Looking up to the mountains

A centre for Himalayan studies located in the plains

MARK TURIN in SILIGURI

It is always heartening to find a group of good scholars working on interesting topics and better still if they are doing so together.

On a recent research trip to Darjeeling and Sikkim, I twice happened to come across Occasional Papers from the Documentation Call of the Centre for Himalayan Studies at North Bengal University in local university archives and libraries. Some of the publications were press digests and news clippings from dailies in South Asia, while others were indices of parliamentary proceedings pertaining to relations between India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim (before the mid-1970s) and China. This corpus of data exemplifies a kind of meticulous documentation that few scholars have the time to do these days, so I set myself the task of tracking down the elusive centre.

In the hub of urban Darjeeling, the first point of call for learning anything about anything is naturally Google, and sure enough it delivered: a single entry with a telephone number and email address of the Centre for Himalayan Studies. I got in touch and resolved to pay the centre a visit in Raja Ram Mohan Pur, just outside of Siliguri and strategically located on the road to the Nepali border.

Nested in the tree-lined campus of North Bengal University (NBU), with a Himalayan backdrop true to its name, lies the Centre for Himalayan Studies (CHS). Directed by the dynamic and welcoming Karushki Datta, it is populated by a range of scholars and support staff. This interdisciplinary research centre falls under the Area Studies Program of the university.

It was established in December 1978 and is treated as a fully-fledged department of NBU. In the past 27 years, the Centre has had eight directors and a number of impressive resident research scholars, including two who are particularly well-known to the Nepali-speaking academy: NC Sinha and T B Bobhim. The activities of the centre range from research projects, seminars and publications, to guidance and supervision of graduate students. Collaborative research projects include a profile of the Eastern Himalayans, while individual scholars are presently investigating topics as diverse as the women of Bhutan, the carrying capacity of the Teesta basin of Sikkim, the growth of Kalimpong as an urban centre and others that compile a resource planning atlas of the eastern Himalayan Region. Twenty-nine MPhil dissertations and 14 PhD theses have been completed by students at the centre, largely in the social sciences and during my short visit, I witnessed a student from the centre, participating in the social sciences and during my short visit, I witnessed a student from the centre, being guided by her supervisor to be able to find a resource planning atlas of the eastern Himalayan Region.

A specific project worthy of mention is the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) settlement information for Sikkim based on maps and statistical information from the Indian census, spearheaded by the cartographer DB Boot. The publication’s weaving and the documentation cell of the centre deserve special attention. Along with seminar proceedings and special lectures, the centre publishes a useful annual journal entitled Himalayan Miscellany which is regrettably not subscribed to by many university libraries in the west, while the documentation cell focuses its attention on producing splendid digests of events that transpire in the eastern Himalayas. The library is well run and contains a set of standard texts along with some delightfully rare volumes and the staff are eager for more scholars to pass through, avail themselves of the resources and perhaps give a lecture or two.

I would encourage any researcher, should they happen to land in the area, to pay a visit.

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Germany’s zero hour

Looking back at 8 May 1945 in sorrow and anger

RALF DAHRENDORF

The Eighth of May always brings back memories of 1945 because for me the end of the war in Europe really was a zero hour.

When the first Soviet soldiers came up our little street in the western suburbs of Berlin, we knew that the great slaughter would now end. I was 17 and my father who had been in the resistance would come back from Brandenburg prison. I no longer needed to hide as I had done after my release from a Gestapo camp at the beginning of February. Somehow a new life would begin.

First, however, was the chaos. The Nazis were gone and the occupation powers had not yet set up any kind of administration. We all went looting the local shops; I still have the slim volumes of romantic poetry which my 16-year-old self took from a bookshop. The occupation troops went on a rampage. Food was hard to find. My father was taken from prison and transported straight to central Berlin, where he was told to set up his office for Berlin’s occupation administration. We all went looting the local shops; I still have the slim volumes of romantic poetry which my 16-year-old self took from a bookshop. The occupation troops went on a rampage. Food was hard to find. My father was taken from prison and transported straight to central Berlin, where he was told to set up his office for Berlin’s occupation administration.

Arranged in a tank, the army rode into town and we went from house to house, changing our guns and rifles but remaining in use.

The western powers in Germany, on the other hand, pursued, after a short period of non-fraternalism, a policy of controlled empowerment. Within a year of the end of the war there were indigenous administrations, within two years elections. Democracy was not just preached but practised and it could build on German traditions. All this, to be sure, was not just benevolence on the part of the occupying powers. It was also a result of the incipient Cold War and the desire of both sides to consolidate their part of Germany. Even then, there are lessons to be learned from the process.

Two of these deserve to be mentioned. One is economic and has to do with the Marshall Plan. It is perhaps regrettable but nonetheless real that democracy finds roots more easily if economic conditions improve. Such improvement requires above all self-help, the actions of individuals who will accept the misery of the zero hour for long. Such self-help can be encouraged by policies (which is what Ludwig Erhard, the father of the ‘social market economy’ did in Germany) but some starting capital helps. The other lesson is moral and it is more difficult. The Nuremberg Trials exposed the guilt of the Nazi leaders beyond doubt, if they did not accept the misery of the zero hour for long. Such self-help can be encouraged by policies (which is what Ludwig Erhard, the father of the ‘social market economy’ did in Germany) but some starting capital helps. The other lesson is moral and it is more difficult. The Nuremberg Trials exposed the guilt of the Nazi leaders beyond doubt, if they did not accept the misery of the zero hour for long.

Germany’s Nazi past is uniquely horrible, so comparisons with other countries is not helpful and can lead to misleading. Still, in its own way Poland has followed a similar path after 1989: first the new, then the old, one Hitler is to come to terms with the past. On balance this is a better method of dealing with a nation’s zero hour than doing the opposite.

In Europe then, 8 May 2005 is an occasion to look back in sorrow and anger. It is also an occasion to look forward with pride in the achievements of recent decades and therefore for hope.

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