getting their money's worth, and television channels would prove ever eager to cut coverage of other sports to broadcast yet another cricket series.

But back then, us greenhorn sports journalists were still made to believe that, with good, intelligent, head-down work, success would eventually come our way. Cricket was just one part of the wide and wonderful world of sports, in which everything had a place; our paper would even carry reports from English county games. International cricket has supplanted not only reportage of all other sports, but also coverage of other cricket. Today, domestic Indian cricket games do not receive mention in any but the most provincial of papers. If a domestic match is not featuring at least one bitter, discarded Test star, why should it even come up in editorial meetings?

Bluster

It was in the mid-1990s that Southasian cricket stopped being a sport, and was converted into a money-making industry. In the process, the game created a new personality for the previously friendly cricket writer: the bloated ego, the self-important bluster. As the players became celebrities and proximity to them acquired a premium, reporters-turned-rockstars became a loud and intrusive presence on the cricket grounds. In this world of heavyweights, the stakes are high. There continues a running battle in the press box at New Delhi's Feroz Shah Kotla stadium over which of the local cricket-scribe bigwigs discovered Virender Sehwag. Everyone claims ownership, and as Sehwag's star fades, all say that they were the first to stick their necks out and warn of his impending decline.

Any serious cricket journalist can vouch for the existence of this kind of petty near-sightedness, which takes away from a meaningful engagement with the sport. For readers tired of the bluster of cricket journalism, there is only one recourse – turn to other sports. Only when the public rewards sports journalism that does not take away the romance of the game, will the editors and television programmers begin to give more importance to other sports.

tribal community of the Imphal Valley. The Zeliangrong, or Kabui, sect of the Naga community, for instance, is considered a natural antagonist of the Valley-based Meitei community. But even the Zeliangrong Football Association, an organisation with a troubled relationship with the AMFA, called off play, expressing its solidarity with the bandhs.

In Manipur, football represents perhaps the only point on which all can agree. Maybe Manipuris unite when confronted, via national football, with the image of an India that has alienated them in the past, and which spurns them in the present. "Nationalism manifests itself in almost all teams coming out of the state. They are ready to die for the state," says football-crazy IAS officer R K Nimai.

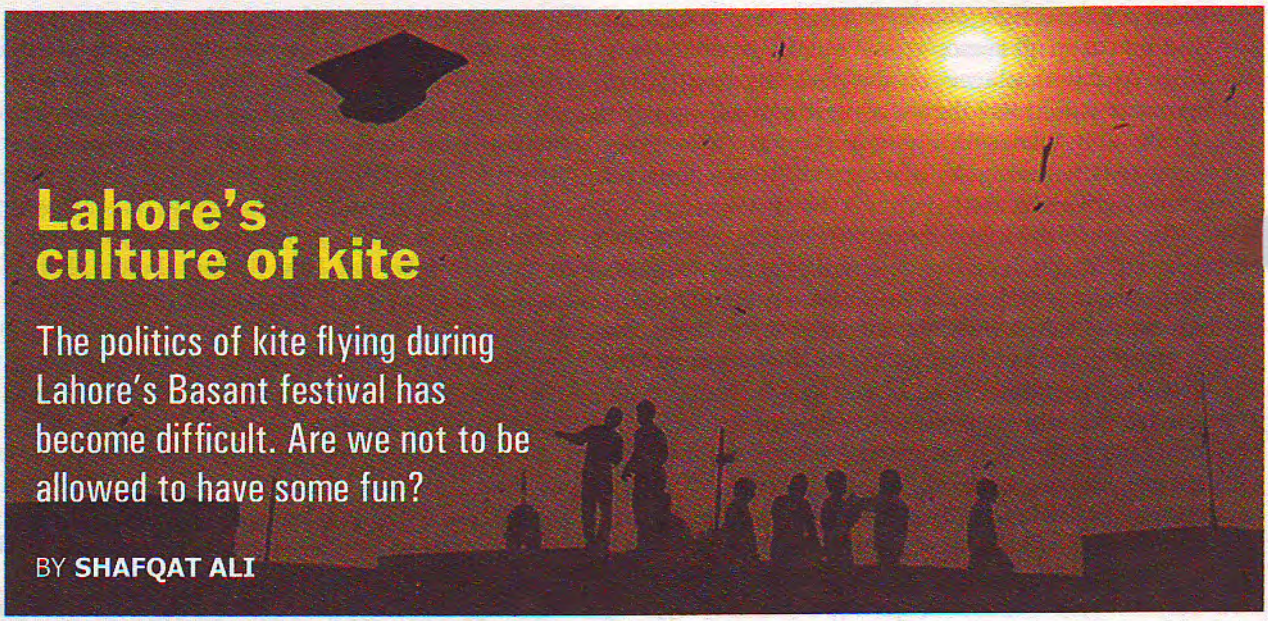
"Sport is the one counter-insurgency plot by the government that has actually proved popular," chuckles one political activist. Referring to the spread of hard drugs among young Manipuris, he claims: "First they went for the youth with other tricks. It was rampant in the 1990s, and it worked like magic. Then they discovered the opium of sport. Now they've thrust hockey sticks and badminton racquets into their hands, and the guns have gone." No one seems to be complaining.

Over the past decade, Manipur has served as a nursery for mainstream Indian football. Each major club in mainland India boasts of an array of Manipuri players. Add to that a triple world women's boxing champion in Mary Kom; a clutch of excellent sportsmen and women in cycling, judo and boxing; evergreen women weightlifters, and a fresh interest in sports not traditionally associated with Manipur (including archery and wushu), and the picture for Manipuri sport could not be rosier. Dhanabir Laishram, a political scientist at Manipur University, suggests that part of the reason why sport has become a raison d'etre for Manipuri youth is a lack of traditional employment options: "Manipur is a case of urbanisationwithoutindustrialisation. The agricultural sector too has been poor. Sport has become an industry in Manipur."

But why does it arouse such passion? In the dressing room in Kochi that day in November 2005, the anger was palpable. We will never play in India again, never! was the refrain heard from many players. "There is a sense of alienation in all walks of life in Manipur, not just in football," says Nimai. "There was a sense of hurt with what happened in Kochi. Things like this make people feel that the Centre doesn't really care."

What would correct that ill-feeling? "An apology, that's all," insists Pradip Phanjoubam, of the Imphal Free Press. "All those in Manipur need to have their sentiments assuaged is a mention from the Federation that the referee was wrong. We are not asking for the result to be reversed. That cannot happen in football. What we are asking for is just a show of concern. All of Manipur is looking for just that one word. And not just in football."

– Siddharth Saxena



Lahore's culture of kite

The politics of kite flying during Lahore's Basant festival has become difficult. Are we not to be allowed to have some fun?

BY **SHAFQAT ALI**

People have flown kites for millennia – for relaxation, as recreation, as an ancient tool for military signalling and as a modern signifier of an ephemeral harmony. The practice originated in China around 3000 years ago, from where it eventually trickled into South and Southeast Asia. In Pakistan, kite flying has long brought the followers of various religions together annually, to join hands – and cross strings – in heralding the arrival of spring.

In the Subcontinent, legend tells of the 12th-century saint Nizamuddin Aulia, of Delhi, and his grief at the death of his nephew, Taquiddin Nooh. As he was wondering what he could do to cheer him up, Nizamuddin's close friend and disciple, Amir Khusro, came upon a group of village women dressed in bright yellow, the colour of mustard in bloom. The women told Khusro that they were celebrating spring, and offering flowers to their gods. The sight of the gaily-dressed women did indeed brighten Nizamuddin's spirits, and to this day, the Basant, or spring, festival is commemorated with a profusion of mustard flowers at several Nizamuddin shrines. While they are celebrated throughout Southasia by communities of all religious backgrounds, the festivities have long had a particular connection with Lahore. And the old, walled city is especially famed for its enthusiasm for Basant *patang baazi*, or kite flying.

Lahore, once renowned for its fashion and style, has in recent years been working to recover the glory that it had as the cultural capital of Punjab. The effort began around 1990, when the World Bank funded a massive renovation of the old city. During this push, civic leaders latched on to the popularity of the Basant festival; and over the past decade and a half, Basant has become an event surrounded by so much hype in Lahore that many people have dramatically reworked their *havelis* (mansions) in the city, decorating rooftops and expanding lawns so as to be able to accommodate the festival-goers. Multinational companies have also cashed in on the public mood, and the festival has become increasingly commercialised.

Amidst this rising popularity, however, there is also rising angst. In recent years there has been growing public disgruntlement with the kite flying at the festival, due both to safety concerns and rising pressure from fundamentalist groups. A nearly year-round ban on flying kites throughout Pakistan, with a two-day exception for Basant, has now led to uncertainty with regards to the future of the festival. Indeed, the substitution in the public rhetoric of the Basant celebrations in general for kite flying in particular goes to show just how characteristic kites are of the Lahore festivities.

Paicha

Basant begins each year around mid-February. The festivities start in the evening, when people begin to fly their kites from illuminated rooftops. This distinctively Lahori practice of night-time kite flying, coupled with music, dancing and feasting, carries on throughout the night, ending eventually at the end of the third day. The kites flown in Lahore during Basant are of the manoeuvrable, square construction, with a triangular tail and five bamboo struts – the same basic design found in the other cities of Southasia. As elsewhere, the Lahore kites are tethered by cotton strings coated with powdered glass. With multiple kite-fliers in a particular area, the goal is to get into a *paicha*, wherein the strings of two or more kites cross. Then, using a special flying technique, each kite-fighter attempts to cut the strings of the other kites, success in which results in shrieks of *"Boo kata!"* The vast majority of those who fly during Basant are kite-fighters – perhaps because they have little choice

in the matter, since kite fighting is probably as old as kite flying itself.

To prepare for launching, a kite is punctured with a matchstick on each side of its central strut, at two places above and two below the point at which the cross-struts meet. This provides for a triangle of string, making the kite more aerodynamic. The puncturing process is called *taran*, and how well it is done defines how responsive the kite is to its master during flight, particularly important in kite fighting. The string used for fighting also has to be readied with great care. The string's strength is tested by crossing it over a master string, and two people saw the strings back and forth until one is cut. Once its strength has been discerned, the string, or *dor*, is wound into a ball called a *pinna* or *gola*. The string is sharp and abrasive, having been coated with finely ground glass, and young children have grown up being taught the special ways to deal with *dor*. Some *dor* sold on the market, however, is extremely sharp and sometimes even reinforced with metal, posing a frightening public safety hazard.

There are certain ethics involved in the *paicha*. For instance, a kite may not be attacked until it is completely up in the air, and in the control of the flier. Nonetheless, competitions surrounding kite fighting can often descend to ground level, with fliers resorting to fisticuffs once their kites are defeated in the air. In recent years, a number of deaths in Pakistan have been attributed to kite-fighting frustration.

Dangerous, but un-Islamic?

If razor-stringed aerial dogfights sound like they could be dangerous, they are. This year, at least 11 people died and more than 100 people were injured during the two days of legal kite flying. These deaths and injuries were due to lacerations, electrocutions, people falling off rooftops and getting hit by stray celebratory bullets. During the previous five years, official records show that 861 people died and over 2000 were injured in kite-related accidents.

The physical toll may be considered part of the game by many, but the game itself is now under attack. Over the years, there have been several petitions against the festival placed before Pakistani courts. In 2004, the Lahore High Court heard a new complaint by a Lahore-based lawyer, alleging that the Basant kite flying was un-Islamic. The court rejected the claim, but the government nonetheless decided to pass a countrywide ban on kite flying in 2005 on grounds of safety concerns, with a few days' allowance for Basant.

To this day, however, Islamabad officials are at pains to emphasise that the government's actions were not religiously motivated. "The fact is that Basant has nothing to do with any religion," says Minister for Culture G G Jamal. "There has been a problem with some people who use razor-edged strings. This has caused some accidents, and the government had to ban kite-flying just for this." Sheikh Rashid Ahmad, Pakistan's Railway Minister, who himself flies kites during Basant, notes: "Some religious fanatics want to tie everything with Islam. They forget that culture and religion are different things. I think the kite-fliers should be allowed to enjoy, but with some restrictions."

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Makhdoom Amin Fahim says that kite flying is an integral part of Pakistan's culture and tradition. "We have been living in this region for centuries, and our forefathers and their forefathers have been flying kites," he says. "Where does Islam stop us from flying kites?"

Despite the assumption that the majority of Pakistanis tend to agree with Fahim, religious groups continue to press for doing away with the Basant festival. The head of the rightwing Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), Qazi Hussain Ahmed, goes so far as to say that Basant is a Hindu festival. "It is un-Islamic, and the government must ban it," he says. "To add to this, hundreds of people lose their lives in this 'killing festivity'. Whenever we come to power, we will not allow this Hindu festival to be celebrated at the cost of so many lives."

The MMA is in the opposition in Islamabad, but governs in NWFP, where the provincial government in 2006 passed its own law outlawing the practice, over and above the Supreme Court's ban. Transgressors are now threatened with fines of PKR 40,000 or three months in prison. A religious leader at the Jamia Hafsa seminary, Ghazi Abdul Rashid, explains religious concerns this way: "Anything that wastes money or resources is not acceptable in Islam."

Such fire-and-brimstone aside, fundamentalists are certainly not the only voices calling for restrictions to be placed on kite flying. Liaqat Ali's daughter was killed last year during the Basant; she was a bystander, simply watching the festivities, when some wayward string acted as a razor. "What's good in flying kites?" Liaqat demands. "My daughter's throat was slit, and I can't forget it. I think they should ban Basant."

Flying versus fighting

Despite objections by the cultural fundamentalists and victims of kite flying, tens of thousands of people gathered in Lahore this year on 24-25 February, the window set aside for legal kite flying. As fliers sent their kites up by the thousands, the floodlit skies of Lahore were once again a kaleidoscope of whistling, swooping paper diamonds, and the air filled with enthusiastic shouts and cheering from the rooftops. Special kite-flying functions were arranged at more than 1100 sites around the city, led in places by some of Lahore's most prominent personalities. In keeping with tradition, many kite fliers wore yellow ribbons, scarves and even full yellow dresses. Again, there were accidents.

For his part, General Pervez Musharraf, a longtime Basant supporter, said that the ban on flying kites could be lifted in the future only if the hysteria surrounding kite-fighting was defused, and the practice could be

looked at as a simple game. "We are not against the festival, but rather against those people who are manufacturing such threads that slit throats," the general said in Lahore. "We should not look at it as Islamic or un-Islamic. ... Play the game as a game, so that we can continue to enjoy it, so that our next generations can enjoy it."

In the final analysis, flying kites is a significantly different sport than fighting with kites. Many feel that putting restrictions only on the latter would be a relatively balanced solution. "I don't want to lose this festival," said Fareeha Pervez, a renowned singer, during the most recent Basant. "Action should be taken against those who bring a bad name to Basant by manufacturing those dangerous strings that cause accidents." Marina Akhtar, a college student, agreed: "We should enjoy kite flying as a game, but there should be checks on those who shoot into the air [in celebration], and those who manufacture metal strings that cut people."

This would appear to be the way that the government is leaning as well. During the two days that it allowed kite flying this year, the Punjab court laid down several conditions. In addition to stipulating the size of the strings and kites that could be used, it banned the use of some of the more flagrantly dangerous kite-fighting strings, including metal-reinforced ones. Instead, strings could only be covered with wheat-flour glue and finely ground glass to provide the cutting edge. The government has also started regulating the industry, issuing licenses to compliant string manufacturers. Even such precautions were evidently deemed as insufficient, however, as Lahore officials also took it upon themselves to urge bicyclists to attach safety antennas to their cycles, to guard against dangerous strings that may descend from above. The hope Lahoris harbour is that, with the dangers posed by kite flying tackled, the sport will be allowed to herald spring in their city, unencumbered by the fundamentalist urge to ban anything that is celebratory and enjoyable.

Malh, challenging the equals

The traditional form of wrestling in Sindh is being revived thanks to business and media patronage, but some critics are unhappy with the excessive marketing.

BY **ZAFFAR JUNEJO**

Malakhro in progress

NASIR ALI PANHWAR

The word *malh* is derived from the Sindhi *malha'n*, meaning 'to celebrate'. Contemporary linguists have accepted the word as a proper noun describing the ancient Sindhi form of wrestling that is today also played in Balochistan, NWFP and Afghanistan. Malh is thought to date as far back as the Indus Valley Civilisation, and is said by some to have led to the internationally popular Greco-Roman form of wrestling.

Long before Pakistan became a separate country, malh was famous in Sindh, trumping other contact sports such as *bilharo* and *wanjhavati*. While all three were popular in the rural areas, British influence eventually led to cricket taking hold in the urban centres. After Partition, Pakistan's governments have displayed a tendency to mimic the colonisers, including in their support of certain games to the exclusion of others.

As such, the authorities in Islamabad have promoted hockey and football, and greatly pampered cricket players. Meanwhile, they have paid scant attention to the traditional games of Punjab, Sindh, NWFP and Balochistan, leading to the gradual decline of these pastimes. Bilharo and wanjhavati, for instance, are now virtually extinct in Sindh, while many worry that malh has been limited to being a traditional spectacle rather than as a popular sport. An exploration of these issues unpacks the story of the Sindhi nation, and of the suppression of its culture and aspirations.

Sandro diann

Malh in Sindh is still played with traditional flair, with certain rituals performed before each game. The mood is set by *Manghanhaar fakirs*, Sindhi folk musicians, beating drums to a particular rhythm. Games generally begin in the evening, and the drumbeat serves to attract

spectators. The fakirs are accompanied by a musician playing the *shehnai*, the reed instrument. The music they produce together is called *malhkhri ji vajja*, the music of the game.

Following the musical overture, the *pehelwans*, or wrestlers, ceremoniously bow and touch the soil with the index fingers of each hand. They then kiss these fingers, and touch their ear lobes. This ritual is meant to demonstrate the pehelwan's humility and the absence of undue pride in one's strength and skill. A more recent inclusion in this preparatory practice has been the players touching the feet of their *ustad*, their teacher, seeking permission to take part in the upcoming match.

Next, the pehelwans sit in individual *baries*, or squares drawn on the ground. They are now ready to engage in the last element of their preparations – the *sandro diann*, or 'challenging the equal ones'. The player chooses his equal from the various squares, a pehelwan who belongs to the same malh category as he does. Inclusion in any one of malh's three categories is based on mastery of the game's techniques and on physical strength, particularly of the wrists.

A malh match starts when a pehelwan ritualistically grabs at the *sandro*, or cotton cummerbund, worn by his opponent. These cummerbunds, traditionally made of *ajrak*, the block-printed cotton cloth typical of Sindh, are brightly coloured with crimson and indigo blue. Grabbing the *sandro* is known as *sandro dhhikinn*, 'directly challenging the opponent'. Thereafter, the match's referee ensures that both pehelwans grip one another by the hand – and the match begins.

There are ten moves and techniques that a malh player needs to know in order to compete on the field. These include various types of trips, pulls, pushes and other moves to throw an opponent off balance, as well as moves to counteract such attacks. The goal is to have the opponent fall, and to pin him to the ground. A match involves two rounds, or *joree*, and the winner is declared following the results of the second round.

There are 83 locations in Sindh where *malakhro*, or malh matches, are held each year, all of which are associated with religious shrines. There are also 17 events where malakhro are held, the most important of which is the annual Uris Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, the fair of Bhit Shah. This festival gives malh players an opportunity to prove their skills in public, and to fight for titles. The winners hold their titles until the next year's fair.

Malh and media

Although the Sindhi media and the rulers in Islamabad have not generally enjoyed cordial relations, they have undertaken certain joint activities over the decades that have been good for the health of malh. Back in 1966, for instance, the Ayub Khan government organised a series of events in Sindh known as *jashan*, and the common feature of each was the malakhro. As a result, the Sindhi-language daily *Ibrat* began following malh. Readers, in turn, began to demand further promotion of the game, as well as the construction of malh stadiums.

Patronage is essential for malh wrestlers, who need not only to maintain families on their earnings, but also to sustain themselves on expensive, high-protein diets consisting of meat, ghee, butter, milk, almonds and pistachios, and to have enough time for extensive exercise.

During the late 1970s, *Hilal-e-Pakistan*, a Karachi-based Sindhi-language newspaper owned by the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), began to publish its own sports page, devoted to coverage of malh. Shortly thereafter, PPP founder Zulifqar Ali Bhutto's government was toppled by Zia ul-Haq, and martial law was declared. S M Abbasi was subsequently appointed Sindh's martial-law administrator, and he continued the state's patronisation of malh. Meanwhile, amongst the majority of pehelwans from peasant backgrounds, a man named Ghulam Sarwar Jatoi became known as one of the few educated malh players. Jatoi was not only able to found and register the Malh Association, but was also able to foster additional links with government officials, continuing the revival of the game in Sindh.

Recently, the Karachi-based Fauji Fertiliser Company began promoting a new product through the medium of malakhro. The Kawish Television Network joined the campaign, and began to air live and recorded malakhro events. This was the first time in the history of electronic media in Pakistan that a channel was devoting a primetime slot to a non-big-draw game. Porreho Pehelwan, a top-ranked wrestler, remarked that malakhro had never before been broadcast with live commentary.

However, not all malakhro aficionados are pleased with what they perceive as marketing gimmicks to promote an aspect of Sindhi culture. Haji Khan Mangi, a veteran political activist, does not feel that culture can be preserved or salvaged through its commercialisation: "Social justice and equal distribution of resources is the only way to promote cultural activities, including malh," he says. Some observers believe that social stability is crucial to provide an environment in which the game can thrive, and that political turmoil is affecting social stability.

So we have the paradox of the preservation of Sindhi culture: the attempts to revive malh have mostly been initiated by non-democratic governments, from Ayub Khan to Pervez Musharraf. Perhaps this has been in the hope that this traditional form of wrestling will prove cathartic for a suppressed people – that it will help to relieve them of everyday frustration, or to shake off a collective disgruntlement with the regime. Whatever the motivation, the fact remains that malh is seeing a revival. The pehelwans and a growing number of malh supporters cheer.

The December 2006 season gets underway, Calcutta

FATIMA CHOWDHURY

From royal past to a corporate present

Although the roots of modern polo are in Southasia, until recently the sport's future in the Subcontinent seemed tenuous.

BY **FATIMA CHOWDHURY**

As the warm weather reaches across Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, the 3700-metre-high Shandur Valley stirs from its winter slumber, to play host to a veritable anachronism. As the valley greens, tribesmen from near and far gather at the highest polo ground in the world, to be part of a colourful festival of music, dance and ancient sport. The main attraction of the festivities is the polo tournament, played under the light of a full moon between the traditionally rival teams of Chitral and Gilgit. The players observe rules set out almost 800 years ago by Ali Sher Khan, a descendant of Genghis Khan. The excitement generated by the skill, power and speed of this ancient game – one of the fastest in the world – is dramatically heightened by the energy of the gathered crowd.

Polo is one of the oldest team sports still being played. While the game's true origin remains a subject of speculation, many scholars believe that polo emerged from the harsh encampments of nomadic warriors in Central Asia, who are known to have domesticated wild horses more than 2500 years ago. The name itself is said to have come from the Tibetan word *pulu*, meaning ball. By the fifth century BC, as an elite cavalry under the Persian King Darius I marched across the steppe, the game was taken up as a training technique for mounted soldiers.

The first firmly documented polo game dates back to around 600 BC, between the Turkmen and Persians. Evidence of the strong popularity of polo in Persian society is widely attested to in surviving paintings and scholarly texts. Polo subsequently spread rapidly throughout Asia, from Japan in the east to the Byzantine Empire in the west, patronised by some of the greatest warriors of history, including Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. Indeed, polo became an integral part of court life of that era. With the demise of those empires, polo too became humbled.

By that time, however, the Persians had brought the game to India. There, under the patronages of Sultan Qutb-ud-din Aibak and Emperor Babur, the game flourished, eventually becoming the national sport during the 16th century. Its popularity spread beyond the Mughal courts among the Rajput kings, whose descendents ended up as the patrons of the sport down through the centuries. But once again, with the demise of the Mughal Empire in the late 16th century, polo found itself bereft of royal patronage, and continued to be played only in remote village areas.

In 1858, two British soldiers, Captain Robert Stewart and Major General Joe Sherer, witnessed a game similar to polo known as *sagol kangjei* being played by locals in Silchar, Manipur. Both officers were so captivated by the experience that they quickly introduced the sport

to their peers. The following year, they established the Silchar Polo Club, followed by the Calcutta Polo Club in 1862, which remains the oldest active polo club in the world. Over the subsequent decades, polo spread throughout the British Empire, and is today played professionally in more than 70 countries.

Although today Southasian polo is largely confined to India, the game is still played in other countries of the region. Second to India in this regard is Pakistan. Beyond the country's distinction of hosting the Shandur Valley grounds, the Lahore Polo Club is also one of the world's oldest surviving clubs. There, the main grounds are named after Sultan Qutabuddin Aibak, the 13th-century ruler of Delhi, who died in 1210 when his horse fell while playing polo in Lahore. Elsewhere in Southasia, the origins of polo can still be found in Afghanistan, in a game known as *buzkashi*. In this, the national game in both Afghanistan and nearby Kyrgyzstan, riders use their hands to grab and carry the carcass of a goat or calf across a goal line. Finally, in Nepal and Sri Lanka, the polo scene has evolved to use elephants rather than horses, a twist on the game that was first introduced around the turn of the century as a novelty for rich tourists. The World Elephant Polo Association was formed in the early 1980s in southwest Nepal.

But the legacy of Southasian polo would be incomplete without particular mention of the princely kingdoms of Rajasthan, where the Rajasthan Polo Club is this year celebrating its 100th year. While the maharajahs long ago embraced the game with a passion that continues to this day, given the natural inclination for horse riding in the area, the game also earned an important patronage among the non-royal locals. The royal polo-playing families of Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur have continued to make their presence felt in the polo scene in India, along with the prominent 61st Cavalry of the Indian Army, and a handful of highly skilled civilian teams.

Eight horses, eight mallets

A polo game is comprised of two teams of four players each, who compete on a field that is 300 yards long and 160 yards wide. The game takes place during seven-minute segments, called *chukkas*, and a full match is generally made up of between four and eight *chukkas*. Players wield long-handled mallets from horseback, and attempt to move a small white ball across a goal line at either end of the field. Each player on a polo squad has a significant role to play, although the responsibilities assigned to individual positions are interchangeable. Unlike many other team sports, polo allows both men and women to compete together on the same team, as well as a mix of professionals and amateurs.

While the success of a polo team depends on the skill of the riders, the horses are a critical part of any game. "Horses are the very essence of the sport," says Devyani Rao, a prominent Indian female polo player. "They look so beautiful on the field, and when you see a good display of horsemanship, it shows you what a horse-human team can do." The centrality of the horse in polo is also emphasised by one of India's most prominent players, Colonel Kuldeep Singh Garcha. "Everything in the world is still measured by horse power, because the horse, irrespective of the advancing technology, has left a tremendous impact on mankind," Garcha notes. "The sheer beauty, grace and speed, coupled with strength, sends the adrenaline rushing more than any other sport - which once led someone to say that polo is a disease, and the only cure is poverty or death."

Polo's fundamental rules are meant to ensure the safety of the riders and their mounts. Nonetheless, it remains one of the most dangerous sports in the world. Sawai Man Singh II, the last Maharaja of Jaipur and one of India's most notable polo players, died after a polo accident in England in 1970. More recently, the young heir of Jodhpur, Yuvraj Shivraj Singh, slipped into a coma that lasted several days due to head injuries after a fall in 2005. The experience of watching a game of polo is subsequently one of melding the players' courage, artistry and horsemanship, with a constant worry for their safety.

The excitement of a polo match begins to build the moment a spectator takes a seat overlooking the wide-open polo field. As the umpire throws the ball between the two teams, there is a sudden explosion of energy, as horses push each other and players begin swinging their wooden mallets. The energy on the field translates directly into the stands. As veteran polo player, Pradip Rao, suggests: "Despite its image of being an exclusive and niche sport, polo attracts many different kinds of spectators. There are those who are enthusiasts and come to see the game for what it is. Then there are those eager to experience the aura that polo exudes of past grandeur and royalty, and even those who just want to be seen. Either way, it is a must-attend event on the social calendar, with media shutterbugs eager to capture the glamour, glitz and aura of royalty."

Corporate polo

It is this perception of glitz that has both helped and hurt polo over the centuries - and, in truth, has come to define the sport. By hitching its own health to that of royalty and empire, polo has been able to ride high when empires were doing well, but has also repeatedly

By hitching its own health to that of royalty and empire, polo has been able to ride high when empires were doing well, but has also repeatedly ebbed in sync with those empires.

ebbed in sync with those empires. This symbiosis continued right into modern times. For decades, the game received significant support from the Indian Army and members of former Indian royal families. Nonetheless, as per the experience of centuries past, the popularity of polo in India was clearly on the downswing as the sun set on the British Empire.

Things have changed dramatically in recent years, however. The turnaround began during the 1990s, when the Indian corporate sector suddenly became interested in polo as a way of reaching the niche and lucrative crowd of polo aficionados. This led to an infusion of funding, and injected a whole new energy into Indian polo. But everything has not been set right. Pointing out some of the emerging contradictions, Pradip Rao says, "The increase of corporate sponsorship in polo has made the game more competitive and receptive, with a growing number of civilian teams. At the same time, it has done very little to raise the level of the game and increase the number of polo players that take up the sport professionally."

Devyani Rao agrees, pointing to the irony of polo's slow corruption by money and flashiness. "Polo is slowly falling prey to imitating only the lifestyle aspects," she says. "Rather than quality of the game, we are trying to match only the glitz and glamour." Likewise, Col Garcha says that, at the moment, corporate sponsorship is a "double-edged sword. It has brought in the necessary 'Vitamin M' [money], while at the same time the sport itself has taken a backseat. Hopefully it will evolve by itself and strike a balance in the coming years."

The Calcutta Polo Club (CPC) perhaps best embodies the paradox of polo in modern India. Far removed from the glitz and glamour, the oldest active club in the world is struggling to regain its glorious past. The club was once the hub of subcontinental polo, where several members of royal families and world-class polo players competed for prestigious cups. Then, as the sport itself fumbled with the changing times, the CPC's fortunes began to spiral downward, with fewer funds and crumbling infrastructure.

In the last few years, however, the CPC's prospects have brightened significantly. First, club president Keshav Bangur, a polo enthusiast himself, spent a significant chunk of his own money to set the club back on track – improving the grounds, rebuilding the stabling facilities, purchasing and training horses, and putting together a professional team to conduct lessons. The next step was to engage the skills of public-relations consultant Khadijah Chowdhury, to promote the sport and club during the December 2006 polo season – the first official season to take place in nearly a decade.

The public response was positive. Crowds first came in a trickle, out of curiosity. By the time the season ended, the Calcutta Polo Club was regularly enjoying a full house, for the first time in decades. While Chowdhury credits the success of the season to the club's own initiatives, she also believes that media support helped significantly. The December 2006 season was covered extensively in the sports sections of leading Indian dailies and television channels. This coming December, the CPC staff will be trying to match and build upon that success.

Grandeur and uncertainty

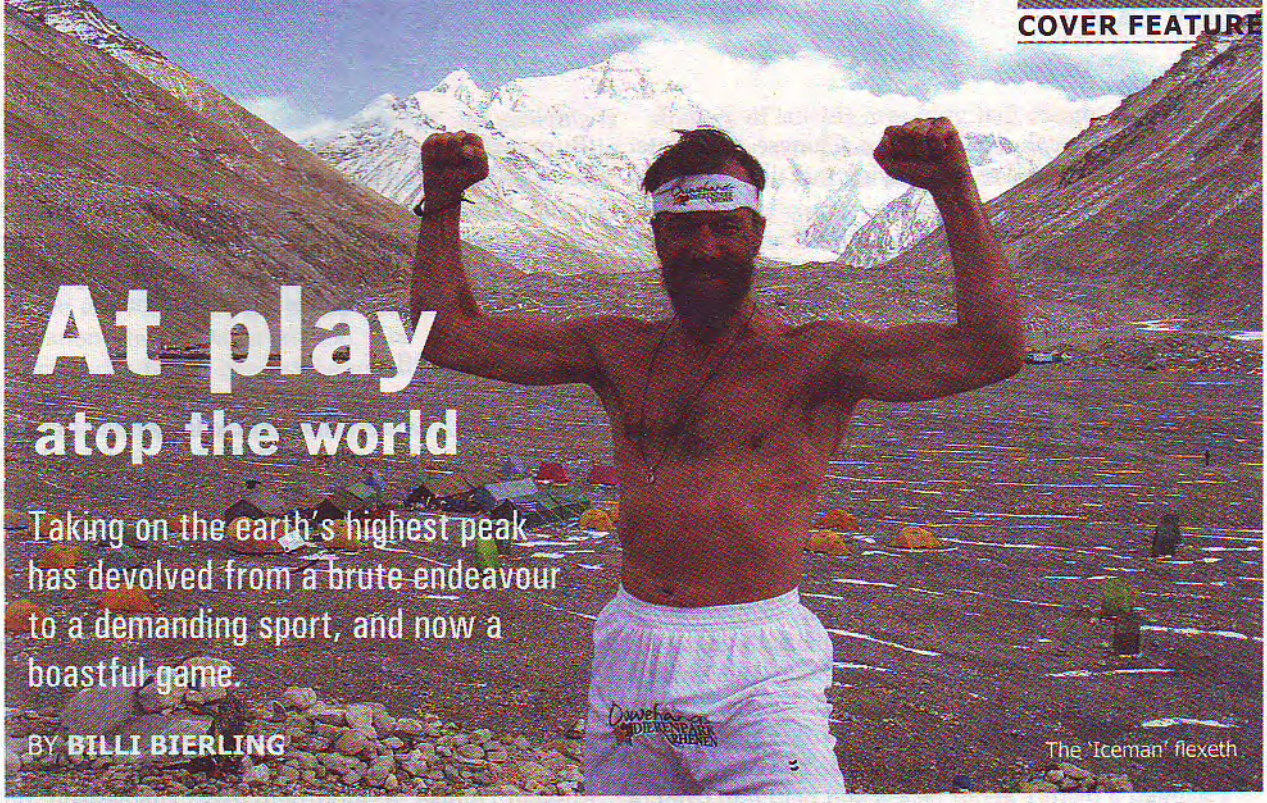
In the current situation, there is much optimism amidst the apprehension about preserving polo's legacy in India. Devyani Rao notes that the Indian polo team has done very well at recent World Cups, and that a new crop of players, including Hamza Ali, Vishal Chauhan and Rakshit Agnihotri, looks promising. Chowdhury points to the recent success at the CPC as indicative of the national potential the sport has to grow, but cautions that young, talented players need to be encouraged and provided with adequate training and facilities to raise the standard of their game to an international level.

The CPC is now offering a programme aimed at students, which has already attracted more than 25 new members since January. The Haryana Polo Club, in Gurgaon, is planning a similar programme. Angad Kalaan, captain of India's 2007 World Cup team, whose family owns the Haryana club, says that low-level promotion is exactly what Indian polo needs. While Kalaan acknowledges that corporate sponsorship has allowed for a crucial infusion of energy into the game, he emphasises that the sport's future in India will depend on new talent.

Over in Rajasthan, H H Gaj Singh, Maharaja of Marwar-Jodhpur and the founder of the Jodhpur Polo & Equestrian Institute, has been working persistently to reinstate Jodhpur as India's main centre for equestrian sports in general and polo in particular. In 1993, he restored the well-known Jodhpur team, which also included the young heir apparent, Yuvraj Shivraj Singh. In 2000, the Maharajah Gaj Singh Foundation renovated the polo ground in Jodhpur and also hosted two Jodhpur teams, along with teams from Kashmir, Delhi and one from Kenya.

The Garcha family, meanwhile, has made its presence felt in Jaipur, where the family's members have put their software fortune into creating a mini polo empire. Colonel Garcha, along with his son Satinder, has been instrumental is setting up the famous 30-acre Jaipur Riding and Polo Club, on the outskirts of Jaipur. The 11-acre polo ground, surrounded by a massive, 300-seat grandstand, is said to be only the beginning.

The current polo scene in India thus finds itself in a contradictory predicament. On the one hand, polo has historically followed the cyclical rise-and-fall of empires, feeding off the rich and royal. On the other hand, there is now a need to play to the galleries of a wider audience, to ensure the sport's survival in this post-imperial age. Abandoning the grandeur of the past and tackling the uncertainty of the future is now the challenge.



At play atop the world

Taking on the earth's highest peak has devolved from a brute endeavour to a demanding sport, and now a boastful game.

BY **BILLI BIERLING**

The 'Iceman' flexeth

Why would anyone voluntarily choose to risk life, limb and bank balance to try to get to the treacherous top of a massive, snow-covered hill? Numb with cold, gasping for air, with muscle tissue quickly deteriorating – even when mountaineers do achieve their goal, they can do little more than briefly stand tall on the summit, and cajole their companions into taking a souvenir photograph. They then begin the arduous and equally dangerous journey down. Why not simply stay home?

"Because it's there," goes the famous quote by the British mountaineer George Mallory. Shortly after mouthing this memorably obtuse aphorism, in 1924 Mallory took part in the third British attempt on Mount Everest (he had also been on the first two), and promptly disappeared. Although his body was eventually found in 1999, to this day no one knows exactly what happened. An expedition that began this June is attempting to discover whether or not Mallory and his companion, Andrew Irvine, made it to the top.

Since these first efforts were made on Everest from the Tibetan side of the mountain, Himalayan climbing has changed dramatically. Whereas Mallory and Irvine were still clad in woollen knickerbockers, modern mountaineering has brought with it not only the relative luxury of high-tech clothing, but also the indisputable opulence of cinema tents, heated showers and bakeries at the base camps on both the Tibetan north and Nepali south sides of the mountain.

From 29 May 1953, the day Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay first summited Everest, until 1996, the year a single storm killed eight people near the summit, only 842 ascents were recorded. Over the last decade, however, more than 2200 people reached the peak. After last year recorded 471 ascents of Everest – also claiming 11 lives – the 2007 season has again broken all records, with more than 500 people reaching the top of the world between April and June.

Obtuse records

In the old, halcyon days of Himalayan mountaineering, it was considered a privilege to take part in an expedition. Nowadays, would-be mountaineers have only to cough up a pile of cash (Everest can be climbed for between USD 15,000-60,000, depending on the side of the mountain, number of Sherpas employed for support, and additional services) to be helped up the mountain. Of course, this is a claim that most expedition leaders are loath to admit. "Climbing Everest has changed," veteran Everest expedition leader Russell Brice accedes. "But people still have to put one foot in front of the other themselves. Carrying someone up is simply not possible."

These assertions aside, Everest has become something of a playground. Indeed, with dozens of people gathering at the summit at one time taking snapshots, slogging your way to the top has lost some of its charm, not to mention its exclusivity. Rather, the race to 'conquer' Everest has devolved to one of a series of 'firsts': the first blind man, the first blind woman, the first person without arms, without legs, the first Welsh woman, the first man in shorts, or the first Westerner to race up and down the mountain multiple times in a single season.

This year, upon reaching Everest's summit, a 17-year-old American girl became the youngest person to climb the highest summits on all seven continents. Weeks later, a 71-year-old Japanese man became the oldest person ever to reach the mountain's heights. A Brit this spring claimed to have made the first telephone

call from the peak – although a Chinese team later disputed this alleged record, saying that they had done so way back in 2003.

Of course, of those hoping to achieve another 'first' this year, not all have succeeded. Wim Hof, known as the Iceman, failed to reach the summit wearing only his shorts (*see photo*). The 48-year-old Dutchman, who holds nine endurance records and recently ran 21 kilometres barefoot north of the Arctic Circle in Finland, reached an altitude of 7400 metres, but was forced to turn back. He has vowed to tackle the mountain again before long.

Taking on Everest under-clothed made a big splash last year as well, when Lhakpa Tharke Sherpa caused a furore by baring his upper chest while atop the peak. Many of his fellow climbers, as well as the Nepal Mountaineering Association, were aghast, decrying his actions as an insult to the holy mountain. But Lhakpa Tharke claimed his deed was a religious one. "It was a way of promoting peace in the world, and making different religions come together," the 26-year-old said. "I painted a picture about peace, and held it in front of my heart. I prayed to the gods, and stayed like this for three minutes. My life has been better since then." That might indeed have been the case, but Lhakpa Tharke has now become known, rather incorrectly, as the 'naked Sherpa'.

Despite the dramatic changes in equipment and support, the popular techniques used in approaching Everest have changed little over the decades. The expedition that had put Hillary on the summit in 1953 used the 'siege' style, whereby a huge team sets up a large camp at the mountain's base. From there, they create a massive supply chain up the mountain, eventually leading all the way to the summit. Such an approach requires a large number of workers behind the climbers themselves, a niche that has long been filled by the Sherpas that live in the area leading to the entrance to Everest. The economic benefit of mountaineering to this community in particular has therefore, on the south side, been tremendous.

Depending on size and kind of expedition, the normal ratio is one climbing Sherpa per climber for summit day. In addition, however, there is generally a large team of Sherpas providing back-up to an expedition – cooking, fixing ropes, setting up camp and the like. The Sherpas earn about USD 50-70 per day, plus up to a USD 1000 bonus if they get to the top.

However, even as Westerners are setting more and more records, climbing Everest has become more than a mere job for some Sherpas. "This is my interest," says 34-year-old Lhakpa Sherpa, from Okhaldunga, a region south of the Sherpa heartland of Solu-Khumbu. "From my hometown we can see the amazing panoramic view, and when I was young I always wanted to climb all these mountains. That has always been my dream." Meanwhile, the famous Apa Sherpa has now broken all records, by scaling Everest 17 times and counting. (Rumour has it that the 47-year-old Apa had promised his wife he would stop when he reached the summit for the 12th time, back in 2001.) This year, he summited with a speed climber, Lakpa Gelu, who currently holds the record for the fastest ascent from base camp to the top, at 10 hours, 56 minutes and 46 seconds.

Siege v alpine

Armchair adventurers have long been particularly obsessed with Everest, and tend to forget that there are seven more 8000-metre peaks in Nepal alone. While each of these is tackled every season, climbers do so in a very different style than is employed on Everest. And, whereas criticism has arisen that the 'siege' approach has allowed rich amateurs to climb Everest without previous mountaineering experience, such is not the case on most of the other 8000-metre peaks in the Nepali Himalaya.

Annapurna, the world's tenth-highest peak, is infamous for its avalanches, and has claimed the lives of several world-famous mountaineers, including the Russian climber Anatoli Boukreev. This season, only three mountaineers reached Annapurna's summit, and according to some of the accounts, the experience was rather unpleasant. "We did it, we did it, we did it – and survived," read the dispatch written by Andrew Lock, Australia's most accomplished mountaineer, when he finally reached the safety of Annapurna's base camp this spring. "We did not have the thousands of metres of fixed rope, oxygen, climbing Sherpas or hundreds of other climbers, as on both sides of Everest," he wrote, emphasising the difference between the climbing culture surrounding Everest and other peaks.

One question that is posed from time to time is whether the way of tackling Everest would have been different if the first Westerner to set foot on its summit had not been Edmund Hilary and his siege-style expedition (led by John Hunt), but rather Reinhold Messner. In 1978, the south-Tyrolean became the first person to climb the mountain 'alpine style', a technique that does without Sherpa support on the Himalayan peaks. Then climbing alpine, the mountaineers carry everything themselves, without using additional oxygen in bottles. If Messner had been the first to summit Everest, could alpine style have come to be seen as the 'proper' way to ascend the mountain? Or, what if Hillary's initial prediction had been correct, and his achievement had been of little interest to the world in general? If the urge to climb Everest, as the world's tallest peak, had not been so strong, perhaps Himalayan siege-style would never have emerged as a progressively less sporty sport.

But today, regardless of the purists turning their nose up at siege-style climbing on Everest, it seems clear that this particular version of the climbing sport will continue – as long as Everest "is there".

The logic of suicide attacks in Afghanistan


October 2006 blast, southern Afghanistan

AP

Before the fall of the Taliban and the influx of Coalition military forces, Afghanistan had only ever experienced a single suicide attack. Last year alone, there were nearly 120. What happened?

BY **HEKMAT KARZAI**

Suicide terrorism, like 'terrorism' in general, is difficult to define. The act of committing suicide towards a particular objective is nothing new, and we have seen it done by the Bible's Samson and by the Japanese *kamikaze* pilots of World War II. The recent global phenomenon of the suicide attack started in the early 1980s, with groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and al-Dawa in Iraq. The former's 1983-85 suicide campaign against Israeli troops in southern Lebanon not only caught international attention, but was also considered an unmitigated success – unable to cope with the assault, Israel eventually retreated from Lebanon almost entirely for decades.

In Sri Lanka, the LTTE has been active since the 1970s, and has played a significant role in bringing suicide attacks to Southasia. The LTTE studied the success of Hezbollah's suicide attacks, but modified the technique to its own requirements. In her 2005 book *Dying to Kill*, Mia Bloom writes that Tamil Tiger head Velupillai Prabhakaran "saw the potential benefits of this method specifically in carrying out targeted assassination attacks in situations where it was difficult or impossible to attack a certain public figure or group of people using other methods."

The LTTE has thus been held responsible for the assassinations of several political leaders, including Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa. The LTTE is also unique in that it was one of the first groups to use women as suicide attackers, and to date 30 to 40 percent of the group's attacks have been carried out by women. If the tactic of suicide terrorism has brought attention to the Tamil Tigers' cause, the organisation has also contributed to the tactic by perfecting it on land, air and sea. The elite Sea Tigers, for instance, is well known for its ability to inflict serious casualties through suicide attacks on Sri Lankan Navy vessels.

Because of its effectiveness, by the mid-1990s the strategy of suicide attacking had caught the eye of al-Qaeda, which proceeded to conduct, coordinate and synchronise suicide assaults using multiple bombers. This led, of course, not only to the 1998 synchronised bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, but also to the attacks on the US of 11 September 2001. Al-Qaeda's greatest impact has been to inspire other groups to adopt its modus operandi. Besides the massive spread of global jihadi ideology to areas with disparate local grievances, al-Qaeda's influence has also manifested itself in the worldwide increase in suicide bombings. Indeed, out of more than 700 suicide attacks that have been recorded in the course of modern history, over 70 percent have taken place since 9/11.

A new phenomenon

Although Afghanistan has seen constant conflict over the past three decades, there had been no record of a suicide attack within the country until 9 September 2001, just two days before the American targets were hit. On that day, two al-Qaeda members assassinated Ahmad Shah Massoud, the head of the Northern Alliance. Even after the US-led Coalition forces arrived in Afghanistan in October 2001, the trend in suicide attacks emerged only gradually, with one attack in 2002, two in 2003 and six in 2004.

From that point on, however, the pace escalated dramatically. Learning from the effectiveness of the insurgents in Iraq and other places, various militant groups carried out 21 attacks in 2005, with targets concentrated in Kabul and Kandahar. In 2006, there were 118 suicide attacks, which included political and religious figures as targets. This year, as of 19 June, there have been 59 attacks. What explains this surge in mayhem?

There are several reasons why Taliban and foreign militants have decided that suicide bombings are particularly suitable for use in Afghanistan. First and

most straightforward, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have concluded that this approach is most effective in killing Afghan and Coalition troops. This is a direct result of the perceived success of Hezbollah and the LTTE, as well as that of Hamas in Palestine and the various groups now operating in Iraq. Suicide attacks allow insurgents to achieve maximum impact with minimal resources. Studies have found that when insurgents engage in direct combat with Coalition forces in Afghanistan, there is only a five percent probability of inflicting casualties. With suicide attacks, the 'kill-rate' increases several-fold.

Second, Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders have noted that the use of suicide attacks has instilled fear in the local populace. This has not only led to a widespread feeling amongst the Afghan people that the authorities are unable to protect them, but has subsequently destabilised the authority of local government institutions. As such, the gulf between Kabul and the population at large is expanding inexorably, and this serves the purpose of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Third, insurgents in Afghanistan have been able to tap into the expertise and training of the global jihadi community. Militants have been able to impart knowledge on suicide tactics to Afghan groups both in person and through the Internet. Combined with al-Qaeda assistance and recruitment from madrassas in Pakistan, those militants have also supplied a steady stream of potential suicide bombers to the jihadi insurgency in Afghanistan.

Fourth, suicide attacking is extremely effective as an assassination tactic, in situations in which there is significant security around a target. The Taliban and al-Qaeda began to use suicide attackers as assassins over the past year, targeting important personalities including Abdul Hakim Taniwal, the late governor of Paktia who died as a result of the attack on 10 September, 2006; Engineer Mohammed Daoud, the former governor of Helmand, who barely survived the attack; and Pacha Khan Zadran, a member of the Afghan Parliament who survived as well.

Fifth and most important, suicide attacks have provided renewed visibility to the Taliban and its allies - something that guerrilla attacks had been failing to generate. Given their high profile and casualty rate, every suicide attack conducted is reported on in both the regional and international press, providing augmented exposure to the 'cause'.

From without, within

A couple of years ago, there was significant debate in Afghanistan regarding the identity of the suicide attackers causing such havoc. At the time, it was assumed that the majority were foreigners, and that the tactic was essentially an imported product. As more information became available, however, there appeared to be two categories involved in the attacks.

The first group is indeed made up of foreign militants, influenced by the global ideological jihad against the West, especially the United States. This group sees

Afghanistan as the second front of that jihad (the first being Iraq), which provides them an opportunity to face their enemy in direct battle. These individuals are heavily inspired by global and Internet-based radical clerics and Taliban members, who proclaim, as Mullah Dadullah (killed in battle against the Coalition Forces on 11 May 2007) did in 2006, that "Afghanistan has been occupied by the crusaders, and it is a personal obligation of the Muslims to fight against them." Thus encouraged and motivated, these people come to Afghanistan from countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with the goal of attaining martyrdom, and of setting an example for the rest of the Muslim *ummah*.

But a small group of Afghans too are carrying out suicide attacks. While many of the bombers may originate from training camps in Pakistan, the fact that they come from over the border does not necessarily make them Pakistani. An Afghan war orphan educated and trained in a madrassa in Pakistan, who now returns as a suicide bomber, is still an Afghan. While most Afghans believe that suicide attacks are neither culturally nor religiously acceptable, they ignore the fact that Afghan culture is not as isolated as it was in the past. At one point, one quarter of Afghanistan's 25 million people became refugees, and a significant segment of that population attended madrassas in Pakistan, where many were introduced to extremist ideologies. Indeed, such training continues today, and there remains no shortage of suicide recruits from these madrassas.

There are three other prominent possibilities that could lead an Afghan to commit a suicide attack in Afghanistan. First, many operations undertaken by the Coalition forces have killed innocent civilians, including little children. Afghan culture has long placed a priority on revenge for the death of a family member. Second, poverty and unemployment are currently high in parts of south and southeast Afghanistan. Often, those involved in suicide assaults, particularly Taliban members, do so for the monetary support promised to their families. Third, there are instances when the attacker has seemed unaware that he is performing a suicide mission; he is simply given a package to deliver, and a handler ultimately detonates the bomb with a remote trigger.

In addition, the relatively easy access today to various types of technology allows for the very rapid spread of ideas, including dangerous ones. The objective of most of these is straightforward: to inspire and motivate Afghans who are disillusioned with the Coalition forces and the Afghan government to join the jihad. Underlying all of this is the exposure of Afghan citizens to al-Qaeda, which has been very successful in injecting its extremist global ideology throughout Afghanistan. It was during the Taliban's reign from June 1996 until November 2001 that al-Qaeda and the Taliban established a close relationship, wherein al-Qaeda supported and trained many Taliban cadres.

An Afghan war orphan educated and trained in a madrassa in Pakistan, who now returns as a suicide bomber, is still an Afghan.

Following the post-9/11 transformation of the Taliban from a conventional military force into an insurgent one, this training and indoctrination began to reap significant benefits, and the Taliban started to act as a significantly more sophisticated organisation.

Anti-suicide fatwa

Faced with such a situation, the Kabul government has no choice but to enhance the capacity of its intelligence agencies, with an eye to disrupting the network that organises and supports suicide bombings. As has been widely noted, suicide attackers hardly ever work alone. While intelligence is the initial link in the chain of thwarting any kind of terror attack, it is of utmost importance with regard to suicide attacks.

Police training in particular needs to be enhanced. Currently, the Afghan National Police is given a few of weeks of general training, but recruits receive nothing specific on threat assessment or related analysis. In addition to receiving necessary resources, the police force needs to be taught two sets of skills: first, in engaging the local community in a friendly and professional manner, in order to create a network of unofficial on-the-ground informants; and second, advanced training in counterinsurgency techniques, to be better able to deal with violent groups.

More broadly, there is a crucial disconnect between the military actions in Afghanistan and the reality on the ground. Both Coalition and Afghan troops must abandon their heavy-handed approaches, which tend to kill and injure innocent civilians. They must instead work with local communities, to try and develop mutual trust. The Afghan military must also familiarise itself with the Taliban's new way of operating. After analysing the pattern of recent attacks, it is clear that the two theatres for suicide attacks are Kabul and Kandahar, and security in these hotspots must be immediately increased. Only by knowing the environment and protecting it will the military be able to anticipate future attacks.

But the answers to Afghanistan's future peace can hardly be limited to military actions. The Afghan *ulama* (religious authorities) must continue to oppose suicide bombing, and issue fatwas to that effect. The moderate religious leadership throughout Afghanistan should be empowered, and given prominent opportunities to spread its message of peace and tolerance. Importantly, the government must cooperate with society at large to formulate healthy counter-ideological measures, such that religious clerics are engaged to initiate dialogue first with the population at large

and second with militants and their sympathisers, in order to dispel notions that suicide is compatible with Islamic jurisprudence.

Until Afghan security institutions are sufficiently strengthened, the international community must remain engaged in Afghanistan. Without continued assistance, the country's fragile security institutions will crumble, inevitably leading to a repeat of the early 1990s, when the country was a hub of international militancy and drug production. Most crucially, it is vital that the organic capacity of the state security agencies is developed, so that these agencies do not appear to Afghan citizens to be mere Western lackeys.

Suicide bombings are the horrific residue of larger malaise and so, given both its landlocked position and geopolitical situation, Afghanistan's relationships with its neighbours must be upgraded for the sake of its long-term stability. As such, Kabul must work to strengthen ties with nearby countries, whether through commerce and trade or transfer of knowledge. The two most important neighbours are clearly Pakistan and Iran, and their assistance is crucial to curb the inflow of militants from either West Asia or Pakistan itself.

It also is imperative that strong but informal ties be forged with village communities that live along the Afghan-Pakistani border, as some have been known to offer a safe haven for Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives. Kabul must formulate an overall plan to deal with these communities, and to provide them with necessary services - particularly education and healthcare - with the specific aim of improving living standards. The fact is that the majority of the population in these areas continues to resent the Taliban, and does not wish to go back to the draconian rule that was forced on it under the Taliban regime until 2001. This local mindset translates as goodwill for the Karzai government and must not be squandered.

Looking at the experiences of other states around the world, though, the strength or capability of Afghanistan's government and security sector may not matter all that much. No state, after all, has been able to fully immunise itself from suicide attacks - and Afghanistan may be set to follow this pattern. The trend of suicide bombings in Afghanistan has clearly gone up in the last few years, and it could continue to for the foreseeable future - particularly if the insurgents believe that suicide assaults are the best answer to the very sophisticated military of the West. However, by developing a professional security sector, drawing on global experiences, and incorporating issues of cultural and religious sensitivity, it might still be possible to develop a rational middle way in Afghanistan.

War zones

The present and future of India's SEZs

Indian policymakers rush headlong towards the discredited model of China's Special Economic Zones, even as people-power movements pose a challenge.

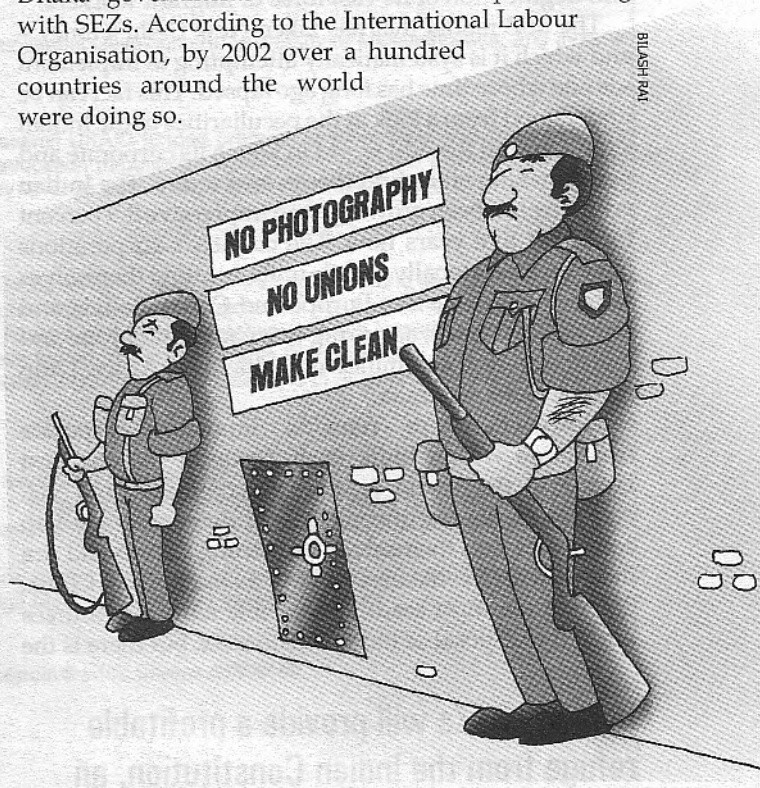
BY **ASEEM SHRIVASTAVA**

The summer of 2005 saw a major shift in India's economic policy, when Parliament passed the Special Economic Zones Act without even the semblance of a debate. Since then, widespread resistance notwithstanding, over 250 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have received formal approval, and the government has made the final announcement of the creation of 80-odd SEZs. There are several hundred applications in the queue.

The notifications of SEZs have followed a particular pattern in India, whereby major shifts in the country's economic policy are affected through stealth. In 1991, a crisis regarding short-term balance of payments in the country's external accounts was manipulated by the country's policymaking elite, to quietly usher in major changes in the way the national economy was to be run. These far-reaching changes included the liberalisation of the import regime, which had a special significance for agriculture; becoming more open to foreign investment in various areas of industry and services; allowing more foreign investment in finance; and privatisation of public sector assets. There was no public discussion of these changes, no debate befitting a democracy. The role of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in this process was hardly incidental. Much of underprivileged rural India continues to reel under the impact of the structural-adjustment policies that the two Bretton-Woods institutions brought to the country 1991. If we also take into account the role of trade concessions made by New Delhi to the World Trade Organisation after 1995, we can understand the origins of perhaps the most prominent consequence of this remote-control management of India's economic policies: the rapidly rising pile of corpses of bankrupted Indian farmers who have committed suicide

What is a Special Economic Zone? It is a specially demarcated area of land, owned and operated by a private developer, deemed to be foreign territory for the purposes of trade, duties and tariffs. With the intent of increasing exports, within the SEZ production can be carried out by investing companies utilising a large number of concessions – tax exemptions, guaranteed infrastructure and the relaxation of labour and environmental standards. These last are what make SEZs particularly 'special'.

It is worth noting that India may be the first country in the world to be experimenting with privately owned Special Economic Zones; in China, even when they have been developed by the private sector, SEZs are ultimately owned by the state. And SEZs are not new to the Subcontinent. Their predecessor was the Export Processing Zone (EPZ), the first of which was created in Gujarat in India in 1965. The Colombo and Dhaka governments have also been experimenting with SEZs. According to the International Labour Organisation, by 2002 over a hundred countries around the world were doing so.



BILASH RAI

The Shenzhen syndrome

New Delhi's recent enchantment with Special Economic Zones is a direct consequence of the perceived success of the Chinese model. Beijing experimented with SEZs over a period of two decades, beginning in the early 1980s, with the liberaliser Deng Xiaoping at the helm. They were initially introduced in the coastal areas of the southeastern part of the country, as a pilot experiment during the early phases of the post-Mao opening up. Despite at least one case of notable 'success', in Shenzhen in Guangdong Province, the SEZ model of economic growth has stood discredited in China for nearly a decade due to the outcry regarding unacceptable working conditions for the majority of workers and the devastation of local ecologies as a result of the Special Economic Zones.

Much of India's move towards SEZs can be traced to a 2000 visit to China by former Union Commerce Minister Murasoli Maran, who became enchanted by the success of the showpiece SEZ at Shenzhen. Shenzhen's annual rate of growth has been 20-30 percent for the past quarter century, and over 10 million people have found employment in an area the size of the Jaipur metropolitan area. The city continues to generate 14 percent of China's exports.

And yet, drawbacks abound. As a *New York Times* reporter wrote in December 2006, few cities anywhere have created wealth faster than Shenzhen, but the costs of its phenomenal success were "environmental destruction, soaring crime rates and the disillusionment and degradation of its vast force of migrant workers."

The SEZ model that has taken New Delhi's fancy – and which it is systematically attempting to implement – is one whose time has long ago lapsed. This fact can be understood from a look at the peculiarities of the Indian situation, and the odd world in which its corporate and policymaking elites find themselves today. The Indian economy has been growing at an impressive 8-9 percent for about five years now. The country's corporations have become globally mobile units, locating themselves as far afield as eastern Europe and China, Bolivia and Equatorial Guinea; acquiring companies in Europe and North America, and mines and oilfields in Africa, Latin America and Australia.

However, there remains immense corporate frustration within India itself. Some of the cheapest labour in the world is at their command and yet, because of the 'inconvenience' of democracy, Indian companies find themselves hamstrung to hire and fire in sync with the business cycle – as happens in China. Some of the most readily accessible natural resources are at the disposal of Indian businesses, but there is the nuisance of bureaucracy, in the shape regulations and pollution-control boards and the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. While Indian businessmen may have firm control over the hearts and minds of politicians, they still feel encumbered by regulations and by being made to pay too many taxes. There is infrastructure in India, but it is either in the city and already burdened, or adjacent to agricultural land and a pain to acquire. The list of grievances goes on and on.

In India, SEZs will provide a profitable refuge from the Indian Constitution, an effective waiver from democracy.

Special Economic Zones offer relief from this bramble of hurdles. Much that could never be attempted outside their boundaries is the norm within the safe confines of the SEZs. American corporations routinely abuse both labour and the environment in Shenzhen in ways unacceptable back home – though few seem to mind the cheap goods and clothing. In India, SEZs will provide a profitable refuge from the Indian Constitution, an effective waiver from democracy. The Development Commissioner and SEZ Authority are to have overwhelming powers, making local, provincial, national and international laws all but irrelevant. Nandigrams and Kalinganagars will happen from time to time, but so long as they do not all take place simultaneously, or too close to any given election, there is little worry.

This is the plan, at any rate. But is it working?

Adjust kar lenge

After a series of protests in Raigad, Maharashtra – where the Reliance conglomerate wants to build a massive SEZ, equal to a third of the area of Bombay city – and the fierce uprisings in West Bengal (to name only the most prominent anti-SEZ protests), the central government has been forced to flip-flop on the issue. When, in 2006, the new SEZ rules went into effect, at one stage the Board of Approvals was clearing SEZ proposals at the rate of one a day. This past January, however, the government halted the process, following the first massive protest in Nandigram against the huge SEZ project that the Indonesian Salim group had planned to construct there, in which half a dozen people lost their lives. In the middle of March, Nandigram erupted again, forcing the West Bengal government to scrap the project altogether.

Following some new restrictions, however, New Delhi has lifted the freeze on Special Economic Zones. In early June, final approval was given for the construction of 24 new SEZs, with nine more pending the authorisation of individual states. This took place following tbe announcement of some possibly significant changes in policy in April. For instance, the government has now placed a ceiling of 5000 hectares on any SEZ; earlier, there was no cap. More importantly, state governments can no longer acquire land for an SEZ on behalf of private developers. Nor can state governments form joint ventures with private developers if the developers do not already have land

in hand to offer the project. States can acquire land to develop SEZs on their own, provided they abide by the rules of a new relief and rehabilitation package, to be announced soon. Moreover, at least half of an SEZ's total area is to be earmarked for processing units or areas within an SEZ reserved for industrial activities like mining, manufacture, or fabrication. Earlier, the norm was 35 percent for multi-product SEZs.

If actually implemented, these changes would be significant. For instance, the new policy implies that private developers would have to deal directly with farmers and landowners to acquire land for SEZs. While this means that the state will not interfere in such processes, it will remain to be seen whether land mafias will be restrained from snatching land from peasants for companies. In a country such as India, where the acquisition of large chunks of contiguous land in a farmed area is complicated by the number of different owners the acquiring company has to deal with, the transaction costs for an interested company are substantial.

There is also the risk that a company may fall short of the minimum land required for the industry in question, due to the unwillingness of one or a few owners to sell their property. This was the very reason that the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 was originally invoked to acquire land for SEZs, allowing the state to act as a broker for private companies – hardly a role behoving of a democracy. The conflicts and protests of the last year in West Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab and elsewhere have revealed the moral folly of such an approach.

The likelihood is that the recently announced amendments can be easily circumvented by businesses, with help from politicians. When pressed recently by the media about whether he would listen to Reliance's urgings that the 5000-hectares cap should be relaxed, Union Minister for Commerce Kamal Nath gave a revealingly convenient reply: "It's not the Gita or the Bible, no?" In any case, Reliance is still moving ahead with its plans in Maharashtra and Haryana, attempting to construct an area significantly larger than 5000 hectares by acquiring contiguous land under the names of several different companies.

Approaching eventualities

What else do India's policymakers want to do? Recent concessions such as the liberalisation of foreign direct investment in real estate; the rush of builders and developers to acquire SEZ land; the fact that only half of the area under an SEZ has to be dedicated to a broad definition of processing or industrial activities;

the fact that industrialists are all too often being granted land well in excess of their production requirements – all these point to an engineered real-estate boom through SEZ growth. Huge amounts of capital are pouring into the land market, from both within India and overseas. Returns of 30, 40, even 100 percent are becoming common – making Indian real-estate markets some of the most attractive anywhere in the world for investors.

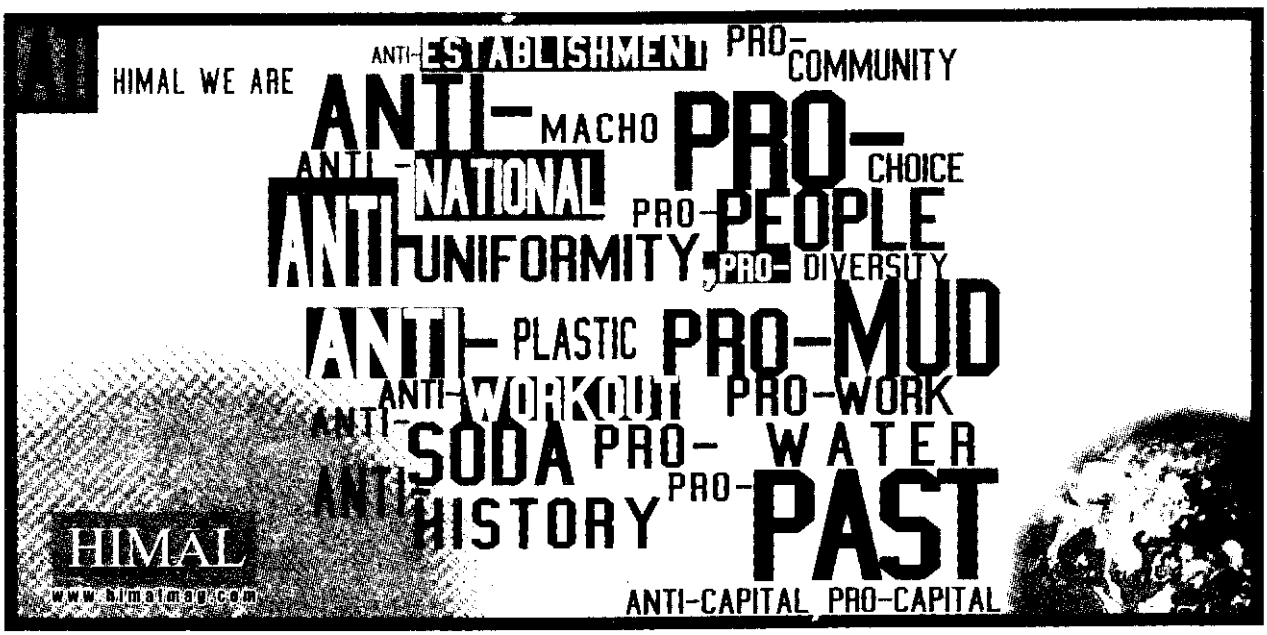
And the political implications of SEZs? Far-reaching and monstrous. It is proposed that the SEZ Authority will be headed by a centrally appointed Development Commissioner, in whom will be vested all the powers of local administration, the state Labour Commissioner and the regional pollution control boards. The Authority will consist of five other members, at least two of whom will be representatives of the private developer. Importantly, none of the six members of the SEZ Authority will be elected. The Authority will have jurisdiction over areas as large as 50 or 100 sq km, putting out of applicability such things as elected municipal government (for urban areas) or panchayats (for rural areas).

Indeed, the powers being granted to the unelected SEZ Authority suggest a real-time experiment in corporate totalitarianism, launched through the high offices of the nation state. As flags are raised once again in *rajwadas* and princely states, the long-slumbering glories of Indian feudalism may once again rise from the ashes under newly coined corporate brands, fitting snugly into the needs and imperatives of global finance, injecting with new energy a capitalism that would appear to be stagnating worldwide.

With their private airports, luxury housing, super-deluxe hotels, world-class shopping malls and multiplex plazas, SEZs offer us a window into the world of corporate consumer dreams. To some, they also portend the end of effective democracy in India. The surrounding sea of human misery and squalor is bound to give rise to repeated and violent rebellions, something that is already well underway. With such concerns in mind, private armies of security guards are now being trained and readied for the approaching inevitabilities. While statistics on the growth of private security are hard to come by, it is well known that security firms like Group 4 and others have been expanding their operations in recent years.

With this alarming scenario as a backdrop, the question may be asked: is there not a way that SEZs could be used judiciously? The short answer is no, not under the given provisions and the extension of overarching rights to corporations. Moreover, there are a plethora of alternatives to SEZs. For instance, the government could widen and strengthen the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), putting purchasing power in the hands of the rural poor, raising at once rural employment, aggregate demand, investment, output and growth. In the process, it could create Sustainable Ecological Zones (another species of SEZ altogether) as programmes like watershed management, soil conservation and afforestation are institutionalised and the natural environment is protected.

But to execute such a strategy would involve environmental democracy, in which local elected bodies such as panchayats have control and decision-making powers over resources. To galvanise the collective imagination and to forge the will to implement these alternatives in practice, will require a thriving public culture of democracy – precisely that which SEZs are being created to undermine. Globalisation, far from bringing freedom to the world, is taking it away – in the name of freedom.



Simulated encounters, real murder

The recent spate of reports on fabricated 'encounter killings' by the paramilitary and police in India points to a systemic rot. Fortunately, a tenuous check on this impunity is coming from within the ranks themselves.

BY **V K SHASHIKUMAR**

Reports of the cold-blooded killing of civilians by security forces in Jammu & Kashmir, the Northeast and Chhattisgarh, in the name of combat operations against insurgents or Maoist guerrillas, grabbed headlines in India during the first half of this year. Despite the public hubbub, the top brass in the Indian Army, police and paramilitary forces have kept quiet about the allegations, and seem to be in favour of standing behind their men whatever their crimes may be.

In January this year, the infamous Ganderbal killings, in which the murder of three civilians was covered up and attributed to an 'encounter', came to light after a probe by a special investigations team (SIT) headed by the deputy inspector-general (DIG) of the J & K police. The victims were villagers 'disappeared' from south Kashmir: carpenter Abdul Rehman Padroo and street vendors Nazir Ahmad Deka and Ghulam Nabi Wani.

The investigations in Ganderbal uncovered yet another case of police complicity – in the killing of Maulvi Shaukat Ahmad Kataria of Banihal in Doda District, who 'disappeared' last October from the local mosque where he was the imam. A SIT found that the photograph of a "slain Pakistani militant" – identified by the Ganderbal police as Abu Hafiz, of Karachi – was actually a picture of the missing imam. In line with the prevalent police practice, weapons had been placed on the body to implicate the deceased. In this instance, the weapons were found to have come from a cache of arms seized from militants in genuine operations, which the police had kept out of the records with the intention of using them to provide clinching 'evidence' in simulated encounters.

Bringing the guilty to book in the Kashmir encounters case has been particularly difficult due to the conflicting interests of the security agencies involved. In early May, the army filed an application in a lower court in Srinagar, challenging the SIT's chargesheet – which names, in addition to five policemen, five personnel of the paramilitary Rashtriya Rifles, including a colonel and a major, implicated in the killing of Maulvi Shaukat. The army claimed that the J & K police should have sought permission from the Home Ministry before filing the chargesheet, because security forces deployed in J & K were protected under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, the AFSPA. The J & K police, however, maintained that the army personnel were not "acting in the line of duty", and therefore should not enjoy impunity under the AFSPA.

In April, the public uproar regarding the Ganderbal killings led the J & K government to set up a commission of inquiry, which is expected to submit a report by the end of July. The attention being given to these fake encounters has also enabled whistleblowers from within the ranks of the security forces themselves to gather the courage to reopen older cases of disappeared persons. What is revealed is a sordid saga of murder and high-level cover-ups.

BSF cover-up

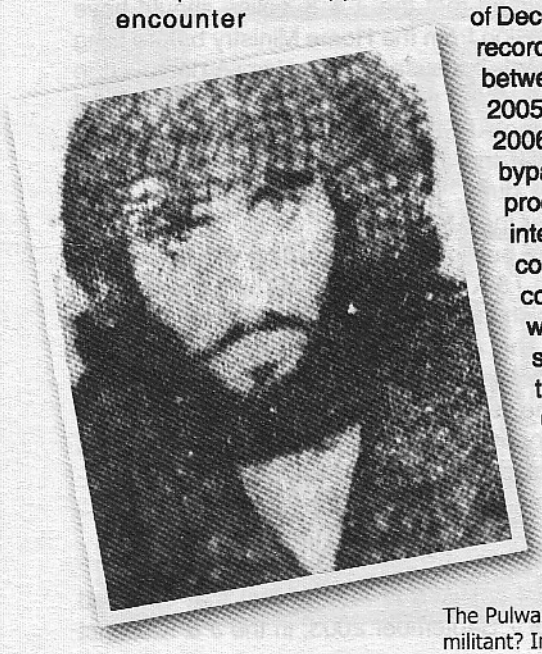
A case in point is linked to the incident that occurred on the night of 7 September 2003, in the J & K district

of Pulwama. That evening, a Border Security Force (BSF) commander with the 42nd Battalion, Narender Singh Dangawas, claimed to have killed Ismail Bhai, supposedly a Jaish-e-Mohammad militant from Karachi, during a counter-insurgency operation. But Ghulam Nabi, the stationhouse officer at the Rajpura police station, where the body was brought for identification, told this writer that the body had never been positively identified. The implication was that the report was falsified.

Despite the dubious nature of the Pulwama operation, Dangawas was recommended for a President's Police Medal. Before he could be awarded, though, an insider blew the whistle. Constable Subhash Rathod testified against his commanding officer, telling BSF authorities that an officer of the intelligence wing of the BSF had handed over an innocent Kashmiri to Dangawas, who later killed him and faked the encounter. Yet, Dangawas continues to be shielded by the BSF: all of the five inquiries that the BSF has conducted of the matter over the past four years have exonerated the commander.

The J & K police remain suspicious, and an investigation into Dangawas's actions remains open. But investigations have stalled, supposedly because no one has come forward to identify the victim's body. Evidence unearthed by this writer, however, suggests an elaborate cover-up. For instance, while Dangawas claimed that 66 of his soldiers had taken part in the encounter, 47 of them have subsequently testified for an internal, confidential BSF enquiry that they had not in fact been involved. Similarly, the situation report prepared by Dangawas claims that Constable Bashir Ahmed fired 68 rounds during the encounter, but Bashir himself says that he was nowhere near the scene.

A BSF informant who wishes to remain anonymous clandestinely recorded phone conversations with 16 BSF personnel supposedly associated with the fake encounter of December 2005. The recordings were made between December 2005 and February 2006, with the aim of bypassing the formal process by which internal reports continue to remain confidential. They weresubsequently submitted to the Delhi High Court in 2006 as evidence that the BSF was indeed covering up a fake encounter.



The Pulwama victim: Pakistani militant? Innocent civilian?

Below are some excerpts from the tapes.

Paresh Sahu, Constable, 42nd Battalion, BSF

Sahu: I have made it absolutely clear in all enquiries that I was not part of the operation.

Informant: When the encounter was on, what were you doing?

Sahu: I was on patrol duty.

Shashi Jogi, Constable, 42nd Battalion, BSF

Informant: That means Narender Singh Dangawas fraudulently included your name in the list of those who were part of the operation.

Jogi: Yes, that's what he did. So when I was called in for the deposition, I told the senior BSF officers conducting the enquiry that I was just not part of the operation, and so I could not have been part of the team that carried out the fake encounter.

A BSF deputy inspector general, K C Padhi, conducted the first inquiry on the alleged encounter in 2004. In phone conversations recorded by the BSF informant, Padhi admitted that Dangawas played foul.

Informant: But sir, you are aware that many names have been fraudulently added to the roster of those who took part in the operation?

Padhi: I have mentioned it [in my report].

Yet Padhi later cleared Dangawas of all charges. This procedure was repeated with Deputy Inspector General V R Bahl, who sat on yet another inquiry commission. Bahl confirmed to the informant that the evidence against Dangawas was damning, but he nevertheless gave him a clean chit.

There is hardly any tangible evidence to back up Dangawas's version of events. For instance, all Indian security units engaged in counter-insurgency operations make it a point to keep photographs of their operations, but in the case of the Pulwama encounter, Dangawas claimed that all photos had gone missing. His colleagues, however, are more forthcoming. "Commandant Dangawas deleted all the photos from the hard disk of the computers in our unit," alleges Vinay Gehlote, an inspector with the 42nd Battalion, in a taped conversation with the BSF informant.

The process of cover-up, however, required extensive in-house collusion. In Dangawas's first report to his superiors, he claimed to have killed a Bangladeshi Jaish-e-Mohammed militant. But in a subsequent FIR report, the man's nationality had changed and he was said to be with the Pakistani Jaish-e-Mohammed. Then, in 2004, BSF chief J B Negi, replying to an internal enquiry letter, wrote an order giving permission for a Summary Court of Inquiry against Dangawas. In this order, Negi described the victim as a "Bangladeshi terrorist".

Either way, according to official records, a Pakistani

Jaish-e-Mohammed militant named Ismail Bhai is now buried adjacent to the Kellar police station in Pulwama District. But is he really a Pakistani, or even a militant? The Delhi High Court is now hearing Constable Subhash Rathod's petition, but Dangawas remains a free man, shielded by the BSF on the basis of a diluted chargesheet. The General Security Force Court that dismissed the charges against Dangawas this past February had only heard evidence against the defendant for the following three charges: first, for an act prejudicial to good order and discipline, in which he was accused of confiscating a civilian's car; second, for ill-treating a subordinate; and third, for committing a civil offence by wrongful confinement and harassment of civilians.

Triple murder in Gujarat

The situation surrounding Dangawas and the Pulwama encounter would have passed undetected if it had not been for the anguished conscience of a member of the BSF's 42nd Battalion. Subhash Rathod's courage in pursuing a court case against his superior seems nothing short of extraordinary, but the collapse of institutional mechanisms of accountability – whereby illegal acts are covered up with impunity – merits closer examination. With five internal BSF inquiries having exonerated Dangawas despite the fact that his superiors knew the encounter in question was dubious, it is clear that internal structures of accountability alone are not enough to ensure justice. This is a particularly crucial disconnect in situations in which human rights come a distant second to concerns of 'national security'.

Even as the public was trying to come to terms with the unfolding situation in Kashmir this spring, events in Gujarat underlined the precarious position of whistleblowers in the system, further raising questions on their effectiveness in exposing internal rot – particularly when up against collusion at the highest levels. The case in question was the killing of a man named Sohrabuddin Sheikh.

Starting in late 2005, a man by the name of Rubabuddin Sheikh began appealing to the Gujarat authorities to initiate a CBI inquiry into the death of his brother, Sohrabuddin, and to produce his missing sister-in-law, Kauserbi. He finally approached the Supreme Court, which ordered that an investigation be conducted by the state's Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The case was then handled by an agent named Geetha Johri. Her team's first report, released in September 2006, presented evidence to attribute three separate murders to the Gujarat state police's Anti Terrorism Squad (ATS). Johri had also stumbled upon an elaborate nexus of corruption that furthered a political-communal agenda. The investigation stunned India, particularly because it detailed how the police forces from three different states – Gujarat, Rajasthan and

Andhra Pradesh – had all colluded in the operation and cover-up. For her pains, however, Johri was removed from the investigation in early 2007. It was only after the Supreme Court intervened in March that the officer was reinstated and allowed to continue the investigation.

According to the ATS's internal records, at about five in the morning of 26 November 2005, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, a team comprised of members of the squad and a few Rajasthani policemen saw the headlight of an approaching motorbike. As the bike came closer, the policemen claimed they recognised Sohrabuddin Sheikh, a gangster alleged to have links to Pakistani militant groups. They claim that they leapt to stop the bike, that the biker lost control and that he fired a gun as he fell. The policemen then returned fire, killing the suspect. The story as given was full of holes. To begin with, how could the policemen have recognised Sohrabuddin in the darkness of a November morning against the headlight of the oncoming motorcycle?

Geetha Johri's investigation provides a picture of how the preparations for the 'encounter' had proceeded. The CID team traced Sohrabuddin, his wife and a third person to a bus traveling from Hyderabad to Sangli, in Maharashtra. At around one in the morning on 23 November, a team consisting of ATS personnel, assisted by the Andhra Pradesh police, halted the bus in Karnataka, and dragged the three people out of the vehicle.

It was more than a thousand kilometres away and three days later that Sohrabuddin was shot dead. But the police were not yet finished. On 27 November 2005, the day after Sohrabuddin was killed, his wife, Kauserbi, was brought to a bungalow in Koba, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. There, she is said to have become hysterical upon being told that her husband was dead. The ATS's original plan had evidently not included Kauserbi's murder, but when she vowed to expose her husband's killing, she was poisoned by a police doctor. According to the CID report, her body was carried away in a police jeep and burned.

Even Kauserbi's murder was not the end of the Sohrabuddin cover-up, however. Along with his team, then-ATS chief D G Vanzara (now a deputy inspector general) launched another operation, targeting Tulsiram Prajapati, an associate of Sohrabuddin. As one of the last people to see Sohrabuddin and Kauserbi alive on 24 November, Prajapati was a key witness in the fake-encounter case, and Vanzara did not want him spilling the beans. So, Prajapati was arrested in November 2005 for the 2004 murder of gangster Hamid Lala, a rival of Sohrabuddin's. Fearing for his life, Prajapati wrote to the local court in Udaipur, warning that "the police say they will kill me and spread the story that I escaped from police custody." A year later, in December 2006, his fears turned out to be well-founded. According to the FIR registered in Ahmedabad, Prajapati purportedly escaped from police custody on 27 December. A day later, Vanzara's team was said to have located him at

Ambaji, on the Rajasthan-Gujarat border, and shot him dead. Just 10 days earlier, the Gujarat CID had listed Prajapati as a witness in the Sohrabuddin case.

The marble dole

Why did this triple murder take place? Who was Sohrabuddin, and who wanted him dead? To uncover the story, this writer tracked the last decade of Sohrabuddin's life from Rajasthan to Madhya Pradesh. Thirty-three years old when he was killed, Sohrabuddin began his working life as a truck driver. He gradually took to crime, and eventually became the main accused in a high-level arms-transport case in 1995. Sohrabuddin's mentor at the time was Abid Khan, better known as Chhota Dawood, the local front man for Bombay's notorious underworld don, Dawood Ibrahim, who is purported to have links to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence. It was this connection that, a decade later, allowed Indian police to label Sohrabuddin a 'terrorist'.

Sohrabuddin rose quickly in the underworld, his criminal activities eventually spanning four states. According to the Rajasthan police, Sohrabuddin began extorting traders in Rajasthan's lucrative marble industry, which had an annual turnover of INR 50 billion. The marble traders eventually approached M N Dinesh, the Udaipur police superintendent, who it is presumed contacted then-ATS chief Vanzara. The last straw came in 2005, when Sohrabuddin is said to have made an extortion demand to Rajasthan's biggest marble trader (who, with the CID investigation ongoing, needs to remain anonymous). According to the Gujarat CID, Vanzara's phone records showed that, immediately before and after Sohrabuddin's death, he had been in regular contact with this trader's family.

Questions regarding Sohrabuddin's killing cropped up almost immediately after the alleged encounter. Although any incident including an encounter is supposed to be investigated by the local police station, in Sohrabuddin's case Vanzara's team acted as defendant, judge and jury by investigating its own encounter. Vanzara and two other officers of the Indian Police Service have since been suspended and arrested for murder, and several additional policemen face prosecution in the Sohrabuddin case, but the question of impunity remains.

Hit-men in khaki

The term *encounter killing* has now become synonymous with murder, often involving high-profile cops who are generally assured of future impunity. Veteran police officers blame the rise in encounter killings on a failing justice system. They suggest that policemen frustrated with the slow pace of adjudication and acquittals, evidently due to lack of sufficient evidence, take the law into their own hands. Yet despite the increase in simulated encounters, there are no organised, updated or accurate statistics on encounter or extrajudicial killings, and those involved are forced to rely on their own experience. "The criminal-justice system has to come back on the rails," says Julio Ribeiro, a well-regarded former police commissioner of Bombay. "Twenty-five years ago, this number of encounters was not taking place. It is coming up now more and more. You must understand why the judicial system has become so weak: it is because of corruption. Corruption is the main cause of all this."

In the case of Gujarat, at least, this corruption goes all the way to the pinnacles of the police and political establishments. Three years ago, the Gujarat police evolved a plan of action for a state that had, in their assessment, "become a haven for terrorists". Top police sources who served in the state at the time of the Godhra incident and the riots that followed confirm that there was a clear political directive to eliminate some Muslim criminals, in order to send a message to any who may be planning attacks in retaliation for the 2002 communal riots.

The connection between organised crime and the hit-men in khaki has subsequently come to wield a vice-like grip over many police forces, particularly in Gujarat. "I was asked by high-level bureaucrats to plan the elimination of people," recalled R B Sreekumar, former Additional Director General of Police in Gujarat. "I said it is illegal." At the moment, the justice system of India is heavily dependent on the consciences of people such as Sreekumar, as well as those who led to the breakthroughs in the cases of the Kashmir and Gujarat fake encounters. The health of the system overall, however, is far too important to continue placing it in the hands of a few high-minded individuals.

The recent exposés of extrajudicial killings in India, coupled with the inability of the country's criminal-justice system to address a spate of fake encounters, have brought the spotlight squarely onto India's archaic Police Act of 1861. One solution could be found in a legislative proposal currently being vetted by the Ministry of Home Affairs for a Model Police Act (*Himal December 2006, "Reforming Indian policing"*). The Supreme Court in September 2006 directed the state and Centre to implement the Act, which aims to ensure transparency in police functioning – including through the creation of state security councils, which would take on the responsibility from the state governments for overseeing the police forces. Several states have refused to accept the new legislation, however. The Gujarat government, for one, has publicly stated that it does not want to let go of control over the state police.

The question therefore remains: Is there enough political will to put in place the reforms directed by the Supreme Court? Former police commissioner Ribeiro says that regardless of the current political climate, the necessary momentum will eventually build up. He notes, "It is not the job of the police to kill people. It is not the job of the police to be judge and executioner."

Paddy in Bihar's Tharuhat

With rice production in the Bihari Tarai facing stiff competition from sugarcane, the traditional reliance of the Tharus on paddy as food and currency is changing rapidly.

BY **SAMIR KUMAR SINHA**

When the Tharus of Rajasthan migrated to the Himalayan foothills some 400 years ago as it is said, they left behind more than just the desert sands. From a diet based on wheat and millet, they switched over almost completely to rice, to such an extent that many in the Tharu community now believe that wheat and millet are fit only for poor people. Nowadays, wheat flour is not widely available in Tharuhat – the term for the region where the Tharus live – and wheat-based foods are never served to guests. Rice paddy became a lifeline for the community; a common sight in the Tarai is now that of Tharu farmers ploughing the land and singing traditional *birhani* songs, praying for good rains and the plentiful production of their paddy.

The Tharu as a community is today scattered across the Himalayan foothills of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand as well as in Bihar. Tharus are also found across the belt of the Nepali Tarai. In Bihar, the community is concentrated in West Champaran District, with its largest settlements in the area also popularly known as Tharuhat – a flat stretch of about 45 square kilometres, surrounded by the Dun and Someshwar hills. There are over 25 Tharu-dominated villages in Bihar's Tharuhat.

S K SINHA

Sugarcane loads ready for market

Due to sufficient irrigation and productive land suitable for paddy cultivation, the communities of the Tharuhat depend on rice not only as their staple, but also as their security and medium for transactions. Mahendra Mahto, the head of Naurangia village, says that in this area, paddy is still the preferred form of wage among agricultural labourers. Even barbers and blacksmiths are paid in measures of paddy, for services rendered to the community throughout the year. Here, paddy can be exchanged for anything, says Mahto – from turmeric, chillies and cumin, to silver and gold. Though the dowry system is not prevalent in Tharu society, before going to her in-laws house for the first time after marriage, a daughter is presented with paddy in beautiful handmade baskets of *munj* and *khar* grass.

Paddy is not only an individual family's asset, but also serves to increase community cohesion and social responsibility among the Tharus. Perhaps the most important element of a Tharu village is the community granary, the *dharam bakhar*, a paddy reserve that is created by contributions from the villagers, according to the size of landholding and harvest. Villagers can borrow rice from the *dharam bakhar* for any purpose, except direct marketing for monetary benefits. The borrower simply has to convince the granary management committee, generally headed by the *gumasta*, or village head, and has to return the quantity by an agreed-upon date. In Mahto's village, five percent interest per month is charged for the paddy lending, if the payment is delayed. It is because of the *dharam bakhar* that no family in Bihar's Tharuhat goes hungry, it is said.

Losing taste and ground

Rice production in India has increased by nearly four and a half times over the past half-century, from 20.6 million tonnes in 1950 to more than 91 million tonnes

during 2001-02. This can largely be attributed to the advent of hybrid varieties of paddy. Like other areas, Bihar's Tharuhat has begun to lose its indigenous strains of paddy. "We have already lost some good varieties, like *kala mansuri*, *kanak jeera* and *gurdi*," says Ambika Mahto of Gobarahia village. Soon other varieties will also vanish, he warns, including *basmati* and *anandi*. As with other lost varieties, these last two are Agahani – 'late' species, which take almost four months to ripen, unlike the hybrids, which are ready for harvest in just three months.

While *basmati* is now only being grown by farmers with a significant amount of land available, *anandi* is, for the moment, continuing to survive relatively well, due to its importance in Tharu culture. Roasted *anandi* is commonly served to guests with curd, milk and pickles. "If a guest is not served with the roasted *anandi*, the hospitality is considered wanting," says Chandar Diswah, of Naurangia. *Anandi* is neither sold nor exchanged among the Tharu community. Instead, it is cultivated only by certain affluent farmers, and is provided to other community members as a gift.

"The hybrids give us more produce in less time, but the native varieties we have lost were tastier, and more suitable to the local soil and climatic conditions," says Ambika. High-yielding 'dwarf' varieties grow quickly and consume less water, and hence have quickly become preferred among Tharu cultivators. This change has not only caused the loss of an indigenous gene pool, but has also reduced the fertility of soil. "Two decades ago, we did not use synthetic fertilisers for the paddy crop," recalls Ambika. "But now, we can't expect a good harvest without using them."

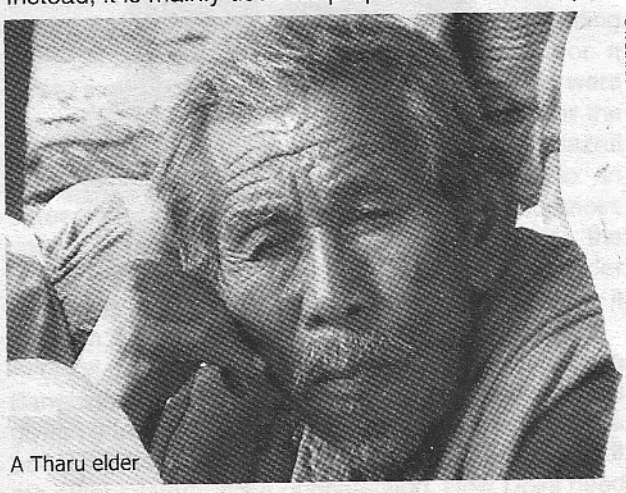
Urea and di-ammonium phosphate fertilisers are extensively used to supplement soil nutrients in the Tharuhat. For the past five years, on the advice of agriculture experts, villagers have also begun adding zinc. "When we were growing the old paddy varieties, only two crops were possible in a year, providing enough time to rejuvenate the soil," says Chandar. "While hybrid paddy allows three crops in a year, it leaves no time for the soil to get replenished." While synthetic fertilisers nourish the soil in the short term, he continues, with extended use they deplete the soil and pollute the groundwater. One youth in Naurangia village blames the current situation on the agricultural practices and lifestyles of his ancestors. "Pulses are not an integral part of our diet," he says, pointing out the reason for not growing pulses that act as natural nitrogen fixers and thus nourish the soil.

Food v cash

Besides the challenge of hybrids and environmental dislocation, Tharuhat's paddy culture is facing other obstacles. To begin with, rice production in West Champaran is not particularly high. According to the Directorate of Rice Development in Patna, the 1863 kg of rice produced per hectare here makes it a medium-to-low producing district. But paddy is being increasingly displaced by sugarcane, whose acreage has doubled in the last half-century in India as a whole. In Tharuhat, about a quarter of paddy cropland has been converted to sugarcane fields in the last 20 years.

Compared to rice, sugarcane requires less labour over the course of its three-year cycle, needing care only during its first year. While local mills in West Champaran are the main sugarcane purchasers, the crushing capacity of these mills is poor. As such, they are unable to consume the entire crop of a particular area. In addition, exploitative mill owners do not pay the farmers for two or three years in a row, a situation that has spawned regular agitation by the farmers.

Taking advantage of the current imbalance between supply and demand, illegal sugarcane-crushing units have sprouted in many Tharu villages in recent years. But these small-scale units, heedless of government regulations, often produce inferior quality jaggery, which has less market value and poor consumption potential. Instead, it is mainly used for preparation of local liquor.



S K SINHA

A Tharu elder

Furthermore, these village-based crushers exploit local farmers by paying very low prices. "The purchase rate of sugarcane by the sugar mills is about 110 rupees per quintal, but the local sugarcane crushers give them only 75-80 rupees for the same quantity," says one Naurangia villager.

While Tharuhat villagers replace paddy with sugarcane to earn more from their land, many small-scale landholders are now faced with food crises. Many have become dependent on either the government or the village granaries. "In Tharuhat, the villagers are used to good rice, and the quality of the rice provided by the public-distribution system is inferior to their own product," complains Mahendra Mahto. While previously the *dharam bakhar* was used mainly for special occasions, now more and more villagers are forced to take loans from the community granary simply to meet their everyday food requirements. "The time has come for our community to reverse the trend in our farming system," says Mahendra. "Not just only to save our rice-based culture, but also to get healthier food."

Cosying up to the Bangla generals

Civil-rights and other abuses notwithstanding, New Delhi is looking at the current situation in Bangladesh with great interest – and actually hope.

BY **WASBIR HUSSAIN**

BILASH RAI

After years of turbulent relations, it is ironic that New Delhi is currently basking in a sense of reassurance over the possibility of good-neighbourly relations with Bangladesh, with the army-backed interim government appearing to be firmly in place in Dhaka. Since it took over in January, the tenor of statements emanating from the highest levels in the interim administration have enthused New Delhi for a variety of reasons. In particular, Indian diplomats and security officials have expressed approval for Dhaka's crackdown on 'terror'.

Indeed, hopes have been stoked in the Indian establishment that the interim government headed by Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former banker, will eventually take the long-awaited steps that could choke off the insurgents from Northeast India, whom New Delhi is convinced are taking refuge across the border in Bangladesh. But there are also hopes that the current administration in Dhaka will energise Indo-Bangladeshi ties that have been at a low over the past decade. In particular, this could translate into creating an atmosphere of trust and goodwill to boost mutually beneficial economic measures.

To optimistic observers, New Delhi and Dhaka have over recent years maintained a hot-and-cold relationship, largely defined by who has been in power in Bangladesh – either the seemingly secular Awami League, or the conservative Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). To a dispassionate observer of Southasian politics, however, India-Bangladesh relations have more specifically been held hostage to the bitter 'battle of the begums', between Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina and BNP supremo Khaleda Zia.

Either way, both parties have found it to their benefit to thwart Indian policy. The Awami League early on sought to shake off its pro-India image to please the domestic audience, by not coming out with proactive measures for improving ties with New Delhi. Meanwhile, the BNP, backed by Islamist forces, was able to be significantly more open in its anti-India posturing. Under both parties, New Delhi feels it has received very little cooperation from Dhaka on matters of illegal migration, or shelter for the Northeast insurgents who India says operate out of 200 camps inside Bangladesh. Furthermore, Dhaka has regularly continued to deny India transit facilities from West Bengal through Bangladesh, to service its landlocked northeastern states.

At least on the surface, things have changed significantly since the interim government took over in January and imposed a state of emergency. The army-backed regime called off the 22 January national elections, and has subsequently reconstituted the Anti-Corruption Commission, and arrested close to 200 politicians (and mounting), mostly on graft charges. It has also revived the National Security Council, giving military leaders a platform on which to air their views on governing the country. In the meantime, there has been mounting criticism over human-rights abuses, unconstitutional governance, and clamping down on the media and other bodies urging transparency. But New Delhi seems heartened by the crackdown on militancy, and this may well blind Indian policymakers to a host of problems, the seeds of which are planted in the current bout of activism by its eastern neighbour.

The most 'reassuring' signal that the interim government in Dhaka has sent New Delhi came on 30 March, when the authorities executed the most prominent names in Bangladesh's rising Islamist militancy – chief of the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) Abdur Rahman and his deputy, Siddiqul Islam, alias 'Bangla Bhai'. With its hands full in Kashmir, India has been extremely wary of the possibility of a new front on its eastern flank, along the 4100-km porous border, particularly in the wake of controversial Western reports that the country was becoming a hub of al-Qaeda-linked Islamist forces.

The 30 March executions were seen as a significant blow to Bangladesh's first overt militancy campaign, which had rattled the country through a series of

coordinated blasts and suicide bombings during 2005. With the BNP-Jamaat alliance government having consistently denied the existence of Islamist militancy in the country, the executions were seen by Delhi as Dhaka's getting serious about a clear and present danger.

What India can do

Should India cosy up to Dhaka's new army-backed regime? Some analysts would give an emphatic nod – despite both the strong-arm tactics being employed by the interim administration, and the fact that Dhaka officials have yet to carry out any action against the alleged Northeast-insurgents' camps. As things stand, the possibility of the Bangladesh Army taking over direct power appears unlikely, particularly given the role its ranks play in lucrative peacekeeping missions. This is all the more reason, then, for India to engage with the interim government, and give it much-needed backing.

The current rulers in Dhaka look set to remain in power for some time, with elections not about to be held for at least a year. Furthermore, the process of comprehensive electoral reforms, including the preparation of the new voters' list and identity cards for all those above 18 years of age, is yet to begin. This massive exercise, involving between 76 and 80 million voters, is estimated to take at least 12 months to complete. Furthermore, the Bangladesh Army chief, Lieutenant-General Moeen U Ahmed, has vowed no let-up in the hunt for corrupt politicians and militants while the interim government clears the way for a 'free and fair' election. That job will be accomplished neither easily nor soon, and so it appears that the army will inevitably carry on ruling Bangladesh by proxy for some time to come.

Aside from keeping contact with the Fakhruddin Ahmed regime, New Delhi must also take into account the possibility that sections from within this interim authority (or a new political force entirely, including fresh faces from the existing political parties) could well come to call the shots during the next elections and beyond – with, perhaps, the backing of the army.

As the larger and more powerful neighbour, India is also in a position to cut some ice with the regime, by taking unilateral, proactive action on a few particular issues. New Delhi can demonstrate its support to Dhaka's battle against militancy by rounding up Bangladeshi criminal elements who may be operating from India's border areas. Towards this end, Dhaka has already been regularly furnishing the names of such criminals to Indian officials, just as India has been providing Dhaka with details of Indian militants said to be operating from within Bangladesh.

But the most important area where New Delhi needs to intervene is in correcting the balance of trade between the two countries, which has long been weighted heavily against Bangladesh. In 2001-02, Bangladesh's exports to India were a meagre USD 50.2 million, while imports from India that year stood at more than USD 1 billion. That trade imbalance continues, with Bangladesh's exports to India in 2005-06 standing at USD 251.6 million, and imports from India going up to nearly USD 1.8 billion during that period. Part of this process is already underway, and offers an immediate opportunity for the Indian government. Since mid-2006, India has offered duty-free import of seven new items from Bangladesh, and promised to do away with duty on 4200 additional items within three years. New Delhi has also sought a list of all irritants, including non-tariff barriers, that are currently impeding bilateral trade.

During the visit of Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee to Dhaka on 19 February, the Indian government announced unconditional duty-free access to the import of two million pieces of readymade garments from Bangladesh. With a total investment of USD 389.2 million during the period of 1971 to September 2006, India is ranked as the 12th-largest investor in Bangladesh. Now, hopes are pinned on India's Tata group to finally negotiate its long-pending three-billion-dollar investment in Bangladesh, for a power station, steel plant and fertiliser unit. Talks were suspended last summer, but in mid-May this year the new Board of Investment executive chairman, Nazrul Islam, said that the government was "close to an agreement with the Tatas". While these assurances need to be taken to their logical end, under the current circumstances India should also consider extending to Bangladesh a free trade agreement, as it has with Sri Lanka.

Once bilateral economic ties improve, and once Bangladeshis begin to see benefits from concessions given by India, the government in Dhaka would be in a better position to pursue an 'India-friendly' policy. As for the other bilateral bone of contention, New Delhi need not even push for transit facilities through Bangladesh at this time. After all, India has recently started a USD 103 million development project on the Sittwe port in Burma and the Kaladan River in Mizoram, bypassing its need to access the Chittagong port. If Dhaka-New Delhi relations improve, the two countries would be in a position to work on a strategy to end the most politically potent issue – economic migration from Bangladesh to India – by focusing on how to jointly improve the economy in Bangladesh.

Being the most dominant of Bangladesh's neighbours, and a democracy to boot, India cannot for long remain a mute witness to widespread reports of the throttling of democratic values by the army-backed Dhaka regime. Apart from everything else, the test for New Delhi will lie in successfully performing a delicate balancing act: between cosying up to the generals in Dhaka, and warning them of the possible consequences of straying too far from the democratic path. This will be a very difficult undertaking, but the latter cannot be accomplished without the former.

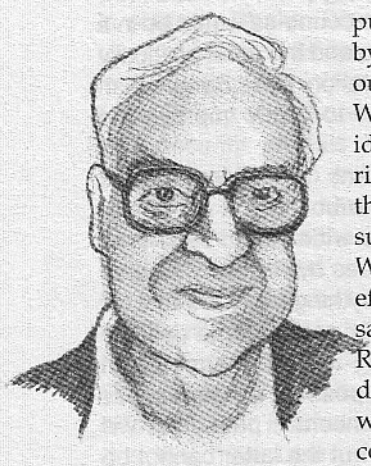
Rorty and Ramu
Hesitation, hope and happenstance

When Hitler will be fast asleep.
Gandhi in deep trance,
spinning his wheel.
That's when,
We shall play hide and seek.
– Sindhi Poet Vimmi Sadarangani

Two of the more remarkable philosophers of our time passed away recently. On 8 June, at his home in California, Richard Rorty succumbed to pancreatic cancer. He had been fighting the disease for a long time, and his departure, at age 75, was not unexpected. Five days later, on our side of the globe, Ramchandra Gandhi quit his own haunt unannounced, without leaving a forwarding address for his limited circle of admirers. The 70-year-old was found dead on 13 June at the India International Centre in New Delhi.

It is unclear whether Rorty and Ramu (as they were known to their peers) ever met one another, but they shared some similarities. Rorty drifted from analytical philosophy to the humanities and then on to comparative literature. For his part, Ramu went from teaching to dialogue and conversations, before turning to hybrid fiction to express his most profound thoughts. According to the theologian W L Reese, Rorty once proposed that, in place of building theories about 'reality', attempts should be made to "poetize culture, rather than rationalize or scientize it, celebrating not truth but play and metaphor". Meanwhile, Ramu did just that, through his plays and prose.

Both would have depended on happenstance to see what happened to their interpretations.



Of the two, Rorty was better known as a public intellectual. Though reviled equally by critics from left and right, his eclectic output intrigued the press. He opposed Western ethnocentrism, but supported the idea of promoting democracy and human rights around the world. He prophesied that democrats in the US would be forced to support the war in Iraq declared by George W Bush due to the "terror" of looking effete, but continued to oppose it all the same. It may not have been his motto, but Rorty affirmed Walt Whitman's famous declaration, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

Ramu's assertions were subtler, but they emerged from a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of his extraordinary lineage (he was grandson of Mohandas K Gandhi and C Rajagopalachari) and unusual circumstances. For his last few years, he had lived the life of a nomadic intellectual – an academic without perch, a philosopher without sponsor, and a writer without regular publisher. But he remained engaged through his public lectures, occasional books and regular contact with the literati of New Delhi. The fact that he was not quoted very often in the media says more about the state of the market-oriented Indian press than about one of the most erudite philosophers of the Subcontinent.

Age of uncertainties

Children love to play hide and seek, for the sheer pleasure of hesitation. *Is she in that nook or the other corner? Is he hiding behind the arch or pretending to be the pillar?* In a way, discovery and disappointment are both immaterial – the game is an end in itself. There is no objective truth, only relative positions of almost equal significance. Such equivocation infuriates traditional philosophers to no end. Bertrand Russell dismissed pragmatism as "shallow philosophy" suitable only for an "immature" country such as the United States. But the end of certainty has made doubt acceptable. The philosophy of hesitation propounded by Jacques Derrida has made pragmatism respectable, although this did not happen overnight.

Ironically, the end of superpower rivalry did not result in the acceptance of diversity. Rather, it merely gave birth to two coterminous wordplays: the 'clash of civilisations' formulation of Samuel Huntington, and 'end of history' forecast of Francis Fukuyama. But the centrality of the US was an inalienable part of both propositions. The committed pragmatist that he was, Rorty saw through the games of those in Washington, DC who were masquerading as philosophers: intellectual spadework was preparing the ground for *pax americana*.

But unlike many of his peers in the fields of relativism and pragmatism,

Rorty refused to accept that the West had no business promoting its own brand of democracy and human rights in the rest of the world. He was unrepentant to be an American, even in the age of hyperpower paranoia; he continued to insist that the messages the empire needed to carry were those of Jefferson, Lincoln and Wilson. In the interim, how to cope while struggling was the crucial question for humanity.

Pain is an integral part of being. Civilisation has been built through efforts aimed at lessening human suffering. It was the West that first discovered ether, aspirin and morphine, but the non-West too deserves to benefit from these discoveries. Rule of law, freedom of the press, independence of the judiciary, right to education and access to public services are similar socio-political devices that need to be spread throughout the world. The West need not be apologetic about supporting those struggles that seek to establish democracy and human rights anywhere in the world. These were Rorty's suppositions. To Huntington's position that "It would be immoral of the West to shove its stuff on the rest of the world," Rorty supported the retort of Roy Mottahedeh: "It will be immoral not to!"

When Rorty visited Kathmandu in September 2001, the Maoist insurgency was in its ascendancy. In the intense discussion that followed an interesting presentation on the philosophy of pragmatism, he pointed out the importance of hope in all human struggles. Then, it is the stage of hesitation: is the struggle the only way out of the morass in which we find ourselves? Certainties inevitably lead to violence. Doubts and reflections allow the mind to get over the passions of the moment. The inherent contradiction between hope and hesitation is the most difficult phase of struggle. This is where happenstance becomes the decisive factor.

We all do what we can do; some of us can manage to do what we want to do. But ultimately, Rorty noted, it is the mere quirk of circumstance that actually decides what has been achieved by what we have done. Such a sentiment sounded fatalistic back in 2001. In hindsight, however, his prognosis about mass uprisings seems breathtakingly prescient. As with individuals, societies too need to adopt devices of lessening pain. Just as nirvana is unachievable to most, the perfect society is a utopia. It is the search that matters. And we need to carry the social and political equivalent of morphine derivatives to lessen the pain along the way.

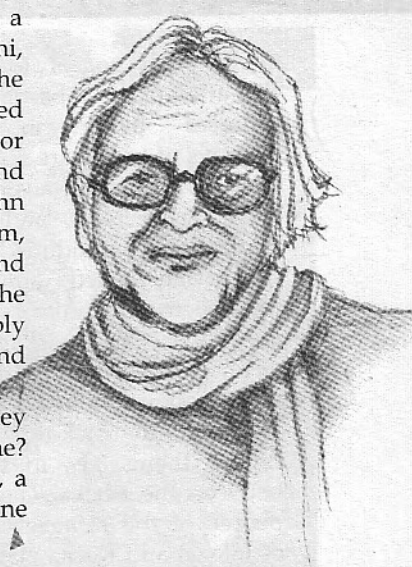
Journey to unknown

On the face of it, coupling Hitler with Gandhi, even in a poem, as Vimmi Sadarangani does in the verse that begins this column, is nothing short of sacrilege. But these two figures merely represent binary opposites. One inflicts pain; the other is a healer. 'Dead certainty' is Hitler's motto; 'unending doubts', Gandhi's credo. One sleeps, the other walks. What better metaphor could one find to depict darkness and light, to create some space for playing the game of hide and seek that is human life?

Those who can cope, survive. Learning to play the game lessens the agonies of living. But if there is a God, Nature, Destiny or History, what does He do when Hitler is not sleeping? With the irreverence of pragmatists, Rorty would have dismissed the question of truth, and pointed out the primacy of struggle. Ramu, on the other hand, would have probably woven a story around a mythological figure to establish the importance of hope, as he did with *Sita's Kitchen* in 1992, to cope with the consequences of the Babri Masjid tragedy. Both would have depended on happenstance to see what happened to their interpretations.

Kabir talks about the contradictory facets of truth – *kagad lekhi* (accumulated knowledge) and *aakhan dekhi* (life experienced) – and proposes submission to the divine as an escape from the confusion created by these two. Richard Rorty, a pragmatist, and Ramchandra Gandhi, an adherent of Vedantic *adwaita* (the non-dualism of 'not this, not that'), lived and died to show that the trail we take for the journey of life is for us to choose and build. There are no easy escape routes. John Dewey, the patron saint of pragmatism, defines philosophy as "a catholic and far-sighted theory of adjustment of the conflicting factors of life". Ramu probably found that definition quite agreeable, and lived to deal with it as best as he could.

What will Rorty and Ramu do if they meet wherever it is that they have gone? They will probably play hide and seek, a game that best exemplifies the discipline called philosophy.



God knows if I will stay

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **AURANGZAIB KHAN**

The image of an Afghan refugee caught amidst a stampede over ice-distribution (*see photo*) eerily reflects the struggles of his own current existence. For now, he is happy to hold a block of ice, happy to be able to chill some water for his family living under a burning sky. But soon he will once more run after uncertain aid, trampling his peers, only to find it literally melting away again.

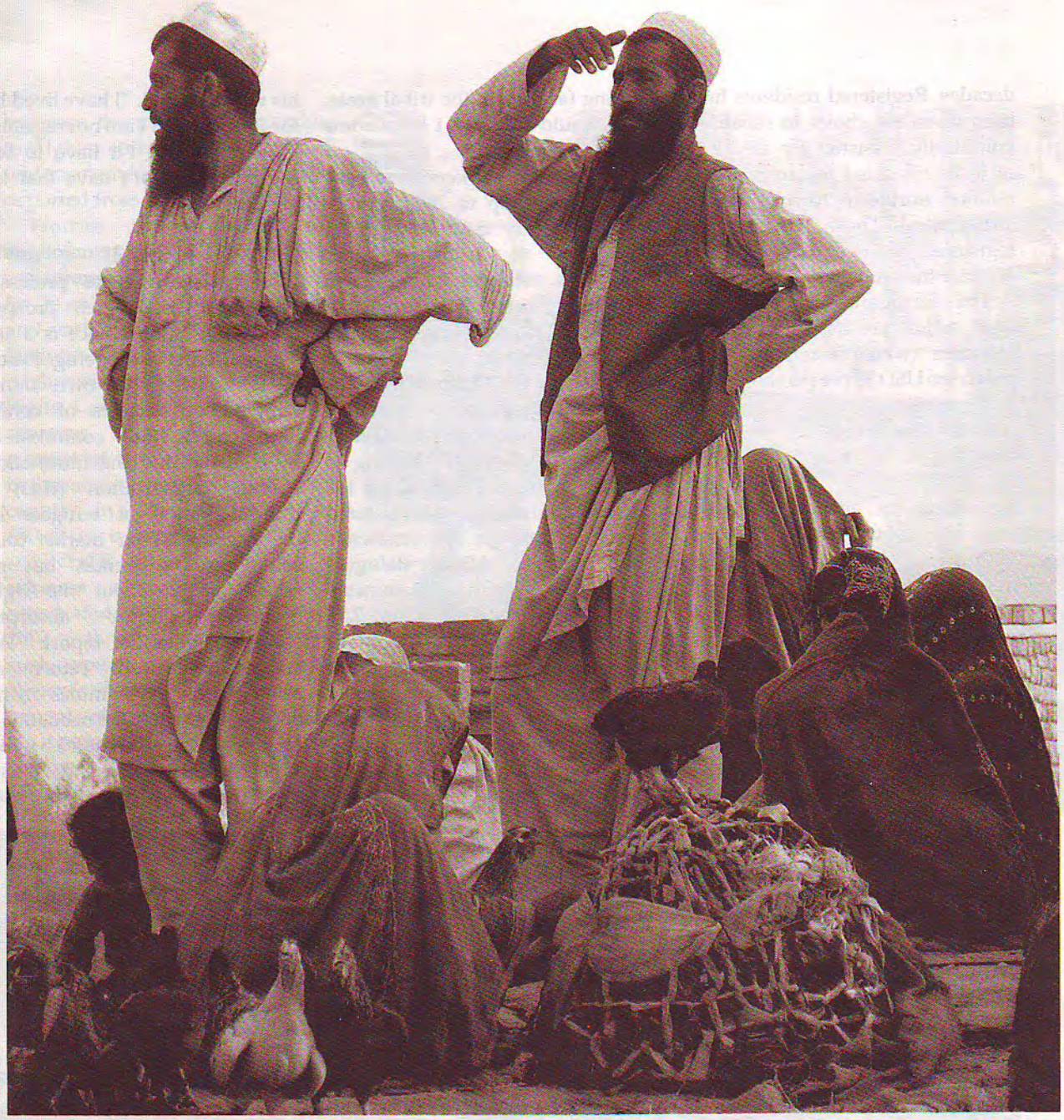
As push comes to shove in the attempt to repatriate Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, convoys of trucks are now heading westward, full of exhausted families, cows, cockerels, and battered doors and windows salvaged from demolished homes. They now begin the endless wait for an elusive assistance package. Women enveloped in coloured *kuchi* shawls sit precariously atop rocking string beds tied to truck-tops. Children relieve themselves in the spaces between the trucks. These are the people of the refugee settlements of Jalozai and Kacha Gari – two of the biggest in and around Peshawar – which the Islamabad government recently slated for closure by this coming August.

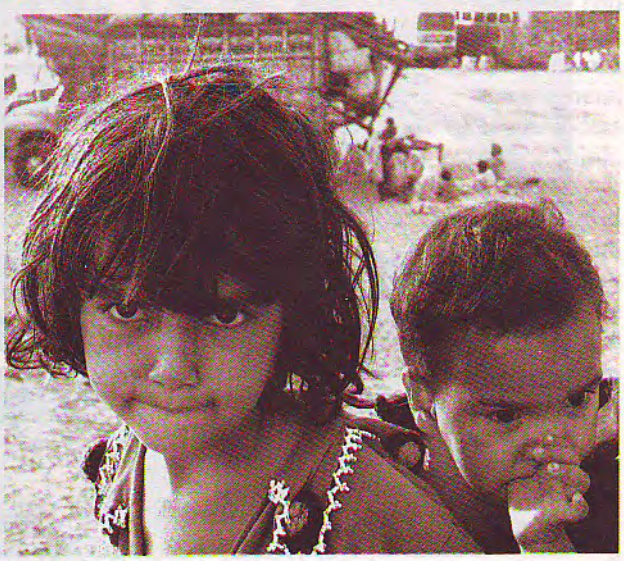
Sitting in the shade of a truck that carries his ragtag possessions, Feroz Khan, a patriarch of 75, quotes with resignation: *"Paise che dar sarawi/ Nan ma warkawa chahta/ Alam ba day tabeh wi/ Maldar bawai tata"* (If you have money/ Don't give it away/ The world will be at your feet/ Will treat you with respect reserved for the rich). "I am old and poor," says the elderly man, surrounded by his family of 23, all of whom are waiting for UNHCR's promised assistance package, and then to return to the Afghan border town of Nangrahar. "Those who pay commission to the authorities are cleared first. No one bothers about a blind old man like me." Sleeping children lie in the shade, surrounded by clouds of flies. The air is thick with the stench of decay and excrement.

Khan is one of the 205,000 unregistered refugees who received the UNHCR assistance package of USD 100 per person during what was termed a 'grace period' from 1 March to 15 April this year. "The Pakistan authorities extended this window of opportunity to Afghans who had not taken part in the registration exercise of October 2006 to February 2007," says UNHCR spokesperson Babur Baloch. "These refugees do not have proof of registration, and would be treated as illegal immigrants subject to national laws if they stay."

The refugee population in Pakistan is spread over huge distances. Poverty and low literacy limit their access to information, and many are likely to remain uninformed about the registration exercise. And then there are those who view it with suspicion – a tool for authorities to identify and crack down on refugees, to send them back against their will.

Earlier this year, the Islamabad government served notice to the residents of Jallozai and Kacha Garhi that they would have to leave. Many had been living here for





decades. Registered residents have been given the choice to repatriate voluntarily, assisted by UNHCR, or to be relocated to camps in the remote northern towns of Dir and Chitral. Those who are not registered, however, will face legal action if they remain in the camps.

The carrot-and-stick policy of legal action versus the USD 100 incentive (which was raised last year from USD 33 per person) seems to have been relatively successful. Indeed, the rush of refugees has posed a major challenge for UNHCR, now tasked with separating the genuine returnees from the 'bogus' cases. "They are asking refugees how much is the bus fare from here to the city, or how much is a kilogram of daal in the local market," says Anas, a 38-year-old from the northern town of Haripur, explaining how screeners are attempting to tell who is actually from Afghanistan. "I was asked who was the local mayor, or if I knew about the fighting factions in the tribal areas. How would I know? I have come from another place."

Repatriation workers have been turning away up to 2000 refugee claimants every day. Apart from interviews to establish their credentials, refugees who wish to return home have also to prove that they are indeed receiving assistance for the first time.

Long after the 15 April deadline, Afghan refugee groups continue knocking on the doors of the Afghan embassy in Islamabad, hoping to get the time limit extended for the forced expulsion of unregistered refugees. But the government's Commission for Afghan Refugees has made it clear that the amnesty period is over. Only the 2.15 million Afghan refugees who have received registration cards from the government will be granted temporary protection – and then only until December 2009.

"There will be no peace here for me if I stay," says Zalmay, 40, on his way to Kabul. "I have lived here for 23 years, but I am not registered. If I am caught, I'll have to bribe the police. I don't have that kind of money."

Back to the war

While many refugees profess to be upbeat about their prospects back home, their choice is a stark one: suffering in the refugee camps or the same in their own country, crippled by decades of conflict. Last year, a study commissioned by UNHCR and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on the integration of refugees into the Afghan labour market found some positive trends, but also raised concerns about "the Afghan economy's future absorption capacity". Said the report: "With respect to future return and reintegration programmes ... new approaches would be needed if the majority of the estimated 3.5 million Afghans still in Iran and Pakistan are to return." Adding to this worry

has been the news that, according to Afghan authorities, some 90,000 undocumented Afghans have been deported from Iran since 21 April.

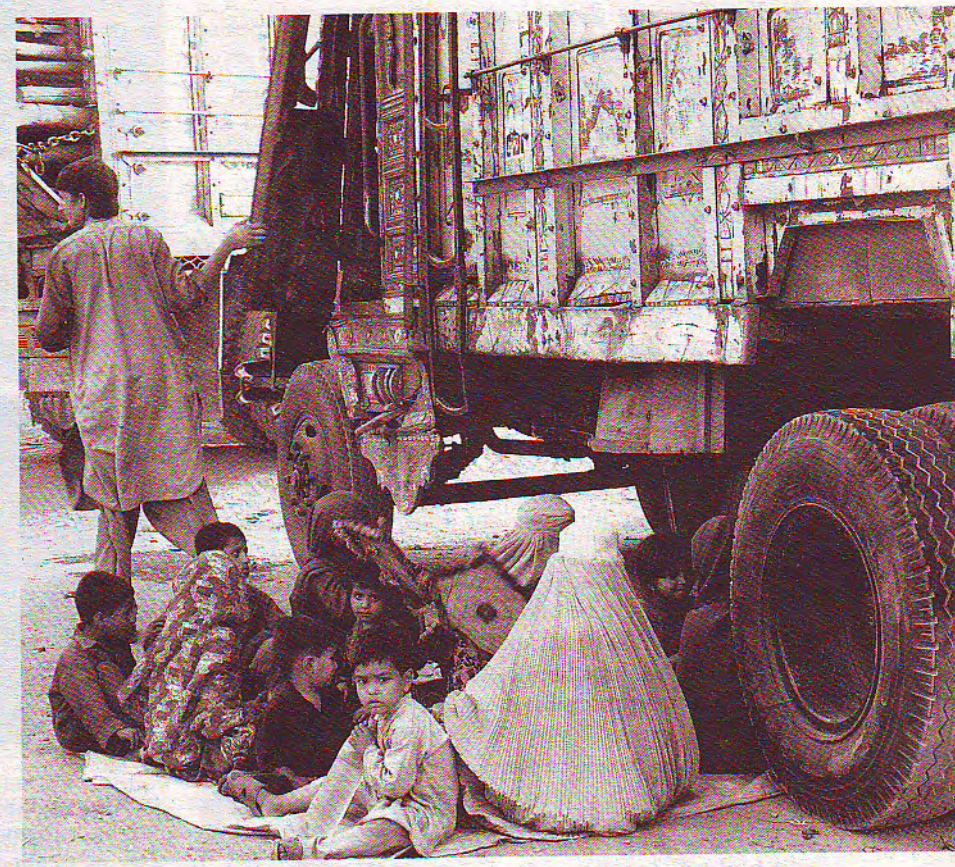
Worries about shelter and employment aside, refugees feel that conditions in Afghanistan remain far from conducive for returning and starting a new life. The United Nations, Human Rights Watch and Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission have all raised concerns about the increasing number of civilians being affected in the ongoing armed conflict in the country. In 2006 alone, more than 650 civilians were killed.

UNHCR puts the number of refugees who have voluntarily repatriated from Pakistan since 2002 at three million – the largest such operation in the refugee agency's history. Meanwhile, the annual voluntary repatriation drive for registered refugees started this year on 15 April. But a recent UNHCR briefing paper cautioned: "While voluntary repatriation is the preferred solution, all parties acknowledge that there are some Afghans who will not be able to return home and will need alternative solutions."

Unregistered refugees have little hope for such a solution, however, and are feeling the pressure to leave. The sight of families and children sleeping under trucks while awaiting registration to cross the border brings to mind the song that popular Afghan singer Farhad Darya sang during his years as a refugee:

> When I look at my palm it seems
> in the coming days and nights,
> God knows if I will stay.
> In which country will blow the
> dust of my grave?
> In the cemeteries of my land, God
> knows if I will stay.

In the last months of their stay in Pakistan, refugees have begun exhuming the bodies of those who have died in the camps, and prepared to take the bodies back home.



Morbid symbolism seldom fails to surface in conversations with Afghan refugees. After decades of war and displacement, it seems the only certainty in their lives is death. Majeed, 60, is a carpenter from Nangrahar Province in eastern Afghanistan. He sits on a string bed outside his shop in the Kacha Garhi refugee camp, in Peshawar's suburbs. His wares: coffins made of cheap wood, standing in rows beside his bed. He is not the only one dealing in coffins; more carpentry shops along this road offer coffins than doors or construction materials for homes.

"Ka gor gran day kho the mari nakam day" (The grave is expensive, but the dead have no choice), Majeed quotes a Pashtu proverb, to show that the refugees have run out of options in Pakistan – and that even though it is difficult to go back, that is what they must now do.

Asif Nang, an Afghan writer, came to Pakistan as a young boy twenty years ago, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He describes what he calls the three stages of his life as a refugee: "I came here very young. Like any child's, my childhood was innocent. We had suddenly lost everything. A refugee comes to a country where he has no legal status. His worldview becomes distorted; his heart dies, and he lives with that fear and hopelessness all his life."

The second stage was when Asif and his family struck root in Pakistan. "You have to live. You struggle, find a job, do business. Twenty years go by, you have a family. Your children grow up here, think they belong here. Your elders die and are buried here. You think, This is life, this is home."

And now, the third stage? "And then, you are asked to leave again. Your children ask questions: Why are we leaving? Why don't we belong here? It takes a physical and psychological toll, where you have to let go of your home, your business, your education, the land you have come to love – and leave for a land that has become alien. It is like becoming a refugee all over again."

It is always tremendously sad to report on the killing of journalists, and here *Chhetria Patrakar* has to refer to the murder of **Zakia Zaki** on 5 June. Zazi (*see pic*) headed the private radio station Sada-e-Sulh (Peace Radio) in Afghanistan's northern province of Pawan. Her murder – by seven bullets fired point-blank – was seen as a warning for women not to work in the media. Hundreds of women have joined the profession since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Zaki, described by the Afghan Independent Journalists Association as "independent and courageous", had previously received death threats, and had faced down demands for Sada-e-Sulh to be taken off the air. Another woman journalist was also murdered in Afghanistan during the last month. Shakiba Sanga Amaj (*see pic*), a 22-year-old television presenter with the Pashtu channel Shamshad TV, was killed on 31 May. Amaj's death might have had something to do with a marriage-related family matter, but the loss of a professional reporter and presenter will be felt dearly by the fledgling Afghan media.

We all liked to believe that **Gen Musharraf was a libertarian** when it came to the media, for the way in which he allowed journalists free reign all these years. Well, it turns out that that was only because he was confident about his hold on the polity, the lack of opposition from exiled leaders Nawaz and Benazir, and the Western support that propped him up, especially after 9/11. Also, because he knew that the English-language press represented no political challenge, the general was willing to indulge it in its independence. But with the unravelling of his control, the anti-media nature of the Musharraf regime is becoming clear.

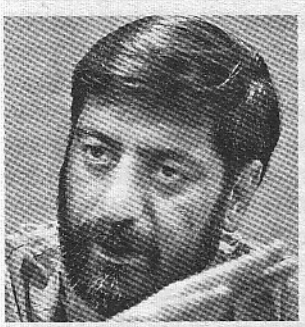
During May, the transmission of three leading private television channels was blocked, in an attempt to contain the controversy surrounding the general's suspension of the chief justice. What scares Gen Musharraf, of course, is that these channels – ARY, Aaj and GEO – air in Urdu, and thus have the power to rouse mass sentiment. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has denied harassing the stations, claiming that cable operators had themselves begun censoring their own broadcasts. Well, we know otherwise. Following political opposition and vigorous protests by journalist organisations, the Pakistani government was forced to suspend implementation of an ordinance that would have increased PEMRA's powers. The authorities have instead announced the creation of a six-member committee to review the controversial ordinance, and to submit a report to the prime minister. But things will probably get worse for the media in Pakistan before they get better.

Over in India, the central government is at least is a little circumspect when it comes to directing the press. And so, when the authorities decided that their journalists were getting out of hand in its coverage of the conflict between the Meena and Gujjar communities in Rajasthan (*see accompanying story*), Information Minister Priya Ranjan Das Munshi (*see pic*) called in the television channels and asked them to **show restraint**. NDTV executive director Dibang indicated that the authorities even suggested that the names of the two communities not be used in newscasts. Responding to reports that he had issued veiled threats to the media, the minister said: "I am not advising or dictating. I have no right to dictate." Meanwhile, Rajdeep Sardesai of CNN-IBN stated that the minister had "made an appeal for self-regulation, which is fine."

It has now come time for the Pakistani regime to be worried about a **Sindhi magazine published in India** with a circulation of 1000, of which perhaps a score or two arrive in Karachi. Ghanshyam Das G Hotumatani is a Pakistani who emigrated to New Delhi in 1995, where he started the monthly *Sindhun Yo Sansar* – the 'World of Sindhis'. It is a one-man operation, and copies are mailed to readers, especially journalists, in Sindh. The Sindh Home Department has now ordered a ban on the publication and the confiscation of all copies on the market. The allegation is of provocative articles against the state of Pakistan. Meanwhile, the province's Home Secretary, Ghulam Muhammad Mohatarem, told the *Daily Times* of Lahore: "I don't remember exactly why we have banned the magazine, as I am out of my office and the related file of this issue is lying in my office." We await the honourable secretary's visit to his office, and hope that he locates the file.

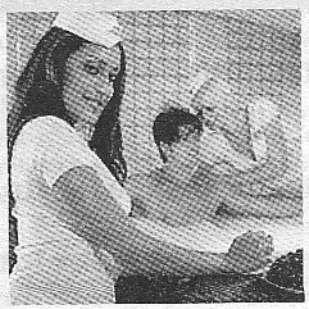
In case you missed it, **Aung San Suu Kyi** turned 62 on 19 June 2007. Here's a nice painting by artist Andrea Harris.

The World Association of Newspapers (WAN) has come out with a report on newspaper sales globally and in Southasia, which allows us to see just how fast the Indian press is growing. Whereas 97 million Americans read the news in print, every day in India **150 million people (and counting)** pick up the paper. In terms of numbers of copies sold, the world's five largest newspaper markets are: China (99 million copies sold daily), India (89 million), Japan (69 million), the US (52 million) and Germany (21 million). Sales of Hindi dailies in India make up 34 million, while English papers sell around 11 million copies. Indian newspaper sales increased 13 percent in 2006, and 54 percent over the past five years. Newspaper advertising revenues in India increased 23 percent over one year, and 85 percent over the last five. All of which makes you wonder: Why are we doing whatever it is we are doing, instead of investing in Indian media, and becoming subcontinental media moguls?



Rakesh Sharma is the maker of the widely hailed documentary on the 2002 Gujarat carnage, *Final Solution*. May 2005 found him filming on the sidewalks of New York City with a handheld video camera - having taken neither the official filming permit nor the one-million-dollar insurance coverage needed. After Sharma was detained by the New York authorities, he decided to sue, claiming that the need for a permit was an impediment to free speech. For his pains, Sharma has forced through a rewriting of the rules in NYC: filmmakers and photographers using handheld equipment will henceforth need neither city permits nor insurance coverage. It is said that the New York Police Department has agreed to pay the filmmaker "an unspecified sum" as part of the settlement. CP would guess the sum would be enough to fund several more Sharma documentaries (with handheld camera) in the days to come.

On 20 June, Sri Lankans who tried to log on to Tamilnet, a Tamil news website, were frustrated by their inability to do so. It later turned out that the government had ordered all major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Sri Lanka to block the website. Hosted overseas, Tamilnet became one of the most well known news websites under editor Darmaratnam Sivaram, until his murder in April 2005. Well, *Chhetria Patrakar* is aware of Tamilnet's pro-LTTE leanings, but is always appreciative of its analyses, insights and reports on Tamil issues - almost missing from mainstream Sinhala and English-language media. Surely, banning Tamilnet is not how to promote debate and discussion.

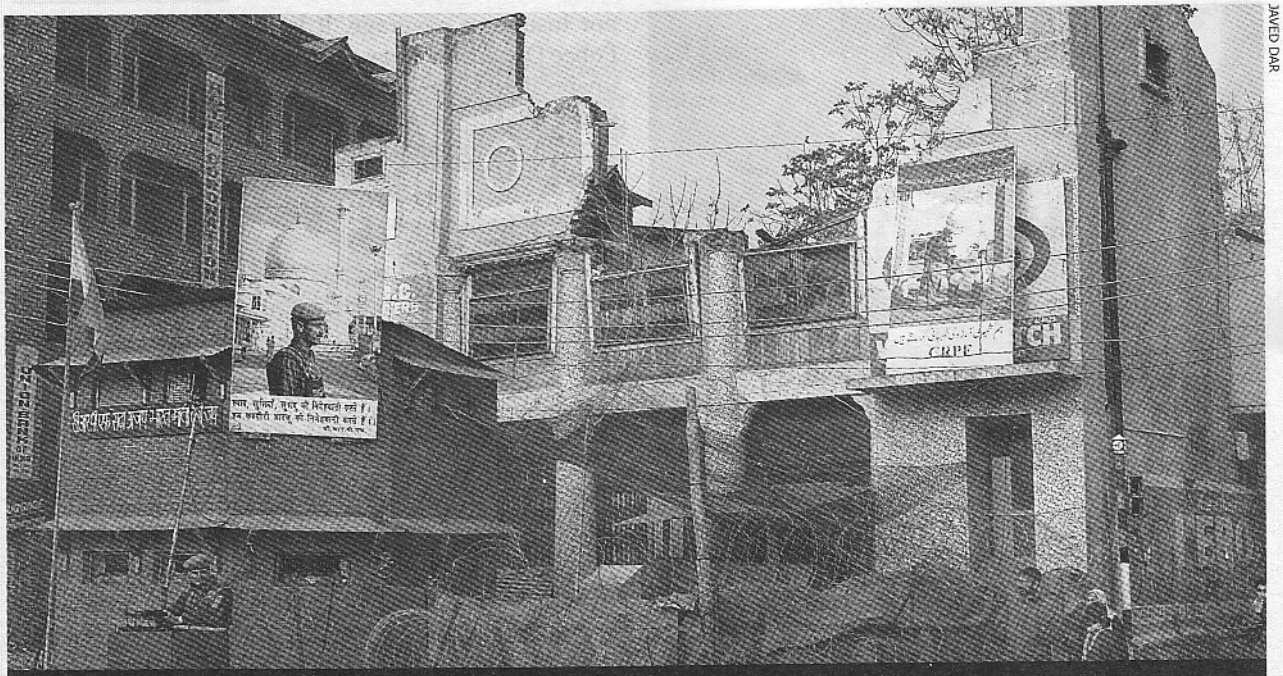


In an article published in the *Business Standard* in early June, journalist Shuchi Bansal took a wide-ranging look at the use of **tabloid-like material on Hindi news channels**. It seems that the new station India TV's use of sensational news items (including an odd preponderance of stories on sex, snakes and ghosts) has led to a massive ratings rise over the past few months. Though it may have rival companies indignant, Bansal says that media veterans blame Star News for starting the trend of "blowing up the inconsequential" back in 2005, during a week of ratings wars in which Aaj Tak responded in kind.

Bansal notes that at least eight major Hindi news channels compete for an advertising pie worth INR 5.5 billion. But competition for ratings does not entirely explain the steamy or trivial nature of a significant amount of Hindi news content. Bansal's sources observe that news of this sort would not sell in Kerala, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh or the Northeast.

Some observers point out that the "race for the frivolous" can only be a shortcut for many Hindi networks and that, as these organisations re-evaluate their strategies, the market will be segmented between channels showing hard and soft news. Indeed, *Chhetria Patrakar* certainly hopes the best for Hindi television's non-tabloid news practitioners; India's Hindi-speakers deserve better, regardless of what ratings may show today.

- Chhetria Patrakar



JAVED DAR

Dark entertainment in the Kashmir Valley

Srinagar's once-thriving cinema culture too is hostage to a resolution of the Kashmir problem.

BY **PEERZADA ARSHAD HAMID**

For people who live outside of the Kashmir Valley, cinema halls are generally places of lively entertainment, abuzz with queues and excited talk of the latest blockbusters. In Srinagar, however, cinema houses are more likely to resemble military garrisons – either actually housing paramilitary troops, or with overwhelming security to keep safe those few theatre-goers willing to brave the anger of fundamentalist groups.

Since the late 1980s, when insurgency exploded in Kashmir, militant outfits such as the Allah Tigers have issued a series of morality-based diktats, ordering cinema owners to pull down their shutters. Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of the Faith), a women's separatist organisation, has long rallied against perceived degeneracy in Jammu & Kashmir, and has many times marched through the streets of Srinagar, attempting to ensure that cinema halls were darkened. Similar bans have been imposed on liquor shops and street vendors selling fashion and film magazines.

Although the revival of popular cinema culture in Kashmir remains a distant dream, this spring did see Srinagar's Tagore Hall suddenly bedecked for a weeklong film festival, the first International Film Festival of Kashmir. The idea behind the event was not only to entertain, but also to groom aspiring filmmakers and art lovers in the Valley. The dramatic turnout – writers, filmmakers and students in particular – proved that the Valley's citizens have been awaiting such an opportunity to indicate their rejection of the fundamentalist lockhold on popular culture.

Not only had most festival-goers never attended a similar event, many had never even been in a cinema hall. Shafia Wani, a college student, said that she was more excited about the ambience inside the hall than about watching the films themselves. "There is a need to revive cultural activities in the Valley," she said. For most Kashmiris in Shafia's generation, entertainment has been – and remains – limited to the confines of the family house.

As dusk sets in, doors and gates in the Kashmir Valley are quickly shut and padlocked, restrictions on night-time movement having long been routine. "The fear of the gun, of the combat-gear-wearing trooper, is always there," says Mariah Majid, an undergraduate student from Hyderpora, in uptown Srinagar. "No one can gather courage to roam around freely after dusk sets in. Here, darkness brings more darkness. It throws us back into the Stone Age." Mariah, who also attended the recent film festival, called the experience a "bonanza …We hardly get to see films on the big screen!"

Although there is clearly a yearning to watch films in a hall, in general the level of danger has simply precluded going to the movies. Fifteen-year-old Aqib did not attend the festival, and he has

never ventured into a cinema hall. With the excitement generated by the event at Tagore Hall, Aqib says he will go to a cinema hall at least once in his lifetime. Not only have Aqib's parents disallowed him from going to movie theatres, they have barred him from playing in the central polo grounds in Srinagar as well. Following school, he has to rush home before dark. But even if Aqib's parents were to allow him greater freedom, he would not have many friends with whom to play – their parents have all imposed similar rules.

Ghostly quiet

Prior to the insurgency, the Kashmir Valley alone had 18 cinema houses. Among the most prominent of these were the Broadway, Paladium, Neelam, Shah, Sheraz, Khayam, Firdous, Naaz and Regal. Theatres dotted the urban landscape, and cinema lovers were able to watch any new release from Bombay, even in the remote corners of the state.

Following the early-1990s ban imposed by the militants, in 1997 some cinema halls, including the Broadway and Neelam in Srinagar, were reopened, and this seemed to indicate a 'return of normalcy'. However, the re-opened theatres did not fare well due to the public's fear of being targeted by fundamentalist groups. The Broadway theatre subsequently downed its shutters again – and this time, the decision was the proprietor's own. Despite being situated in a locality with arguably the highest troop presence in the world, a stone's throw from an army cantonment, the Broadway could not attract enough cine-goers to remain solvent. The building is now being converted into a hotel. Another cinema hall, the Regal, was targeted in a grenade attack the day that it reopened in 1999. It shut down again immediately.

The Neelam is currently the only functioning cinema hall in Kashmir, but it shows films to just a handful of people at a time. The theatre gives the appearance more of a military installation than a place of entertainment. Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) troops guard the building, aiming guns at passers-by from sandbagged bunkers atop the theatre building, while the cinema's outer fence is surrounding by coils of razor wire. Given the area's restricted-movement designation, pedestrians generally prefer to take alternate routes, to avoid any untoward incident.

In his late 60s, Noor Mohammed sells tickets for the shows at the Neelam. The tedium of waiting for customers is writ large on his wrinkled face. Nonetheless, with a pile of ticket books in his hand, he welcomes everyone with a smile. Behind him are a couple of hoarding boards advertising the current show – *Kabul Express*, the controversial film on Afghanistan that was screened several months ago outside the Valley. "We cannot afford to show any film soon after its release," says Surrinder Singh, the Neelam's buyer. "The reason is, people here don't turn up in big numbers, and so we cannot afford first-run costs."

From screening five shows a day, the Neelam now only schedules three showings. On this particular day, the first two shows have already been cancelled, because no viewers showed up. The third show is now playing, with just ten viewers in the theatre's balcony. The rest of the hall has a ghostly appearance, as scenes from the movie flicker over row upon row of empty seats. Although the Neelam can take an audience of 800, since the hall reopened the number of viewers has never gone over 40 at a single time, Noor says.

Noor has worked at the Neelam since its opening in 1966. "In those days, there was no threat," he recalls. "People used to throng cinemas to entertain themselves. Tickets used to sell out in advance." He looks at the little-used ticket book in his hand: "When the cinema was closed, I was asked to work at the flour mill owned by the proprietor of this cinema hall." Others at the Neelam similarly shifted to the mill between 1990 and 1999. A couple have been lucky enough to have been able to move back, although making a living at a place like the Neelam remains difficult. Noor is sceptical about the prospects of reviving the Valley's cinema culture. "Unless and until Pakistan and India reach a compromise on the long-standing Kashmir dispute, nothing can happen," he says.

> 'Here, darkness brings more darkness. It throws us back into the Stone Age.'

Certainly little is happening at the rest of the Valley's theatres. At the Palladium, in the centre of the city at Lal Chowk, the hoarding boards now bear images of gun-wielding CRPF men. Sycamores and other trees have grown through the washrooms and balconies (*see photo*). Three other halls – the Firdous, Sheraz and Shah – remain under the occupation of paramilitary troops garrisoned there. The Khayam is now a hospital. The Naaz is securely locked up. The Regal is out on rent, where local vendors sell cheap items to Srinagar's citizens.

Some of the grandeur of the cinema halls of the Kashmir Valley lives on, in absentia, if you will. Their familiarity as well-known, well-loved landmarks remains ingrained in the life of this city, and the streets and areas surrounding these old theatres still retain the names – Broadway, Regal, Naaz, Khayam – that once inspired notions of excitement, splendour and leisure. Kashmir used to be the favourite haunt for Bombay filmmakers, but they have largely stopped shooting in the Valley. Now even their productions are a rarity here, as Kashmiris are denied the pleasures of watching cinema as a collective exercise.

India's humane anarchy

BY **ADITYA ADHIKARI**

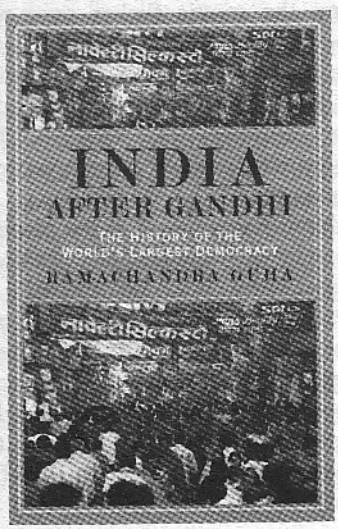
A unitary, democratic and progressive Indian state was by no means pre-determined by its colonial legacy. At the time of Independence in August 1947, there had been nearly a year of incessant rioting between groups of Hindus and Muslims. An Islamic state had been carved out from the western and eastern flanks of the Subcontinent, areas that many Indians regarded as an inextricable part of 'their' civilisational heritage. Almost a million people were killed, and many millions more fled to safety among their co-religionists. Many Hindus who fled Pakistan to seek refuge in West Bengal and the Punjab bore intense anti-Muslim feelings, which played to the advantage of radical rightwing Hindu groups that wanted India to be declared a Hindu state.

The territory that remained as part of India was by no means united. Over 500 princely states, some the size of large European countries, remained unintegrated with the nation. These were states that had never come under direct British rule, and now some of their rajas and nawabs wanted complete independence. The Subcontinent was fragmented among hundreds of communities that spoke different languages and dialects. Indian society was extremely hierarchical, with the lower orders living in abject poverty and degradation – ready across the country, some would say, for a Maoist-style revolution. The conditions for the creation of a unitary state of any kind, let alone a secular, democratic and socially progressive one, were highly unpropitious.

The basic tenets on which the Indian nation state now rests – democracy, federalism and secularism – are taken as given. But in the years immediately following Independence, India's leaders had to struggle to establish these foundations – through argument, compromise and sometimes force.

For those already well versed in recent Indian history, Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi* still offers fresh insights, peppered with the felicitous turn of phrase and the revealing anecdote. It also contains much that is new. In general, comprehensive histories of this kind rely mostly on secondary sources. However, due to a paucity of literature on certain areas of India's history over the past fifty years, Guha spent significant time delving in various archives, and in the process unearthed original materials and unexpected discoveries.

In the earlier sections of *India After Gandhi*, Guha is keen to impress upon his readers the tremendous difficulties that lay before India's post-Independence leaders. The author does not take a structural view of history, where all movement is predetermined by existing economic and social conditions, and where the individual is largely ineffectual. For Guha, history is shaped when people decide on particular actions and carry them through. The lives, thoughts and actions of individuals important to India's recent history (not only the Nehrus and Ambedkars, but also those such as Sukumar Sen, the country's first chief election commissioner, and Naga leader Angami Zapu Phizo) are thus given a position of primacy in this book. Indeed, encountering the host of characters in its pages is one of the volume's principal pleasures.



India After Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy
by **Ramachandra Guha**
Picador, 2007

Awe of the nation

Guha's deepest respect is reserved for the first leaders of post-Independence India – Vallabhai Patel, B R Ambedkar and the like, but above all for Jawaharlal Nehru. It is the Nehruvian vision of India as a plural, secular, democratic state that Guha champions throughout this new work. Among other things, *India After Gandhi* is a response to Guha's ideological rivals on the right. Although it responds to criticism of him from the left as well, it does so to a lesser extent and often only implicitly. Guha himself has sympathies with a 'softer' left – it is mostly with the violent and authoritarian tendencies of the militant left that he has problems.

In interviews, Guha has called himself a "liberal constitutionalist". He is also a patriot. As such, he locates the source of India's national identity and pride in the defining ideas of the modern Indian nation, as enshrined in its Constitution and supportive documents. Doing so is the author's way of responding to the Hindu nationalist's search for glory in a mythical Hindu past.

"Whenever I see these great engineering works," Guha quotes Nehru as saying, "I feel excited and exhilarated." Guha himself shares these feelings when he observes India's post-Independence leaders' struggle to achieve a desirable political, social and economic order. His sense of awe and wonder is contagious, and often present in the first third of the book: when he describes, for instance, the gigantic enterprise that was the first general election, the first attempts at industrialisation, and the Constituent Assembly debates. Guha illustrates

how the general Indian populace during the 1950s also shared its leaders' "romance and enchantment" with democracy and development. Thus, of the 1954 inauguration of the Bhakra-Nangal hydroelectricity project, he writes:

> Seeing the water coming towards them, the villagers downstream set off hundreds of home-made crackers. As one eyewitness wrote: 'For 150 miles the boisterous celebrations spread like a chain reaction along the great canal and the branches and distributaries to the edges of the Rajasthan desert, long before the water got there.'

Such accounts of celebration diminish as memories of colonialism recede. The idealism of a new nation wanes, and it becomes embroiled in a multitude of internal and external conflicts.

Much of the remainder of *India After Gandhi* reads like the story of a constantly embattled state. There are the repeated conflicts with Pakistan – over Kashmir, and over the territory that in 1971 became Bangladesh; the secessionist movements in the Northeast and the Punjab; the rise of Hindu nationalism; the strife between Hindus and Muslims, between the upper and lower castes, between the Hindi-speaking national political elite and the non-Hindi-speaking states. The Indian state also came under assault from the political class, that very group that was supposed to protect it. Indira Gandhi dismantled the institutions her father had expended so much energy building. She got rid of intermediate leaders in the Congress hierarchy, and personally selected holders of top political positions. Real power was concentrated in her 'kitchen cabinet', which consisted of close family members and loyal retainers.

The general decline of institutions continued, even as Indira Gandhi and her son (and successor) were assassinated. Corruption infected the political class and bureaucracy. Political parties across India became increasingly prone to nepotism. Confronted with the innumerable conflicts the Indian state had to contain, and by the increasing venality of the political class and its ineffectual government, foreign observers predicted the imminent death of Indian democracy. Some foresaw a military takeover; others envisaged an India that had fractured into a plethora of smaller states.

The second upsurge

But, except for the brief period between 1975 and 1977, when Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency, the institutions of democracy continued to function. Despite repeated assaults, the centre held. And hidden behind the chaos, fundamental changes were occurring in Indian society and politics. "The churning – violent and costly though it undoubtedly was – could be more sympathetically read as a growing decentralisation of the Indian polity," Guha writes. "away from the hegemony of a single region (the north), a single party (the Congress), a single family (the Gandhis)."

The rise of parties organised around regional groupings and lower castes represents, to use the words of the political scientist Yogendra Yadav, a "second democratic upsurge" in India's post-Independence history. Starting the late 1980s, the Congress party has been almost completely wiped out from the political powerhouse of Uttar Pradesh, and the fact that control over the state government has mostly alternated between a party of Other Backwards Castes and a party of Dalits cannot be seen as anything but a deepening of Indian democracy.

As an epigraph to one of his chapters, Guha quotes Ashis Nandy: "In India the choice could never be between chaos and stability, but between manageable and unmanageable chaos, between humane and inhumane anarchy, and between tolerable and intolerable disorder." India has seen intolerable disorder. The Indian state has not been able to do enough to educate and feed its people. It has not been able to provide adequate protection to its minorities – for instance, during the anti-Muslim carnage in Gujarat in 2002. But for much of the past half-century, the system laid down by those who founded the nation has provided a framework within which anarchy has been tolerably contained, and various interests have been allowed to compete without destroying the integrity of the nation state.

Despite brief forays into the realms of Indian economy, film, music and sport, *India After Gandhi* is primarily a work of political history. Guha does intervene to defend Nehru's economic policies, but he completely sidesteps the contemporary debate between those who argue that only free-market policies can achieve the high rates of growth that India needs, and those who maintain that government intervention is necessary to ensure an equitable distribution of resources. Besides being in full accordance with the dominant economic thought of the mid-20th century, he insists, Nehruvian planning was necessary for India, as government-led industrialisation gave a joint purpose to a recently forged and deeply divided nation. Guha's defence of Nehru's economic policies, then, is also primarily political. A deeper engagement with India's economy, as well as with cultural history, would have brought to the reader better a sense of the material and internal lives of India's post-independence citizens.

At a time when Nehru has come under attack from various quarters – Hindu nationalists accuse him of pandering to minorities, proponents of the free market claim that his economic policies kept India in a state of economic stagnation for decades, and leftists claim that he did not have the political will to institute wide-ranging land-reform and other measures to ensure the uplift of the poor – *India After Gandhi* provides a new look at the Nehruvian legacy, and offers fresh arguments as to why India's gratitude to its founding fathers would not be misplaced.

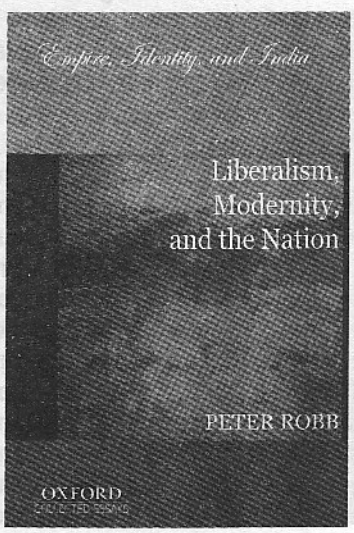
Not a colonial apologist

BY **ATUL MISHRA**

It is difficult to prevent history from becoming a caricature. In popular imagination, Southasia's colonial subjugation represents a sincere example of that modern art of storytelling: a near-perfect plot. The British 'protagonist' and the Indian 'foil' play out the 'rising action' leading to the 'climactic' end of colonialism. Identity crisis fuels the catastrophe of Partition, but does not lead to denouement, much less to a resolution or eventual catharsis.

But the progress of this nice, linear narrative is ruptured by the contradictions of colonialism. Hence, 250 years after Plassey, 150 years after the Mutiny and 60 years after Independence and Partition, the ghost of the colonial past still keeps Southasians anxiously suspended. The chaos of Southasian mass politics draws the most attention within the confines of political systems of respective countries – Indian democracy versus Pakistani dictatorship versus Bangladeshi military rule, etcetera. This practice obscures the common reasons behind our political mess, foregrounding what appear to be distinct, country-specific causes. The root causes nonetheless persist, deep beneath the paraphernalia of modern states, leading to the recurring crises that plague our region. Historians, however, are an incorrigible lot. They seek to rescue history's descent into caricature. By offering us an account of the broad tropes that inform modern Southasia, British historian Peter Robb invites readers to assess how well he performs in discussing the role of what he calls 'liberal imperialism' – in modern India in particular and the Subcontinent in general.

Electoral democracy is no guarantee of a liberal polity. We often miss this point by privileging the gloss of formal democracy over the quality of a liberal public culture. The distinction becomes more obtuse in Southasia, where representative democracy has been hard to come by and, barring perhaps India, governments have oscillated between technical democracies and outright dictatorships. The grammar of the colonial Indian state has much to tell us about our current infirmities. The colonisers did indeed come first to trade with and later to rule India, Robb argues, but all the while they were imbued with a sense of purpose. They set certain ideas into practice, which had profound, if even ironic, influences. "I suggest that it was largely because the British tried to interpret and to improve India," the author writes.



Empire, Identity, and India: Liberalism, modernity, and the nation
by **Peter Robb**
Oxford University Press, 2007

We may have heard this argument from empire apologists before. But Robb distinguishes himself by claiming only the influence of liberal ideas, and not the success of the outcomes they intended. His 'liberal imperialism' is a weak cousin of the liberal philosophy that emerged from the European Enlightenment. The need to govern India made it imperative that it be done in ways familiar to the men of the British East India Company. As such, a system of minimalist government emerged that largely imitated the institutions back home.

Planting an alien philosophy in a largely unknown land necessitated some pruning. So, the British did not intervene in the communitarian affairs of the people of the Subcontinent, at least not until the events of 1857. From Robert Clive onwards, successive governor-generals, and later viceroys, harboured a sense of responsibility towards their unequal and partially inferior subjects. Hubris of power uncharacteristically lived with false modesty of purpose; in an over-abused phrase, this was the 'white man's burden'. There consequently emerged a superficial liberalism around which modern India (and modern Indians) constructed its identity. Unfortunately, this farcical variant of liberalism continues even today.

Timeless unity

The seven essays of Robb's *Empire, Identity, and India* subtly chronicle the nature of this "ideas-in-practice" in the construction of the Indian nation, the Indian state

and the Subcontinent's Muslim separatism, carefully stressing the role of the region's people in each of these constructions. According to Robb, the state preceded the nation in India. Definite boundaries and institutions of governance within those boundaries were vital to the emerging sovereign state, and the author presents incredibly detailed snapshots of how territorial boundaries of the colonial state were marked in the Northeast and Mysore regions. Territorial consolidation was a cumbersome exercise, and brutal measures were often undertaken to demarcate the limits of the state.

These essays tell a great deal about the current problems of India's Northeast, where sovereignty did not flow from colonial writ. Powerful local resistances either thwarted the efforts of achieving sovereign statehood, or led to the creation of vast areas of indeterminate control. The colonial government's formal jurisdiction over the eastern and western parts of the Subcontinent was inconsequential in the face of its negligible actual control. Is it surprising, then, that exactly these areas were partitioned in 1947, to create Pakistan? Robb does not go so far as to ask such a thing, although the question lingers nonetheless.

The 'Mutiny' of 1857 caused the Queen to promise subjecthood to the people of the Subcontinent, implying representation in the institutions of the state. This ushered in a crisis in 'liberal imperialism', because it had survived thus far precisely by denying representation to the native population. Robb appears to argue that this debate between English conservatives and liberals (in which the latter won, albeit marginally) created a space for the nationalist leadership to emerge. In effect, a question of Indian participation in their own state opened the means of construction of the Indian nation. Is it surprising, then, that a liberal Jawaharlal Nehru 'discovered' the timeless unity of an Indian nation, just in time to offer it to an independent people? Robb does not ask this question either, although it too would be worth asking.

Furthermore, this nascent nation would have been short-lived had it not been for a rescue effort. Robb is correct to argue that the secular identity of the colonial state need not have logically informed the identity of the emerging nation. The communists and the communalists were, after all, in competition. But Nehru rescued his nation from primordial temptations to give it a secular identity. Had Robb followed up his own argument, that India's secular identity was not predestined, the drift would have become clear. But he has not.

Republic of Brazenness

One likewise does not quite know what to make of Robb's treatment of Muslim identity politics and separatism. Ambiguity marks his account. To be fair, he accurately captures the coloniser's view of the Muslim 'orthodoxy', as it were. He is on firm ground when arguing that the movements for Partition redefined the Southasian Muslim community in two ways. First, it politicised a religious alliance. Second, it represented an incomplete association of Southasian Muslims with a territory. But the argument is not taken forward. Partition created a regime of suspicion towards the loyalties of minority citizens. One of the indicators of the tragedy of liberalism in Southasia has been this culture of fear and suspicion between minorities and majorities. One wonders why a historian of 'liberal imperialism' does not confront ailments that his subject matter had a hand in producing.

Robb emphasises that equating the sentiments that "all colonialism is bad" with "colonialism is all bad" is "not interesting". One could say it is not important, either. Extreme positions seldom get the picture right. Had it not been for 'liberal imperialism', the difference between British and Spanish conquistadors would never have become clear to us. The British Empire in India privileged 'civilising' over proselytising. In contrast, the importance of Mohandas Gandhi's balancing role in the face of colonial liberalism and religious communalism cannot be overlooked. His presence in the crucial decades of the early 20th century may have saved Southasia from many excesses, far worse than those that now form its history. Gandhi openly admired aspects of the Raj without necessarily conceding his own ground. However, the influence of Gandhi's resistance to the brutalities of 'liberal imperialism' is missing in *Empire, Identity, and India*. For a work of immense sophistication, these oversights are inexplicable.

The Southasian nation states that emerged out of the euphoria and tragedy of 1947 have gone in paradoxical ways. India can perhaps boast of a robust democracy, while Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have yet to decide whether they want to govern themselves or be governed by a small elite. None of the three, however, can claim to be a liberal polity. There are genuine limits to what India's public culture can tolerate, and in the past few years, the discord between democracy and liberalism in the country has deepened. As with most things, India appears comfortable inheriting the legacy of 'liberal imperialism'. A gap between popular rhetoric and meaningful practice has turned it into a "Republic of Brazenness", as the political scientist Pratap Mehta noted recently. Should not one ask how different Mehta's Republic of Brazenness is from Robb's liberal imperialism?

Robb's stature as a fine historian of the colonial Indian state is well established by his rigorously researched works on a range of related issues. *Empire, Identity, and India* must be read patiently and repeatedly, lest he be mistaken to be an apologist of the empire. His is a history of the superficiality that substitutes for the rich philosophical edifice of Southasian states. This book must be read to understand, if not to ease, our own anxieties.

Tracking 'Milbus'

The feudal and the general

BY **SAFIYA AFTAB**

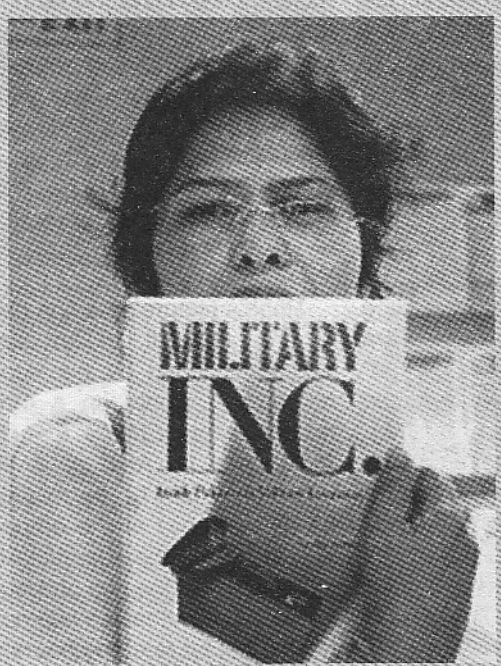
Contrary to the impression created by the reaction of an obviously unnerved regime in Islamabad, independent military analyst Ayesha Siddiqa's recent book, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's military economy*, does not contain startling revelations, libellous claims or outrageous assertions. In itself, it is not a sensational book, and does not give the impression of having been written with the intent of grabbing headlines. Rather, it is a painstakingly researched academic project, with a central theme couched in a theoretical framework. Nonetheless, the authorities tried strenuously to stop the volume from reaching the bookshelves – in the process, only succeeding in tripling sales.

Siddiqa's work includes a detailed historical analysis of the role of the military in Pakistan, and presents meticulously referenced data on what are essentially public institutions. Again out of line with the government's reaction, some of this material has already been published elsewhere. Much of the analysis includes arguments that have made regular appearance in the past, when Pakistani writers and journalists have reported on the 'perks and privileges' enjoyed by the country's military personnel. Siddiqa's conclusions are disquieting, but anybody who has had an interest in Pakistan's politics and economic history would have already come across similar hypotheses in the extensive literature on state-society relations in the country.

Military Inc.'s scholastic worth is undeniable. If the work had been published five years ago, it probably would have been launched at a sombre function in a five-star hotel, with guest speakers drawn from the senior echelons of the military

Ruling classes v the people of Pakistan

Currently in London delivering a series of public lectures, Ayesha Siddiqa talked to **Nadeem Omar Tarar** about her academic pursuits and the future of peace in Southasia.



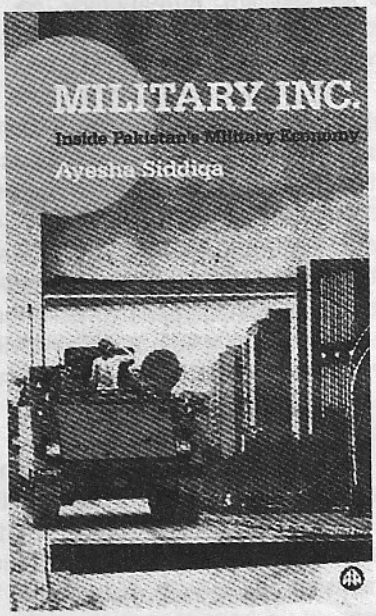
DAWN

What got you interested in the Pakistani military?
It was partly a result of watching war films in cinemas as a child with my parents, who were too modest to watch romances with their young daughter. It was under considerable family pressure that I sat for the civil-service examination in 1987. After an MA in War Studies at the King's College in London, I did my PhD. I returned to Pakistan in 1996, and was assigned the department of Military Accounts, and later to the Pakistan Railways and Defence Audit. My academic engagement with the Naval War College, in Islamabad, as a guest lecturer, and my research on defence and strategic issues, enabled my interactions with senior officers in the armed forces

At what point did you quit the civil service?
In 2001, I decided to quit the civil service, as I felt compelled to devote more time to scholarly writings rather than sitting in the government. Based on my doctoral dissertation, my first book, *Pakistan's Arms Procurement and Military Buildup*, 1979-1999 was coming out. I had also been contributing to several of the leading defence journals. But my status as a government servant was proving limiting to my academic career, and I eventually resigned in 2001. Apart from working as an independent consultant and holding several overseas fellowships, I served as visiting research fellow with the Islamabad-based Sustainable Development Policy Institute.

and possibly civil bureaucracy and academic circles. It would have been discussed for some weeks in newspaper editorials and academic forums, and perhaps been the target of half-hearted rebuttals by the corporations discussed in its pages. The book would have received the sort of attention that a research work of merit can and should receive.

This book, however, had the misfortune – or, indeed, the fortune – to be published in May 2007, at a time when General Pervez Musharraf was beginning to experience what might be the worst crisis of his regime. The timing has propelled both the book and its author into international headlines, with Islamabad attempting to disrupt the launch ceremony, and allegedly sending intelligence agents to intimidate Siddiqa's family. There were subsequent reports that a chargesheet was being prepared against Siddiqa for the publication of 'malicious' material against the armed forces. In the tradition of other Pakistani intellectuals who have dared to question the status quo, Siddiqa has now left the country, perhaps indefinitely.



Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's military economy
by **Ayesha Siddiqa**
Oxford University Press, 2007

The parent-guardian

Aside from the widely publicised figures of the estimated worth of the Pakistan Army's private business empire (around USD 19.7 billion) and the legally acquired assets of top generals (ranging from USD 2.6 million to nearly USD 7 million per individual), what is *Military Inc.* really about? As detailed in the introduction, the book puts forward three general arguments. All three revolve around the idea of 'Milbus', a term Siddiqa coins to refer to 'military businesses' or capital that is "used for the personal benefit of the military fraternity". As such, her first argument is that Milbus rests

Tell us a little about the writing of *Military Inc.*
In 2004, I was selected for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship on the strengths of a book proposal that eventually became *Military Inc.* One of the most intriguing questions for me at that time was the complicity of the civilian governments with the military establishment. I could understand what military interests were in the economy, but why the rest of the stakeholders cooperated escaped me. I used the opportunity to draw on my experience as a former civil servant in the accounts and audit department, and my training as an academic in defence studies to analyse the political structure of the Pakistani state in terms of the hegemonic role of military capital and class in the governance of the country. The book is not about conflict between civil or military institutions, but is essentially about the ruling classes, which includes bureaucrats and politicians versus the people of Pakistan. Unless we change the political structure, nothing is going to change.

What is your reaction to the controversy that has erupted?
The book had no intention other than academic pursuit, and I sought no other audience than academics. I have tried to distance myself from the public controversy surrounding the book, while affirming my mandate as a dispassionate academic – which includes the justification for writing the book in English. I am not a journalist, not even a politician. It's not a people-people thing, it's an academic work. The hue and cry which you see around the book is precisely what I didn't want to happen. My intent was to present a scholarly piece of work, which might be controversial academically but definitely not politically, the way it in fact turned out to be. I don't want to be remembered as an author whose launch was banned by the government, but rather for writing a thorough, credible piece. Whatever has happened to me will curb the voice of others. You know, it's just bad timing. But I have to say that I do feel very saddened by the fact that none of my academic peers stood up to defend my freedom to express myself. Academics of any worth, if there are any in Pakistan, should have said, 'Look, let her say whatever she has to; even if it is a trashy work, let the debate go on.'

Given the political-economic role of the military in Pakistan, how do you see the future?
As an analyst, my duty is to describe what is there, whether it is pessimist, bleak or bleaker. I don't believe it's my business to find solutions. I don't think there will be peace in Southasia until fundamental structures change – not only in Pakistan, mind you, but also in India, where the Indian Army has begun to take on an active role. That's actually the subject of my next book, a comparative study of the militaries in five countries of the region.

on the transfer of resources from the public to the (military-affiliated) private sector. Second, that the growth of Milbus encourages the top echelons of the armed forces to support "policymaking environments" that will "multiply their economic opportunities". And third, that such actions are "both the cause and effect of a feudal, authoritarian, non-democratic political system". This last assertion is particularly interesting, as it implies that the interests of the military and the feudal landlords converge, thereby belying the image of the Pakistan Army as a modern, technology-savvy institution with an interest in supporting technocrats in government.

Siddiqa begins her thesis with an analysis of various forms of civil-military relations. She refers to the pre-1977 role of the Pakistan Army as an "arbitrator military", which acquires political power in certain circumstances (particularly during periods when civilian governments are perceived to be particularly corrupt), but does not seek to prolong or institutionalise its role. Instead, it relies primarily on the civilian bureaucracy to run state affairs, even when the army is in power.

On the other hand, the current dispensation in Pakistan (comparable to the situations in Turkey and Indonesia) is classified as a "parent-guardian" military type. In this form, the military seeks to institutionalise its role in politics through constitutional amendments, with the active help of certain civilian partners. Siddiqa argues that such a transformation in the role of the armed forces is necessitated by their need to "secure their dominant position as part of the ruling elite", and points to the 2004 formation of the National Security Council in Pakistan as an indicator of the institutionalisation of military rule. It is important to understand, though, that this process could not have taken place without some measure of support from powerful elements within the civil bureaucracy, as well as from some political leaders.

How did the military manage to effect this transformation in a country such as Pakistan, which enjoys a powerful civil bureaucracy and political parties that have solid grassroots support? Pakistan's vulnerability to external threats from the time of its creation has, of course, been a key contributing factor to the military's prominence among the organs of the state. In addition, Siddiqa contends that civilians do not understand the linkages between the military's growing financial and political power. Civilian governments tend to allow the military to accumulate assets and build financial empires free of oversight, she notes, in

exchange for the military's support during periods of civilian rule.

Such a contention implies that political leaders and the civil bureaucracy have consistently underestimated the military's need to consolidate its power, and that they did not revise their expectations, even as the military continued to infiltrate civilian government structures. Immediately thereafter, however, the author discusses the evolving role and growing power of the Pakistan Army from 1947 onwards. While acknowledging Hamza Alavi's classification of Pakistan as an "overdeveloped" state, she notes that "the civil bureaucracy and the political elite have always viewed the armed forces as an essential tool for furthering their political objectives." Siddiqa thus does not appear to subscribe to the view that politicians are altogether naïve; instead, she points to a symbiotic relationship between feudal political leaders and the army.

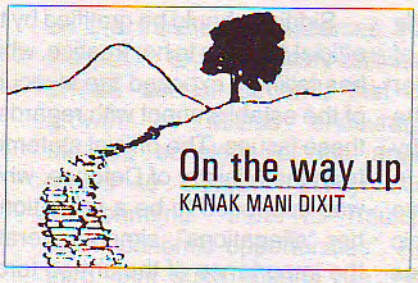
Ban backfire

The key sections of *Military, Inc.* relate to the military's financial empire. Here, Siddiqa covers the four, relatively more transparent, subsidiaries – the Fauji, Shaheen and Bahria foundations, and the Army Welfare Trust. But she also pays generous heed to the commercial ventures, such as the National Logistics Corporation (officially a part of the Ministry of Planning and Development, but the ground operations of which are run by the army), the Frontier Works Organisation (initially under the control of the Ministry of Communications, and now under the Ministry of Defence), and the housing projects administered by all three branches of the military. In a more daring move, Siddiqa also attempts to quantify the economic benefits utilised by armed-forces personnel. These fall into two categories: the visible, in the form of land grants, a rough calculation of which places the value of military land at about USD 11.6 billion; and the invisible, or the business opportunities availed by military personnel using the influence of their parent organisations, with the government, for instance, providing natural-gas subsidies worth USD 18.97 million to Fauji Fertilizer alone in 2006.

Perhaps the most revealing section of *Military, Inc.* deals with the cost of Milbus, which directly challenges the view that financial institutions managed by the armed forces are efficient and competitive. Siddiqa documents, for example, the financial travails of the Army Welfare Trust, which in 2001 was forced to ask the government for a bailout of USD 93.1 million – not the first time the Trust had run into difficulties. Siddiqa's analysis of the other three foundations is less detailed due to a paucity of data; but she is able to note annual losses of USD 17.2 million in the three sugar mills run by the Fauji Foundation, as well as negative operating profit margins of 10-15 percent in the Fauji Jordan Fertilizer Company at the beginning of this decade.

Siddiqa should be gratified by the official reaction to her treatise, which has tellingly exposed the insecurity of the establishment with regards to these issues. The official statement from the Ministry of Defence, which was supposed to be a refutation of her "allegations", simply reiterated the importance of the armed forces as a pillar of the Pakistani state, as well as the military's right to provide for the welfare of its employees – neither of which contentions had been challenged by the author.

More than three weeks after *Military, Inc.* was launched in Pakistan, and more than a month after its initial publication in London, no public institution had challenged the information or analysis presented. Instead, a considerable amount of energy was expended in vilifying the credentials of the author, including the time-honoured method of invoking her meetings with Indian researchers at international conferences. The bungled attempt to ban the book launch, and even the book itself (the government denies banning sales, but the book was not available in most key bookstores on the day of its launch) has in fact succeeded in trebling its sales, with the publisher already into a third edition. Overseas sales are likewise recording significant highs, and the book is receiving exceptional coverage in the international press. A government that insists on taking credit for launching the information age in Pakistan with the liberalisation of the country's media really should have known better.



The mind's rock

When trekking in the hills of Southasia with a load on one's back, the mind is concentrated and the eyes are fixed on the ground. The satisfaction of walking alone – carrying a load, though one not too heavy – is probably linked to human evolution, as the kind of activity our ancestors did in the long march from monkey to man. One might even hazard that some aspect of hiking alone is written into the human genetic code. Herein lies the attraction of trekking as a recreational activity, into which it has evolved since the 1970s.

KANAK MANI DIXIT

Trek is actually a Boer/Dutch term that was imported into the Nepali Himalaya after some pioneering tourism entrepreneurs realised that there was no English word to describe this type of walking. This was neither camping nor hiking, but a special kind of walking on trails used by villagers who have done so – and have carried loads on their backs with the help of a forehead strap, also called *namlo* – for millennia.

Trekking sharpens the mind, especially after the body finds its pace, breathing becomes regular, and the heart pumps harder to supply the oxygen demanded by the lungs to feed the muscles. In the process, the brain gets a bonus dose of well-oxygenated blood.

Even when in a trekking group, the actual walking is an individual exercise, with each trekker in his or her own world. The mind is free to roam, to be imaginative, to think, plan, devise. Many more ideas are born during a strenuous walk than sitting sedentary on a settee. A study of how inventions come to be, or how flashes of inspiration are generated, would probably show that the origins lie not in seminar halls or in cross-legged meditation, but on walks or rambles. (An aside: *Himal* magazine was born in the mind of one trekker during the summer of 1986.)

The brain can, of course, also go awry when it is receiving a surge of blood, and creativity can tilt towards the impractical, if not the downright absurd. Speaking of which, over years of trekking, with the eye fixed on the ground and a pack on the back, I have found that rocks and pebbles often take the sudden shape of – Southasia! The shape of the Subcontinent constantly jumps up at me from the pieces of stone along the trail.

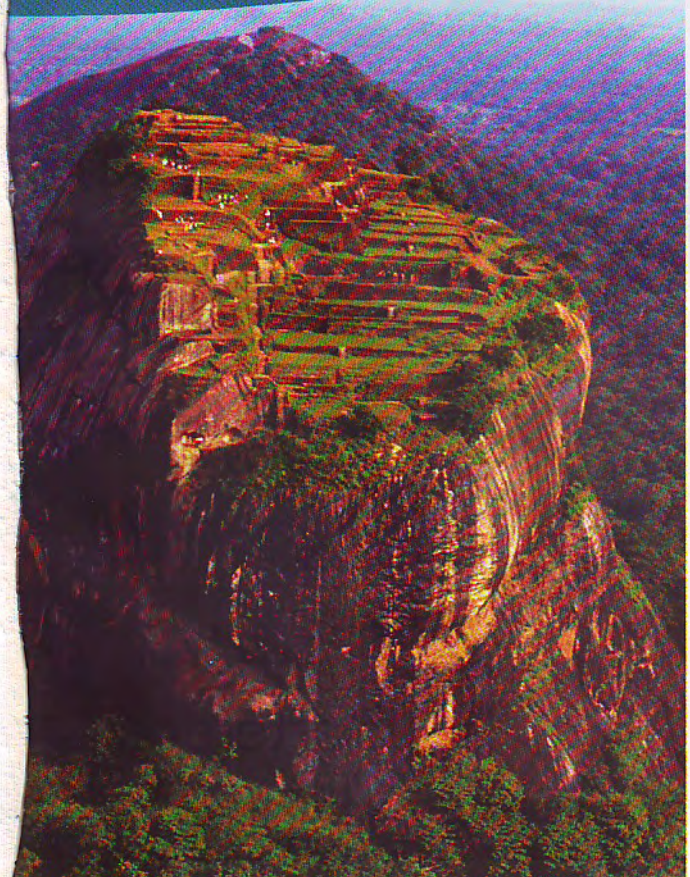
During a trek in the Langtang region north of Kathmandu in early June, I tried to divert the mind's advanced creativity to decipher this phenomenon. Why do I tend to see Subcontinental shapes everywhere I turn, with the outline of the African continent coming a distant second? Of course, I stand to be directed by the reader on something that a few – at least one or two – might consider worthy of weighty consideration.

This seems to be a matter to be discussed between a geologist and a psychologist (and perhaps, in the case of this columnist, a psychiatrist). The geologist might suggest that the crystallochemical structure of certain rocks naturally promotes a chipping or breaking at the distinctive 60-degree angle that defines peninsular India, between the Coromandel Coast and the Bay of Bengal shoreline. Or s/he might point outs that rocks break all the time in all different directions – not limited, of course, to the two dimensions that give us a Southasian shape. This is where the psychologist butts in, to say that, among the plethora of forms of broken rocks to be found in nature and along walking trails, the mind's eye will search out the shape(s) that come(s) closest to what one is familiar with. Essentially, you see what you want to see, and not what you don't.

And so, when the mind is excessively creative during a trek, what else would the Southasian editor notice while heaving his backpack up the Langtang Valley, but Subcontinental forms everywhere? Someone else may see that of Mahatma Gandhi, or, more likely, that of Aishwarya Rai.

Moral of the story: If you want to commune with your ancestors, go on a trek. Do the same if you want to see things that are not there, or shapes that come jumping at you with a certitude that defies geology. Alternatively, too, if you want to start a magazine, do a trek.

Sun, 600 million years old.
Sea, 6 million years old.
Culture, 3000 years old.
All in Sri Lanka.



There is year long beachcombing climate in Sri Lanka.
If you're not content just lounging in a deck chair,
there's water sports, deep sea diving and surfing.
However, you wouldn't be prepared for the
awe-inspiring spectacle of ancient Sri Lanka
and all its well-preserved remnants.

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