

"AND the wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Kathmandu," said Rudyard Kipling. Nepal is a place where various cultures have met and combined and now grow with promise. Although it is a small third world country, yet the warmth that it offers visitors is no less than what one can expect anywhere in Europe or USA.

Legend and facts have it that the entire valley was once covered with water. According to popular belief, a god with his sword slashed through the circling mountains. What was left behind was land where farmers have grown crops for ages. To the north are the snow covered mountains of Tibet and to the south are the Terai jungles.

Invaders began a series of kingdoms and for these dynasties Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur were the main cities. It was only in 1769 that they got unified under a single kingdom. In 1846 the Rana king took power and reduced the Shah king to a figurehead. By 1951, uprisings put back King Birendra's grandfather, Tribhuvan, and Nepal was opened to the world. By 1956 proper roads linked the capital to India. It was then that the cars made their first appearance in Kathmandu.

The valley itself holds one million of Nepal's population of 17 million. There has been the influx of 10,000 Tibetan immigrants to add to this over the past thirty years. To it one can easily add 40,000 Indians who have filtered in from the nearby Ganges plains for good wages. About 200,000 tourists swell the crowd each year.

While the Himalayan cherries, yellow mustard and green millet brighten the valley, wild cats and leopards lurk about. Rhododendrons grow among the oak, chestnut and pine. Here indiscriminate deforestation has unfortunately led to serious soil erosion so that the Nepalese farmer is being pushed to the flat Terai region.



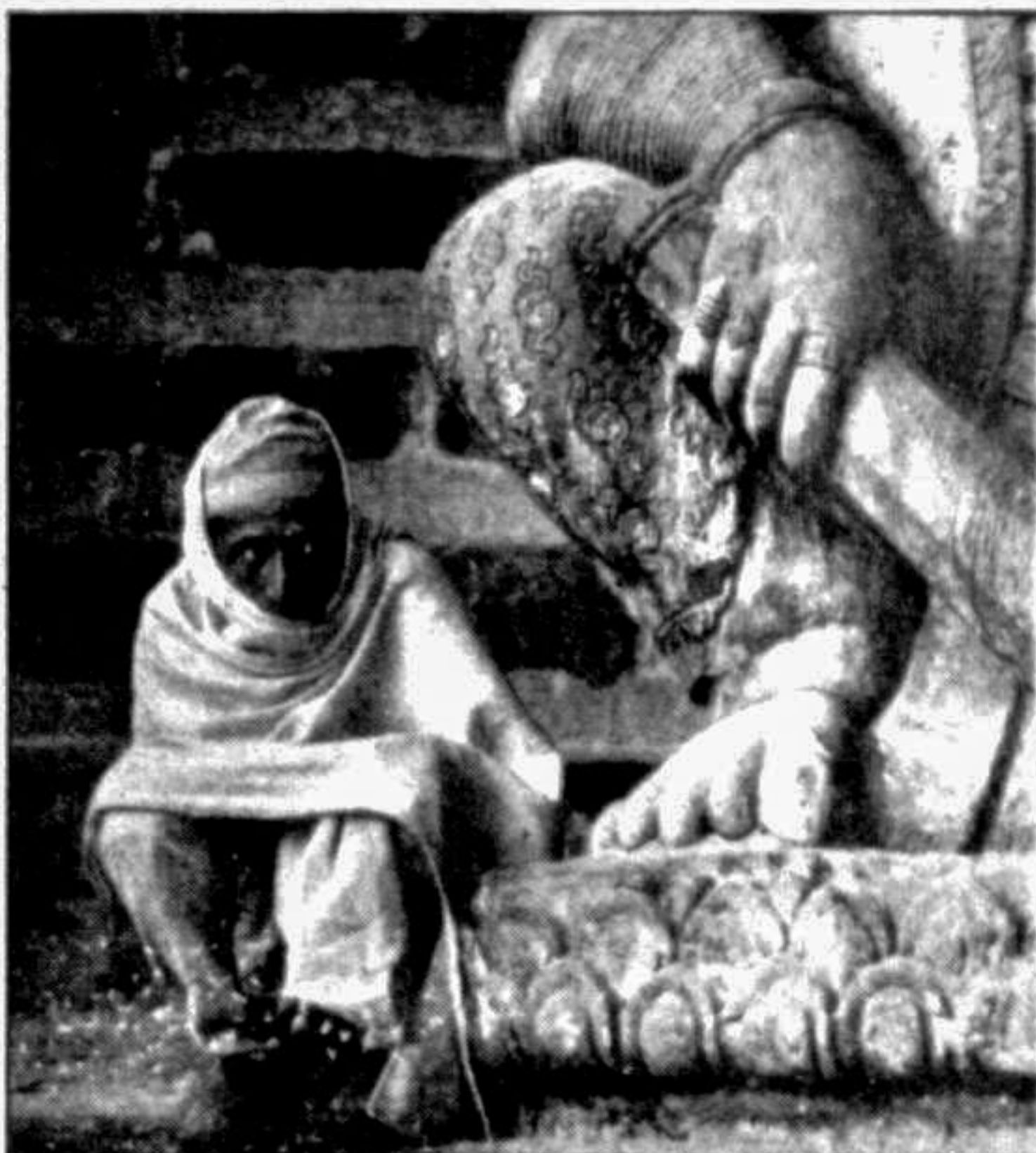
Kathmandu's famous Durbar Square.

People and Places

The Valley of Deities and Dragon Chasing

by Fayza Haq

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A Nepalese seems to cast a watchful eye beside an image of a wrestler.

next to India. The population pressure in Terai itself has reached such a point, says an FAO expert, "That ecological refugees come here with no

money, no land and no properties. To survive they burn off patches of forest to grow rice." The once thick forest in the Himalayan foothill has been



In Kathmandu the Garuda image, created about AD 500 and probably the oldest of its kind in all Nepal, has unfortunately been half-buried by successive layers of pavement.

reduced to patches of bushes and thorny shrubs. According to a Nepalese survey only 19% of the 123,000 sq km territory is covered by forest today as compared to 57% in the 1950s.

Floods and landslides have become a recurrent feature of



"Chasing the dragon," a young Kathmandu heats a piece of unrefined heroin — "brown sugar" — and inhales the fumes. Thousands of Nepalese, most of them in the valley, are believed to be addicted to the drug.

the Nepalese landscape. Climatic faults like shooting of temperatures and drying of groundwater have become common. Domestic animals have hastened the deforestation. The livestock population is 19 times higher than the land's carrying capacity. To add to this, for years the Nepalese farmers have used leaves as fodder for their cattle. Nepal's forestry programmes, started in the 80s, however, are ambitious and they are making some progress.

Durbar square is Kathmandu's main tourist area. In it is the famous road called Freak Street. In the sixties and the seventies it was full of the flower-power people. Here hashish and marijuana had been legal. The drug sale was banned in 1975 by King Birendra. By the eighties this place became a tourist centre offering all sorts of cuisines and facilities for mountain trekking.

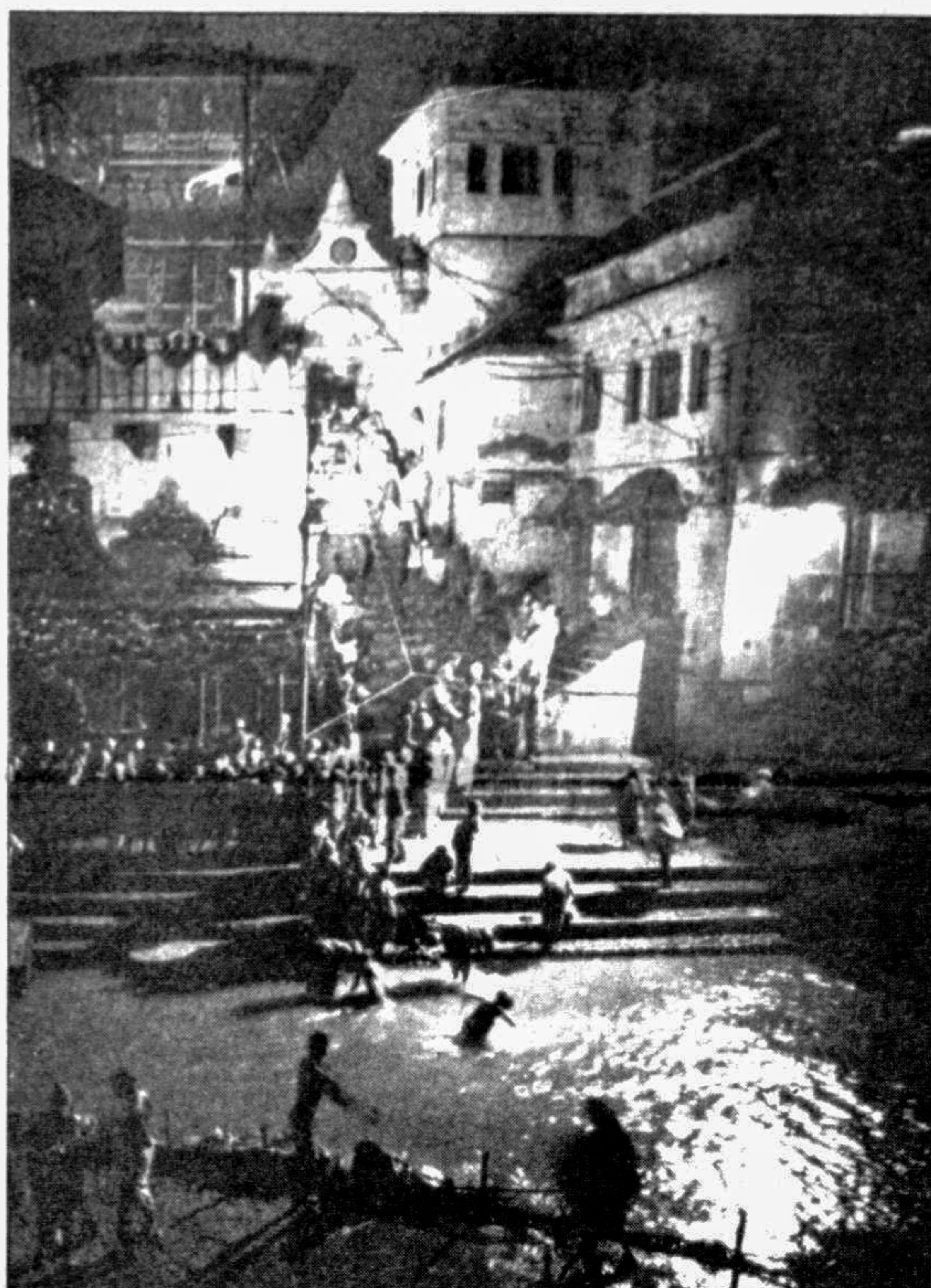
The young Nepalese in the city flaunt Western style clothes. These involve the "Hong Kong trade" but actually come via Bangkok or Dhaka. Merchants pay the fare to students to get electric goods and clothes for sale in the "grey market." Another item that was, and perhaps still is, squeezed in through the airport is "brown sugar" or cheap heroin. Inhaling the fumes was commonly known as "chasing the dragon". Some years ago Nepal had about 50 heroin addicts. Of late every one out of twenty young men in Kathmandu city was suspected an addict.

One encouraging factor is the rise of the literacy percentage. While half the population is under 21, the literacy percentage has shot up to 25% from 5%. One wonders if there will be adequate job opportunities for all. Salaries for civil service work are low and bribery is common.

Wedge between India, that has a population that is 45 times more overwhelming, and mighty China, Nepal maintains a well-balanced neutrality. There are, however, groups of leftist students linked with China or the erstwhile USSR. The country's carpet indus-

try is the valley's largest employer. For a nation that can boast of only a few exports,

these thick dramatically designed rugs are of great consequence. For the tourists, the



Nepal's paramount deity, Pashupati, one of the infinite forms of the Hindu god Siva, may draw 100,000 devotees to this Kathmandu Valley temple on Siva's Night in February or March. Many trek from India to the shrine, one of the most important sites in the subcontinent for Siva worshippers.

shops sell anything from gems to drinking cups made of skull, lined with silver.

In neighbouring Tibet, Buddhism is extremely strong, but there is no contact with the world outside. In Nepal Buddhism blends with Hinduism and it is common to see shrines to Krishna, Siva, Durga and Kali. During an October festival, which falls at the same time as a good tourist season, goats and buffaloes are sacrificed. Stories say that there have been human sacrifice until only recently. The Nepalese were also superstitious and great believers in the evil eye.

The tiny but beautiful landlocked kingdom deserves every one of the tourists that are essential for its survival.

Photos: Courtesy — The National Geographic

Pakistan's Historic Records Being Acquired

Masroor Mohsin Gilani writes from Islamabad

S NAP by Snap the National Documentation Centre is microfilming the historic records of Pakistan movement and British rule now placed at India Office Library and Records (IOLR), London.

The record, so far acquired by the NDC, from IOLR, contains historic documents such as intelligence reports of British government on Muslim struggle for freedom, political movements, transfer of power, Kashmir states and accession of states, reports on native press.

It also includes constitutional and legislative developments, the subcontinent partition records, private office papers and political secrets department records and host of other events during the British Raj are also part of the record.

Fact-finding Body
Soon after independence in 1947, the British Government

appointed a fact finding committee comprising the representatives of the UK, India and Pakistan Governments to consider the disposal of the assets of India Office.

The committee could not meet because Indian delegation did not arrive. Representatives of the British Government, however, recommended that the IOLR should be retained in London, Prof Nazir Ahmed said.

Later, education ministers of Pakistan and India held talks on the subjects in New Delhi and they agreed that the records belonged to successor governments of India and Pakistan and the division of assets was their concern.

Subsequently Pakistan set up a committee of scholars and experts which finally advised that a fair and equitable distribution ratio would be 60:40 for India and Pakistan. India, however, demanded her share at 82 per cent of the total assets. No agreement could be reached on the issue.

The matter was again raised in May 1960 at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference, but in vain.

Selected Records
In 1963, when India started to get selected records for IOLR micro-filmed, the academic community in Pakistan stressed the need for a similar course of action, but it took nearly a decade to elicit an official response.

These records were of immense value in the early days of Pakistan as these served as precedent for administrative matters. But, the greater need was felt when historians wanted to study Muslim separatism and universities wanted to conduct research on decline of Muslim rule and were frustrated by the non-availability of records.

This speaks of the dilemma that no factual history of Pakistan has been written by a Pakistani while foreign scholars have made extensive use of IOLR material and produced many books on the subject,"

said Prof Nazir. In 1975, government set up NDC in Lahore to acquire microfilms from London and an exchange agreement was made with India Office Library and Records. NDC has acquired about 100 microfilm to date.

Priority Material
The important question before acquisition was that what kind of material should be obtained. The priority was material from 1946 to 1947 and then move backwards said Prof Nazir Ahmed.

NDC has prepared microfilm and photocopy holding lists of nationally important records, primarily pre-partition, held by the provincial archives and other record offices in Pakistan and by the UK repositories IOLR. It is still striving to get Pakistan's rightful share to historic records in Calcutta and London.

The material is of enormous value to researchers, scholars and historians. It will greatly assist them to pen the history in a befitting manner. —APP

Hong Kong: Monks Join the Brain Drain

WHEN the Hong Kong government relaxed its rules last year for the import of foreign workers to bridge the colony's labour shortage, it received applications from an unlikely quarter. The Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery put in a bid to import overseas monks to fill a shortage of local Buddhist masters.

Abbot Ng Pak-wah of the Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery said monks were in short supply as many local masters had joined the "brain drain" in advance of the Chinese handover in 1997. More and more monks are being hired by foreign monasteries, particularly in Canada and the United States, where Buddhism is becoming increasingly popular among disillusioned yuppies, or to serve the growing Hong Kong immigrant Buddhist communities there.

"Key posts here have been vacant for several years and it is very difficult to recruit monks in Hong Kong. So I think it is necessary to import them," said Ng, adding that he hoped to secure entry permits for two monks from China's Yunnan province.

While Buddhist monks are leaving Hong Kong for fear of religious persecution after 1997, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit young monks locally. The rigorous of monastery life appear to hold little attraction for young Hong Kong people.

Monks and priests are in short supply in the British Colony as spiritual masters join the emigration rush in the run-up to 1997, reports Yojana Sharma of IPS from Hong Kong.

"Not many people are willing to become monks because of the attractions of the materialistic world," said Reverend Sik Yuen Qing of the Po Lin monastery, one of Hong Kong's largest Buddhist monasteries.

Yet, ironically, more Hong Kong people are turning to Buddhism today, increasing the need for monks to direct prayers and other rituals.

Since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, the number of Buddhists in Hong Kong has risen 10 per cent to around 600,000, said Chiu Sze Yin of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, which has 15,000 members and runs 400 monasteries around the colony.

Yet the number of monks has not increased despite relaxation of the rigorous training rules.

In the not too distant past, a novice had to train and study for almost 10 years before being considered ready for ordination. That preparation period has now been cut to 21 days in an attempt to attract recruits.

Monasteries in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Thailand do not face the same problems of recruitment. Many young children are

still brought up their parents for a life in the monastery. But in Hong Kong, growing affluence and the desire of many families to emigrate in the run-up to 1997 have meant that parents prefer their children to prepare for professions with broader and better prospects.

Buddhists are not alone in facing a brain drain. A number of Hong Kong's Taoist priests have also emigrated to Canada, Australia and the United States to work with overseas communities.

There are some 200,000 Hong Kong followers of the Tao — an ancient Chinese religious and philosophical system — and some 3,000 practising priests.

Although the Hong Kong Taoist Association opposes emigration "because Taoism is a Chinese religion which must be based and developed in China," it has set up branches overseas to internationalise its operations and make it less open to pressure from China after 1997.

Both the Buddhists and Taoists fear that China will impose a state-controlled bureau of religious affairs in Hong Kong after 1997 that could

restrict religious freedoms. Buddhists are thought to be particularly vulnerable because of their interest in Tibet. China fears any outside attempt to fuel an independence movement in Tibet to overthrow Chinese domination.

Also in a sensitive position in the Catholic Church in Hong Kong.

Because of its relations with the Vatican, which Beijing does not recognise, persecution of Catholics has been stepped up in China during the last two years.

The number of priests serving Hong Kong's 250,000-strong Catholic community is thought to have dropped by almost 25 per cent since 1985 as priests join the brain drain. Some 300 priests and 700 nuns serve the Catholic community but Hong Kong's only seminary has just seven recruits currently preparing for the priesthood.

Once again the drop is blamed on the fear of future religious persecution after 1997 and growing demand overseas for priests to serve Hong Kong's immigrant communities. Hong Kong Catholics are said to be emigrating at twice the rate of the rest of the population.

"Despite the reassurances of the Chinese government on religious freedom in Hong Kong, Hong Kong Catholics are extremely apprehensive about Chinese rule after 1997," said Father Luis Ha, director of the Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office.