

## FOCUS

THE recent explosion of English medium schools in Bangladesh caters to the pent-up desire of many middle class parents to give their children an edge in an increasingly competitive world. In the minds of many, fluency in English has become a passport to affluence and success. However as the title of this article suggests, this has come at a certain cost. Many English medium students find themselves alienated from their own culture and values, caught between two worlds, one they were born in, and the other they are trying to acquire.

This theme of alienation, and how to address it was the topic of a recent symposium organized by an unusually insightful and socially conscious group of young people — "The Teenage Awareness Group (TAG)". Prior to the symposium TAG had conducted a survey which documented that a majority of English medium students felt alienated from Bangladeshi culture and society, and thought that they were inadequately exposed to information about such issues. As part of the symposium, a variety of speakers including students, parents, teachers

and other observers spoke at length about the dimensions of the problem and how to deal with it. Many of the comments focused on the lack of information about Bangladesh, particularly about history and cultural identity, and the lack of consensus about such topics. There were some very poignant questions from the students about the core issues of who we are as a nation, and our role models should be? I was really struck by the yearning on the part of these young people to define themselves, to belong, to be a part of their own society.

I totally agree with the speakers about the inadequate exposure in English medium schools to the history, the geography, the culture and politics of Bangladesh. However, the crucial failing of such schools is, in my opinion, the lack of emphasis on fluency in Bangla. The essential difference between Bangla medium students and English medium students is, not that the former know more facts about Bangladesh, but rather that (because of their fluency in Bangla) they have the ability to explore their world around them, and feel comfortable in it.

## IN SEARCH OF BANGLADESH

## The Identity Crisis of English Medium Students

It is certainly true that one could, with some effort, learn a fair amount about Bangladesh in English, master arcane theses on birth rituals and kinship networks, and be well versed in the minutiae of politics and history. But that would not make one a Bangladeshi, or give oneself a sense of identity. For the latter you need to know the language and the literature. Language is after all the filter of one's perceptions, one's sense of belonging, and a command of it is the essential pre-condition for national and cultural identification. The old analogy of teaching someone how to fish as opposed to giving them a fish is particularly relevant. Teaching children a set of prescribed facts about Bangladesh (however 'politically correct') is like giving

them a fish, while teaching them Bangla is giving them the means to acquire knowledge about their world from a variety of sources, and

in shaping their children's world view. They must shoulder a significant part of the responsibility for their children becoming alienated

parents really were interested in their children getting a more comprehensive exposure to Bangladesh, the schools would accommodate this interest, not out of a desire to foster national consciousness necessarily, but because of narrow self-interest.

One of the more intriguing aspects of the TAG survey was that, while eighty per cent of parents were in favour of more exposure to Bangladeshi culture and values, about twenty per cent of parents were opposed to any such requirements. It is this latter group that intrigues me. While it would be tempting to dismiss them as marginal, I think they are symptomatic of a larger societal malaise in which parents are focusing on a very narrow and financially lucrative ob-

jective — the acquiring of fluency in English — even if it comes at the expense of being divorced from one's own language, culture and history. As an acquaintance of mine put it somewhat crudely: 'identity doesn't pay, English does'. This type of false pragmatism has in my opinion disastrous long term consequences for young people. Even in this era of the 'global village' national and cultural identities cannot be shed or replaced at will. I feel sorry for those who in the arrogance of youth discard their native language, culture and values and aspire for a nebulous internationalism.

The irony of course is that even from the point of narrow careerism, being integrated into one's own culture is a definite plus. Bangladeshi students who desire to go the "promised land" (i.e. the west) for further education, should realize, that their attraction to university admissions counselors lies largely in their adding cultural diversity to the student body. One's knowledge of the west, its institutions and culture, is only an advantage if it complements knowledge about one's own society. There are many there who know about Shakespeare, but few who

know about Rabindranath. I think it is important to dispel an important myth about becoming fluent in English. There is ample evidence from Europe, (where large numbers of people speak multiple languages with a high degree of fluency) that command of one language does not preclude command of another. Thus English does not have to be a substitute for Bangla, and should be a complement. In this regard English medium schools have a huge unrealized potential. Precisely because they are not bound to the centralized archaic syllabi of Bangla medium schools which stifle creativity, they are free to experiment and teach their students Bangla as it should be taught, free from the shackles of rote memorization and prescribed formulas.

It is my firm belief, that properly structured, English medium schools can offer a bilingual education which will produce students who are comfortable, in themselves and in their own society, while having the requisite tools to interact with the world outside. The fact that this is not happening is the tragedy of unrealized potential.



## REFLECTIONS

by Dr Omar Rahman

a diversity of opinions. This is particularly important given the paucity of books about Bangladesh in English, and the lack of consensus about history and politics.

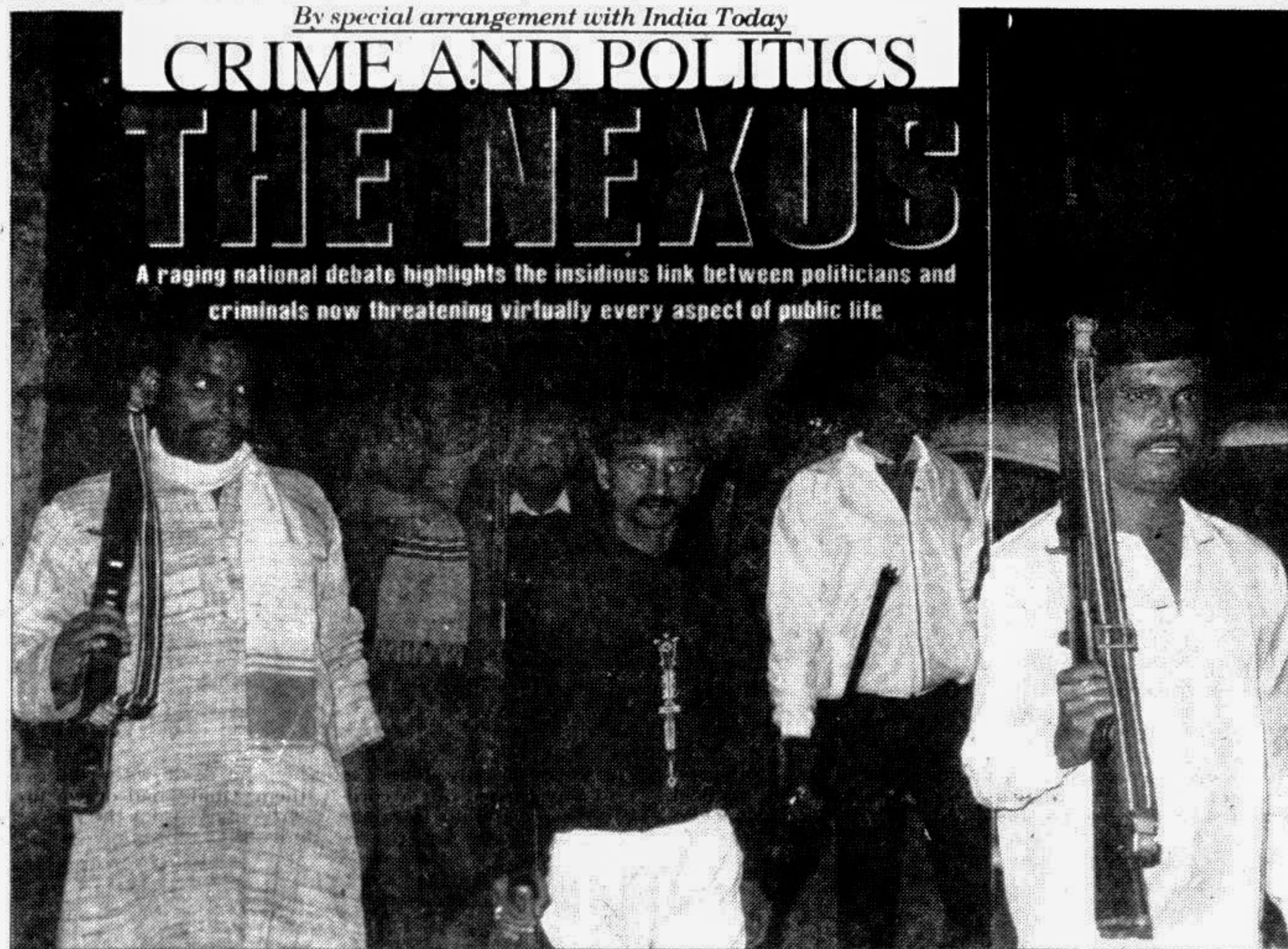
While it is fashionable to blame schools for a multitude of sins, I think it is important to realize that parents have as important a role if not more

from their own society. Even with regard to the schools not offering enough exposure to Bangladesh, this is largely due to the lack of such demand from parents. In the final analysis, schools are commercial institutions who cater to the needs of their clients, the parents of their students. To put it bluntly, if

HYPOCRISY seldom needs a showcase, but it got one last fortnight. It took a 29-year-old woman to be killed and stuffed into an oven in the nation's capital for politicians to scream blue murder. And for the Government to wipe twenty-two months of dust off the Vohra Committee report on the nexus between crime and politics. Tabled in Parliament on August 1, the report touched off a storm of words that blew from all points of the political compass: the BJP called it devoid of skin and flesh; the Janata Dal said it was a farce; the Left Front demanded another inquiry, this time, "without fear or favour". Much of the criticism was hypocritical, much of it justified.

For the five-member committee set up by the Government on July 9, 1993 — three months after the Bombay serial blasts — had been asked to "take stock of all available information" on the nexus. The final document, however, made a molehill out of a mountain of evidence. Reading more like a 'college' term-paper on crime and politics than a sincere exercise in soul-searching, the 12-page report had the paint but not the picture.

For example, in his report, Vohra says he told the members at the committee's very first meeting that the Dawood Ibrahim gang, according to intelligence and investigative agencies, had established a powerful net-

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CRIME AND POLITICS  
THE NEXUS

A raging national debate highlights the insidious link between politicians and criminals now threatening virtually every aspect of public life

by N K Singh and Farzand Ahmed

work. And, therefore, it was necessary to "identify" the linkages. But in the report, identification is couched in

generalities: "big smuggling syndicates"; "Mafia organisations"; "powerful economic lobbies" and "governmental

agencies".

The adjectival jargon has offered political gold to the Opposition — it is trying to veer the debate towards a virtual no-trust move. And when Parliament resumes on August 21, there is likely to be less debate and more grilling.

Some key questions likely to figure are: Why was the report buried so long, especially when it had suggested action based on discussion with the finance minister and, later, the prime minister? Why were the reports of the intelligence agencies, that were available to Vohra, not included in the final report? Why weren't responses of the Committee members presented in detail? Had the report been doctored?

What prompted such speculation was a statement by Minister for Parliamentary Affairs VC Shukla that Vohra's report ran into "hundreds of pages". And a cryptic gap in the numbering sequence — Para 3.7 is followed by Para 6.1. Claimed a Home Ministry official: "This discrepancy was there even in the original report drafted by Vohra". When contacted, Vohra declined to comment.

Pushed to the wall, the Government set up a nodal agency as recommended by the Vohra Committee and put Home Secretary K Padmanabhaiah in charge. The announcement didn't cut much ice with the Opposition. Accusations and assurances flew thick. All mainstream parties, aware of their links with criminals, seemed to be unaware of it. The Janata Dal lambasted the BJP which tore into the Congress (I) which vowed

that it would never allow criminals into its fold. They all took opposing tacks but their conclusion was the same as Vohra's: the politician-criminal nexus was "running a parallel government pushing the state to irrelevance".

One of the few candid admissions came from Delhi's former chief executive councillor Jag Parvesh Chandra, now a senior Congress (I) leader in the Assembly. "The nexus is natural," he told INDIA TODAY. "No side lays down any conditions. The criminals give you money, people and cars. I never asked for money. But they gave me enough. A thousand here, a ten thousand there." The nexus is every where.

More recently, its MLA Gajanan Kirtikar, charged with vandalism and arson, was appointed the minister of state for home. Says former Bombay municipal commissioner S.S. Tinaikar, who is now a crusader for probity in public life: "The minister of state for home has been charge-sheeted. Where does one begin?" Tinaikar's despair is understandable. Says Anand Chakravarti, professor of sociology at Delhi University: "Capturing power at any cost means compromising with those who offer support. This forms the pivot for all politician-criminal links." And it's around this pivot that forces feeding the nexus work.



Here's guns: A training session of a 'private army' employed by landlords in Bihar to terrorise the backwards.

## What Sustains it

UNION Minister V.C. Shukla and former Madhya Pradesh BJP Chief Minister Sunderlal Patwa are political rivals. But they have a few things in common. Both went to jail as political detainees: Patwa during the Emergency and Shukla in 1978. Patwa met the notorious opium smuggler Mohammad Shafi in jail. Shukla met extortionist Rusi Pathan. Their meetings may have been a coincidence but, in hindsight, it seems they were at the right place at the right time. The two criminals were to become their flunkies.

Last fortnight, as the debate over crime and politics heated up, Patwa denied any links with Shafi. "He's a supporter of our party," he said. "There's nothing beyond that." Well, not quite. In 1992, when Patwa was the chief minister, Shafi's younger brother was arrested with 3 kg of brown sugar valued at over Rs 3 crore. When the case came up in court, 14 crucial pages of the FIR were reported "missing". No action was taken against the policemen.

As for Shukla, Rusi has been his bodyguard, driver, a perpetual hanger-on until he has arrested for suspected involvement in the Bombay blasts. Says Shukla: "I have even stopped going to his house for tea. People like him want to hang around me to gain respectability." But Rusi recalls how he had helped Shukla muscle his way through the violent state Congress (I) elections in 1990. "If I hadn't broken the door," he told INDIA TODAY, "Bhaiyya (Shukla) wouldn't have been able to enter the building."

Patwa and Shafi, Shukla and Rusi illustrate the politics of patronage that sustains the nexus. "It has its roots in the days of the Raj when siding with the British meant rich rewards," says sociologist Veena Das. This bred an ethos: if you were loyal to the regime, you could get things

done. Things haven't changed. Says Kiran Saxena, chairperson of the department of political science at the Jawaharlal Nehru University: "Even after Independence, democracy in India has been an afterthought. It is feudal relations that are important." In fact, feudal patterns of power marked the Congress, the traditional bastion of rich farmers.

So when it began to lose its grip on the Centre in 1967, landlords used their henchmen to intimidate opponents and armed thugs were deployed to keep the party machinery well-oiled. "This was the main reason why the nexus grew," says former Bihar director-general of police DN Sahay. "Until 1967, criminals were helping their political masters. Then they began to seek power themselves." Stoking their ambitions was the culture of lumpenisation introduced by Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency. "The nexus got crystallised and institutionalised," says Sahay. Result: entry of criminals into the legislature. In 1977, the Bihar Assembly had 10 MLAs who were history-sheeters; by 1990, there were 40. In Uttar Pradesh, over 180 of the 425 MLAs have criminal cases pending against them.

What has given the nexus further legitimacy is the garb of ideology. Consider the demolition of the Babri Masjid. According to Saxena, the demolition was peddled as ideology by the BJP — and largely accepted as such by even its critics — but it was essentially a dangerous facet of the politician-criminal nexus. Says Janata Dal's Sharad Yadav: "If the Bombay blasts were a result of the nexus, so was the demolition of the Babri Masjid."

If patronage props the nexus, it's cash that binds it. Until the late '60s, political parties got funds for election campaigns and party rallies from business houses and industrialists, who, in turn,

were allowed income-tax rebate on such donations. In her first term as prime minister, Indira Gandhi got the Income Tax act amended. Ironically, her argument was that the rebate introduced money power into the political process. Concessions were withdrawn, and when politicians tapped the familiar sources for funds, it was 'black' or unaccounted money that they got. Transactions became covert, adding to the insidious secrecy of the nexus.

Another amendment carried out by the ruling party in the Representation of the People's Act (RPA) also cleared the ground for underhand funding of elections. A Supreme Court ruling decreed in 1975 that the expenditure incurred by a political party would form part of a candidate's election expenses. The Government immediately amended the law to nullify that ruling. Says N M Ghatge, advocate and a member of the BJP's national executive: "Since political parties were not obliged to maintain the accounts of receipts and expenditure, the corruptive influence of money power increased at an alarming rate."

That the nexus enjoys an almost talismanic immunity from public scrutiny is because it is essentially covert in nature. Aided by a pliant police force and a submissive bureaucracy, dealings between politicians and criminals rarely get examined. Often, evidence, even when available, is covered up. Says Andhra Pradesh Director-General of Police (Crime) A P Rajan: "Stalling promotions and threats of transfers are used as potent weapons to deter conscientious officials and worsen the malaise. Result: someone like Uma Kant Yadav, who has 44 criminal cases pending against him and who allegedly shot dead a police constable in full view of hundreds of people, is today a free man. What helps is his being a BSP legislator in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly."

## How Deep the Rot Runs

OUTSIDE his state, few have heard of him. But in West Bengal, 34-year-old don Jhunnun Ansari has just bailed out the ruling Left Front Government. With at least four murder cases pending against him; Ansari rules the underworld in Garden Reach, Calcutta's notorious eastern suburb, known as much for its thriving market for smuggled goods as for its gang violence. Arrested for his involvement in the post-Ayodhya riots in December 1992, he is currently out on bail. Ansari contested last month's Calcutta Municipal Corporation polls and was elected as an independent. Having scraped through with a slender lead over the Congress (I), the Left Front needed one more seat to get an absolute majority. It approached Ansari. And he said yes.

"It wasn't so much a case of morality," says Anil Biswas, a prominent member of the state committee of the CPI (M). "It was a game of numbers." Ironically, barely weeks before the Left Front embraced Ansari, it had stridently criticised him. In its mouthpiece, Ganashakti, edited by Biswas, the party took a "principled" stand, calling Ansari "an anti-social and a rigging master".

The Marxists are hardly the only ones compromising principle for power. In fact, the nexus runs so deep and so wide that it ensnares virtually every mainstream party in every state. Says Janata Dal MP Jaipal Reddy: "All parties have a nexus with criminals. The links just differ in degree from party to party." And in nature, from state to state, each shaped by local economic and social forces. Says economist Vijay Joshi, Fellow of the Merton College at Oxford University: "In India, the crime-politics nexus goes beyond politics. It's not a scramble for power, it's for what power can do."

So, in Bihar, criminalisation of politics thrives on the

deep-seated divisions of caste and class. In Andhra Pradesh's granite-rich Rayalaseema districts, rival politicians — from the Congress (I) and the Talugu Desam Party (TDP) — patronise armed gangs involved in illegal mining. Smugglers enjoy political patronage in the opium belt in Madhya Pradesh. And in urban Bombay, feeding off zooming real-estate prices, politicians and landlords keep crime figures soaring.

That this nexus, as Joshi says, is blind to political distinctions — Right or Left, backward caste or upper caste — is one sign of its pervasive nature. A typical example: agrarian violence in Bihar. The Congress (I) — traditionally a party of rich peasantry — propped up the Bhooni Sena, an armed vigilante group, which levied a 'tax' from marginal farmers in Patna, Nalanda and Jehanabad. Bhooni Sena members were behind the Pipra carnage in which 22 Dalits were killed in 1980. When the Laloo Prasad Yadav Government came to power in 1990, it was the turn of Yadav landlords; they organised the killing of 11 Dalits in Tiskhora in 1990. Laloo is yet to take action.

If Bihar has come to symbolise the debasement of Indian democracy, Uttar Pradesh isn't far behind. In fact, it surpasses Bihar in the number of MLAs with pending criminal cases. While Laloo's second run for office was marked by relatively fewer criminals contesting elections — many were denied tickets — the nexus seems to have overwhelmed politics in Uttar Pradesh.

According to a Home Department report, there are cases of "heinous crimes", including rape and murder, pending against 52 sitting MLAs. The SP heads the list with 25, the BJP has 15 and the BSP has four. Sociologist Veena Das sees a dangerous trend: "Earlier, criminals

helped politicians get elected. Today, criminals occupy the seats themselves."

And they litter national politics. In Tamil Nadu, the Independent MLA from Srivilliputhur, R. Thamarakani, has 25 criminal cases registered against him. Flaunting his three rings emblazoned with images of MGR, Jayalalitha and the AIADMK symbol, he shrugs off any questions about his background: "When I question officials who act against the public interest, they brand me a rowdy. And if I pat someone on the back, they call it an assault."

That this arrogance betrays clout is beyond doubt. Says a senior Shiv Sena leader in Bombay: "Criminals routinely demand tickets. If you ignore them, you've had it. Other parties will accept them — and win." He should know. The Shiv Sena, backed by the BJP, has not only accepted criminals but is paying the price too. Several of its MLAs and councillors have become victims of an ongoing battle between rival criminal gangs. Notorious Sena corporator Khim Bahadur Thapa, who had 13 cases pending against him, including murder and assault, was murdered in 1992.

More recently, its MLA Gajanan Kirtikar, charged with vandalism and arson, was appointed the minister of state for home. Says former Bombay municipal commissioner S.S. Tinaikar, who is now a crusader for probity in public life: "The minister of state for home has been charge-sheeted. Where does one begin?" Tinaikar's despair is understandable. Says Anand Chakravarti, professor of sociology at Delhi University: "Capturing power at any cost means compromising with those who offer support. This forms the pivot for all politician-criminal links." And it's around this pivot that forces feeding the nexus work.

## Can the Slide be Checked?

MADHYA Pradesh seems to have taken the lead. Last fortnight, as the debate over the nexus gathered momentum, the Digvijay Singh Government announced a one-man judicial commission, headed by the retired Chief Justice of Patna High Court, G G Sohni, to probe into links between the underworld and politicians. This is probably the first time that a state government has ordered an inquiry into the nexus.

How effective it will be is open to question. Says Dipankar Gupta, professor of sociology at JNU: "Bureaucratic solutions don't work, they are a part of the problem. Committees and secretive organisations forians are not the way of breaking

the nexus. They will, in effect, strengthen the culture of high-handedness and secrecy."

One solution that did work was Chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan's radical poll reforms. In fact, he was responsible for what was perhaps a rare, shining moment in Bihar's politics: virtually every major political party inclined don got a severe drubbing during the last assembly elections.

Dreaded Anand Mohan Singh, chief of the Bihar People's Party, lost all the three seats he contested. Dularchand Yadav, considered a terror in Mokameh, suffered a humiliating defeat in Barh constituency where he got only 105 votes. Not only did Seshan's deployment of security personnel keep thugs in check, it also gave disenfranchised Dalits the chance to vote — many for the first time.

But Seshan's diktats targeted the symptom rather than the cause. So, given the forces responsible for the nexus, how can they be countered? Or, to be more realistic, how can they be weakened? Answers lie buried in a thicket of social, political and economic factors, each affecting the other. One answer comes from Oxford University professor Vijay Joshi. "Reduce the dependence of the poor on the po-

litical process for basic survival. Think of improving schools and hospitals first, relax import duties later." In this context, economic liberalisation, he says, doesn't help unless it reaches the poor.

As for the middle class, its attitude amounts to a grudging acceptance of the nexus. Says Gupta: "It views politics and politicians as the detestable 'other'. It prefers to adapt to the situation by staying aloof from politics while having enough influence to secure privileges for itself. One reason for this may be its relatively small size, as compared to the middle class in Western democracies. Another, its weak sense of civic responsibility."

Another related solution has to do with the induction of new faces into politics. "The same faces keep coming up again and again," says a CPI(M) leader. "In the absence of new leadership, the nexus gets a more fertile ground to anchor itself."

Meanwhile, legal experts feel that the criminal-justice system should be more responsive. According to Section 8(1) of the RPA, only those candidates can be debarred from contesting elections who have been convicted for one or more of a list of criminal offences. Says

Supreme Court lawyer Rajiv Dhawan: "In most cases, they cannot be debarred because they are not brought to book. Section 8 needs to be relooked at and re-examined."

One reason why politicians with criminal charges are rarely brought to book is a largely obliging police force. Suggests former director-general of the West Bengal police Arun Prakash Mukherjee: "Delink the police from their political masters." Mukherjee recommends setting up of what he calls a "state security commission" comprising the chief minister, the police minister, the leader of the Opposition and eminent public personalities.

When it first came to power in the 1980s in Andhra Pradesh, the TDP tried to set up a state security board through an executive order. But Chief Minister N T Rama Rao abandoned the idea. Perhaps he realised that such a board could go against the TDP's interests. By the cynical criteria of realpolitik, therefore, the nexus seems to be veritably impregnable. Warns sociologist Veena Das: "In the next 10 years, we will witness a tremendous rise in criminality in politics, in forms that we may not even recognise." In the end, therefore, what the electorate did in Bihar seems to be a small but significant first step: throw the rascals out.

—With Harinder Baweja