

# THE CARAVAN



*A journal of politics & culture*

July 1-15, 2009 • Rs 35

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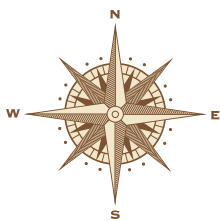
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# Neda's Legacy

How does one begin to write about the horrors that were enacted on the streets of Tehran? How about the mother at the Behesht Zahra cemetery mourning her child killed in a protest rally? Or the young student bludgeoned to death by riot police in the courtyard of a private residence? Or the anguish of the family of a 19-year-old soon-to-be groom, who was shot in the head while returning from acting class?

Or – and this is among the ghastliest of all – the young woman in designer jeans and the mandatory *hijab* standing on a quiet street with her singing instructor watching the anti-government protests from a distance, and shot through the heart by a *Basiji* sniper, a government vigilante perched on a nearby rooftop. Neda Agha-Soltan, 26-years-old, collapsed and died within two minutes of being shot, but she became both mascot and rallying cry of the latest revolution in Iran.

A macabre cellphone video of her death, a helpless but essential witness, became the operative symbol of post-election rebellion in Iran and of the gruesomeness of the Ahmadinejad regime. Many such stories emerged every day. Tehran haemorrhaged at the hands of its own government.

In the days that followed the bland announcement of election results on June 13, Iran witnessed more political upheaval than in the past 30 years of the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a denier of the Holocaust who has made no secret of his dislike of the West, had become an extremely divisive figure both within and outside Iran. After four years of his radical nationalist rule – which had the support of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the all-powerful clerics – it was expected that he would fall to the reformist Mir Hossein Mousavi in a tide of popular disenchantment. Mousavi, who represents the face of a more secular Iran, had promised to reverse many of Ahmadinejad's extremist policies.

In the days leading to the elections, the world watched with tense excitement. After all, even though the Supreme Leader and the clerical councils control almost every aspect of political and civil life, Iran offers the best hope for the success of democracy in the Middle East. The country has had regular elections; it elected a reform-minded president in the person of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and again in 2001 (although he had limited success in implementing his reforms because of the control hardline clerics exercised over the country's powerful Guardian Council); and, most importantly, Iran has, over

the years, developed an extremely vibrant civil society and an aware youth demanding more socio-political openness and relaxation of the strict codes of conduct.

Poll after poll indicated a victory for Mousavi. But on June 13, the Interior Ministry made the shocking announcement that Ahmadinejad had won 62.6 percent of the vote and Mousavi only 34 percent.

In the days that followed, all of Tehran erupted in controlled anger. Millions of protesters, ranging from adolescents to grandmothers, students to professionals, street-cleaners to academics, were led by a greying and professorial Mousavi, who alleged widespread irregularities in vote-counting and a near-total rigging of the electoral process.

The protests raged day after day, and so did the brutality of the regime. Notwithstanding the brutal *Basiji*, the Revolutionary Guards and the (often sympathetic) anti-riot police, hundreds of thousands of Iranians organised themselves in largely ordered protests, defying the authorities – and sometimes dying for their defiance. In the absence of access to the international press, the world was brought almost minute-by-minute updates by citizen journalists who uploaded mobile phone videos on Internet sites such as YouTube.

For a moment, a glimmer of hope appeared when Ayatollah Khamenei ordered an inquiry by the Guardian Council into voting irregularities. The Council, on its part, announced that while there were indeed some voting errors, nothing could be done about them. It declined to nullify the election results and endorsed Ahmadinejad's electoral supremacy.

One can only imagine the despair of those millions of protesters – an inch away from regime change, but yet so far. After three decades of living under the chokehold dispensation of hard-line clerics, and four years under a president with a radical and often absurdly counterintuitive agenda, a vast majority of Iranians were looking for a change. What the regime's reaction made them realise was that the price they would have to pay for this change would be extraordinarily high.

To empathise with the anguish of Iran's millions who hit the streets morning to night without let or doubt and to even remotely comprehend their torment, one had only to watch the 46-second video of Neda's appalling death. In her fading eyes, one saw the cost that freedom would extract. But if there is one thing we can be sure of, it is that Iran will never be the same again.

Anant Nath,  
Managing Editor

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## Ruminations

### Lalgarh Sees Red

*The security sweep against the Maoists is the beginning of a long season of discontent*

First, the inventory of weapons on either side: The security forces – the Central Reserve Police Force, the State Armed Police, the Border Security Force and run-of-the-mill beat cops – have light mortars, machineguns, Carl Gustav 84 mm recoilless rifles, INSAS rifles, Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine guns, FN35 and Glock pistols, Dragunov, Mauser SP66 and Heckler and Koch MSG-90 sniper rifles, electronic surveillance equipment, night vision devices, light mortars, a few landmine-protected personnel carriers that the Ordnance Factory Board of India cloned (rather badly) from the South African Casspir, and one reconnaissance helicopter. On the other side, the armed but bedraggled vanguard of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) has single-shot country-made rifles, World War II vintage Lee Enfield .303 blunderbusses, outdated Sten guns, a smattering of China-made AK-47s and AK-56s, and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) of questionable stability; the Maoist-backed Police Santrosh Birodhi Janashadharaner Committee (PSBJC), or People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA), and the ragtag *adivasi-mulvasi* (tribal-non-tribal) combine have, for the most part, flimsy bows (not, even, medieval arbalests), swords, knives, staves and digging instruments – in short, anything that can be used to stab, bludgeon or just hurl.

On the face of it, the ongoing

engagement between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (Maoist) – CPI (M) vs CPI (M) – for the heart, head and land of West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district is seriously lopsided. On the ground, however, there is a surprising (non)democratic levelling of what has been, for the past eight months, a very rough playing field.

Lalgarh (literally, Red House), where much of the current action is taking place, is aptly named – or was, until a landmine exploded at Salboni, 50 km away, on November 2, 2008, marking the end of the casualness of the CPI (M)'s longstanding domination of the area. The explosion interrupted the dusty progress of a convoy carrying the Union minister for steel and mines, Ram Vilas Paswan, and West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and stoked the state police into massive overreaction. Eight months after the police erupted with its customary attrition, scouring villages, assaulting *santhal* tribals and incarcerating harmless adolescents in their search for the bombers, the conflict is expanding into 250-odd villages, spread over almost 10,000 sq km of extremely rugged topography, and 18 police stations in the three Maoism-affected districts of Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia.

Like for three decades running, Lalgarh returned the CPI (M) in the recent general election, too, but only because of the strategic inexperience

of PCAPA leader Chhatradhar Mahato, a half-crafty, half-naïve quixotic figure who is currently being made to jump through a hoop by both the armed Maoists he has aligned with and some otiose upper class intellectuals from Kolkata who are determined to mediate peace in an area of suddenly unbolted impoverishment. Mahato had prevented polling booths from being set up in the Lalgarh region; villagers receded from the very thought of steaming through the heat to polling booths at the outskirts and half the booths ended up with voting of between 0 and 13 percent. The CPI (M) would have lost the Lalgarh seat had voting been business as usual, but the PCAPA-mandated low turnout worked in its favour.

It was a red fortress gained by a minority of votes, and has been lost to the majority. As the anti-Maoist security sweep unspools, the locals – a loose banding of *santhals* and *mulvasis* – are likely to gather more nerve and staying power (it's their familiar land, after all, and their all-too-familiar deprivation) and are increasingly unlikely to give either the Maoists or the establishment substantive opportunities to co-opt them into a regime of renewed servitude.

The state establishment, including the security forces, has, in the eyes of the locals, pretty much irredeemably demonised itself. The Maoists, working out an almost ancient pattern of doctrinaire behaviour, have begun alienating themselves from the local population by asking for "taxes" from a people who barely eke out a meal a day in the good summer months when they can harvest *sal* and *kendu* leaves



and other raw materials to make ropes to sell for a meagre Rs 20-25 a day.

A West Bengal state minister recently said that all that is necessary to render the Maoists unnecessary is good governance. There are two problems with this prescription: first, in a state that the Marxists have (mis)governed for three unruly decades, it is a very tall order; second, it sees the Maoists as either an ideological problem or a law-and-order problem – in short, a problem. It doesn't take into account the origin of Maoism in the state – indeed, the country – as a reactive impulse towards existential equitability, a counterpoise to existing problems. Rationality ceases when the answer to a great problem is viewed as a greater problem.

West Medinipur is fertile ground for Maoist ferment because it is one of the most densely populated and underdeveloped areas in the country. But the Maoism here is neologistic, specific to context and only loosely loyal to the canon established by Naxalism. The area has been absent roads, electricity and an adequate market infrastructure for so long that parts of it have slipped back into a pre-feudal exchange economy, a sort of ahistorical egalitarianism that has nothing to do with prototypal equality and opportunity and everything to do with developmental retardation.

Once the heat dies down and ideological consolidation is attempted beyond the ready cadre of unemployed and otherwise disenchanted youth, the Maoists in Paschim Medinipur will have to deal with dismissal from elders such as Kanu Sanyal, Purnendu Basu and Azizul Haq. “[T]he Maoists are egging on the tribals of Lalgarh from the rear,” Sanyal said. “When the state machinery strikes, they have their retreat route ready...they have always played on the emotions of the tribals by calling them a class. During the Naxalite movement we just had two classes: the rich and the poor. We didn't create such caste divides.”

“They are using helpless tribals as bait to increase their influence,” said Basu. “Several Naxalite leaders like Santosh Rana, Pradip Banerjee and Aditya Kisku have been trying for the past year to visit them and start a dialogue.” Haq views with some dubiety the bonhomie between the Maoists and the Trinamool Congress. “How can a movement like this find a friend in Trinamool that represents the remnants of feudalism?”

Despite the fact that the reason for their existence will not fade anytime soon, the Maoists could find themselves out on a limb, deserted by allies suddenly more in tune with the mainstream. Mamata Banerjee, chief of the

Trinamool Congress and Union minister for railways, whom many consider responsible for having heated West Bengal's Maoists out of a decadal ice age during the Nandigram agitation, realised that her Union Cabinet position called for caution more than valour and repudiated their legitimacy in Paschim Medinipur a few days into the security sweep. But a symbiosis such as this, however opportunistic, isn't easy to conceal. On June 17, for instance, when Chhatradhar Mahato and the Maoists put up a massive show of strength in Lalgarh, the four-hour-long proceedings were attended by the Trinamool Congress block president, Banobihari Roy. The meeting ended with the torching of the Lalgarh CPI (M) party office.

To the Central and state governments, the genealogy of Lalgarh's Maoists is of no import. The Centre instituted a national ban on Maoist organisations for the most antsy of reasons – the increasing fluidity of Maoist cadres across state borders. Bhattacharjee might have been cautioned against a state ban on Maoist organisations by the residual ideological loyalty of his own party members but he is all too aware of the pan-Indian ambitions of the extreme Left and sees no dichotomy in exercising the Central ban to his advantage. In the state assembly in December 2008, he had accused the then Jharkhand chief minister, Shibu Soren, of kindling trouble in Purulia, Bankura and West Medinipur in a plan to merge these three districts with Jharkhand. Bhattacharjee said that Chunibala Hansda of West Bengal's Jharkhand Party (Naren) was directly involved with Maoists.

The largest of the Jharkhandi groups in West Bengal had called for a mass meeting in Jhargram in Paschim Medinipur on November 14, 2008. The posters the group put up listed three demands: the withdrawal of Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia from West Bengal and joining with Jharkhand; the immediate construction of an intermediate development council comprising these three



Furniture and official papers of the CPI (M) office go up in flames after an arson attack by PCPA activists

districts; and the stoppage of police atrocities against the *santhals*. It's another matter that the mass meeting "couldn't be held" because "supporters couldn't come due to barricades". In the area, however, this intention remains common to both the Jharkhandi parties and the Maoists, who see a possible redrawing of state boundaries as a consolidation of areas of influence.

Meanwhile, the standoff in Lalgarh will probably be serially extended. The Maoists are hoping that it will – more Central forces stationed semi-permanently in West Bengal would mean a bleeding of the state coffers, less money for development and increasing rural hostility towards the CPI (M). The firefights that started in June in the Lalgarh-Jangalmahal area between the security forces and the Maoists, with the tribals – who have spent three decades enduring on little more than rumours of development – fretting in the pincer (but clearly on the side of the Maoists) are hardly the stuff of face-offs between Rambo artillery and shadowy guerrillas. The police contingents have weapons but not binoculars, which are essential for spotting

armed Maoist activists hidden in copses or on rooftops; the tribal and Maoists use their knowledge of the terrain to walk a few paces into the foliage and, seemingly, vaporise. There is one bomb-disposal squad at the frontlines, one cooped up in Lalgarh police station and one leashed, for no good reason, in Kolkata; so, the police, scared witless of booby-trapped IEDs they can't recognise, use local boys they arm with rods shaped like shepherd's crooks to prod tree roots and under culverts. The security forces use wireless communication, which the dense foliage and uneven landscape happily muffle; the tribals, and the Maoists embedded with them, ululate indecipherable messages to each other. The security forces inch over the terrain that the locals dip and dodge through, leaving the rearguard open to 're-liberation' by circling Maoists. The CRPF and SAP are trained to blow away hostiles, if only they could spot them; the tribals have bows and arrows with a range of up to 50 feet, depending on wind-speed, direction and luck. It's a very uneven conflict, all right.

-Kajal Basu

## There's Time for Everything

*Why the Left has put off making hard decisions*

Change or no change? The more things change for the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the more status quoist they seem to become. In the aftermath of its bad electoral drubbing in the recently concluded Lok Sabha election and then a mass insurrection in Lalgarh in West Bengal close on its heels, the party is chastened enough to propose a 'political' approach to the Maoist question. But CPI (M) General Secretary Prakash Karat, the one who had occasion to enunciate this line, has instead managed to wring out an opportunity from the crisis. He has used the sense of things falling apart to ensure that the centre holds –

around himself. Asked at the media briefing following his party's three-day politburo and central committee (CC) meeting (June 19-21) whether he was willing to take responsibility for the CPI (M)'s poll debacle – in his capacity as the guiding force behind the central leadership which has collectively owned up its failure – his reply was pithy. "No."

He explained why. As general secretary, he had merely implemented the CC's decision. "So I take responsibility along with other members of the committee collectively, not as an individual." No one can fault his argument ideologically, after all it's very Marxist not to put

the individual before the collective.

Slowly at first, but decisively subsequently, Karat has managed to deflect criticism that was crystallising against him both within and outside the party. Like him, many important personages in the party are feeling politically embattled; so the time was expedient to send out the message that no personalised campaign – for or against – would be encouraged. In other words, the status quo would prevail: Karat will continue to be the general secretary, there will not be any political *sanyas* or fresh thinking, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee will continue to be the chief minister of West Bengal and the party's face in the state, Kerala Chief Minister VS Achuthanandan and party leader Pinarayi Vijayan, too, will continue until the next special politburo meeting.

In effect, then, the much-anticipated CC meeting turned out to be a damp squib. Even if there were fire-works inside, no one really got burnt or even marginally scalded. The circumstances seem to have helped Karat outsmart his critics. Devastated by Cyclone Aila in 24-Parganas district and the rebellion in Lalgarh, West Midnapore district, West Bengal was in no position to lead an attack. As it turned out, both Karat and Bhattacharjee weathered the storm quite well. The enervating crises in traditional bastions of Kerala and West Bengal meant the usually combative CC members could do little to dissect the flaws in the leadership or push the party to refashion its politics and go for an ideological overhaul. They were all exhausted from the fire fighting in West Bengal and the constant blood-letting in Kerala. Mentally, no one had the time or energy to seek a larger, longer-term perspective or to imagine afresh the party's existential issues.

Only minor tactical battles were waged and won. Sensing that his critics were on the backfoot, Karat adopted an even more ideologically hard line, which was difficult for the ideologues in the CC to refute or disagree





*CPI (M) Polit Bureau members at a meeting in Delhi on February 14, 2009*

with. Instead of honestly analysing the electoral impact of the Left's withdrawal from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in July 2008 over the India-US nuke deal – a move that helped Mamata Banerjee consolidate her position in West Bengal with a quick alliance with the Congress – he manoeuvred himself deeper into the trench. He maintained that party's support should have been withdrawn much earlier, a year before, when the negotiations over the deal began. The CC had suggested that, but the central leadership dithered. With this one deft move, the central committee's collective wisdom was acknowledged – or blame was transferred at large, if you will – and criticism stemming from real political concerns was kept at bay.

Meeting in the backdrop of a paradigm-changing situation in Lalgurh – where central paramilitary forces were tackling a tricky uprising, with no clear distinction between people's action and Maoist rebellion, a politically overground 'Naxalite' insurgency, so to speak – the CPI (M) could hardly afford to go ballistic at itself. Everything was, understandably, subdued. The need of the hour was to show solidarity. Thus, both the state and central leadership were duly blamed for the poll debacle, the original reason for which the central committee was meeting. The central leadership owned up to the erroneous

line taken before elections; the state leadership, especially in West Bengal, was blamed for the party's disconnect with the people.

This air of tokenism helped Karat, who is naturally of the opinion that in the current milieu there is no point harping on the 'stale' issue of withdrawal of support. The party would do better by focusing on its present politics – on how to build an opinion against neo-liberal legislations being planned by the Manmohan Singh government, the political unrest in West Bengal and the infighting in Kerala.

It was decided that the central leadership would delineate a position on future relations with the Congress – whether it would ever align with, or support, a centrist party again – at the next party congress. On the Left's alliance making, too, the Karat line seems to have won the debate. The CC endorsed the view that the idea of an alliance of Left-minded secular parties was neither wrong nor inappropriate. It was just put together in too much of a hurry before the Third Front experiment could accumulate popular support. That fitted in nicely with the logic that support to the UPA should have been withdrawn earlier.

On West Bengal, the CC came down heavily on the state leadership, blaming everyone from top to bottom for moving away from the party's traditional ideological

moorings to such an extent that they appeared anti-people. In fact, for the first time state leaders came under fire for their "lifestyle" (euphemism for corruption). The CPI (M) leadership admitted that thanks to certain "administrative issues" and the lifestyle of its leaders, the rural and urban poor, the middleclass, and, to some extent, the minorities and the landless peasantry had moved away from the party. The West Bengal government may very soon bring in legislation to extend educational and job reservations to the Muslim minority in order to woo them back. This, it seems, will be done by including Muslims within the 27 percent Other Backward Classes or OBC list.

The infighting in Kerala was also condemned in the meeting. The central leadership's support to Pinarayi Vijayan notwithstanding, the fact that a Marxist leader has been found embroiled in a corruption case being probed by the Central Bureau of Investigation has shaken the CPI (M)'s rank and file. As of now, they're calling it a "political witch-hunt" launched by the Congress, but the politburo will have a special meeting in early July to specifically discuss the issue.

In other words, all messy decision-making has been postponed.

*-Santwana Bhattacharya*

## Defeated by Defeat

*Only a change of guard can help the BJP halt the crisis*

The convulsions racking the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) today are unprecedented not only because its senior leaders are taking pot-shots at each other, which often happens after defeat following the sudden exposure of all the fault-lines. Jaswant Singh, Yashwant Sinha and Arun Shourie have initiated a letter blitz against Arun Jaitley, objecting to the party's master strategist being elevated to the post of leader of the opposition in the Rajya Sabha, which they say amounts to putting "a premium on defeat".

The BJP's two Muslim leaders, Shahnawaz Hussain and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, have attacked Varun Gandhi for handing victory on a platter to the Congress in Uttar Pradesh. His anti-Muslim hate speeches pushed the community into the Congress's open arms, enabling it to notch up an impressive 21 seats in the state. These leaders are of the view that Varun Gandhi had done as much to help the Congress as had Rahul Gandhi.

The BJP, which had been all set to emerge as the alternative to the Congress, is today a party at war with itself. And this at a time when it should have been closing ranks to prepare for

the important electoral battles that lie ahead in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana in October this year. The BJP's stakes are high in all the three states, where a good showing will put it back on the path to a revival.

Its major handicap was that it did not have a presence in about 150 seats in the south and the east of the country. The party lost steam in the middle of its election campaign, rattled by Varun Gandhi's self-injurious diatribe and affected in all sorts of ways by the projection of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as the party's future prime ministerial candidate, which undercut LK Advani's position. As a result, it failed to come across as a party that could provide political stability, something the Indian middleclass has always coveted.

It is understandable for any political party that has been vanquished at the hustings to take stock of itself, examine what went wrong with its strategy and tactics and fix responsibility. But what BJP leaders are doing is suddenly questioning the very basics of the party's ideology and relevance. This is the first aspect of the crisis in the party that has been mani-

festated on two levels. It is those close to Advani, such as Sudheendra Kulkarni, who have publicly called for a need to venture beyond Hindutva and redefine the BJP-Sangh Parivar relations, which is just another way of saying that the party should become autonomous of the Parivar. Arun Jaitley, an Advani acolyte, felt that the BJP paid the price for running a "shrill" campaign when the mood in the country was against anything that verged on the extreme.

But Advani, who is believed to have expressed in private views similar to those of Kulkarni, distanced himself from Kulkarni. He said that he disagreed with Kulkarni's observation that the RSS had been responsible for the BJP's rout.

This is not the first time that BJP leaders have felt the need to broaden the party. Ironically, it was this and the need to acquire a moderate image that led Advani on the adventure to Pakistan which resulted in the Jinnah fiasco. His statement praising Jinnah was the wrong one at the wrong place, even though his objective might have been to acquire a liberal support base for the party.

Although he has agreed to continue as leader of the opposition in order to facilitate a smooth transition in the party, the once-bitten-twice-shy Advani is not yet ready to lead the party from the front in order to help refashion it into a forward-looking, right-of-centre mainline alternative to the Congress with its focus square on development.

Like Rajnath Singh, who made it clear that a stem could not survive without its roots, even while admitting that the BJP had failed to articulate its ideology in a contemporary idiom, Advani, too, is trying to do a balancing act – making Hindutva inclusive and acceptable to the minorities without antagonising the RSS.

For all the grandstanding that took place at the party's national executive meet on June 20 and 21 in Delhi about Hindutva being "eternal" and "liberal" and akin to



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“Bharatiya”, neither Advani nor Rajnath Singh nor anyone else addressed the question of how to allay the minorities’ distrust of Hindutva, which has been used by its protagonists to create a communal divide.

If a consensus did emerge at the meet, it was to go in for a more liberal version of “Hindutva”, or to “tweak” Hindutva, as one newspaper headline put it. The BJP has understood that the current mood in the country, particularly in middleclass urban India, which affected the electoral outcome in 30-odd seats, is against anything extreme, and that 26/11 marked this turning point towards gravitas. That is why Narendra Modi, despite being projected as the 2014 prime minister bang in the middle of the election campaign, did not cut much ice at all the meetings he addressed. The poll outcome is also a setback for Modi, who was among those who persuaded Advani not to press ahead with his resignation as leader of the opposition.

Whatever the pressures and pulls, the BJP, as it is structured today, is hardly likely to cut its umbilical chord with the Sangh Parivar, a fact that again became evident at the national executive. As for the refashioning of the BJP-Sangh Parivar ties, which Sudheendra Kulkarni had called for: this relationship has depended, over the years, on the stature of BJP leaders in the saddle and the authority they have wielded. There was a time – when Balasaheb Deoras was RSS chief and his brother, Bhaurao Deoras, acted as a bridge with the BJP – when Advani influenced the Sangh’s political line rather more than the Sangh directed the BJP’s stand. Advani no longer enjoys that authority in the party. Nor is there any other leader of his stature. This makes it more difficult for the party to function autonomously of the Sangh Parivar.

The second aspect of the crisis

within the BJP is the difficulty it is facing in effecting a generational change, which is critical to its rejuvenation. The party needs a new leader of the opposition and a new president. Advani is believed to have conveyed to the Sangh Parivar that he will continue as leader of the opposition only until the dust settles. His hand might have been strengthened and his voice carried more steel had he not retracted his resignation under pressure from party colleagues. He would then have also been better placed to mediate between warring colleagues.

Instead, as leader of the opposition, having appointed Arun Jaitley as the BJP’s leader in the Rajya Sabha and Sushma Swaraj as deputy leader in the Lok Sabha, Advani is being viewed by those gunning for the Jaitley-Swaraj duo as a faction leader.

These two appointments unleashed sharp reactions from within the party. Swaraj was deputy leader under Jaswant Singh in the Rajya Sabha; he will now have to work under her in the Lok Sabha. Jaswant Singh, Arun Shourie and Yashwant Sinha are also targeting Arun Jaitley.

While Swaraj is seen to be waiting

in the wings to take over as leader of the opposition from Advani when he eventually exits, Jaitley’s contemporaries and opponents apprehend that he could emerge as a frontrunner for party presidentship when Rajnath Singh’s second term comes to a close in January 2010.

Despite all the criticism of Jaitley, Advani came to his defence at the national executive by making it a point to congratulate him. It is inconceivable that Advani would have made the parliamentary appointments of Jaitley and Swaraj without taking into confidence the leadership of the Sangh. Unlike in the past, when Swaraj and Jaitley worked at cross purposes, the two can now be expected to move in step, forging a new axis in the party in the weeks to come.

The crisis in the BJP today stems from its lack of clarity on what it should stand for as a political organisation in a rapidly changing India caught in the throes of an aspirational revolution. But the crisis is also about the ‘who’, the ‘how’ and the ‘when’ of effecting a change of guard in the party, which is imperative but which is proving to be more contentious than many in the BJP had imagined it would.

–Neeraja Chowdhury

## Never Too Late

### *Lessons Mayawati has learnt after poll debacle*

**T**he outcome of the Lok Sabha poll delivered a shock reality check to the overweening political ambitions of Mayawati. She now has to live up to her past record of emerging stronger after being pushed to a corner. This is not the first time that the Dalit firebrand has fallen to ground. Nor is her current predicament the worst she and her party have faced in their amazing political saga over the past two and a half decades.

Indeed, Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) managed to recover from far graver

crises in 1997 and 2003 that endangered their very survival. In 1997, a substantial chunk of her legislators were lured away by bitter political rivals Kalyan Singh and Mulayam Singh Yadav after a move to force mid-term elections in Uttar Pradesh backfired. The crisis over the Taj Corridor controversy in 2003 not only cost her the chief minister’s job but also threatened to put her behind bars.

Yet not only did Mayawati manage to survive the overwhelming challenges but actually enhance her political career and the



prospects of the BSP. The Uttar Pradesh chief minister is aware that, unlike in 1997 and 2003, she continues to be in saddle and no legislator or member of parliament has yet abandoned her party. She can also draw heart from the fact that despite the disappointment of slumping from the expected 40 plus seats in the Lok Sabha polls to barely 20, in terms of vote percentage, her party continues its upwards trajectory both in Uttar Pradesh and in the rest of the country.

It is true that the Dalit leader did show signs of initial panic and hysteria immediately after the results came out – transferring officials and blaming communities. But there are indications that her innate pragmatism and survival instincts are likely to triumph over her other less salutary attributes of paranoia and megalomania. As a matter of fact, there are reasons to believe that Mayawati is already engaged in correcting at least two of her fundamental mistakes in the run-up to the general election.

Mayawati's first major policy initiative in the aftermath of poll debacle is the new administrative emphasis on providing security and economic sops to her core constituency Dalits who had virtually been forgotten after she swept to power in the 2007 Uttar Pradesh assembly polls. This neglect of her main support base had undoubtedly led to a certain cynicism if not disenchantment among the faithful. Although a majority of Dalits ended up voting for the BSP, the failure of the party to address their problems did result in a less enthusiastic turnout by the community which may have made a vital difference in more than a dozen parliamentary constituencies across Uttar Pradesh.

Aware that Rahul Gandhi and the Congress are making strenuous attempts to snatch away her Dalit base, Mayawati has cracked the

whip on the mandarins who run the government from Lucknow to give top priority to grassroots issues concerning Dalits. All of a sudden senior police officials are seen rushing the spot as soon as an atrocity against the long oppressed community is reported and there is fresh urgency in implementing economic welfare measures for them. Significantly, there is also a concerted move by her government to woo the poorer backward castes by giving them similar benefits as the Dalits in an attempt to

ue with its Sarvajan Samaj message wooing the upper castes but without diluting the BSP's commitment to the Dalits and poorer backward castes.

The other big shift made by Mayawati appears to be a climb-down from her earlier stubborn insistence of the BSP not having alliances with regional parties in states where such arrangements could be mutually beneficial in elections. This was underlined by her recent announcement of a pre-poll alliance with former Congress leader



create a wider constituency for the BSP among the poor and marginalised sections of the population.

However, the renewed drive by Mayawati to connect with the lower castes need not mean that she has entirely abandoned her collaboration with some upper castes, particularly Brahmins, as sections of the media have reported. Although stung by the desertion of Brahmins in the Lok Sabha polls in favour of the Congress, the BSP supremo is aware that they could return to her in large numbers when state assembly polls are held with prospect of Mulayam Singh Yadav coming back to power. It is therefore more than likely that the party would contin-

Bhajan Lal's Haryana Janahit Congress for the Haryana state assembly polls scheduled for early next year. Significantly, Mayawati has displayed uncharacteristic humility in the alliance by agreeing to support a chief ministerial candidate from the Haryana Janahit Congress and also giving the party a larger percentage of seats although in the parliamentary polls it is the BSP that had got a larger vote share.

Clearly, the abrupt collapse of her dreams of becoming prime minister in the recent Lok Sabha polls has forced Mayawati to withdraw her head from the clouds and come to terms with the fact that despite the BSP's incremental accretion of

vote share across the country over the past two decades, the party can afford to go it alone only in Uttar Pradesh. BSP insiders feel that it is more than likely that the BSP will also enter into regional alliances in Maharashtra where elections are due later this year. With Mayawati and the BSP still extremely relevant among Dalits across the country, this new flexible approach to regional parties could have serious impact in assembly polls over the next few years.

While in Uttar Pradesh, assembly

elections are not due for three long years, the first test for Mayawati may come in the next round of by-elections in 11 assembly constituencies and one parliamentary seat. Since the BSP does not hold a single one of the constituencies up for by-elections, the Uttar Pradesh chief minister and her aides are hoping that even if the party wins a few of them it could restart the Mayawati juggernaut whose momentum had been so badly disrupted by the Lok Sabha poll outcome.

-Ajoy Bose

## Just Talking...

### *The three-day ILO Global Jobs Summit held in Geneva in June was a gabfest*

Imagine seeing India's national bird in a park that overlooks Lake Geneva. That was one of the surprises for me, a first-time visitor to the capital of Switzerland. The next surprise was the realisation that some people, from different parts of the world, look (and behave) just like your neighbour/s. There was more in store: the tussle between conflicting ideological worldviews, between capitalism and socialism, has divided the planet and arguably become more intense over the span of a generation.

The United Nations' second largest office is situated in the Palais des Nations building in the 45-acre Ariana Park. On a clear day, one can see Mont Blanc towering over the Alps. The park, which boasts many trees over a century old, was originally owned by the family of Gustav Revillod de la Rive whose last descendant bequeathed it under one important condition: the peacocks would always be allowed to roam free – and they do, more than seven decades after the grand Palais des Nations came up to house the erstwhile League of Nations.

This awesome building underwent a major expansion well after the League of Nations was transformed

into the United Nations after World War II. The main conference hall can seat some 2,500 delegates, while more than 1,600 UN staffers work in the maze of surrounding buildings. The thought that I would be moderating two panel discussions in this venue before an audience comprising representatives of more than 180 countries was, to say the least, daunting. I fiddled around with the knobs on my headset that neatly fitted inside one of my ears – the proceedings were being simultaneously translated into the six official languages used by the UN: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

The three-day International Labour Conference's ILO Global Jobs Summit took place in the Palais des Nations in the middle of June. The conference is part of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) annual big bash and seeks to address issues relating to the ongoing global jobs crisis. The ILO is unique among dozens of UN organisations in that it is the "world's only tripartite multilateral agency (it engages representatives of workers, employers and governments in discussion and dialogue) ... dedicated to bringing decent work and liveli-

hoods, job-related security and better living standards to the people of both poor and rich countries". It says it helps to attain these goals "by promoting rights at work, encouraging opportunities for decent employment, enhancing social protection and strengthening dialogue on work-related issues".

The mandate of the ILO (which completes nine decades this year) is grander than the Palais; some would even call it grandiose. It believes that it helps countries "build the institutions that are the bulwarks of democracy and to help them become accountable to the people" by, among other things, "setting minimum standards of basic labour rights: freedom of association, the right to organize, collective bargaining, abolition of forced labour, equality of opportunity and treatment and other standards addressing conditions across the entire spectrum of work-related issues".

This year's conference had a lot of star value because of the presence of nine heads of state, including the stunningly-beautiful Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President of Argentina, Brazil's shoeshine-boy-turned-president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the diminutive Nicolas Sarkozy, president of France – who spoke like a socialist although he heads a Rightwing government – and the presidents of Finland, Poland, Togo, Burkina Faso, Mozambique and the prime minister of Jamaica. Like Sarkozy, however, many leaders spoke more to their constituents than to the international gathering. Kirchner outlined how her country's economy had done remarkably well and created new jobs at a time when the economies of almost all other countries were shrinking.

There was remarkable unanimity and consensus that even if the current financial and economic crisis played itself out over the next year or two, it would take much longer – six to eight years – before new employment opportunities were created. As Juan Somavia, director-

general of the ILO, pointed out, the “unprecedented increase in unemployment globally and a persistence of very high levels of poverty” meant that with 45 million young women and men entering the job market each year, “some 300 million new jobs (would have to be created) over the next five years just to go back to pre-crisis levels of unemployment”.

The thought is daunting. The so-called Global Jobs Pact adopted by the conference may remain just a piece of paper. The pact urges measures to retain persons in employment, to sustain enterprises and to accelerate job creation combined with social protection systems, in particular for the most vulnerable and integrating gender concerns. It calls for a “stronger, more globally consistent supervisory and regulatory framework for the financial sector, so that it serves the real economy, promotes sustainable enterprises and decent work and better protects the savings and pensions of people”, and urges countries to avoid protectionism and shift to low-carbon, environmentally-friendly economic strategies that would accelerate a jobs recovery.

The arguments were passionate but along predictable lines. One set of speakers felt that the crisis was “in” the system while others contended that the crisis was one that was “of” the system itself. At times, there seemed to be a meeting ground. On other occasions, one got a feeling that there was more bluster and fewer statements of true intent. I quoted Shakespeare, Gandhi, Nehru and Dylan in search of profundity and popularity. I was given a poem by Irish Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney that began: “Human beings suffer. They torture one another. They get hurt and get hard. No poem or play or song/Can fully right a wrong/Inflicted and endured...”

Around me were familiar faces. They could have been spitting images of my cousins, aunts and uncles – but no, they didn’t speak my language. It was a Tower of Babel. I searched for

their identities on their badges. They were different and, yet, the same. On the long flight back home, I watched *Slumdog Millionaire* and read the *Newsweek* cover story by Fareed Zakaria ironically titled ‘The Capitalist Manifesto’. In hot and dusty Delhi, I checked my email and read an article by another Nobel laureate, Joseph

Stiglitz, in *Vanity Fair*: “...no crisis, especially one of this severity, recedes without leaving a legacy. And among this one’s legacies will be a worldwide battle over ideas – over what kind of economic system is likely to deliver the greatest benefit to the most people...”

My brain almost imploded.

- Paranjoy Guha Thakurta

## To the Best Mother

### *Memoirs of a son*

People have several strands to their lives: as a child, as an adult, as a parent, as a homemaker. Weaving these bits together into a composite may sometimes be difficult, the more so for a creative individual who shunned boundaries and conventions, sometimes at immense personal cost.

Human success is defined in terms of money and positions held. A ‘success’ is an individual who has won plenty of either or – as is usual – both. Kamala Das searched for neither. Wherever she lived, word very soon went around about how easy she was as a touch, and every day there would come individuals with hard-luck stories, some fake but many true. When she ran out of money, she would give away her ornaments, to the despair of my father, who, however, never complained. From the time she was a smiling teenager in pigtails, he had accepted her for all that she was, and nurtured and protected her from the time they got married in 1949, when she was barely 15.

Although both her brothers as well as her sister became doctors, marriage ended Amma’s stint with formal education. Not that she noticed. For her, books and learning were to be found in much more profusion in the world outside the classroom. From the start, she loved reading, loved thinking about ideas, exchanging them with those she knew. Books were a steady presence in her life as she followed her husband K Madhava Das to the various places where the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)

posted him. He himself was a scholar, helping to write the authoritative *History of the Cooperative Movement in India* together with Eleanor M Hough, a wonderful American who loved India, loved the people of this country and did so much for them. My father was himself a fighter, and in the 1970s, he fell foul of the higher echelons of the RBI for having opposed a plan to go in for large-scale mechanised farming in India. He argued that such a measure would create millions of unemployed farmers, and would, moreover, make little sense in a labour-abundant, capital-scarce country. Finally, the RBI top brass accepted his view, but not before a period of exile from his beloved cooperative credit department.

During this struggle, my mother would be by his side, soothing away the anxieties of an individual who was seeing his career at risk because of his adherence to a vision. Her stand helped him to persevere. The relationship between them was close and complex, but what was never in doubt to the children was the love they had for each other, emotions often expressed in little notes to each other, where they would write almost as two children to each other. Each time they were apart, it was an ordeal for both, although fortunately such occasions were not many.

From her day, usually late at night, when the rest of the family were asleep, Amma used to snatch away time to write poetry and prose, both in



Malayalam and English. She was happy in such moments, smiling to herself as an expression or a word formed in her mind. Initially, editors were cold to her submissions. Once she pasted the entire top of her writing table with rejection slips. But in the 1960s, she brought out *Summer in Calcutta*, a slim volume of poetry that made people notice her talent. Then onwards, her writings began to be accepted, most of them. Writing was a precious corner of her existence, and she would keep clippings carefully, adding to the collection almost every month.

It was during this time that *My Story* was written. People have asked how my father accepted a wife who wrote about extra-marital sex. He would always say that she was “as innocent as a child”, and that all that she wrote had to be fiction. He never lost his trust in her, and despite all the shocks created by her writing, the constant in their lives was their love for each other, a mutual understanding of the other that allowed their personalities to grow. My father provided a shield behind which my mother could launch a sexual revolution in what was – and is – in many respects a conserv-

ative country. After reading Kamala Das, women began to realise that their bodies were not the property of their husbands but of themselves, and that they had the right to give it away to another. Indian men have certainly become a little better in understanding and responding to their wives after *My Story*. A woman should never be taken for granted, even if she is a wife legally bound to her husband.

A country develops only if its women are strong. I believe that one of the subliminal reasons why the British race went far afield and conquered so much of the globe was because an Englishman could never take his wife for granted. The consequence was that he had to prove himself to retain her feelings; he had to keep growing as a personality to match her needs. Societies where women are treated as doormats seldom excel. If India is developing faster now, a lot of it should be attributed to the Indian woman, who is coming into her own and showing that she is – at the least – the equal of the male. Kamala Das was not a ‘feminist’ in the way the word is commonly understood, as a woman who set

herself apart from men and sought to confront them. Rather, she competed with them as an equal, and as an ally.

Apart from her writing, illness was a constant companion. She had lived with my father in a run-down, old house in Trivandrum when he passed away in 1992, and moved to Kochi, to a flat, to be closer to her youngest son Jaisurya, who kept watch to ensure that her health would not break down. Long ago, when he was just nine, my mother had had a cardiac incident in her village home in Kerala, and it was Jaisurya who called his uncle in Calicut to ensure that Amma was moved to a hospital to recover. That sense of duty has remained with Jai throughout. This was why, when her health began to fade, Amma relocated to Pune to once again be in a flat in the same building with him, his wife Devi and daughters Nayantara and Chandrima. My brother Chinnen, my wife Lakshmi and I would visit her at least once every six weeks. On March 31, her sons and their families all came to Pune for Amma’s 75th birthday. That was a happy day, and she smiled throughout the day. On April 18, she was taken to Jehangir Hospital as she had trouble breathing. After a couple of weeks in the intensive care unit, she was brought to a private room, where she passed away on May 31.

Lakshmi was nicknamed “night watchman” by Amma, because she who would spend long nights in the hospital, always available for Amma, Jai standing in whenever Lakshmi had to leave the city for a few days. During Amma’s stay in hospital, during the extra time we were given with her, I used to talk to her about old stories, such as the way she nursed me when I had fallen ill with pleurisy at the age of six, about the wonderful childhood holidays we had when she would work hard to make her children laugh and be happy. She was the best mother in the world, and I wanted her to know that.

-MD Nalapat



# Collateral Damage

*A first hand account of the largest internal migration in Pakistan's history*

WG Wheeler

**S**peeding away from Islamabad's grid-based refuge of central planning — and the well-guarded elites who live between its checkpoints — it is, at first, hard to shake off the illusion

that you are travelling through a stable, prosperous country. The smooth six-lane motorway passes vast green fields, where farmers' busy wheat-threshing churns a soft haze that glows in the afternoon

light, and dusky orange mountains stretch away into the distance out both windows. In a land of jarring roads, the smooth, luxurious highway reinforces a sense of the idyllic in this peaceful pastoral scene: every



*A Pakistani displaced man from Swat valley holds his grandson outside his tent at the Jalozaï camp near Peshawar*

25 km or so along its route, ‘mobile repair’ trucks wait to assist stranded motorists; it is patrolled by well-paid professionals said to be nearly incorruptible. Overhead, green road signs with white lettering remind you to buckle up, drive safely, and watch out for fog. One displays the moniker, “Pakistan National Highway: Making Things Possible.”

But this is a narrow corridor of order and accountability in an increasingly volatile land. Pakistan is currently grappling with its largest internal migration since Partition— a refugee crisis the UN says may be the world’s worst since Rwanda. Nearly two million people

have been displaced by the military’s ongoing campaign against Taliban militants in its rugged northwestern mountains. The campaign was justified as an attempt to extend the state’s control over its territory. In May, however, when I visit Mardan, a main town south of the fighting, where an influx of refugees has doubled the population of one million, I got the sense that “the state” has not yet arrived.

Turning off the highway, we pass a roundabout where dozens of men wearing *shalwar kameez* were gathered under a tent beside a growing mountain of crates—supplies donated by local residents to help the refugees. Avoiding the crowded official camps, where supplies are in short demand anyway, some 90 percent of those displaced are relying on friends and relatives. An array of secular and Islamic charities have stepped into the governmental void, including at least one with ties to the militant group allegedly involved in the November’s attacks in Mumbai.

We continue along a street choked with cars and bicycles, flatbed trucks loaded with passengers, multi-colored transports packed with empty strawberry crates, and an occasional donkey cart. After a few minutes we turn into the parking lot of a small hospital treating many of Swat’s wounded. Among the dozen or so patients in the men’s ward—a Spartan scene of metal cots and glum faces, where flies buzz in the stifling heat— are three newcomers: a Swat refugee whose hip was shattered in a mortar explosion that killed three of his children the day before; an unidentified man from Buner whose left side was riddled with shrapnel— his feet are bare and bloodied, and he is drifting in and out of consciousness on a gurney near the entrance; and Saddam Hussein, a 20-year-old labourer with a thin mustache, a tousled mop of brown hair, and a bandage on his right hand, which had been stripped of the flesh

between the thumb and forefinger by a stray bullet as he returned home to help his family evacuate.

Hussein had been working on a farm in the fields in Bujarat in late April, when the Pakistani army launched its offensive against the Taliban in Dir and Buner valleys. Like thousands of other Pakistani villagers, Hussein’s family was trapped in the fighting and a military curfew that blocked the main exit route. His parents told him to come home so they could escape together through the mountains. But soldiers wouldn’t allow his bus past a checkpoint some 60 km away from his village, so Hussein and a few others got out to walk. Still out of sight of the frontline, Hussein said he and two others were struck by a burst of gunfire, and ended up in the hospital in Mingora. After 10 days, he said, the doctors “just disappeared,” and he had to walk for miles before he found a transport that brought him to Mardan. The power is still out in his hometown, he says, so neither he nor his family knows what has happened to each other.

When I ask Hussein who he thinks shot him, he tells me “this bullet was from the army,” an unlikely explanation considering the round that hit him was fired from a Kalishnakov. When I point out the improbability of it, Hussein questions whether there was any difference between the two groups at all, eliciting chuckles from the other men in the room.

Until recently, most western tourists knew Swat as a honeymoon destination, a valley of scenic vistas that boasted its own ski resort. But its rural residents are mostly poor, under-served, and weary of the government’s on-again-off-again battle against the Taliban’s growing strength there. In February, 2009, after four months of fighting, authorities agreed to a peace deal in exchange for recognition of Sharia



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law in the valley. Many Swatis say they welcomed an end to the fighting as well as the return of the Islamic system of justice, which had been in place until 1969 and was viewed as a swift and effective alternative to the country's legal bureaucracy. According to a March survey by the International Republican Institute, some 80 percent of Pakistani's supported the ceasefire.

But the deal made Washington irate, and officials blasted Islamabad for giving up the fight, especially after the Pashtun militants subsequently pushed into and captured the adjacent district of Buner. On April 22, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Pakistan risked becoming a mortal threat to the world. Three days later, she publicly questioned the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal with the Taliban presence "only 60 miles from Islamabad," a dramatic depiction that obscures the fact that Buner is still a part of the country's mountainous northwest, separated from Islamabad by an ethnic firewall and an army trained for the conventional battle it would take to defend the capitol. The next day, however, the Pakistani army launched an assault in the Dir Valley, and took the fight to the Buner two days later.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari announced the drive to retake Swat on May 6, while meeting with US President Barack Obama and Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai in Washington.

The offensive has convinced many that Pakistan's military and political officials are now committed to eliminating militants in the remote border regions. Washington has since applauded the campaign as a serious effort against militant strongholds. But it has also exacted an enormous civilian toll, displacing nearly two million people around the country. Rather than a sophisticated tactical approach—employing surgical strikes based on solid intelligence, outreach to local elders, and plans to limit civilian casualties, to

evacuate them and to provide for the displaced—the Pakistani military's reliance on heavy bombing and air strikes suggests it is not ready to wage the nuanced counter-insurgency it would take to win Pakistani hearts and minds and avoid blowback. Instead, its fighting-style reflects training steeped in preparation for a more conventional war against India—a subject of long-running frustration in Washington. It's as if the army is conducting a sensitive medical operation with a broadsword instead of a scalpel, threatening to undermine an effort that was supposed to help stabilize the country and the region.

Pakistanis want their leaders to curb Taliban influence, says Indian historian Dr. Mushirul Hasan, but not at the cost of heavy civilian casualties.. "I don't think the full scale military operation will work," he says. "It will hurt the military and the civilian government."

The refugees' mistrust of the government has been compounded at every stage of the operation. "The government has not made the people stakeholders in this fight," said Rifaat Hussain, a professor of Defence and Strategic Studies at Qaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. "I think if the provincial government had told these people, 'look if you want the military to fight these Taliban whom you don't like because they are repressive, they are brutal and we need your support,' then I think the people would have been much more forthcoming."

This failure was followed by a lack of coordination to adequately warn civilians before the bombing began, to evacuate them safely, and to provide for them in camps, which the vast majority of the displaced have avoided altogether. The international pressure to act against the Taliban appears to have forced Islamabad's hand. "Without this pressure," says Hussain, "the preparation for a disaster response could have been put in place."

"The rapidity with which this migration took place really took the

government by surprise," Hussain continues. "This is the largest migration in Pakistan's history from one place to another and it has occurred in less than three weeks. So whatever resources the government had, they are really stretched to their limit," he says. "The army does not have the surplus capability to actually deal with the civilian side of the problem."

Zardari vowed to minimise civilian casualties and care for the displaced. The stakes, he seems to acknowledge, are high: in his appeal for \$1 billion for relief and reconstruction funds from the international community, Zardari said that without assistance, disgruntled refugees could "turn against the government and we will lose the impetus we've managed to create in the country against the Taliban."

While the scope of the crisis may have been hard to predict, the near exclusive reliance on a heavy-handed military strategy was not destined to convince many refugees the government is on their side. That could be a significant problem, says Hussain, as managing the humanitarian crisis will be "equally significant" to the success or failure of the military operation in combating militancy in Pakistan. If thousands of Pakistanis are disgruntled by their treatment at the government's hands, he says, it could create "another nightmare situation."

**I**n Pakistani minds there is glaring contrast to the government's ability to cope with the current crisis: its response to the 2005 earthquake that displaced some 3 million people. "What the Pakistan army did after the 2005 earthquake was exceptional," Shamsul Mulk tells me. "Some Americans say it was better than what the United States did in Katrina." When, a few years ago, Mulk, the country's former water and power chief, was awarded a public commendation by then President Pervez Musharraf he sat beside an American admiral receiving an award of gratitude for the



*Refugees registering in a camp in Islamabad*



*Recent arrivals to Mardan. The daughter is developmentally disabled and needs specialised care, says her father.*

American response to the earthquake. “The Americans in those days were always in great demand because people were seeing they were coming to their aid and assistance,” he told me. “And they were in need of that.”

These days however, when Mulk visits his ancestral home in the Northwest Frontier Province, he hears a different story from the villagers in Pakistan’s remote mountains. “They say (Americans) are not wanting to eliminate the threat. They are compounding it—to weaken Pakistan,” he said. “I don’t believe we are fighting America’s war. We are fighting our war. I got to my village and people come around and they tell me stories. And what worries me is the common man’s perception is different from my perception... Because of the enormous propaganda that has been made against the Pakistani army and against American intentions, it’s going to be a bloody campaign.”

Down the road from the Mardan hospital we drive past soldiers guarding the entrance to a refugee camp that has sprung up in an empty green field. Besides our driver, Mark, I was travelling with a photographer who had come to hang around the military checkpoint outside Swat for a few hours and try to negotiate a ride with an ambulance driver to get as close to the front line as possible (we subsequently learn not even ambulances were allowed past). Because several people had been killed in a blast at a checkpoint outside Peshawar a few days earlier, I ask the photographer what risk our trip entails. “Maybe 10 percent,” he tells me. He thinks for a moment, then quickly revises his estimate. “Maybe 15 or 20 percent—it’s kind of random,” he says. “But low.” I remember that at dinner the night before—we ate with a table of journalists at a steakhouse in the Marriott hotel, which had become a heavily secured compound since it was bombed last fall—he had said

that he survived an IED explosion that struck the tank he was riding in while embedded in Iraq. I ask whether it made him reconsider his line of work. “Not really,” he shrugs. “I figure when my number’s up, it’s up, you know?” (he was also the one who recommended to us the Pearl Continental—“a proper hotel”—in Peshawar, which has since been bombed.) When I ask Mark, the driver, whether he worries about bombings along the road we travelled or people shooting at the car or, worse, trying to stop it, he tells me: all of the above. At the gate, soldiers peer into our sleek silver sedan, talk to the driver, then let us pass.

“**T**his was only 40 or 50 tents last time we came,” says Mark, who had been there only two days before. It had since filled with thousands of refugees—a sea of tents and bodies with little in the way of food, clean water, medicine, or mattresses. Just past the gate, at the intersection of two dirt roads, there is a dense cluster of tents where a mass of people are listlessly milling. The glade has been organised into administrative zones, like neighborhoods, that stretch towards the edges of the field, which is rapidly filling in as new neighbours arrive in waves following periodic relaxations of the military curfew still in place. The scene reminds me of old black-and-white photos of Palestinian refugee districts in Lebanon—not the concrete ghettos I’ve seen with schools and markets and a sense of community, which have evolved over six decades, but the ‘camps’ that they had once been, tent cities sprouting in the olive groves.

As soon as I get out of the car, a crowd swarms around me. Among the dozens of curious onlookers is a patient and persistent young man named Syed Naveed Shehzad, one of about 100 university students gathering and distributing donated

goods to the refugees in several sections of the camp. As we tour his area of the camp, he explains that he wants the attention of the foreign media because the Pakistani press acted as a mouthpiece for the government. That morning, he said, a politician had spoken to reporters from the road outside the camp, using a convoy of trucks carrying relief supplies as a backdrop: as soon as the speech was finished, the politician and her entourage—press, trucks and relief supplies, all rolled off without distributing anything. When I ask what message he would have given to the cameras, he takes me into one family’s tent, which has only a plastic tarp to sleep on and a pile of crumpled clothes inside. “I would say to my prime minister—if you were living in this tent, how would you feel,” he says.

Among those I interview, in the hospital and refugee camps alike, everyone says they blame both sides: they only want to return to their homes in peace. But behind their restraint there is anger at the government’s use of force. “The people are angry at the government and the Taliban both,” says Zeeshan Khan, a lanky 17-year-old engineering student who is watching in disbelief as crowds drift through the center of camp. “These people have a bad mind for the government.” Just days before Khan’s cousin was to receive his degree, he was killed by a mortar in the Swat fighting. He had formerly wanted to be a Pakistani fighter pilot, but is now angered by the government’s use of overwhelming force. “The Taliban have small weapons,” he says. “These people are coming due to bombing, jet artillery, heavy weapons, F-16s.” Since his cousin’s death, two dozen members of his family have come to share his two bedroom mud home nearby, which he shares with three siblings. They had arrived at the camp only to find the entrance was closed because the officials responsible for registering





*A man tossing biscuits to children at the Mardan camp*

the internally displaced were inexplicably absent. “They money that has come, I think they are not using good. They are thieves. They are stealing the money that the international community sends,” he says. “I cannot understand this condition. How long can this continue?”

Fuelling conspiracy theories among the displaced, and compounding their anger at being caught in the crossfire, is the belief that latest offensive is just another half-hearted—and ultimately futile—campaign to appease foreign interests. Like others I interviewed, Khan voices a suspicion that the conflict is intended to mask a partnership between the militants and the army. “This is a blame game,” he says. “The Taliban and the government are on the same side.” It’s a common theory, repeated in various incarnations and supported with a variety of anecdotal claims: that both sides target civilians, that surrounded militants manage to receive new shipments of arms and ammunition, that the bombs fall on every building except the ones with militants in them.

—“The Taliban are poor people. Where are their weapons coming from? Either the army or the United Nations.”

—“The Taliban are all surround-

ed. Where do they get their ammunition? No one in Swat has this much ammunition.”

—“The Taliban are just the army. The military and the Taliban don’t want peace.”

In the absence of that outreach, refugees seemed to feel they have little to hope but for the quickest possible return to the inevitable status quo.

As evening falls, the men stroll through the streets or squat to chat outside their tents, which seem to have been left to the women for some semblance of privacy (modesty dictates they remain out of public view—a custom obviously strained by the circumstance of displacement). They scurry away or cover their faces whenever the photographer approaches them, he tells us, when Mark and I find him waiting at the car. He’d been aggressively confronted by a group of Pakistani men and had to show them the photos he’d taken, cycling through the images on his camera’s small display screen, to defuse the situation. Mark goes to accompany him while I wander around the camp. Most people greet me with a mixture of curiosity and skepticism — I must have looked out of place, alone, as night descended— but many are eager to tell their stories.

“We hope to return soon but the situation is not clear,” as Sohail Mohammad tells me, “because the army doesn’t want to win.” Mohammad is a 30-year-old electrician who had left Buner with his family a week before on foot. Along the way, they found a transport and paid the speculative driver three times the normal rate for a lift to Mardan. “They will charge as much as they can,” he explains. Mohammad introduces me to another man who has walked the whole way: he lifts his pant leg to show his dirty, blistered feet. Over his shoulder I can see a man using his bare hands to string electrical wire to power a strand of lights as the crowded camp grows dark.

**T**he subject of refugees’ ambivalent loyalties, says Khalid Rahman, director of the Institute for Policy Studies in Islamabad, is anything but cut and dry. “What people now realise is there are criminals and foreign elements [in the Taliban], so they don’t have much support from people,” he says. “But they know people who have been living with them for years, and some are very sincere. And some have joined them because of collateral damage. For the common man there is a lot of gray area,” he says. “It depends on what kind of Taliban you have met.”

“I think people are clearly confused,” he says. “They believe this army is their own army, but they don’t understand this current strategy. When they analyze it, they think it is because of US pressure.”

That thinking applies not only to the refugees, but to the larger Pakistani public. Zardari’s administration finds itself in difficult straits in this regard. Pressured by the need to combat the Taliban’s growing strength within its borders, and from President Obama—who promised US support would be dependant on Pakistan’s progress after blowing \$10 billion in



WG Wheeler

*Children at Mardan in a section run by volunteers from a local college*



WG Wheeler

*Caregivers at the Mardan camp say there's a shortage of food, medicine and safe water*





*Children at a camp in Islamabad. Doctors say many of them have waterborne diseases*

American aid since 2001, during which time it ceded large swaths of land to militants— it launched a battle that has stretched its forces thin and tested the administration's political solvency. As much as it has been a military success, the campaign can also be considered a litmus test, in the minds of many Pakistanis, for authorities' ability and willingness to provide for its own; it is another potentially perilous fault in a nuclear nation at risk of becoming a failed state.

In its initial stages, the campaign enjoyed popular support. Rahman says a successful preliminary PR campaign—an outreach to Pakistani elite and to journalists— preceded the military campaign, but that support is eroding as the scope of the crisis comes into focus.

The rapid migration that has dispersed refugees around the country, he says, is creating a powerful counter-narrative to the government's claims about minimising harm and providing for civilians. "When 1.5 million people— who

have friends and family all over the country and outside Pakistan— when they share these stories, it will make it impossible to continue this for long and to avoid collateral damage," he says. "People are already recoiling."

Maintaining the support of the Pakistani people is a difficult balancing act. While Rahman believes the ongoing campaign is being waged in earnest to combat the dangerous threat of militancy, he says the government has failed to convince mainstream Pakistanis that they aren't being asked to shoulder the burden of a future US exit strategy from the 'American war' in Afghanistan.

This all takes place amid a chorus of complaints that the government has failed to protect its citizens against the US drone attacks that have killed large numbers of civilians along with militants in the border regions. According to a poll conducted in March by the International Republican Institute, a little more than half of respon-

dents said they were more worried about US drone attacks than Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and 87 percent said Pakistan should not support the US war in Afghanistan. This has created a backlash from Pakistanis who feel their leaders are giving in to US demands and fuelling more conspiracies that the American goal is to destabilise the country. "Many think this is a way to attack Pakistan's strength and nuclear capabilities," says Rahman.

A central pillar in Obama's "Af-Pak" strategy is the effort to de-escalate tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, which would allow Pakistan to reduce its troops along the eastern border and redeploy them to the western border with Afghanistan. But the action against militants in Swat won't automatically reassure Indian leaders that their rivals are now committed to fighting international terrorism, says MK Bhadrakumar, a retired Indian diplomat. "Pakistani military has never been ambivalent about threats to its own security," he says. "But



Swat is not really the epicenter of Al Qaeda. Confronting militants in Waziristan would be a different ballgame altogether.”

It's still too early to say what effect the Swat offensive will have on Pakistan's internal security and South Asia's regional stability. The air strikes have managed to destroy militant ammunition depots and its command structures, says Rifaat Hussain, but a large portion of the militants have escaped into areas they will be harder to rout and raising the risk of wider destabilisation and the fear the Taliban may return in the future. Local communities have absorbed most of the refugees, straining relationships between the hosts and their guests. A minority of refugees take shelter in the camps administered by the UN, which says it is cash-strapped and that only a third of the \$543 million it's appealed for to deal with the crisis has materialised. Hussain says it could cost \$3-4 billion to rebuild communities and police forces and settle disputes between neighbors who return to find their homes have been looted or taken over by squatters.

“We are all going more or less by what the Pakistani government is saying,” says Bhadrakumar. “This is very important. No senior Pakistani Taliban leader has been caught. One has to wait and see. I will not go to the extent of questioning the Pakistani leadership, but the track record is not very convincing to put it mildly.” If the operation has merely pushed militants out of Swat, then the question arises whether the Pakistani military has the will to follow them into Waziristan. If so, Indians “would applaud with the rest of the international community,” says Bhadrakumar. But to stabilise the India-Pakistan relationship, he says, Pakistan would have to go further: it would need to prove it's cut ties to Kashmiri

militants and is taking actions against anti-Indian elements training in the country.

The continued fighting also increases ethnic tensions within Pakistan, as much of the fighting in the country's northwest has occurred in areas dominated by ethnic Pashtuns. “This is already a political tendency toward a backlash along the ethnic lines,” says Bhadrakumar. “These kind of operations are perceived by the Pashtuns as being directed against them.” In mid-June, after two months of fighting, the army pushed into the tribal belt along the Afghanistan border, widening the conflict in pursuit of top Taliban commander Beitullah Mehsud and his strong network in South Waziristan, which is likely to displace even more people. It has also begun to rely on local militias, angered by a Taliban suicide bombing that killed dozens at a local mosque in early June. The use of such militias could lead to increased sectarian rivalry and warlordism. “This is almost like subcontracting the military operations,” says Bhadrakumar. “This is very dangerous because once the blood is spilled, the feud begins.”

But Islamabad's options are also constrained by political considerations. Just as Obama has to walk a political tightrope between giving aid to stabilise Pakistan and Congressional pressure to hold Islamabad accountable for the money—Obama recently pushed through a plan to distribute \$7.5 billion in aid over the next five years—Zardari has to distance himself from Washington to win the support of the Pakistani public concerned about the country's sovereignty.

“They would like to think we are not fighting an American war,” says Rahman. Given the country's volatile political history, Zardari's failure to win public support could push the country closer to chaos. His popularity has sunk to lows that even his predecessor Pervez

Musharraf never suffered. If he is forced from office, says Rahman, history shows that “those mobilising for radicalisation often will find support.”

On a small private lot in Islamabad, an unofficial refugee camp has been set up along a hill above a polluted stream. The owner of the land, who works for a local politician, says it was supposed to be a temporary solution for the refugees displaced by the fighting that ended in February. In the days before I came, it had grown from 100 residents to 400 people as the newly displaced trickled in all the way from Swat. At the entrance to the camp, I find a doctor, who had been displaced himself and was making rounds in the camp. Most people he treated, he tells me, suffered from stomach bugs, mental trauma, and depression.

Abdul Rahim, a 48-year-old father of 12 kids, tells me that even before the fighting he had struggled to feed his family off the roughly \$25 a month military pensions he received for his 16 years of service in the Pakistani army. The recent offensive, he says, is a continuation of the troubles that began under Musharraf's Washington-friendly policies. “This is Musharraf's mistake,” he says. “Musharraf's policies are wrong. He started this operation. That's why we are here.”

Another refugee, Mohammad Amin, a 36-year-old who had owned a video shop, agreed. “For two years, there has been oppression—there is the bombing, the f16s, the air shelling, the artillery, the helicopters. There are lots of dead people,” he says. The life he had found in Islamabad had not given him much hope that things are getting better. “There is no life here,” he says. “People have been here for months and still they have nothing.” □

(Anna-Katarina Gravgaard contributed to this report.)



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# Mayhem in Mangalore

*What communalism can do to a once 'normal' city*

Vishal Arora



Dayanand Kukreja/ Daijiworld

*Relatives and friends at the funeral of human rights lawyer Naushad Kashmiri, who was killed in April*



The city of Mangalore in Dakshina Kannada district in southwest Karnataka has hit the national media headlines thrice in recent times, all of them for the wrong reasons: in September 2008, following a series of attacks on churches in the state by the Rightwing Bajrang Dal; in December 2008, after a series of attacks on fashion shows, in particular one held at Moti Mahal in the

city; and in January 2009, following an assault on women visiting a pub. The latter two were carried out by male activists of the Rightwing Sri Ram Sene. The incidents shocked the country, but left it no wiser to the history of this ostensibly peaceable city's long decline into communalism and gangsterism.

It is the last incident that grabbed the attention of the nation. On January 24 this year, 40 members of the Sri Ram Sene stormed a pub called 'Amnesia – the Lounge' and brutally ejected the women inside, accusing them of behaving outside the permit of Hindu tradition. Two of the women were hospitalised. A video of the incident, originally taken by journalists from *Daijiworld.com*, an online e-news-paper that primarily serves the coastal Konkan region, was telecast by national television channels.

The Sene might be a maverick outfit hungry for nationwide publicity but it is not unknown to the establishment. According to *The Indian Express* (January 30, 2009), Prasad Attavar, the organisation's state vice-president, who allegedly led the attack on the pub, heads a private security agency that had, ironically, been contracted by the Mangalore administration to provide security for a regional cultural festival, Karavali Utsav, which was in progress at the time of the attack.

Moral policing seems to have become the Sene's trademark. The local press reported at least 20 incidents of moral policing in Mangalore prior to the pub assault. On January 3, according to a local daily, *Jaya Kirana*, Sene activists attacked St Ligeria Primary School for allegedly having distributed the Bible to some students. The *Karavali Ale* newspaper reported that on February 2, "unidentified" Rightwing activists forced a group of engineering students who were leaving for Bangalore for an intercollegiate competition to cancel their trip.

Despite the opprobrium that the

Sri Ram Sene has attracted, it has not stopped its shenanigans. Most recently, *The Hindu* reported that on the evening of May 16, the day that the general election results were announced, a group of people celebrating the victory of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Nalin Kumar Kateel from Dakshina Kannada in the Lok Sabha election ransacked the houses of four Muslim families and assaulted people with sticks, soda bottles, cricket bats and cycle chains in the Nettrakere area in Bantwal taluka in Mangalore.

Although Mangalore has usually flown under the radar, it is not just another city. It has, for one, nurtured a whole host of authors, politicians, Bollywood stars and cricketers. For another, the city has a literacy rate of 83 percent, far higher than the national literacy rate of 61 percent (United Nations: Millennium Development Goals Report 2006). This renders the significance of Mangalore's decline stark in comparison to the rest of the country. But shocking though the incidents of Rightwing menace were, their reportage downplayed the prevailing atmosphere in the city, which is murkier. A lot murkier.

In fact, even after the media conniption, it is hardly common knowledge that Mangalore slid from being a largely harmonious city under British rule in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to a hotbed of communalism in the 1990s and, a decade later, to a cauldron of communal poison nourishing, and nourished by, underworld dons. And terror outfits followed suite.

Situated on the west coast and encircled by the Netravati and Gurupura rivers that debouch into the Arabian Sea, Mangalore's landscape resembles that of Goa: beaches, rolling hills, coconut palms and freshwater bodies. The buildings, roofed with red clay tiles, are reminders of Portuguese explorer Vasco Da Gama, who landed at St Mary's Island, near Mangalore, in 1498.





*A serene scene at the Netravathi Bridge as the sun sets*

Mangalore's melting-pot nature has endured for a long time: communities that originated in the north of the country; Christians; Muslims; and a mishmash of Hindu upper and lower castes that have only lately come to see each other as implacable social, political and economic hostiles.

Bound in by the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats mountain range, Mangalore also has demographic similarities with Goa. The Konkani had migrated from Goa to Mangalore in three waves – during the early years of the Portuguese rule and the Inquisition of 1560s; during the 1571 war with the Sultan of Bijapur; and during the wars of 1683-1740 with the Marathas. While Hindus comprised the first wave, the second and third waves consisted mostly of Christians.

Konkani-speaking Catholics, popularly known as Mangalorean Catholics, are the largest Christian community in the city. Senior Congress leader Oscar Fernandes, former defence minister George Fernandes and model and actor Freida Pinto, who played Latika in the Academy Award winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, are from this community.

Mangalore's Konkani-speaking Hindus are known as Goud Saraswat Brahmins ('Goud' meaning from the north – those who lived on the banks of the now extinct river Saraswati in Punjab and Kashmir; the word 'Saraswat' identifies their Aryan roots). Unlike the Mangalorean Catholics, the Goud Saraswati Brahmins did not adopt Portuguese culture. Vijay Mallya of United Breweries and Kingfisher Airlines, cricketer Sanjay Manjrekar, Canara Bank founder Ammembal Subba Rao Pai and Syndicate Bank founder Upendra Anant Pai are from the Goud Saraswat Brahmin community. Booker Prize winner Aravind Adiga and cricketer Ravi Shastri are from the Shivalli Madhwa Brahmin community.

Hinduism is the majority religion here. (In fact, Mangalore derives its name from a local Hindu deity, Mangaladevi.) Bunts, Mogaveeras, Billavas and Ganigas are the largest people groups in the Hindu community. The distinctions between them have a significant electoral impact.

The Bunts (meaning 'powerful') are higher caste Kshatriyas and one of the most affluent communities in

south India. Aishwarya Rai, Shilpa Shetty and Suneil Shetty are from this community. While the Mogaveeras, classified as a Scheduled Caste, are primarily a fishing community, the Billavas have traditionally been toddy-tappers, and the Ganigas, who are Shudras, are mostly oil producers and merchants. BJP leader Manorama Madhwaraj is from the Mogaveera community, and Congress veteran Janardhan Poojary is a Billava.

Mangalore's Muslims are mainly from the Beary community, which dates back more than 1,350 years and has its own unique traditions and distinct cultural identity. They belong to the conservative Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam and speak their own dialect. While a majority of the Bearys are fish traders, some are active in local politics as legislators from the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular).

"Unlike in other parts of the country, most communities in Mangalore have always identified themselves as belonging to their respective castes, rather than sharing one common identity based on their religion," says John Fernandes, professor and head





The Rosaria Cathedral, Mangalore's oldest church, built by Portuguese in 1568

of Chair in Christianity at Mangalore University. But although the role of caste in the local economy is easily visible, conflict was kept at bay by the fact that no community is big enough to dominate the others.

Until lately. "The tensions [today] are rooted in economics and power politics, but, on the surface, they appear to be religious," says Fernandes. The story is still unfolding, say voices from Mangalore's civil society, warning that with the BJP bagging the Lok Sabha seat from Dakshina Kannada district in the recently concluded general election, the city could be headed for even worse times. The recent violence can, in fact, be linked to the excitement among Rightwing groups about the BJP's increasing clout, believes Walter D'Souza, founder and editor-in-chief of *Daijiworld.com*.

**T**he BJP came to power on its own in Karnataka only in May 2008. The party's first standalone government in a south Indian state was preceded by a 20-month rule in alliance with the JD (S). But it was hardly a secret that BJP workers, along with the cadres

of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), had been preparing for a communal harvest in the state, particularly in Mangalore, for more than two decades.

"They [the Sangh Parivar] have made inroads into every nook and corner of Dakshina Kannada district. Through their numerous organisations, they lead almost all cultural and public functions," says Pattabiram Somayaji, lecturer of English at the University College of Mangalore and district president of the Karnataka Koumu Souharda Vedike (Karnataka Communal Harmony Forum).

The BJP's influence began to appear in the 1980s. It won seats (18) for the first time in Karnataka in 1983. Nine of these seats were won from the undivided Dakshina Kannada district comprising Mangalore and Udupi districts (which later became separate constituencies).

Somayaji says that the Sangh Parivar took advantage of economic inequalities under Congress chief minister D Devraj Urs (1972-77 and 1978-80). Urs, a heavy-handed ruler and part of the so-called Syndicate of powerful regional satraps, had brought in land tenancy reforms in

Karnataka which, though largely successful, benefited mainly the larger tenants, the Bunts. Many of the Bunts owned some land that they could leverage to lease more land for commercial cultivation that would pay for increasing their share in urban business.

The smaller tenants, the Billavas, who had little original collateral, fell by the wayside. For the younger generation, especially, the traditional Billava occupation of toddy-tapping became an unattractive and difficult way of earning a livelihood, since classier drinks had begun cornering the market.

Unlike elsewhere in Karnataka, Christians and Muslims in Mangalore were mainly from the middle class and not from Dalit or tribal backgrounds. The Christians had well-established institutions, both religious and educational, which became symbols of their prosperity. Even Muslims run educational institutions in the city. Besides, both Muslims and Christians advanced financially by migrating to the Gulf for employment.

The Mogaveeras, who were fish-catchers in the employ of the upper castes, and the Billavas were left





The women who were attacked by Sri Ram Sene men at the Amnesia pub in January 2009

behind on the road to development. The Sangh Parivar directed their sense of injury at 'outsider' Muslims and Christians. "A majority of Sangh Parivar supporters are Billavas and Mogaveeras," says Somayaji, especially the Billavas, who had once been predominantly pro-Congress. The main accused in the pub attack, 28-year-old Prasad Attavar, is from the Billava community.

"While underlying causes of conflict were there, tensions did not surface until the demolition of the Babri Masjid [in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh in December 1992]," says John Fernandes. The demolition led to communal violence in Karnataka, including Mangalore, that took the lives of 78 people, mostly Muslims. Tension continued to simmer till six years later, when communal violence flared up in Suratkal, a Mangalore suburb, in which 12 people were killed. (The then chief minister of Karnataka, JH Patel, ordered an inquiry into the riots. However, more than a decade later, the government has yet to make public the report of the Justice AJ Sadashiva Commission of Inquiry.)

Globalisation, a ubiquitous deepener of economic inequalities, has served to further infuriate the Billava and Mogaveera communities, who largely remain onlookers to the rash of high-rise buildings, shopping malls, restaurant chains and high-tech hospitals that have cropped up in the city in the past five years. Deprivation has made it easier for them to be recruited in the Sangh Parivar.

**I**n the early 1990s, a former BJP leader, Uma Bharti, had tried to hoist the Indian flag at a Muslim prayer ground, the Idgah Maidan, a disputed property in Hubli in north Karnataka that had been in the exclusive possession of Muslims for more than 200 years. The RSS is not given to hoisting the tricolour, but bent its principles this time to apparently gain legitimacy for the social exclusion of Muslims. It had hoped that this would provoke Muslims to object and thus declare their "anti-India" stand.

The effort bombed – a Muslim trust offered to unfurl the flag. The fiasco cost Uma Bharti her chief ministership more than a decade later,

when she had to resign in August 2004 after an arrest warrant was issued against her in a case related to an anti-Muslim riot that occurred after the flag-hoisting incident.

After the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the Sangh Parivar shifted its focus from the Idgah Maidan at Hubli to the Sufi shrine of Baba Budangiri in Chikmagalur district, which borders the Western Ghats. Claiming that it was the seat of a Hindu sage, Swami Dattatreya, the Parivar declared the shrine the "second Ayodhya". In the late 1990s, the RSS declared its intention to "liberate" the shrine. But the Karnataka Koumu Souharda Vedike frustrated the organisation's attempts to exploit the issue by organising massive rallies.

The Parivar then took another tack, raking up the issue of Muslims slaughtering cows; this led to numerous incidents of communal violence, mainly in the coastal belt. According to a report, 'From Kandhamal to Karavali: The Ugly Face of Sangh Parivar', published by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) in March

2009, at least 80 major communal conflicts occurred in Karnataka between the late 1970s and 2004.

In February 2006, the rule of the JD (S) and the Congress ended, thanks to the opportunism of HD Kumaraswamy, a film producer-turned politician and one of the sons of former prime minister HD Deve Gowda. Helped by BJP leader BS Yeddyurappa, Kumaraswamy led 42 JD (S) legislators to withdraw support to chief minister Dharam Singh's government. This allowed the BJP to sit in government with the JD (S) without having to seek the people's mandate.

As part of a power-sharing agreement, Kumaraswamy was to abdicate after 20 months in favour of Yeddyurappa. But Kumaraswamy reneged, until voted out in the assembly elections in May 2008. The vote, apparently, was not so much in favour of the BJP's communal politics as it was against Kumaraswamy, who was seen as an opportunist and was alleged to have collected Rs 1.5 billion from mining operators in Bellary district. Since Kumaraswamy is a Vokkaliga, his betrayal was also perceived as an insult to the Lingayats, a more powerful community 'represented' by Yeddyurappa.

Many see the BJP's victory even in the Dakshina Kannada constituency in the recent Lok Sabha election as having been born of Congress's weakness rather than of communalism. The competition was between the Congress's ageing candidate, Janardhan Poojary, and the BJP's 42-year-old Nalin Kumar Kateel. Mangalore's mainly Hindu rural youth seemed to have identified more with the latter. And to the youngsters in urban parts, the fact that Kateel had a website in English and Kannada that looked no less professional than the website of LK Advani was indicative of his contemporariness.

According to media reports, the BJP won despite complaints against it of irregularities such as cash distribution and the deletion of Christian and Muslim names from the electoral lists.

And although the Sangh Parivar has been active in Dakshina Kannada for years, its cadre became more aggressive after the BJP's arrival, says PB D'Sa, president of the South Kanara unit of the PUCL.

In 2007, at least 48 attacks on Christians were reported in various districts of Karnataka; between August 17 and September 21, 2008, there were 28 attacks on churches, mainly in Mangalore. D'Sa says that in every case, the attackers were from the Bajrang Dal, the Hindu Jagaran Vedike or the Sri Rama Sene.

The August 14 attacks were seen as fallout of the violence in Orissa's Kandhamal district, where Maoists had killed a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Swamy Laxmanananda Saraswati, on August 23 but for which Christians were blamed. In Karnataka, the Sangh Parivar's activists also based their violence on protests against a booklet, which they said was "derogatory" to Hindu gods, published by a Christian group, New Life Fellowship Trust, and against the alleged conversions of Hindus to Christianity.

"The attacks on churches in Mangalore on September 14 were well organised, as 12 churches were attacked in different parts of the city the same day and in a similar fashion," D'Sa says.

In September 2008, the police arrested Mahendra Kumar, Karnataka convenor of the Bajrang Dal, and some of his associates for the attacks. The Bajrang Dal members carried on their mayhem in the district jail in Mangalore, beating up Muslim inmates, including suspected terrorists Fakeer Bava and Rafique, who were hospitalised.

Somayaji blames the presence of the RSS and the spread of a divisive ideology among sections of the Mangalorean society for the increasing tensions in Mangalore. BJP's Kateel, who won the Lok Sabha seat, is a protégé of a strong RSS leader, Prabhakar Bhat Kalladka, a Kota Brahmin, who Somayaji says controls the BJP government of Karnataka and its police department. In fact,

Kalladka is said to have been responsible for the BJP giving a ticket to Kateel. *Rediff.com* reported on May 1, 2009 that Ram Bhat, Kalladka's brother, also believes that Kalladka virtually runs the state government.

Kalladka does not shy from airing his hardcore views. "We have only one expectation, and that is Hindutva," Kalladka told *Rediff*. "We want the government to rule as per Hindutva."

**I**f the Sangh Parivar is one end of the communal parentheses in Mangalore, the police, accused of targeting the minorities and human rights activists, is the other.

Some people believe that it was the police who had killed, on April 9 this year, Mangalore's most aggressive human rights lawyer, Naushad Kashmirji, who had been appearing in court on behalf of Rashid Malbari, an aide of Dawood Ibrahim. The Mangalore police had arrested Malbari for planning terror strikes and extortion, and Kashmirji was seeking judicial custody for him, as opposed to police custody, fearing that Malbari would be killed in an 'encounter'.

The police were a natural suspect. "I request the DK [Dakshina Kannada] police to take strict action against the official who has killed my brother [Kashimji]. Please I request you.... We all have lost a great fighter who was fighting against crime in Karnataka. Let Allah give them patience," said one Mohammad Kasshaf in one of the many messages that were posted on *Sahilonline* after it reported on Kashmirji's killing. "Although Naushad was an intelligent lawyer, he was disliked by the police for the way he functioned; Naushad did not hesitate to take on the establishment by filing private complaints against the police on behalf of his clients," wrote Mohammad Muiz Musba.

On April 10, the Mangalore Bar Council's senior-most lawyer, Purushottam Poojary, with whom Kashmirji had worked as a junior, lodged a complaint at the Pandeshwar police station against four police officers who, says D'Sa, appear to have

become encounter specialists. They were apparently emulating Mumbai's controversial Anti-Terrorism Squad, whose cowboy shootout with gangsters in November 1991 became the inspiration for the Bollywood film, *Shootout at Lokhandwala*, and for trigger-happy cops all over the country.

Poojary, alleging that the cops had colluded with Rightwing extremists, said that a few hours before his death, Kashmirji had been issued a "veiled threat by the four officers" at the district court complex after he finished arguing his case on behalf of Malbari.

Poojary pointed out that Kashmirji appeared against the same police officers on behalf of one Atul Rao, who, he believed, had been falsely implicated in the murder of Padmapriya, wife of a BJP legislator, Raghupati Bhat. Kashmirji had also appeared for 25 persons these police officers had rounded up in connection with the murder of BJP and Bajrang Dal leader Sukananda Shetty. He had obtained bail for 13 of them.

Poojary told *The Hindu* on April 11, "Whenever Naushad [Kashimji] heard of a case of 'custodial torture' by the police, he would immediately appear on behalf of the victims... and in all the cases of this nature, he always came up against one of these four officers."

Poojary went on to allege that these officers worked as "extended arms" of the Sangh Parivar and had been targeting minorities and human rights activists ever since the JD (S)-BJP alliance came to power in the state.

The police, however, claimed that Ravi Poojari – an underworld don who had launched an attack on the office of filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt in Mumbai in June 2006 – was behind the killing.

On June 11, the Karnataka High Court directed the state government to conduct an "impartial" inquiry into the Kashmirji case. "The incident happened in April 2009, so far no action has been taken against erring officers. The media report says few police officers were behind the murder of Kasim [Kashimji]... Let officers engage with the advocate to defend their case,"

*The Indian Express* quoted the court order as saying.

The Mangalore police was also suspected of having played a role in the September 2008 attacks on churches. "What was striking about these attacks, especially in Mangalore, is that the police acted in tandem with the Bajrang Dal," says the PUCL report. "The pattern we observed was that the Bajrang Dal would attack Christian places and cause injury to persons and damage to property. Then the police would step in, not to chase and arrest the assailants, but ostensibly to prevent any violent retaliation by the Christians. And in the course of the alleged preventive activity, they would assault the Christians further."

The report says that on September 15, 2008, a day after a series of attacks on churches in Mangalore, Christians gathered in churches to plan protests. "The police imposed prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure... The police stood outside the church compounds, and wanted the protestors to disperse... Had they [the police] accepted the legitimate character of the protests, there would have been no difficulty in handling them... But the police behaved as if they expected the Christians to fire Kalashnikovs or plant RDX in the city. It was not a case of misunderstanding, but unwillingness to see that they were the injured party and had the right to protest. So the police indulged in brutal force to clear the churches."

The 45-minute raid ended with 113 persons being arrested. "They [Christians] were made to sit on the ground and an inspector taunted them saying, 'now tell your prayers'," the PUCL report said. The police registered a case against the protestors who, in turn, registered a counter-complaint against the police. They named the superintendent of police and DSP Jayant Shetty, who had also been accused in Kashmirji's murder.

A report of the National

Minorities Commission (NCM) also said that in the first week of the attacks on churches, the police arrested more Christians (47) than activists of the Bajrang Dal (36).

**T**he rise of the underworld in Mangalore parallels the rise of communalism in the city.

On May 28, 2009, Deputy Inspector General of Police (Western Range) Gopal B Hosur told the media that the police would constitute two units, each comprising 100 specially trained personnel, to check underworld activities in the Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts. The announcement was made after the launch of the first patrol speedboat of the Coastal Security Police (CSP) at New Mangalore Port at Panambur.

In the 1990s – the period when the Mumbai Crime Branch had carried out the maximum number of its highly-controversial 'encounter' killings – the Mumbai underworld relocated first to Bangalore, smelling rich pickings in the city's booming real estate business, and then to Mangalore, where they could use rising communal tensions to their own ends.

"They have been here since earlier, but they really got active in the 1990s," says Superintendent of Police (SP) Subramayeshwar Rao. However, he doesn't think that communalism gave the initial impetus to the underworld. "There were other factors. Many underworld elements operating from Mumbai had migrated from Mangalore, and after things became difficult for them they returned to their native land. After all, it's the second convenient place for them. Also, it's a good city; there's a lot of money from the Gulf and the real estate business is booming," he says.

What he doesn't disagree with, however, is that communalism has helped the underworld in the recent past. "The underworld is now taking [on] a communal colour, as Ravi Poojari has been trying to cash in on the communal divide," he says. "Earlier, Poojari used to extort money



from both Hindus and Muslims.”

Ravi Poojari is a scarface, literally, and of medium height and build. A school dropout who started his criminal career in Andheri in suburban Mumbai, he speaks English, Hindi and Kannada. Most of all, he is now seen as a ‘Hindu’ don.

The Kashmirji case highlights the religious divide in the underworld. According to a report in *Daijiworld* (May 6, 2009), the lawyer representing Ravi Poojari’s men, arrested for allegedly killing Kashmirji, fig-

2008) that while states such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar and Assam are constantly under watch by the Intelligence Bureau, security agencies now believe that Karnataka is the state to watch out for. “Karnataka has over the past two years become one of the most important states where terror is concerned after terror outfits found this state a safe haven to regroup in... While North Karnataka remained the terror hub for nearly a year, the

Bhatkal left for Pakistan and returned after training to coastal Karnataka. Basing themselves in Bhatkal, they began to influence Muslim youth. They started operating in 2001; in 2003, they became more aggressive and tied up with several religious schools in the coastal belt. Operatives arrested after Operation BAD – bomb blasts in ‘B’angalore, ‘A’hmmedabad and ‘D’elhi in 2008 – were all closely linked to the Bhatkal brothers.

“The ISI’s directive to these persons [Bhatkal brothers] is that they



Sri Ram Sene men launching an attack at the ‘Amnesia - The Lounge’ pub in Mangalore

ured in the hitlist of Chhota Shakeel, who is seen as Chhota Rajan’s ‘Muslim’ rival.

Chhota Shakeel’s aide Malbari, whom Kashmirji was representing in court, was in Mangalore to plan revenge attacks on the Sri Ram Sene head, Pramod Muthalik, and the BJP’s Varun Gandhi, who rose to infamy for his anti-Muslim diatribe at an election rally in Philbit in Uttar Pradesh.

It was only a matter of time before terrorist groups followed in the trail left by the underworld. “A nexus between the underworld and terror groups is very much possible,” says Mangalore SP Subramayeshwar Rao.

*Rediff* reported (October 14,

focus has now shifted towards Mangalore,” the report said.

“The police say it [Karnataka] has always been a hotbed for communal tension. Mangalore and other places in coastal Karnataka had seen violence in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition. To counter Hindu activists, outfits in Pakistan started to send out men to the coastal town. These persons did not immediately focus on terror activities. They coordinated more with the underworld, built up their base and for a long time only focused on creating communal tension...,” reported *Rediff*.

After the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the *Rediff* report said, two men identified as Riaz and Iqbal

ought to help out in terror activities if they needed to hide in Pakistan. Help from the underworld would include sneaking in of arms and ammunition and counterfeit currency. Moreover, the money made through drug deals would have to be shared for terror operations. To cut a long story short, the ISI demands protection money from the underworld,” said the *Rediff* report.

But not everyone’s got their head out of the sand. Asked the reason for the spurt in communalism and crime in Mangalore, its new member of parliament, Nalin Kumar Kateel, says, “Crime? Who says there’s crime in Mangalore? It’s a peaceful city.” □

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Caravan to Auschwitz

# The Story of a Young Girl

*Reliving Auschwitz, in all its grimness*

Preeti Verma Lal



Preeti Verma Lal

*Three-tier bunk beds in the Birkenau barracks – wooden barracks that could house 52 horses had more than 400 prisoners*



A brown, tattered leather suitcase is bearing the name, "Marie Kafka. Prag XIII-833", written slantingly in white that has not paled. Under the 'M' there's a little squiggle, and a tad hurried dot... At corners, the seams are ripped; the iron latch in the centre is rusty. Marie must have painted her name. Perhaps Marie did not have a paintbrush. Maybe she used a twig quickly snapped off from the tree or the back



of her pencil that she must have packed in that brown suitcase before leaving Prague.

Marie could have been 16. Probably 40. The calligraphed 'M' and 'K' do not reveal much. From the squiggle I imagine Marie, perhaps 16, in pigtails and a pinafore, her porcelain cheek blemished with the anguish of a long train journey "to a new life" in Auschwitz. The moment she hopped off the train, the German Nazi soldiers must have impounded all her belongings. Her dolls. Her diary. Her chemise. Her beads. Everything she brought from Prague. At the ramp, with the flick of his gloved hand, the brusque, uniformed army commander must have picked her for slave labour. Her long blonde hair must have been sheared for sale at half Mark per kilogram. Every morning Marie must have woken up to watery coffee for breakfast and insipid rutabaga, potato and groat soup for lunch. She must have worked grueling 12-14 hours in the synthetic rubber factory. Marie must have slept hungry every night, for the food was never enough. And then must have dawned that fateful morning when Marie would have been compelled to strip and get ready for the "shower". Marie must have gingerly walked the dirt track into the innocuous looking building and peered at the fake showerheads. She must have been naked when the Nazi soldier dropped the powder blue Zylon B pellets through the chimney chute. Marie must have coughed, gasped, wheezed, puffed...

In 20 minutes, Marie must have died. And then her body would have been laid on an iron gurney and shoved into the fire oven. In a blink, the porcelain-skinned Marie must have turned to ash. Just a handful of burning ash. The SS guards (Schutzstaffel or SS was Hitler's paramilitary unit that grew into Fuhrer's Praetorian Guard and was responsible for the most heinous Nazi crimes) must have callously dumped that handful of ash into the river. Not a drop of tear. Not a murmur of a prayer. No epitaphs. Nothing for

Marie Kafka. Not even dignity in death.

More than 60 years later all that remains of Marie is that brown suitcase. Her name painted in white. Standing behind the glass pane in Building Number 5, I spot Marie's suitcase, piled grimly amid thousands of other suitcases. There's Klement Hedwig's natty portmanteau, on it just the name and a date: 8.10.1898. There's L Grootkerk of Holland with a date: 11.10.05. Zdenka Fant – a mere number: S716. Hundreds of them. Perhaps thousands. So many names. Each a poignant story. So much brown behind that glass pane. Not one swatch of red. Or yellow. The suitcases are empty. There is nothing inside. Except death. And humanity that was brutally killed in the red brick buildings of Auschwitz, the largest Nazi concentration/extermination camp where more than 1.3 million people, mainly Jews, were killed.

That morning the sky in Cracow is thick with clouds. The poppies are blooming but Poland's cultural capital looks glum and rainy. Bundled in woollens and clutching a ticket I wait for the tour guide who would take me to Auschwitz, roughly 50 kilometres away. Like me, there are others in the hotel lobby, bundled in woollens, holding a ticket. I can hear their murmur, people telling stories in hushed whispers... In that crowd no one has been to Auschwitz before, the stories are reminiscences from history classes, dog-eared books and Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*.

As the guide walks in with a blue flag, the whispers make way for impatience and trepidation. What would it be like to stand in the gas chamber where thousands of men, women and children were stripped and gassed to death? How would one look at two tonnes of human hair that was sold to make felt and fabric? To touch the grey concrete Wall of Death against which 22,000 Jews were shot? To lean against the high-voltage barbed wires? To walk into the Birkenau camp's barracks where 400 people were herded into what was meant to



accommodate 52 horses? And yes, Building 11 where Dr Josef Mengele, the 'Angel of Death' who was obsessed with research on twins and dwarfs, picked up twins and cut them open on his marble dissection table, injected phenol into the hearts of children or dye into their cornea to change the eye colour, for he wanted to create "blue-eyed" world....

By the time I peel the blue Cracow Tour sticker and stick it by my heart for identification, the bus has revved its engine and the documentary is spooling... "When the Soviets liberated the camp on January 27, 1945, 836,525 sets of women's clothing, 533,216 sets of hosiery, seven tonnes of hair, 38,000 pairs of men's and 5200 pairs of women's shoes were recovered...." A man with a raspy voice is narrating facts on the screen. But beyond this, I can only hear my heart's loud bruits... Slumped in the seat, I close my ears. The tiny town of Oswiecim where Auschwitz sits like a blot is not too far, but facts are running into tears...

I head back to 1939, to history, to Hitler and his fanatic zeal of annexing more land into German occupation. Even before World War II began, Hitler had tasted blood; Austria and Czechoslovakia fell into his kitty without a skirmish. His next stop: Poland. Much before the sun woke up on September 1, 1939, the marauding German army had bombed Poland into a rubble. Two days later, England and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun.

Looking out of the bus window I can see a church spire scraping the sky, I can hear the bells clanging. And then I notice a blue signboard – Oswiecim. In 1939, the tiny peasant town was just a scratch on the map. Its fate changed in October 1939; it was annexed to the Third Reich and renamed Auschwitz. Oswiecim's folly lay not just in its geographical location of being in the heart of a war-torn Europe, but also its good transport connection. That blessing became history's bane when the Germans chose the abandoned, dilapi-



Preeti Verma Lal

*High-voltage barbed wires in Birkenau and Auschwitz that were used to prevent the prisoners from escaping*

dated barracks in Auschwitz to confine Polish political prisoners. That was just the beginning. A year later, another camp was built in Birkenau, three kilometres from Auschwitz; soon 40 other sub-camps were constructed. On the television screen, I see dots that mark the sub-camps and I start counting. One, two, three...

"This is Auschwitz..." I hear the guide. Faces have clamoured my imagination, they are getting blurred – faces of happy, smiling peasants in Oswiecim before 1939 overlapping the skeletal, bony, hungry, sleepless deportees at Auschwitz. I can't fathom Hitler's hatred for the Jews; I can't reconcile one man's evil to the death of millions.

**A**t Auschwitz, there are rows of tourist buses and thousands of people. I prop the headphone and adjust the tiny black contraption to hear the narration – the pretty guide has blue chandeliers in her ears and a pink stole around her neck. The clouds are hovering, it might rain; she is carrying a sorrel umbrella with a wooden head. The voice through the gadget is scratchy and there are thousand other visitors in Auschwitz, some carrying flowers, others candles. I have nothing.

I walk towards the first gate. There is a skull painted on a wooden post. There are barbed wires everywhere, held taut at corners on cement posts.

I touch the wire, it is sharp and prickly. I think of the prisoners, desperate to die to put an end to the Nazi cruelty, flinging themselves on these wires, electrocuted in a second. I shudder. The red brick buildings, 28 of them, are neatly arranged in rows, each with a number painted in black, each seemingly cookie-cut in design. There are dandelions fluttering in the morning breeze. I look at the green large trees, the grim guard towers from where the SS guards hollered for inmates to fall in line for the roll call that often took hours. I think of little children standing barefoot on snow waiting for their numbers to be called. Hungry children with barely anything to cover their bones. Waiting endlessly in -10 degrees Celsius temperature. There is silence within Auschwitz, deafening silence. No one is talking. Suddenly a bird's twitter shatters the quiet monotony.

"Auschwitz did not begin as a concentration camp; in the beginning, it was a penal colony... Only when the Nazi policy towards the Jews changed did Auschwitz become an extermination camp..." I can hear the guide's sing-song narrative. On June 14, 1940, the first set of 728 Polish prisoners arrived from Tarnow. That was the beginning. Soon that trickle would include thousands who came from all over Europe in the dingy cattle carts (train bogeys) with no toilet, a tiny hole



*The gas chamber where thousands of people were killed with Zyklon B gas*



*The Wall of Death in Auschwitz against which nearly 22,000 prisoners were shot dead*





*An outside view of the Auschwitz camp*

for ventilation and only three days of food supply. Not that all journeys lasted three days – those who came from Greece chugged on the train for 17 days. With only three-day supply of food and clutching to hope that they would start anew a life amid the chaos and turmoil of World War II.

But hunger was the least of their woes. As soon as they disembarked, the SS guards robbed them of all their belongings. They were left with nothing. Not even a name. For at the ramp began the ‘selection’. With a ruler in a gloved hand, an SS commander would signal left or right – right meant assignment to work, left death in the gas chambers. Death was a certainty for infants, elderly, infirm, pregnant woman, they were not deemed fit to work in the neighbouring factories where the SS men lent these deportees for three marks per person per day. Those who looked healthy survived, but became numbers. Or winkles (triangles): red for political prisoners, green for criminals, black for prostitutes, pink for homosexuals. Everyone was tattooed a number, older children on their

forearms, little children on their legs. In Auschwitz, names became redundant, obsolete; all that mattered was numbers: 18564, 29871, 45618, 32091... Random numbers that became destiny.

In Building Number 11, the names have returned on large laminated black and white pictures. I can read some. Michalana Petrenko, Pole, 13; Kopel Polter, Jew, 13; Anica Gruden Urisek, 14, fate unknown. From the stark walls emaciated children stare from the frames – rickety gypsy children, victims of the medical experiments of Dr Josef Mengele, MD, PhD, who was researching the issues of twins and dwarfism in cooperation with the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Genetics and Eugenics in Berlin-Dahlem; herds of naked women heading for the fateful ‘shower’; Franciscan monks from Niepokolanow being arrested; men cowering with fright in the transit camp in Pathviers, Drancy... Below the photographs is a chintz frock with striped patches, a pinafore with white buttons, a moth-eaten powder blue infant dress, a pink cardigan... They look sullied with time, their owners dead. And forgotten.

I run my hand on the glass on the pink cardigan. A little baby’s cardigan. Must have been six months old. Must have felt warm in the freezing cold... On a large laminated poster, statistics speak for themselves: 1.3 million killed. In bullets is the break-up: 1.1 million Jews. 150,000 Poles. 23,000 Gypsies. 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war. 25,000 others. I did not know where to count the baby in pink. I ran my hand on the glass pane again. Had she lived, that baby in pink would have been around 70 now, a woman with craggy skin and gleaming eyes. But Auschwitz killed her. She must have been thrown in a burning pit or died of starvation. Or succumbed to diarrhoea. Or died in her own filth or faeces. For no one could use the toilet more than twice a day; there was never enough water to clean up. Who knows what happened to that baby in pink.

I step out of the building where candles flickered in the starvation, suffocation and standing cells. In a cell, soiled clothes are hung on the washbasins. When the guards were too lazy to step out, they killed men inside these rooms; their blood flowing down the narrow



drain. The walls of the standing cell have fallen off but I peer at the tiny 4 x 4-foot space where four men were made to stand for hours as punishment. I stand by the wooden posts with iron hooks on which prisoners were hung with their hands tied at the back. I walk by the grey concrete Wall of Death where guards shot dead victims. There is not a drop of blood. It is impeccably clean. I touch the Wall; I almost hear a ricocheting bullet and feel the glee of the SS guards as a man slumped to death in his own pool of blood. I had walked back in time; I want to run away from Auschwitz, the barbarity is gnawing at my soul. Others from my group are heading to another building, I return to Building Number 5.

In Building Number 5, I am still thinking of Marie Kafka. In a pile of 80,000 shoes, I wonder which one is hers. I find a pair of white and maroon dainty stilettos; could be Marie's. There is a wooden clog. A black school shoe with missing laces. A strapped sandal. A pair of cowboy boots. Eighty thousand shoes. In another corner, spread evenly on concrete, is two tonnes of hair (during the 1945 camp liberation, seven tonnes of hair was seized at the Birkenau camp), a tight plait held tidily with a rubber band, a mop of sinuous curls by a bale of fabric woven out of human hair. If you look carefully, in the fabric you can still see real hair sticking out of the weft. Thousands of pots and pans dumped in a pit, mangled mass of hundreds of spectacles, countless tooth, shaving and shoe brushes. No names. Just personal belongings that the SS guards looted at the unloading ramp and stored them in Canada (warehouses were known as Canada; in Poland the term was used for the act of viewing fine gifts, a term stemming from the gifts that the Polish emigrants sent home from Canada). On a table I find punched tin lids, big and small – Derby Europe Cream, Kili Cream, Lola with a yellow lid, Schnoll pasta... Did the blue ornate Kili Cream belong to Marie? I wonder.

"To the gas chamber," the pretty

guide in blue chandelier earrings instructs. Between 1941 and 1942, Auschwitz must have echoed these words a million times. During the two years that the gas chamber was used as a killing room, SS guards must have huddled the elderly, sick, infirm, children, pregnant women into the gas chamber, which was originally a bunker. They knew not they were walking towards death; it was a 'shower' that they had to undress for. Instead of a hot shower, it was Zyklon B that snuffed life out of hundreds in a few minutes. Zyklon B was not a new miracle cyanide for the Nazis; the blue pellets were meant to delouse the camp inmates, until they became death's best alibi. The patent of Zyklon B was held by IG Farben company, but it was Tesch and Stabenow of Hamburg and Degesch of Dessau that supplied nearly three tonnes every month to Auschwitz, the bills of lading for which were produced in Nuremberg. The Nazis knew that it would take seven kilos of Zyklon B to kill 2,000 people in 20 minutes – tiny blue pellets that could pass off as prescription pills packed in green tin boxes and labelled – ironically – Gift Gas. The drill remained the same. The pellets were dumped through the chimney and the doors opened after 20 minutes; no, not to bury the dead but to yank their gold teeth off and then the bodies shoved hurriedly into the crematoriums that bore the imprimatur Topf, the ashes later dumped in the river. Then another wait... Another 2,000 hollered towards death in the gas chamber.

Inside the gas chamber, I shudder. A bat flaps its wings and darts by, I hear a wail. With flowers in her hands, a young woman sobs uncontrollably. I look at the ground beneath my feet, it is ordinary cement floor; I look at the ceiling and see the sunrays slanting in from the chimney, I stand under its warmth. In 1941, Marie must have stood here, naked, coughing, gasping for that last breath after the deadly pellets were dropped from the same chute. I step back; the thought of Marie is slaying my senses.

I touch the iron gurney by the crematorium and want to say a prayer.

My thoughts are interrupted. "This is the end of the tour." From the black recorder I hear the scratchy voice of the pretty guide in blue chandelier earrings. I can hear the shuffle of shoes as others from my group hurry out. I do not. I have to finish my prayer. I close my eyes and think of Marie. And the million others at Auschwitz.

I walk back towards the main entrance. I see the barbed wires. The skull painted on a wooden post. I deposit the headphone and walk out. The clouds have vanished with the wind, the sun is sweltering, my throat parched. I see an ice-cream kiosk. I pull out coins from my wallet to buy an ice cream. I hear footsteps behind me. And a loud cry. Is that Marie? I think of an emaciated Marie, curled up in the bunk. Cold and hungry. Bruised and teary. Separated from the family. Alone in her despair. I walk away from the kiosk. I forget about my parched throat. The ice cream. I buy a white rose. I do not know where Marie lay. For her, I place the rose under a tree. Marie must have walked that path once.

I think of Marie and head towards the bus.

I look back. A little girl in pigtails and pinafore has picked that rose... Marie must have looked like her before she packed that brown suitcase, painted her name, added the squiggle and took that train from Prague. If only there was no Auschwitz, Marie would have been over 80 today.

Someone once said, "Ever since I have come back from Auschwitz, I have cried every night." Ever since I have come back from Auschwitz, I have prayed for Marie every night. A question has been gnawing at my soul: What if Fate had played dirty with me? What if I were Marie Kafka who died in Auschwitz? What if...? I have returned from Auschwitz but that thought has left me sleepless. I can sleep no more, Marie. □

# No Phony Business

*How the cell phone revolution is sweeping the Indian countryside*

Linda Blake

Eleven-year-old Ritu crouches barefoot beside a row of freshly pressed dung cakes in Dugarau village in Uttar Pradesh. Encircled by cows and bleating baby goats, the pre-teen quickly takes out from her pocket her mother's mobile. "Mam, you coming my home," she types. "I am very happy and my mother and grandmother are very happy. Thank you." The SMS she sends is to "Ms Judy", a middle-aged American English teacher who volunteers in her block.

A couple of years ago, this scene, enacted in a rural backwater, would be hard to fathom. Ritu is, however, one of 1,000-odd students enrolled in a local school – 'Pardada-Pardadi', in the Anupshahar district of Bulandshahar, Uttar Pradesh. The school, about 130 kilometres from Delhi, aims to educate and empower village girls.

A precocious student with an infectious smile, Ritu is making the most of this new technology and practicing her English with Judy Hunger, a spunky, silver-haired teacher from North Carolina. "It is the best form of communication here, because the emails are so stilted," says Hunger as she unsuccessfully double-clicks the frozen school computer in front of her.

The internet's snail's pace is hardly helped by the school's frequent electrical outages – at least a dozen a day. "The nearby villagers are lucky if they get two hours of electricity a day," says Renuka Gupta, chief executive of 'Pardada-Pardadi' school. Uttar Pradesh's hot climate aggravates an already overtaxed power grid, making the supply of electricity intermittent

and unpredictable, and that too often at low voltages.

The latest World Bank statistics from 2008 indicate that 30 percent of Indian villages have no electricity. In Uttar Pradesh itself, roughly 18 thousand villages are still without electricity – that according to a report from the Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development at New York's Columbia University.

The same report says that even in villages where electricity is available, many villagers don't use the service because they can't afford it. Installation fees are an average of Rs 700 plus an additional Rs100 to Rs 500 allocated towards what the report calls 'facilitation costs,' which is formal-speaks for bribes. With 40 percent of the state below the poverty line, Gupta says "usually villagers don't pay for the electricity; they don't feel like they should."

"Villagers are far more willing to spend money on mobile phones than on erratic electricity," Gupta adds. Mobile phone services here have some of the cheapest rates in the world. It cost less than Rs 2 for Ritu to send an SMS to Hunger, for example, and call rates are as low as Rs1 a minute. This has made mobile phones financially accessible to poor young villagers like Ritu's schoolmate 19-year-old Sony Sharma – the proud owner of a Nokia 1600 phone. The olive-skinned teenager flashes her phone, a hunk of circuitry which has quickly turned her into the village DJ. By night, the tinny melodies of "Oh when the Saints Go Marching In" or "Jai Ho" echoes through endless

rows of sugarcane in her village.

It is new rural phone owners like Sony – with an earning power of less than 4,000 rupees monthly – who make up India's approximate ten million new mobile subscribers each month. Investment in mobile phones is increasing and quite visible in a village like Sony's, where three steel cell-phone towers have cropped up on a flank of the still, greying Ganges this past year. Sony says about half of the families in her village have already acquired cellphones.

The Indian Cellular Association estimates that by next year two-thirds of all Indians will own a mobile phone with most new sales coming from rural India. For some villagers without electricity, charging the phone, however, can become a problem. Needless to say, many villagers don't let this get in the way of their chances of owning a functional mobile device. Take the residents of a Madhya Pradesh village – just 80 kilometres from Sagar, for example. According to a recent CNN-IBN report, 40 of them travel at least 20 km a day just to charge their mobiles.

Despite these infrastructural handicaps and inventive workarounds, mobile phones have become devices that villagers can rely on for connectivity and predictability. Villagers in India are one sim card away from "equal access to information, the government, and financial and health schemes," says Hilmi Quraishi, chief officer for ZMQ Software Systems, a New Delhi-based e-learning company that designs mobile games.

Fully activating the potential of mobile phone content may be just the







ticket to boosting India's global influence. "Apart from being a communication tool, which is the prime reason you possess (a mobile phone) to begin with, the ideal role of the mobile phone would be to serve as your bank, a learning tool, a platform where people have access to government tenders, policy matters and even to their local leaders and officers," explains Quraishi.

In some places, mobile phones have helped increase business productivity, allowing farmers to communicate directly with buyers round the clock, without the need for middlemen, and check up on prices before they transfer produce to the market, "thus saving money and (giving them) higher margins," says Quraishi.

"Education for All" has been a popular cellular ad campaign on television. Created in 2008, the commercial gushes sappy music as a teacher sits before a sea of cellphones. The teacher goes on to transmit a live mobile lesson to India's youth, ranging from sun-baked tots on a Kerala shore to turbaned Rajasthani children. Viewers are left with the message that mobile telephony is breaking barriers to educational access.

In reality, India's village-based teachers like Ms. Judy Hunger are not likely to have a sea of mobile video phones at their disposal anytime soon. And, as far as Hunger sees it, most Indian villagers have just enough mobile competency to dial a phone number or shoot off an SMS.

Hunger says that built-in functions have enormous potential to increase willingness among village folks to learn. She cites many villagers who are currently not in school, but are using their mobiles as "a self-exploratory device to learn letter and number basics" – the first step to overcoming illiteracy. Most cellphones available in the villages have a Roman alphabet default. This creates a "basic familiarity with English script," Hunger explains.

India has more than 350 million active mobile users. Quraishi says that these "tools of the common man," are far more accessible than government-subsidised computer kiosks in villages or heavily discounted laptops. "The fact

of the matter is," says Quraishi "these people who run these kiosks are like masters and give very little access to computers to the general public."

Quraishi adds there are many people in villages who have been able to tinker with the computers thanks to the assistance of an NGO volunteer but are not actually given the hours necessary to explore the operating systems and use them for consistent learning. Mobile, on the other hand, "is a personal device which people learn through self exploration." No wonder then that Carnegie Mellon University professor Matthew Kam has dubbed cellphones "the PC of the developing world."

It used to be that cellphone ownership in rural India was limited to the male head of the household. Now, it is more common to see "two mobiles per household in the villages," says Quraishi. Although mobile ownership is increasing even within a single household, "it's a shame that mobile phone content in India is not being utilised enough for social development purposes," says Sashwati Banerjee, executive director of Sesame Workshop India.

Banerjee runs the educational children's television series 'Galli Galli Sim Sim.' The TV show, funded by Turner Broadcasting, which airs on Pogo, Doorarshan and Cartoon Network, features colourful cloth characters that teach basic social and literacy skills to children aged three to six. The characters include Chamki, an orange-tinted Muppet adorned with little blue boys and a matching Indian school uniform. Then, there's Googly, a gentle, shy six-year-old who has a cricket-ball nose and likes to read in solitude.

These relatable characters are designed especially to teach Indian children "who are marginalised and underprivileged," says Banerjee. 'Galli Galli Sim Sim' reaches children living in urban slums of the six largest cities in India – Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore and Ahmadabad.

"Personally I think there is a huge amount of potential and it has been sad that the large mobile services providers haven't latched on to this as their CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility],"

Banerjee says. While Corporate Social Responsibility is well developed in the United States "in India it is very nascent and almost non-existent," she adds. Banerjee simply does not have the financial support, the kind generally provided by corporations, to expand into the mobile market and reach poor children or families with educational content on mobiles.

There is no shortage of such content readily available to distribute on mobile phones, however. Sesame Workshop India recently collaborated with Carnegie Mellon University professor Matthew Kam to pilot a mobile game that teaches English to young rural Indians. The pilot series featured 'Galli Galli Sim Sim' characters. Additionally, each mobile game mirrored traditional rural activities like Giti Phod, where teams have to arrange rocks into a configuration while avoiding getting smacked by a ball.

Most school-aged participants in the project had taken some English classes in rural school houses, but still struggled to spell their names or read each letter in the alphabet. The game filled in those educational gaps and significantly improved the children's day-to-day use of the language. English education "is an integral component to making India a commercial superpower," says Kam. "Without a highly-skilled workforce that is fluent in a global language like English, how can they participate in international commerce?"

What's lacking now is the "distribution arm," says Banerjee. Funded by a MacArthur Foundation grant, Kam's Mobile and Immersive Learning for Literacy in Emerging Economies (MILLEE) project, is now sitting idle. Kam also has ambitious plans to create an audio-only version of the game that village children can play while going through their morning chores. Kam says he hopes to collaborate with "the Indian educational authorities, cellphone manufacturers and wireless carriers to seize the mobile learning opportunity." When asked about the progress he has made in getting a wireless partner, Kam points out that "there isn't enough altruism to go around".

Village youth will not be turning to their mobile phones in great num-



Two girls peeping into each other's cell phones to see who is winning the English language mobile game

bers to play English education games anytime soon. However, there are some innovative mobile game efforts that are already in play. For the past couple of years, Hilmi Quraishi's software company ZMQ has been distributing to rural Indians mobile games that touch on sensitive issues such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, cholera and even child trafficking.

Their largest effort is the 'Freedom HIV/AIDS' initiative, four educational mobile games that, thanks to support from such groups as Johns Hopkins University and Reliance Infocomm, have already reached 29 million people across Asia and Africa. More than half of all the game downloads generate from what Quraishi calls "media dark areas." These are areas like "deep villages in Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh where populations have no access to radio and television," explains Quraishi. But, they have mobile phones and they are hyper-eager to use them to access information, the game-designer explains.

One of ZMQ's most popular games in rural India, with 10 million players to date, is *Safety Cricket*, which teaches players about safe sex and HIV while they play India's favourite sport. High scorers are praised for being faithful to their partners and protective cricket helmets are equated with condoms. Outs appear in the form of 'Unsafe Sex', 'Infected Blood Transfusions', 'HIV Virus', 'Infected Syringes' – and the company of bad friends. If you get out in the game, you get out in life for having had unsafe sex.

Available in black and white and in various regional languages, *Safety Cricket* is for many players their only exposure to HIV and AIDS education. According to the latest UNAIDS fact sheet released in 2008, less than one-third of Indians between the ages of 15 and 24 surveyed actually knew how to prevent HIV infection. Many states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh have banned sex education in schools. The World Bank reports that HIV is responsible for

two percent of all deaths in India.

Subhi Quraishi, Hilmi Quraishi's brother and chief executive of ZMQ, says that mobile games are the perfect way to cut through the politics that permeates HIV/AIDS prevention endeavours in India to provide useful information that will actually save lives. "Nobody points a finger at what's being delivered to you," he says. "You are actually playing a game, so it's not serious study. It is good quality entertainment with good learning."

One other recent mobile phone education effort carrying a social advocacy message is a BBC World Service Trust produced downloadable mp3 mobile ringtone named 'Condom-a-cappella' or 'Condom Condom Ringtone', composed by Rupert Fernandes and sung by Vijay Prakash. This ode to safe sex – even its audio waveform looks penile, but sheathed – blasted from millions of cellphones with the unmistakable chorus, "Condom, Condom, Connnnddom", through most of 2008.



Linda Blake

*Safety Cricket, one of ZMQ's most popular mobile games, is for many players their only exposure to HIV/AIDS education*

In an interview with Reuters Health, Yvonne McPherson, country director for India for the BBC World Service Trust, said that she “wanted to create a conversation piece that would get people talking and ultimately break down taboos about condoms”. While it certainly got people singing and snickering, the jury’s still out on whether this melding of sex, singing and technology encouraged more Indians to “strap on their cricket helmets,” so to speak. The ringtone can still be downloaded from [www.condomcondom.org](http://www.condomcondom.org).

If cricket and condoms aren’t exactly your cup of *chai*, you could live out your Sherlock Holmes fantasy by playing the soon-to-be-released *Copenhagen Challenge*. ZMQ has just teamed up with the Danish government to launch this mobile phone detective game designed to educate Indian schoolchildren about climate change. The mission: “Free Dr Kumar

from the clutches of the fossil fuel mafia and save the earth from total annihilation.” Currently available on Reliance Networks free of charge, the game will be available May 1st on Airtel, Idea, Vodaphone, and Tata for a minor fee of Rs 5 per download.

Denmark’s Minister for Climate and Energy Connie Hedegaard says that India’s cellphone penetration made the Indian mobile network the “natural choice” for this extensive climate-change advocacy. She adds that she hopes this information will impact young Indians to do what little they can, from composting to switching off the lights when they leave a room. The impact of this campaign will be explored when Denmark hosts the United Nation’s international climate change conference, COP-15, in Copenhagen this December.


In the coming months, ZMQ also plans to launch an SMS programme

for expectant mothers. “We want to empower women in villages with healthcare and support,” says ZMQ CEO Subhi Quraishi. Pregnant villagers submit their approximate date of conception and are issued an instant mobile nurse. Much like a daily horoscope, the women receive regular messages on their mobile phones with advice on how to maintain their prenatal health. Once the child is born, the mother sends an SMS reporting the gender. Each month thereafter, the mother is sent nutrition factoids and critical information on appropriate inoculations.

As mobile education expands, ZMQ is already busy working on the next stage, which Hilmi Quraishi calls “Indian mobilisation goes global.” In the next three or four months, ZMQ will export *Mobile Yoga Classroom*, a game that sends something quintessentially Indian to a global mobile audience. □



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# Why Isn't the Brain Green?

*How perceptions of risk shape our responses to climate change*

Jon Gertner

Two days after Barack Obama was sworn in as president of the United States, the Pew Research Center released a poll ranking the issues that Americans said were the most important priorities for this year. At the top of the list were several concerns — jobs and the economy — related to the current recession. Farther down, well after terrorism, deficit reduction and energy (and even something the pollsters characterized as “moral decline”) was climate change. It was priority No. 20. That was last place.

A little more than a week after the poll was published, I took a seat in a wood-paneled room at Columbia University, where a few dozen academics had assembled for a two-day conference on the environment. In many respects, the Pew rankings were a suitable backdrop for the get-together, a meeting of researchers affiliated with something called CRED, or the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions. A branch of behavioral research situated at the intersection of psychology and economics, decision science focuses on the mental processes that shape our choices, behaviors and attitudes. The field's origins grew mostly out of the work, beginning in the 1970s, of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, two psychologists whose experiments have demonstrated that people can behave unexpectedly when confronted with simple choices. We have many automatic biases — we're more averse to losses than we are

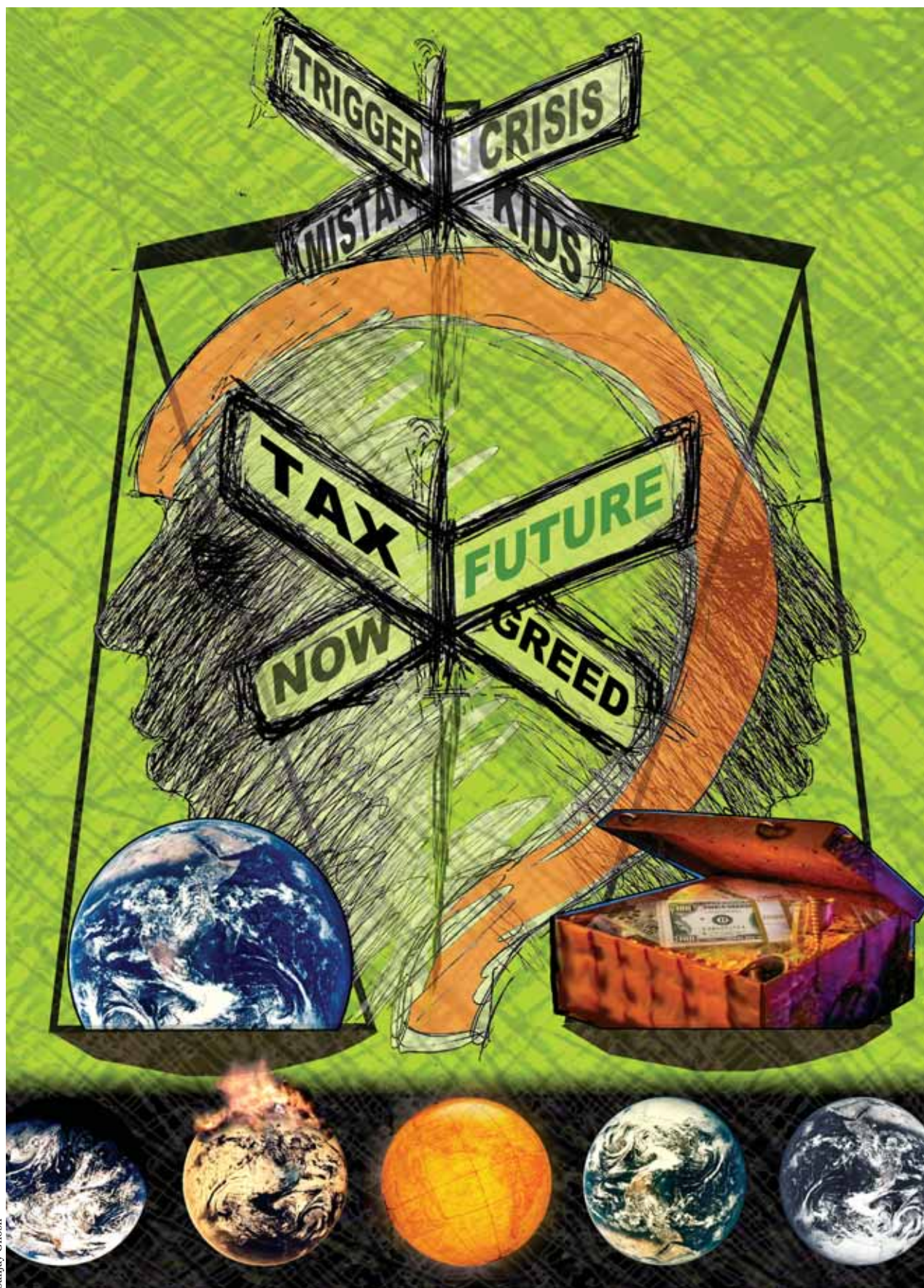
interested in gains, for instance — and we make repeated errors in judgment based on our tendency to use shorthand rules to solve problems. We can also be extremely susceptible to how questions are posed. Would you undergo surgery if it had a 20 percent mortality rate? What if it had an 80 percent survival rate? It's the same procedure, of course, but in various experiments, responses from patients can differ markedly.

Over the past few decades a great deal of research has addressed how we make decisions in financial settings or when confronted with choices having to do with health care and consumer products. A few years ago, a Columbia psychology professor named David H. Krantz teamed up with Elke Weber — who holds a chair at Columbia's business school as well as an appointment in the school's psychology department — to assemble an interdisciplinary group of economists, psychologists and anthropologists from around the world who would examine decision-making related to environmental issues. Aided by a \$6 million grant from the National Science Foundation, CRED has the primary objective of studying how perceptions of risk and uncertainty shape our responses to climate change and other weather phenomena like hurricanes and droughts. The goal, in other words, isn't so much to explore theories about how people relate to nature, which has been a longtime pursuit of some environmental psychologists

and even academics like the Harvard biologist E O Wilson. Rather, it is to finance laboratory and field experiments in North America, South America, Europe and Africa and then place the findings within an environmental context.

It isn't immediately obvious why such studies are necessary or even valuable. Indeed, in the United States scientific community, where nearly all dollars for climate investigation are directed toward physical or biological projects, the notion that vital environmental solutions will be attained through social-science research — instead of improved climate models or innovative technologies — is an aggressively insurgent view. You might ask the decision scientists, as I eventually did, if they aren't overcomplicating matters. Doesn't a low-carbon world really just mean phasing out coal and other fossil fuels in favor of clean-energy technologies, domestic regulations and international treaties? None of them disagreed. Some smiled patiently. But all of them wondered if I had underestimated the countless group and individual decisions that must precede any widespread support for such technologies or policies. “Let's start with the fact that climate change is anthropogenic,” Weber told me one morning in her Columbia office. “More or less, people have agreed on that. That means it's caused by human behavior. That's not to say that engineering solutions aren't









important. But if it's caused by human behavior, then the solution probably also lies in changing human behavior."

Among other things, CRED's researchers consider global warming a singular opportunity to study how we react to long-term trade-offs, in the form of sacrifices we might make now in exchange for uncertain climate benefits far off in the future. And the research also has the potential to improve environmental messages, policies and technologies so that they are more in tune with the quirky workings of our minds. As I settled in that first morning at the Columbia conference, Weber was giving a primer on how people tend to reach decisions. Cognitive psychologists now broadly accept that we have different systems for processing risks. One system works analytically, often involving a careful consideration of costs and benefits. The other experiences risk as a feeling: a primitive and urgent reaction to danger, usually based on a personal experience, that can prove invaluable when (for example) we wake at night to the smell of smoke.

There are some unfortunate implications here. In analytical

mode, we are not always adept at long-term thinking; experiments have shown a frequent dislike for delayed benefits, so we undervalue promised future outcomes. (Given a choice, we usually take \$10 now as opposed to, say, \$20 two years from now.) Environmentally speaking, this means we are far less likely to make lifestyle changes in order to ensure a safer future climate. Letting emotions determine how we assess risk presents its own problems. Almost certainly, we underestimate the danger of rising sea levels or epic droughts or other events that we've never experienced and seem far away in time and place. Worse, Weber's research seems to help establish that we have a "finite pool of worry," which means we're unable to maintain our fear of climate change when a different problem — a plunging stock market, a personal emergency — comes along. We simply move one fear into the worry bin and one fear out. And even if we could remain persistently concerned about a warmer world? Weber described what she calls a "single-action bias." Prompted by a distressing emotional signal, we buy a more efficient furnace or insulate our attic or vote for a green candidate — a single action that

effectively diminishes global warming as a motivating factor. And that leaves us where we started.

Debates over why climate change isn't higher on Americans' list of priorities tend to center on the same culprits: the doubt-sowing remarks of climate-change skeptics, the poor communications skills of good scientists, the political system's inability to address long-term challenges without a thunderous precipitating event, the tendency of science journalism to focus more on what is unknown (will oceans rise by two feet or by five?) than what is known and is durably frightening (the oceans are rising). By the time Weber was midway into her presentation, though, it occurred to me that some of these factors might not matter as much as I had thought. I began to wonder if we are just built to fail.

Columbia's behavioral labs are located underground and consist of a windowless suite of bright, sparsely furnished rooms with whitewashed cinder-block walls and gray industrial carpet. Each lab has a common area with a small rectangular table; adjacent to the common area are several tiny offices equipped with Dell computers. Depending on the experiment, test subjects, who are usually paid around \$15 to participate and who are culled largely from Columbia's student body, can work on tests collaboratively at the table or individually in the private offices.

Each lab room is also equipped with a hidden camera and microphone. One afternoon in February, I sat in a small viewing room and watched, on a closed-circuit television monitor, a CRED experiment being conducted down the hall by Juliana Smith, a graduate student at Columbia. Three subjects were dealing with several quandaries. The first involved reaching a consensus on how to apply \$5 billion worth of federal funds to wind-energy technologies.

Should they spend it all on conventional wind turbines? Should they invest some (or all) of the money on an as-yet-unproven technology that would employ magnetic levitation to create a huge, long-lasting, superefficient wind-powered generator? After the group came to a consensus in each of the test segments, its members were asked to go into the offices and figure out their own individual decisions.

When I first heard about these particular experiments at CRED, I assumed they were meant to provide insight into our opinions about wind power. It turned out the researchers had little curiosity about what we think of wind power. Because CRED's primary goal is to understand decision-making in situations of uncertainty, the wind-turbine question — should we spend money on building turbines now with a proven technology or should we finance technologies that might be more efficient someday? — was intriguing not for its content but for the way it revealed how our minds work. The familiar variables were all there: uncertainty, time, potential gains, potential losses.

For the researchers, it was crucial to understand precisely how group dynamics shaped decisions during the experiment. In Weber's view, many important environmental choices (building codes, for instance, or vehicle purchases) are made by groups — households, companies, community boards and the like. And various experiments at CRED have established the ease of getting random individuals to cooperate; in one test, simply giving some subjects a colored sticker, a blue star, say, and telling them they were on the "blue-star team" increased group participation from 35 percent to 50 percent. (Just seating them together at a table increased participation rates to 75 percent.) "So cooperation is a goal that can be activated," Weber told

me one morning. Her point was that climate change can be easily viewed as a very large "commons dilemma" — a version, that is, of the textbook situation in which shepherders have little incentive to act alone to preserve the grassy commons and as a result suffer collectively from overgrazing. The best way to avoid such failure is by collaborating more, not less. "We enjoy congregating; we need to know we are part of groups," Weber said. "It gives us inherent pleasure to do this. And when we are reminded of the fact that we're part of communities, then the community becomes sort of the decision-making unit. That's how we make huge sacrifices, like in World War II."

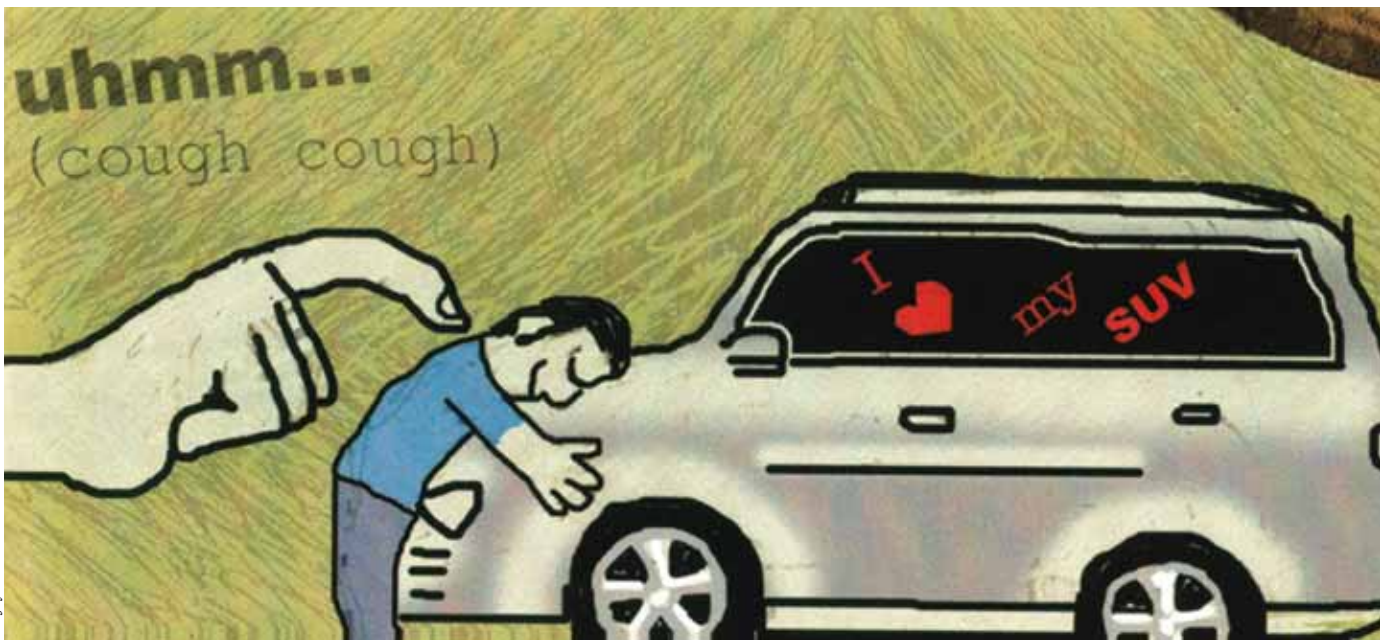
A few days before visiting Columbia's behavioral labs, I watched a test run of the same experiments at a large conference table at CRED's nearby offices in Schermerhorn Hall. Student subjects, two men and one woman, debated the two windmill scenarios. "We should put more money in project A," one said. Another countered, "But science grows exponentially, so I think we should put more in B." An impassioned discussion about wind turbines went

round and round.

I sat between Weber and Michel Handgraaf, a member of CRED and a professor of psychology at the University of Amsterdam. Handgraaf, who had already started running a similar experiment in Amsterdam, leaned over and whispered to me: "You'll notice they're saying, 'This has so-and-so effect over so many years' — that's analytical. But then often they're saying, 'But I feel this way' — that's emotional." In short, what Handgraaf and Weber were hearing wasn't a conversation about the best wind turbine but a tussle between the subjects' analytical and emotional methods of risk assessment. These experiments would be run with 50 different groups in New York, Handgraaf told me, and the conversations would be recorded and scored for data. The data were in the words. They were in how individuals parsed uncertainty and future trade-offs; they were in the phrases they used as they navigated between thinking and feeling; they were in the way the subjects followed a winding path to a consensual decision, soothing worries or explaining technical information to one another or



Cartoon Arts International / Distributed by The NYT Syndicate



Sanjay Ghosh

appealing to the group's more courageous instincts.

Embedded deep within the experimental structure was another inquiry, too. The subjects in half of the 50 test groups would first make their decisions individually and then as a group; the other half would make group decisions first and individual ones second. Weber and Handgraaf were fairly confident, based on previous work, that the two approaches would produce different results. In Amsterdam, Handgraaf told me, he had already seen that when subjects made decisions as a group first, their conversations were marked far more often by subtle markers of inclusion like "us" and "we." Weber, for her part, had seen other evidence that groups can be more patient than individuals when considering delayed benefits. "One reason this is interesting is that it's general practice in any meeting to prepare individually," Handgraaf said. Or, to put the matter another way: What if the information for decisions, especially environmental ones, is first considered in a group setting before members take it up individually, rather than the other way around? In Weber's view, this

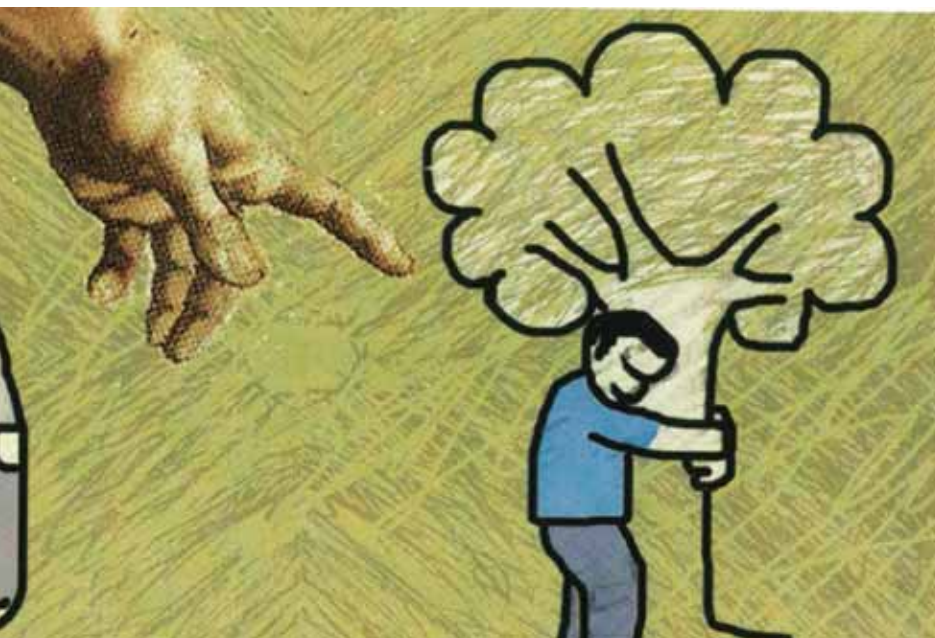
step could conceivably change the decisions made by a corporate board, for example, or a group of homeowners called together for a meeting by a public utility. Weber's experiments have also looked at how the ordering of choices can create stark differences: considering distant benefits before immediate costs can lead to a different decision than if you consider — as is common — the costs first. Here, then, is a kind of blueprint for achieving collective decisions that are in the world's best interests, but I asked Weber if that wouldn't that skew the natural decision-making process.

"We tend to always wonder," she replied: "What's that person's true preference? What do they really want? I think that's the wrong question, because we want it all." People have multiple goals. If group involvement or the ordering of choices changes the process of making a particular decision, and in turn the result — whether because it tweaked our notions of risk or because it helped elevate social goals above individual goals and led to better choices for the global commons — that isn't necessarily a distortion of our true preference.

There is no such thing as true preference.

At the moment, about 98 percent of the federal financing for climate-change research goes to the physical and natural sciences, with the remainder apportioned to the social sciences. In science-policy-speak, that leftover percentage is typically referred to as "human dimensions" research, an omnibus description for studies on how individuals and groups interact with the environment. Paul Stern, a psychologist who heads the Committee on Human Dimensions of Global Change at the National Research Council in Washington and whose work includes looking at how people consume energy in the home, told me that human-dimensions work usually falls into one of three categories: the human activities that cause environmental change, the impacts of environmental change on people and society and the human responses to those consequences. Much of CRED's research is about the human responses to the experiences (or anticipated experiences) of climate change. What makes CRED's work especially





relevant, though, is that various human attitudes and responses — How can there be global warming when we had a frigid January? What's in it for me if I change the way I live? — can make the climate problem worse by leaving it unacknowledged or unaddressed. Apathetic and hostile responses to climate change, in other words, produce a feedback loop and reinforce the process of global warming.

Lab experiments in the social sciences, like the ones I witnessed at Columbia, are sometimes criticised for their counterfeit drama. After all, how often do we actually get to disburse \$5 billion from the Department of Energy on windmills? Also, is the real world made up entirely of Columbia University students? These factors don't necessarily affect the knowledge that researchers can gain about human decision-making processes; lab experiments on investment decisions, for instance, have long been shown to offer useful insights into our real-world investment choices. Nonetheless, fieldwork has a value that can't always be reproduced in a lab. The

lab experiment designed by Weber and Handgraaf actually took a cue from research done by another CRED member, Ben Orlove, an anthropologist at the University of California, Davis, who studied farmers in southern Uganda. In 2005 and 2006, Orlove observed how the behavior of the region's poor farmers could be influenced by whether they listened to crucial rainy-season radio broadcasts in groups or as individuals. Farmers in "community groups," as Orlove described them to me, engaged in discussions that led to a consensus, and farmers made better use of the forecast. "They might alter their planting date," he said, "or use a more drought-resistant variety of seed." Those in the community groups also seemed more satisfied with the steps they took to increase their yields.

In 2005, Anthony Leiserowitz, a CRED member who directs the Yale Project on Climate Change, began a multiyear field project when he drove to Anchorage in a camper with his wife and two-year-old son. "I had worked on some national studies about American perceptions of climate change," he told me, "and

one of the clear findings was — and still is — that most Americans think about climate change as a distant problem. Distant in time, and distant in space." In Alaska, however, there was already evidence of melting permafrost, insect-driven tree mortality and diminished sea ice. Leiserowitz saw a natural opportunity. The possibility that society won't act decisively on global warming until we experience a shattering realisation — a Pearl Harbor moment, as the climate blogger and former Department of Energy official Joe Romm recently put it — aligns with our tendency to respond quickly to the stimulus of experience and emotion, but slowly to a risk that we process analytically and that may be rife with uncertainties. Leiserowitz simply wondered if Alaskans, now living in a state of easily perceived climate changes, could illuminate how — and by how much — direct experience could change attitudes.

Traveling the state, Leiserowitz interviewed scientists, journalists, environmental leaders, politicians and — in the remote northwestern city of Kotzebue — indigenous tribal leaders. He also commissioned a survey. His data showed that the majority of Alaskans had indeed detected a change in climate and attributed it to man-made causes; they also said they believed warming would have significant impacts on Alaska and the world. But Leiserowitz found deep perceptual gaps between urban Alaskans, whose experience of climate change was limited, and rural residents. (People living in Kotzebue, for instance, were experiencing a threat to their culture from the erosion of sea ice, which limited their ice fishing.) In sum, Alaskans were no more worried than the American public as a whole about climate change. And they were no more inclined than typical Americans to see it as a serious threat to themselves or to their communities.

About half of them, in fact, considered climate change a long-term problem that required more study before acting.

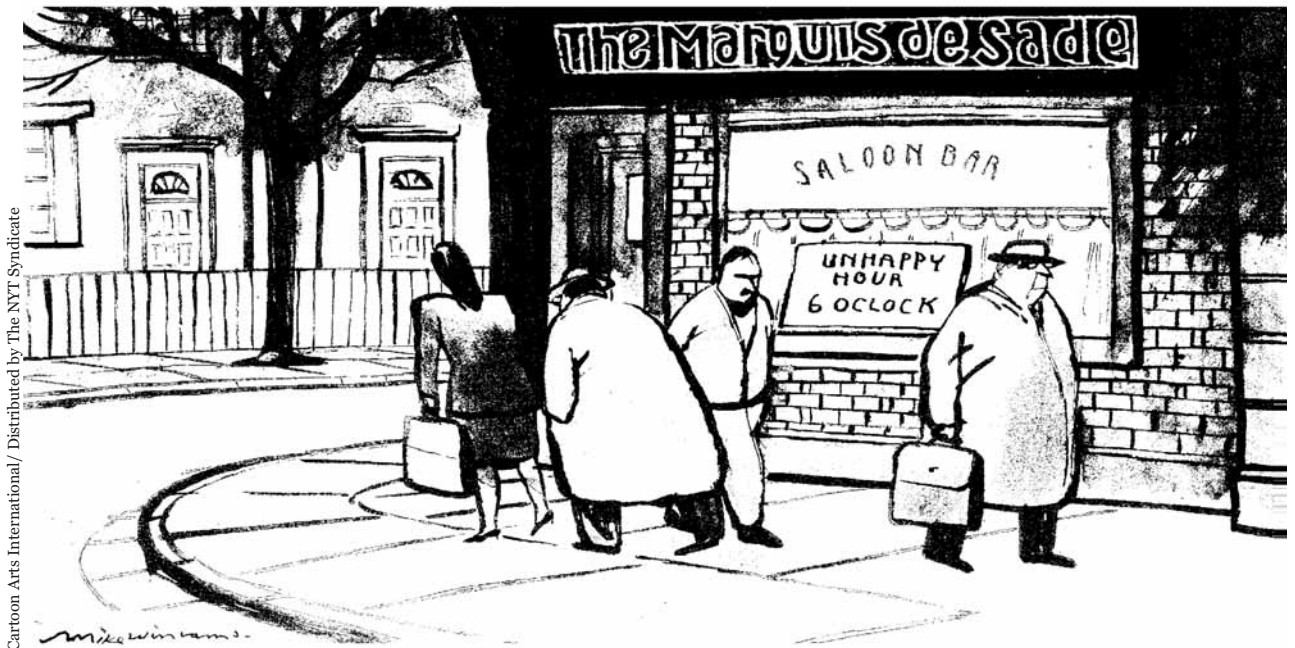
Among other things, the results suggested that experience of climate change is a relative thing: something happening to another part of your state, or to a different cultural group, doesn't necessarily warrant a change in your own response. It likewise hinted at the complexity of instilling feelings of climate-related urgency in Americans. If you don't think or feel there's a risk, why change your behavior? In response, researchers like Leiserowitz have investigated messages that could captivate all different kinds of audiences. Reaching a predominantly evangelical or conservative audience, Leiserowitz told me, could perhaps be achieved by honing a message of "moral Christian values," an appeal possibly based on the divine instruction in Genesis 2:15 to tend and till the garden.

Over the past few years, it has become fashionable to describe this kind of focused communication as having the proper frame. In our

haste to mix jargon into everyday conversation, frames have sometimes been confused with nudges, a term made popular in a recent book, "Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness," written by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein when they were academics at the University of Chicago. (Sunstein later moved to Harvard Law School and has since been nominated as the head of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.) Frames and nudges are not precisely the same; frames are just one way to nudge people by using sophisticated messages, mined from decision-science research, that resonate with particular audiences or that take advantage of our cognitive biases (like informing us that an urgent operation has an 80 percent survival rate). Nudges, more broadly, structure choices so that our natural cognitive shortcomings don't make us err. Ideally, nudges direct us, gently, toward actions that are in our long-term interest, like an automated retirement savings plan that circumvents our typical inertia. Thaler and Sunstein explain in their

book that nudges can take advantage of technology like home meters, which have been shown to reduce electricity usage by making constant feedback available. These appeal to our desire for short-term satisfaction and being rewarded for improvement. Or a nudge might be as simple as a sensor installed in our home by a utility that automatically turns off all unnecessary power once we leave for the day — a technology, in effect, that doesn't even require us to use our brains. "I think the potential there is huge," Thaler told me recently, when I asked him about environmental nudges. "And I think we can use a whole bag of tricks."

Leiserowitz and Weber spend a fair amount of time talking to scientists and policy makers about how to translate their insights into possible frames and nudges. In Weber's view, CRED was established because the traditional model of using decision research — in which physical scientists doing a study might seek the input of psychologists at the end to help them frame their findings — seemed both backward and ineffective. "By then it's too late," Weber said,

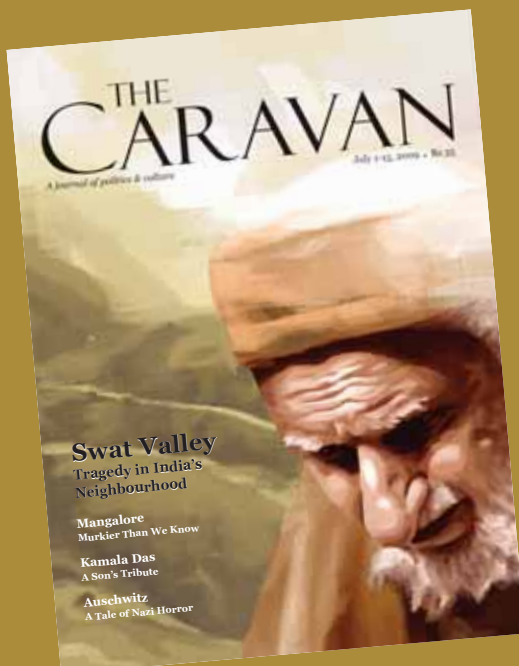


“because you haven’t explored all the initial options that would have been more beneficial.” In other words, Weber says she believes decision science isn’t only about structuring choices or finding the right frame to get a better outcome; it’s about identifying useful information that can be used for innovative products, policies and scientific studies. At the National Research Council, Paul Stern offered the example of a climatologist who had been discussing climate change with cherry farmers in several Michigan counties. The farmers didn’t care about future temperatures as much as the date of the last spring frost. “No one has been interested in trying to predict the date of the last spring frost,” Stern told me, but maybe they should be. “They’ve been trying to

predict average temperature and heat waves.” Weber likewise envisioned a similar application in technology or government policy. “Whatever you design as the most cost-effective or technologically feasible solution might not be palatable to the end users or might encounter political oppositions,” she said. Behavioral research could have helped you see such hurdles ahead of time. “You could have designed a way to implement it better. Or you could have thought about another solution.”

Over the winter, the Obama administration began working on regulations for carbon-dioxide emissions, arguably the most important climate-related policy ever undertaken. While many economists favor the simplicity of a carbon tax, it seemed every person

of influence in the United States government agreed that a cap-and-trade policy — in which carbon emissions are capped and firms can buy and sell credits — was preferable. Perhaps this was understandable: the poisonous associations of the word “tax” appear to doom it as a policy. And yet this assumption can obscure what actually happens in the minds of Americans on this issue. Not long ago, David Hardisty, a student of Weber’s, led an experiment in which a 2 percent fee added to an airline ticket was described to various subjects as either a carbon “tax” or a carbon “offset.” The subjects were told the fee would finance alternative-energy and carbon-reduction technologies. Hardisty predicted he would get different results from Democrats and



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A more interesting part of the experiment came next. Hardisty asked his subjects to write down their thoughts, in order, as they decided whether to pay the tax or the offset. Why should this matter? We've long understood that many of us find the word "tax" repellent, but we don't know precisely how it repels us. For the past few years, Weber and her husband, Eric Johnson, a professor at Columbia's business school, have been looking at how we construct our preferences when making a choice; they theorize that we "query" ourselves, mustering evidence pro

people to list their thoughts about the fee in one order or another (pros first or cons first) affected their preference, regardless of whether they were Democrats or Republicans.

So in terms of policy, it may not be the actual tax mechanism that some people object to; it's the way a "trivial semantic difference," as Hardisty put it, can lead a group to muster powerful negative associations before they have a chance to consider any benefits. Baruch Fischhoff, a professor at Carnegie Mellon and a kind of elder statesman among decision scientists, told me he's fairly convinced a carbon tax could be made superior to cap and trade in terms of human palatability. "I think there's an attractive version of the carbon tax if somebody thought about its design," Fischhoff told me,



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adding that it's a fundamental principle of decision research that if you're going to get people to pay a cost, it's better to do it in a simple manner (like a tax) than a complex one (like in cap and trade). Fischhoff sketched out for me a possible research endeavor — the careful design of a tax instrument and the sophisticated collection of behavioral responses to it — that he thought would be necessary for a tax proposal to gather support. "But I don't think the politicians are that informed about the realm of the possible," he added. "Opinion polls are not all that one needs."

One objection to potential nudges, whether on carbon taxes or household energy use, is that they can seem insidious. "They empower government to maneuver people in its preferred directions," Thaler and Sunstein note in their book, "and at the same time provide officials with excellent tools by which to accomplish that task." Thaler and Sunstein conclude that a crucial principle is to always preserve choice as an option (nudging people with a home energy meter, for instance, is fine as long as they can opt out of using it). Weber and David Krantz, two of the co-directors of CRED, have given the matter a good deal of thought, too. "People need some guidance over what the right thing to do is," Krantz told me. But he said that he was doubtful that you could actually deceive people with decision science into acting in ways that they don't believe are right. "Remember when New York tried to enforce its jaywalking laws?" he asked. "You can't enforce stuff that people don't believe should be done."

When I raised the issue of possible ethical dilemmas with Weber, she countered by claiming that government constantly tries to instill behaviors that are considered to be in society's best interest. "There's no way around

it," she told me. "We're always trying to push some agenda." Take the decision to allow certain kinds of mortgages and securities to be sold that are now considered disastrous. In doing so, according to Weber, "we were privileging certain people, and certain institutions. And for a long time we were pushing the idea that everyone should own a house." As for the question of manipulation, Weber contended that there is no neutral, "value-free way" of presenting people with information. "I think you have to take it as a given that whatever we do, whether it's what we currently do or what we plan to do," she said, "has some value judgment built into it." The crucial question, at least to her, is whether (and when) we want to use the tools of decision science to try and steer people toward better choices. If our preferences aren't fixed the way we think they are — if, as Weber has argued, they're sometimes merely constructed on the spot in response to a choice we face — why not try new methods (ordering options, choosing strategic words,

creating group effects and so forth) to elicit preferences aligned with our long-term interest? That has to be better, in Weber's opinion, than having people blunder unconsciously into an environmental catastrophe.

In fact, any potential climate disasters, at least to a behaviorist like Weber, would likely signal the start of an intriguing but ultimately dismal chain of events. A few years ago Weber wrote a paper for the journal *Climatic Change* that detailed the psychological reasons that global warming doesn't yet scare us; in it, she concluded that the difficulties of getting humans to act are inherently self-correcting. "Increasing personal evidence of global warming and its potentially devastating consequences can be counted on to be an extremely effective teacher and motivator," she wrote, pointing to how emotional and experiential feelings of risk are superb drivers of action. "Unfortunately, such lessons may arrive too late for corrective action." □

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**"We've merged the Conflict Resolution class with the Karate class."**



# The Original Maverick

*Life and times of the grand old man of Indian theatre*

Abhimanyu K Singh

I distinctly remember the first time I saw Habib Tanvir. It was in 2003. He had come to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where I studied, to stage two of his plays – *Ponga Pundit* and *Sadak*. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in power and was targeting both these plays. *Ponga Pundit*, a play about untouchability and other ills in the Hindu society, was an obvious choice for attack. So was *Sadak* – it dealt with the destruction of the traditional way of life of a rural community due to incursions of ‘development’. The BJP was keen on the Golden Quadrilateral project, an ambitious venture to connect four major Indian cities by road highways.

Habib Tanvir, however, seemed perfectly oblivious to such opposition. JNU was a safe venue though; BJP’s youth wing Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (ABVP) had been decimated in the university elections and their activists badly beaten up for their stunts on the election day so they either didn’t turn up at the play venue or if they did, they kept quiet. I had recently started doing theatre with the JNU chapter of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). Having been told that Habib Tanvir started with the IPTA, all of us in the group naturally saw him as our own.

I vividly remember the grand impression he made on my mind that night. His aura lay not in how he looked or what he did; it was simply his manner of being; stately. He looked every inch an old-fashioned renaissance gentleman, with a humility that you immediately knew

and recognised as genuine, and there was realisation that you were in the presence of a great man.

Amid all the praise and remembrance that has inundated the media in the last few days on account of Habib Tanvir’s death after a prolonged illness on June 8 – and justifiably so because a man of his stature, talent and accomplishments is rare to find and he will be greatly missed by the Indian theatre aficionados and general public alike – one is liable to forget that it is actually the 50th year of the founding of Naya Theatre by Habib saab, as he was fondly known, and Nathi Ram Bhatt.

It is by no co-incidence that Habib saab named his theatre company as Naya Theatre. Nothing is *new* per se; the novelty of something lies in the process, not in the product. And Habib saab was all for the process. The process can be all encompassing: it includes training oneself, equipping oneself with the intellectual and artistic tools, familiarising oneself with what one was otherwise unaware of and in one’s own work, keeping complacency at a distance. These were the credos Habib saab lived by.

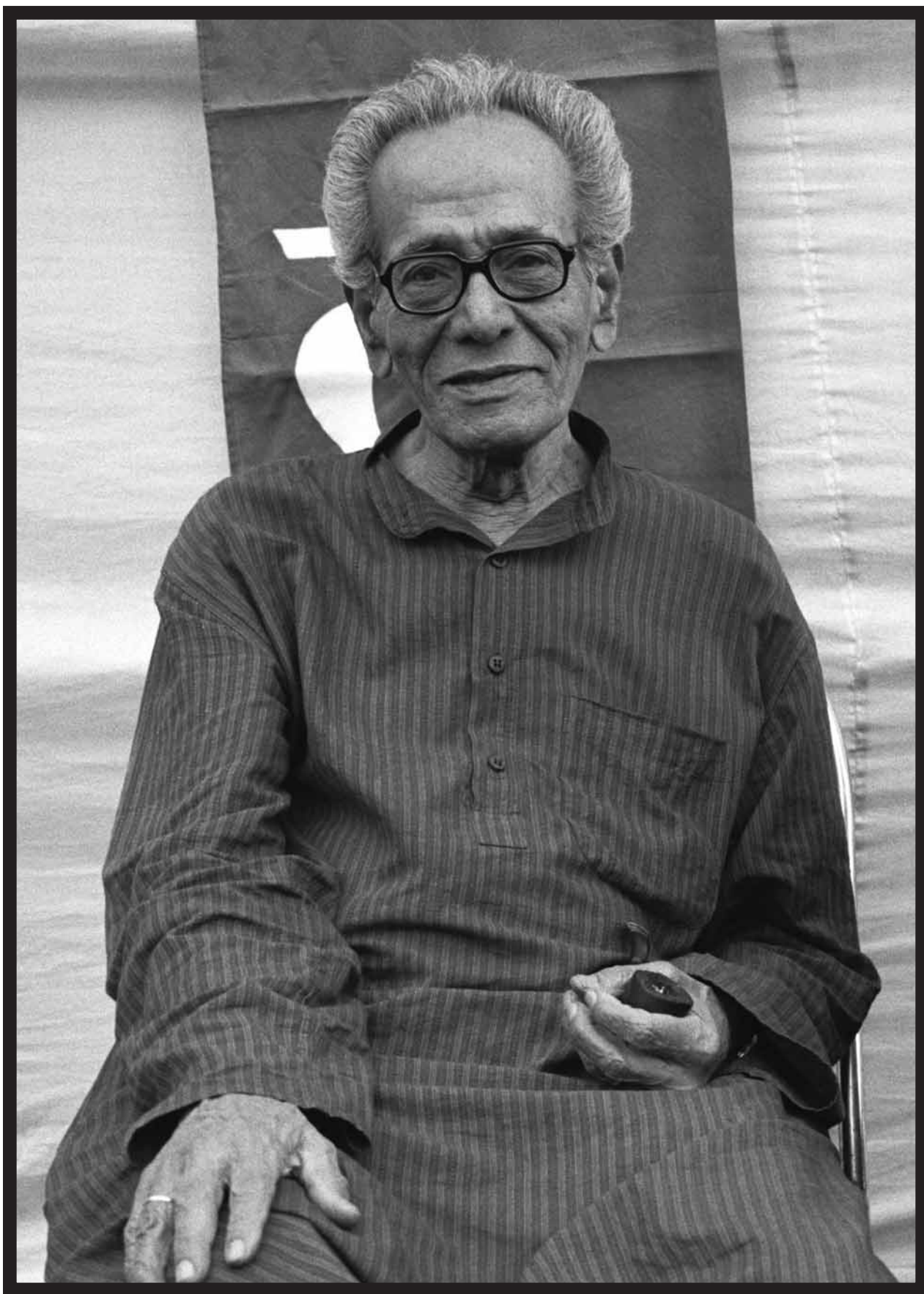
Javed Mallick, his nephew who lives and teaches at Indraprastha College in Delhi and whose house I visit on a Sunday when the heat has the city in siege, tells me a story that perfectly illustrates these qualities of Habib saab. A few months ago, Habib saab was not keeping well. But that didn’t keep him from attending a French film festival being held in Bhopal. He saw all the films screened – seven or so. His

daughter, Nageen, gave up after watching two or three.

Another story from his last days shows his tremendous commitment to his craft. *Charandas Chor* was being staged at Khalsa College, Delhi. Of course, by now, the actors could manage everything without Habib saab’s active participation. Just as he was about to have a drink with Javed, someone from the college called and pleaded him to come saying arrangements to felicitate him had been made. Although he cared little for such rewards, he went because Nageen had told him about a scene that needed more work. All through the performance he took notes in his diary, napping in between. He then assembled his actors after the performance and told them what he thought was wrong.

Those who worked with him, his actors, like Purushottam Bhatt, and his technicians, like Arvind Gaur, a successful theatre director in his own right who runs the Asmita theatre group in Delhi and who handled lights for Naya Theatre productions, vouch for the basic democratic ethos that Habib saab inculcated and nurtured in his group.

Recently, I met Gaur at the India Habitat Centre, after failed attempts to speak to him on phone; he was busy, as four shows – three with children and one of Asmita – were lined up for the same day. One group of children was rehearsing on the stage at the open-air amphitheatre. Another group was rehearsing a song behind the stairs on which we sat while Gaur was taking care of the desperate demands of production.





SAHMAT

Zohra Sehgal blesses Habib Tanvir on his 85th birthday celebration at the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) office on September 1, 2008

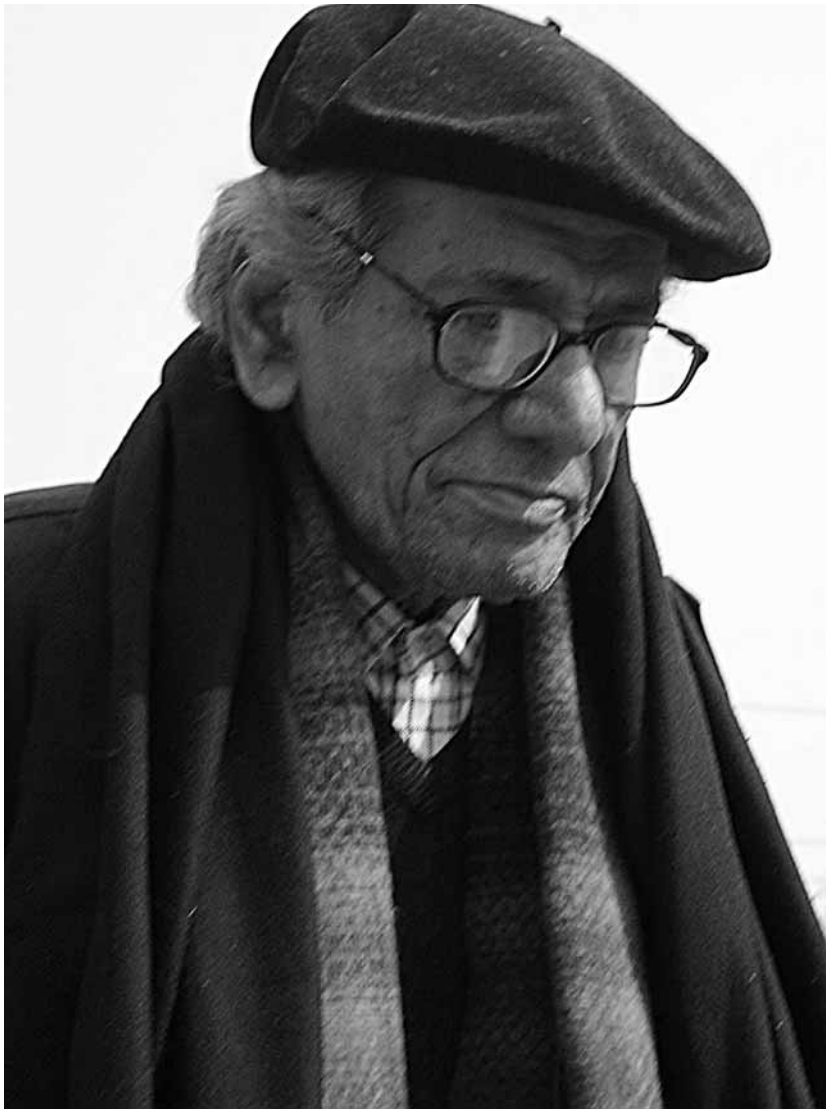
Someone came up to him to inform that the *dholak* was missing. A cot also needed to be arranged for one of the scenes. He delegates the job to his people. He was apologetic for making me wait but I was perfectly all right; I remember my own days at the IPTA, and the hectic backstage improvisation for props and costumes and a thousand little things that go into producing a play. Moreover, I was thinking there couldn't have been a better setting for us to talk about Habib saab.

It was clear that Gaur was yet to come to terms with Habib saab's demise – he was using the present tense while speaking of him – which was only natural; they shared a long relationship which, as was often the case with Habib saab, was both personal and professional. His association with Habib saab dates back to around 1985 when the latter was involved with a television programme Taana-Baana.

Gaur was modest enough to admit that Habib saab's plays would have been equally great and famous without his assistance with the lights and overall design, but his eyes lit up when I told him that *Agra Bazar*'s design was considered to be a classic. He said his brief was simple – “just play with the colours of the lights”. He recalled how he used different layers of lights to float up in the air together to create the colourful ambience of a market place. “He gave one a lot of freedom to work,” Gaur said. He also mentioned Habib saab's commitment towards the subaltern – which Javed Mallick attributes to his brief and also fruitful association with the IPTA – that came across strongly in *Agra Bazar*, which is based on the poetry of Nazir Akbarabadi, a poet of the people. Ghalib was also mentioned in the play as a “young, precocious lad of 13-14, already making his mark”.

Habib Tanvir was essentially an actor's director. This was achieved by a marriage of work and personal life, the like of which is quite rare in the Indian theatre context. Neeraja Mallick, Javed Mallick's wife and also a professor at Indraprastha College, told me a story that speaks volumes about Habib saab's attitude towards his actors. In the early 1990s, he was looking for houses in Delhi where he and his troupe could stay. He was offered a bungalow by the government (for a while he had lived in one, when he was a Rajya Sabha member, before he was made to vacate the house, with all his belongings thrown out. Javed remembers him then, standing in the middle of all his things, along with his wife, the late Monika Mishra, perfectly calm and unruffled) but he didn't want to be away from his troupe. So one day, the director of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), who was a friend,





A scene from *Chandradass Chor*, one of Habib Tanvir's most famous plays

took him on a tour around the city and showed him places in all posh localities. But Habib saab was thinking of his actors who came from the recesses of Chhattisgarh - whether they would feel comfortable living in such places - and he didn't approve of any of them. Finally, when they were passing through Ber Sarai area in south Delhi, where the government had constructed low-income group flats, each with two small rooms and a kitchen and a bathroom, the DDA director offered to show him those flats, just for a lark. Habib saab instantly agreed and asked for 12 flats, of which he used one as his home, one as his office and the rest for his troupe. And he hosted and met everyone there, "even Peter Brook", said Javed Mallick.

Purushottam Bhatt, fondly called 'Kaka', who started his career in theatre by going to the shows of Agra Bazar - in which he was to act later - along with his brother, Nathi Ram Bhatt, told me one of Habib saab's favourite quotes, explaining his approach to acting and direction - "*Ek kabootar uda, samundar paar kar ke lauta; ek kabootar uda, munder par ja kar baitha*" (one pigeon flew, and he returned after crossing the sea; another flew and went and sat at the ledge of the rooftop). "He never told the actor how to act," Bhatt said over phone, in a voice heavy with loss and awe for a man in front of whom "he could not even dare to stand properly". "He only explained the character."

Saumyabrata Chaudhury, professor of performance studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, is known to employ a similar technique while dealing with his actors (he was my first director for an IPTA play *Tendua*) and someone who has pursued what can be called 'independent' theatre, just like Habib saab, for the last 25 years, sees in Habib Saab's theatre a kind of 'rural modernism', which he credits to his ability to "extract and invent a mod-

ern idiom from the elements of rural life, from the traditional structure of culture". And that includes "social commentary along with political awareness". It is quite a remarkable contradiction since Habib saab was himself quite a sophisticated man who studied and travelled abroad. When I asked Shomu da, as Saumyabrata Chaudhury's students address him, about that one element

Habib saab's – and who is killed in the end for being righteous, the play works essentially because of humour. And it is not wry but "raw, raucous, earthy" humour, as Javed Mallick put it.

Sudhanva Deshpande of the Jan Natya Manch (a theatre group that was "Habib saab's adopted son" in Kaka's words), who made a documentary on Habib saab's life, *Gaon*

fled" – echoing Javed Mallick's description of him – and as someone who could see "something funny in every situation". For someone who knew Habib saab for over two decades, he believes that Habib Tanvir's plays were more about a "celebration of the plebeian, including the dress, the food habits, the customs, the traditions, the way of life..." than a challenge to the State.



Habib Tanvir being felicitated on his 85th birthday. MK Raina and Malini Bhattacharya are seen

that might have brought about the disappearance of the perceived dichotomy between the rural and modern, he picked out his "awesome, fantastic humour". "The essential element of satire," he says, "had a direct political use."

In a play like *Charandas Chor*, one can find the use of humour as a potent tool to subvert, criticise and show a mirror, for that is what art ultimately is, to the system. Despite it being an extremely poignant and depressing story about a thief who can't lie – irony was another love of

*Ka Naon Theatre, Mor Naon Habib*, doesn't really think that there was a dichotomy in Habib saab's life and work, in the rural and urban. He cited Charlie Chaplin, the master of slapstick who had a sophisticated sense of humour. He recalled a serious play of Habib Tanvir, *Jin Lahore Nahin Dekhya, Woh Janma Hi Nahin*, based on the Partition, saying, "He could still make it humorous."

Sudhanve Deshpande also remembers Habib saab as someone who was not easily rattled or "ruf-

"In hardly any of the plays is there a revolt," he pointed out.

Some have questioned Habib saab over his assertion that feudalism patronised the arts and that it was not bad compared to a democracy that had allowed genocides like the one in Gujarat in 2002. Habib Saab never supported feudalism, his life and work testifying this. It is only his open mind that could question all established beliefs, which is the hallmark of a true artiste.

Just as Javed Mallick, Shomu da finds the range of Habib saab and

his troupe amazing, considering they could perform anywhere, from the posh and literate settings of Edinburgh, where *Charan Das Chor* won the first prize, to the small towns of India, with the same non-chalance and confidence.

Certainly, Habib saab was “human and not without his faults”, said Javed Mallick. Specifically, “he never showed much gender con-

publisher, had sent him the proofs for corrections. But as was true to his nature, said Neerja, he began to rewrite entire paragraphs and never came to writing the second part.

In a way, that was quite characteristic of Habib saab to have left his autobiography incomplete. As Neerja Mallick affirmed, Habib saab would leave things incomplete because he was constantly working

Whitman wrote in *Leaves of Grass*: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Of course, Habib saab ‘contained’ much more than multitudes; as Arvind Gaur put it, “he was like the sky himself”. Now that the sky has been lifted, it makes one anxious for the future of his Naya Theatre. Kaka believes that it will



Habib Tanvir with delegates of DASTAK-programme, SAHMAT, taking out a march to Rashtrapati Bhawan on December 31, 1998

sciousness, as we know it today,” in his work. He did a ‘feminist’ play called, *Aur Ek Aurat Hypatia Bhi Thi*, about the life, the times and the cruel end of the famous Greek Mathematician Hypatia. Even in *Bahadur Kalarin*, there was a strong female protagonist, but said Neeraja Mallick, Habib saab’s work was without a tangible gender consciousness.

Habib saab was working on his autobiography and had already finished the first part, according to Javed Mallick. Penguin Books, the

on something new and it all formed part of a whole. That’s how he worked and lived. It was, almost always, about the process than the finished product. The journeys that he undertook theatrically were sufficient in themselves, without any promise of a set destination or even homecoming. His views and beliefs also made him a man, an artiste, forever in exile, but at the same time, always at ‘home’ because he had no permanent address. And if that seems contradictory, we only have to remember what Walt

survive although the flight won’t be as high and as swift as before. In any case, 50 years was a monumental period and we can say that “an era has come to end”, in Javed Mallick’s words.

What can be done to preserve Habib saab’s memory – Arvind Gaur would like a museum in his name – must be done so that, to paraphrase what Einstein said about Gandhi, the coming generations do not find it hard to believe that man like him walked this earth in flesh and blood. □



# Estranged from History

*Aatish Taseer's odyssey through Islamic lands is a study in confusion and irresolution*

Feroz Rather

He was five years old, perhaps six. His mother was a journalist and out on work, his father painfully, and understandably, absent. So his Sikh grandparents sent him to his aunt's house to spend the morning. The house was much bigger; it was filled with the boisterous activity of many cousins, unlike the Lutyens' bungalow owned by another aunt where he lived with his mother that midsummer in Delhi. He found that his cousins had been given notebooks by their fathers to record the license plate numbers of passing cars. The rule of the game was that the one who recorded the highest number of license plates would be the winner.

He was late joining in because of his reluctance to go to his aunt's. But a handicap of 20 numbers, bargained by his aunt from his turbaned cousins, put him much ahead of them. To his great relief, as the day advanced, the victor remained unannounced. His cousins ran back to attend the ritual of drinking milk, he went to the boundary wall and started peeing. One of his first cousins – who eventually joined him there – looked towards him and started screaming, “Aatish ka susoo nanga hai (Aatish's penis is naked)!”

When he returned to the house, he found his aunts and cousins laughing. He laughed louder than anyone else.

The long quasi-historical narrative in Aatish Taseer's first book, *Stranger to History: A Son's Journey Through Islamic Lands*, is punctuated by many such brief, poignant accounts. Twenty-nine-



years-old, he is son of an Indian Sikh journalist, Tavleen Singh, and a Pakistani politician, Salmaan Taseer. A travelogue that sweeps across the breadth of the Muslim world – from the “violent” neighbourhoods of Istanbul to the classical city of Mecca via Damascus, from “addictive” Tehran to the “moribund” city of Karachi in Pakistan – the book is, at its heart, unabashedly personal. It is

a deep response by a son trying to wrestle with the cold absence of his father, and the deeper religious and historical schisms that ripped apart his parents, the countries they come from, and the world beyond.

Taseer attended a Christian convent school in southern India and college in the United States. He was in London during the July 7, 2005 bombings. Immediately after, he vis-

ited Beeston, Nottinghamshire, where most of the bombers had hailed from, and then wrote his first cover story for a British political magazine. He linked the rootlessness of the British second-generation Pakistanis in collision with modernity, and the consequent failure of identity on multiple fronts, with the genesis of Islamic extremism in Britain. His father responded by sending him a letter, of which an excerpt reads:

“Islamic extremism is on the rise because of Palestine and Iraq. If Hindus were bombed, occupied and humiliated you may find the same reaction.... By projecting yourself as an Indian-Pakistani, you are giving this insulting propaganda credibility as if it is from one who knows it all.”

The letter, although hurtful, became his motivation to travel. *Stranger...* is more Taseer’s response to his father who, although he drank wine and ate pork, had a strong sense of affiliation to the global community of Muslims and pride in the history of Islam. And it is perhaps this motivation, which is far from being dispassionate, that perches the book on a rather precarious edge.

In Istanbul, following a brief visit to a “religious” neighbourhood called Fatih Carsamba with Eyup, a Marxist student, he qualifies the quarter as a “radical hilltop”. His impression of the place is that of a “violent” street filled with women covered in long veils and hostile men with shaved upper lip and a fistful of beard and of shops filled with religious books and CDs and copies of the *Qu’ran*. It is a “sub-culture” reminiscent to Taseer of punks, hippies and even neo-Nazis; it is a word, he tells us, that he would have used to describe radicalised British Pakistanis.

In a failing conversation that he and his friend have with a young man wearing a long robe, a dangerous-seeming atavism emerges when the ways of dressing elicit a direct comparison with the Prophet. Taseer takes us far in illuminating



the complicities of the religious nature of secular Turkey. The dogmatic secularism evident here, as conceived by Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish state, was achieved by the state's intrusion into the religious sphere and co-opting it. The operating of religion outside the realm and control of the state had to be terminated. And, yet, Taseer creates a milieu of hostility and blame against the young man for not being open enough, for being preoccupied with a brand of religion that is new and literal and divorced from the traditional diversity of Turkish Islam. His dress is mistaken as a reaction to the challenge that modernity poses to Turkey, and is not understood as a historical component of an individual's existence and identity.

After Taseer's luminously evocative description of his journey on the old Hijaz railway from Istanbul to Syria in the winter of 2006, we are brought to a raging crowd gathering around the Danish embassy in Damascus and then putting it to flames. Before the issue of the Prophet's caricature in the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper surfaces, Damascus is introduced to us as a city sinisterly redolent of propaganda and intrigue, suddenly waking to its international Islamic significance after "so many years of Arab Nationalist sleep". But was it really no more than the absence of the idea of a free press or an individual's right to express oneself freely, in the true liberal sense, that led the entire Muslim world in general and Damascus in particular to behave in such a manner?

It might well be that people in the Muslim world had mistaken the expressions of a single newspaper, an individual cartoonist, an editor as the Danish nation – or even the entire West – having turned suddenly blasphemous. But, of course, what Taseer tries to condone are the political actualities that surrounded the incident – a history of civilisational

prejudice, resentment and discursive misrepresentation that not only indicates to us why those particular cartoons were published but also gives us a sense of the time and the manner in which they were created.

In one instance, the face of the Prophet is painted a half green crescent with a star replacing one eye; in another, a typical, recurrent media image of an Islamic terrorist – bearded, turbaned, with lineaments of anger and frustration – presents an impression of irrational desperation. (This reminds me of the cover of the September 1990 issue of *The Atlantic*, in which Bernard Lewis's essay, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', was published.) On its part, Syria, which has a geographical proximity

### Stranger to History: A Son's Journey Through Islamic Lands

by Atish Taseer

Picador India  
Rs 495, Pg. 336

to Bosnia and accommodates thousands of refugees from Palestine (living through the sixth decade of their land's occupation) and Iraq, can hardly be demonised if they demonstrate in order to register their anger when they are being ontologically threatened.

Owing to its institutional orientation, the Western media, instead of shattering xenophobia and creating bridges of dialogue and understanding, continues to malign and denigrate the Islamic world. That is why, in the particular issue that came to be known as the "Cartoon Controversy", what made headlines in the most of the Western media was the fury and outrage of Muslims and the banning of Danish products by certain Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia. This served to confirm the earlier

Orientalist biases against Muslims and Islamic civilisations as being fundamentally retrograde, unchanging and anti-modern. After the end of the Cold War, the alarmism of the 'clash of civilisations' theory proclaimed by Samuel Huntington has suddenly assumed a new gravity and has gripped the attention of the Western consciousness. (Huntington, not surprisingly, derived his thesis and the title of his book from Lewis's article.) Therefore, Taseer's statement that "if there hadn't been the cartoons, they would have had to invent them" to give vent to their frustration from what he later calls "total civilizational defeat" is hideously fallacious and grotesque.

What is perhaps far more important and worthy of probing – the actual historical differences in the cultural values of (individual) freedom, their evolution and how these values are perceived by people living in different civilisational streams – continues to be unaddressed and unemphasised.

The view that Islam and the West are fundamentally irreconcilable despite centuries of borrowings and peaceful cultural exchange – as "if every Muslim and every Westerner were watertight containers of civilizational identity, doomed to endless self-replication", as Edward Said wrote in his *Covering Islam* – continues to prevail among the majority of American and European consumers of news.

Two long chapters in *Stranger...* take us through Iran. An engaging conversation Taseer has in Tehran with one Muhammad, who has an Indian education and a past marked by anti-Shah revolutionary activities, informs us that the (recently re-elected) president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, like the late Imam Khomeini, is thought to be an American pawn. The argument is that men like them render the country problematic, which leaves foreign powers enough scope to med-



dle. For Muhammad, even though he has not been entirely without zeal for it, the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 seems to have been a grim failure, with pernicious symptoms of religious tyranny and intolerance manifested in the Islamic regime's narrow conception of Iranian history. The chief reason for the Islamic Revolution had been the proliferation of new wealth and property, brought about by oil, and "because the people had nothing else to do". In Iranian schoolbooks, less space is now devoted to the grandeur of ancient Persia, a vast empire ruled by greats such as Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes, Greece's classic rival. The manipulation of religion and its deployment for the purposes of "bloody" politics has resulted in transfer of power from the "democratic" Shah and his Westernised elite to Khomeini and his fundamentalist mullahs.

Whatever the degree of success or failure of the Islamic Revolution – which one can gauge by looking at it from the various angles provided by differing perspectives and by probing its sociology – the "Iran Story" carries huge weight right across the media spectrum. A story associated with hysteria, anger, doom and martyrdom, it is a queer amalgam that Ayatollah Khomeini, once a shepherd and now an elevated cleric whom VS Naipaul called "Khomeini's hangman" in *Among the Believers*, seems to embody with perfection. It was tom-tommed with such shrill vehemence that one wonders if the Revolution, which was both political and cultural, had created a potential alternative to the Western liberal democracy of Francis Fukuyama.

Robert Kaplan, however, in his perspicacious *The Ends of the Earth*, is more worried about the unchecked increase of air pollution and the rapid inflow of rural populations into Tehran and the consequent pressure on the departments of healthcare and sanitation, issues

that overshadow the Revolution. Tehran, a city that Taseer couldn't see through, has become the fourth most polluted city in the world, and its population has doubled since the Revolution. However, Muhammad, the "golden child of [the] Islamic revolution", who lived the first "interesting" half of his life in the Shah's regime and the other "cataclysmic" half after the Revolution, is disillusioned especially because of the opportunity he has lost to rise to the level of minister in the new presidential form of government.

Towards the end of his journey in Iran, with hardly any time to visit the city of Qom, Taseer is given a thorough interrogation by the authorities when they grow suspicious of his being a writer-in-the-guise-of-a-tourist and track his extensive interaction with sundry people, including journalists. His disillusionment with Iran – and the many sick characters he seems to befriend – seems to flow once again from personal experience and leads him, after a drink while riding in a car with a couple of friends associated with the censored Iranian film industry, to blurt out, "F\*\*\* the Islamic republic of Iran."

Kaplan, unlike Taseer, isn't prone to such personal bitterness. Unlike Taseer's oblique projection of the Shah as more open, democratic and welcoming of modernity, Kaplan, quoting from Ryszard Kapuscinski's *Shah of Shahs*, is elaborate and incisive: "The shah thought that urbanization and industrialization are the keys to the modernity, but this is a mistaken idea. The key to modernity is village."

And it's because of this that Khomeini, himself from a humble background, became the charismatic hero of the people, including the rural poor. The Revolution has been the hope of Iran's underclass. Tendencies towards maturing it into a totalitarian clerical state couldn't be excluded but, Kaplan writes, "Iran under the ayatollahs, with its competing centres of power – the

*majlis* (parliament); the elected president and his cabinet; the mullahs and their buddies in security services; and the governors in various cities – is far more flexible and chaotic than the Iran of [the] Pahelvis."

The one thing that unites Kaplan and Taseer is their association of the term "terrorism" with Indian Occupied Kashmir. While Taseer is very lax in using the term while describing the job of his mother, a journalist in India, Kaplan uses it while profiling Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat, for *The Atlantic*: but the "Islamic terrorism" that Kaplan speaks of goes unexplained and indicates a significant gaffe, unusual for an otherwise precise writer. Other Indian writers who have used the term are Aravind Adiga and Kiran Desai in their Booker Prize-winning novels. In the consciousness of India's cultural elite, Kashmiris are terrorists: Adiga's Balram Halwai, who is about to board a train at a station in Hyderabad immediately after murdering his master and taking away his money, sees them as such; Desai, while describing a hill station in northern India, uses the phrase, "the pre-terrorist days of Kashmir", with relishing ease.

*Stranger...* concludes on a note of distrust in the city of Lahore in Pakistan, the land of Taseer's father. On his earlier visits to this country, Taseer had made many warm filial attempts to make peace with his father, who had virtually abandoned him when he was two years old and who now lives with a beautiful young wife and their children. This time, it is even more difficult to come to terms with Taseer *père*: ever a Pakistan People's Party man, he had been hit hard by the killing of Benazir Bhutto. Thus ends "a son's journey through Islamic lands", a journey of his attempt to find the relationship between the missing foreskin of his penis and his father leaving him as much a stranger to history as estranged from it. □

## Non-Fiction

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## Fiction

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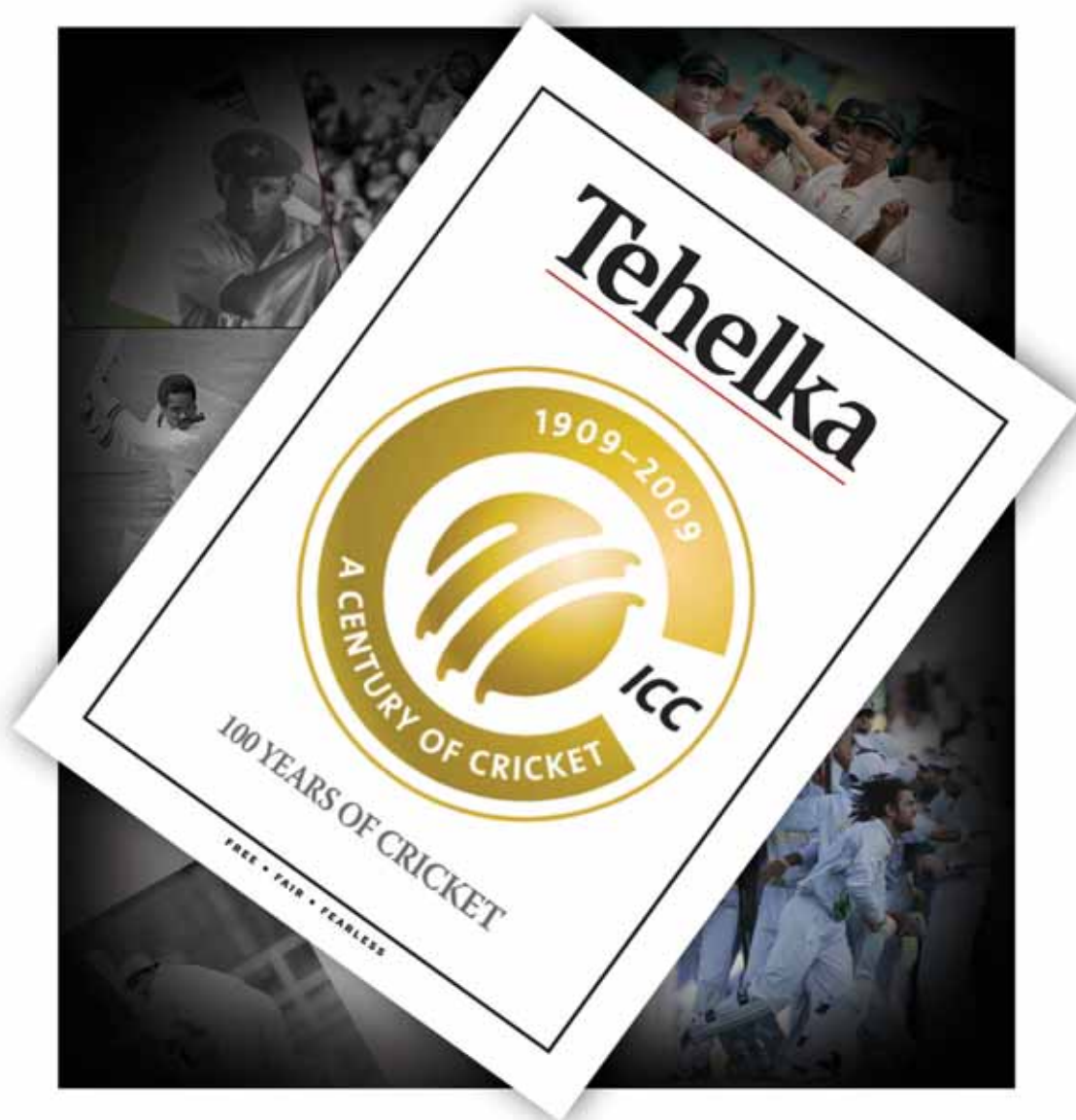
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